

Transcultural Bodies: a Comparative Approach to Dissident 'Minor' Women's Writings in
Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish

by

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Abstract

Postcolonial criticism has been academically defined by an over-reliance on Anglophone texts creating a new type of dominant discourse under which other postcolonial contexts get subsumed. This dissertation is a comparative study of transcultural literary works written by women in Portugal, Spain, and Italy as well as these countries' former African colonies Mozambique, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Somalia. It brings into conversation Lusophone, Hispanophone, and Italoophone texts by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, Isabela Figueiredo, Dulce Maria Cardoso, Paulina Chiziane, Igiaba Scego, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, Guillermina Mekuy, and María Nsue Angüe in order to highlight their shared preoccupations with breaching national myths, countering stereotypes, and historical redress. In other words, the aim of my project is to show how these texts contest Eurocentric national representations and propose new ways of belonging, insisting on the plurilingual and multifaceted realities of a world increasingly shaped by migration and diaspora. I use a postcolonial lens in my commitment to dismantling imperial narratives but I also shed light on it by drawing attention to the 'minority' status of these less canonical literatures and the silenced voices they bring to light. I follow the 'minor' transnational model of Lionnet and Shih to illustrate the productivity and creativity of horizontal transcolonial perspectives. My first approach to demonstrating the common dissident nature of these texts focuses on language. I outline how the writers use particular language-related strategies to resist and decolonize different regimes of authority and carve out rebellious forms of agency and subjectivity. Beyond language, I move on to explain how texts negotiate cultural difference through the category of the 'racialized' body marked by gender, race, and social status, specifically analyzing how signifiers of 'otherness' such as hair and skin colour both inform and disrupt lingering imperial narratives. Thirdly, by drawing on social history's attention to common people's voices, I look at these texts as repositories of national and transnational memory and present their contribution to rewriting historical representations of the South, which refers both to Africa and to the peripheral position of Southern Europe in the West.

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Introduction

The broader field of postcolonial literary studies has much to gain in turning to ‘minor’ contexts where languages other than English or French are used. Although fundamental in foregrounding key debates related to power inequalities, racial discrimination, imperial dynamics, “the act of writing back, the appropriation and abrogation of language, the patterns of hyphenation and hybridization of cultural identity, and the question of race and ethnicity as connected to citizenship and belonging” (Ponzanesi, “The Postcolonial” 60), the definitions of the field offered by its foundational texts (Ashcroft et al., Said, Bhabha, Spivak, among others) overlook aspects of colonial relationships and postcolonial rhetoric that distinguish the Lusophone, Hispanophone, and Italoophone contexts.¹ At the same time, comparative exercises across these ‘minoritized’ postcolonial experiences can also illuminate each other in productive and self-reflexive ways. In Portugal, Spain, and Italy, discourses of national identity and belonging are embedded in benevolent legends that hinder fair assessments of the colonial past and the postcolonial present and future. Notions such as that of *italiani brava gente* [Italians great people], Portugal as a country of *brandos costumes* [affable manners], and Spain as the root of a fraternity called *hispanidad* [Hispanicity] tend to ignore power dynamics and superiority/inferiority complexes inherited from colonial history, the prolonged reign of fascist regimes and Southern Europe’s contemporary peripheral position. The narratives of transnational women writers are countering this alleged homogeneity by exposing creative ways of belonging in and through language, newer and

¹ Despite acknowledging that their currency is not always neutral, I am, at least for now, addressing “lusofonia como o espaço cultural dos falantes de português” [lusophony as the cultural space of Portuguese-speaking peoples] (par. 6), following Onésimo Teotónio de Almeida’s suggestion (2015), and transposing this definition to the Spanish- and Italian-speaking contexts. I will come back to this during my discussion.

broader definitions of citizenship and homeland, and disruptive representations of both Africa and Europe.

This dissertation is a comparative study of transcultural² works of literature written by women in (or in-between) Portugal, Spain, or Italy, and some of these countries' former colonies in Africa, particularly Mozambique, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Somalia, and originally produced by Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian publishing industries. The works and life stories of Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, Isabela Figueiredo, Dulce Maria Cardoso, Paulina Chiziane, Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ali Farah, Guillermina Mekuy, and María Nsue Angüe are shaped, one way or another, by Lusophone, Hispanophone, or Italophone colonial histories in the African continent. Their texts demonstrate, firstly, the growing heteroglossia and pluriculturality emerging from the fringes of the postcolonial, migrant, diasporic, and increasingly globalized Portuguese-, Spanish-, and Italian-speaking worlds. Secondly, they challenge lingering myths and stereotypes about the 'other' that belie anxieties about Southern Europe's own marginality. And thirdly, they unsettle imperial, colonial and postcolonial histories and narratives by drawing attention to historical silences. I focus on eight authors and ten texts, all written in the 2000s, with one earlier exception. From the Lusophone context, they are: *Niketche, uma História de Poligamia* [Niketche: A Story of Polygamy] (2002), by Chiziane; *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* [Notebook of Colonial Memories] (2009), by Figueiredo; *O Retorno* [The Return] (2011), by Cardoso; and *Esse Cabelo* [That Hair] (2015), by Almeida. From the Hispanophone context, *Ekomo* (1985) by

² I use the term 'transculturation' to refer to the mixing of cultures in these authors' works. The term, originally coined by Fernando Ortiz, speaks to "the turbulent and unpredictable process resulting from the interaction among cultures in contact and which potentiates, in spite of unequal power relations, the emergence of new cultural forms" (Cheadle and Pelletier xi).

Nsue; and Mekuy's *Las Tres Virgenes de Santo Tomás* [The Three Virgins of Saint Thomas] (2008), and *Tres Almas para un Corazón* [Three Souls for One Heart] (2011). From the Italophone context, *Madre Piccola* [Little Mother] (2007), and *Il Comandante del Fiume* [The River's Captain] (2014), by Farah; and *Oltre Babilonia* [Beyond Babylon] (2008) by Scego. This dissertation is not monographic but instead thematic. In other words, it does not envision perfect symmetry between the different discussions of case studies at the risk of being too broad. The emphasis is rather on the intersections between the works concerning the overarching topics under analysis. This means that some texts are considered at length, whereas others are discussed more briefly or just in passing.

The privileging of women writers does not correspond to an exclusive focus on gender aspects, as implied in analytical terms such as 'Gynocriticism' or 'Gynesis.' As Susan S. Friedman explains, "Gynocriticism [...] retains gender as the assumed foundation of feminist critical practice and thus remains out of step with locational discourses of identity and subjectivity" (25). She adds that "Gynesis, emerging out of a poststructuralist critique of the author as source or origin of expressivity, has been more concerned with the textual effects of gender than with gendered writers" (26). Even though questions of gender are interwoven into my analyses, they are not the only focus. As Friedman rightly points out, "Such gynocritical and gynecic emphasis on the writer's gender has the effect of subsuming, repressing, or marginalizing other aspects of the writer's identity" (26). She proposes thus a palimpsestic view of gynocriticism and gynecic reading strategies informed by multiple "discourses of subjectivity and alterity" (29). Inspired by Edward Said's "travelling theory," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "transnational literacy," and the concept of "transnational

feminism” proposed by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (5), Friedman presents the idea of “Locational Feminism” (3) as a type of practice that pays attention to time and place while also acknowledging the intertwined nature of global cultures set in motion by migration and transcultural borrowings. This implies breaking “out of a specifically American localism” when involving subjects rooted in other parts of the world (5). Friedman points to a panoply of discourses that complicate gender-only approaches, such as multiple oppression, multiple or contradictory subject positions, relationality and situational subjectivities, and hybridity (21). These discourses draw attention to the intersection of gender with other aspects of identity, namely race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, national origins, religion, citizenship, etc. The texts of my corpus speak to this “interplay of power and powerlessness” (22) dictated by conflicting subject positions. The need to take into consideration the coexistence of multiple hierarchies of difference was initially suggested in the 1980s (Lorde 1984; Spelman 1988), and later complexified (Collins 1990) by the idea not only of interacting but also of competing oppressions that configure women’s lives. Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim explain that these “locations can include combinations of both privileges and oppressions” (22). Along this line of thought, Jennifer C. Nash pertinently remarks, in her reassessment of the concept of ‘intersectionality’ initially put forward by Kimberlé Crenshaw, that:

intersectional literature has excluded an examination of identities that are imagined as either wholly or even partially privileged, although those identities, like all identities, are always constituted by the intersections of multiple vectors of power. (Nash 199)

The writers emerge from different postcolonial, transnational locations, some identifying as African (Chiziane, Nsue), while others as European (Figueiredo, Cardoso, Scego, Almeida) or as Afro-European (Scego, Farah, Almeida, Mekuy); they come from multiple sides of the colonial spectrum, including the former colonized, the former colonizer, and places in-between (Almeida, Farah), whether or not they lived through colonialism or inherited the memories of their family. In other words, the experiences of marginality and/or privilege brought forward in my discussion of texts are mediated and complicated by intersections of gender with race, class, nationality, language, and citizenship. In different yet conversing ways, these works problematize the purported homogeneity of those post-imperial European societies and assert a place for sidelined transcultural voices.

While this project follows postcolonial literary critique in its commitment to dismantling imperial discourses and bringing silenced voices to light, it also departs from it—and its Anglophone dominance—by using a ‘minor’ model of analysis, borrowed from the groundbreaking work *Minor Transnationalism* (2005) by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. This framework privileges lateral communications and helps highlight and relate the multiple layers of power at play that account for the particular postcolonial conditions of the analyzed texts and contexts. For example, the ‘anti-racist’ rhetoric of Portuguese colonial policy inspired by theories of Lusotropicalism encounters reverberations in the Spanish colonial project in Equatorial Guinea, and in Italy’s presence in East Africa. In a similar vein, the idea of the Italians as ‘benign’ colonizers has currency in the Portuguese and the Spanish contexts as well. The texts investigated also uncover anxieties about the peripheral (‘minor’) position of Southern European empires, especially in the late stages of colonialism. In this

context, the former African colonies were construed as ‘others’ against which the colonizers defined themselves. These discriminatory practices are continued against migrants of African origin who live in postcolonial societies in Southern Europe.

The contributions of this research are threefold: first, it demonstrates that the Lusophone, Hispanophone, and Italophone contexts have more comparative potential amongst themselves than in relation to mainstream theories, making thus a point of moving beyond adaptations of Anglophone discourses and instead “bring[ing] intellectual questions raised in one field to bear upon the other, and vice-versa” (Lionnet and Shih 4). This responds to Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller’s observation that “the study of the borrowings, reciprocal influences, and parallel developments between metropolises and colonies is a relatively new scholarly development” (1). The comparison of different contexts “is not,” as Robert Stam and Ella Shohat underscore, “a question of merely juxtaposing colonial/national histories within an additive approach, then, but rather of exploring their connectivities within a global system of intercolonial hegemonies and struggles” (299). This leads to my second intervention, which is related to highlighting ‘minor’ languages and contexts. As Michael Cronin emphasizes, “Minority languages can be seen as the quintessential and emblematic expression of the local in the era of globalization” (*Globalization* 164). Certainly, amongst Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian there are distinct levels of ‘minority,’ but arguably all play minor roles vis-à-vis the global dominance of English. At the same time, those languages also play ‘major’ roles in relation to the African languages included in the fabric of the texts (Somali, Fang, Kimbundu), drawing attention to the indexicality of the categories of ‘minor’ and ‘major’ themselves and to the plurilingual aftermath of the postcolonial worlds. Thirdly,

this research maps out the transcultural creative and pedagogical value of previously silenced voices whose narratives start now to be heard, bringing a necessarily wider spectrum into postcolonial literary criticism. Despite being marginal to the globalized canon of postcolonial and transnational literatures, these literary works have been receiving increasing academic attention within the separate fields of Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian studies, often also referred to as Lusophone, Hispanophone, or Italoophone (currencies that I discuss in Chapter 1), respectively.³ My particular approach within these three contexts offers a comparative study from a ‘minor’ perspective that outlines the intersecting postcolonial and post-imperial situations as well as the different negotiations of transcultural identities in these narratives. By doing so, I also contribute to feminist discourses focused on demonstrating the potential of women’s writing to subvert canons of knowledge and to advance new insights to postcolonial theory. This comparative exercise, besides making clear the historical coexistence of different colonialisms, also promotes a deeper understanding of the varied consequences of multiple imperial and colonial practices and discourses in the postcolonial moment.

In my endeavour to counter a “monolingual, monocultural, monolithic world” (Trivedi 7), controlled by global English, I have deliberately chosen to keep the quotes from case studies in the original language, opting to include the respective translations in footnotes. I acknowledge that this decolonial gesture (Mignolo 2000) disrupts the reading experience, yet it draws attention to both the value and the predicaments of translation. I cite

³ For seminal discussions about Hispanophone literatures, see Bacheng 2000, Brancato 2009, Kanellos 2011. For Italoophone literature studies, check Wright 2004, Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005, Parati 2005, Ponzanesi and Merolla 2005, Bekers, Helff, and Merolla 2009, Curti 2007, Coppola 2011, Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2013. For the Lusophone context, see Santos 2001, Owen and Rothwell 2004, Branche 2006, Madureira 2006, Medeiros 2007, Rothwell 2007, Brugioni et al. 2012, Ferreira 2007, 2012, Martins 2013.

the published translations of the English editions of *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* [Notebook of Colonial Memories] (2009) by Figueiredo, and *Madre Piccola* [Little Mother] by Farah, unless otherwise indicated. All other translations are my own.

In Chapter 1, “Framing the ‘Minor’ in Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian,” I offer a closer look at the intersectional ‘minor’ methodological framework used in this dissertation. I also provide a historical rationale for the pertinence of this comparative exercise, specifically situating the imperial and colonial projects of Portugal, Spain, and Italy in Mozambique, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Somalia within larger European and African definitions. I explore some key terms that contribute to a fuller appreciation of the disruption of homogenous narratives operated by these texts. Relatedly, I also delve into pertinent arguments about the subalternity of the South —both in the sense of meridional Europe and of Africa.

In Chapter 2, “Am I What I Speak? Language as a Site of Identity Claim,” I propose that language and writing, as opposed to national geographies, are places of belonging for the uprooted transnational subjects that emerge in the texts. I examine a panoply of multilingual strategies, such as heteroglossia, code-switching, and varied translational processes, that reflect not only histories of colonization and decolonization but also the subsequent experiences of displacement, diaspora, exile, return, migration, and globalization. The analyzed texts present dilemmas arising from interrogations of notions of identity and mother tongue set in motion by postcolonial movements of migration. Plurilingualism and heteroglossia are studied in their relationships with translation, agency, and sexuality, testifying to the capacity of language play to produce decolonial gestures that resist the

authority of major languages and of the cultures from which they emerge, with their attached patriarchal scripts.

In Chapter 3, “Nation and Citizenship: From Migrant Object to Transnational Subject,” I demonstrate how concepts of home, belonging, and identity are inflected by instances of racism and ‘racialization’ in *Esse Cabelo*, by Almeida, *Oltre Babilonia*, by Scego, and *Il Comandante del Fiume*, by Farah. The hyphenated (Angolan-Portuguese, Somali-Italian) protagonists of these novels, set in Lisbon and Rome, respectively, rebel against systemic racism (embedded in the signifiers of hair and skin colour) and carve out alternative, Afrocentric, transnational, diasporic and/or liminal spaces of belonging. A counterpoint to the struggles experienced in Rome and Lisbon by Almeida’s, Scego’s and Farah’s characters is offered in *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, by Mekuy. These four narratives of migration set in the capital cities of Lisbon, Rome, and Madrid bring perceptions of multiple identities to intersect with issues of power, class, and privilege, complicating assumptions about race, ethnicity, place, belonging, origins, and nation.

In Chapter 4, “A Different Story: Rewriting History, Rewriting the South,” I use the topic of the memorial as a metaphor for the silences in representations of national traumas. I show how the textual exposure of the darker sides of the colonial histories of Portugal, Spain, and Italy debunk benevolent national myths behind which the dictatorships of António de Oliveira Salazar, Francisco Franco, and Benito Mussolini have built narratives of the nation, including the idea of having been ‘good’ colonizers. Conversely, the peripheral Western position of Southern Europe has been used to justify Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian claims of having undertaken less aggressive colonial projects, which are countered with textual

evidence of colonial violence, based on sexism and racism. The rewriting of glorified perspectives of the colonial past contributes to an overall exercise of rewriting of Africa that disrupts stereotypical and eschewed views. This rewriting of Africa is furthered by textual analyses of instances where Somalis, Equatoguineans, and Mozambicans represent themselves instead of being represented and anthropologized.

Given the breadth of texts discussed, in what follows, I present an overview of the literary works under analysis, including brief biographies of the authors, general plot descriptions, and publishing/translation facts that help position them in their own geographies vis-à-vis the canon. Paulina Chiziane was the first Mozambican woman to publish a novel. She was born in 1955 in Manjacaze, province of Gaza, and is a native speaker of the Chope language. At the age of seven, she moved to Maputo (then Lourenço Marques), where she learned Ronga, the native language of the city, and Portuguese, the colonial language. On the back cover of *Niketche*, she writes: “sou contadora de estórias e não romancista.”⁴ *Niketche*, published in 2002, deals with how a group of women converts the infidelities of their common partner into a formal polygamous scheme that totally reverses and subverts power relations within the domestic and social spheres, empowering them. *Niketche* won the prestigious *José Craveirinha* prize awarded by the *Associação dos Escritores Moçambicanos* [Association of Mozambican Writers] in 2003, immediately after which the novel was published in Brazil and translated into Spanish, both in 2004. Two years later, *Niketche* entered the Francophone markets with a translation by Sébastien Roy under the title *Le parlement conjugal: Une histoire de polygamie*. With a ten-year gap between them, Italian

⁴ “I am a storyteller, not a novelist.”

and English translations ensued, in 2006 (*Niketche, una storia di poligamia* translated by G. De Marchis), and 2016 (*The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy* translated by David Brookshaw), the latter distributed in the UK, US, and Canada.

Isabela Figueiredo was born to Portuguese parents in Maputo in 1963 and moved to Lisbon in 1975, when she was twelve years old, with the wave of returnees who fled to Portugal following the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974, which officially decreed the end of the colonial period in Africa.⁵ Her parents remained in Mozambique for another ten years while she stayed in Portugal with relatives. This ‘return’ was actually her first contact with the ‘homeland.’ Her 2009 memoir, received with controversy due to the violence that it depicts, is an account of Figueiredo’s recollections of life in Mozambique under Portuguese colonialism. The narrator crudely describes and interprets everyday life in the former colony, the atrocities of the colonial war, and the aftermath of the decolonization process. After selling out five editions produced by a small publishing house in Coimbra (Angelus Novus), the book was republished in 2015 by the popular Caminho.⁶ That same year, it was also translated into English by scholars of Lusophone studies, Anna M. Klobucka (Darmouth), and Phillip Rothwell (Oxford) and released in online open access.

Dulce Maria Cardoso has a somewhat similar story, reflected in the shared nature of the described events.⁷ She was born in 1964 in Northeastern Portugal but was only six months old when her family moved to Luanda, Angola. Like Figueiredo, she returned to Portugal in

⁵ The term *retornado* [returnee] became popularized in Portugal to describe the half a million to a million Portuguese citizens and their descendants who had settled in the former African colonies, especially Angola and Mozambique, and later fled to Portugal following the coup of April 25, 1974, known as the Carnation Revolution, that put an end to the fascist regime and initiated the decolonization process.

⁶ Caminho is also known for the publication of the works of 1998 literature Nobel prize José Saramago.

⁷ Even though Figueiredo’s language and criticisms of colonialism are more jarring and overt.

1975, at the age of eleven. A coming-of-age story, *O Retorno* is narrated by Rui, a fifteen year-old boy who, like Isabela, ‘returns’ to Lisbon from Luanda with his mother and sister, leaving behind a missing father, taken by Angolan troops. His narration follows the last days of his family in Luanda, their arrival in Lisbon, the family’s one-year stay in a hotel occupied by returnees (sponsored by the Portuguese government), and the moment when his family, rejoined by his father, finally moves into their new home. *O Retorno*, released in 2011, was awarded Book of the Year 2011 by the Portuguese *Prémio Especial da Crítica* [Special Prize of the Critics] and due to its success within Portuguese-speaking immigrant communities in France, it merited Cardoso the prestigious French government distinction of *Chevalier de l’ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2012. It also won the *English Pen Translate Award* and it is part of the Portuguese government initiative *Plano Nacional de Leitura* [National Reading Plan], which is a canonizing institution. It is translated into several languages, including Italian (2013, Feltrinelli Indies), French (2014, Stock), English (2016, MacLehose Press, by Angel Gurria-Quintana), and Spanish (2015, Colombia: Tragaluz).

Esse Cabelo is Angolan-Portuguese Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s literary debut (2015). It is narrated by her alter ego Mila, a young woman born in Angola who moves to Lisbon in 1985, at the age of three. She is brought up by her Portuguese family on her father’s side, but her quest for tracking down her African roots sheds light onto her feelings of inadequacy concerning her kinky hair, inherited from her Angolan mother’s side. Through the story of her different hairstyles throughout the years, she engages not only with her personal biography, but also with Portugal’s and Angola’s national histories, as well as with the history of international black movements. A first-person narrative, *Esse Cabelo* is

described in the Portuguese newspaper *Público* as a “Estreia literária que resiste a catalogações, misto de romance, memória e ensaio” (Lucas).⁸

Resonating with Chiziane, María Nsue Angüe’s 1985 *Ekomo* is the first novel written by a woman from Equatorial Guinea. Born in 1948 in Ebebiyín to Fang parents, she emigrated to Spain at the age of eight, where she completed her studies and published her works. She has lived between Madrid and Malabo until passing away on January 18, 2017. The title of the novel, *Ekomo*, refers to the name of Nnanga’s husband. She is the narrator and, as the story unfolds, the reader realizes that she is also the main protagonist and that the narration of their journey to find a treatment for Ekomo’s illness, is also the journey of a woman towards her self-awareness and consequent freedom. The book is translated into French (1995) under the title *Ekomo au coeur de la forêt guinéenne*.

Guillermina Mekuy was born in 1982 in Evinayong, Equatorial Guinea, and moved to Madrid, Spain, with her family at the age of five, where she studied and lived until 2008. Since then, she has occupied different governmental positions in her home country. The main protagonists of *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás* are María Lourdes, María Fátima, and María Inmaculada, three sisters who are sent to a convent by their sickly, fervent Catholic and animist parents, self-denominated Tomás and Teresa, after Priest Saint Thomas Aquinas and Carmelite nun Santa Teresa de Cepeda (165). They move from a small town in Equatorial Guinea to Spain, Teresa’s home country and where Tomás obtained his degree in medicine, when the girls were five, nine, and thirteen years old. Middle child María Fátima is the narrator but the voices of the other family members enter the narration through several

⁸ “a literary debut that resists labels, a mix of novel, memoir, and essay”

letters sent between the parents and among the siblings. Mekuy's most recent novel, *Tres Almas para un Corazón*, is about the polygamous story of Santiago Nvé Nguema and his three wives: Melba, Zulema, and Aysha. It is organized as individual interviews with each of the characters led by journalist Rita Maldonado Obono, the author's alter ego. Educated in Spain, the narrator explains the practice of polygamy in Equatorial Guinea to her Western readership.

Born in Verona, Italy, in 1963 to an Italian mother and a Somali father, Cristina Ali Farah grew up in Mogadishu, Somalia. After fleeing the civil war in 1991, she lived in Hungary before relocating back to Italy, where she lived for a number of years until moving to Brussels recently. Farah won the *Concorso Letterario Nazionale Lingua Madre* [National Mother Tongue Literary Competition], at the Turin 2006 International Book Fair, aimed at women (both Italian and foreigners) who represent the relationship between roots and alterity/otherness. Domenica Axad, Barni, and Taageere are the narrators and protagonists of *Madre Piccola*, and are each responsible for three of the nine chapters that compose the novel. Their stories are shaped by Somalia's recent history (under the dictatorship of Siad Barre and during the civil war) and the Somali diaspora in Italy. In Sabrina Brancato's words, "the novel explores the complicated ways in which language at once connects and separates people" (58). *Madre Piccola* was published in 2007 and was awarded the prestigious *Vittorini* Prize. The novel has received academic attention from Italoophone scholars Giovanna Bellesia-Contuzzi (Smith College) and Victoria Offredi Poletto (Emerita Smith College) working in the United States, who have themselves translated it into English, and published it with the Indiana University Press in 2011. Considered the first postcolonial Italian coming-

of-age novel (di Maio), Published in 2014, *Il Comandante del Fiume* is narrated by an Italian-Somali eighteen-year-old boy named Yabar, who lives in Rome after having fled the civil war in Mogadishu with his Somali parents. The novel is organized into eighteen chapters that follow Yabar's struggles throughout his journey into adulthood.

Igiaba Scego is an Italian author born in Rome in 1974 to Somali parents. *Oltre Babilonia* tells the intersecting stories of Zuhra and Mar, and of their respective mothers, Maryam and Miranda, as well as their shared father, Elias. The book is structured as a labyrinth, where the reader collects in each of the eight chapters the necessary puzzle pieces that compose the characters' traumatic stories. Every chapter of this multi-voiced and multi-genre narrative is formed by five subsections, each dedicated to one character's viewpoint. These characters' multiple linguistic and national belongings speak to their migrant or traveller conditions. The novel was published in 2008, but it was Scego's following work *La Mia Casa è Dove Sono* (2010, Rizzoli), a more autobiographic book also about belonging and identity, which granted her the 2011 *Premio Mondello*, under the category of Italian author.

This brief summary helps trace the different *situations* of these writers and their works, as well as their broader positions within national and international canons of literature. In the multiplicity of plot lines here presented we can also start sketching out comparative points of entry across these texts. Before delving into those exercises, however, we need to contextualize the 'minor' frame of reference that guides this dissertation as well as the theoretical foundations of Lusophone, Hispanophone, and Italoophone postcolonial discourses.

Chapter 1

Framing the ‘Minor’ in Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian

‘Minor Transnationalism’

The postcolonial literary landscape has been academically defined by an overarching Anglophone critique⁹ that has become a new type of dominant discourse under which other postcolonial contexts get subsumed. What is commonly perceived in Western academia, especially in North America, as postcolonial theory is often composed of a corpus of now canonical texts written by critics such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and a few others. While these texts have opened up the path for many key discussions related to colonialism and postcolonialism (such as power relationships, racism, hybridity, Orientalism, subalternity, etc.), they have also remained too concerned with an Anglophone “vertical analysis confined to one nation-state [failing] to foreground the productive cultural work of minorities resulting from their transcolonial and transnational experiences” (Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism* 11).¹⁰ Their over-reliance on “the postcolonial framework of colonizer-colonized, colonial hegemony, center-periphery, metropole-colony, and hybridity” (Stahuljak 255) does not fully address the particular histories of other colonial and postcolonial contexts in the current transnational and globalized moment influenced by a number of post-imperial circumstances, such as contemporary migration, multiple belongings, displacement, multilingualism, diaspora, exile, and international cultural and

⁹ We must also acknowledge that even within Anglophone postcolonial studies, certain contexts have tended to be privileged to the detriment of others.

¹⁰ The postcolonial as a field emerged from the Anglophone world, which partly explains this dominance. However, in the same way that Francophone scholars, such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Aimé Césaire, and Édouard Glissant, expanded and complexified the field, so might others from ‘minor’ contexts.

economic markets.

Along with a canonical corpus of theory comes an equally canonical catalogue of works of literature that is made to represent postcolonial writing. Emily Apter argues that the hegemony of the English language together with the current rush to globalize literature creates a “transnational canon” regulated by the constraints of what is available in translation (“On Translation” 2). This situation fuels a

drive toward a transnationally translatable monoculture [which] is supported by the fact that linguistic superpowers –with English the clear victor– increasingly call the shots and turn once formidable competitors (European languages, say) into gladiators fighting among themselves for international market share. (3)

One obvious result is the aforementioned international circulation of an anthology of English texts that synecdochically constitute African literature, or for that matter, “international,” “postcolonial,” “native,” or “minority” literature (2). Within this context, Apter explains, the “global” signifies “not so much the conglomeration of world cultures arrayed side by side in their difference but, rather, a problem-based monocultural aesthetic agenda that elicits transnational engagement” (3). This scenario raises questions about the “precarious future of minoritarian languages in a global market that favors linguistic superpowers” (Apter 7). In a similar line of thought, Michael Cronin finds it problematic that postcolonial critics tend to reduce Europe to two languages (English and French) and two countries (England and France), which makes “the critique of imperialism [...] itself imperialist in ignoring or marginalizing the historical and translation experience of most European languages” (*Globalization* 140).

The imperialism of the English language, the privileging of a specific colonial history over others and the lack of situatedness of critics are some of the “blind spots” (Jensen 63) created by this mainstream postcolonial theory that I attempt to counter.¹¹ Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s minor transnationalism model (*Minor Transnationalism*) provides a productive alternative for the analysis of Portuguese-, Spanish-, and Italian-speaking postcolonial contexts. These scholars propose a framework for understanding transnational cultural production through a ‘minor’ lens, which takes into account “relational discourses among different minority groups” (Lionnet and Shih 2).¹² They conceive of the transnational as a “space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center” (5). Instead of “North/South” or “dominant/resistant” models of culture, Lionnet and Shih advocate a “cultural transversalism,” which includes all sorts of relationships with the major as well as minor-to-minor networks (8). This approach, they argue, values “the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries” (7). The discipline of postcolonial studies has only during the past decade made its way into Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian university curricula and tends to find much of its theoretical bearings in mainstream Anglophone (and some Francophone) literature, overlooking their geographical and cultural Southern neighbours’

¹¹ Robert Stam and Ella Shohat also critique this Commonwealth-centric postcolonial theory for its “elision of class” due to the elite status of many critics themselves (87).

¹² Lionnet and Shih assign to Franz Fanon a pioneer place in this lateral minor transnationalism, given the fact that he created a dialogue between the marginal spaces of Algeria and the Caribbean (3).

postcolonial discourses.¹³ This perpetuates vertical models of analysis that hinder “interethnic solidarity and international minority alliances” (Lionnet and Shih 4). The problem with these binary models is that they presuppose that “minorities necessarily and continuously engage with and against majority cultures in a vertical relationship of opposition or assimilation” (Lionnet and Shih 7). However, if we shift our thinking onto a relational transcolonial and transnational approach, we can make horizontal communication amongst minorities visible and contribute to a better contextualization of the writing produced in “national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities” (Lionnet and Shih S 6). Furthermore, looking at cultures that operate in languages other than English helps shift the focus towards new contexts thus expanding, innovating, and democratizing the field of postcolonial studies.

Lars Jensen calls for “the need to map out the particularity of the postcoloniality of each situation, which entails both the mapping out of the colonial and postcolonial history,” and, drawing on Stuart Hall, “the question of how to culturally translate [...] the important work that has been carried out in Postcolonial Studies” (Jensen 69). This call suggests that, while learning from the wealth of research that has already been done, the field needs to be informed by the specificities of contexts that are less visible at the risk of ignoring its own breadth of knowledge. In his discussion on the importance of the ‘local,’ Walter Mignolo argues that it represents the “condition of possibility for constructing new ‘loci’ of enunciation as well as for reflecting that academic knowledge and understanding should be

¹³ About the Portuguese context, Ana Martins says that “those necessarily excluded from Huggan’s theoretical postulate have been recurrently inscribed into that same master discourse by Lusophone postcolonial theory itself, which arguably privileges non-Portuguese imperial epistemologies” (152). In this article, Martins uses Huggan as an example of Anglo-Saxon postcolonial theory.

complemented with ‘learning from’ those who are living in and thinking from colonial and postcolonial legacies” (*Local Histories* 5). For him, postcolonial theory is tied to what he calls “border thinking,” which arises from “the recognition of the colonial difference from subaltern perspectives” (6). Mignolo makes a significant contribution to the chronology of the “modern world system” (18), situating the beginning of globalization in the late fifteenth century by taking into consideration the early contacts established during the Spanish and Portuguese empires. As he explains, this is a more suitable paradigm than those proposed by “Said, Guha, critical theory, [and] poststructuralism,” who locate the frontier of modernity in the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment (19). He contends that the period extending from the late fifteenth century to the current stage of globalization has built a framework that has subalternized certain kinds of knowledge (13). This is why he believes that despite the end of the colonial period, we still live under a “coloniality of power” (16) that can only be overcome through a process of legitimization of “border epistemologies emerging from the wounds of colonial histories, memories, and experiences” (37). He draws attention to the importance of getting to know the “colonial experiences in their historical diversity” since the histories of colonialism are still to be written from this ‘minor’ perspective (37).

Mignolo and other Latinamericanists, such as Aníbal Quijano and Enrique Dussel, striving to break away from a globalized Euro-Anglocentric worldview, end up “generaliz[ing] from the epistemic privilege of Spanish-America to the whole of Latin America,” as Ana Paula Ferreira aptly underscores (“Specificity” 24). Their move, which attempts to be decolonial in nature (Mignolo “On Comparison”), ends up erasing not only the Portuguese empire (including Brazil and Africa) but also Spain’s late imperialism in

Equatorial Guinea (Ferreira, “Specificity” 24). Acknowledging that there is no “zero-point epistemology: the detached observer who describes and explains” (Mignolo, “On Comparison” 101), I try to think through the border knowledges of ‘minor’ transnationalisms about different layers of marginality that affect the literatures under analysis in this dissertation as well as the contexts from which they emerge, inflected by colonial, imperial, and post-imperial dynamics. As an epistemological backdrop against Anglo-Eurocentric models, this project is also framed within models of the South (Santos 2002, Ferreira 2010, Calafate Ribeiro 2008, Maio 2009,¹⁴ Chambers 2017), which here refer to ‘minor’ voices from Southern Europe, i.e., Portugal, Spain, and Italy, as well as from the South represented by the African countries of Mozambique, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Somalia. In relation to the marginalized and oppressed people of these various locations under imperial, colonial, and postcolonial circumstances, the South is apt to “signify the systemic human sufferance caused by global capitalism,” as Boaventura de Sousa Santos proposes (“Between” 16). In the South, he sees a twofold device, which serves to address “the size and multifaceted character of oppression in contemporary societies” as well as “the capacity for creation, innovation, and resistance of the oppressed peoples once they were liberated from their condition of victims” (16). In other words, a model of the South offers new ways of representing the polysemy of the ‘minor,’ as a framework that not only gives voice to lesser known literatures and languages in the global arena, but also allows those literatures to laterally illuminate each other, moving away from what Donna Haraway describes as an unproductive “view from above” (446). Borrowing her words, I argue “for situated and

¹⁴ Theorized as Black Mediterranean, inspired by Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic (2).

embodied knowledges and [...] against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (Haraway 443).

Subaltern Southern Europe

The pertinence of putting these particular Lusophone, Hispanophone, and Italoophone contexts in dialogue is related not only to their social, cultural, and historical similarities, but also to contrasting colonial and postcolonial features. This comparative exercise promotes a new horizontal communication that allows for a re-reading of histories, contributing to a better understanding of colonial and postcolonial discourses and respective underlying national and political agendas. The rationale for including these three contexts within the ‘minor’ is founded on the fact that Portugal, Spain, and Italy were the “‘Christian Europe’ of the fifteenth to mid-seventeenth century” and were later replaced by the imaginary of Germany, France and England as the “heart of Europe” (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 57). The decline of the three Southern empires placed these countries in a ‘subaltern’ European position, described by Lars Jensen as a ‘racialized’ Mediterranean “not-quite-white, not-quite-right” space (70). The former colonies were thus the spaces onto which these countries managed to project their authority and develop ‘othering’ processes in order to assert their national identities under the fascist regimes of Salazar, Franco, and Mussolini, respectively.¹⁵ Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla describe Portugal and Spain as “[m]arginalized empires, self-enclosed under dictatorship” (30). According to Luís Madureira, the current Portuguese national project goes back to Salazar’s “endeavour to reinscribe Portugal into

¹⁵ Nowadays, this minor position continues to live on as the Central and Northern European powers try to rescue the South (pejoratively called the PIGS —Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain) from the economic crisis.

world history by restoring the spirit of its imperial past,” and that there is a continuing anxiety about the marginality of Portugal’s empire (5). In a similar line of thought, Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller comment, in regards to the Italian context, that the “empire promised an escape route from a subordinate international position and a means of advertising Italian power and modernity” (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 3). Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian colonial projects in Africa from the late nineteenth century on are then an attempt to recover some of those countries’ former splendour.¹⁶ The former African colonies contributed to the rhetoric of positioning Portugal, Spain, and Italy in a “new supracontinental economic and political order” instead of the periphery of Europe (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2).¹⁷ Furthermore, they were part of the dictatorial regimes’ national projects. The (in)famous 1934 propaganda poster of a map of Portugal and its colonies overlapped with Europe¹⁸ speaks to the regime’s endeavour to overcome the country’s marginal position by displaying the significant proportions of its empire. As Manuela Ribeiro Sanches explains, “Portugal não é um país pequeno,”¹⁹ the title of the map, “revelava o modo como a pequenez da nação carecia de um império para se libertar da sua periferia, afirmando-se como potência a nível nacional e internacional, ao mesmo tempo que legitimava o seu empreendimento colonial” (Sanches 7).²⁰ This is corroborated by the fact that English and French versions of this poster were also circulated

¹⁶ In the Italian case, the sought-after splendour predates the modern formation of the country.

¹⁷ Anchimbe and Mforteh say that the role of countries such as Portugal and Italy “has in the past been sanitised or downplayed in various discourses” (5).

¹⁸ See Sanches (22-3) for a reprint of this map.

¹⁹ “Portugal is not a small country”

²⁰ “revealed how the smallness of the nation banked on the idea of the empire to free itself from its periphery, asserting itself as a national and international power while also legitimizing its colonial enterprise.”

at the time.²¹

Having lost their colonies in Latin America, Spain and Portugal turned to Africa in search of reestablishing some of their power and prestige. Gabriel Paquette, in his discussion of Portuguese debates after the loss of Brazil in 1822, comments on the national fears materialized in newspapers at the time:

As the Porto newspaper, the *Imparcial*, noted in 1826, Portugal, ‘solely considering its territory on the Iberian peninsula, is one of the smallest and weakest nations in Europe’. Without Brazil, the editorial continued, ‘Portugal’s situation is even more precarious. What will become of Portugal without overseas possessions?’” (par. 12)

Afraid of losing its “sovereign nation” status by becoming a mere “province of Spain” (Paquette par. 12), Portugal looks at Africa as a “new Brazil” (Ferreira, “The Colonial” 282). Also in search of prestige, as Martin Repinecz explains, “For both Spain and Italy, African colonialism served as a way to ‘keep up’ with Britain’s and France’s vast overseas empires and transcend their own ‘southern’ decadence” (26). He draws attention to a particular event as the motor for Spain’s renewed interest in African colonialism: the “national humiliation” of the 1898 Spanish-American War “in which the United States took possession of Spain’s last remaining colonies, Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippine Islands” (Repinecz 26). By the time Portugal and Spain leave Latin America, Italy is just establishing itself as a country, concluding its Unification process, also known as *Risorgimento* [literally meaning revival] (Collier 2) in 1871. Patrizia Palumbo argues that

²¹ This map materializes Salazar’s claim that “the colonies formed part of one multi-continental and ‘pluri-racial’ Portuguese nation,” used as ‘proof’ of the “myth of Portuguese exceptionalism in his efforts to justify ongoing imperial rule” until the mid-1970s when other colonial powers were retreating (Deventer and Thomas 348). Note that Salazar was replaced by Marcello Caetano in 1968, but the regime only fell in 1974 with the Carnation Revolution.

“After national political unification had taken place, ‘Italian-ness’ was nothing but a rhetorical trope, whose lack of meaning was made evident by the ever unfinished project of a true cultural and economic homogenization” (9). The colonial expansion of Italy into the Horn of Africa is then a way to consolidate the idea of ‘italianità’ [Italianness], which tried to overcome internal national issues by drawing on a fabricated notion of a common “Italian culture [...] marked by a discourse of national unity and grandeur sustained through the resuscitation of Rome’s glorious history and antiquity” (Palumbo 9-10). One of these issues, which remains central today, is related to the divide between Northern and Southern Italy based on the ‘racialization’ of Southerners. This debate, termed ‘la questione meridionale’ [‘the Southern question’] by Antonio Gramsci (1974), has been extended by other scholars, such as Lidia Curti (2013), Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (2013) to include both Southern Italy and the former Italian African colonies in rhetorically subaltern places as compared to Northern Italy.²²

This divide epitomizes the larger European borderline separating North and South,²³ where backwardness, poverty, and laziness are usually attributed to the latter in contrast to the entrepreneurism, modernity, and overall success of the former. Similar to the findings of the aforementioned studies by Curti, Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his leading work about “identity processes in the time-space of the Portuguese language” (Santos 9), observes the coincidences between representations of Africans by the Portuguese and the portrayal of the Portuguese by Northern Europe. Looking at different

²² For more on the Italian North/South divide, and particularly for an overview of stereotypes of Northern Italians about Southerners, see Pugliese (2008).

²³ The term ‘Mouro’ [Moor] is still used as a derogatory by Northern Portuguese to refer to people living anywhere south of Lisbon (often including the capital city).

sources written “by North European travelers, traders, and monks” since the sixteenth century, Santos reports that some of the characteristics ascribed to the Portuguese are “underdevelopment and precarious life conditions, sloth and sensuality, violence and affability, poor hygiene and ignorance, superstition and irrationality” (Santos 21). He mentions one particularly illustrative document, found by Laura Pires, where

the Portuguese are depicted according to the racist stereotypes of the time: extremely ugly, certainly not white, and rather the result of some clearly disgusting ethnic mixture, the Portuguese are said to combine the worst defects of blacks, Jews, Moors, and ... the French. (22)²⁴

In a concomitant way, Heather Merrill holds that “In European spatial imaginaries, Italians have frequently been perceived as of a different shade of whiteness, closer to the Global South” (135), which is a source of national unease. Similar anxieties underlie discourses of unity under Franco’s regime, based on racial valuations. Raquel Vega-Durán shows that the key pillars of “*raza*” [race] and “*hispanidad*” [Hispanicity] support Franco’s ideology (xv). She explains that the idea of ‘hispanidad’ has an implicit connotation of racially distinct (xvi), connected to “Greeks, Romans, and Goths” (xv) and blatantly “ignoring that many Spanish communities had at least partial Moorish and Semitic origins” (Corkill quoted in Vega-Durán xvi). Drawing on Roberto Dainotto’s assessment about the marginality of meridional European countries, Repinecz says that “Southern Europe, over time, was constructed as ‘the sufficient and indispensable internal other’ against which Europe

²⁴ For more on early representations of the Iberians and the Portuguese as part of a Mediterranean ‘race,’ see Blackmore (28-29).

constituted its identity” (2). In other words, “The South [...] has been imagined both historically, and in the present, as a kind of ‘Africa’ within Europe” (Repinecz 3).

This subaltern European position has offered the grounds to posit Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian colonizers as somewhat closer to the colonized, and therefore, *allegedly* more benign than Northern colonial powers. In the aforementioned pioneering study about Portuguese colonialism, “Between Prospero and Caliban: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Inter-Identity,” Santos wonders:

Of mixed race to start with, calibanized at home by foreign visitors, cafrealized in his own colonies, semi-calibanized in the colonies and former colonies of the European powers, how could this Prospero be a colonizer and colonize prosperously? (29).²⁵

Santos relies on the idea of a “calibanized Prospero” (37), given the fact that the Portuguese have traditionally been “disconcerting and exasperatingly disqualified and incompetent colonizer[s]” (29) to put forward the idea of “a subaltern colonialism” (9).²⁶ Eduardo Lourenço (1978; 2014) has critically engaged with Portuguese colonialism and postcolonialism in light of national ideas about this alleged ‘exceptionalism’ of the Portuguese in their colonial projects, lingering from the dictatorial rhetoric, as Lourenço calls to mind: “Salazar quis administrar aos olhos do mundo a prova que o nosso colonialismo é de essência positiva e radicalmente diferente dos outros” (“Do Colonialismo” 29).²⁷

²⁵ Santos explains that “Cafrealization is a nineteenth-century designation used mainly in Eastern Africa to stigmatize the Portuguese men that yielded their culture and civilized status to adopt the ways of living and thinking of the “cafres,” the blacks depicted as primitive savages” (24).

²⁶ I criticize this term in Chapter 4.

²⁷ “Salazar wanted to make the world believe that our colonialism was of a positive essence and radically different from other colonialisms.”

Even though Italian and Spanish colonialism in Africa have not been overtly called ‘subaltern,’ Santos’ provocation resonates in Ben-Ghiat’s argument that “memories of Italian colonialism were [...] displaced, in favour of narratives of an Italian ‘exceptionalism’ which distinguished between the exploitative and abusive nature of other imperial enterprises and the essential humanity of Italian colonisers” (“Italy and Its Colonies” 263). This ‘exceptionalism’ is based on “narratives of ‘Italians as good people’ (*Italiani brava gente*)” (263), made possible by Italian “government policies that severely restricted scholars’ access to important colonial archives for most of the post-war period, and [by] a general rejection of alternative framings of the histories and legacies of Italian colonialism” (263). In an ironic tone, Paolo Favero describes ‘brava gente’ in the following terms:

We are intrinsically generous, charitable, sociable, convivial and friendly. Neither xenophobic nor homophobic. Our doors are open to anyone and we would never hurt the stranger knocking at our door. Fundamentally, “we” are a good people, “*brava gente*.” (140)²⁸

There is less literature on this aspect of Spanish colonialism in Equatorial Guinea but some sources point nonetheless to a similar rhetoric of Spain as a ‘generous’ colonizing nation (Brydan 2). The maintenance of this myth, comparable to the Italian silencing of sources, is supported by the status of “*Materia reservada*” [classified matter] with respect to “all

²⁸ For critical discussions of the uses of the term ‘italiani brava gente,’ see Favero (2010), Nicola Labanca (2009), Angelo Del Boca (2005), Pierluigi Battista (2004).

information concerning Equatorial Guinea in Spain during the later years of the Franco dictatorship,” (N. Price 7) particularly between January 1971 and August 1976.²⁹

David Brydan’s (2017) case study on the violence against indigenous people in the Spanish missionary settlement of Mikomeseng, and Adriana Chira’s (2018) research on forced labour, especially of the Bubi ethnic group, in cocoa plantations in Fernando Poo are only two recent examples that contradict such benevolent accounts. In the Italian case, recent critical historiography (Boca 2003, 2005; Labanca 2000; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005; Palumbo 2003) has contributed to uncovering the colonial violence of Italy in the so-called *Africa Orientale Italiana* [Italian East Africa], as Mussolini has proclaimed it at the height of the empire in 1936. In the Portuguese case, early criticism started emerging from a few directions already in the 1950s and 1960s, still under the dictatorial regime: first, from the African students in *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* [Home of the Students of the Empire] in Lisbon, as explored by Manuela Ribeiro Sanches (2013); second, the English historian Charles Boxer (1963) has also vehemently denounced the racist relationships of the Portuguese in their colonies; and third, within fiction, Bernardo Honwana has condemned racism in “As mãos dos pretos,” a short story included in *Matámos o Cão Tinhoso* [*We Killed Mangy Dog*] (1964). Contradicting glorifying versions of the past, some of the case studies examined in this dissertation further debunk those myths.³⁰

Colonial Amnesia

The strategic state manipulation of the archives (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2) after the end

²⁹ For literary analyses on the pervasiveness of the Franco regime rhetoric in the colonial school system in Equatorial Guinea, see Price (2005).

³⁰ See particularly Chapters 3 and 4.

of the colonial period in Spain and in Italy has led to the silence regarding the “consequences of the countries’ imperial involvement in Africa” (Brancato 4). Simona Wright remarks that despite Italy’s history of colonization, “Italian historiography and, most suspiciously, Italian literature are mysteriously silent on the subject of colonial and postcolonial conditions” (14). Many scholars agree that this “removal of the colonial past and the institutional amnesia” (Triulzi 5) in Italian society is a way of “ignor[ing] the defeat and the loss of the colonies” (Curti 63) since the empire “ended not in a groundswell of nationalist revolts by colonized peoples [...] but by military defeat and diplomatic fiat” (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2).³¹ These authors argue that this abrupt loss resulted in a “limited reception of a decolonization process suffered, rather than desired, by the dominant classes and the public opinion of the time” (Triulzi 5).³²

A homologous colonial amnesia also surrounds Equatorial Guinea, which “doesn’t figure on the map” of Spanish colonialism (Brancato 4). Brancato explains that while Latin America is fully embraced by Spaniards as part of the imaginary of “*hispanidad*,” the notion of a “Hispanophone Africa” is not acknowledged in academia (5). For instance, Eleni Kefala, following Mignolo’s decolonial thinking, intends to undertake an impartial discussion of the “Hispanic World” but ends up neglecting the African side of its history. Likewise, Ponzanesi and Merolla ignore Equatorial Guinean writers residing in Spain in their discussion of Hispanophone writers. Brancato links these writers’ invisibility in the Spanish cultural establishment to two main factors: the fact that they are usually published by small

³¹ The Allied powers took over Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya as they routed Italian forces in Africa during World War II. The 1947 Paris Peace Treaty made these losses official (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2).

³² One of the leading voices in countering Italy’s colonial amnesia is Angelo Del Boca (1992; 2003).

publishing houses with very limited distribution (6), and the “long-enduring racist views that are usually not recognized as such,” (8). In recent years, though, Equatoguinean literature, as well as Maghrebi literatures in Spanish,³³ have started to receive some academic attention.³⁴

In Portugal, there is a neocolonial and paternalistic inclination towards the African former colonies, often charged with “nostalgia for lost grandeur” (Jensen 66), which tends to euphemize the actual contours of the colonial enterprise, with its violence, discrimination, and unequal gendered and racialized power relations. This attitude, in reality, belies a kind of silence that is not that different from the one described above in relation to Italy and Spain. Even though colonialism is not a taboo topic in Portugal, it tends to be filtered by a glorifying light that does a disservice to accurate historical representations. Picking up on this bias, Paulo Jorge de Sousa Pinto argues that

a memória dos portugueses enquanto povo permanece truncada no que diz respeito ao nosso passado colonial, ofuscada por “descobrimientos”, feitos, heróis, pioneirismo, brandos costumes e excecionalismo no que toca à relação com outros povos; e [...] essa memória truncada tolda o nosso entendimento do presente e impede-nos de debater com clareza e sensatez [...] velhas questões enraizadas, como a existência de problemas raciais em Portugal. (Pinto par. 8)³⁵

³³ See Campoy-Cubillo (2012) and Ricci (2010; 2014).

³⁴ Dosinda García-Alvite (2003), Joanna Boampong (2004; 2012), Marvin Lewis (2007), M’bare N’gom (2009), Michael Ugarte (2010), Lola Aponte-Ramos (2010), Dorothy Odartey-Wellington (2014; 2015; 2016) have all made important contributions to cultural and literary debates about Equatorial Guinea and its colonial and postcolonial literatures, mostly produced in the diaspora in Spain. Also worth of mention is the work developed in anthologies. Some notable ones are *Border Interrogations: Questioning Spanish Frontiers*, by Benita Sampedro Vizcaya and Simon R. Doubleday (2008), *De Guínea Ecuatorial a las literaturas hispanoafricanas* by Landry-Wilfrid Miampika and Patricia Arroyo (2010), and *African Immigrants in Contemporary Spanish Texts: Crossing the Strait* by Debra Faszer-McMahon and Victoria L. Ketz (2015).

³⁵ “the memory of the Portuguese people remains silenced with regard to our colonial past, overshadowed by ‘discoveries,’ great and pioneering deeds, heroes, mild manners and exceptionalism in relation to other peoples; and [...] this silenced memory obscures our understanding of the present and prevents us from debating in a clear and sensible way [...] old entrenched issues, such as the existence of racial problems in Portugal.”

This haunting nature of the Portuguese empire is studied in depth in anthologies such as *Fantasmas e Fantasias Imperiais no Imaginário Português Contemporâneo*, edited by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and Ana Paula Ferreira (2003), *Portugal Não é um País Pequeno*, by Manuela Ribeiro Sanches (2006), *Cidade e Império: Dinâmicas Coloniais e Reconfigurações Pós-coloniais* by Nuno Domingos and Elsa Peralta (2013), and *Geometrias da Memória: Configurações Pós-Coloniais* by António Sousa Ribeiro and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (2016). Important related discussions of postcoloniality were also proposed by Calafate Ribeiro (2003), Ferreira (2007; 2010; 2013), Madureira (2008), Teresa Pinheiro (2014), and Sheila Khan (2015) —with a chapter dedicated to the literature by returnees— among others.

In the Portuguese case there is yet an additional layer of subalternity, related to its common categorization under the Hispanophone cluster of theory, criticized by Ferreira as the “seemingly logical dyad ‘Spain and Portugal’” which relegates the latter to the status of “an afterthought of the first” (“Specificity” 24). The inadequate subsumption of Portuguese colonialism (and history, more generally) under the Spanish or Iberian cluster³⁶ overlooks the divergent approaches of those countries to their African past in the present, where one glorifies it and the other one ignores it. But it also disregards their rhetorical intersections under the regimes of Salazar and Franco, respectively. One notable intercolonial ‘borrowing’ is the supposedly anti-racist Portuguese colonial policy materialized in the myth of Lusotropicalism, and adapted as Hispanotropicalism in support of Spanish colonialism in

³⁶ For examples of this clustered analysis, see Mignolo (2000), Ponzanesi and Merolla (2005), Branche (2006), among others.

Africa under Franco (Nerín 1998).³⁷ Inspired by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre's ideas about the "adaptability of the Portuguese to different environments as the key to their success as colonizers" (Burke 71), the Lusotropicalist myth banks on the supposedly "[...] soft, natural form of cultural and racial mingling that spread as Portuguese explorers married and procreated with indigenous women" (Deventer and Thomas 348). In line with pro-miscegenation theories that intend to differentiate the Portuguese from the British, it blatantly implies, as Ferreira underscores, that "Luso-based societies had a multiracial propensity" ("Contesting" 103).³⁸ This theory depicts the Portuguese as more humane than other colonizers, and more physically able to adapt to different cultures and places.³⁹ In the Spanish case, it is used to 'soften' earlier colonial representations of Spaniards as aggressive and sanguinary.⁴⁰ In the Italoophone framework, interracial relations under colonialism between Italian men and African women are usually addressed as 'madamismo,' ['madamism,' from English word 'madam'] and even though later repealed by colonial laws, they were at first used to attract Italian men to the colonies (via postcards of half-naked indigenous women, for example).⁴¹ Although official policies increasingly controlled and restricted sexual relations between colonizer and colonized in the former

³⁷ Hispanotropicalism is further explored in my historical discussion in Chapter 4.

³⁸ Burke explains these ideas disseminated by Gilberto Freyre about the "adaptability of the Portuguese to different environments as the key to their success as colonizers" (71). Burke argues that this is a borrowing from the Anglophone view according to which "the English in particular were naturally suited for the task of colonization and the establishment of an empire" (71). But then he adds the Portuguese twist: "[w]here Froude argued that the chastity of the English helped them establish their empire, Freyre produced the opposite argument to explain the success of the Portuguese" (Burke 72).

³⁹ For the rhetorical use of Lusotropicalism by Salazar's regime to justify continued colonization in Africa, see Castelo (1999), and Araújo and Vasile (2014).

⁴⁰ For more on the heated debate about the degree of Spanish colonial violence in Latin America, check Keen (1969).

⁴¹ For detailed discussions on 'madamismo' and sexual regulations and representations under Italian colonialism, see Ponzanesi (2012), and Iyob (2005), for a focus on Eritrean women.

colonies of Somalia, Equatorial Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique, in the Portuguese and Spanish former colonies, they also indirectly drew on miscegenation narratives as a subtext to justify colonization and to address the ‘good’ character of Southern colonizers. This is a commonality across the three contexts, as transpired in the myths of ‘brava gente’ or ‘brandos costumes.’⁴²

Hilary Owen warns about the “implications for the way in which key terms of postcolonial criticism, such as ‘hybridity’ and ‘ambivalence’ come to be understood as materially raced and sexed concepts” (“Women’s” 498) if read against the discourses of miscegenation advanced by Portuguese colonialism (and borrowed by the Spanish, we could add). Not only are these narratives ‘raced’ and ‘sexed’ but they also disclose “the sexist rules of sexuality that usually allow the white man to sleep with the black woman, but not the white woman with the black man” (Santos 17). These tropicalist myths also emphasize the violence belied by celebrated discourses of hybridity and métissage. This pervades representations of children of mixed race couples as untrustworthy, as Maryam, a Somali character of *Oltre Babilonia*, remembers: “Brutta gente i *mission*, si diceva in giro, non c'era da fidarsi di loro, avevano dentro il sangue dell'invasore, erano pronti al tradimento” (Scego 110).⁴³

⁴² ‘great people’, ‘mild manners’

⁴³ “the *mission* were bad people, people said, you couldn’t trust them, they carried the invader’s blood, they were set for betrayal.” Anna Proto Pisani explains the term ‘mission’: “Missioni est ainsi un terme italien qui, dans la langue somali pendant le fascisme, indiquait par métonymie les enfants métis qui étaient forcés de grandir dans les missions religieuses, pour pouvoir obtenir une instruction de base et accéder à la nationalité italienne. Par un glissement sémantique ultérieur, ce mot a fini par désigner le métis en général” (120).

Past Fears in the Transnational Present

Previously emigrant countries, Portugal and Spain have seen their influx of immigrants grow exponentially since the mid-seventies, and Italy since the eighties: first, from the former African colonies, Eastern Europe, South America and North Africa, and since the 2000s, migrants seeking refuge from conflict zones, often entering Italy and Spain in dire conditions following perilous crossings of the Mediterranean Sea. But while waves of migrants from former colonies arrived in Portugal and, to a much lesser degree, in Spain immediately after the fall of these countries' dictatorships in the mid-1970s, they only started arriving in Italy in the mid-1980s. In fact, Manuela Coppola notes that, unlike other European countries, only recently "has Italy started confronting its colonial past and the consequences of global mass migration" (121). Concurrently, Lombardi-Diop and Romeo argue that the Italian postcolonial consciousness was actually deferred to the moment when the country started receiving these immigrants (7). Curti remarks however that Italy has accepted but not "welcomed" the newcomers (62). She explains that the connection of some of these immigrants with the Italian colonial past is often an avoided topic because, as the "colonial adventure is removed from the Italian imaginary and from historical memory; it is not studied in school, and until recently has rarely been the object of research and reassessment" (62). This wave of migrants is received with apprehension and often with hostility, which surely complicates the question of their integration (Wright 2). Curti attributes such attitudes in Italian society to lingering racism from the colonial experience

that has “left a long trail in the popular imaginary, through songs, images, stereotypes, caricatures, slogans” (63).⁴⁴

Drawing on a study done by Isabel Santaolalla, Vega-Durán observes that the “Latin American immigrant tends to be approached as a more ‘familiar’ presence, while the African immigrant [...] is perceived as the Other par excellence” (xvii). As anachronistic as it may sound, given that Spain’s colonial history in Latin American precedes the one in Equatorial Guinea, ‘racialization’ appears to be the motor of such discrimination. As Deventer and Thomas emphasize, the idea of Lusotropicalism still “lingers in the Portuguese imaginary in the form of a reluctance to acknowledge the brutality and the long-lasting consequences of its colonial enterprise [...]” (348). One of these consequences is, just as in the neighbouring countries of Spain and Italy, an undercover enduring xenophobia. Addressing this ‘undercover’ work of discrimination, Ferreira draws attention to the fact that racism persists “through the many subtle ways provided by the politically correct, officially anti-racist, language of democracy and multiculturalism [...]” (“The Colonial” 287). Playing precisely on the incompatibility between being compassionate (or ‘brando’) and racist, Joana Gorjão Henriques rewrites the original motto of ‘brandos costumes’ and critically replaces it with a racial undertone in her new book *Racismo no País dos Brancos Costumes* [Racism in the Country of the *White Manners*, emphasis added], just released on May 4, 2018.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ For an excellent discussion that complicates national definitions by intertwining them with racial and linguistic assumptions, see Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2012).

⁴⁵ See Marta Lança (2015) for a study on racism against African immigrants and black Portuguese. For racism (also known as ‘colourism’) between mixed-race people inherited from the Portuguese assimilation policy, see Khan (2006). For a study on anti-black discrimination in Portugal from a socio-anthropological perspective, see Neusa Maria Mendes de Gusmão (2005). Current racism in Portugal is explained within the framework of Lusotropicalism in Jorge Vala, Diniz Lopes, and Marcus Lima (2008).

Decolonizing Labels

Both Portugal and Spain are currently targets of what Graham Huggan calls “reverse colonialism,” a phenomenon that implies the inversion of processes of colonization (“Postcolonial Europe” 243). He gives the example of Brazil, which has supplanted its former colonizer “in terms of global cultural capital, economic potential and geopolitical power” (243). Even though none of the Spanish-speaking Latin American countries has statistically supplanted its former colonizer in terms of economic growth, we cannot disregard the prolific cultural production emerging from different Latin American countries, and, in addition, the fact that postcolonial theory in Spanish is being shaped to a great extent by Latinamericanists. Simultaneously, umbrella categories such as *Lusofonia* or *Hispanidad* still bank on supranational imagined communities of Portuguese, or Spanish speakers, mostly gathered precisely in Latin America. Although there is to a certain extent a comparable relationship with the former Latin American colonies, Portugal and Spain approach their ex-colonies in Africa in a considerably different manner.⁴⁶

Vega-Durán observes that in the Spanish market Latin American authors are perceived as familiar when compared to African writers (labeled ‘as outsiders’) and often figure under the tag of “Spanish literature” (211). The literature of Equatorial Guinea, mostly written in exile, in Spain, is addressed by M’bare N’gom as “literatura hispano-africana” (411) and by Deventer and Thomas as “Afro-Hispanophone” (349).⁴⁷ In this context, the term ‘hispanophone’ does not seem to raise much criticism amongst scholars or writers, which

⁴⁶ Hoping to shift the predominant focus of Hispanophone studies away from the Latin American axis, Adam Lifshy (2012) proposes the field of global literature in Spanish as a transnational model to account for fiction written in Spanish from Equatorial Guinea and the Philippines.

⁴⁷ See N’gom (2009) for a discussion on the circumstances surrounding the creation of a literature from Equatorial Guinea in exile, especially in Spain.

might be illuminated by the particular circumstances of Equatorial Guinea during and after colonialism. It is important to remember that the colonial model in Equatorial Guinea followed an indirect rule policy established through missions, which contrasts with the larger settler colonies established in Angola, Mozambique, and Somalia by the Portuguese and the Italians, respectively. Also, there were different Europeans present in Guinea at different times: first the Portuguese starting in 1472, followed by the British in the early nineteenth century, and finally the Spaniards, who despite their colonizer status (since the concession of the territories by the Portuguese in the 18th century), held control only between 1855 and 1968. And then we should not forget the impact of the French-speaking countries that surround Guinea, as well as the neocolonial threats of France and the United States (Odarthey-Wellington, "El Exiliado" 166), making Spain less of a threat and more of an escape route. Under Franco, the country was linguistically and socially isolated: the Spanish language was not spoken in any of the surrounding countries, and the flow of information was restricted by the regime, making it impossible for Equatorial Guinea to collaborate with African nationalist movements developing elsewhere (Deventer and Thomas 349). Aponte and Rizo explain how this "confinamiento" [confinement] continued post-independence with the dictatorships of Francisco Macías Nguema, between 1968-1979, and then of Teodoro Obiang, since 1979 until the present (746). As will be explored in the works by Guillermina Mekuy, Spain is mostly portrayed in a positive light, whereas in María Nsue the indirect criticisms of Spain are addressed at Europe as a whole. The Spanish language, moreover, is perceived as a distinguishing identity factor that separates Equatorial Guinea from the

surrounding countries (Ugarte 30).⁴⁸ As Equatoguinean writer Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo expresses in an interview, the Spanish language works as a

instrumento pragmático para facilitar la unificación y armonización entre los diversos grupos étnicos de Guinea Ecuatorial, por un lado, y, por otro, como indicador de la singularidad de la experiencia colonial de este país. (Rizo 204)⁴⁹

As in Equatorial Guinea, the former colonial language is also part of national projects in Angola and Mozambique. However, the currency of *lusofonia* as a postcolonial project is a much more charged label than that of ‘hispanophone,’ often perceived as a neocolonial attempt when used in discussions of Portugal’s national identity. Miguel Vale de Almeida maintains that

The democratic nation-state did not abandon the master national narrative based on the Discoveries and refashioned it in modern terms by means of promoting special ties with the ex-colonies and creating the notion of lusophony, largely equivalent to the better known francophony. (“Anthropology” 438)

In a similar way, Alfredo Margarido believes that the idea of *Lusofonia* implies a ‘linguistic’ colonialism that tries to recover the old Portuguese hegemony (*A Lusofonia* 76). There is an established literature of African origins in Portugal, initially referred to as a whole under the label of ‘Literaturas Africanas de Expressão Portuguesa’ [Portuguese-language African literatures],⁵⁰ and over the past decade or so more distinctly divided into the national

⁴⁸ The circumstances under which Spanish was maintained as a postcolonial language in Equatorial Guinea is discussed at length by John Lipski (2000).

⁴⁹ “pragmatic tool that facilitates the unification and harmonization among the different ethnic groups of Equatorial Guinea, on the one hand, and, on the other, it is an indicator of the particular colonial experience of this country.”

⁵⁰ For seminal studies on ‘Literaturas Africanas de Expressão Portuguesa,’ see Patrick Chabal (1994), Russel Hamilton (1981; 1984), Gerald Moser and Manuel Ferreira (1983), Inocência Mata (1992), Pires Laranjeira (1995), and Ana Mafalda Leite (1998).

literatures of Angola, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde. This is where, for instance, Paulina Chiziane is usually placed, as a leading voice in Mozambican literature, despite often being overshadowed by her male counterpart, Mia Couto. Even though granting writers access to publication, the label is problematic because, according to Inocência Mata, it represents for many a mere “apêndice da literatura portuguesa” (Mata “A Crítica” 3).⁵¹ These literatures coming from former colonies are welcomed with enthusiasm and make their way through university curricula, despite being often presented in an exotic way, domesticated by the Portuguese academy and publishing industry. An example of this can be found in Paulina Chiziane’s editorial and paratextual elements (covers, introductions) that tend to anthropologize her work.⁵² I further address the ‘anthropologizing’ of African literatures in Chapter 2, where I also show how the texts under analysis hybridize and decolonize the major language, be it Spanish, Portuguese, or Italian.

Due to the fact that “education for ‘the natives’ was neglected or kept at an elementary level” under Italian colonialism (unlike other colonial regimes, such as the British and French), Curti finds the growth of a diasporic literature in Italian quite surprising (64). The same colonial policy occurred in the Portuguese context, but the body of literature of African origins has been more visible perhaps due to the fact that Portuguese continued to be used as an official language in those former colonies. Because of the defeat that led to the end of Italian colonialism, “Italian did not remain the official language in any of Italy’s former colonies” (Ben-Ghiat “Italy” 266). Indeed, the British made an effort to replace any Italian

⁵¹ “appendix to Portuguese literature”

⁵² I have explored this further elsewhere: see “O Corpo como Itinerário Cultural em Paulina Chiziane” [Body as a Cultural Itinerary in the Works of Paulina Chiziane] (2012).

traces with their own presence and language in Eritrea and Somalia but this was later changed by Italy's 'return' to Somalia under the United Nations' Trusteeship system between 1950 and 1960.

The postcolonial and transnational literatures coming from former colonies in Africa or, more conspicuously, from Italian descendants with African heritage (like Igiaba Scego) fall under the label of 'migrant writing.'⁵³ The tag 'letteratura migrante'⁵⁴ is, as Armando Gnisci explains, "la versione italiana dell'emergere delle letterature post-coloniali nelle lingue europee della grande colonizzazione" (*Creolizzare l'Europa* 83).⁵⁵ Coppola argues that "[a]lthough they gain increasing visibility through access to publication, these writers still occupy ambiguous spaces of exotic objectification and limiting definitions" (121). She adds that this exoticism is particularly poignant in the case of women, who generally occupy marginal social positions that reduce them to the condition of objects (121). Ponzanesi and Merolla question, thus, the label of 'migrant writing' because it might "relegate [these writers] to a luxury ghetto" (4). Thinking particularly of second and third generations of migrants and of the risk of their "ghettoization from the mainstream canon, be it of the home or hosting nation," Ponzanesi and Merolla pertinently ask "When does a migrant stop being a migrant?" (4). The urge to label "seems to respond to the urge of somehow controlling the new phenomenon of subjects of non-Italian origins claiming their space into the national

⁵³ The label of 'migrant writing' also circulates in Spain, although to a lesser extent due to the fact that this literature is only very recently being acknowledged. Brancato explains that an important contribution is being made by African migrant writers from non-Hispanophone countries who act as mediators between Spaniards and Spain-based African communities (14).

⁵⁴ 'migrant literature'

⁵⁵ "the Italian version of the postcolonial literatures that have emerged in the European languages of big colonialisms." The term 'migrant' is problematic because some of these authors, like Igiaba Scego, were born in Italy and their 'migrant' category is only assigned based on racial prejudices that target them as 'other.' Triulzi tries to solve this by using the label 'italophone,' when he mentions a "newborn italophone postcolonial literature" ("Displacing" 431) to draw attention to the recent nature of the creation of the field.

literary community” (Coppola 126). This same ‘literary community’ has awarded Somali-Italian Igiaba Scego in 2011 the prestigious Mondello prize in the category of Italian author, suggesting that representations of who can be an Italian writer are changing over time. It is striking, though, that even critics fall into the trap of ‘othering.’ For instance, Italian professor at Naples Lidia Curti includes Scego in a group of “newcomers” to Italy, despite the fact that she was born and raised in the country (Curti 72).⁵⁶ In a similar tone, a publisher’s comment on the inside cover of the 2005 short stories’ anthology *Pecore Nere* [Black Sheep] authored by Igiaba Scego and three other young and female transnational writers⁵⁷ affirms that the book will help understand “noi e loro” [us and them].

Unlike the situation in Spain and Italy, where there is a niche market for literatures written by migrants and their descendants, in Portugal the label of ‘migrant’ literature is only just timidly developing. Marta Lança considers *A Verdade de Chindo Luz*, by Joaquim Arena (2006) “o primeiro de uma inexistente literatura da diáspora” (par. 19).⁵⁸ This work is preceded by the seminal *Cais-do-Sodré té Salamansa* (1974), a collection of short stories about the lives of Cape Verdean emigrants in Lisbon by Cape Verdean writer Orlanda Amarílis.⁵⁹ Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s *Esse Cabelo* seems to continue in this tradition. Asked in an interview if she feels African, Almeida replies: “Sim, e totalmente lisboeta, mas uma pessoa como eu é sempre uma rapariga africana em Lisboa” (Lucas, “Uma Rapariga”

⁵⁶ This seems to happen inadvertently since Curti’s article makes a plea for recognition of Scego’s (and others’) literature in the Italian canon.

⁵⁷ Gabriella Kuruvilla, Ingy Mubiayi Kakese, and Laila Wadia.

⁵⁸ “the first book of an inexistente diasporic literature.” Born in 1964 in Cape Verde of a Portuguese father and a Cape Verdean mother, Arena grew up in Portugal and has been living between Lisbon and São Vicente. Recently, he has also published *Debaixo da Nossa Pele* [Under Our Skin] (2017).

⁵⁹ Maria Regina Barros (2005) has framed Amarílis’s work as “literatura de exílio” [literature of exile] (8).

par. 11).⁶⁰ Born in Angola, she has lived her childhood and adult life in Portugal. With similar travelling histories, Dulce Maria Cardoso (who grew up in Angola) and Isabela Figueiredo (born in Mozambique) are not discussed as diasporic or exilic writers but instead are included in an informal subgroup of Portuguese literature called “*literatura dos ‘retornados’*” [literature of returnees] (Khan 2015). These are all, one way or another, transnational anti-racist literatures about the African experience, but the colour line that separates the writers appears to produce its own labeling processes, uncovering some of the mechanisms of society at large.⁶¹ Bearing in mind Cardoso’s “*literatura de retornados*,” Maria Araújo da Silva explains that these works “envisagent l’importance du processus de décolonisation dans la construction d’une identité en mouvement marquée par cette ‘fracture’ qui hante l’actuel post-colonialisme portugais” (Silva 3).⁶²

The Minor Against ‘Linguistic Darwinism’⁶³

Proposing new and needed directions for Italian postcolonial studies, Ponzanesi calls for the need to

⁶⁰ “Yes, and totally *lisboeta* [demonym for Lisbon], but a person like me is always an African girl in Lisbon.”

⁶¹ Both Cardoso (Gomes 2015) and Figueiredo (*Caderno* 131) perceive their texts as a ‘treason’ to the returnees because they denounce, unlike many of the nostalgic returnee accounts, the racist and sexist ideology that guided Salazar’s regime and the colonial and postcolonial relationships in Angola and Mozambique (Figueiredo, in particular, is overtly critical).

⁶² Perhaps less incipient is the development of an Afro-Portuguese hip-hop (Fradique 2003) and of a filmography related to African immigrants and their descendants (Arenas 2012). According to Arenas, “Many Luso-African hip-hop artists have documented or denounced the lives of the marginalized Afro-descendant youths in Portugal, in addition to expressing hopes for a better life in a more tolerant and accepting society, while identifying with and appropriating the globalized aesthetics, language, sounds, and countercultural ideology of African American inner-city youth” (“Cinematic” 17).

⁶³ I borrow the term from Norrie MacQueen, who says that Mozambique “is undergoing a form of linguistic Darwinism in which Portuguese may eventually be displaced by English (a process accelerated by Mozambique’s Commonwealth membership)” (“The Liberation” 466).

intensify the field of comparative postcolonial studies in order to account for multiple alliances and divergences. In this way Italian studies would free itself from its own national ghetto and acquire visibility and credibility by engaging with other traditions. (“The Postcolonial” 61)

This type of comparative exercise has advantages both on a theoretical and on a pragmatic level. As my discussion has shown, the currency of labels such as ‘Lusophone,’ ‘Hispanophone,’ and ‘Italophone’ is not identical, in the same way that the terms ‘hybridity’ and ‘métissage’ carry particular undertones when applied to those three contexts. Portugal, Spain, and Italy have modelled their colonial projects partially after the British (indirect rule in Equatorial Guinea, Italian anti-assimilation policy) and the French (assimilation policy in Portuguese colonies), but to better grasp the consequences of those colonialisms in the postcolonial moment, there is a “limited applicability of Anglo-French models of imperialism” (Ben-Ghiat, “Italy” 264) and thus it is not efficient to simply adapt “noções sedutoras do repertório pós-colonial estrangeiro” (Khan “Prefácio” 4).⁶⁴ Certainly, mainstream postcolonial theory has offered invaluable insight that illuminates other contexts but now it is also time that other contexts refract back and across each other with their own particular situations.

Some comparative work has been actively attempting to move beyond the Anglophone bias. One example is *Comparing Postcolonial Diasporas*, edited by Michelle Keown, David Murphy, and James Procter (2009), which draws links across Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanic and Neerlandophone linguistic frameworks. As I work on this doctoral research, other dissertations with similar preoccupations to mine came out. In her

⁶⁴ “seductive notions from the foreign postcolonial repertoire.” Note that here ‘foreign’ refers to mainstream postcolonial theory.

dissertation *Euroblack: Race and Immigration in Contemporary Afro-European Literature* (2011), Allison Van Deventer studied African diasporic writing in France (Bessora, Sami Tchak), Italy (Jadelin Gangbo), and Portugal (Germano Almeida), making an important contribution to discussions of ‘racialization’ in Europe. Martin Repinecz, in his dissertation titled *Southern Europe Unraveled: Migrant Resistance and Rewriting in Spain and Italy* (2013), studied the rewriting of canonical literary texts by Afro-European authors working in Spain (Najat el-Hachmi, Francisco Zamora Lobo) and Italy (Amara Lakhous, Jadelin Gangbo). Finally, Simone Brioni’s book (based on his dissertation), *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in ‘Minor’ Italian Literature* (2015) discusses texts by Somali-Italian writers, including *Oltre Babilonia*, by Igiaba Scego, and *Madre Piccola*, by Cristina Ali Farah. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s minor literature model, Brioni shows how Somali elements ‘deterritorialize’ the Italian language. While his analyses are convincing, he treats Italian as a major language, failing to acknowledge Italy’s own position as ‘minor’ in relation to other centres.

My ‘minor’ approach draws attention to the plurilingual character of the current transnational world and reminds us of the importance of a polyphonic consciousness as the only way to avoid that “small languages succumb to big ones” (Apter, “On Translation” 11). Furthermore, a comparative horizontal study fosters the recovery of what has been subsumed or neglected in hierarchical postcolonial discourse. Stam and Shohat propose that an intercolonial comparison focuses on “ideas in transit, pointing to their reaccentuation as they circulate through various zones in a back-and-forth that transcends an idiom of origin/copy, native/foreign, and export/import, within a narrative that foregrounds the in-between of

languages and discourses” (300). Furthermore, Lionnet and Shih see great value in perspectives that bring “postcolonial minor cultural formations across national boundaries into productive comparisons, and engage with multiple linguistic formations” (11). This comparative exercise, besides making clear the historical coexistence of different colonialisms, also promotes a deeper understanding of the varied consequences of multiple imperial and colonial practices and discourses. The focus on the consequences and paths of “lesser empires” promotes a reversal in the postcolonial Southern European amnesia and/or distortions and de-marginalizes “promising writing in the minor European languages” (Curti 64). A ‘minor’ model of analysis seems to be the optimal site to discuss and compare these particular contexts of Portuguese-, Spanish-, and Italian-speaking postcolonial literatures, contributing to unveiling silenced parts of the historical archive and to deepening knowledge of the different colonialisms and of the postcolonial and transnational situations. The emphasis on ‘minor’ languages can also counter a homogenized cultural canon and fuel a real transnational sensibility that accommodates the specificities of given contexts.

Negative representations of Africa, and of Africans —particularly women— are challenged in the texts under scrutiny in this dissertation, problematizing in fundamental ways the pervasive nature of colonial thought that persists to the present and is particularly visible in the treatment of ‘racialized’ individuals, both immigrants and citizens, with real or imagined ties to Africa. Pointing in this direction, Ferreira suggests that “[...] literature can bring to light the colonial script that survives not only in postcolonial ideologies of ‘race’ but also in concrete practices, including languages, racisms in metropolitan contexts of immigration and multiculturalism” (“The Colonial Form” 277). The ways in which this

‘colonial script’ is perpetuated in imperial and post-imperial Italoophone, Hispanophone, and Lusophone societies is both illustrated and challenged in the literary works. Current myths that support Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian national discourses are disrupted, contributing also to a rewriting of Europe. The definition of nation offered by Benedict Anderson, “imagined as a *community*,” and “always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” despite “the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail” (7) is questioned by these texts because they propose affiliations that are no longer national but transnational. Furthermore, the myths that support these ‘nations’ are rebutted and new definitions of the postcolonial, post-imperial start to emerge. A rewriting exercise is also undertaken in relation to women of African descent, along the lines argued by Ponzanesi.⁶⁵ In her study on ‘madamismo,’ she makes an important plea against obsolete prejudiced representations of black women:

[M]any of the voyeuristic and stereotypical representations of the black female as both “primitive and sexually available” and “menacing and dangerous” continued, almost unchanged, into the postcolonial era, showing that racist thinking is still widespread, though it resonates differently in contemporary perceptions of the other. It is therefore important to recode those outdated colonial images with less biased representations that re-narrate the colonial encounter from new standpoints and through diverse representational practices. (“The Color of Love” 167)

By drawing attention to ‘othering’ practices that erase some subjects from history, while inscribing others, these authors put forth a counter-discourse that promotes and provokes a “cultural decolonization” (Wright 8), showing that linguistic and cultural difference *define*

⁶⁵ A compelling contribution has been made by Tatjana Williams in her dissertation *La storia conta e pesa: The Ghosts of Colonial Past in Igiaba Scego's Writings* (2011) where an overview of texts that continue colonial imagery is provided and then contrasted with some of Scego’s texts that undo colonial representations, especially in relation to representations of black women.

contemporary societies. Regardless of Portugal's, Spain's, and Italy's varying approaches to their colonial pasts, the fact is that the "European borderline is now being redefined by voices which once were excluded or marginalized from its main body" (Ponzanesi and Merolla 6). Almost all of these writers currently live in Europe; however, their location is less important than their *situation*. Their works target (mostly) a Western readership and are (mostly) published in Europe. With their uniqueness, they each represent a different postcolonial situatedness, from where they renegotiate marginalized postcolonial and transcultural identities complicated by vectors of gender and race.

Chapter 2

Am I What I Speak? Language as a Site of Identity Claim

*Mas o exército de mulheres estava de mãos nuas.
Confiava na arma da língua. Da persuasão.
Da negociação. Era um exército pacífico.*⁶⁶
Paulina Chiziane, *O Alegre Canto da Perdiz*, 15

*Reinventamos o português,
os tugas a aprenderem connosco,
somos colonos desta vez.*⁶⁷
Lyrics from “É Dreda Ser Angolano,”⁶⁸ by Ngonguenha

*So, if you want to really hurt me,
talk badly about my language.*
Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 81

The texts analyzed in this dissertation were originally produced within the Portuguese, Spanish, or Italian markets but their transnational authors, often formed by more than one language and more than one culture, rely on multiple language-related narrative strategies in order to creatively communicate their plural identities “across gaps of cultural knowledge” (Tymoczko, “Cultural Translation” 230). These texts are impacted by histories of colonization and postcolonial migrations that complicate definitions of home, identity, origin, belonging, and certainly, of mother tongue. Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian, the former colonial languages of Mozambique and Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Somalia, respectively, are challenged and reinvented through different processes of linguistic and

⁶⁶ “But the army of women was bare-handed. They trusted the weapon of the tongue. Of persuasion. Of negotiation. They were a peaceful army.”

⁶⁷ “We reinvented the Portuguese language/now the Portuguese people [pejorative] learn from us/it’s our turn as colonizers”

⁶⁸ “It’s cool to be Angolan”

narrative innovation, often mediated by acts of cultural translation. Tina Steiner defines cultural translation as a manipulation of language in such a way as to signify translated experience, arguing that these “translation processes can open up pockets of resistance to dominant discourses [...] which seek to regulate and control social and linguistic behaviour in particular ways” (Steiner 1).

These innovative plurilingual and heteroglossic processes materialize in the texts of Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ali Farah, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, Dulce Maria Cardoso, Paulina Chiziane, Isabela Figueiredo, Maria Nsue Angüe, and Guillermina Mekuy in numerous ways: through the explicit insertion of different languages (code-switching, inclusion of foreign words, loanwords, and neologisms); diglossic difference, or different registers of the same language; the use of oral narrative modes (phone conversation, song, interview), and/or use of arguably *less* literary genres (email, letter, diary);⁶⁹ multi-voiced narratives; literal and cultural translation strategies; and the questioning of issues such as language choice, mother tongue, and the power of colonial/imperial languages. Furthermore, the plurilingualism of these texts emerges from what Catherine Khordoc has called the “thématisation de notions babéliennes telles que la traduction, la créolisation, l’exil, et de questionnements d’ordre philosophique sur le langage” (227). In these texts there are different translational processes: the authors write in formerly colonial languages, into which they translate cultural phenomena and traditions constructed in (or in cohabitation with) other languages, while simultaneously translating social experiences of diaspora and exile marked by gender, race, and social status. Drawing upon Haroldo de Campos’s concept of translation

⁶⁹ This is based on a perception of what enters the canon and not on a personal judgement of these genres.

as blood transfusion and as ‘parricidal dis-memory,’ Susan Bassnett describes postcolonial translation in the following terms: “It is parricidal because it involves killing off the power of the source and reasserting the right of the translator (the colonised) to speak in her own voice, whilst simultaneously recognizing the source as inspirational” (Bassnett 93). These authors take over the major language and make it their own. The ‘colonised’ status is no longer officially dictated but is instead refashioned within postcolonial power dynamics, with their inherited colonial and imperial fractures. Even though all literary case studies discussed in this dissertation present a preoccupation with language and representation, and employ some of the above-mentioned linguistic strategies, some do so in a more explicit and self-reflexive manner. It is not my goal, thus, to strike a perfect balance between the discussion of case studies; instead, I consider at length those texts that more forthrightly illustrate the subversive potential of linguistic strategies, while alluding in passing to other texts that contribute to the conversation.

In her 2011 article entitled “Comparative Literature and the Global Languagescape,” Mary Louise Pratt proposes that we think about contemporary migration through language since, “when people move, their languages move with them, and this is not a matter of choice” (275). One result of this phenomenon is that the meaning of home becomes inflected by an increasing shift from national to transnational belongings, leaving within the fluid domain of language one of the fundamental sites where identity is embedded or uprooted in transnational writings. As pertinent as a study on language may appear to be, Pratt notices that, astonishingly, “language has not been a category of analysis in the now vast academic literature on globalization” (274). Along the same lines, bell hooks remarks that “[r]ecent

discussions of diversity and multiculturalism tend to downplay or ignore the question of language” (“Language” 173). She suggests that “[s]hifting how we think about language and how we use it necessarily alters how we know what we know” (hooks, “Language” 174). The languages we speak are not only codes we use to communicate but also lenses through which we see (and are seen in) the world. They carry power relationships.

It is my intention to show how the authors of my corpus’ multilingualism highlights alterity and subjectivity by enabling readers to envision more complex and diverse perspectives of the societies they inhabit,⁷⁰ composed by many “local histories” (Mignolo *Local* 40), where languages transform, translate, and decolonize the purported homogeneity of national discourses and definitions of belonging. Informed by migratory and diasporic movements, multilingualism gives visibility to minority languages and peoples, promotes intercultural dialogue and acceptance, and, most crucially, allows for the creation of new literary languages.⁷¹

The theoretical background that underpins this chapter is based on the concept of ‘minor literature’ developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, updated by the ‘minor transnationalism’ model of Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. The notion of heteroglossia is borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin, and reworked by Lise Gauvin. The particular contribution of women’s writing draws on Françoise Lionnet’s ideas about transnational women’s writing. Even though Deleuze and Guattari apply the term ‘minor literature’ to Kafka’s work, some of

⁷⁰ I do not mean to assume that all readership is located in Europe. But issues related to “índices de analfabetismo, escolaridade e poder de compra” [“illiteracy, schooling and purchasing power”] (Hamilton, “A Literatura” 22) are serious obstacles to the creation of a broad readership mass in the African countries where some of these authors were born or grew up. I discuss the marketing of difference later in this chapter.

⁷¹ The use of multilingualism to describe a postcolonial, migrant, and diasporic society is not exclusive of the so-called ‘postcolonial’ writers. In this respect, see for instance *Irene ou o Contrato Social* (2000) by Maria Velho da Costa.

their postulations gain an empowering currency when applied to women writers working in transnational, exilic, diasporic, and postcolonial contexts. Particularly emblematic is the concept of “deterritorialization” (16), which consists in the creative use of a major language by minority writers that provokes a dissolution and a re-creation of cultural spaces (28).

Lionnet and Shih argue that Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of minor in opposition to major falls in the trap of emphasizing the centre while critiquing it (3). Trying to move away from a vertical analytical axis between centre and periphery, Lionnet and Shih propose to focus on the “rarely examine[d] [...] relationships among different margins” (2). This is also the aim of my discussion: to bring into conversation different texts and their different levels of marginality.

In the novel, heteroglossia, as studied by Bakhtin “is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” (681). He explains that it can emerge through a variety of languages, multiple voices, and multiple discourses within the text. Reflecting on Bakhtin’s language model, Gauvin clarifies that the “plurilinguisme bakhtinien est complexe et met en cause aussi bien l’hétéroglossie ou diversité des langues, l’hétérophonie ou diversité des voix, et l’hétérologie ou diversité des registres sociaux et des niveaux de langue” (11). She is interested in the writing strategies that embody multilingualism, which she links both to “les langues étrangères” and “les niveaux de langues” (7). She argues that multilingual authors experience two acts of deterritorialization: the first relates to “le passage de l’oral à l’écrit” and the second is “créée par des publics immédiats ou éloignés, séparés par des acquis culturels et langagiers

différents” (10). Keeping in mind Francophone contexts, she outlines the different strategies that typify multilingualism:

Stratégies qui prennent les formes les plus diverses, de la transgression pure à l’intégration, dans le cadre de la langue française, d’un procès de traduction ou d’un substrat venu d’une autre langue, sans compter les tentatives de normalisation d’un certain parler vernaculaire ou régional, ou la cohabitation de langues ou de niveaux de langues, qu’on désigne généralement sous le nom de plurilinguisme ou d’hétérolinguisme textuel. (10)

Some of these strategies related to language, voice, and social register are explored in the chapter, and attention is drawn to the ways in which they contribute to producing an actual new language that challenges and interferes with the (illusion of) homogeneity of the major language itself.

In her discussion about women’s texts from postcolonial contexts, Françoise Lionnet explains that these writings “show us precisely how the subject is ‘multiply organized’ across cultural boundaries and languages” (*Postcolonial Representations* 5). She argues that these authors put forth a “mongrelization or métissage of cultural forms” achieved through the manipulation of the colonial language in such a way that they “enrich, transform, and creolize it” (7). From the shifting peripheries from where these authors work (or start working),⁷² “there is an incessant and playful heteroglossia, a bilingual speech or hybrid language that is a site of creative resistance to the dominant conceptual paradigms” (Lionnet

⁷² Even though Scego, Farah, Almeida, Cardoso, Figueiredo, Chiziane, Nsue, and Mekuy are all peripheral to globalized (read Anglophone) canons of postcolonial literature, the positions of some of them within the contexts in which they write and publish is swiftly changing. Some important factors are their involvement in consecration acts, such as prizes, and the international (read English-speaking) attention of Lusophone, Italoophone, and Hispanophone scholars, which has led to translations and incorporation of some texts in university curricula. Also, Nsue and Chiziane play pioneering roles in the canons of Equatorial Guinean and Mozambican literatures (canons established mostly outside of those countries, especially in the former case), having been the first women to write a novel in either context.

6). Lionnet's maxim "la langue nous parle et parle en nous" (9) reflects the intricacies of the polyphonic, polyglot and multilayered literatures created by transnational writers, who operate a transformation by "braiding" multiple traditions and fragments (5).

This chapter is divided into five main parts. Part one, "Babel, Mother Tongue, and Translation" is bipartite: the first section, "Beyond Babylon" discusses the myth of Babel in *Oltre Babilonia*, by Scego, and *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, by Mekuy, paying attention to questions of plurilingualism and heteroglossia, and their relationship with translation, agency, and sexuality; the second section, "Owning the Mother Tongue" tackles definitions of identity and belonging embedded in the use of sociolects (Romanesco) and standardized languages (Italian, Spanish) and considers intersections of definitions of mother tongue and 'racialization' in Scego's text and in Farah's *Madre Piccola*. Part two, "De-Colonized Languages" reflects on practices of cultural translation and linguistic deterritorialization as decolonial exercises and/or marketing strategies through the textual inclusion of formerly colonized languages (Fang, Somali) and anti-colonial toponymy; referenced novels are *Ekomo* by Nsue, *Oltre Babilonia* by Scego, *Las Trés Vírgenes* by Mekuy, and *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* by Figueiredo. Part three, "Colonial Languages and Cultural Imperialism" addresses the impact of globalization in the creation of cultural imperialism as well as the ways in which formerly colonial languages and their attached Western patriarchal scripts are challenged in Farah, Mekuy, Figueiredo, Cardoso, Almeida, Nsue, and Chiziane. Part four, "Exoticism and Subversiveness" draws on theories of the exotic as a twofold label that can both disallow and empower. Part five closes the chapter by

advancing the idea of “Writing as Home” as an insurrectionary ‘location’ from where transnational women writers can root their practice.

I. Babel, Mother Tongue, and Translation

Beyond Babylon

Oltre Babilonia, by Igiaba Scego, is told in five voices, in Italian but with echoes of many other languages (Somali, English, French, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese), and by virtue of a multiplicity of genres. The five main characters, Zuhra, Mar, Miranda, Maryam, and Elias, in a painful retrieval of events, each attempt to deal with their traumas and make peace with the past and with each other. As their narratives unfold, their intersected trajectories also cross the borders of countries, cultures, and languages. They each have an epithet, which gives the reader hints about their complicated identities, relating to the struggles they try to overcome through or in relation to language. “*La Reaparecida*”⁷³ is Miranda, an Argentinian writer of Portuguese and Italian ancestry, who flees her home country in the 1970s and settles in Rome. In the form of a long letter, she addresses her daughter, not only to tell Mar about the father she does not know, Elias, but also to confess her humiliating affair with an Argentinian torturer. Her daughter is Italian-born Argentinian-Somali Mar, or “*La Nus-Nus*,” “the half-half” in Somali, as explained in a footnote (Scego 25), who deals with the loss of her partner and of their unborn child as well as with the difficulty of approaching her mother; her story is mostly told in the third person, and is occasionally interrupted by her direct

⁷³ “The Reappeared” [in Spanish]. Susanne Kleinert suggests that this label pays homage to *Le Reaparecida*, an Italian compilation of interviews with Argentinian women prosecuted by the regime (208).

speech in the first person. “*La Pessottimista*”⁷⁴ is Maryam, who shares her story through a cassette audio recording prepared in hopes to reconnect with her daughter, Zuhra, from whom she has grown estranged due to an alcohol addiction caused by the pain of exile in Rome after leaving Mogadishu. “*Il padre*”⁷⁵ is Elias, the father of Mar and Zuhra, whom neither of them has ever met. At Maryam’s request, he prepares a voice registration for Zuhra, at first expecting to make himself known to her but ending up chronicling the suffering of his own parents, both raped by colonial officers. Finally, “*La Negropolitana*”⁷⁶ is “afro-romana” (384) Zuhra Laamane, the main protagonist and likely Scego’s alter ego, who also narrates the prologue and epilogue. She tells the reader in the first person about her journey towards healing from her childhood rape trauma, while grappling with her inner linguistic, cultural, racial and gender identity tensions. Through writing, learning a new language, or telling one’s story out loud, the characters survive their past traumas and manage to reconcile with their past, with themselves, and with each other.

Zuhra meets Mar and Miranda outside of European borders, in Tunis, a city that represents a blend of cultures. Just like those three characters, Tunis “Non era Africa, non era Europa, non era Medio Oriente. Era un po’ tutto frullato insieme” (Scego 328).⁷⁷ The cohabitation of multiple cultures and languages is particularly noticeable in the spaces of the Bourguiba School where Mar, Zuhra, and Miranda learn Arabic, and the vivid and chaotic

⁷⁴ “The Pessoptimist.” This subtitle is a tribute to *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, by Palestinian writer Emile Habibi. As Scego explains, “Palestinesi e somali si somigliano moltissimo, i primi non hanno una patria, gli altri ce l'hanno, ma è un territorio senza governo.” [Palestinian and Somali resemble [each other] a lot, the former do not have a homeland, the latter have it, but it is an ungoverned territory] (Scego 2008).

⁷⁵ “The father”

⁷⁶ “*Negropolitana*” is a neologism resulting from the agglutination of the words “negra” [black woman] and “metropolitana” [metropolitan]. It could be read as a hint at the term ‘Afropolitan,’ proposed in 2005 by Taiye Selasi to describe the current educated, well-travelled, multicultural generation of African or Afro-descendants working in the West.

⁷⁷ “It wasn’t Africa, it wasn’t Europe, it wasn’t the Middle East. It was all a bit muddled together.”

market of Medina, a “serpentina di persone” (267),⁷⁸ where one could hear English, Arabic, Italian, among other languages (274). Tunis can be seen as a metaphor of Babel, not only in its original Genesis sense, but also, and more productively, in the sense of a transnational plurilingual space, as proposed by Michael Cronin, and by Catherine Khordoc. About the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis, Jay Clayton explains that “Linguistic diversity was inflicted on the people as a curse” (vii). We see this sense of the term in instances when communication is made impossible by a language barrier. The anecdotal episode of Zuhra trying to place an order in Arabic at a food stand to then end up with an absurdly spicy and inedible “shawarma” (174) is an eloquent example of how a lack of language proficiency thwarts communication. On the flip side, in another passage, knowing Spanish helps her connect with Luis from Cuba (176). These are examples of language competence functioning as a code to get around, a tool that enables cross-cultural communication.

Cronin, addressing the inceptive sense of the myth of Babel, which connects translation with migration, explains that, “The moment of linguistic confusion, when the city builders are forced up from the basement level of ‘one language’ and ‘one speech’ to the new reality of translation, is also the moment of forced departure, the journeying once again to the uncertain and the unknown” (*Identity* 43). Seeing potential in the “linguistic complexification” of Ireland brought about by the influx of migrants in pursuit of economic opportunities, he proposes “not to see language (singular) as a barrier but rather to see languages (plural) as cultural and aesthetic resources” (*Globalization* 60). His anti-Babel model puts translation at the centre of political thinking and practice, particularly embodied

⁷⁸ “serpentine of people”

in the conversion of urban spaces and education into “*translation space[s]*” (*Globalization* 68). This points towards the importance of acknowledging the presence of various cultural identities within societies. In this sense, translation enables the chance of “dialogue across difference which is vital if societies are to survive the predatory divisiveness of identity-based terrorism and repressive responses to it” (*Identity* 72). Instead of blocking conversation, translation produces difference that “binds rather than divides” (*Identity* 63). In sum, bearing in mind a positive view of cultural and linguistic alterity within contemporary migration, Cronin suggests that we “[...] see linguistic otherness as an area of genuine possibility, bringing with it new perspectives, energies, traditions and forms of expression into a society” (*Globalization* 68).

In a similar paradigm, Khordoc proposes that, keeping in mind the multiple interpretations made possible by the myth of Babel, we see in it a “*bénédictio pour l’humanité*” (225). She reminds us that Babel “*évoque [...] la diversité des langues et des peuples, plutôt que la recherche de la langue parfaite prébabélienne ou de l’homogénéité*” (227). In fact, she suggests that the utopia of Babel “*fait allusion à la tolérance et à la compréhension mutuelles entre groupes ethniques*” (228). The conception of the Babelian metaphor as a “*représentation de la pluralité*” (227) is certainly a productive approach that we might conceive of as a frame of reference to better understand and accept difference, while allowing ourselves to express and live (in) our own otherness too. It is true that language diversity and specificity renders translation difficult (Khordoc 226), but the alternative to a multiplicity of languages would be the dangerous current “*drive toward a transnationally translatable monoculture*” (Apter, “*On Translation*” 4), and more specifically,

“the *imperium* of monolingualism, a state of Malthusian survivalism in which small languages succumb to big ones” (11). Countering ideas of “purity of a national standard language” (Apter, “Balkan” 75), the cohabitation of languages “is well-prepared to do the kind of radical anti-colonial work” with potential “for the destruction of hegemonic nation-states and the creation of alternative relationships between the castaways of [...] nations” (Robertson 63).

Miranda is the embodiment of this multilingual and translational sense of Babel. Zuhra describes Miranda’s language influences in the following terms:

Scrive in tutte le lingue. Lo spagnolo natio è mischiato con tutte le sue altre appartenenze. Ci trovi echi di catalano, italiano, portoghese, inglese, francese. Ma ci sono anche parole arabe e stranamente c’è il somalo. (Scego 237)⁷⁹

Zuhra’s interest for Miranda’s books is actually sparked by the presence of Somali words.

The adverb “stranamente” [strangely] foreshadows the fact that Miranda’s knowledge of Somali comes from her relationship with Elias, Mar’s and Zuhra’s father. Language—or language-learning—is ultimately what impels Zuhra to travel to Tunis, bringing her towards Mar and Miranda. It is in the Babel represented by Tunis where the characters start their journey towards healing from their various traumas. The difficulties of communication across languages represented by Babel are also a metaphor for the incommunicability created by a “dolore troppo grande da condividere” (Scego 433).⁸⁰ Zuhra recalls hearing someone in school describe Babylon as “tutto quanto di peggio possa esistere al mondo. La feccia, il

⁷⁹ “She writes in all languages. The native Spanish is mixed with all of her other belongings. You can find traces of Catalan, Italian, Portuguese, English, French. But there are also words in Arabic and strangely there is Somali.”

⁸⁰ “a pain too deep to be shared”

vomito, lo shifo, il dolore,”⁸¹ and she decides, then, that she wants to live “oltre Babilonia” (450).⁸² This cathartic space beyond Babylon, beyond all pain, is for Mar learning a new language, Arabic, which helps her deal with the loss of her girlfriend, Patricia, who committed suicide, and of their unborn child, forcibly conceived, and later aborted, against Mar’s will: “Era una bella lettera, la *sad*. Mar si sentiva Michelangelo. [...] Guardò la *sad* che aveva tracciato sul quaderno. [...] Mar sorrise. Per un istante Patricia le aveva dato tregua” (125).⁸³ Tunis is also, for Mar, the place where she finally makes peace with her double linguistic and cultural identity and is able to piece together her two geographies: “Mar si sentiva finalmente unita, una ragazza con sangue del Sud e del Nord insieme” (225).⁸⁴ For Miranda, Tunis is the place where she recovers her voice and her language: “Però ora è cambiato qualcosa dentro di me. Sarà questa città mediterranea? Credo di sì. [...] Mi ha fatto uscire il dolore” (188).⁸⁵ Tunis changed something in her that allowed her to finally tell her story to her daughter, Mar, enabling them to reconnect as mother and daughter: “Quel pomeriggio erano state felici. Lei, la figlia, con sua madre” (269).⁸⁶ For Zuhra, being in Tunis helps her overcome her rape trauma as a young girl in boarding school. This is signalled by her recovery from colourblindness when she sees the red of her menstrual blood at the end of the novel (456). An emblematic passage of Zuhra’s newfound happiness is when she dreams of giving birth but instead of a baby she expels long iron bars and feels light and relieved

⁸¹ “the worst in the world. Shit, vomit, disgust, pain”

⁸² “beyond Babylon”

⁸³ “it was a beautiful letter, the *sad*. Mar felt like Michelangelo. She looked at the *sad* that she had traced in her notebook. Mar smiled. For a moment Patricia had offered her a truce.” The “*sad*” [ص] is the fourteenth letter of the Arabic alphabet.

⁸⁴ Mar felt finally united, a girl with both Southern and Northern blood”

⁸⁵ “But now something has changed inside me. Is it this Mediterranean city? I believe so. [...] It let my pain out.”

⁸⁶ “That afternoon they had been happy. She, the daughter, with her mother.”

(449). Her recovery from trauma is deeply related to a recovery of her own adult female body. She goes “oltre Babilonia”: “Oltre tutto, in un posto dove la mia vagina è felice e innamorata” (449).⁸⁷ It is also in the immediate aftermath of her trip to Tunis that Zuhra reconnects with her mother, Maryam Laamane, who struggled with a drinking problem, “vinta dall’odore dell’esilio” (347).⁸⁸ It is then in this babelian Tunis where everything unfolds: at first an escape route, it becomes the place where the characters start carving their way back towards themselves.

In *Oltre Babilonia*, the multiplicity of languages is not only directly inscribed into the text through the characters’ various linguistic affiliations; it also occurs through a multitude of other ways, through which we get glimpses of cities, varied sounds, music, historical references. The fictitious characters organically interact with actual references to our current world and recent history. For instance, we read newspaper headlines about Argentina in the 1970s, we cast an eye over excerpts of speeches by different politicians from different eras, from Mussolini to Nkrumah; we read lines from poetry, television series, and movies, such as *Mary Poppins* (19); there are numerous musical references, from American pop culture to Brazilian bossanova, and Portuguese Fado song, sung by Mar’s grandmother Renata (likely a prostitute in the streets of Lisbon) joined by her son Ernesto’s guitar, creating an eclectic mix of tango and Fado (98); we are taken to places in Rome, Mogadishu, Argentina, and Tunis. For instance, we get to know the Termini Station as a neuralgic point for the Somali community in Rome, with its bilingual ads, poignantly described as written in “italiano e

⁸⁷ “Beyond everything, to a place where my vagina is happy and in love”

⁸⁸ “lost by the odour of exile”

inglese o italiano e terzo-mondese” (191);⁸⁹ there are parks and squares, like the Villa Borghese in Rome (28) and the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, street names of Mogadishu, and myriad voices from of the Medina of Tunis (223); there are thinkers, scholars, divinities and saints: “Giove, Buddha, Shiva, Ra, Zoroastro, Mitra, san Paolo, san Francesco, san Gennaro, Milingo” (34);⁹⁰ soccer players, and even a leaflet with instructions in several languages for tampon use (21); there is an imagined letter from prison from Ernesto (243), which interrupts Miranda’s own letter to Mar, and an email from Zuhra to her cousin in Switzerland; there is Zuhra’s psychologist’s voice, dottor Ross, who keeps reminding her to stop the little girl inside her from strangling the woman she has become (172). Before going to Tunis, Zuhra admits: “ho paura di essere donna, a volte” (172).⁹¹ In a cemetery in Mahdia she finally manages to leave the fear behind and allows herself to be born again: “Sono nata ora, vicino a questa tomba bellissima” (407).⁹² The plurivocal narrations also contribute to the Babelian polyphony. For all of the above, *Oltre Babilonia* is a Babel in itself, bearing traces of several languages, media, spaces, but also working as a metaphor for the difficulties and possibilities of communication across languages and cultures. Its form, too, is Babelian, not only due to the sub-genres that it conglomerates (letter, email), but also because of its long labyrinthine construction that requires from the reader the diligence to collect in each of the eight chapters the necessary puzzle pieces to compose the five characters’ plurilingual traumatic stories.

⁸⁹ “Italian and English or Italian and Third-Worldese”

⁹⁰ “Jude, Buddha, Shiva, Ra, Zoroaster, Mithras, Saint Paul, Saint Francis, Saint Gennaro, Milingo”

⁹¹ “Sometimes I am afraid of being a woman”

⁹² “I was born now, next to this beautiful tomb”

The metaphor of Babylon, even though it is not as extensively thematized as in Scego's text, also emerges in Guillermina Mekuy's *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás*. It is depicted as a dishonourable place of lust, in opposition to the house of God. Seeing María Fátima kiss her little sister's forehead, the abbess deems her behaviour inappropriate and warns her:

—Jamás, María Fátima, vuelvas a hacer demostraciones de afecto hacia María Lourdes en presencia de las demás compañeras. Y menos en la casa del Señor. Aquí está prohibido cualquier mero contacto de piel con piel, de roce con cualquiera de tus compañeras. Ésta es la casa de Dios, aquí no estamos en Babilonia, éste no es un lugar de caricias, de fornicación y pecado. (57)⁹³

While in Scego's text, Zuhra wants to go beyond Babylon, which is associated with her trauma, here Babylon represents for María Fátima her desire to break free and to express her sexuality. The intertextual reference to the biblical queen of Jezebel emphasizes Fátima's will to take her destiny into her own hands since she does not gain any fulfillment from being just a spectator, as she stresses: "A mí eso de contemplar siempre me pareció muy aburrido [...]" (69).⁹⁴ As Janet Howe Gaines explains in her article provocatively entitled "How Bad Was Jezebel?":

Unlike the many voiceless Biblical wives and concubines whose muteness reminds us of the powerlessness of women in ancient Israel, Jezebel has a tongue. While her verbal acuity shows that she is more daring, clever and independent than most women of her time, her withering words also demonstrate her sinfulness. Jezebel transforms the precious instrument of language into an evil device to blaspheme God and defy the prophet. (Gaines 17)

⁹³ "Never, María Fátima, repeat a public display of affection towards María Lourdes in the presence of the other girls. And less in the house of the Lord. Here, any mere skin-to-skin contact, or touching, is forbidden. This is the house of God, this is not Babylon, this is not a place of caresses, fornication and sin."

⁹⁴ "To me contemplating has always seemed very boring [...]"

Babylon thus represents agency for Maria Fatima, allowing her to escape from the religious straitjacket of eight years of convent life and to pursue her sexual desire in the role of “¡la gran ramera de Babilonia! ¡Seré Jezabel!” (76).⁹⁵ Just as the people of Babel were trying to become agents of their own future by building a city and a tower, Fátima’s impersonation of Jezebel materializes her apostasy and emancipation. The limitations of such agency come into question when compared to the history of the Jezebel stereotype, explained by David Pilgrim as a portrayal of black and “mulatto” women as “seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd” (par. 1). The conspicuous way in which this stereotype is deployed in Mekuy’s text, reaching a culminating point in a graphic passage that describes an auction of women for sexual intercourse (Mekuy 156), suggests a deliberate representation of women as “sexual commodities” (Pilgrim par. 39) —perhaps an attempt at mining the stereotype by overexposing it. In divergent but conversing ways, both texts employ the idea of Babylon in association with the recovery of women’s sexuality and freedom, which is deeply intertwined with the acceptance and fruition of their own adult black female bodies.

Owning the Mother Tongue

Zuhra’s character also speaks Romanesco, which can be linked to at least two functions. First, it replicates realistic interactions between youths, here represented by her dialogues with her friend Lucy. And relatedly, it also demonstrates her belonging to Rome, despite being discriminated against due to her skin colour. It is then in Romanesco that

⁹⁵ “the great whore of Babylon! I will be Jezebel!”

Zuhra's character claims a place for black women like her who grew up in Europe. Rome, typically perceived as a repository of Western civilization, traditionally known as 'Urbs Aeterna' [Eternal City] and 'Caput Mundi,' [Head of the World] is changing rapidly, at the rhythm of the forces that reconfigure its landscape, such as diasporic and migratory movements. As a part of the second generation of Somali-Italians, already born in the destination country, Zuhra is just as much part of the social fabric as anyone else. She is outraged at the attitude of Libla clients, who always look for a white salesperson, thinking, "Ma che ci fa Mozart in mano a 'sta zulu?" (Scego 235).⁹⁶ The play on pejorative stereotypes about black people, grouped in one ethnic group, the Zulu, and incompatible with prodigious classical central-European figures such as Mozart, draws attention to continuing monolithic representations of Africa as well as to the blatant discrimination and racism in Italy against black people. Feeling invisible, Zuhra rhetorically asks: "Ma che, nun ce vedete?" (235).⁹⁷ The pluralized personal pronoun "ce" marks a shift from a singular first person to a plural account. This narrative shift is a combative move where a plural identity is negotiated. And she adds, "Renditi conto, cliente Libla, che volente o nolente, la città eterna te sta a cambia' intorno. Che ci siamo pure noi" (235).⁹⁸ This angry shout about the new configuration of Roman society defies the recurring stigma of attributing a migrant status to non-white citizens and contributes to a racial remapping of contemporary Europe.

Constantly labeled as 'others,' 'racialized' citizens like Zuhra (*Oltre Babilonia*) or Domenica Axad (*Madre Piccola*) have to fight for their social citizenship status. Language

⁹⁶ "What is Mozart doing in this Zulu's hands?"

⁹⁷ "Hey, can't you see us?"

⁹⁸ "Bear in mind, Libla customer, that willing or not, the eternal city is changing around you. That we are here too."

proficiency, be it in the form of fluency in dialectal variants or in the ability to use highly standardized forms of Italian, is a social doorway to attaining that status. The quest for social acceptance in Rome, then, is backed up by the idea of language expertise, where Italian is recognized as a mother tongue. One emblematic passage is when Domenica talks about a confrontation with the police, when she becomes very defensive because they seem to suggest that she cannot speak Italian. Her reaction is to write her responses to the interrogatories purposefully using “parole desuete e fuori dal comune” (Farah 253).⁹⁹ The use of uncommon and erudite words is her way to lay claim to the language, to show that Italian is also the language she grew up in and the mother that ‘raised her’: “voglio che tutti sappiano senz’ombra di dubbio che questa lingua mi appartiene. È il mio balbettio, è il soggetto plurale che mi ha cresciuto, è il nome della mia essenza, è mia madre” (254).¹⁰⁰ Birth place (or the place of childhood) and language are also profoundly interwoven in Domenica’s decision to give birth to her son in Italy, where she knows the “segreti della parola” (Farah 135).¹⁰¹ Her linguistic limitation concerning Somali, which she does not speak as fluently as Italian, is overcome through the marking of her son in his body, through circumcision, to make him belong to his own Somali history and culture (259). The connection of motherhood with mother tongue and, in particular, the sense of having the tongue as a mother is also present in Zuhra’s description of Maryam speaking. She says that listening to her mother speak Somali is like “Assistere al parto di una madre che partorisce la

⁹⁹ “rare and unusual words” (219)

¹⁰⁰ “I want everyone to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that this language belongs to me. It is my childhood babbling, it is the plural subject that raised me, it is the name of my essence, it is my mother” (219).

¹⁰¹ “secrets of the language”

madre” (Scego 445).¹⁰² This other mother that her own mother gives birth to, she explains, is “la sua lingua” (445).¹⁰³ Zuhra’s belonging to language, however, is more entangled than Maryam’s:

A mamma piace il mio misto di somalo e italiano, dice che è la mia lingua. Io ancora me ne vergogno, però. Vorrei essere perfetta in ognuna delle due, senza sbavature. Ma quando ne parlo una, l’altra spunta sfacciata senza essere invitata. In testa cortocircuiti perenni. Io non parlo, mischio. (Scego 445)¹⁰⁴

Her awareness of her own code-switching and her feelings of shame towards it outline her struggles in respect to her double identity and belonging.

But even when using “un italiano gentile, colto, irrealista” (Scego 283)¹⁰⁵ in government offices and other official institutions, Zuhra is still asked for the “Permesso di soggiorno” (283).¹⁰⁶ She admits to feeling embarrassed and this feeling draws attention to misconceptions that connect race with non-citizenship, but, more deeply, makes her (and the reader) question why being a foreigner should be a reason for feeling embarrassed: “Mi chiedo perché debba essere una vergogna essere straniero” (Scego 283).¹⁰⁷ The legal and bureaucratic Italian language, where terms like ‘extracomunitario,’ despite sometimes refuted academically (Reich and Garofalo 2002; Bullaro 2010), are still used to describe non-EU individuals, might offer a key to answer this question. According to Reich and Garofalo,

¹⁰² “Witnessing the birth of a mother giving birth to her mother.”

¹⁰³ “her mother tongue”

¹⁰⁴ “Mom likes my mix of Somali and Italian, she says it is my language. I still feel ashamed, though. I would like to be perfect in each of them, without blemishes. But when I speak one, the other shamelessly pokes in without being invited. In my head, never-ending short circuits. I do not speak, I mix.”

¹⁰⁵ “a gentle, cultivated, unreal Italian”

¹⁰⁶ The ‘permesso di soggiorno’ is a residency permit issued by the Italian State Police to non-EU citizens in order to legally stay and work in the country.

¹⁰⁷ “I wonder why it should cause shame to be a foreigner”

“extracomunitario” is pejoratively coupled with an illegal, irregular, subversive and invisible community (111).

The Spanish language is another mother tongue used in *Oltre Babilonia*, by Argentinian Miranda and her Argentinian-Italian daughter Mar. Its use confers strength and authenticity to feelings related to affections, fears, and traumas. Miranda describes the Argentinian political climate of the late 1970s, which starts the so-called Dirty War, when the military dictatorship kills and makes ‘disappear’ thousands of suspected left-wing political opponents. She says, “Non potevamo parlare, non potevamo discutere, non potevamo nemmeno respirare. [...] Tutto era controllato e per la paura a poco a poco tutti cominciarono a cancellare se stessi” (Scego 45).¹⁰⁸ It is thus very significant that Miranda uses her native Spanish in swear words that show contempt, worry, and revolt towards those traumatic years, recovering her voice and agency in the language that had once vetoed her—and her fellow Argentinians’—freedom. For instance, to show her deep dislike of Menem¹⁰⁹ and his obscure relationship with the United States, she says: “Quell’uomo aveva una *sonrisa Norteamericana que no me gustaba carajo*” (181).¹¹⁰ Her own epithet, “*La Reaparecida*,” plays upon the historical reference of the “*desaparecidos*” (Scego 43).¹¹¹ Her inner self ‘reappears’ and is crystallized in the fact that she becomes a writer: “Però ora io, Miranda, tua madre, una donna, scrivo. Trasformo il pianto in una lingua, in una ribellione” (Scego 415).¹¹² Writing is a weapon and a means to come to terms with trauma, it is a place where Miranda can finally feel

¹⁰⁸ “We could not talk, we could not discuss, we could not even breathe. [...] Everything was controlled and for fear, little by little, everyone began to erase themselves.”

¹⁰⁹ Carlos Menem was president of Argentina from 1989 to 1999, and a number of suspicious deaths occurred during the decade of his government.

¹¹⁰ “[in Italian] That man had a [in Spanish] North American smile that I didn’t fucking like”

¹¹¹ “the disappeared ones”

¹¹² “But now I, Miranda, your mother, a woman, write. I turn the tears into a language, into a rebellion.”

accomplished as a mother, as a woman, and as a writer. As she explains, she converts her pain into a new rebellious language. This language rebellion is twofold: it relates to the freedom of speech away from the repressive regime in Argentina during the 1970s and to a bending of the colonial Spanish of Argentina. Miranda explains that Spanish is originally

la lingua della storia, lo spagnolo esportato col sangue e con l'inganno. Ma nella nostra bocca è cambiato, lo sento, si è ingentilito, si è innervato di noi. Non è più la lingua arrotolata dalle consonanti compatte dell'inizio del mondo. Diventa aria e stelle, diventa sole e luna. Si fa carne. Si fa viva. Diventa altro, una lingua segreta che si parla da bambini, una lingua per comunicare con gli angeli. (415)¹¹³

Spanish also adds a layer of intimacy between mother and daughter, but this intimacy is often tainted with memories of traumatic events. Mar tenderly greets her mother in a blend of Spanish and Italian: “*Buenas tardes, mamma. ¿Qué tal? Stai bene?*” (220).¹¹⁴ But the Spanish language is also present in Mar’s recurring dream, where her mother sings *Alfonsina y el Mar* to her unborn grandson whose name is always Ernesto,¹¹⁵ after “Guevara,” but also after Miranda’s brother, “lo zio *desaparecido*” of Mar (271).¹¹⁶ In this context, language carries memories of Mar’s personal and familiar trauma. Similarly, for Miranda, her mother tongue is also a reminder of her self-destructive romantic relationship with a torturer whose first name is, like Menem, also Carlos. This is why she leaves Argentina without saying goodbye to her own mother, because she could not stand her mother telling her, “*No mereces que*

¹¹³ “the language of history, the Spanish language imposed with blood and deceit. But in our mouths it changed, I feel it, we refined and animated it. It is no longer the language rolled up by the compact consonants of the beginning of the world. It becomes air and stars, sun and moon. It becomes flesh. It becomes alive. It becomes something else, a secret language spoken since childhood, a language to communicate with the angels.”

¹¹⁴ “Good afternoon, [Spanish] mom! [Italian] How are you? [Spanish] Are you ok? [Italian]”

¹¹⁵ *Alfonsina y el Mar* is a popular Argentinian song composed by Ariel Ramírez and Félix Luna and first published in Mercedes Sosa’s *Mujeres Argentinas* in 1969. It honours poetess Alfonsina Storni, who committed suicide in Mar del Plata in 1938.

¹¹⁶ “the *disappeared* uncle”

[Carlos] *te llame puta*” (183).¹¹⁷ Spanish also marks a painful familiarity when newfound friend Katrina calls Mar “nena,”¹¹⁸ like her deceased partner Patricia used to do (273).

Despite not being her mother tongue, Zuhra also speaks Spanish fluently after having studied in Spain through a student exchange program. Spanish words are included in the text to represent the discrimination she is subjected to at a Valencian police station, where due to her skin colour, she is accused of not being Italian: “*No eres italiana. Puta. Marica. Falsificadora de papeles*” (40).¹¹⁹ This excerpt in Spanish is left untranslated, increasing the insults’ impact by confronting the reader with the immediacy of overt xenophobia. Zuhra uses the stereotypically Spanish interjection “*olé*” (40), which loosely translates as ‘bravo,’ to draw attention to the ludicrous assumptions made by authoritative figures about someone’s identity, based on biases and stereotypes. It is not, then, just in Italy that she is made to feel like she does not belong, but also in other European countries, such as neighbouring Spain.

II. De-Colonized Languages

The relationship between mother tongue and migration is further teased out in Nsue’s *Ekomo*. The novel is narrated by Nnanga, who, together with her husband Ekomo, goes on a journey on foot to try to find a cure for his leg wound. The further they are from home, the more they grow estranged from the comfort of their home language, Fang, (first, they encounter different accents, then different languages, like French and Bulu) and from each other. The reader also experiences this estrangement through code-switching between

¹¹⁷ “*You don’t deserve to be called a whore* [by Carlos]”

¹¹⁸ “babe”

¹¹⁹ “*You are not Italian. Whore. Fag. Paper forger.*”

Spanish and Fang (and some French), whose translation or approximate interpretation is woven into the textual narrative. For instance, when they arrive in a village, Nnanga transcribes:

- *Ambolanaang* - saludamos al llegar.
- *Ambolan* (133).

This passage is not literally translated but the performative verb helps the reader understand that the italicized words are forms of greeting. In another passage, she says: “- ¡Chisst! ¡Escucha! *¿Ba djô ya? ¿Qué dicen?*” (55).¹²⁰ Here, the italicized Fang phrase is duplicated by an in-text translation into Spanish. When the same phrase is later repeated, though, it is no longer translated, leaving literacy in the reader’s hands. In a didactic tone, the narrator incorporates etymological descriptions of rites, beliefs, legends, and ethnonyms in the body of the text.

When they cross the border into a different country (which we might assume is one of continental Equatorial Guinea’s neighbouring French-speaking countries of Gabon or Cameroon) and are asked for their documents in French, they are confronted with the incommunicability which characterizes the original sense of Babel. The situation gets resolved in Bulu, which despite some difficulty, Nnanga understands (193). Other layers of multilingualism, which also translate Fang culture, can be seen in the lyrical use of repetitions, poems, songs, and epigraphs at the beginning of some chapters. Also the varied external voices introduced still in Spanish but in italics represent communal decisions (20, 21) or thoughts (107), Nnanga’s grandmother’s admonition (156), ancient laws (180), and

¹²⁰ “Shhh! Listen! What are they saying? [in Fang] What are they saying? [in Spanish]”

Nnanga's own mind and inner thoughts (234). In a Western-style hospital, Nnanga and Ekomo find an interpreter who helps them communicate with the doctor. The repeated sentence, "Habló el blanco y el negro tradujo" (198-199),¹²¹ emphasizes the power invested in the black mediator to interpret and translate what the white doctor says. This postcolonial inversion of linguistic privilege works as a counter-hegemonic discourse against white supremacy and highlights the agency of black people to speak. This is illustrated by the reversal of the noun order in the sentence, which suggests a role reversal as well: "habló el negro al blanco" (199).¹²²

These are all instances where not only language but also culture is translated. The language strategies of code-switching, language play, inclusion of foreign words, among others, can be framed as cultural translation because they correspond to a set of practices that mediate cultural difference in order to "convey extensive cultural background" or "represent another culture via translation" (Sturge qtd. in Steiner 7). In other words, cultural translation happens when literary works "denote the way in which the textual production constructs cultural difference and transports it into the fabric of the text" (Steiner 3).

On a paratextual level, it is also worth noting some editorial changes (cultural translations?) made to *Ekomo's* 1985 edition in the 2008 reprint. As Natalia Naydenova observes, the 2008 editor dismisses as "typos" changes to the original text such that it conforms to a more standardized variant of Spanish than the one spoken in Equatorial Guinea (Naydenova 336). These examples show that cultural translation can be not only a "matter of empowerment" (Tymoczko 221) and a resistance strategy towards homogenizing approaches

¹²¹ "The white man spoke and the black man translated"

¹²² "The black man spoke to the white man"

to culture, as advanced by Sommer (1992), but also, on the flip side, an oppressive attempt at domesticating difference (Huggan 2008). As Maria Tymoczco argues, translators and postcolonial writers alike have a dilemma between producing “material that is opaque or unintelligible to international readers” and including excessive amounts of “explanation and explicit information” (29). In the case of *Ekomo*, this marketing strategy’s description would be incomplete without a mention of other important paratextual elements, such as the academic prologue of the 2008 edition, which brands the author as “la mejor escritora de Guinea Ecuatorial” (Nsue 7),¹²³ providing a list of scholars who have discussed her work, and affiliating her style within canonical European and Latin American sub-genres such as the “epopeya”¹²⁴ or “*realismo mágico*” (9).¹²⁵ The use of language is described as poetic (10), with rhetorical devices either comparable to “Quijote” or borrowed from film and the contemporary novel, such as flashbacks (11). Even though these marketing strategies aim at promoting Nsue’s work, they also suggest that her credibility abides by dominant cultural affiliations, from wider contexts of *Hispanidad*, such as the Spanish and the Latin American.

In addition to Fang, Somali, Arabic, Kimbundu, Kikongo, and Lingala are some of the African languages inscribed in the works under investigation in this chapter. They educate the reader about cultural difference; complicate and make the narratives more sophisticated and nuanced; destabilize linguistic power relations, particularly toppling colonial languages over; and creatively reinvent languages. On the topic of educating the audience through the inclusion of foreign words, Steiner says that “Western readers are likely to find their general

¹²³ “the best woman writer of Equatorial Guinea”

¹²⁴ “epic”

¹²⁵ “magic realism”

knowledge inadequate for a full understanding of the text, and their ethnocentric assumptions are thus laid bare” (17). In the context of plurilingual writers, these translation exercises play a central role in terms of identity. In Cronin’s words:

In taking translation as a central paradigm of political thinking and practice it is possible to go beyond the cultural holism of identity politics (cultures as unified, hermetically sealed wholes) and the cultural hegemony of universalist idealism (we are all the same so differences do not matter). (Cronin, *Identity* 71)

Along parallel lines, Joshua Price argues that translators should “protect [the] hybrid meanings” in their movement from source language to target language and from source culture to target culture (43). He argues that the “opacity to dominant meaning is one of their strengths, one of their functions, and one of the means of survival for the speakers of hybrid tongues” (43). However, he does not explain how the translator can actually preserve this hybridity. If we think of multilingual writers as cultural translators, we might find in the examples that follow some clues about the mechanisms of preservation of ‘hybrid meanings,’ whose emphasis on difference ultimately counters the risk of ending up with a “wholly translated, monolingual, monocultural, monolithic world” (Trivedi 7).¹²⁶

Apart from English, Zuhra also interweaves Somali words into her Italian speech. Performing the role of cultural translator, she alternates between offering direct explanations of the terms and just hinting at their meanings, inviting the reader to commit to a literacy exercise.¹²⁷ Somali words are used, for instance, in interjections, to describe food items,

¹²⁶ I must remark that Trivedi is against ‘cultural translation’ when it does not imply a literal translation as well. He argues that it spells “the very extinction and erasure of translation as we have always known and practised it” (4) and encourages scholars to use other “words for this new phenomenon, such as migrancy, exile or diaspora [which] are already available and current” (6).

¹²⁷ Her cultural translations are not only linguistic but also historical, as explored in chapter 4.

varied objects, and kinship relations. In some instances, they complicate the narrative in Italian, adding layers of meaning to the text. One example is when Zuhra asks Mar: “Ti posso lavare i capelli, *abbayo?*” (385).¹²⁸ The word ‘*abbayo*’ means sister in Somali but its use is not restricted to siblings and can also be used towards a good friend or a close relative. When Zuhra calls her actual sister ‘*abbayo*,’ instead of using the Italian word for sister (‘*sorella*’) or friend (‘*amica*’), the reader is left to guess if the two young women have already found out that they are actual half-sisters. This example confronts the Italian language with the ‘opacity’ of hybridity, showing the limitations of Italian to represent Somali identity but also drawing attention to Somali’s semantic capabilities in expanding Italian’s expressiveness. Another culturally didactic instance is when Mar teaches the Italian reader the colours in Arabic, as she herself learns them at the Bourguiba School in Tunis: “*Abiad* bianco, *aswad* nero, *ahmar* rosso” (327). The association of the original words followed by their in-text translation inherently enrich the reader’s vocabulary, making him or her a participant in the learning process and in the construction of meaning.

The inscription of the Fang language in *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás* appears either translated in footnotes or explained within the body of the text. A significant instance of the use of footnotes is related to the description of animistic rituals or the invocation of gods. For example, the warning to Tomás of an elderly woman from the village to leave his daughter alone at the risk of getting punished by the gods (32), Teresa’s invocation to the spirits (34), and a purging ritual to rid María Fátima from her sins (98) are all in Fang. The explanation for the meaning of Fang comes through in María Fátima’s narration, when she

¹²⁸ “Can I wash your hair, *abbayo?*”

considers it as important as Spanish for her identity, inscribing Equatorial Guinea into a global idea of *Hispanidad* while marketing the idea of the Fang language as exotic:

Ahora soy dueña, en mi interior, de dos culturas, me pertenecen dos países, y tengo la enorme riqueza de dos lenguas, la española y el *fang*, que forman mi presente y mi pasado. Ese *fang* que suena a magia y a exotismo [...]. La lengua de mi etnia y la lengua de mi cultura, las lenguas de un país único en el mundo que comparte el idioma de Cervantes con millones de personas, y que nos permite comunicarnos fuera de las fronteras de mi pequeña pero gran nación. (Mekuy 192)¹²⁹

A less literal and more cultural translation and interpretation is done by the character of Pastora, a descendant of Spanish settlers who devotedly works for the family, and moves with them from Equatorial Guinea back to Spain. In an interview-like dialogue with María Fátima, where the latter asks questions and the former responds, the reader learns about Guinean local customs and the impact of colonialism. By drawing a comparison between American gospel music and Guinean traditional song, Pandora's voice inscribes Guinea into the international sphere: "cantaban canciones que llamaban *entonobe*, que se asemejan a la música góspel de América" (199).¹³⁰ Also pedagogical are her toponymic explanations, used to teach a history lesson about the Spanish presence in Equatorial Guinea. For instance, she mentions "[...] la ciudad que antiguamente se llamaba Santa Isabel de Fernando Poo y que hoy es Malabo" (198).¹³¹ In a very neutral tone which overlooks the impact of colonialism, she then adds: "En ese tiempo, vuestro país era provincia española y muchos *aventureros* que

¹²⁹ "Now I am the owner, deep inside, of two cultures, I belong to two countries, and I have the enormous wealth of two languages, the Spanish and the Fang, which form my present and my past. That fang that sounds of magic and exoticism [...]. The language of my ethnicity and the language of my culture, the languages of a unique country in the world that shares the language of Cervantes with millions of people, and that allows us to communicate outside the borders of my small but great nation."

¹³⁰ "They sang songs that they called *entonobe*, which resemble the gospel music of America"

¹³¹ "The city that was formerly called Santa Isabel de Fernando Poo and which today is Malabo."

querían ampliar horizontes y hacer negocios marchaban a esa tierra rica y exótica” (198, emphasis added).¹³² Historically, Fernando Po refers to the Portuguese explorer, the first European to set foot on the Guinean island of Bioko in 1472. Three centuries later, under the 1778 Treaty of el Pardo, the Portuguese ceded Fernando Po, Annobón, and Rio Muni, present-day Equatorial Guinea, to Spain in exchange for territories in modern Brazil. Given the lack of immediate interest on part of the Spaniards, 34 years of British presence ensued, starting in 1821, when the capital was named Port Clarence in honour of the Duke of Clarence. In 1855, when Spain retook control, Port Clarence was renamed Santa Isabel, after the Spanish Queen Isabel II. Upon independence in 1968, Francisco Macías Nguema became president and his campaign to replace colonial toponymy with African names prompted the renaming of the capital city in 1973, in homage to the last Bubi king, Malabo Lopelo Melaka.

An analogous phenomenon of linguistic decolonization related to the reworking of local ethnonyms and toponyms in order to destroy colonial power relations is critically examined in Figueiredo’s *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais*, when the narrator ironically expresses her cousin’s racist resistance to postcolonial appellations: “O meu primo nasceu em Lourenço Marques e nunca pronunciou as três sílabas muito difíceis da palavra Maputo. Ma-pu-to. As cinco de Lourenço Marques fluíam líquidas. Muito brancas” (65).¹³³ Lourenço Marques was, like Fernando Po, a Portuguese navigator, who started the exploration of the now Maputo Bay in 1544. In the postcolonial period, starting in 1975, the city was renamed after the Maputo River, which delineates the border with South Africa. But the renaming of

¹³² “In those times, your country was a Spanish province and many adventurers who wanted to broaden horizons and do business marched to that rich and exotic land.”

¹³³ “My cousin was born in Lourenço Marques and never uttered the three very difficult syllables of the word Maputo. Ma-pu-to. The five syllables of Lou- renço Marques flowed off his tongue. Very white.” (*Notebook* 71)

places often bears the colonial history that it tries to erase. As César Cumbe explains, “urban toponyms recalled the indigenous people’s places of origin” (200), which, as a consequence draws attention to colonial spatial segregation. Cumbe clarifies that “the ethno-history of Southern Africa reveals that the abundance of indigenous place names has to do with the colonial policy of grouping indigenous people according to race and ethnicity in the colonial town of Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) in the 1890s” (Cumbe 199). What this shows is that toponymy carries an important discursive and socio-political subtext. Liora Bigon points out that “place naming reflects the power of political regimes, nationalism, and ideology” (Bigon 2). In the case of Maputo, Cumbe clarifies that in Maputo, under colonialism,

a ‘territorial separation of bodies, hierarchy of race and colour’ was prominent in the occupation of urban areas: the downtown area (offices, business, leisure and pleasure), the upper town (an exclusive area for whites) and the suburbs (area for the blacks). Such a hierarchy of race and colour was also felt in the use of public transport and shops. (200)

This segregated socio-spatial division is still reflected in today’s toponyms. These are thus spaces of “linguistic practices” and identity platforms which expose “urban multilingualism and mark [...] territories of spatial symbolism and control” (Cumbe 205).

For the narrator of *Caderno*, the disappearance of the name of the city where she was born (Lourenço Marques), with the fall of the regime, establishes instead a split, double consciousness. On the one hand, she acutely criticizes her cousin, her family, and her community for their racist attitudes, drawing a larger criticism of colonialism; on the other hand, she cannot reconcile her opposed feelings of affective belonging vs. official non-

belonging to the land: “Não voltaria a esse lugar, que sendo a minha terra, não me pertencia” (87).¹³⁴ Renaming the city is thus, for Mozambicans, a recovery of identity, but for Isabela, and although recognizing its historical meaning, it represents an irretrievable loss. Between Figueiredo and Mekuy’s discussion of toponymy, though reflecting similar colonial histories and decolonial attempts, they also speak volumes in regards to contrasting contemporary Hispanophone and Lusophone attitudes towards the African colonial past. In the Lusophone text, there is the acknowledgement of the detrimental views of the Portuguese towards indigenous people from its former colonies, and on the flip side, in the Hispanophone case, there is an amnesia about Spanish colonial endeavours in Africa, the dismissal of colonialism’s negative impact on the continent, and the play on exotic stereotypical tropes.

Madre Piccola is a polyphonic multi-genre novel, whose protagonists are Domenica Axad, Barni, and Taageere, who each narrate three of the nine chapters that compose the book. Polyphony and heteroglossia, as defined by Bakhtin and Gauvin, are omnipresent in many ways. There is the linguistic cohabitation of Italian with Somali, and with English to a lesser degree; there are the three narrative voices, two female, one male; and a panoply of narrative modes (radio, video, song) and sub-genres (letter, interview, poetry), which personalize the accounts, making the stories more individual, more localized, and more verisimilar. The terms of Somali origin, as explained in the first page’s footnote, appear in a glossary at the end. They include food and drink items, kinship relations, currency, cosmetic products, clothing items, pieces of furniture, lullabies, Muslim religious expressions,

¹³⁴ “I wouldn’t return to that place, which, being my land, did not belong to me.”

derogatory words, phatic interjections, lines of Somali poetry, the national anthem, and songs. The terms whose superstratum is Italian, such as “*fazoleeti*” and “*barbaroni*” (Farah 21) for instance,¹³⁵ are marked in the glossary, together with their translation, with the clarification “*dall’italiano*” (269-271).¹³⁶ These words are a reminiscence of the Italian colonial period, when they entered Somali as loanwords, which were gradually transformed and absorbed into the Somali language.

Similar glossaries are also used by Mozambican writer Paulina Chiziane. Hilary Owen interprets Chiziane’s glossaries, added at the end of some of her books, as a ‘gendering’ of transculturation since they represent women as guardians of the oral tradition (170). These additions are mainly vocabulary explanations of the Tsonga language. Likewise, in Igiaba Scego’s earlier book, *Rhoda* (2004), we find not only a glossary but also a short collection of Somali recipes. Catherine Field frames women’s recipe collections within the life writing genre and discusses it as assertions of women’s authority.

In *Madre Piccola*, direct inscriptions of the Somali language into the Italian text’s fabric are intersected by other layers of heteroglossia that go beyond linguistic multiplicity and into a plurality of narrative modes, which Claire Lavagnino calls “multimodal storytelling, meaning that the authors employ various modes of communication to transmit their protagonists’ voices” (Lavagnino 22). One eloquent example is the first chapter, “Preludio,” narrated by Italo-Somali Domenica Axad. She describes her childhood, rooted not only in one place, Mogadishu, but also in one person, Barni, her older first cousin, her “*abbaayo*” (3), who is the other female narrator, whom she does not see again until twenty

¹³⁵ From the Italian words “*fazzoletti*,” and “*peperoni*,” meaning “tissues,” and “bell peppers,” respectively.

¹³⁶ “from Italian”

years later, when they are both exiled in Rome. The anaphoric construction of the first paragraphs lends emphasis to ideas of community, roots, and origins:

“Il mio principio è Barni mentre mangiamo insieme dal piatto comune” (1).

“Il mio principio è noi due [...]” (2).

“Il mio principio è Barni quando tocca a me raccontare le storie [...]” (2).

“Il mio principio sembra spezzarsi quel giorno, mentre Barni mi sta pettinando i capelli per la partenza [...]” (2).¹³⁷

As in a contrapuntal tune, this narration is intertwined with (and interrupted by) the Somali poem “*Soomaali baan ahay*,”¹³⁸ read on the “Radio Mogadiscio” by “una voce *waddani*” (3),¹³⁹ which is a sub-text about Somali identity. The original 1977 long poem by Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad, also known as “Yamyam,” was written in the aftermath of the war declaration of Somalia on Ethiopia which culminated in the Ogaden War, and is critical of the political control and exploitation of Somalia, equating Somali identity with values of self-respect, dignity, pride, justice, bravery, and equality, and urging the people to reunite. The version of the poem that appears in this chapter is freely translated into Italian by Farah, with the exception of the repeated expression “*soomaali baan ahay*,” most times left untranslated, despite being explained in the glossary. The author discusses her process in an interview: “In tre capitoli del libro (che corrispondono a tre voci differenti) ho utilizzato testi di canzoni somale famose legate a momenti storici precisi. Le canzoni non sono tradotte, ma scritte ex

¹³⁷ “My beginning is Barni as we eat together from the communal dish” (1). “My beginning is the two of us [...]” (2). “My beginning is Barni when it’s my turn to tell stories [...]” (2). “My beginning seems to break that day when Barni is combing my hair in preparation for my departure [...]” (3). [From published English translation]

¹³⁸ “I am Somali”

¹³⁹ “a patriotic [Somali] voice [Italian]”

novo, usando i testi originali come tracce” (“I nodi”).¹⁴⁰ Ashcroft et al. argue that the “use of untranslated words interrupts and questions the privileged position of [...] the “standard code” and powerfully asserts cultural difference” (41). They are instances of ‘deterritorialization’ (Deleuze and Guattari 16), of the minor uses of the major language. Steiner maintains that the discursive challenge of leaving words untranslated is a strategy of “defamiliarization” that brings together “multiple locales, languages, traditions and histories” (17). But Farah pushes this one step further. It is not only about adding a multicultural *feel* to the text; what she grants to the text is a degree of erudition that makes a poignant linguistic and cultural intervention.

The individual account of Domenica Axad overlapping with the communal story of the Somali people embodied in the poem draw a complex, pluralistic, and multilayered definition of identity unlikely to have been captured by a single voiced narration. Her innovation also arises from the collage of oral genres (such as the radio narrative) —or ‘minor’ genres, if we take into account the privileging of the written over the oral in the Western tradition where these texts are being published— vis-à-vis the sophistication of rhetorical devices, in this case through the interplay of anaphora, “Il mio principio [...],” in Domenica’s narration and epistrophe of the phrase “*soomaali baan ahay*” from the poem. The authorial strategy of free translation is again invoked in Taageere’s narration, in chapter five, where he describes the war destruction of Mogadiscio. The last three paragraphs of the chapter open with the

¹⁴⁰ “In three chapters of the book (which correspond to three different voices) I used texts of famous Somali songs linked to certain historical moments. I did not translate but re-wrote the songs, using the original texts as traces.”

anaphora of 1990s Axmed Naaji's song's refrain, "*Xamar waa lagu xumeeyay*" (144-145).¹⁴¹

As Anna Proto Pisani pertinently clarifies,

Le mot xumeeyay dérivé du verbe xumee qui signifie faire du mal, ruiner, causer un tort grave, est traduit par trois versions différentes : rovinata, ruinée, oltraggiata, outragée, tradita, trahie, comme pour approfondir en italien la signification de ce terme somali qui prend toute sa relevance dans le contexte de la guerre. (Pisani 116)¹⁴²

The multiple concurrent translations of the same term offered by the author, corroborated by the rhythmic alternation of Taageere's voice and the song, convey the severe impact of destruction in Somalia's capital city during the armed conflict while simultaneously problematizing the act of translation in itself.

The concept of translation is also present in Barni's character in different ways. She acts as a translator for her younger cousin Domenica Axad, who lives with terror "la condizione di tabula rasa linguistica" (237)¹⁴³ upon returning to Somalia after each summer vacation spent in Italy. Domenica reveals, "Era Barni chi mi offriva riparo ogni volta che tornavo, era lei chi mi aiutava a scivolare rapidamente dentro l'altra lingua" (238).¹⁴⁴ During their childhood, Barni has the difficult job of translating the Italian fairy tales that Domenica learns from her mother (2).¹⁴⁵ Domenica's inner linguistic tension is a result of her bilingualism, with an Italian mother and a Somali father. These circumstances strongly

¹⁴¹ "Xamar, they have ruined you" (127).

¹⁴² For a survey of words and expressions in Somali present in Ali Farah's text, see Pisani 111-114.

¹⁴³ "the linguistic condition of blank slate"

¹⁴⁴ "It was Barni who offered me shelter every time I came back, it was her who helped me quickly slip into the other language"

¹⁴⁵ The highly codified sub-genre of the fairy tale is played upon by Chiziane, in *Niketche*, when the character Rami, asks the mirror for advice. In a parody of the original text of *Snow White*, to the question "- Diz-me, espelho meu: serei eu feia?" ["Tell me, mirror of mine: Am I ugly?"], the mirror responds: "- Ah, sua gorda!" ["Ah, you fat one!"] (34).

impact her upbringing in Mogadishu, where she also acts as an interpreter for her mother, and has to deal, from a very young age, with the consequences of her own acts of translation. After an “incidente di diplomazia familiare”¹⁴⁶ when she hurts her cousins’ self-esteem by reporting a literal translation of her mother’s words about their “due enormi orecchie in fuori” (235),¹⁴⁷ she becomes “una grande dissimulatrice,”¹⁴⁸ carefully filtering what she hears and always trying to please her interlocutors:

Vivevo la traduzione come un divertimento, a tratti, ma più spesso con un forte senso di responsabilità, soprattutto quando si trattava di limare le asprezze, di non lasciar trapelare sentimenti negativi. Ero alle prese con voci schiette che scaturivano dall’animo prive di filtri. Voci consegnate a me traghettatrice senza che l’emittente si sforzasse di adattarle al destinatario. (233)¹⁴⁹

This description of the role of the interpreter ultimately also speaks to the role of the multilingual writer, who needs to juggle several (often conflicting) cultures and languages.

Apart from letter-form chapters by Domenica Axad and Barni addressing each other, which is a written genre traditionally associated with women’s writing, there are other narrative modes whose usage is subversive because they are related to oral narratives: the abovementioned Somali poem on the radio; an interview with Barni; a phone conversation between Taageere and his ex-wife Shukri, and a discussion of Taageere with an immigration interpreter, both intertwined with a Somali song, and the national anthem, respectively; and even a video project of Domenica and Saciid Saleebaan, who want to film the Somali

¹⁴⁶ “incident of family diplomacy” (my translation)

¹⁴⁷ “two big ears sticking out” (my translation)

¹⁴⁸ “a great dissimulator” (201)

¹⁴⁹ “I lived translation as an entertainment sometimes, but more often with a strong sense of responsibility, especially when I had to tone down harshness, to hide negative feeling. I was dealing with blunt utterances that sprung unfiltered from the soul. Voices that were entrusted to me to ferry across without the speaker making any effort to adapt them to the receiver.” (201-202)

diaspora (121). For Domenica, to film is related to her “lealtà per le persone [...], una lealtà vecchia maniera” (190).¹⁵⁰ In an interview, Farah reminds us of “the fact that here in the Western world we’re accustomed to memory being transmitted through writing instead of through multimediality [...]” (Lavagnino 158), which makes her book all the more insurrectionary. Another important device that expands the heteroglossia of this text is the presence of interlocutors: Domenica and Barni who address each other in their letters, Barni’s interviewer, Shukri on the other end of Taageere’s phone call, and the immigration interpreter. The speech is always in the first person and the interlocutors’ voices are never heard. On this topic, Farah says:

Preferisco la prima persona perché mi dà la possibilità di far uscire la voce dei personaggi e mi interessa utilizzare l’interlocutore esterno perché chi parla modula sempre il proprio linguaggio e il proprio comportamento in base a chi ha di fronte. (“I nodi”)¹⁵¹

Ultimately, these different media sew a complex and perfectly articulated patchwork, which is also a meta-text about the power of linguistic deterritorialization to subvert the canon of knowledge in a postcolonial, diasporic, and migratory context.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ “an old fashioned loyalty towards the people”

¹⁵¹ “I prefer the first person because it gives me the opportunity of giving voice to the characters and I use the external interlocutor because speakers always modulate their own language and behaviour according to who they speak to.”

¹⁵² The interview form is also taken up by Mekuy in *Tres Almas para un Corazón*, where the story is told through four interviews led by the author’s alter ego. In that case, we hear both interlocutors, and both address not only each other but also the audience.

III. Colonial Languages and Cultural Imperialism

Zuhra is a thirty-year-old Italian woman of Somali origin, well-versed in standard Italian, Romanesco (the dialect of Rome), Somali, English, and an aspirant Arabic speaker, who despite holding a degree in Brazilian literature, has a precarious job selling CDs at “Libla,” a “megastore della cultura” (Scego 82).¹⁵³ Her professional circumstances are a generational byproduct of Southern Europe’s economic crisis and of the mass culture industry brought about by cultural globalization.¹⁵⁴ This phenomenon is critically discussed through the narrator’s admiration of musical icons such as Brazilian singers Caetano Veloso and Maria Bethânia to the detriment of North American popular stars such as Britney Spears (83). The ubiquity of the English language is played upon through the introduction of English expressions that permeate Italian youth culture via television, film, literature, music, school, and travel, such as “*last but not least*” (35), “politically correct” (35), “No comment” (36), “top five” (38), among others. Note that while the foreignness of some expressions is marked by italics, others are simply included in regular font, suggesting their assimilation into the Italian language. In this regard, literary critic Filippo La Porta bemoans the fact that the “lingua italiana di oggi [è] inesorabilmente televisiva, impoverita nel vocabolario [e] semicolonizzata dall’inglese” (15).¹⁵⁵ The idea of the cultural imperialism of the English language is also discussed in *Madre Piccola*, where Ayaan, Domenica Axad’s friend who lives in London, comments that the British Museum hosts “*a lot of culture*” (120). This ironic

¹⁵³ “Culture megastore”

¹⁵⁴ The idea of cultural globalization is also described in *Esse Cabelo*, where Mila describes Lisbon in the 1990s as a city under construction, where young kids like her looked forward to new cd megastores, metro stations, and shopping centres (Almeida 47).

¹⁵⁵ “today’s Italian language is inexorably influenced by television, impoverished in the vocabulary and semi-colonized by the English language”

use of the English language, while playing on its high linguistic and cultural status, also calls into question the “culture” housed in that museum, partly composed by masterpieces allegedly pillaged from different parts of the world.

In *Oltre Babilonia*, English and French are also intertwined with Italian in a strategic code-switching that contributes to drawing a criticism of post-Second World War Europe, which, despite being in ruins, still gets to make decisions about Somalia. Through Elias’ narration, we perceive a disdain of both the British and the French towards the Italians:

“Ah, the Italians, oh God, non cambiano much. They’re sempre the same. Always”.
“Bien sûr. Les italiens...” (Scego 259)¹⁵⁶

This excerpt ridicules the historical decision of the United Nations to concede to Italy, no less, a country “distrutto nell’animo” (260),¹⁵⁷ the role of helping Somalia move towards independence, through a ten-year-long trusteeship mandate, from 1950 to 1960. At the same time, it also draws attention to European hierarchical disputes, and particularly to the uneven power relations between peripheral Southern European countries, like Italy, and wealthier countries, like France and Britain, who are the decision-makers.

The prestige of imperial and colonial languages is both recognized and called into question by linguistic strategies that corrupt them. In *Madre Piccola*, during a phone conversation with Shukri, Taageere discusses the status conferred by fluency in former colonial languages. He recalls the time when he registered in Italian classes in Mogadiscio because of the language’s connotation of “uomini perbene, con un lavoro buono al ministero,

¹⁵⁶ “Ah, the Italians, oh God, they don’t change much. They’re always the same. Always”

¹⁵⁷ “destroyed to the soul”

a scuola, nell'esercito" (82).¹⁵⁸ Essentially, he summarizes, knowing Italian in Mogadiscio "Fa elegante" (82).¹⁵⁹ The prestige of European languages is also evident in *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás*. For example, in a letter from Tomás to Teresa, he says that he had a premonition that they will go "[...] a España, porque el Señor entiende que es a través de su palabra en castellano como nuestra descendencia se educará mejor" (231).¹⁶⁰ Contrasting with its colonial neglect of schooling, here Spain is a privileged doorway to a better education.

The topic of a globalized culture present in Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* contrasts with Mekuy's *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, and this is revealing about differences between Hispanophone and Italophone contexts. The globalized youth culture is criticized by Scego and praised by Mekuy,¹⁶¹ but in different ways both authors are speaking to a global audience, with all the international references, Afrocentric ideas, and globalized outreach across different countries, languages, and cultures.

Benedict Anderson draws attention to the idea of colonial languages as possessions when he states that there was a "conviction that languages (in Europe at least) were, so to speak, the personal property of quite specific groups (...) and moreover that these groups, imagined as communities, were entitled to their autonomous place in a fraternity of

¹⁵⁸ "Decent men, with good jobs at the ministry, at school, in the army."

¹⁵⁹ "Is elegant."

¹⁶⁰ "...to Spain, because the Lord believes that it is through his word in Castilian that our descendants will be better educated."

¹⁶¹ Also in Mekuy's *Tres Almas para un Corazón*, the narrator Rita Maldonado Obono, at the beginning of her interview with Aysha, one of the three wives of Santiago Nvé Nguema, says: "Porque estas confesiones van a crear, con seguridad, un debate importante, no solo en Guinea Ecuatorial y África, sino en otras partes del mundo. Supongo que estás enterada de la polémica que existe en Francia con el tema de la poligamia. Y en el mismo Estados Unidos, donde tú vives ahora, por cierto." (154) ["Because these confessions will surely create an important debate, not only in Equatorial Guinea and Africa, but in other parts of the world. I suppose you are aware of the controversy that exists in France with the subject of polygamy. And in the United States, where you live now, by the way."]

equals” (84). In *Caderno*, for instance, we see how the Portuguese language is a privilege of the colonizers and works as a means of power against black Mozambicans. However, as we observe in *O Retorno*, language fluency is not sufficient for the returnees to be accepted as part of the Portuguese nation, unlike what they might have been made to believe by the institutional ideology while living abroad in the former colonies and forming part of an imagined Portuguese community. Even though they have what Gert Oostindie calls the “postcolonial bonus” (Oostindie 15), which is to say that compared to other immigrant groups they have some cultural capital validated by mainstream society, the returnees are also perceived in Portugal as “bearers of a morally polluted Portugueseness,” as Stephen Lubkemann explains (189), also perceived in their language use. Rebelling against the major language, the 15-year-old narrator of *O Retorno*, Rui, born in Angola to Portuguese parents, speaks Kimbundu (an Angolan Bantu language) to defiantly talk back to his math teacher in Portugal, who does not understand that language and angrily commands, “[...] falas em português se faz favor, aqui fala-se português [...]” (145).¹⁶² The teacher’s patronizing tone reflects a deeper social anxiety and displays a superiority complex in relation to the returnees from Africa, who are made to represent the ‘other,’ mere second class citizens, due to being a painful reminder of the national defeat embodied by the end of the empire. With their private jokes in a minor, private language, Rui and his fellow returnee classmates assert their presence and operate a linguistic decolonization, momentarily subverting the institutional order of the classroom, where they are all put side-by-side “na fila mais afastada das janelas, nos lugares com menos luz” (141).¹⁶³ The math teacher never addresses any of them by their

¹⁶² “You speak Portuguese, please, here we speak Portuguese [...]”

¹⁶³ “in the row farthest from the windows, in the seats with the least light”

names and perceives them as a whole, asking, “Um dos retornados que responda” (141).¹⁶⁴

This xenophobic attitude against the returnees and, by extension, the African former colonies is avoided by Milucha, Rui’s sister, who, in order to be socially accepted in Lisbon, resorts to a careful use of highly standardized Portuguese, making a conscious effort to hide words of Angolan origin that would signal her identity as a returnee, as Rui explains: “[...] a minha irmã a fingir que não é retornada, a dizer pequeno-almoço, frigorífico, autocarro, furos, em vez de matabicho, geleira, machimbombo, borlas” (150).¹⁶⁵

In an opposite direction (Portugal to Angola) but with the same intention of looking for recognition through the scrupulous manipulation of one’s language, Mila, the narrator of *Esse Cabelo*, confesses that she tried to hide her Lisbon accent when visiting her mother in Luanda. Out of fear of being spotted as an outsider, she would conceal her natural, more standardized, accent: “temendo que dessem por mim, e tentando mudar de sotaque quando falava com as quitadeiras” (78).¹⁶⁶ This could allude to the fact that she craves a close relationship with her mother, with whom she only spends a few weeks per year, and yet she does not feel a sense of belonging in Luanda. Also, standard Portuguese bears the weight of colonial history, which Mila might want to avoid.

It is telling that Kimbundu, one of the most widely spoken languages in Angola, particularly in the Luanda-Malange region, which includes the capital, Luanda, has enriched the lexicon of the Portuguese spoken in Portugal, Brazil and Angola. Similarly, it also bears traces of European Portuguese, following centuries of contact, borrowing, and ongoing

¹⁶⁴ “One of the returnees may answer”

¹⁶⁵ “my sister pretending not to be a returnee, saying breakfast, refrigerator, bus, skipping class, instead of *matabicho*, fridge, *machimbombo*, playing hookie”

¹⁶⁶ “Fearing to be noticed, and trying to change my accent when speaking to the street sellers.”

interaction. The linguistic exposure between Angola and Brazil dates back to the 1600s and the transatlantic slave trade, when Angola became the main source of slaves for sugarcane plantations in Brazil. Many words and expressions of Kimbundu, and other Angolan and Mozambican languages, also entered Portugal, during the decolonization period in the mid-1970s via the *retornados*, and more recently, through Angolan immigrants fleeing the civil war. This is a way in which languages, marked by history, intermingle, creolize, and enrich each other.

Young Rui occupies an in-between position: on the one hand, he is the ‘other’ in Portugal; on the other hand, he feels superior towards Angolans. Mirroring his parents’ discriminatory attitudes towards indigenous people, Rui ridicules the lack of fluency in Portuguese of the black soldiers who took his father during the decolonization period in Angola. He insults them and mimics their ‘accented’ Portuguese language:

[...] vamos matar-te com a tua arma e com a tua bala nem precisamos de gastar nada. Não, os cabrões de merda não falaram assim que os cabrões de merda nem sabem falar, vámo matáti cum tuá arma e tuá bála nei precisámo di gastá nada. (76)¹⁶⁷

The soldiers reproduce the language of the colonizer to the point of being understood, but refusing to linguistically assimilate, they instead bend that language, ridicule it, and make it their own. These Angolans speaking ‘broken’ Portuguese are in reality reinstating their power against foreign rule in the newly postcolonial conflicts in Angola. The fact that they take Rui’s father illustrates this. The lack of fluency in Portuguese by a vast number of Angolan

¹⁶⁷ “we’ll kill you with your own gun and bullet, we don’t even have to spend anything. No, the fucking bastards did not talk like that because the fucking bastards can’t even talk, *vámo matáti cum tuá arma e tuá bála nei precisámo di gastá nada.*”

citizens also speaks to Portuguese colonial policies and lack of investment in education, unlike British and French colonization, which conceived of education as part of their ‘civilizing mission’ projects, later taken up by postcolonial subjects to ‘talk back’ in the colonizer’s language. This is why Rui naively, and prejudicially, says that “os [carteiros] pretos nem sequer sabem ler as moradas” (44).¹⁶⁸

The language of the colonizer is also bent and appropriated in *Madre Piccola*, where an elderly woman sings to celebrate the independence of Somalia from Italy. Bending the Italian language, in which she would have sung ‘primo luglio,’ she sings instead “*Bariimo luuliyooo*” (37),¹⁶⁹ converting the colonial language into her own “*buraambur*,”¹⁷⁰ her property, as a Somali, and as a woman. As Barni tells her interviewer, “Quello era il suo canto poetico, la sua lingua di donna contaminata dal colonizzatore scacciato” (37).¹⁷¹ The literary imposition of Somali upon the Italian language becomes even more subversive if we take into consideration that English, Italian, and Arabic were the official languages upon independence due to the lack of agreement on a written code for Somali, a centuries-old language spoken by the majority of the population. Following an effort to find a common writing script that would work as an orthographic reference guide for the Somali language, many attempts were made and different proposals put forward by different scholars. Finally, in 1972, Somali linguist Shire Jama Ahmed’s Latin-based script was, after some failed attempts, approved and made official by Siad Barre’s government. This linguistic question in Somalia highlights the importance of the Somali language for the configuration of Somali

¹⁶⁸ “the black mailmen can’t even read the addresses”

¹⁶⁹ “July 1st” [Reference to the date when Somalia gained independence from Italy in 1960.]

¹⁷⁰ “Female poetry genre” (Farah, *Little Mother*, 232)

¹⁷¹ “That was her poetic song, her woman’s tongue contaminated by the cast out colonizer”

identity, both in the motherland and in the diaspora, due to the fact that the Somalis kept their language instead of succumbing to other major languages.

This manipulation of the colonial language allows for rebellion and resistance. bell hooks focuses on the empowerment made possible by the transformation of standard English by oppressed subjects in the following terms: “We take the oppressor’s language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counter-hegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language” (hooks 175). The expansion of this culture of resistance in the face of the colonial language triggers a wider awareness of regimes of oppression and contributes to a linguistic decolonization. One very interesting aspect here is the redefinition of hierarchical categories kindled by the fact that Rui and his generation are no longer the settlers and colonizers (despite the fact that he is nonetheless racist), but the second generation, who is critical of their parents’ national definitions, and of the history into which they were born. The categories here are now shifting: it is no longer black Africans and their vernacular languages against the white supremacist colonizers and their standard languages, it is about what is left after the fall of the empire and the shifted power dynamics formed therein, where notions of race start (slowly) drifting away from notions of citizenship and of linguistic identity.

The colonial language is further deposed through the symbolic destruction of canonical national figures, in particular male writers who are typically used as banners of the Portuguese nation. In *O Retorno*, the act of burning the book *Os Lusíadas*, a canonical 16th century epic and prophetic poem about the supposedly notable destiny of the Portuguese people,—institutionally turned into a main symbol of the Portuguese national sentiment—allegorically means to burn down the colonial library, and the imperial nation, opening up

space for a new post-national era: “O professor de português da turma B queimou os Lusíadas, o império não devia ter existido e os Lusíadas que o aclamam também não” (46).¹⁷²

This decolonization of canonical literary symbols also resonates in *Esse Cabelo*, where the Angolan-Portuguese narrator Mila anchors her Portuguese identity, not onto the Portuguese language of the poet Fernando Pessoa, whose famous adage, “Minha pátria é a língua portuguesa,”¹⁷³ clearly establishes the link between language and fatherland. Instead, she uses that popular verse as a subtext with which to rewrite her own identity. When she says, “A minha pátria é o cabelo de Lúcia” (34),¹⁷⁴ she is rooting her sense of belonging in her Portuguese grandmother’s hair, an element of her body marked by the politics of gender and race, not taken into account in the original phrase.¹⁷⁵

Édouard Glissant defines “creolization” as “the meeting, interference, shock, harmonies and disharmonies between the cultures of the world” (qtd. in Stam and Shohat 60). This process embodies the linguistic decolonization at work in these texts. Yet another way in which the colonial language is manipulated and creolized is through the revision of religion, for instance, when highly coded religious prayers are rewritten. This linguistic play with fixed religious expressions, the coexistence and conflict between animist religions with Christianity, or the tension between Muslim and Western principles is present in most of these texts. Three illustrative cases can be drawn from *Esse Cabelo*, *Ekomo*, and *Niketché*. First, in *Esse Cabelo*, Mila describes the way in which her very Catholic mother breaks the

¹⁷² “The teacher of Portuguese of class B burned down the *Lusíadas*, the empire shouldn’t have existed and the *Lusíadas* which acclaimed it shouldn’t either”

¹⁷³ “My fatherland is the Portuguese language”

¹⁷⁴ “My fatherland is Lúcia’s hair”

¹⁷⁵ The link between hair and identity is further explored in chapter 3.

prayers' rules to embark into "um improviso pródigo, em que não se importava com a questão vã de termos de nos coibir de nós mesmos quando rogamos a Deus" (77).¹⁷⁶ In a similarly subversive way, Mila rewrites a Eucharistic formula to reflect on the importance of the notion of estrangement to the awakening of her own mind. Talking about her mother's landlord in Luanda, whose formality reminds her of their status as outsiders, Mila says: "A questão não era por isso a de não sermos dignas de que ele entrasse na nossa morada, mas a de aprendermos através da sua insistência em habitar-nos que o visitante éramos nós mesmas" (79),¹⁷⁷ playing on the formula used in Christian worship service: "Senhor, eu não sou digno de que entreis em minha morada, mas dissei uma palavra e serei salvo" (Gulino).¹⁷⁸

Second, in similar fashion, in *Ekomo*, the overlapping of local and Christian religious practices is demonstrated by the prayer sung in Fang by the protagonist's mother: "-
Santamáriaaaa ñíaaa Zamaaa, Vôlo biaaaa awaaalaaa miseemmm mbembeee casôaamen" (Nsue 25). This prayer is left untranslated, even though the reader aware of Christian liturgy might recognize the first and last words, 'Santamária' [Saint Mary] and 'amen.' The play and adulteration of Christian prayers defies both the religion and the languages that carry it, populating them with new meanings that account for the characters' subjectivity and agency.

Thirdly, a liturgical parody is also produced in Paulina Chiziane's *Niketche*, a novel about a polygamous family whose women subvert the husband's rules to establish their rights

¹⁷⁶ "a prodigal improvisation in which she did not care about the pointless rule of having to restrain herself when praying to God"

¹⁷⁷ "The question was not, therefore, that we were not worthy of him entering under our roof, but that we learned through his insistence on visiting us that the visitors were us"

¹⁷⁸ "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

and agency. Unlike the body of Christ, the body of Tony, the male protagonist, cannot be evenly distributed among his five wives. The reinvention and distortion of a discourse linked to Christianity underlines human imperfection, on the one hand, but also discusses the representation of women in the Bible breaking with the monotheistic and phallogocentric worldview proposed by Christian tradition. Chiziane claims a female authority in the space of the divine by speculating on the possibility of God being married. Referring to this so-called “goddess” as an advocate for women’s rights, the narrator ironically concludes that, even if she existed, such an entity would be as invisible as all other women and equally confined to the domestic space: “O seu espaço é, de certeza, a cozinha celestial” (70).¹⁷⁹ And the satire goes even further: one of the best-known prayers of Christianity, titled “Our Father,” is converted into “Our Mother,” and is used to accuse men of their ‘crimes’: “tirania, traição, imoralidades, bebedeiras, insultos [...]” (70).¹⁸⁰ Biblical history is rewritten and adapted: the forbidden fruit is the banana or the cashew instead of the apple, and the “pão nosso de cada dia”¹⁸¹ is replaced by the “cenoura” (70),¹⁸² in a clear reference to the male sexual organ. The subversion of Catholic symbols breaks the solemnity of the gendered Western institution and its principles. This destabilizes the distinctions between the natural and the artificial in the construction of gender discourses and provokes laughter, which Judith Butler considers “indispensable for feminism,” i.e. to laugh “in the face of serious categories” (xxx). The claim of a feminine deity questions the image built over the centuries by the Judeo-Christian tradition that gives men the protagonists’ role and relegates women to secondary roles, as if

¹⁷⁹ “ Her space is certainly the heavenly kitchen.”

¹⁸⁰ “tyranny, betrayal, immoralities, drunkenness, insults [...]”

¹⁸¹ “daily bread”

¹⁸² “carrot”

this relationship dynamic was natural and not manufactured.¹⁸³ Chiziane's claim of a woman-deity is a call for justice and equity between all genders.

IV. Exoticism and Subversiveness

Lionnet argues that, in relation to the Francophone writers that she studies, the use of French "is a means of translating into the colonizer's language a different sensibility, a different vision of the world, a means therefore of transforming the dominant conceptions circulated by the more standard idiom" (13). But she is also aware that even though the emphasis on difference has the "merit of underscoring specificities that would be muted and ignored otherwise," it also risks overemphasizing dissimilarities that can put "racial and biographical determinism into an essentialist impasse" (14).¹⁸⁴ This draws attention to the fact that while these postcolonial women writers' use of linguistic difference (via heteroglossia, multilingualism, etc.) can transform and decolonize major (colonial, imperial, mainstream) languages, it can also perpetuate exotic tropes that might defeat that purpose. For instance, the use of Romanesco dialect or of 'broken' Portuguese can be misinterpreted as a confirmation of European standardized languages' superiority and feed the same stereotypes that these works attempt to counter.

¹⁸³ In this regard, Merlin Stone (1978), in her book provocatively titled *When God Was a Woman*, explains that in fact there were several female deities worshipped thousands of years before the advent of Judaism and Christianity that go completely unnoticed in popular literature and in education in general. Throughout her work, Stone provides different pieces of evidence that attest to the existence of a prehistoric matriarchy that was destroyed by the Indo-European patriarchy and later, by the Judeo-Christian one.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Young warns of the potential discriminatory risk attached to the concept of hybridity when applied to issues of race and miscegenation. He also criticizes multiculturalism because in looking for what is different, it might encourage extremist groups to come forth "because they have the most clearly discernibly different identity" (*Colonial Desire* 5).

In “Literary Heteroglossia and Translation: Translating Resistance in Contemporary African Francophone Writing,” Paul Bandia considers the inclusion of African proverbs and native words within European-language texts to serve the purpose of “adding local color” (38). He says that the “proverbs in African languages [...] have often been exploited by African writers who use them to enrich and *embellish* their works in European languages” (150, emphasis added). He sees these authors’ work as an “ethnocultural transfer,” through which they express the “African ‘life-world’ in an alien language and culture” (151). This sense of ‘cultural translation’ dates back to its earlier usage in the context of anthropology and consists of translating for the West a foreignizing and essentialist view of Africa (as a whole) as a means of showing difference through the display of the ‘other’ as an exotic object, a mere piece of decoration. It is assumed, in this view, that these authors are exclusively ‘other,’ (read African) and foreign to European languages, which is an anachronism in the context of the contemporary diasporic writer with multiple belongings.

This exoticizing perspective is explained by Graham Huggan as the “anthropological exotic,” a phenomenon through which postcolonial literature is filtered and acquires market value, suggesting that it is primarily an “export product, aimed at a largely foreign audience for whom the author, willingly or not, acts as cultural spokesperson or interpreter” (106). This kind of exoticism “describes a mode of both perception and consumption” that invokes the “familiar aura of other;” it depicts foreign cultures but also provides “a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text” and to the culture (108). This readily marketable version in relation to African societies (and Oriental, we could add) implies the “elaboration of a world of difference that conforms to often crudely stereotypical

Western exoticist paradigms and myths (‘primitive culture’, ‘unbounded nature’, ‘magical practices, ‘noble savagery’, and so on)” (Huggan 108). Ultimately, Huggan suggests that the ‘anthropological exotic’ has a “global market-value as a reified object of intellectual tourism” but it is also an “educative vehicle of a cultural difference seen and appreciated in aesthetic terms” as well as a “medium of unsettlement [that] contains unwanted traces of the violence it attempts to conceal” (122). This suggests that despite the fetishism and objectification to which these texts might be subjected, they also reflect resistance and empower the writers thus contributing to the erasure of “cultural ignorance” (Huggan 123). The concern here is, however, that these works might get inextricably associated with exotic labels to the detriment of their actual linguistic, political, cultural, and linguistic meanings. Also, in both Bandia’s and Huggan’s accounts, it is assumed that the postcolonial writer is located in non-Western spaces, which is complicated by second-generation writers such as Scego and Almeida, among others, whose ancestors are African but who are themselves located in Italy, and Portugal, respectively.

Pisani proposes that “l’insertion de ces fragments de chansons, de poèmes et de pièces théâtrales donne [...] une légitimité littéraire au patrimoine culturel somali” (Pisani 117-118). She also proposes that Farah’s inclusions of Somali words could establish “une complicité privilégiée avec son lecteur somali” (118). This heartening hypothesis of an identification with the Somali reader could acquire more currency now that *Madre Piccola* has an English translation, which comes with a consequent increased potential to reach Somali communities in the diaspora. But this still does not offer a solution to the ongoing problem of exotic commodification. In her recension of Ali Farah’s *Madre Piccola*, Silvia Camilotti argues that

the presence of the Somali language succeeds in accurately depicting a cultural heritage, through the expression of feelings, and the description of objects and events:

[...] la ripresa dei suoni e della lingua somala, gli inni, le poesie, il far rivivere un patrimonio senza l'intento di inserire, una tantum, la parola esotica da dare in pasto ad un pubblico alla ricerca della nota folcloristica, ma con la volontà di esprimere sentimenti, descrivere oggetti e situazioni che solo con quella lingua è possibile fare. (Camilotti)¹⁸⁵

In other words, the erudite attention put into the linguistic fabric could counter exotic definitions that deem these literatures marginal, or 'inferior.' A continuing problem is the underlying power relations that keep on playing the West against the non-West. The presence of African languages might contribute to a balancing of these power relations between European and African languages, as Farah suggests:

Esiste un rapporto di potere tra le lingue: le lingue economicamente e politicamente più forti invadono altri linguaggi. Con il restituire all'italiano queste parole rimasticate e destrutturate, mi pareva di suggerire anche un'inversione di potere che può avvenire proprio grazie al testo scritto. (Ciampaglia)¹⁸⁶

Even though we should not dismiss the agency of transnational writers in banking on their difference to achieve a certain type of "product" that will grant them international recognition and financial rewards (Huggan 107), the question remains nonetheless: how can these writers display their cohabitation of cultures, and the linguistic creativity that arises from their narratives (influenced by their migrant, diasporic, gendered contexts) without being

¹⁸⁵ "the recovery of certain sounds and of the Somali language, the anthems, the poems, the reviving of a heritage does not bank on the exotic word to feed the audience's folklore cravings but instead expresses feelings, and describes objects and situations which can only be done in that language."

¹⁸⁶ "There is a power relationship between languages: economically and politically stronger languages invade other languages. With the inscription of these 'remasticated' and reframed words into Italian, I aimed to suggest also an inversion of power that would take place thanks to the written text."

commodified? Or is commodification simply impossible to counter in markets that are increasingly competitive?

In response to Huggan's concept of 'strategic exoticism,' defined precisely as the conscious commodification of cultural difference by postcolonial writers (Huggan 33), Ana Martins warns,

The crafting of an essentialized global market reader effectively denies the marginal writer considerable agency over the supposed commodification of his or her writing, because it neglects writers' strategic ways of turning their often multiple marginal identities to their own advantage in situated contexts. (Martins 149)

She criticizes Huggan's model for equating "metropolitan mainstream cultural codes" with "English-speaking" (148) contexts, while also ignoring that, "[a]cross different cultural, geographical, and historical sites, strategic exoticism reveals itself as a tool that is complicated by narratives of gendered, as well as national and racial, differences" (Martins 149). Martins' criticism makes important points: it challenges reductive attempts to define postcolonial/transnational works as exotic, while highlighting the importance of situating linguistic difference within a social, political, gendered, and racial frame, that authors are aware of. Having these intersected dimensions of identity in mind, we might be able to better grasp what hooks ultimately proposes as an outcome that can arise from multilingualism, heteroglossia, and awareness of other cultures and languages:

I suggest that we may learn from spaces of silence as well as spaces of speech, that in the patient act of listening to another tongue we may subvert that culture of capitalist frenzy and consumption that demands all desire must be satisfied immediately, or we may disrupt that cultural imperialism that suggests one is worthy of being heard only if one speaks in standard English. (hooks 174)

V. Writing as Home

These transnational writings cannot be easily rooted in geographic coordinates. Borrowing Deleuze and Guattari's model of the rhizome, Lionnet and Shih explain that "rhizomatic terrain is one 'on which minority subjects act and interact in fruitful, lateral ways'" (Lionnet and Shih 2). In the absence of an evident geographic root, language becomes then a privileged space from where transnational authors, in particular women, address and negotiate their plural identities by bringing into light their struggles to belong, their identity crises, their resilience, their physical and psychological traumas, and their marginal writer and migrant conditions. In different ways, the women writers under analysis in this dissertation all have a particular relationship with language that attempts to destroy multiple levels of power relations, through a rebellion against authoritarian systems such as colonial and postcolonial narratives, patriarchy, mainstream society, standardized languages, literary canons, and major religions (such as Catholic or Muslim). These power relations are called into question through an emphasis on arguably 'minor' narrative and linguistic strategies which allow these authors to carve out a dissident agency.

Azade Seyhan, in a discussion about the implications of transnational writing, argues that the "terrain of writing" (15) is sometimes the only place where migrants can negotiate their identities; it is not necessarily situated in a particular land, but in the "space of memory, of language, of translation" (15). It is "Neither here/nor there," (15) but in the middle space offered by literature. Indeed, in all the aforementioned books, there is a preoccupation with language and writing, which is related to one's freedom and agency as women. Some of the narrators are writers, some act as interpreters or translators. The narrator of *Caderno*

remembers the moment when she learned how to read as an initiatory rite, comparable to becoming an adult woman, described as follows:

Os meus músculos, sempre tensos, afrouxaram. Agora já não havia guerra em mim, e podia descansar; as regras de leitura fizeram sentido num ápice, só porque a tangerina teimosa decidira abrir-se por inteiro no meu cérebro, como um polvo que estende os tentáculos. Ali, dentro do carro, a caminho de Lourenço Marques, perto da Sonefe, como a primeira menstruação. (100)¹⁸⁷

Reading and writing become the “ferramenta com que escavaria a minha liberdade” (101).¹⁸⁸

For the narrator Isabela, writing is her way of redeeming herself before the events that she witnessed as a girl.

An example of her subversive establishment as a writer against Western patterns is found in Nsue. Nnanga, *Ekomo*'s narrator, says that she cannot read, yet she is the one who takes on the narration of their journey. This insinuates that the narrator, who is illiterate, *tells* the story in an oral manner, highlighting the richness and erudition contained in a story that is allegorically not *written*. Playing on this, Nsue writes the following dedication at the opening of the novel: “A Nnanga, mi amiga vieja. Lástima que no sepa leer” (7).¹⁸⁹ In a passage that closes the book, after the ritualistic shaving of her hair upon becoming a widow, she says:

Abro los ojos, eso creo, y veo un sinfin de cosas; que necesitaría todo un libro para expresar en su verdad exacta. Abro los ojos, eso creo, y me encuentro confundida entre la gente. Mas... ¡qué sola! ¡Qué tremendamente sola estoy! (248)¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ “My muscles, always tight, relaxed. There was no more war in me and I could rest. The rules of reading made sense in an instant, simply because the obstinate tangerine had decided to open up completely in my brain, like an octopus spreading its tentacles. There, inside the van on its way to Lourenço Marques, near the power plant, like a first menstruation.”

¹⁸⁸ “tool with which to dig my freedom”

¹⁸⁹ “To Nnanga, my old friend. What a pity that she cannot read.”

¹⁹⁰ “I open my eyes, or so I think, and I see endless things; it would take a whole book to express its exact truth. I open my eyes, or so I think, and I find myself mingled with the crowd. But... how lonely! How tremendously alone I am!”

This opening of the eyes is a symbolic moment of awareness of her own feelings and her subjectivity. This resonates with *Oltre Babilonia*'s Miranda, who writes as a rebellion against the past. Almeida needs to write her hair story to explain her history and to establish a new definition of literature. And in *Madre Piccola*, Domenica Axad's self-mutilation can also be seen in terms of language, as Lavagnino suggests: "Writing on the body and on the page compensate for her difficulty in vocalizing her identity as her body in Italian culture has historically been portrayed as dissonant with her mother tongue" (Lavagnino 72, 73). In Mekuy's texts, there are references to the writer, and some of her characters are writers. For example, in *El Llanto de la Perra* [*The Cry of the Bitch*], Eldania copes with her traumas by reading her deceased sister's writings and finally, when she rents a room of her own for herself and her son (188), she also starts writing down her life notes. In the introduction of *Tres Almas para un Corazón*, the narrator Rita Maldonado Obono, Mekuy's alter ego, starts by outlining her main traits, which include being a woman and being a writer: "Soy mujer y periodista. O periodista y mujer. Creo que ambas cosas me configuran por igual, aunque una de ellas sea decisión de la naturaleza y la otra enteramente mía" (21).¹⁹¹

The heightened importance of language in these writings is related to the fact that, as Simona Wright argues, language is "the primary location of culture and cultural domination" (8). It is therefore where the migrant writer can "reject [their] linguistic subaltern status" (8), carving out her identity and subjectivity. Wright warns that "... no identity or subjectivity can be found by the oppressed until language undergoes a process of

¹⁹¹ "I am a woman and a journalist. Or a journalist and a woman. I believe that both things are equally part of my setup, despite the fact that one is a decision of nature and the other one is fully my own."

cultural decolonization” (8). The creative heteroglossic ways in which these writers play with language, recreate genres, and inscribe themselves as women writers contributes not only to linguistic and literary innovation but also to an awareness of the links between our languages and the maps of our histories, showing that in reality we are all (already) babelian: “Noi parliamo la lingua della frontiera, quella degli attraversamenti continui. Quante lingue sono dentro di noi?” (Scego 414).¹⁹²

¹⁹² “We speak the language of the border, the language of continuous crossings. How many languages live inside of us?”

Chapter 3

Nation and Belonging: From Migrant Object to Transnational Subject

*If you want to know about a woman, a black woman that is,
touch her hair. 'Cause our hair carries our journey.
'Cause that's where we carry all our hopes, all our dreams,
our hurt, our disappointments, they're all in our hair.*
Trey Anthony, *Da Kink in My Hair*, 6

*Non esiste un negro italiano!*¹⁹³
Juventus fans chant against soccer player Mario Balotelli,
during a Juventus-Inter match in Turin, April 18, 2009

*Lembrem-se que somos todos filhos do longe,
como essa Maria que viram nas margens do rio.*¹⁹⁴
Paulina Chiziane, *O Alegre Canto da Perdiz*, 25

*La nostra casa la portiamo con noi, la nostra casa può viaggiare.
Non sono le pareti rigide che fanno del luogo in cui viviamo una casa.*¹⁹⁵
Cristina Ali Farah, *Madre Piccola*, 263

Official national discourses and definitions of belonging in Portugal, Spain, and Italy, are largely characterized by ideas of national unity, inclusion, and cultural tolerance rooted in myths such as Portugal being a country of *brandos costumes* [mild manners], Italy as a nation of *brava gente* [great people], and Spain as not only the “indivisible homeland of all Spaniards” (*Spanish Constitution* 10) but also the cradle of a global supranational community interrelated by the umbrella of *hispanidad* [Hispanicity]. In these national imaginations, gentler attitudes towards the ‘other’ supposedly differentiate southern Europe from northern,

¹⁹³ “There’s no such thing as a black Italian!”

¹⁹⁴ “Remember that we are all children from afar, like this Maria you saw on the river bank.”

¹⁹⁵ “We bring our home with us, our home can travel. It is not the rigid walls that make the place where we live a home.”

where harsher attitudes are represented by examples such as the Anglo-Saxon model of colonization and imperialism, as well as by Nazi German history. Those southern myths come with romantic notions of humane, convivial, and benevolent people and were strategically used to justify both colonial history and the dictatorships of Salazar, Franco, and Mussolini.

Such romantic ideas lingered (and linger still) in southern Europe beyond the end of colonialism and are often revived in official discourses. One eloquent example can be found in a recent address by the current President of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, who draws upon geography, history, and race relations to explain why the Portuguese do so well in diversity. He mentions the country's privileged geographical location within Europe, facing the Atlantic Ocean and connected to the Mediterranean Sea, which brought to the continent the knowledge of other peoples and cultures. Looking back on Portugal's maritime history of the 15th and 16th centuries, he emphasizes the pioneering role of the Portuguese in establishing global relationships in America and Africa based on connection, commerce, and affection. He also lists the different ethnic groups that account for the multiethnic origin of the Portuguese people, which brings to mind the idea of Lusotropicalism, a myth with a pro-miscegenation undertone, that encounters equivalents in the Spanish and Italian contexts. Based on this line of reasoning, Rebelo de Sousa praises the tolerance, openness, respect towards others, cosmopolitanism, and ecumenical sense that characterize the Portuguese and highlights the importance of maintaining friendship and cooperation ties globally and in particular with Portuguese-speaking countries. In this context, he refers to the "vocaçã

universalista e humanista da sociedade portuguesa,”¹⁹⁶ a statement that suggests not only a reference to the transnational community of Portuguese-speaking countries, fruit of Portugal’s imperial history, but also the idea of an ethical and almost messianic duty of its people.¹⁹⁷ In a commemorative way which ignores colonialism, colonial wars and their aftermath, as well as the pioneering role of the Portuguese in the history of the Atlantic slave trade, the Portuguese are portrayed as a nation which changed the world for the better, after having bravely overcome the difficulties of creating an empire, as described in the poem “Mar Português” [Portuguese Sea]¹⁹⁸ by Fernando Pessoa that Rebelo de Sousa quotes at the end of his speech.

The texts under analysis in this chapter show that the attitudes towards the ‘other’ are not always benevolent or humane, and are deeply conditioned by issues of race, class, and gender. The authors whose texts will be considered work in “contact zones,” described by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (*Imperial Eyes* 7). These zones are living proof of the resilience of imperial and patriarchal thinking, which now take new shapes in migrant, diasporic, and globalized societies.

From emigrant to immigrant countries, Portugal, Spain, and Italy have received many migrants from their former colonies in Africa. The history of inbound and outbound mass

¹⁹⁶ “universalist and humanistic vocation of Portuguese society”

¹⁹⁷ This messianic inclination goes back to the Treaty of Tordesillas, an agreement signed on June 7, 1494, between Portugal and Castile, and endorsed by the pope Alexander VI, according to which the Portuguese and the Spanish had claim upon all newly found lands in the “New World” that were not already ruled by a Christian king.

¹⁹⁸ This poem is part of the 1934 book *Mensagem* [Message] by Fernando Pessoa. This book of poems, which describes the rise and decline of the Portuguese empire, is a national symbol of Portuguese identity.

migrations has accentuated anxieties about the dismemberment of these (already) peripheral southern European nation-states and the identity narratives that support them, where citizenship and mainstream perceptions of belonging continue to be anchored in narrow definitions of white Catholic elite privilege. Referring to the Italian context, Manuela Coppola explains this phenomenon as follows: “Undecided as to its role, oscillating between a superficial welcoming of migrants and an indistinct fear often turning into overt xenophobia, Italy firmly holds to the fiction of a national identity constructed on religion and colour” (123). This problematic relationship of Italy with its non-white citizens is described by Heather Merrill in “Who Gets to Be Italian? Black Life Worlds and White Spatial Imaginaries,” where she argues that “Blackness is such a pivotal trope of Otherness in Italian society that even those with the most unequivocally culturally Italian identities may be associated with the ‘dark continent’ and an imminent threat to national geographies of whiteness” (138). As discussed in this chapter, these “geographies of whiteness,” more than a racial issue, conceal a ‘racialization’ process related to Southern Europe’s Mediterranean anxieties of being “not-quite-white, not-quite-right” to belong in Europe (Jensen 70). This materializes, for instance, in the history of ‘racialization’ of Portuguese or Italian emigrants in North America and other parts of the Western world.¹⁹⁹ Merrill discusses the impact of colonial histories on “struggles over recognition, place, and belonging among descendants of Africa” (140) and explains that by “[o]verturning simple teleologies, Italo-Africans claim place in a Europe whose history is their own, and partake in the making of new histories” (141). This process is shown in the texts under consideration.

¹⁹⁹ For the perception of Italian Americans as non-white in the United States, see Guglielmo and Salerno 2003.

In this chapter I discuss four texts: *Esse Cabelo* [That Hair] by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, *Oltre Babilonia* [Beyond Babylon] by Igiaba Scego, *Il Comandante del Fiume* [The River's Captain] by Cristina Ali Farah, and *Las Tres Virgenes de Santo Tomás* [The Three Virgins of Saint Thomas] by Guillermina Mekuy. The chapter is divided into five sections. In "The Politics of the 'Racialized' Body," I focus on how concepts of home and belonging are complicated by signifiers of 'otherness' such as hair and skin colour in the works of Almeida, Scego, and Farah. Then, in "Untangling Hair, Race, and Identity," I pay particular attention to the treatment of hair as a social response to systemic racism through which ideas of identity, race, ethnicity, home, and belonging are reworked. In "Alternative Geographies," I analyze the Afrocentric, transnational, diasporic and/or liminal spaces of belonging carved out by the hyphenated characters of *Esse Cabelo*, *Oltre Babilonia*, and *Il Comandante del Fiume*. A counterpoint to the conflicted identities found in the works by Almeida, Scego, and Farah is presented in "The Market of Racial and Gender Stereotyping," where I analyze Mekuy's text, showing how issues of power, class, and privilege shift perceptions of multiple identities and belongings. In this case, racial markers are no longer overt targets of racism but instead work as 'exotica' that feed market demands. The chapter closes with "Difficult Belongings and New Modernities," where I reflect on the intersecting nature of the texts under analysis and propose that we think about Southern Europe from its margins and fluid spaces of struggle.

The Politics of the 'Racialized' Body

In *Esse Cabelo*, the fact that Mila's grandmother Lúcia had been born on African soil produces in her grandfather Manuel a sense of social prestige: "Manuel [tinha] orgulho em

saber a mulher africana, o que lhe emprestava a ele uma certa aura de homem do mundo, que lhe agradava” (Almeida 35).²⁰⁰ Lúcia and Manuel meet in Portugal, then emigrate together during colonial times to Beira, Mozambique, and later to Luanda, Angola, but for the African-born white grandmother, Lúcia, raised and educated (to be a teacher) in the Portuguese town of Seia, ‘returning’ to Africa with her Portuguese husband is a return to her origins and yet “um modo de emigrar de si mesma” (35).²⁰¹ Her birthplace is a foreign one whereas Portugal, where she later returns, is where she feels at home.²⁰²

Mila’s definition of home is also complicated by her transnational genealogy. The daughter of an Angolan mother and a Portuguese father, she is born in Luanda but grows up in Lisbon with her father and paternal family. She perceives herself as Portuguese but her tightly coiled hair is a constant bodily reminder of her ‘otherness.’ She realizes that her hair bears the “vestígio do cruzamento das vidas de um comerciante português errante pelo Congo, um pescador albino de M’banza Kongo, católicas anciãs de Seia, cristãos-novos maçons de Castelo Branco [...]” (34).²⁰³ Perceiving discrimination on the part of some of those who also love her, she says, “O modo de os outros tratarem o meu cabelo simbolizou sempre a confusão doméstica entre o afecto e o preconceito” (49).²⁰⁴ This is illustrated by the very expression that gives Mila’s narration its title, *Esse Cabelo*,²⁰⁵ used by that same

²⁰⁰ “Manuel [was] proud of having an African wife because that lent him a certain aura of man of the world, which pleased him.”

²⁰¹ “a way of emigrating from herself”

²⁰² This resonates with Teresa, the Spanish mother of *Las Tres Virgenes de Santo Tomás*, by Guillermina Mekuy, whom when leaving Guinea for Spain feels like “Atrás quedaba lo que para ella fue su verdadero hogar [...]” [Her real home was being left behind] (41).

²⁰³ “traces of the intersecting lives of a Portuguese merchant wandering the Congo, an albino fisherman of M’banza Kongo, elderly Catholics of Seia, New Christian-Masons of Castelo Branco”

²⁰⁴ “The way others treat my hair has always symbolized the domestic confusion between affection and prejudice.”

²⁰⁵ “*That Hair*”

grandmother Lúcia, who often asks her in a nurturing/condescending tone: “Então Mila, quando é que tratas *esse cabelo*?” (45).²⁰⁶ Her other grandmother, “uma negra fula chamada Maria da Luz” (45),²⁰⁷ is rather proud of their shared kinky hair (46). Maria da Luz’s special attachment to her own hair is possibly linked to the fact that she was immobilized by thrombosis from a young age and the ritual of washing her hair carried out by her husband is what keeps them connected “como se fizessem amor” (45).²⁰⁸

Mila’s morning sight of her unruly hair, that she describes as a lion’s mane, makes her start off her days feeling ashamed, impatient, and angry (16). The source of these negative emotions can be found not only in her paternal family’s prejudices but also in strangers’ comments, such as when someone calls her “uma ‘mulata das pedras’, de mau cabelo e segunda categoria” (16).²⁰⁹ The negative connotation at the origin of the term ‘*esse cabelo*’ invites a re-reading of the front cover picture, which displays a black woman’s face cropped right below the eye line and sporting an afro hairstyle. Informed by the pejorative and ironic use of the determiner “*esse*” [that] that qualifies the “*cabelo*” [hair], those race and gender markers evince ‘that’ particular type of hair in women as a problematic site of struggle. Mila confirms this when she says that “Nada haveria a dizer de um cabelo que não fosse um problema” (17).²¹⁰ The perceived problematic nature of her hair makes Mila feel ‘othered’ whenever she visits a hairdresser. She recalls one of her first experiences at a salon as the moment when she starts feeling self-conscious of both her hair and her womanhood, which

²⁰⁶ “So Mila, when do you fix *that hair*?”

²⁰⁷ “A black Fula called Maria da Luz”

²⁰⁸ “as if they made love”

²⁰⁹ “a ‘mulatto of the Stone Age,’ with bad hair and of second rank.”

²¹⁰ “There wouldn’t be a reason to talk about hair if it wasn’t a problem.”

occurs hand in hand with the impression of being slandered behind her back (29). She says, “Eu nascia, com um grau distinto de paranóia, para o meu cabelo e ao mesmo tempo para uma ideia de mulher” (29).²¹¹ The metaphor of being born (to her hair and to being a woman) is compelling because it connotes coming to life with being aware of one’s own racial and gender identity. Hair and womanhood also go hand in hand for the main protagonist of Igiaba Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia*, Zuhra, for whom long hair is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, wearing it makes her feel happier; on the other hand, it reminds her of her childhood rape. This link between long hair and womanhood is reaffirmed by her mother, Maryam, who suggests that growing her hair will help her “tornare a credere nella donna che h[a] dentro” (Scego 172).²¹² Zuhra confesses her fear: “ho paura di essere donna, a volte” (172),²¹³ explaining why she keeps her hair very short thus avoiding a typically feminine look.

Mila admits that the social pressure to fit in results in repeatedly failed hairstyles because they are not suited for her natural hair texture: “Os penteados [...] têm durado em mim o instante de sair para a humidade da rua, que logo os desfigura; ou para a almofada e as voltas na cama de qualquer noite, num combate com a minha natureza. Cedo à frivolidade, poderia dizer-se” (Almeida 32).²¹⁴ Over the years, she learns to despise her looks, a phenomenon that she describes as “a arte de nos enojarmos com a nossa aparência” (51).²¹⁵

²¹¹ “I was born then, with a distinct degree of paranoia, to my hair and at the same time to an idea of womanhood.”

²¹² “believe again in the woman inside her”

²¹³ “I am afraid of being a woman at times”

²¹⁴ “My hairstyles last just until the moment I enter the humidity of the street, which immediately disfigures them; or until I start twisting and turning on my pillow at night, in a fight with my nature. I give in to superficiality, one could say.”

²¹⁵ “the art of feeling disgusted by our own looks”

During the several “Carnavais étnicos” of her childhood, she recalls dressing up as “índia,” “minhota,” “cigana,” “vampiro,” “espantalho” (85),²¹⁶ where her hair was carefully displayed or hidden according to the intended disguise. With irony, she explains that before turning fourteen years old, when she becomes aware of her hair and, by extension, of her difference from those around her, she naïvely used to think, “Tinha o cabelo ideal para o Carnaval, o que me orgulhava” (63).²¹⁷

Mila grows up with the typical popular and cultural references of the Portuguese generation born in the 1980s: Brazilian soap operas like “Tieta do Agreste” (63),²¹⁸ the American rock band Nirvana (64), personal diaries with a “minúsculo cadeado dourado” (64),²¹⁹ “penteados de galinha” (70),²²⁰ Brazilian dance “*lambada*” (71), the coin-operated children’s ride “abelha Maia mecânica” (75),²²¹ culinary TV shows with chef Filipa Vacondeus (71), the arrival of supermarket chain “Modelo” (76), and living rooms surrounded by depictions of “Últimas Ceias” (69).²²² But all these elements that root her lived experience onto a typically Portuguese environment are not enough to avoid her feelings of nostalgia and longing for what she could have become. It does not seem coincidental that this emotion arises precisely when she cuts her hair short in order to “esquecer dele ainda mais” (86).²²³ This sense of nostalgia, of missing herself, is related to Angola but it cannot be resolved: “Tinha o cabelo curto e via-me em casa no dia em que

²¹⁶ “Ethnic Carnivals”, “indigenous woman”, “woman from Minho region”, “gipsy”, “vampire”, “scarecrow”

²¹⁷ “I had the perfect hair for Carnival, which made me proud.”

²¹⁸ “Tieta of Agreste”

²¹⁹ “tiny golden padlock”

²²⁰ “chicken hairstyle”

²²¹ “Maya the Honey Bee”

²²² “Last Suppers”

²²³ “forget it even more”

acordei com saudades de mim, mas saudades do que nunca fora, de duas ou três ruas de Luanda, de um estereótipo” (87).²²⁴ What she yearns for is a caricatural representation based on the little knowledge that she has of her birth country. She realizes that having grown up in Portugal in a seemingly egalitarian environment made her overlook the differences between her and the people who raised her, which makes her now miss that irretrievable and hardly known part of herself that links her back to Angola (87). Conflicted, she realizes that she is utterly ignorant about Africa and that “essas saudades não poderiam ser colmatadas com nenhum regresso” (87).²²⁵ The lack of knowledge about Africa is equally problematized by Zuhra when she decides to travel to Tunis with her friend Lucy to attend an Arabic-language course. When preparing for her trip, she realizes, “Non conosco l’Africa. E dire che mi scorre sangue negro nelle venne. E che ci sono nata. Ma non è come conoscerla, in fondo. Non è proprio la stessa cosa. Nascere può essere del tutto casuale, in realtà” (Scego 35).²²⁶

The premise of Mila’s narrative is brought about precisely by both her lack of familiarity with Africa and by her commitment to finding the source of her sensed difference in relation to those around her: “A única noção admissível de seriedade parece-me agora a de honrar não quem tenho sido, mas quem julgo não ter chegado a ser. A negra de papel é quem me merece hoje deferência” (89).²²⁷ Mila’s desire to connect with her Angolan ethnic and cultural origins is betrayed by her tendency to naturally dance to the beat of Portuguese

²²⁴ “My hair was short and I was at home the day I woke up longing for myself, but I missed what I had never been, two or three streets of Luanda, a stereotype”

²²⁵ “that homesickness could not be cured by any return.”

²²⁶ “I don’t know Africa. And think that I have black blood flowing through my veins. And that I was born there. But it’s not like I really know it. Not at all. Being born can be quite random, in fact.”

²²⁷ “The only possible notion of seriousness seems to be to honour not who I have been, but whom I think I have not been. The black woman on paper deserves my homage today.”

traditional folk music while being a “inepta aprendiz de kizomba” (49),²²⁸ the popular Angolan dance genre, which prompts her cousin to address her with the slur of “portuguesinha” (49).²²⁹ Her complicated identity results from the overlap of her Portuguese upbringing in a ‘racialized’ body, on the one hand, and of an impossible belonging to the place where she perceives that her own body inscribes her, on the other hand. Mila’s narration comments on the unproductivity of ignoring differences since they actually help shape and define who she is. It is in her difference, she finally realizes, that she is actually Portuguese: “No Portugal que me calhou, foi apenas nos salões, antevendo a frustração de penteados sempre ao lado, que me dei descanso, o que me mostra que foi sobretudo nos salões [...] que fui de facto portuguesa” (128).²³⁰ For Mila, being Portuguese bears the contradiction of feeling both at home in Lisbon, and ‘othered’ based on her African looks. The attention to her hair—a physical marker of her difference from the mainstream Portuguese population—is magnified at hair salons, converting them into the perfect illustration of her conflicted Portuguese identity.

Mila’s perception of being the ‘other’ in Lisbon resonates with *Oltre Babilonia*’s half-sisters Zuhra and Mar, as well as with Yabar, protagonist of Cristina Ali Farah’s *Il Comandante del Fiume*, who also feel ‘othered’ in Rome due to their multiple belongings. *Oltre Babilonia*’s Mar, the child of a mixed couple like *Esse Cabelo*’s Mila, is the epitome of the uprootedness brought about by a hyphenated identity. The daughter of an Argentinian-

²²⁸ “inept apprentice of kizomba”

²²⁹ “Portuguese person” (diminutive, female). The suffix ‘-inha,’ typically endearing, can be read here as derogatory because for her Angolan cousin being Portuguese is frowned upon whereas being Angolan is a reason for pride.

²³⁰ “In the Portugal I grew up in, it was only in hair salons, anticipating the frustration of unsuccessful hairstyles, that I gave myself a break, which shows me that it was mainly in hair salons [...] that I was truly Portuguese.”

Portuguese mother and a Somali father, she is described as “Un po’ Africa, un po’ America Latina, un po’ Europa. [...] Era sempre straniera, lei, Mar Ribero Martino” (Scego 326).²³¹ She feels like “una zebra messa in lavatrice in cui ogni bianco e ogni nero si erano sporcati della *nuance* dell’altro. Una sfumatura. Una virgola di colore. Non le piaceva molto essere così. Non era nulla. Non era nera. Non era bianca. Solo rossiccia. E i capelli un tormento” (329).²³² Her biological *métissage* complicates her sense of identification with the different strands of her heritage. For the Roman society that she inhabits, though, her hair and skin colour make her the victim of racism. Mar recalls being bullied in third grade by a boy who points out that her skin colour looks different from her mother’s. From comments about the repulsive nature of her dark skin and hair, the boy starts drawing a link between Mar and a deeply negative image of Africa, that he describes with scatological and animal-related terminology associated with poverty, hunger, dirt, and basic instincts (123). In a comparable fashion, *Esse Cabelo*’s Mila feels uneasy when her blood link with her own father is questioned by strangers on the street: “Foi num desses passeios que nos abordaram numa rua de Lisboa, em que seguíamos de mão dada, perguntando se éramos da mesma família, eu e o meu pai, com uma curiosidade abominável” (Almeida 66).²³³

Like Mila, Mar is also insecure about her hair, a feeling which is intensified by the continuous micro-aggressions of unwanted hair-touching while growing up: “Posso toccarli? Era una domanda frequente. Le mani violavano il suo cranio, inopportune. Mani di bidella,

²³¹ "A little bit Africa, a little bit Latin America, a little bit Europe. "... "She was always a foreigner, Mar Ribero Martino."

²³² "a zebra put into a washing machine in which every white and every black were stained with the shade of the other. A shade. A comma of colour. She didn't like being this way. She was nothing. She was not black. She was not white. Only reddish. And the hair, a torment."

²³³ "It was on one of those walks that we were approached on a street in Lisbon, where we walked hand in hand, and asked if we were from the same family, me and my father, with an abominable curiosity."

mani di maestra, mani di compagni, mani di parenti” (Scego 392).²³⁴ This Eurocentric curiosity towards her hair makes her feel like “un’umana da zoo. Un esemplare, non una persona” (393).²³⁵ The intertextual reference to colonial exhibits inscribed in the text demonstrates the deeply racist attitudes to which Mar is subjected. It brings to mind particularly the case of Khoisan Sarah Baartman, also known as “The Hottentot Venus” (Gordon-Chipembere 10), put on display in England and France in the 19th century. In her discussion of the legacy of Baartman, Natasha Gordon-Chipembere notes that “‘The Hottentot Venus’ is a construction of a masculinist, colonial discourse on female sexuality that has a prevailing impact on the way that Africa and Diasporic women are represented in the twenty-first century” (10).²³⁶ Constantly observed, scrutinized, and surveilled, the characters of both Mar and Mila, in Rome and Lisbon respectively, deal with the everlasting consequences of prejudices that pre-date the European scramble for Africa.

Succumbing to social pressure, Mar straightens her hair: “Li aveva portati sempre così, se li massacrava con la piastra e con i prodotti schifosi che le bruciavano la cute. Ma dopo, il risultato era assicurato, era una bella Barbie” (Scego 388).²³⁷ Mar’s hairstyle mimics the “capelli spaghetto” (388)²³⁸ of her deceased white girlfriend and brings her reassurance.

²³⁴ “Can I touch it? It was a frequent question. Hands violated her skull, inappropriately. Janitor’s hands, teacher’s hands, classmates’ hands, relatives’ hands.”

²³⁵ “a human of the zoo. A specimen, not a person.”

²³⁶ Sarah Bartmaan was brought from Cape Town to London in 1810 by Dutch Hendrik Cezar and Englishman Alexander Dunlop and exhibited for money at no. 225 Piccadilly Circus, “advertised as a human curiosity” (Gordon-Chipembere 7). She was also exhibited in Paris in 1814 by animal trainer S. Reaux (9). Upon her death in 1815, her body was dissected by Georges Cuvier, who “cut and measured [her] genitalia” (10), “made a plaster cast of her body and placed her brains and genitals in jars of formaldehyde” (Hobson qtd. in Gordon-Chipembere 10). Her remains were displayed at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until the late 1970s and were finally repatriated to South Africa in 2002.

²³⁷ “She had always worn it like that, she massacred it with the iron and with nasty products that burned her scalp. But later, the result was guaranteed, she was a beautiful Barbie.”

²³⁸ “spaghetti-straight hair”

According to her half-sister Zuhra's opinion, though, Mar's subscription to white standards of beauty is not only a source of physical and psychological pain for her but also makes her look fake (386). A sudden burst of Mar's speech in the first person, first directed at her mother, then a monologue about her troubled identity, explains why she perceives herself as "*una mezzosangue*" (389);²³⁹ neither fully black nor fully white, she defines herself via this sense of lack: "*Per i black non abbastanza scura. Per i white non abbastanza chiara. [...] Io sono uno scarabocchio*" (389).²⁴⁰ Mar's identity is complicated not only by the fact that she is seen as a 'racialized' citizen in Rome but also because of her mixed-race origins and, like Mila and Zuhra, her lack of knowledge about her African background (389). Her own mother, Miranda, despite complimenting Mar's hair for looking like that of Angela Davis, does not know how to take care of her daughter's hair, making her feel like a misfit. Opposed to Mar relaxing her hair with chemical products, Miranda makes disapproving grimaces, to which Mar angrily responds: "*Facile fare smorfie mamma, i tuoi capelli sono morbidi, un'onda, i miei sono quelli di un criceto, sono ispidi, irregolari, senza un senso*" (388).²⁴¹ Trying to help Mar reconnect with her own self and face her ghosts, Zuhra tenderly proposes to wash her hair (385). The ritual of hair-washing, arduous at first, eventually helps Mar unblock the memory of the trauma of having been forced into having an abortion and allows her to accept her hair and skin colour as beautiful, imagining how they would have looked in her lost baby (397).

²³⁹ "a half-breed"

²⁴⁰ "For blacks not dark enough. For whites not quite pale. [...] I am a sketch."

²⁴¹ "*It's easy to make grimaces mom, your hair is soft, a wave, mine is like that of a hamster, scraggly, uneven, without a sense.*"

Zuhra, the daughter of Somali Elias and Maryam, also grows up in Rome feeling discriminated against on the grounds of her skin colour. She believes that being black makes her the first suspect and thus she always carries her documents to prove her Italian citizenship (Scego 39). She learns this from her mother, Maryam, who always makes sure to bring her identification card when leaving her house in Rome:

Prima di uscire da casa, fece la conta degli oggetti più importanti. Non voleva dimenticare niente. Il pacchetto di Camel, gli occhiali di riserva, quelli da sole, il portafoglio, la tessera dell'autobus, la carta d'identità... soprattutto quella non se la poteva scordare. Con la sua pelle nera era meglio stare accorti in quella strana città italiana. (299)²⁴²

The pluralized participle (“accorti,” from the verb ‘accorgersi’ [to become aware]) suggests that not only Maryam but all people with black skin should be vigilant in the “strange city” of Rome. Throughout the narrative, instances of racism against Zuhra abound: she is accused of not being Italian on a student exchange in the Spanish city of Valencia (40), showing that racism is not only limited to the Italian context; she is turned away at her workplace by customers who prefer to be helped by white staff (235); and she is often asked for her “permesso di soggiorno” (283),²⁴³ despite holding Italian citizenship. Aaron Robertson explains that Scego’s subjects are mostly women “whose sense of self is fragmented by the politics of documentation and bodily surveillance, which are enacted by a state apparatus to maintain the façade of impermeable nationhood” (62). It is important to recognize that this is the case particularly for ‘racialized’ citizens, whose bodily difference from the mainstream

²⁴² “Before leaving the house, she counted the most important items. She didn't want to forget anything. The Camel package, extra glasses, sunglasses, wallet, bus card, ID card ... above all that could not be forgotten. With her black skin it was best to be on one's guard in that strange Italian city.”

²⁴³ “residency permit”

population is perceived as threatening for the nation-state's narrative of homogeneity. For instance, Argentinian-Portuguese Miranda does not experience this sense of policing in Italy, where she 'passes' as a local citizen due to her skin being "color oliva" (Scego 241).²⁴⁴ Growing up in Argentina, though, despite her talent she is denied the career of soccer player on gender grounds. She explains that "Per giocare a calcio, e soprattutto farci dei soldi, ci vuole un pene" (90).²⁴⁵ Even though Miranda is not singled out in Rome because she is not perceived as a 'racialized' subject, as a woman she does experience the effects of machismo and gender discrimination during her upbringing; and as a migrant, she also deals with loss, anger, disorientation, and guilt.

The link between "bodily surveillance" (Robertson 62) and 'racialization' is corroborated in *Il Comandante del Fiume*, by Cristina Ali Farah. Eighteen-year-old Yabar, its narrator and main protagonist, lives in Rome after having fled the civil war in Mogadishu with his Somali parents. He endures many instances of discrimination in Italy's capital city. For example, trying to leave the bus through the front door, he is addressed in plural by the bus driver, who tells him: "Quante volte ve lo devo dire che si scende dalla porta centrale?" (Farah 149).²⁴⁶ Noticing that there is no one else around him, Yabar confronts the driver, who angrily replies: "Vattene a case tua, va'!" (149).²⁴⁷ In another passage, returning from a stay in London with Somali relatives, Yabar is stopped by a customs agent at the airport, who questions his passport picture (189). Offended, Yabar mumbles, "i soliti

²⁴⁴ "olive-coloured"

²⁴⁵ "To play soccer, and especially to make some money, it takes a penis."

²⁴⁶ "How many times do I have to tell you guys to use the central door?"

²⁴⁷ "Go back to your home, go!"

razzisti!” (189),²⁴⁸ which grants him a visit to the police office. After clarifying that he matches his passport picture, the officer, clearly overstepping his authority, orders him to do fifty push-ups before discharging him (189). As a result of this type of experience, Yabar finds it hard to culturally identify with his younger cousin Sissi, who is the daughter of a Somali-Italian couple. In spite of being close like siblings and of having both been raised by Somali mothers in Rome, with the same “favole” and “canzoni” (37),²⁴⁹ Yabar feels that their skin colour creates a cleavage between them:

Io e Sissi non possiamo essere uguali per tutta una serie di ragioni, ma ce n'è una più importante delle altre e questa ragione è che io sono nero, nato da due genitori neri, mentre Sissi è bianca, ha i ricci dorati e gli occhi grigioverdi. (37)²⁵⁰

Sissi, however, rejects dichotomic definitions of race and proudly identifies with her black ancestry, embodied in her coiled hair texture and in her physical endurance, inherited from her Somali mother: “I miei ricci sono crespi come quelli di mamma, sembrano ragnatele, per questo mamma dice che sono Tincaaro. Io corro come mamma, e il nostro è un fisico da fondista” (37).²⁵¹ Not only is Sissi keen on her black heritage on a personal level but she also places it at the centre of her artistic persona’s identity. She paints a mural under a bridge along the Tiber River where she and Yabar hang out with friends after school. Her trademark drawing of “una donna con le ragnatele al posto dei capelli” (33)²⁵² is not only a depiction of her alter ego inspired by the mythological ancient Somali deity Tincaaro, “la Regina dei

²⁴⁸ “the usual racists!”

²⁴⁹ “fables,” “songs”

²⁵⁰ “Sissi and I cannot be equal for a whole set of reasons, but there is one more important than the others and that is that I am black, born of two black parents, while Sissi is white, has golden curls and gray-green eyes.”

²⁵¹ “My curls are frizzy like mom's, they look like cobwebs, so mom says I am Tincaaro [a Somali goddess]. I run like mom, and ours is a long-distance runner's physique.”

²⁵² “a woman with cobwebs instead of hair”

giganti” (106),²⁵³ whose hair her mother often compares to hers; it is also an imprint into the city of that same Somali heritage, which works as a decolonial gesture.²⁵⁴ A similar drawing by Sissi, with her artistic name and ethnonym, “Capelli di ragno, cantautrice afroitaliana” (106),²⁵⁵ appears in a poster announcing a concert in a social centre where she sings as a special guest. Yabar considers that “Sissi aveva davvero un gran coraggio” (106)²⁵⁶ for representing herself via her hair, an “ethnic signifier” (Mercer 37) that marks her Afro-Italian identity. Countering the negative connotations often ascribed to black hair, present in the discussion of the identity of characters such as Mila and Mar, Sissi uses her hair as a symbol of empowerment of her Somali heritage and identity, which she inscribes into her city of Rome.

Untangling Hair, Race, and Identity

The narratives by Almeida, Scego, and Farah show that hair is for Mila, Zuhra, Mar, and Sissi a locus of embodied identity which cannot be disentangled from the politics of gender, race, and culture. In the complex relationships with their hair much can be learned (and unlearned) about notions of identity and authenticity, home and belonging. The negative feelings of Mila and Mar towards their natural hair texture relate to broader anxieties about cultural and national affiliations, as they seek aesthetic solutions in which they may feel accepted and ‘at home.’ Zuhra’s hair management responds to fears related to her sexuality

²⁵³ “the Queen of the Giants”

²⁵⁴ I use the term *decolonial* following Emma Pérez’s idea of decolonial imaginary, defined as a space where Mexican and Chicana women fight colonial ways of knowledge production (1999), and Walter D. Mignolo’s decolonial thinking, according to which subaltern perspectives have the power to affect hegemonic discourses (2000).

²⁵⁵ “Spiderweb hair, Afro-Italian singer and songwriter”

²⁵⁶ “Sissi had a great deal of courage”

but her general attitudes towards hair also speak to her political engagement against attempts to conform to mainstream beauty ideals. Sissi's hair and hair representations —through her drawings— challenge racial stereotyping by undoing the links between skin shade, hair colour and texture, and race. Above all, the relationship that these young women have with hair is largely influenced by their desire to carve out places of tolerance, creativity, and belonging in their societies.

Michael Barnett argues that the politics of hair for Africans in the diaspora (particularly in the Anglophone Caribbean) is guided by “the internalization of a white supremacist worldview” related to a sense of shame and self-alienation still inherited from slavery (70),²⁵⁷ which can only be overcome when they “embrace their own natural hair and other physical features collectively” in order to “carve out [...] their own ideals of beauty” (99). In the same line of thought but thinking particularly of black women's hair, bell hooks argues that within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy “it is a part of [the] black female body that must be controlled” (“Straightening” 2). She claims that such control was and is exerted over African American women in the United States via the imposition of white beauty ideals such as that of straight hair —commonly associated with ‘good hair.’ She explains that “straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon black people, and especially black women, that [they] are not acceptable as [they] are, that [they] are not beautiful” (“Straightening” 5). According to hooks, this custom represents thus “an imitation of the dominant white group's appearance and often indicates internalized racism, self-hatred, and/or low self esteem” (“Straightening” 2). This position is a reaction to a

²⁵⁷ For a history of hair shaving and slavery, see Byrd and Tharps 2014.

history of racism and discrimination against people of African descent but its circumscription of what constitutes accepted hairstyles is limiting and overlooks, for instance, that “there is a huge variety of straightened hair styles that are distinctly ‘black’ [which] represent a fascinating, unique, powerful aesthetic,” as Dianne Johnson points out (353).²⁵⁸

Even though we cannot be oblivious to the historical context that attributed negative connotations to black hair, —including the shaming and self-alienating ritual of shaving slaves’ hair (Byrd and Tharps 2014), advertisements of the 19th and 20th centuries ridiculing African American women’s hair (Congdon-Martin 1990, Rooks 1996), films of the 1920s and 1930s which operate a “degradation of blackness” (Dash 2006), among others— how does black identity correlate with hair management? And is there a transnational definition of black identity in the first place? Like Johnson, Kobena Mercer takes issue with the type of argument which attributes a certain value to hairstyles deemed natural or artificial, which in the case of black hair usually associates the afro or dreadlocks with “authentically black hairstyles and thus more ideologically ‘right-on’” (33) whereas hairstyles that imply techniques such as straightening tend to be perceived as a “wretched imitation of white people’s hair or, what amounts to the same thing, a diseased state of black consciousness” (33). Challenging the very ‘naturalness’ of hair upon its contact with social and cultural practices that regulate it and populate it with certain meanings and value, Mercer proposes that hairstyles embody both an individual expressivity and a response to societal expectations (34), as indeed we see in Sissi, Mar, Zuhra, and Mila.

²⁵⁸ For representations of black hair and race in African American children’s literature, see Johnson 2009.

One very important point raised by Mercer is that the so-called ‘natural’ African hairstyles do not have their origin in the continent but in the diaspora: “In contemporary African societies, such styles would not signify Africanness [...]; on the contrary, they would imply an identification with First World-ness. They are specifically diasporic” (44). In the same vein, Paul Dash argues that hair, on a black body, is “central to diasporic aesthetics” and a “symbol of black resistance to oppression” (27). This idea of the body/hair as a site of both diasporic embodied creativity and political struggle (27) helps unpack a common discourse amongst the characters of Scego, Almeida, and Farah about a sense of belonging to a diasporic African community. Their hair texture is a signifier that links them to the idea of a shared black history that, despite being only partially known to them, they all perceive to embody. However, this shared perception does not link them to the African continent but to the descendants of the African diaspora. Given the differences between black communities worldwide (with varying geographic locations, class statuses, levels of assimilation to mainstream societies, relationships with particular African countries, languages spoken, etc), this subscription to an international black community is a generalization which is not dissimilar from much of the racial stereotyping by white Europeans (or Americans) that those characters strive to resist. While stereotypical, it still gives them an imagined place of belonging. Orathai Meon Northern proposes that hair be used “to imagine the cultural continuity of the African Diaspora,” defined as a “racial community [with] a sense of racial and cultural belonging” (12). But in the current context of “hair morphing,” a term coined by Kennell Jackson to refer to the mingling between black and white hairstyles which disregards ethnic definitions (Northern 4), how can this ‘black’ community be defined? If the current

moment is characterized by a “personal style and individual expression through hair” (Northern 167), this seems incompatible with the formation of “collective identities along racial or gendered lines” (170). Despite acknowledging a history of oppression, Dash believes that black hair styling “is today located in an environment of mix and match that often shows little regard for [historical] politics” (34). However, drawing from the attitudes towards hair presented in the works under analysis, it seems fair to assume that within the politics of hair, black hair is indeed politicized due to a history of slavery, colonization, and old and new discrimination schemes, on the one hand; and on the other hand, due to counter-movements that inaugurated the celebration of the materiality of black hair such as the “Harlem Renaissance, Rastafarianism, and the Black Power movement” (Dash 31). As Stacia L. Brown remarks, “On a black woman, an Afro invokes the Black Power movement, “black is beautiful” counterculture campaigns, and decades of discrimination” (Brown 17).

One fundamental aspect that seems absent from most discussions about black hair is the conflicted identity of mixed-race women. Scholars mention the “light skin and straight hair privilege” (Banks 76) of mixed-race women which brings them closer to white beauty standards but seem to dismiss the struggle personified by women like the character of *Oltre Babilonia*’s Mar, who perceives herself as inauthentic and therefore an outsider (Scego 389). An exception is England-based scholar Shirley-Ann Tate, who discusses mixed-race women’s struggle to fit within British Caribbean black communities due to their perceived “polluting presence because of the ‘mark of whiteness’ on [their] skin and hair” (318). Like Sissi in her cousin Yabar’s eyes, these women are defined as “an absence” (Tate 307). Sissi’s example helps untangle the concepts of race and ‘racialization,’ and draws attention to the

ways in which both intersect with discrimination and identity. She identifies with her black ancestry through the inscription of her hair drawings in the urban space of Rome, even though she is not discriminated against because she is not perceived as ‘racialized,’ both by mainstream society, and by her fellow Somali cousin Yabar, who experiences daily the repercussions of living in a body perceived as black. Sissi is not ‘othered’ in Italian society but her Somali identity is complicated by her exclusion from ‘blackness.’ Steve Martinot defines racialization as “the process [...] through which white society has constructed and coopted differences in bodily characteristics and made them modes of hierarchical social categorizations” (180). This sense of hierarchy is disrupted by Sissi’s character because typical social categories see their usual meanings shifted; to be clear, she defines herself based on her black identity despite looking white. Finally, Yabar changes his opinion about his cousin and instead of blaming Sissi’s ‘whiteness’ for not understanding the discrimination that he goes through, he realizes that that same ‘whiteness,’ usually defined as “a form of racial privilege” (Ahmed par. 3), impedes her from belonging to a community. He understands that, “[...] la storia di una persona è molto più complessa del colore della sua pelle. Ognuno di noi ha qualcosa di diverso dentro, gli occhi da soli non bastano, si fermano all’apparenza, non vanno in profondità” (Farah 203).²⁵⁹ Drawing upon Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed notes that “the production of whiteness works precisely by assigning race to others: to study whiteness, as a racialised position, is hence already to contest its dominance, how it functions as a ‘mythical norm’” (Ahmed par. 3). White normativity is defied by Sissi, which

²⁵⁹ “the story of a person is much more complex than the colour of her skin. We all have something different inside, just looking is not enough, what eyes can see is not that deep.”

emphasizes the constructed nature of racial categories; to be ‘racialized,’ like its passive voice grammatical construction, is to be the recipient of someone else’s action.

Tate explains how the ‘mark of whiteness’ gains a negative connotation after the globalized redefinition of blackness initiated by political mobilizations such as the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and its defence of a “black anti-racist aesthetics,” where “the beauty that was valorized and recognized was that of ‘dark skin’ and ‘natural afro-hair’” (Tate 302). Tate admits that “Black anti-racist aesthetics for all of its liberation of black consciousness from the mental slavery of racialized standards of beauty can also produce its own normalized racializing standards, its own exclusions” (306). Claiming a place and a voice for black people, this redefinition of black beauty complicates the identity of mixed-race women who, like Sissi or Mar, might feel excluded from both black and white communities.

In her 2015 doctoral work, Latasha Nicole Eley investigates the sense of community (157) and solidarity (158) shared by black women in online media outlets around the topic of natural black hair. Considering the presence of a white woman with coiled hair on one website perceived as “designated for Black women only” (159), Eley shares in the overall resistance of other users, claiming that her presence “is counterintuitive as it minimizes and usurps Black women’s efforts to claim, reclaim, resist, alter, and otherwise manage the narrative and presentation of their bodies” (160). Based on arguments such as that of “colorism” and “pigmentocracy,” according to which lighter skin is more valued than darker skin thus creating a hierarchy in women of colour (82), Eley excludes women whose skin or hair fall outside of a stereotypically black appearance from the definition of black

community. As Sissi, Mar, Zuhra, and Mila illustrate, identity is much more complex than appearing white/black.²⁶⁰ Apart from their skin colour, their hair also frustrates assumptions about race, ethnicity, origins, and belonging.

The rationale behind hairstyling choices has political and psychological implications for women's racial, sexual, and cultural identity. Ashley Dunn observes a current 'back to natural' movement trending on social media (particularly YouTube) not so much as political but as "ritualistic," which she defines as "black women connecting to themselves" (5). In *Oltre Babilonia*, Zuhra encapsulates this 'back to natural' trend. She admires Miranda for not dyeing her hair and showing her age without fear, while encouraging her own mother, Maryam, to wear the "velo"²⁶¹ instead of committing the self-torture of dying her hair (Scego 171). These examples, read together with the ritual of washing Mar's relaxed hair, portray Zuhra as a guardian of culture and tradition, by trying to keep both her mother and sister rooted in their supposed biological ('natural' hair) and religious (muslim) origins. The intimate experience of hair washing with Mar is a moment of communion between the two women, which can be described with similar terminology as that used by bell hooks to recount her childhood ritual of hair-straightening "with a hot comb" ("Straightening" 1) — before becoming aware of the racist and sexist implications of such practice ("Straightening" 5). hooks remembers gathering in the kitchen with her mother and sisters to experience a "ritual of black women's culture of intimacy," "a moment of creativity, a moment of change," "a time when [they] work[ed] as women to meet each other's needs, to make each other feel

²⁶⁰ The instability of racial categories is similarly problematized in Northern's doctoral dissertation, where she shares her personal history: adopted from Thailand by an African American family, she looks Asian but identifies as Black (10).

²⁶¹ "veil"

good inside, a time of laughter and outrageous talk” (“Straightening” 1). This bonding experience, like Mar’s and Zuhra’s, is empowering and emancipatory.

Countering patriarchal ideals and expectations of beauty, according to which “long hair is associated with femininity” (Banks 88), and the “relationship between hair length is related to sexuality, but also female attractiveness” (92), Zuhra sports short ‘natural’ hair (Scego 172). This choice protects her from being seen as ‘sexualized’ and thus a target for men but also prevents her from being happier (172).²⁶² While Zuhra seeks to hide her womanhood behind her hair, *Esse Cabelo*’s Mila at one point shaves her head in order to give herself “uma trégua” (Almeida 129)²⁶³ in her search of her ethnic/cultural background, perhaps to be seen as an individual beyond the marker of her hair. In these examples, hair choices serve to hide sexual or racial coordinates in order to establish one’s identity and subjectivity past the body. Northern pertinently asks: “*how* do we talk about hair without reducing black subjectivity to the body?” (168). In fact, Mila’s changing attitudes towards her hair, “ora zelosa, ora displicente, contraditória” (Almeida 86),²⁶⁴ reflect a complicated search for her identity and place in the world. Revisiting the different hairstyles that she wore over the years, including chemically relaxed hair (28), different types of bangs, bowl cuts, a messy triangular hairstyle (32), a short haircut (86), long braids with extensions (107), and a shaved head (128), she unsuccessfully tries to answer a deeper question: “Onde deixei a Mila?” (138).²⁶⁵ She is pleased when a black boy compliments her “cabelo ‘muita

²⁶² See Rose Weitz (2014) for a discussion of women’s hair management strategies as instances for potential subordination and resistance.

²⁶³ “a truce”

²⁶⁴ “sometimes zealous, sometimes careless, conflicted”

²⁶⁵ “Where did I leave Mila?”

louco” (109)²⁶⁶ with long African braids but more than acceptance from others, her quest is towards herself and her sense of home.

Alternative Geographies

The spaces of identity and belonging encountered by these characters who move through Portuguese and Italian societies have in common a liminal, marginal, fluid, and diasporic position. They live on the border, which Anzaldúa describes as:

*una herida abierta*²⁶⁷ where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. (25)

Borders are a fitting identity metaphor but they are also very real when it comes to questions of access, of who is let in and who is left out. In *We, the People of Europe?*, the French philosopher Étienne Balibar hypothesizes that,

the zones called peripheral, where secular and religious cultures confront one another, where differences in economic prosperity become more pronounced and strained, constitute the melting pot for the formation of a people (*dēmos*), without which there is no citizenship (*politeia*) [...]. (2)

Even though I take issue with the term “melting pot” for its emphasis on assimilation to the detriment of cultural diversity, the argument of placing “the formation of a people” on the knowledge coming from the borders, from peripheral zones, from the ‘others’ of society is quite compelling. Being allowed in, however, through citizenship or comparable

²⁶⁶ “super cool hair”

²⁶⁷ “an open wound”

government-issued documentation is quite different from belonging, which is often hindered by official discourses and anxieties about the ‘other.’ Mila, Zuhra, Mar, Yabar, and Sissi hold Portuguese or Italian citizenship, but the legal claim to Lisbon and Rome, respectively, does not prevent them from being frowned upon, which is inevitably an obstacle to identifying as Portuguese or Italian and feeling rightfully accepted within social contexts (professional, community, etc).

This lack of recognition by mainstream societies urges the Afro-European characters of *Il Comandante del Fiume*, *Esse Cabelo*, and *Oltre Babilonia* to discover creative ways of belonging. Their skin colour and/or hair texture bears the trace of a history rooted in the African continent and its diasporas that they embrace (or at least are drawn to). Even when their knowledge of Africa is limited, they justify their membership to an African (local and/or transnational) community with an activist commitment to counter systemic discrimination in contexts where they often feel, like Mila puts it, that they are “em minoria” (Almeida 88).²⁶⁸

For *Il Comandante del Fiume*’s Yabar, the sense of belonging to an African community is represented by the ties he maintains with other diasporic black kids. His almost instant connection with these friends that he meets in the unkempt and marginalized area of Flaminio Square—in particular Ghiorghis and Libaan, of Ethiopian and Somali ancestry respectively—is explained by Yabar in the following terms: “hanno tutti le mani nere come le mie” (Farah 116).²⁶⁹ With them, he can steer clear of the uncomfortable question, “Di dove sei?” (113),²⁷⁰ and simply take Rome as home. At one point, he decides to distance himself

²⁶⁸ “outnumbered”

²⁶⁹ “they all have black hands like me”

²⁷⁰ “Where are you from?”

from Sissi and Sibarita, his very close yet non-black friends, with the rationale: “Che ne potevano sapere i miei amici della guerra, del passato?” (Farah 141)²⁷¹ Struggling with his own prejudices against mainstream society (embodied in Sissi, for instance), Yabar reacts abruptly when an Italian white boy calls him “fratello” (200)²⁷² whereas he accepts that same appellation coming from his friends of Flaminio Square (112). This racial identification with other black kids is related to their presumed shared diasporic and marginalized histories, embodied in the equally peripheral Flaminio Square. This African identification facilitates Yabar’s sense of belonging to his own city of Rome, through which he guides the reader. By describing in detail the spaces he occupies (Flaminio square, the banks of the Tiber River, the Tiber Island, the Fatebenefratelli²⁷³ Hospital—where he is admitted for treatment of his eye injury—, different monuments, the Termini train station, bridges, parks, statues, etc.), he is drawing attention to the marginality of sites socially allocated to black kids like himself, while simultaneously embedding the Roman geography with his own—and his family’s—memories and tales of Somalia. This exercise of overlapping Somali and Roman imaginaries also helps him become an agent of social change, with a critical eye that looks both in- and outwards. One example is related to the tale that gives the novel its title, which is told to Yabar and Sissi by Sissi’s mother, Rosa. Part of the oral tradition, this Somali tale is about a river brought to a village by two old wisemen to combat drought, which brings not only water but also crocodiles (42); the population chooses a captain, also named Yabar, who can talk to the animals and is thus invested with the power to keep them at bay (79). Re-reading

²⁷¹ “What could my friends know of the war and of the past?”

²⁷² “brother”

²⁷³ “Do good, brothers”

that legend while looking at the Tiber in Rome, Yabar sees in the floating tree trunks “dorsi di cocodrilli” (204),²⁷⁴ understanding that he, like the “comandante del fiume,”²⁷⁵ is responsible for separating good from evil, which starts with changing his own discriminatory attitude towards Sissi (203). If we read this under Mignolo’s decolonial light (2000), we can say that Yabar is decolonizing the city by drawing his own diasporic map of its fringes, not unlike Sissi, who inscribes the wall by the river with her artistic drawings, contributing to a new diasporic definition of Rome, where Somali descendants are part of its very fabric.

An Afrocentric sense of identity is also enacted by the characters of *Esse Cabelo*’s Mila, and *Oltre Babilonia*’s Zuhra and Mar through references to figures and events linked to the African continent or the African-American community as well as through a sense of solidarity amongst black people, particularly black women, in the diaspora. The famous 1957 picture of Elizabeth Eckford printed in *Esse Cabelo* (Almeida 102) is described by Mila as “uma radiografia da minha alma” (101).²⁷⁶ A symbol of the African-American civil rights movement, Eckford is one of the first black students to attend Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas, United States. Giving voice to her multiple identity, Mila impersonates not only Eckford but everyone in the picture, including the woman who angrily shouts at Eckford, the policemen, and the curious mob in the background (101). Mila explains,

Esta imagem captura o supremacista em mim, o espírito agressor que me estraga os dias, por muito que nada ou ninguém me agrida ou tenha agredido de fora; o

²⁷⁴ “the backs of crocodiles”

²⁷⁵ “river’s captain”

²⁷⁶ “an x-ray of my soul”

supremacista implícito na timidez reticente e magoada de tantos cabelos crespos com que me cruzo por Lisboa [...]. (103)²⁷⁷

Reminiscent of ideas developed by Franz Fanon, and Paulo Freire about the perpetuation of oppression produced by a colonized consciousness which makes the oppressed emulate the oppressor,²⁷⁸ this image of Elizabeth Eckford evokes in Mila at once the history of oppression of black people and the discourse of white supremacy within her consciousness. Beyond an international identification with African-American events, Mila also identifies with her “irmãs africanas” (130),²⁷⁹ women of the African diaspora living in Lisbon, who are also the collective protagonist of her narrative.

The African-American civil rights movement is also alluded to by *Oltre Babilonia*'s Zuhra. Following a sexual encounter with a white man, Orlando, which catapults her back to her childhood rape trauma, she has a delirious fit during which she hallucinates. Nearly passed out on a toilet seat of the school of Arabic that she attends in Tunis, and feeling the attention of strangers who try to help her, Zuhra has a fantasy of being a “big star” (Scego 335). In a reference to the 1950 American film noir *Sunset Boulevard*, directed by Billy Wilder, Zuhra feels scrutinized and admired like the actress who plays the protagonist, Gloria Swanson (335). Thinking about the era portrayed in the movie, Zuhra remembers the racial segregation period in the United States, a time when “[...] i negri puzzavano dei loro capelli bruciati dalla chimica dei bianchi” (336).²⁸⁰ She admires in particular African-American civil

²⁷⁷ “This image captures the supremacist in me, the aggressive spirit that spoils my days, even if I am not being openly attacked by anything or anyone; the implicit supremacist in the withdrawn and hurt timidity of so many kinky heads of hair which cross my paths in Lisbon”

²⁷⁸ See Fanon and Philcox 2004, and Freire 2000.

²⁷⁹ “African sisters”

²⁸⁰ “[...] black people’s hair stank of burns caused by white people’s chemicals.”

rights' leaders Rosa Parks and Malcolm X (336), as well as black singer and pianist Dinah Washington (344). Including herself in that transnational community, Zuhra refers to Parks as "La tenace Rosa Parks, la *nostra* pioniera black" (Scego 336, emphasis added).²⁸¹ In both *Esse Cabelo* and *Oltre Babilonia*, African-American media from the 1950s and 1960s are used by Mila and Zuhra as a means of rooting their identities, suggesting that the struggles fought by civil rights movement activists will not be complete until racism and discrimination are eradicated from today's societies, epitomized by Lisbon and Rome.

Apart from an identification with African-American events, a general identification with Africa is represented by *Esse Cabelo*'s Mila, who misses Angola, despite her lack of knowledge of the country and of the African continent (Almeida 87); *Il Comandante del Fiume*'s Yabar, who satisfies his curiosity about Africa through his aunt Rosa, whose fascination with anything African can be attributed to the absence of her Somali mother during her Roman upbringing. As he explains, she has a "bisogno d'Africa" (Farah 83)²⁸² without distinction of "paesi, lingue, colore" (82),²⁸³ which she displays in her house through amulets, statuettes and fabrics (83). *Oltre Babilonia*'s Mar is also generally interested in African music, as mentioned by her mother Miranda in a letter: "Anche a te piace molto la musica del continente. Ti dà gioia [...]. L'Africa del tuo sangue. L'Africa di Elias. I suoi colori" (Scego 306).²⁸⁴ As a matter of fact, Mar's coming to terms with her multiple identity finally happens in the north-African city of Tunis, which is pointedly expressed with a

²⁸¹ "The tenacious Rosa Parks, our black pioneer"

²⁸² "need for Africa"

²⁸³ "countries, languages, colours"

²⁸⁴ "You too like the music from the continent. It gives you joy [...]. Africa of your blood. Africa of Elias. His colours."

geographic metaphor: she is finally “unita,” “una ragazza con sangue del Sud e del Nord insieme” (225).²⁸⁵ Her two geographies finally come together with a ‘return’ to the African continent.

The Market of Racial and Gender Stereotyping

As shown, the texts by Almeida, Farah, and Scego on the one hand expose multiple identities characterized by tensions and struggles, uprootedness and difficult belongings. On the other hand, in Guillermina Mekuy’s works the cohabitation of differences appears flawless, which is mirrored in her own public biography. About having both Equatoguinean and Spanish citizenship, Mekuy says in an interview: “Me encanta tener la doble nacionalidad, porque realmente he tenido la oportunidad de disfrutar de ambas culturas” (Hendel 2).²⁸⁶ She remembers her adaptation to Spain as a child: “[...] en principio cuando llegué aquí, me adapté a todo. Para mí fue una vida más, nunca me sentí discriminada, porque no he dado ni motivo” (2).²⁸⁷

This position is reflected particularly in *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, where racial differences appear to coexist in a normalized and harmonious way. Upon their arrival in Spain from Equatorial Guinea, Tomás and Teresa send their three daughters to a convent. María Fátima, the middle child who also narrates the story, describes the girls in the yard of the convent:

²⁸⁵ “united,” “a girl with blood from the South and from the North, together”

²⁸⁶ “I love having dual citizenship, because I’ve really had the opportunity to enjoy both cultures”

²⁸⁷ “[...] at first when I arrived here, I adapted to everything. For me it was another life, I never felt discriminated against, because I didn’t give any reason.”

Las había de todos los lugares y de todas las razas. Algunas eran de cabello rubio, otras de pelo negro. Otras tenían la piel tostada, como la mía, y las había totalmente oscuras, como mi padre Tomás... Había incluso niñas con los ojos rasgados. (52)²⁸⁸

The untroubled coexistence of difference is matched in María Fátima's mostly seamless dual identity. About her feelings for Guinea and Spain and her mixed race, she says,

Mis dos países... Guinea, mi añorada Guinea, y España, mi encuentro con el sufrimiento pero también con la liberación. [...] Yo soy mezcla. Incluso en mi piel soy mezcla de dos mundos y dos culturas diferentes, aunque unidas por el idioma y la historia. (191)²⁸⁹

Enacting a peaceful belonging to both her birth place and the land where she grows up, the narrator tosses aside the centrality of the colonial enterprise for the establishment of ties between the two countries.²⁹⁰ A key for unlocking this sense of harmony might be found in questions of access and privilege conferred by the narrator's (and author's) European status, as suggested by María Fátima when reflecting upon her affection for her two countries: "[...] aunque amo Guinea con todo mi corazón, también amo al país en el que he crecido [...]. Esa tierra que es la tierra de mi idioma, la tierra por la que también soy europea" (Mekuy 192).²⁹¹ Mekuy, indeed catering to a Spanish/European audience, admits in an interview that "escribir como africano hace que el público europeo no consiga entender nuestras obras, sobre todo lo

²⁸⁸ "There were [girls] from all places and of all races. Some had blond hair, others black hair. Others had toasted skin, like mine, and some were completely dark, like my father Tomás ... There were even girls with slanted eyes."

²⁸⁹ "My two countries... Guinea, my beloved Guinea, and Spain, my encounter with suffering but also with liberation. [...] I am a mix. Even in my skin I am a mix of two different worlds and two different cultures, although united by language and history."

²⁹⁰ This sense of harmony is countered in fiction by 2004 *Jo també soc catalana*, by Najat El Hachmi, for instance, written in Catalan. Scholars also describe the intolerance of Spain towards immigrants (Sá 2011), the racism and xenophobia of the Spanish State (Borra 2017), and call for a "democratización de la participación cultural" [democratization of cultural participation] (Borra 2016).

²⁹¹ "[...] even though I love Guinea with all my heart, I also love the country where I grew up [...]. The land of my language, the land through which I am also European."

que es en el caso de España” (Hendel 5).²⁹² She makes the conscious decision then of moving away from “africanismo,”²⁹³ which would make her “literatura muy local” (Hendel 2)²⁹⁴ and aspires to have a global outreach. She wants the reader to be aware of the fact that, “[...] aunque yo sea africana, se nota que soy una mujer universal” (Hendel 2).²⁹⁵ Her global literary ambitions also transpire in her diplomatic and political career (described in more detail below). In a 2010 interview about her initiatives to promote Guinean literature, Mekuy says: “Yo creo que los países de Latinoamérica son países hermanos con los que vamos a poder trabajar” (Rizo 1138).²⁹⁶ Banking on a common linguistic and cultural heritage with Latin America, Mekuy hopes to reveal, as she words it, “esa África tan desconocida” (Rizo 1134).²⁹⁷ Being a “universal” (Hendel 2) writer suggests catering to an international Spanish-speaking audience and seems to imply translating Africa into a topic that is not too foreign, which might perhaps come at the cost of being also not too specific. The expansion of her readership via translations has also started to materialize with the publication in 2014 of a Chinese version of her 2011 novel *Tres Almas para un Corazón* [Three Souls for One Heart].²⁹⁸

In an inversion of stereotypical racial representations, Teresa, the mother of *Las Tres Vírgenes*, who is white and originally from Spain, is invested with the power of talking to the

²⁹² “writing as an African makes the European public fail to understand our works, particularly in the case of Spain”

²⁹³ “africanism”

²⁹⁴ “literature too local”

²⁹⁵ “although I am African, it shows that I am a universal woman.”

²⁹⁶ “I believe that the countries of Latin America are siblings with whom we will be glad to work”

²⁹⁷ “Africa, which is so unknown”

²⁹⁸ In this novel about polygamy, Rita Maldonado Obono, the narrator and the author’s alter ego, as the writer announces in a preface, (21) expects to create a debate not only in Equatorial Guinea and Africa but also in other parts of the world, such as France (where polygamy is a polemic issue) and the United States (154).

spirits in traditional animist rituals: “Nadie podía comprender cómo una extranjera sentía en su carne el poder de los espíritus, que, hasta entonces, parecía algo privativo de la raza negra” (Mekuy 17).²⁹⁹ On the flip side, the father, Tomás, despite being a doctor by training, is “exacerbadamente religioso y católico” (17),³⁰⁰ devout and fanatic (18). The reversal of racial stereotypes is emphasized by the narrator when she says: “Mi padre era, en realidad, pese a ser negro, más blanco que mi madre, y ella, a pesar del color claro de su piel, más negra que Tomás” (39).³⁰¹ The strategy of choosing a white character to perform African animist rituals is acknowledged by Mekuy as a way of speaking to the European reader. In an interview with Elisa Rizo, she says:

Porque al vivir en Europa, teniendo una mujer blanca como protagonista de una novela donde ella sí que actúa con los ritos africanos, es mucho más fácil que la gente la entendiera. Si fuera todo una familia negra, la gente diría “bueno, claro típico de cosas de África” y vuelve a ser algo exótico y algo diferente. (Rizo 1135)³⁰²

However, the extent to which an inversion of stereotypes really deconstructs the dichotomous Western hierarchy between black and white races is dubious since Tomás is portrayed in a negative light whereas Teresa is depicted as a heroine. It does not come across as fortuitous that Pastora mentions to María Fátima, about her father, that, “los demonios rondaban por su

²⁹⁹ “No one could understand how a foreigner could feel in her flesh the power of the spirits, which, until then, seemed something exclusive of the black race.”

³⁰⁰ “exaggeratedly religious and Catholic”

³⁰¹ “My father was, in fact, in spite of being black, whiter than my mother, and she was, in spite of the light colour of her skin, blacker than Tomás”

³⁰² “Because my experience of living in Europe made me think that having a white woman as the protagonist of a novel where she performs African rites would make it much easier for people to understand her. If it were a black family, people would say ‘well, of course, typical African themes’ and it would become something exotic and different.”

cabeza”³⁰³ whereas Teresa was “la más maravillosa criatura que nunca conocí, vuestra madre, Teresa García, la gran hechicera blanca” (210).³⁰⁴

In addition to racial stereotypes, we need to address questions of gender and sexuality in order to complete this discussion. Again, in *Las Tres Virgenes*, there is an oscillation between the advocacy for women’s liberation and emancipation, and the reinforcement of stereotypical views about the bodies of black women. In response to her mother’s admonition that the daughters need to preserve their virginity and refrain from sex, María Fátima thinks: “¡Algo ajeno a mi cuerpo! ¡Pero si era el centro de él! ¡Era el punto en que mi cuerpo cobraba sentido!” (Mekuy 75).³⁰⁵ At the age of seventeen, she finally leaves the convent and dedicates her life to satisfying her previously repressed sexual desire, despite honouring the vow to her father of preserving her hymen. Her resolution is put in these words: “Quería ser esclava del placer para así ser su dueña” (93).³⁰⁶ Situating Fátima’s sense of purpose in her sexuality is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it breaks with Christian morality and gives the narrator the agency to express her desire without inhibitions; on the other hand, it is prone to perpetuate colonial stereotypes about the bodies of black women as permissive, available, and instinctual.

In their discussion of the desirability of racialized and sexualized bodies of famous Latinas in the US, marketed as “exotic Others” (180), Isabel Guzmán and Angharad Valdivia explain that “Whiteness is associated with a disembodied intellectual tradition free from the everyday desires of the body, and non-Whiteness is associated with nature and the everyday

³⁰³ “the demons roamed his head”

³⁰⁴ “The most wonderful creature I’ve ever met, your mother, Teresa Garcia, the great white sorceress.”

³⁰⁵ “Something outside of my body? But it was the centre of it! It was the point where my body made sense!”

³⁰⁶ “I wanted to be a slave of pleasure in order to become its mistress”

needs of the body to consume food, excrete waste, and reproduce sexually” (Guzmán and Valdivia 179). By the same token, the emphasis on the sexualized and ‘racialized’ body of Fátima “work[s] to mediate her ethnic identity for capitalist consumption” (Guzmán and Valdivia 181). In this line of thought, Dorothy Odattey-Wellington describes Mekuy’s first novel, *El Llanto de la Perra*, where the protagonist Eldania’s position towards men is even more submissive than Fátima’s, as a narrative which “simply reproduces the consumerist stereotype of the African other” (Odattey-Wellington 204). Moreover, Joanna Boampong argues that Mekuy’s explicit textual portrayal of black women as “sexually insatiable” and “emotionally unstable” (Boampong 106) does a disservice to African literature by women for its lack of “commitment to the advancement of women’s position within the patriarchal order” (105). Boampong cites Marta Sofía López Rodríguez to express the strengthening of stereotypes promoted by the explicit sex scenes in Mekuy’s writing:

Mekuy está involuntariamente reforzando un denigrante estereotipo acerca de la insaciable sensualidad de la mujer negra que la mayoría de las autoras africanas han combatido y denunciado con ferocidad en sus textos. (Rodríguez qtd. in Boampong 105)³⁰⁷

Boampong presumes that the fact that Mekuy “does not shy away from graphic descriptions of the sexual encounters of her protagonists” might “desecrat[e] the sacred subject of sex and the erotic that most African writers feel obliged to avoid” (106). From a diametrically opposed viewpoint, Lola Aponte-Ramos argues that Mekuy dismantles both nationalist and

³⁰⁷ “Mekuy is involuntarily reinforcing a denigrating stereotype about the insatiable sensuality of black women that most African authors have fought against and ferociously denounced in their texts.”

classical feminist discourse (239) through a performance of sexuality that breaks with Western regulations imposed on the body by the nation, the church, and the father (236).

Although I agree that Mekuy's female protagonists are often objectified, which might call to mind patriarchal, racist views towards black women, I am concerned about the expectation that women writers of African descent should conform to "archetypical characteristics associated with female African protagonists" (Boampong 107). To my mind, Mekuy is "caught in the dialectic between agency and the objectification of identity" (Guzmán and Valdivia 183). And while the bodies of female characters in Mekuy's texts can be read as commodified, they could also be seen as a praise of the erotic, which is an element that, according to Audre Lorde, was historically suppressed as an oppressive measure against women (4). Lorde argues that by drawing attention to the erotic, "not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (10). Like Rodriguez, Boampong attributes Mekuy's positioning to her idiosyncratic exilic condition by saying that she is the "hija apócrifa del exilio"³⁰⁸ and that her novel is born without a mother:

(des)madrada: desvinculada de la tradición literaria de las mujeres negras, de la cultura de origen de la escritora, de la oratura africana no menos que de la narrativa escrita del continente y la diáspora, e indiferente a la trágica historia de un país... (Boampong 106)³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ "apocryphal daughter of exile"

³⁰⁹ "(un)mothered: disconnected from the literary tradition of black women, from the culture of origin of the writer, from African oral tradition as well as from the written narratives of the continent and the diaspora, and indifferent to the tragic history of a country..."

After living in Spain for a couple of decades, Mekuy has returned to Equatorial Guinea to occupy different public and diplomatic positions: in 2008, she served as Director General of Libraries and Museums; the following year she became Secretary of State for Culture; in 2012, she was appointed Minister of the Department of Culture and Tourism and, in 2016, she became Minister of Culture and Artisanal Promotion. Still in 2016, she also founded a publishing house in Madrid, *Ediciones MK*, committed to “contar las historias de muchas mujeres que hoy no tienen voz” (*MK Ediciones*).³¹⁰ She has also become known as “la ministra Dior” (Bianchi),³¹¹ after having worked as a model for the brand. This professional trajectory plays an important role because, on the one hand, having worked as a model establishes the writer also as a beauty ideal, and on the other hand, her social and political privilege grant her legitimacy, access and visibility to further higher ideals in support of women’s rights.

At the same time, despite her relative success in entering Europe’s publishing industry, her literary works remain attached to a migrant label. While in terms of content, her characters in Madrid do not experience the ‘othering’ of Almeida’s characters in Lisbon, or Scego’s and Farah’s characters in Rome, the marketing of her books banks on the exotic ‘otherness’ of Africa as well as on the challenging of the puritanical views of Catholicism, both aspects suggested by David Nihalat in the foreword of *Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás*:

³¹⁰ “telling the stories of many women who have no voice today” (MK Ediciones)

³¹¹ “the Dior minister”

Y hay también un nuevo descubrimiento de África y sus costumbres, y la explosión de la mezcla, de la que ella es la mejor muestra, de dos culturas (10).³¹²
Las Tres Vírgenes de Santo Tomás puede ser recibida con cierto escándalo por las mentes más conservadoras y estrechas. (11)³¹³

The migrant tag is not exclusive to Mekuy in the Spanish market, though, as we understand from Manuela Coppola's comment about the contesting of the term by the generation of Scego and Farah:

Deeply aware of the need to interrogate stereotypical definitions and representations, the new generation of Italophone women writers registers the limits of the term 'migrant', a handy label used either to mark exotic difference or, more often, a dangerous otherness. (124)

These writers' focus on "narratives concerning the formation of new hybrid subjectivities" instead of only on "migration stories" (Coppola 124) speaks to this questioning effort. Coppola explains that the identity of migrants is usually represented in Italian media through a "set of negative stereotypes which are gender-related," portraying men as criminals and women as "suffering mothers," "mature strong domestic workers taking care of the elders," "young women 'stealing' someone else's husband," or "prostitutes" (123). This type of representation of the female migrant body is countered by characters like *Oltre Babilonia's* Zuhra, who, despite providing cheap labour for a cultural megastore, is too qualified for her job with her degree in Brazilian literature (Scego 82). Barni and Ardo are also educated Somali women who appear in Cristina Ali Farah's *Madre Piccola*. In a dialogue between the

³¹² "And there is also a new discovery of Africa and its customs, and the explosion of the mixture, of which she is the best example, of two cultures."

³¹³ "*The Three Virgins of Saint Thomas* might be received with scandal by the most conservative and narrow minds."

two, in Rome, Barni assumes that her newly found friend works for a family but is surprised to hear that she is a pharmacist (158). Barni confides in Ardo that before getting appointed as an obstetrician at the hospital, she could only find jobs as “infermiera per assistere gli anziani” (159).³¹⁴

Mindful of this marginal status related to their race and gender, Scego and three other young transnational writers (Gabriella Kuruville, Ingy Mubiayi Kakese, and Laila Wadia) title their 2005 collection of short stories *Pecore Nere* [Black Sheep]. Note that ‘pecora,’ whose plural form is ‘pecore,’ is a feminine noun in Italian, referring to female sheep, which draws attention to gender issues faced by migrant female writers, whereas the adjective ‘nere’ [black] brings in issues of race. Trying to renegotiate their peripheral positions, these writers play with the negative connotation of the popular idiom, ‘to be the black sheep,’ society’s outcasts, striving to reject the objectification performed by the literary market. At the same time, they also “refuse to be assimilated as Italian writers *tout court*, resisting a normalization which would simply erase their difference” (Coppola 126). Scego was in 2011 the first writer of non-European descent to win the prestigious Mondello prize in the category of Italian author, indicating a shift in Italy’s perceptions as to who is considered an Italian author. For some decades now, Portugal has been institutionally promoting literature from the PALOP (Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa),³¹⁵ thus creating a parallel canon of Lusophone literature, which is not, however, really integrated into Portuguese literature as such. A Portuguese literature by writers of African descent is thus still a new phenomenon.

³¹⁴ “caregiver for elderly people”

³¹⁵ Portuguese-speaking African countries

Difficult Belongings and New Modernities

Authors working on the borderline of nations and literary canons have complicated relationships with notions of motherland. It is not arbitrary that they are surrounded by what could be called ‘unmotherly’ terminology. Mekuy is labelled “(des)madrada” (Boampong 106),³¹⁶ and Scego writes about her Roman home as a “*dismatria*” (Scego 2005, 11).³¹⁷ The characters in the works examined here by Almeida, Scego, Farah, and Mekuy, all in different yet often intersecting ways speak of multiple belongings, questions of identity, and different ways of rebelling against patriarchy. Their spaces of belonging are less bound to the nation and rather situated in transnational, diasporic, fluid, marginal, imagined loci. Almeida, Scego, and Farah focus on contemporary Portugal and Italy, addressing and speaking for a generation of youth who often feel like the ‘other’ in their own countries due to their ‘racialized’ hair and bodies. Mekuy, oscillating between rebellion against Western patriarchy and Catholicism, and succumbing to market demands, also calls into question racial, gender, and class assumptions.

These texts address types of bodily surveillance (hair management, politics of documentation) as means of subjugating society’s ‘others’ (non-white people, migrants, women, among others) and hint at different decolonial and anti-patriarchal strategies (identifying transnationally, occupying urban spaces, exposing multiculturalism, defying women’s roles and beauty ideals) that question homogeneous definitions of nationhood and citizenship. Reflecting on the ways in which ‘othering’ happens in literature —and its marketing processes— highlights broader anxieties about Portugal’s, Italy’s, and Spain’s

³¹⁶ “(un)mothered”

³¹⁷ “unmotherland”

peripheral positions within Europe. As Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas explain, “The perception that members of ‘visible minority’ groups are necessarily foreigners has been linked to Portugal’s anxieties about its own status as a modern European nation and a member of the European Union” (Behdad and Thomas 347). Countering the underlying mythic idea of nations as homogeneous, and particularly Portugal, Spain, and Italy as inclusive and tolerant, these texts draw attention to the failure of official national projects and point towards the rethinking of Southern Europe from its borders, crossings, and Mediterranean intersections. Drawing upon Paul Gilroy’s model of the Black Atlantic, Italian scholar Alessandra di Maio coined the term Black Mediterranean, defined as a polyphonic, dissonant “transnational site of globalization” (2), which facilitates and complicates the relationships between Africa and Europe (7). Highlighting the ideas of instability, journey, and crossing, the Mediterranean is where “Europe meets Africa” (12) and where symbolically a dialogue can be made possible.³¹⁸ This model allows not only for a vertical discussion between North and South but also for a horizontal dialogue across the countries that share a Mediterranean culture. A border and a bridge, which separates and unites, the Sea is a fluid space of struggle that bears witness to the journey of migrancy.

The dislodging of ingrained physical and mental geographies (nation-states, whiteness, etc.) allows for transnational solidarities to emerge and redefines notions of identity and belonging in the aftermath of colonial history, imperialism, wars, dictatorships, and contemporary migration and diaspora. The premise of a pluricultural Southern Europe is entangled with the deconstruction of racial categories and the acceptance of its multiple,

³¹⁸ For an application of Maio’s model of the Black Mediterranean to Italy, see Maio 2009.

mixed, multicultural citizens. As Françoise Lionnet explains, “L’idée du métissage déconstruit non seulement la possibilité de stabilité biologique (raciale ou sexuelle) mais aussi la notion de pureté nationale (qui est citoyen à part entière ?) ou d’authenticité culturelle (où est le local, où commence le global ?)” (*Écritures féminines* 14). The disruption of notions of homogeneity and authenticity implies looking at all citizens as we look at ourselves. The result might lead us to a creative counter-hegemonic discourse that will enlighten our worldview, as Iain Chambers proposes in his model of the South:

This implies engaging with spaces and practices that propose other rhythms and reasons. In the present circumstances these may well be negated, subordinated and reduced to marginal cultures and local histories, unable to claim the universal validity of the West. Nevertheless they exist, persist and resist within that very same modernity as a sore, a wound, a persistent interrogation [...]. They hold Occidental modernity up to the light, exposing its shadows. [...] The archive slips beyond unique control. Modes of classification and meaning multiply. Worldly coordinates loom into view and another universalism begins to emerge: one not dictated solely by us. (6)

Chapter 4

A Different Story:

Rewriting History, Rewriting the South

*Tengo una mente y un cuerpo entero con los cuales recordar:
El olvido no es una opción.*³¹⁹

Carmen Rodríguez, *De Cuerpo Entero*, 23

*Pergunto-me como escrever com distância se mexo na memória,
mas a distância, apercebo-me então, é condição da memória, não uma moral.*³²⁰

Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, *Esse Cabelo*, 88

*Le favole non sono poi così diverse dalla vita reale.*³²¹

Cristina Ubax Ali Farah, *Il Comandante del Fiume*, 8

Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: 'This is what human beings are capable of doing — may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget'.

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 115

Drawing on Virginia Woolf's ideas about the fallibility of representation, Linda Anderson provocatively says that "much of what we think of as 'true' or historically given, is really an ideological construct; in other words, a fiction" (Anderson 96). Georg G. Iggers would assuredly respond that "every historical account is a construct, but a construct arising from a dialog between the historian and the past, one that does not occur in a vacuum but within a community of inquiring minds who share criteria of plausibility" (Iggers 145). A consensus about these 'criteria' is however complicated by competing interests, as Ann Rigney

³¹⁹ "I do have a mind and a body to remember with. Forgetting is not an option."

³²⁰ "I ask myself how to write with distance when I touch my memory, but the distance, I realize then, is a condition of memory, not a morality."

³²¹ "Fables are not after all so different from real life."

elucidates when she says that “Since history is the domain of collective experience, past events are often the focus of conflicting interpretations motivated by conflicting interests in the latter-day society” (Rigney 64). Moreover, if history happens in the domain of the ‘collective,’ the historian is not alone in the task of dialoguing with the past.

In “Histoire et roman: où passent les frontières?,” Pierre Nora, linking the blurring of limits between those two genres back to the “Nouveau roman” and the “nouvelle histoire” following the Second World War, argues that history and the novel can no longer be simply defined as “Deux ambitions concurrentes de connaissance de l’homme et de la société. Deux formes différentes et opposées de mémoire: l’une historique et scientifique, l’autre existentielle et artistique” (7). He explains that the hybridization of the historical and the literary arises from a renewed social demand regarding the apprehension of the past which requires facing its hardest realities (12). Suggesting that literature can offer historiography the opportunity “[...] d’expérimenter d’autres moyens, d’explorer d’autres chemins encore obscurs,” Nora wonders at the end of his essay “si l’apparition d’une littérature saisie par l’histoire ne représente pas un signe avant-coureur” (12). Falling under this category of ‘signes avant-coureur,’ or auspicious harbingers of historical change, the texts under analysis in this chapter have the potential to subvert canons of knowledge and offer insight into the cracks of history, challenging lingering Eurocentric representations.

I share Dipesh Chakrabarty’s view that “the discipline of history [...] is only one particular way of remembering the past. It is one amongst many” (Chakrabarty 22). If, with him, and as already suggested by Linda Anderson, Georg Iggers, and others, we postulate that “History is a subject primarily concerned with the crafting of narratives” (Chakrabarty

16), then it “is never safely ‘out there’, to be defined in opposition to fiction, but instead can, at any time in the future, disrupt our understanding” (L. Anderson 16). The disruption of borders between fiction and history is emphasized by postmodern criticism, which puts at stake the very national historical narratives that will inform the current chapter’s focus. As Linda Hutcheon clarifies, “What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (Hutcheon 89). The changing structures that underlie meaning-making are signs of the “essentially provisional and contingent nature of historical representation and of their susceptibility to infinite revision in the light of new evidence or more sophisticated conceptualization of problems,” as Hayden White pertinently proposes (White 278). Acknowledging the postmodern effort to demonstrate that “the notion of a unitary history was not tenable, that history was marked not only by continuity but also by ruptures,” Iggers recognizes “the ideological assumptions that have been embedded in the dominant discourse of professional historical scholarship,” even if fearful of the postmodern dismissal of rational historical discourse altogether (13). My corpus of texts moves away from not only official national narratives but also from other types of dominant discourse such as patriarchy and Western hegemony, shifting the attention from known grand narratives to the perspectives of lesser known “men and women who have been neglected in the traditional sources” (Iggers 114). This attention to “the conditions of everyday life as they are experienced by common people” (102) is a preoccupation I share with microhistorical research in particular, and with social history in general due to the foregrounding of the

common people's voices.³²² However, I am not only interested in the voices of those who have been 'othered' by history but also in looking at those events that were, themselves, dismissed or ignored. In other words, I am interested in what Chakrabarty calls 'subaltern pasts,' which certainly reveal a preoccupation with "socially-subordinate or subaltern groups" or "'minority' identities" (18), but most importantly, call for a turn to the silences of history, reminding us of the crucial fact that there is always a "plurality of times existing together" (25), which is alluded to by Rigney when she mentions the concurrent existence of competing narratives. I look at the texts of my corpus, then, as literary repositories of national and transnational memory as opposed to History, with the ability to teach about the importance of remembering trauma, to counter different types of historical amnesia, and to emphasize women's perspectives as fundamental in testing the limits of conventional accounts of the past.

As Paulina Chiziane writes in the preface to the latest edition of Isabela Figueiredo's *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* [Notebook of Colonial Memories], "O corpo das mulheres brancas ou negras, o corpo da terra africana, só o homem branco podia usar, tocar, abusar e violentar" (18).³²³ These women's writings underscore the silenced voices of women — particularly but not only black women— and black men, thus participating in the endeavour of dismantling the body of knowledge that informs patriarchy, totalitarianism, and colonialism. In the same text, Chiziane remarks that history's obsessive focus on "generais vitoriosos, heróis, batalhas, conquistas"³²⁴ ignores essential aspects, such as "sexo,"

³²² For the development and travelling of the concept of microhistory between Italy, the United States, and France over the past four decades, see Trivellato 2015.

³²³ "The body of both white and black women, and the body of the African land, only the white man could use, touch, abuse and rape."

³²⁴ "victorious generals, heroes, battles, conquests"

“paixões,” “sentimentos,” “sofrimento,” “isolamento,” and “ansiedades” (17).³²⁵ These are alternative directions of history, with an emphasis on the silenced, which underscore how the personal can be historically relevant (and vice-versa), as is manifest in Françoise Lionnet’s call for the importance of “the processes that produce the personal and make it historically and politically unique” (*Postcolonial* 4).

In the contexts of Portugal, Spain, and Italy, interpretations of the colonial past in Africa seem to often converge in official discourses—via textbooks, public speeches, memorials—that craft history according to mythic ideals of national identity and empire constrained by silences that distort those narratives. In this chapter, I investigate how the transnational memories about the past interspersed in texts by Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ali Farah, Isabela Figueiredo, Dulce Maria Cardoso, Paulina Chiziane, Guillermina Mekuy, and María Nsue shift the bearings of official histories thus insisting on the importance of remembering, and contributing to an urgent rewriting of historical representations of the South, which refers both to Africa and to the peripheral position of Southern Europe in the West. The chapter starts with “Recovering What the Memorial Conceals,” a discussion on the importance of giving voice to the silences in representations of national traumas through the idea of the disruption of the memorial site in *Oltre Babilonia* [Beyond Babylon] by Scego, *Madre Piccola* [Little Mother] by Farah, and *O Retorno* [The Return] by Cardoso. In “Colonial Atrocities: Can Colonialism be Subaltern?” I contrast the ideas of silenced histories and subaltern colonialisms, emphasizing that the peripheral Western position of Portugal, Spain, and Italy cannot be confused with ideas that provide justifications for the validity of

³²⁵ “sex,” “passions,” “feelings,” “suffering,” “solitude,” “anxieties”

colonial projects. “Against the Myths of ‘brava gente,’ ‘brandos costumes,’ and ‘leyenda blanca’”³²⁶ rebuts myths that contribute to eschewed views of the past. “Colonized Bodies” shows textual evidence of colonial violence that challenge glorified perspectives of the colonial past. “O colonialismo era o meu pai”³²⁷ addresses the gendered nature of colonial projects and the problems arising from reconciling the father figure and the past. In the section entitled “Southern Anxieties,” I expose the different levels of periphery of Southern Europe and propose that they belie anxieties about the ‘other’ that can be countered by looking at historical silences. Even though in the texts in Spanish there is no direct attack on Spanish colonialism, there is an open censure of Eurocentrism and the West in Nsue’s *Ekomo*. In a contrasting manner, in Mekuy’s *Tres Almas*, we perceive instead the Guinean-Spanish narrator’s affiliation with the West, for whom she interprets Guinean culture. I compare these two texts with Paulina Chiziane’s *Niketche* in “Against the West and its Colonial and Imperial Legacies” through a discussion on the topic of polygamy as an example of a counter-narrative in the writing of Africa. Finally, “What Can We Do With the Past?” suggests some productive ways in which the fissures of the past can contribute to a better future. These texts, in comparable and sometimes contrasting ways, deal with representations of trauma that rectify historical myths, denouncing the racist and sexist structures historically inherited from colonialism and imperialism.

³²⁶ ‘great people,’ ‘mild manners,’ ‘white legend’

³²⁷ “My father was colonialism” (Figueiredo, *Notebook*, 14).

Recovering What the Memorial Conceals in Scego, Farah, and Cardoso

Both *Oltre Babilonia* and *Madre Piccola* discuss the power of the media to shape and disrupt collective representations of national traumas. The characters of Miranda and Barni, respectively, question the validity of narratives behind mainstream international news spread in Italian newspapers and television. Miranda, an Argentinian exile in Rome, insists, in her letters to her daughter Mar, on the importance of remembering the crimes against humanity committed by the ruling military junta in her native country during the 1970s. She recalls in particular the international news headlines published in Rome in 1978 that celebrated Argentina's World Cup soccer championship while ignoring the ongoing tragedy of the *desaparecidos*. As social anthropologist Jill Stockwell explains,

Coined by the military as a way of denying the kidnap, torture and murder of its citizens, the word *desaparecer*, "to disappear", began to be used as a transitive verb [relating to those] who were disappeared by the military [and] referred to in Argentina as *los desaparecidos*. The majority of these individuals were abducted by the security forces and taken to clandestine detention centres, where they were tortured and later murdered [...]. (Stockwell 32)³²⁸

Miranda uses the theatrical metaphor of the 'offstage' to draw attention to the invisibility and silence around that traumatic chapter of history: "I giornali facevano vedere solo chi ululava di piacere. Gli altri ululati non interessavano a nessuno. Anzi non esistevano nemmeno. Gli altri erano dei *desaparecidos*, che venivano scannati rigorosamente fuori scena" (Scego 43).³²⁹ Despite acknowledging the impossibility of completely grasping the pain of others,

³²⁸ For more on the *desaparecidos* and the violation of human rights, see Guest 1990.

³²⁹ "The newspapers showed only those who howled with pleasure. The other howls were of no interest to anyone. Indeed they did not even exist. The other howls were from the *desaparecidos*, who were strategically slaughtered offstage."

Miranda stresses the reparative nature of remembering (Scego 244), a process that she experiences through writing both as a professional and published author, and on a private level through her letters to Mar. She questions the effectiveness of the conversion of the former clandestine torture centre “Esma” (Scego 94) into a museum: “Dicono che è per la memoria, che *nunca más* dovrà succedere, in nessuna parte del mondo. Però sappiamo che succede ancora, spesso. Succede a Guantánamo, succede ad Abu Ghraib” (96).³³⁰ The underlying concern of Miranda is that the forgetful nature of humanity allows for history to repeat itself.

As Azade Seyhan points out, memory and commemoration play fundamental roles in avoiding “official or institutionalized regimes of forgetting,” giving history consistency and coherence (4). In order to avoid such ‘regimes,’ Miranda exhorts her daughter to remember the place where both her uncle Ernesto and many others were tortured and lost their lives:

L’Esma. Vorrei che non dimenticassi questo nome. Scrivilo sull’agenda. Tatualo sul tuo corpo. Ripetilo decine di volte. Segnalo sui post-it intorno a te. Insegnalo agli amici più cari. Aggiungilo al promemoria del tuo cellulare. Non lo dimenticare. Tuo zio ci è finito dentro. Tutto il Santiago ci è finito dentro. Non lo puoi dimenticare. Sarebbe come farli morire di nuovo. (Scego 94)³³¹

The idea of imprinting memory in the body in order to prevent forgetting bears an implicit intertextual resemblance with Primo Levi’s own version of the *Shema*, a Jewish prayer, which opens his *Se Questo è Un Uomo* [If This is a Man]. While Miranda urges Mar to

³³⁰ “They say it is a place of remembering so that that it won’t happen *ever again* [in Spanish], anywhere in the world. But we know that it still happens, often. It happens in Guantánamo, it happens in Abu Ghraib.”

³³¹ “The Esma. I would like you to remember this name. Write it on your agenda. Tattoo it on your body. Repeat it dozens of times. Stamp it on post-its all around you. Teach it to your dearest friends. Add it as a memo in your cell phone. Do not forget it. Your uncle ended up in there. All of Santiago ended up in there. You cannot forget it. It would be like making them die again.”

‘tatuare’ [tattoo] the name of the torture centre in her body, Levi incites the reader to ‘scolpire’ [engrave] in his/her heart the memory of the atrocities of the Holocaust.³³² In her commitment to the past, Miranda insists on calling the former torture space by its original name—whose acronym stands for *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* [Army’s Mechanics School]—highlighting the long-lasting traumatic effects that the place still yields today for Argentinians who were affected by the violence of that oppressive regime. Miranda fears that the conversion of the *Esma* into a museum might allow for a passive attitude towards the past. As she puts it, “Il museo ha senso solo se la memoria si fa carne, se la memoria è attiva” (Scego 97).³³³ The museum *Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos* [Remembrance and Human Rights Centre] was established in 2004 by the Federal Government of Argentina in order to, as the website informs us,

promote remembrance about the tragedy this society suffered, contributing to the collective comprehension of our past and committed to our society’s present problems and needs. It was also conceived as a place to pay tribute to the victims of the civic-military dictatorship. (“Remembrance” par. 4)

We have to wonder how this ‘collective comprehension’ of the history of the *desaparecidos* is reworked in the transformation of the school/torture centre into a museum. Miranda’s apprehension relates to the distance that comes with the creation of memorializing narratives

³³² “Meditate che questo è stato: / Vi comando queste parole./ Scolpitele nel vostro cuore/ Stando in casa andando per la via,/ Coricandovi alzandovi;/ Ripetetele ai vostri figli./ O vi si sfaccia la casa,/ La malattia vi impedisca,/ I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi.” [Never forget that this has happened. / Remember these words. / Engrave them in your hearts, / When at home or in the street, / When going to sleep, when getting up. / Repeat them to your children. / Or may your houses be destroyed, / May illness strike you down, / May your children turn their faces from you.”] (7)

³³³ “The museum only makes sense if memory becomes flesh, if memory is active.”

and the ways in which these might influence our engagement with the multiple histories that this revamped 'site of memory' tells or conceals.

According to Pierre Nora, a 'site of memory,' or "a *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora, "Preface" xvii). He explains that these *lieux* "are sites that embody memory through a sense of historical continuity" (7) and that, relatedly, "[t]he quest for memory is the search for one's history" (13). How is this *lieu* of the torture centre then 'continued' in its museum form? The process of 'museification' of past events implies synchronizing conflicting memories into a representation of history conducive to a sense of 'collective memory' (Halbwachs 74). Jefferson J. Marín and Carlos D. Cairo define "museification"

as a particular way of construction and legitimation of collective memory [which] refers to political and cultural actions deployed by institutions and civil servants that are aimed at selecting and placing an "object"—whether cultural or natural, as well as individuals or communities— within lines of reasoning and speeches that "petrify" the historical and cultural meanings of these objects. (Marín and Cairo 76)

It is against this petrification of a historical *lieu* that Miranda speaks up, alluding to the fact that memorializing does not draw a clearcut line between the present and the past and that her suffering—and that of her disappeared brother— cannot simply be converted into a stagnant and nostalgic thing of the past. Even though something might be lost in the conversion of the torture centre into a memorial site due to the distancing that comes from establishing the site as a slice of the past, this transformation of the site of memory into memorial might nonetheless be the only plausible way to counter forgetting, especially for those who did not

inherit, like Mar, a ‘postmemory.’ This term, coined by Marianne Hirsch, describes “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (106).³³⁴

By revisiting the headlines of old newspapers and spelling out their silences, Miranda advocates a type of relationship with the past (echoed in Levi’s words) that might promote not only commemoration but also a more active engagement —*una memoria attiva*. This is why she insists on giving her deceased brother Ernesto a voice not only by telling his story but also by writing the letter that she imagines he would have sent to his friends and mother if he would have had the chance. In this imagined letter, Ernesto writes:

Muoio io al vostro posto, compagni, io amici. Voi continuate la vita, vi prego... ridete, mangiate, divertitivi, fate l’amore, prendo io il posto vostro sul carro della morte, sono stanco, stanco di sorridere mentre mi bruciano i testicoli. Stanco di resistere. (Scego 243)³³⁵

Urging others to enjoy the pleasures of life while sacrificing his own emphasizes the horrific nature of his experiences and might call for feelings of solidarity and empathy which counter the modern detachment regarding the ‘pain of others’ (Sontag).

While the repercussions of what makes —and does not make— the news are assessed in *Oltre Babilonia* through letters from mother to daughter, in *Madre Piccola* this topic is

³³⁴ In her early work, Hirsch focuses on the remembrance of the Holocaust to illustrate the idea of traumatic ‘postmemory,’ though her recent work has become more comparative. I use the term to draw attention to those writers and characters who have not experienced traumatic events themselves but inherited those memories from their ancestors.

³³⁵ “I die in your place, comrades, I die, my friends. You, go on with your life, please ... laugh, eat, have fun, make love, I take your place on the hearse. I am tired, tired of smiling while my testicles are being burnt. Tired of resisting.”

brought up in an interview-form chapter, where Barni is the interviewee for a reportage about her Somali community in Rome. In both cases, the dialogic form can be read as a call for a conversation about the silences of the past. Addressing the power of the media to choose what people are moved by, Barni reminds the journalist of recent headlines published in Italian newspapers and continuously broadcasted on national television about a shipwreck involving Somali people escaping the civil war and the subsequent official funerals organized in the Capitoline Hill in Rome (Farah 20).³³⁶ She finds the media attention upsetting because “quel naufragio poteva essere uno dei tanti” (14).³³⁷ Reflecting on the current immigration influx in Italy via perilous Mediterranean crossings, Barni draws attention to the fact that these “corpi senza vita” (15)³³⁸ have been arriving to the country’s shores for a period of time, but that only the media attention made them visible. She tells the journalist: “Quanto costruisce e distrugge la stampa! Tuttavia le assicuro che finché non ti riguarda da vicino, non te ne rendi veramente conto” (20).³³⁹

The question of proximity as a condition for caring is interestingly put by John Durham Peters, who compares broadcasting to testifying because in both instances “experiences are mediated to an audience which has no first-hand acquaintance with them,” thus making “the borrowed eyes and ears of the media become, however tentatively or dangerously, one’s own” (Peters 717). The sense of feeling like a witness to what the news mediates for us translates in the curiosity and changing attitudes of Barni’s colleagues (with

³³⁶ According to Lavagnino, this episode refers to a shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa on October 24, 2003. She further reports that shipwrecks involving Somali refugees trying to reach Italy have been documented since 1996 (63).

³³⁷ “that shipwreck was just one of many”

³³⁸ “lifeless bodies”

³³⁹ “How much the press constructs and destroys! However, I assure you that as long as you don’t see it, it doesn’t really hit home”

whom she works at the hospital) towards her history and that of her country: “I miei colleghi hanno sentito la notizia al telegiornale, mi hanno fatto le condoglianze, chiedendomi dettagli sulla guerra civile [...]” (Farah 18).³⁴⁰ She is particularly astounded by the “aria complice” (20)³⁴¹ of a nurse who calls her, an obstetrician, during off-duty hours to ask for help with a male patient—a survivor of the shipwreck—based solely on their shared Somali heritage. Barni realizes that without the media events, this man, Maxamed X, “sarebbe stato un povero disgraziato come tanti” (20).³⁴² It is very significant that he receives the epithet of “il Muto” (38)³⁴³ for his initial refusal to speak to the police and the doctors at the hospital (who erroneously suspect that he is a terrorist). Indeed, he only feels comfortable enough to speak to Barni following many encounters when he realizes that, unlike her colleagues and the police, she is not suspicious of him (56). The “Muto” finally speaking might be read synecdochically as Somalia gaining a voice to speak for itself. In the same direction, Barni is pleased with the fact that the Italian journalist wants to include her in the reportage writing process:

Perché quando mi ha detto che voleva scrivere [...] insieme a me, insieme a quelli che intervistava—allora ho pensato che lei è una persona come si deve, con quella modestia dell’essere disarmata che io esigo quando ci si appresta a raccontare argomenti tanto lontani. (40)³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰ “My colleagues heard the news, they offered me their condolences, and asked for details about the civil war”

³⁴¹ “expression of sympathy”

³⁴² “ would have been a poor wretch like many others”

³⁴³ “the Mute”

³⁴⁴ “When you told me that you wanted to write [...] with me [and] the people you interviewed—I thought then that you were the right kind of person, with that disarming modesty that I expect to see in someone who is about to tell the story of such distant subjects” (Farah, *Little Mother*, 36).

Making a plea for an accurate portrayal of the Somali community in Rome, Barni asks the journalist to let her review the final reportage before its publication. She clarifies, “Non che non mi fidi di lei [...]. Ma il problema è che con le interviste non si può mai sapere: racconti una storia e ne viene fuori una completamente diversa. [...] È de la scrittura in sé che non mi fido” (27).³⁴⁵

The issue of representation vs. misrepresentation is further problematized when related to questions of memory, as expressed by Barni: “Ricordo quello che voglio ricordare. E quello che voglio ricordare è una delle voci che vi sollecita a non dimenticare il vostro passato di emigranti” (15).³⁴⁶ This statement questions the selective memory of history writing and the silences it creates. The shift in the attention from the migrant status of Somalis in Rome to Italians’ own emigrant past³⁴⁷ helps destabilize the typical representations of Somalis found in mainstream press that depict them as suffering ‘others,’ by highlighting a shared history of migration, struggles, and hope.³⁴⁸ As the same Barni writes elsewhere in *Madre Piccola*,³⁴⁹ this time in a letter-form chapter addressed to her cousin Domenica Axad, the other female protagonist and narrator, “[...] chi è chi se basta solo spostare il punto di vista?” (Farah 166).³⁵⁰ In an attempt similar to that of Miranda

³⁴⁵ “It’s not that I don’t trust you [...]. The problem is, with interviews one never knows: you tell one story and a totally different one comes out. [...] It’s the writing itself I do not trust” (Farah, *Little Mother*, 25).

³⁴⁶ “I remember what I want to remember. And what I want to remember is one of their voices urging you Italians not to forget your emigrant past” (Farah, *Little Mother*, 14).

³⁴⁷ Fabiana Woodfin, in her dissertation on the impact of post-World War II emigration in Italian national imagination, argues that “the representation of emigration has been one of the major grounds upon which the Italian nation has been articulated” (iii) and that this fact is intertwined with a “long-standing view, in Italy, of emigration as an affront to national pride, a belief with roots sinking back to the beginnings of mass emigration—and of the nation itself—in Italian history” (iv).

³⁴⁸ Raquel Vega-Durán, in “When We Were ‘The Other’. Emigrant Memories and Immigration in Spain,” counters negative portrayals of migrants in the news by comparing Spain’s emigrant past with its current immigrant present.

³⁴⁹ Chapter 6.

³⁵⁰ “[...] who is who, if all you have to do is switch perspective?” (Farah, *Little Mother*, 145).

urging that Mar remembers uncle Ernesto as more than a number added to the ranks of those killed at the hands of the regime, Barni also proposes an alternative way of looking at those deceased in the shipwreck by imagining their personal stories through the objects left behind in the boat: “Borsetta, quaderno, fotografia, scarpa di cuoio, biberon, camicia, zaino, orologio, stringa. Dettagli che scrivono una storia” (Farah 15).³⁵¹

As Miranda debunks the myth of the ‘lieu de mémoire’ of the museum, Barni also, in a concomitant way, uses a memorial site to ridicule the emptiness and misrepresentations contained in some official narratives. Gathered around the Ancient Roman statue of emperor Marcus Aurelius during the funerals following the shipwreck, everyone applauds when the Somali ambassador suggests during his speech: “Che quello fosse solo l’inizio di un futuro di cooperazione tra la Somalia e l’Italia” (16).³⁵² Barni ironically compares the sound of the speech to the “cra cra cra” (16)³⁵³ of the frogs that, according to the urban legend, live inside of the humid statue of the emperor.³⁵⁴ This sarcastic juxtaposition underlines the ‘noise’ of official narratives that covers up crucial aspects of the past. In this case, the ambassador’s speech blatantly ignores the long historical ties between Somalia and Italy, particularly their colonial history and the ensuing United Nations Trusteeship era, according to which Italy administered Somalia between 1950 and 1960.³⁵⁵ Barni counters the “collective amnesia” (Brancato 5) about the colonial and post-colonial relationships between the two

³⁵¹ “Handbag, notebook, photograph, leather shoe, baby bottle, shirt, backpack, watch, shoelace. Details that tell a story” (Farah, *Little Mother*, 14).

³⁵² “That this would mark the beginning of future cooperation between Somalia and Italy” (Farah, *Little Mother*, 14-15).

³⁵³ “Ribbet, ribbet, ribbet” (Farah, *Little Mother*, 15)

³⁵⁴ The 1800 year-old statue is considered a “symbol of Rome’s eternity” (“Emperor”).

³⁵⁵ For a historiographical perspective on the forgotten relationships between Italy and Somalia during the Trusteeship period, see Pandolfo 2017.

countries by emphasizing the actual ignorance of the journalist about them. For instance, she is surprised at Barni's fluency in Italian, at which the latter interjects: "Ma dovrebbe saperlo, noi somali conosciamo quasi sempre l'italiano" (14).³⁵⁶ Even more poignantly, in another passage, the reporter is curious about Somalia's Independence Day, lacking awareness of the fact that July 1, 1960, marked the unification of the Somali Republic.³⁵⁷ In other words, as Barni clarifies in a didactic tone, the day that Somalis became "Liberi dagli italiani" (37).³⁵⁸

The context in which a memorial site is discussed in Cardoso's text is quite different and yet there is something to be said about how, as in Farah's text, it overlaps with an element of strangeness (the frogs there, here the containers) that reframes and contests the monument's historical solemnity and meaning, and in the former case, by antonomasia, also the silences in the ambassador's speech. In *O Retorno*, Portuguese teenage boy Rui is part of a picket of night watchmen who protect the returnees' containers at the harbour by the Tagus River from being stolen or rummaged through. In the mid-1970s, before fleeing the former African colonies, especially Angola and Mozambique, many returnees shipped to Portugal wooden containers filled with what they expected to save from their belongings. Some of those were for several months stationed at the harbour next to the famous *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* [The Monument to the Discoveries], a structure erected during Salazar's regime to commemorate the so-called Age of Discovery of the 15th and 16th centuries. In order to make sense of his confused and estranged subject position in his new Portuguese

³⁵⁶ "But you should know it, we Somalis almost always speak Italian." In the English translation, this passage is nuanced by replacing 'should' with "But you probably already know [...]" (Farah, *Little Mother*, 13), which might suggest a sense of obligation concerning the Italian but not so much the English-speaking reader.

³⁵⁷ The Somali territories formerly colonized by Italy and Britain were unified upon the end of the Italian administration period of the so-called Trust Territory of Somaliland.

³⁵⁸ "Liberated from the Italians" (Farah, *Little Mother*, 33).

‘home,’³⁵⁹ Rui resorts to the voices of some of the adult returnees to show the fragmented and heterogeneous perspectives on the empire and the decolonization process within his hotel group. He turns to his older friend, Mr. Belchior, for clues about the sense of the containers:

O Sr. Belchior diz que os contentores são as sobras do império, não deixa de ter piada que estejam a apodrecer no mesmo sítio de onde o império começou, alguma coisa isto quer dizer, alguma coisa devemos aprender com isto, tudo na vida tem os seus porquês. (Cardoso 188)³⁶⁰

Nuno Domingos and Elsa Peralta, in their introduction to *Cidade e Império* [City and Empire], explain that the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* is one of the “espaços de comemoração da capital portuguesa [onde] continuam a reproduzir-se os velhos mitos imperiais, sobretudo aqueles associados às primeiras viagens de descoberta e expansão e ao esplendor do Império marítimo português” (xxxvii).³⁶¹ The stark contrast between the imposing memorial³⁶² and the ‘scraps of the empire,’ waiting to be picked up by their homeless owners,³⁶³ calls for a need to rework national definitions in light of the post-imperial moment, away from the nostalgic, neocolonialist, and paternalistic views of Africa symbolized by the monument. This exercise implies of course coming to terms with the new social and cultural realities brought about by the waves of immigration —the returnees

³⁵⁹ The fact that Rui first arrives to Portugal as a teenager complicates definitions of home.

³⁶⁰ “Mr. Belchior says that the containers are the scraps of the empire and that it is ironic that they are rotting in the exact same place where the empire started. This must mean something, this must teach us something, everything in life has an explanation.”

³⁶¹ “spaces of commemoration of the Portuguese capital [where] the old imperial myths continue to be reproduced, especially those associated with the first voyages of discovery and expansion and with the splendour of the Portuguese maritime empire”

³⁶² The 56-metre high monument represents a caravel in full sail headed by a statue of Henry the Navigator, accompanied by many statues of figures related to the Portuguese maritime past.

³⁶³ “Os contentores estão aqui há meses mas os donos não os podem vir buscar sem terem sítio onde os pôr, têm de arranjar a vida primeiro” (193). [The containers have been here for months but the owners can’t pick them up without having a place to store them, they need to fix their lives first.”]

included— that started arriving in Portugal (and other Southern European countries) following the decolonization processes. For Rui, the abandoned containers by the harbour carrying what is left of the empire, and symbolically of his past life, also work as a metaphor for his current diasporic condition. Reminiscing about the Angolan Cuanza River while gazing at the Tagus River in Lisbon, he imagines a new voyage: “O rio tão perto, se daqui partiram as caravelas para lá também poderei partir daqui para a América” (193).³⁶⁴ The imperial past becomes then a palimpsest where a renewed hope in the future is written, this time corresponding to Rui’s fantasy of embarking on the American dream —symbol par excellence of the ideal migration destination.

The imperial world disrupted by the uncomfortable presence of the containers is also a phallogocentric world, perfectly mirrored in the memorial itself, where out of its thirty-three statues of important figures related to the construction of the Portuguese empire (including kings, navigators, scientists, writers, chroniclers, and missionaries) only one is a woman, Philippa of Lancaster. English-born Queen of Portugal from 1387 to 1415, by marriage to Portuguese King João I, she seals, as property exchanged between father and husband, the Treaty of Windsor —the backbone of the diplomatic relationships between Portugal and England (a relationship discussed later in this chapter).³⁶⁵ So, when Chiziane says that “O colonialismo é masculino” (17),³⁶⁶ we could, in like manner, say that imperialism is also, if not male, led by males. Like the frogs shifting the attention from the male power of the

³⁶⁴ “The river so close... if the caravels departed from here, I could also leave from here to America.”

³⁶⁵ Even this female presence, objectified in diplomatic affairs, speaks to the sexist ways in which patriarchy works.

³⁶⁶ “Colonialism is male”

Roman ancestors of Italians represented by Marcus Aurelius' statue,³⁶⁷ the containers also in contrast with the Discoveries Monument propose a revision of imperial grand narratives and of their tired patriarchal symbols. Drawing on the anthropological work done by Elsa Peralta, journalist Vanessa Rato explains that, despite being “um dos maiores traumas nacionais,” “o ‘retorno’ foi ‘silenciado’, mantido na ‘invisibilidade’” (Rato).³⁶⁸ I will show next that this silence forms part of an even larger process that cuts across national borders, and is shared by Portugal, Spain, and Italy, which is supported by Sabrina Brancato's argument that “Southern European countries seem to have been struck by an acute form of colonial amnesia, leading to a complete erasure of the memory of past guilt” (5). The texts discussed in this chapter speak up, not only against colonialism, but also against other types of oppression (like the trauma of the *desaparecidos*, and patriarchy), giving a voice to those who were strategically kept ‘offstage’.

Colonial Atrocities: Can Colonialism Be Subaltern?

It is important to establish a clear distinction between the ‘subaltern pasts’ (Chakrabarty 15) that these writings recover —particularly those related to histories of colonialism and oppression— and the idea of a ‘subaltern colonialism,’ as developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Referring to “Portuguese colonialism,” he argues that because it was “featuring a semiperipheral country, was also semiperipheral itself. It was, in other

³⁶⁷ The Roman empire was used by Mussolini to signify the greatness of the empire.

³⁶⁸ “one of the greatest national traumas,” “the ‘return’ was ‘silenced’ and made ‘invisible’.” For more on the silenced history chapter of the returnees, see Raquel Ribeiro (2015).

words, a subaltern colonialism” (Santos, 2002: 9). Santos’s argument relates to the ‘minor’ role played both in the colonial and in the postcolonial moment by Portugal:

Portuguese colonialism was from the start prey to hegemonic colonialism, mainly in its English version, and prey as well to the forms of imperialism into which it translated itself until its latest avatar in our time, namely neoliberal globalization presided over by the United States of America. Actually, these imperial forms are responsible today for the consolidation of internal colonialism in countries formerly under Portuguese colonialism. (37)

This speaks to the peripheral position of Portugal in the West but does not preclude the fact that any colonialism, as astutely expressed by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, “por mais pobre que seja, nunca é ‘subalterno’” (Ribeiro).³⁶⁹ Portuguese imperialism is nonetheless generally perceived as a “imperialismo de semiperiferia” (Ribeiro, *Uma História*, 15)³⁷⁰ because it existed under the constant vigilance and sphere of influence of Britain.³⁷¹ The use of colonial vocabulary —by calling Portugal an “informal colony” of England (Santos 11)—³⁷² to describe the uneven power relations between Portugal and England risks, however, minimizing the violence contained in the term ‘colonialism’. The comparison serves, though, to draw attention to the subaltern condition of Southern Europe, particularly Portugal, on a

³⁶⁹ “no matter how poor, is never subaltern”

³⁷⁰ “imperialism of semiperiphery”

³⁷¹ And under the shadow of the Spanish empire (or at least perceived as such globally), as Ana Paula Ferreira pertinently illustrates when she challenges the Latin Americanist idea of the Spanish empire as the “standard of Iberian imperialism” (“Specificity” 24). The semiperiphery of the empire becomes more apparent in the national imagination during the last century of colonial history, especially after the English *Ultimatum*. This was a “minor incident in the so-called ‘scramble for Africa’” (Duarte 102) which was delivered in 1890 by the British government urging Portugal to withdraw its claim to a large stretch of land between Angola and Mozambique. As João Duarte explains, “the Ultimatum represented a deep blow to national identity, one, moreover, that was going to be felt for a very long time, henceforward coupling Britain with any threat to the integrity of the colonies” (104).

³⁷² Boaventura de Sousa Santos is not the first to call Portugal an informal colony of England. What I find problematic in this argument, as voiced by Santos, is the open comparison of the Portuguese colonizer to the British colonized (Santos 11), which erases, at least partially, not only the history of colonial power imbalance but also the violence of Portuguese colonialism.

continental level, as I explore ahead. However, what I called “southern myths” in chapter 3, which depict Portugal, Spain, and Italy as more “humane, convivial, and benevolent people” than other Europeans (particularly from the North) cannot be used to justify the regimes of violence and dehumanization that go hand in hand with every colonial project, as sharply described by Aimé Césaire as early as 1955 in relation to French colonialism:

Entre colonisateur et colonisé, il n’y a de place que pour la corvée, l’intimidation, la pression, la police, l’implôt, le vol, le viol, les cultures obligatoires, le mépris, la méfiance, la morgue, la suffisance, la muflerie, des élites décérébrées, des masses avilies. (18)

To put it more bluntly, those countries might be, to different degrees and with varying levels of economic, cultural, and social subalterity (also amongst themselves), ‘minors’ in the current Western world but their colonial histories cannot be termed ‘minor’ colonialisms, as the textual examples will illustrate.

Before analyzing the ways in which colonial relationships counter ideas of subaltern colonialisms, a word is due about the literary origin of representations of Africa in Europe. Josiah Blackmore identifies, long before Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Gomes Eanes de Zurara’s *Crónica da Tomada de Ceuta* [Chronicle of the Capture of Ceuta]³⁷³ as a foundational text in the construction of a European imperial discourse about non-European spaces, particularly in the writing of Africa:

Zurara’s narrative of the capture of Ceuta is already part of an expansionist mentality that has identified the city as the real and symbolic initiation of imperial campaigns, so

³⁷³ To explain the historical and symbolic role of Ceuta in European thought of the time, Blackmore reminds us that “the capture of Ceuta traditionally stands as the first action of Portuguese —and European— maritime empire that will soon lead to the Iberian voyages to the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific” (xvi).

that Africa and its peoples are mapped, appropriated, and incorporated into a rapidly expanding imperial-mercantilist *oikoumene*. (xv)

Not surprisingly, David A. Gilliam links early representations of Africa on the Iberian Peninsula with the Moors, who were once “associated with power and learning and prosperity” (Gilliam 265), despite some punctual negative portrayals. He attributes “the final defeat of the Moors in 1492, combined with the rise of the African slave trade in the century that followed” with changing, increasingly negative, images of the African continent (265).³⁷⁴ Persisting negative renditions of Africa in the West continue until today, constructing the continent in a way that emphasizes exhausted stereotypes such as homogeneity, conflict, political instability, poverty, savagery, wilderness and exotic tropes, despite the independence movements and processes of decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as the postcolonial counter-current direction of the body of postcolonial literature, theory, and some historiography and discourses.

In *Oltre Babilonia*, the narratives around the Italian trusteeship period in Somalia (1950-1960) draw attention to the unsuccessful nature of the Italian colonial project, resulting in a lack of infrastructure and in political instability following independence, the exclusion of Somalis in their auto-determination; and to the minor role played by Italy in the international arena, led by England, the United States, and other superpowers. These factors, however, do not make Italy a subaltern colonial power, as the next section’s accounts of colonial violence will demonstrate. The “southern myths” are countered by textual descriptions of colonial

³⁷⁴ For more on the changing perceptions about Moors in Spain, see Cobb 1972, and Pimienta-Bey 1991.

atrocities, particularly instances of physical abuse under Portuguese and Italian colonialism, present in texts by Farah, Scego, Figueiredo, and Cardoso.

Against the Myths of ‘brava gente,’ ‘brandos costumes,’ and ‘leyenda blanca’³⁷⁵

The critical effort to uncover historical silences about the past of Italy and Somalia, already suggested earlier in Farah’s *Madre Piccola*, is broadened in Scego’s *Oltre Babilonia*, through the characters of Maryam and Elias, who use audio recording devices to register their memories for their daughter Zuhra. Like Miranda’s letters to Mar, these audio recordings also participate in an endeavour to teach the younger generations—or ‘postmemory’ generations—about a traumatic past. Following twenty-five years of silence, Maryam calls Elias on the phone, asking him to record his story for his daughters, particularly for the daughter they have in common and whom he never met, Zuhra. Commenting on her beauty, inherited from Elias’s mother, Maryam says: “Per questo devi raccontarle la tua storia, perché la bellezza senza storia è muta” (62).³⁷⁶ Restoring Zuhra’s story to her is an attempt by her parents to restore her voice and agency, thus helping her overcome her physical abuse trauma. Maryam asks Zuhra for patience because the task of retrieving the puzzle pieces that compose the past is a challenging one: “[...] sto facendo uno sforzo per mettere tutti insieme questi frammenti di noi” (Scego 102).³⁷⁷ Maryam’s exile in Rome, which starts in 1975, dragging her to her physical and psychological ruin, stems from the political situation in Somalia following the “anni brutti” (103)³⁷⁸ after the coup d’état that

³⁷⁵ ‘great people’, ‘mild manners’, ‘white legend’

³⁷⁶ “Therefore you must tell her your story because her beauty without history is silenced.”

³⁷⁷ “I’m making an effort to piece our fragments together”

³⁷⁸ “ugly years”

brought the dictator Siad Barre to power in 1969. She remembers that her compatriots started leaving Somalia in the 1970s “per la politica”³⁷⁹ and in the 1980s “per la fame”³⁸⁰ and kept leaving until today (104). Drawing an acute criticism of the uneven power relations between the West and Africa, Maryam recalls both decolonization and the ensuing trusteeship as international decisions made by the “Nord grasso”³⁸¹ about the “Sud povero”³⁸² (114). As a little girl, she goes out to the streets of Mogadishu with her cousin Hibado and aunt Salado to riot against the trusteeship, a decision made about Somalia “A New York. In un palazzo tutto di vetro” (114),³⁸³ which describes the ostentatious United Nations General Assembly headquarters.³⁸⁴ In an official UN pamphlet about the draft and implementation of the trusteeship, it reads that “After an extended debate, the Committee [invited the political party] Somali Youth League [...] ‘to participate *without vote* in the work of the committee’ during the debate on the question of the draft trusteeship agreement for Somaliland” (Finkelstein 10, my emphasis).³⁸⁵ While protesting on the streets, Maryam realizes that she is participating in history by fighting against this disenfranchisement act: “Maryam capì che quello non era un gioco, ma una cosa da grandi. Che forse era la storia di cui parlava sempre Hibado” (115),³⁸⁶ her cousin who belonged to the aforementioned Somali

³⁷⁹ “for political reasons”

³⁸⁰ “because of hunger”

³⁸¹ “Fat North”

³⁸² “Impoverished South”

³⁸³ “In New York. In a building all made of glass”

³⁸⁴ This trusteeship is described as follows in an official UN archive: “On November 21, 1949, the United Nations General Assembly decided that the former Italian colony of Somaliland, then under military administration by Great Britain, should be placed under the United Nations trusteeship system, with Italy as the Administering Authority, for a ten year period, at which time the territory should become independent” (Finkelstein 3).

³⁸⁵ The inability of the then Somaliland to formally participate in the writing of the trusteeship draft is reminiscent of the procedure followed in 1884-85 at the Berlin Conference, which formalized the African scramble amongst European powers without any Africans in attendance.

³⁸⁶ “Maryam understood that [the protest] was not a game, but a grown-up thing. It was perhaps history, the one Hibado always talked about”

Youth League (113). Maryam's storytelling sheds light on the cracks of official historical narratives (which tend to praise a consensual and efficient Italian trusteeship) by showing how her personal experiences breach them. Trying to justify Maryam's exile, which led to her depression and alcoholism, as not only personal but also politically motivated, the omniscient narrator explains, "Colpa del gin, di Siad Barre, della sua testa che non sapeva che direzione prendere" (59).³⁸⁷

The fragments of Maryam's narration are complemented by those of Elias (and vice versa). Official versions about the Italian administration period in Somalia tend to converge in holding the "tribal" and "primitive" political organization (Finkelstein 4) of the Somali territories accountable for high poverty rates and an inadequate education system (33), while agreeing that:

[...] whatever objections there may have been to Italy's return to the territory, the solution agreed upon by the General Assembly in 1949 was better than continued confusion and irresolution. The rewards, in terms of public order in the territory, should be gratifying to all concerned. (Finkelstein 33)

Regarding those 'objections,' Elias remembers that Somalia faced no other option but to succumb to the Italian presence because "Il messaggio della comunità mondiale era stato molto chiaro: o con gli italiani o niente indipendenza" (Scego 261).³⁸⁸ He explains how the return of the Italians fed neocolonial aspirations, materialized in a renewed belief in the "ruolo civilizzatore della stirpe italyca"³⁸⁹ promulgated in magazines such as "*Africana*,

³⁸⁷ "Blame the gin, blame Siad Barre, blame her mind unable to decide which way to go"

³⁸⁸ "The message from the international community had been very clear: either with the Italians or no independence"

³⁸⁹ "civilizing role of the Italic lineage"

Oltremare, Riconquista” (260). Speaking against the ‘gratifying’ aftermath of Italy’s presence in the territory, Elias reveals that even though the Italians intended to “insegnare la democrazia” (260),³⁹⁰ what Somalia really learned from Italy was, instead, “la corruzione” (262):³⁹¹

Alcuni, come il futuro dittatore Siad Barre (che ci ha quasi rovinato la vita, Zuhra mia), furono direttamente addestrati dai servizi segreti italiani. L’amministrazione fiduciaria italiana durerà dal 1950 al 1960. In quei dieci anni le infrastrutture sono state nulle. E la pubblica amministrazione completamente ferma. (Scego 262)³⁹²

On a theoretical and academic level, the work of some scholars has countered glamorized views of Italian colonialism as a source of infrastructure and modernization in Somalia, but, as Tatjana B. Williams points out, it appears that the public sphere is still falling behind:

the pioneers in revisionist Italian colonial historiography like Angelo Del Boca, Giorgio Rochat, Nicola Labanca, and others, have created a corpus of historical writings that provide the basis for what Nancy Peterson has termed an ‘official counterhistory’ [but] their findings have yet to exert a substantial effect on public opinion regarding Italian colonialism, which is mostly slow-changing, or outright hostile to change. (Williams 23)

Some of the uncovered hidden ‘deeds’ of Italian colonialism, which make us, with Angelo Del Boca, pose the question “Italiani, brava gente?” (2005), are: “the massive employment of chemical weapons in Ethiopia between 1935 and 1940,” “the lethal concentration camps in Libya, Somalia, and Eritrea,” and “the decimation of the Coptic Church [in] 1937 —an

³⁹⁰ “teach about democracy”

³⁹¹ “corruption”

³⁹² “Some, like the future dictator Siad Barre (who almost ruined our life, my dear Zuhra), were directly trained by the Italian secret services. The Italian administration lasted from 1950 to 1960. In those ten years the development of infrastructure was inexistent and the public administration was completely dormant.”

operation led by General Maletti with such zeal and professionalism that it caused the death of 1200 deans and priests— which has recently been proved by Ian L. Campbell and Degife Gabre-Tsadik (1997:79-128)” (Del Boca, “Myths” 19). The meticulous work of Del Boca debunks public narratives, represented for instance in the publication *L'Italia in Africa* [Italy in Africa], a fifty volume collection sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the postwar period, which he describes as “a coarsely and impudently falsified account that aims to exalt Italian colonialism and underline its ‘difference’ from other contemporary colonialisms” (18). This ‘difference’ implies depicting the Italians as more compassionate and sympathetic than other colonizing nations.

Despite being sharply denounced in some academic sources,³⁹³ similarly glorifying versions have been (and continue to be) produced about Portuguese colonialism, both in historiographic and in literary genres,³⁹⁴ as well as in textbooks and other official narratives (such as public speeches, for instance).³⁹⁵ These versions rely on the idea of Portugal as a country of ‘brandos costumes,’ which practiced an equally ‘mild’ colonialism, overshadowing a history of violence (poignantly described by Figueiredo), translated into prejudices that last up to today (as seen in Almeida’s text in chapter 3).³⁹⁶

In a similar vein, David Brydan describes how Francoist representations of the Spanish presence in Equatorial Guinea highlight a “benevolent colonial rule” (Brydan 1), with a

³⁹³ See Lourenço (2014), Ferreira (2007; 2010; 2016), Calafate Ribeiro (2003; 2008), Vecchi (2016).

³⁹⁴ Some examples of this nostalgic literature: *Os Retornados. Um Amor Nunca se Esquece* by Júlio de Magalhães, *Deixei o meu Coração em África* by Manuel Arouca, *Os Colonos* by António Trabelo, *O Último Ano em Luanda* by Tiago Rebelo, *Os Dias do Fim* by Ricardo Saavedra.

³⁹⁵ See Henriques 2016 for a recent controversy around racist tropes in Portuguese school textbooks.

³⁹⁶ The lack of infrastructure is illustrated in the Portuguese case via a lack of investment in education. In *O Retorno*, Rui mentions that the black postmen cannot read the addresses (Cardoso 44). Conversely, Lidia Curti explains that under Italian colonialism “education for ‘the natives’ was neglected or kept at an elementary level” (64).

generous ‘civilizing mission’ based on progress and philanthropy: “Spanish officials and experts adopted the language of humanitarianism and development deployed by the British and French empires to position Franco’s Spain as a respectable and progressive colonial power” (2). Using the Mikomeseng leprosy settlement as a case study, Brydan shows that those positive descriptions actually mask a highly

repressive military regime, backed up by the Church, [which] exercised violent and coercive control over the lives of the majority of its African subjects, prioritising the supply of cheap, pliant labour to the major timber and cacao plantations, while strictly limiting basic civic rights and neglecting social services. (5)

Franco’s regime attempted to create a ‘White Legend’ to counter the popular ‘Black Legend’ used to describe the violence of Spanish colonial rule in Latin America.³⁹⁷ This Francoist rhetoric is based on the idea of Hispanotropicalism, which is inspired by Lusotropicalism, defined by Ana Paula Ferreira as a “postcolonial mythology that the Portuguese have a special affective relation with Africa” (Ferreira 102). Similarly, Hispanotropicalism is characterized by

la innata vocación africana de los españoles, la tendencia misionera de la nación española, la ausencia total de actitudes racistas, y la difusión del mestizaje como consecuencia de este supuesto antirracismo genuinamente hispano. (Nerín 12)³⁹⁸

Examples like Brydan’s insist nonetheless on the repressive nature of the Spanish-Guinean colonial relationships and might offer clues to explain the current silence in Spain’s official

³⁹⁷ For more on the heated debate about the degree of Spanish colonial violence in Latin America, check Keen (1969).

³⁹⁸ “the innate African vocation of the Spaniards, the missionary tendency of the Spanish nation, the total absence of racist attitudes, and the spread of miscegenation as a consequence of this supposedly genuine Hispanic anti-racism”

narratives about this particular colonial past, which, unlike the Latin American past revived in the continuing idea of ‘hispanidad’.

Colonized Bodies

The public mythic narratives that depict the Italians as “good colonizers” (Williams 19), and the Portuguese as the executors of a “colonialismo suavezinho” (Figueiredo 131)³⁹⁹ are discredited in Scego’s, Figueiredo’s, and Cardoso’s texts by sharp descriptions of colonial violence which expose a “double colonisation” (Loomba 166) process: the occupation of the land and of the black body. Addressing the intricate interconnections between colonial and sexual domination, Ania Loomba’s claim that under colonialism women’s bodies symbolize the conquered land (152) is further elaborated in the texts by Scego and Figueiredo via textual instances where the black man’s body is also sexually controlled and/or physically repressed.

Rape scenes in Figueiredo and Scego provide some of the most glaring descriptions of colonial cruelty. This violence prompts Elias, in his audio record to Zuhra, to explain his diegetic need to distance himself from the story he tells: “[...] ti racconterò tutto come se non fosse la mia storia, ma come se ti raccontassi la storia di un altro. In terza persona. Sentiremo meno dolore. O almeno mi illudo” (63).⁴⁰⁰ The trauma of which he carries a ‘postmemory’ is related to the heartbreaking event that brought his parents together: a collective sexual assault undertaken by “Truppe italo-tedesche” (Scego 118).⁴⁰¹ Famey and Majid were sixteen years

³⁹⁹ “kind and gentle colonialism” (Figueiredo, *Notebook* 131)

⁴⁰⁰ “I will tell you everything as if it were not my story, but somebody else’s story. In the third person. We will feel less pain. Or at least I would hope so”

⁴⁰¹ “Italian-German troops”

old and were strategically put on the same bus by Famey's mother, who, playing matchmaker, hoped that the two would fall in love with each other after having gone on a long trip together. Little did they know that the journey would indeed bring them together, but with the reason behind it being an insurmountable trauma. The bus, travelling from Brava to Mogadishu where the pair were supposed to attend a distant cousin's wedding, was intercepted by two vehicles with "ragazzetti bianchi,"⁴⁰² one of which shouting: "Uhm, carne fresca, ragazzi!" (67).⁴⁰³ Motivated by an infantile bet placed between colonial officers fuelled by European rivalries, one of the six passengers in the bus, Muqtar, was asked if he was more fearful of Germans or Italians (68). Wanting to please, he answered "Gli inglesi,"⁴⁰⁴ thinking that the German and Italian officers wanted to hear that they were "buoni e bravi"⁴⁰⁵ whereas the English were "delle canaglie," "disumani con le belve, i bambini, le donne" (68).⁴⁰⁶ Threatened by the colonial power of the British, an Italian colonel shot Muqtar in the head, after which other members of the military brutally attacked the group, humiliating, hitting, cutting, and raping them (68). This episode, described in fragments throughout Elias's narrative, involves a level of suffering that his parents can only deal with in each other's company, which is why they decide to get engaged a few days later (69). In her dying hour, while giving birth to Elias, Famey's agony is not only rooted in the labour pains but also in the impossibility of healing from that collective traumatic experienced with Majid. It is relevant to quote this passage at length:

⁴⁰² "young white boys"

⁴⁰³ "Uhm, fresh meat, guys!"

⁴⁰⁴ "The English"

⁴⁰⁵ "good-hearted and great"

⁴⁰⁶ "scoundrels," "inhumane with beasts, children, and women"

In realtà il sacrificio era stato più grande. La gente non immaginava neppure. L'urlo di Famey morente, era anche l'urlo di Famey stuprata. Era l'eco di Majid stuprato. Era la dignità calpestata. Il loro orgoglio sfregiato. L'amore abbattuto. Era lei. Era lui. Lei che si raccoglieva le vesti intrise di sangue e sperma. Che le strizzava rabbiosa. Che ci buttava addosso la sabbia della boscaglia. E lui che si alzava. Che ricadeva. E lei che gli andava incontro, che gli strofinava la sabbia sul culo. Che lo massaggiava. Lei che sussurava all'orecchio di lui le parole di una ninna nanna sfumata. Lui che le fermava la mano. Lui che provava a massaggiarsi l'orgoglio. Il sesso. E lui che tirava su le sue brache calate. Lui che piangeva. Lei che non riusciva ad abbracciarlo. (203-204)⁴⁰⁷

This passage has been read by Williams as “a metaphor for the foundational violence of Italian colonialism” (101). Remembering the supercilious attitudes of Italians in the 1930s, Elias' narration suggests that this sexual assault is not a mere circumstantial episode but reflects the general former colonizers' tyrannical reputation upon the formation of the so-called *Africa Orientale Italiana*:⁴⁰⁸

I nuovi padroni si credevano onnipotenti, avevano piegato l'Etiopia, proclamato l'impero, ed esibito le palle al vento. Gli italiani negli anni trenta si credevono dei. Ben presto si sarebbero svegliati dal loro sogno malato. Ma all'epoca, fuori da Mogadiscio era meglio non incontrarli - si dicevano cose orribili sulle loro scorribande. (Scego 67)⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ “Actually, the sacrifice had been greater. People couldn't even imagine. Famey's death throes was also Famey's terrified scream while being violated. It was the echo of Majid being raped. It was their crushed dignity. Their wounded pride. Their broken love. It was her. It was him. It was her, gathering her clothes soaked in blood and sperm. Squeezing them in anger. Drying them against the sand from the bush. It was him, trying to stand up and falling back again. It was her, walking towards him and rubbing sand on his ass. Massaging him. It was her, whispering in his ear the words of an indistinct lullaby. It was him, pushing her hand away. It was him, trying to massage his own pride. His sex. It was him, pulling his pants back up. It was him, crying. It was her, incapable of hugging him.”

⁴⁰⁸ Italian East Africa was a colony created under Mussolini's dictatorship in 1936 which comprised Italian Somaliland, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.

⁴⁰⁹ “The new masters thought of themselves as omnipotent, they had just gotten hold of Ethiopia, proclaimed the empire, and strutted around with a hard on. In the thirties Italians believed they were gods. Soon they would wake up from their sick dream. But at the time, outside Mogadishu it was better not to meet them —horrible things were said about their raids”

The memory of brutality is also invoked by the second generation in *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* and *O Retorno*, even though the narrators Isabela and Rui, unlike Elias, descend from the settlers. And yet they occupy ambiguous positions in the colonial structure given the fact that they live through colonialism while still underage. These two texts deal with the final decade of Portuguese colonial history in Africa as well as with its lingering consequences in the immediate postcolonial moment.⁴¹⁰ Margarida Calafate Ribeiro sees in *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais*

a grande novidade do olhar sobre o colonialismo português [...] a partir da memória do olhar de uma criança que, ao mesmo tempo que acorda para o mundo, [...] acorda também para a realidade do colonialismo, personificado na complexa, amada e odiada, figura do pai. (Ribeiro)⁴¹¹

Drawing attention to the fact that these returnees' memories are only published decades after the events that they refer to, Raquel Ribeiro rightly notes that "A balada do Ultramar tem sido cantada por vários escritores desde o final da década de 70, mas foi preciso esperar 30 anos para que as feridas abertas por um retorno abrupto começassem a sangrar" ("Os Retornados").⁴¹² Referring to the body of literature that employs nostalgic and glorifying views of colonialism,⁴¹³ Joana Emídio Marques argues that "Ao contrário do que nos diz tanto saudosismo, há uma história de violência profunda que poucos se atreveram a

⁴¹⁰ The term postcolonialism is being used here to refer to the "process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome" (Lomba 1110).

⁴¹¹ "the great novelty of looking at Portuguese colonialism through the gaze of a child's recollections, a child who, while waking up to the world, also awakens to the reality of colonialism, personified in the complex, loved and hated father figure"

⁴¹² "The ballad of the 'Overseas Territories' has been sung by several writers since the late 1970s, but it took 30 years for the wounds opened by an abrupt return to start bleeding." Araújo and Vasile (2014) explain that the term *Ultramar* "is the linguistic expression of the transcendental unity of the [Portuguese] Nation" (318).

⁴¹³ See footnote 392.

contar” (Marques).⁴¹⁴ Figueiredo herself recognizes, in an interview, the need to uncover that “passado que continua silenciado na nossa História recente” (Figueiredo quoted in Marques).⁴¹⁵

The examples of racism and sexism in colonial Luanda and former Lourenço Marques interspersed in the texts of Isabela Figueiredo and Dulce Maria Cardoso offer an alternative account to nostalgic views of the past, and shed light on discrimination schemes before and after the end of colonialism.⁴¹⁶ The collective rape crime suffered by Elias’ parents shares with Isabela’s and Rui’s descriptions of colonial contact an emphasis on the colonial abuse and dehumanizing practices of colonizers. Isabela describes non-consensual sexual intercourse between black women and white men as a customary aspect of the colonial lifestyle. Purposefully making use of the colonizer’s prejudiced language, she recalls:

As brancas eram mulheres sérias. Que ameaça constituía para elas uma negra? Que diferença havia entre uma negra e uma coelha? (...) Os brancos entravam no caniço e pagavam cerveja, tabaco ou capulana a metro à negra que lhes apetecesse. A bem ou a mal. Depois abotoavam a braguilha e desapareciam para as suas honestas casas. (Figueiredo 14)⁴¹⁷

The discourse that the narrator recapitulates is animated by conversations she heard as a little girl coming from

⁴¹⁴ “Countering what we learn from many nostalgic accounts, there is a deep history of violence that only few have dared to tell”

⁴¹⁵ “past that remains silenced in our recent History”

⁴¹⁶ See Bender (1978), and Pennevenne (1995) for studies on racial discrimination in colonial societies in Angola, and Mozambique, respectively.

⁴¹⁷ “White ladies were serious women. What threat was a black woman to them? What difference was there between a black woman and a rabbit? [...] White men went into the shantytown and bought beers, tobacco and yards of sarong fabric for the black woman they fancied. For better or worse. Then they buttoned up their flies and went off to their honest family homes” (Figueiredo, *Notebook*, 29-30).

as mulheres dos brancos, ao domingo à tarde, todas em conversa íntima debaixo do cajueiro largo, com o bandulho atafalhado de camarão grelhado, enquanto os maridos saíam para ir dar a sua volta de homens, e as deixavam a desenferrujar a língua. (13)⁴¹⁸

It is thus informed by private moments of female connivance that Isabela reproduces the crude and prejudiced language that guided colonial relationships, with its particularly negative representations of black Mozambican women's bodies and sexuality. In a similar manner, Rui remembers the female neighbours's comments in Angola about how black women "trazem a boca do corpo ao ar e têm os filhos de pé" (Cardoso 215).⁴¹⁹ Similarly, in Scego's text, trying to distract the attention from her own Italian husband's extramarital relationships with Somali women, Magda, the employer of Elias's father, Majid, disapproves of indigenous women's unchaste nature: "E quelle ci stanno, le troie" (Scego 263).⁴²⁰

As if to strengthen the veracity of the events recounted in the memoir, Figueiredo's text is complemented by photographs from the author's childhood albums. To wrap this discussion on the representation of black women's bodies under Portuguese and Italian colonialism, I will focus on one of these pictures. After selling out five editions, Figueiredo's *Notebook* had a 6th edition republished in 2015 by the prestigious Portuguese publisher Caminho.⁴²¹ This edition, revised and expanded, comes with a foreword by the author, and two prefaces, one by Paulina Chiziane, and another one by José Gil, a Portuguese philosopher born in Mozambique, which validate the text. Some photographs of the author alone as a little girl are removed from this edition while others are added, like the one I am

⁴¹⁸ "white women on lazy Sunday afternoons, chatting away under a big cashew tree, stuffing their bellies with grilled prawns, while their husbands went out for their men's stroll and left them to sharpen their tongues" (Figueiredo, *Notebook*, 29).

⁴¹⁹ "don't cover their genitals and give birth while standing"

⁴²⁰ "and they enjoy it, the whores"

⁴²¹ Caminho is also known for the publication of the works of 1998 literature Nobel prize José Saramago.

about to mention. After the description of the colonizers' "incursões sexuais no caniço" (Figueiredo, 2015: 40),⁴²² there is a photograph showing the writer as a very young girl at the centre of the image surrounded by two older girls and two women in the background. To her right, the white woman (her mother?) and a girl, fully clothed, look straight at the camera with a soft smile; behind her, the black girl and woman also gaze at the camera but with a straight face; the black woman appears topless, in a seemingly tense position and is slightly turned away from the camera (Figueiredo 41). This image plays a documenting role, functioning as historical evidence and lending credibility to the accounts of crude racism and sexual abuse under colonialism in Maputo. At the same time, unlike the other images in the book, the graphic nature of this portrait risks perpetuating exotic and anthropological Western tropes otherwise countered by the narrative.

“O colonialismo era o meu pai”⁴²³

Rui remembers his own 'sexual incursions' as a pre-teenager with his father, who teaches him in detail how to negotiate with the husbands and fathers of black women, according to their ethnic backgrounds, as well as how to get away from accusations of having impregnated one of the women, so that they can all live "in peace" (Cardoso 204). Rui admires his father and keeps his extramarital secrets because he feels: "pertencemos ao mesmo clube" (258).⁴²⁴ Rui's memory of his father's cheating on his mother and giving him advice about Angolan women powerfully contrasts with a fellow returnee's statement, in the

⁴²² "sexual incursions in the shantytown" (Figueiredo, *Notebook* 30)

⁴²³ "My father was colonialism" (Figueiredo, *Notebook*, 14).

⁴²⁴ "we play on the same team"

hotel in Lisbon when Rui's father is still missing: "Era um homem bom, um homem respeitador" (204).⁴²⁵ The latent irony of this narrative sequence overtly questions the idea of the Portuguese as 'good colonizers.'

Figueiredo's text defies more bluntly this idea present in many Portuguese narratives which claim a gentle colonialism:

Ouvi isto toda a minha vida. Venham falar-me no colonialismo suavezinho dos portugueses... Venham-me com essa história da carochinha. As pessoas não mudam. Um branco que viveu o colonialismo será um branco que viveu o colonialismo até ao dia da sua morte. E toda a minha verdade é para eles uma traição. Estas palavras, uma traição. Uma afronta à memória do meu pai, mas com a memória do meu pai podemos bem os dois. (Figueiredo 131)⁴²⁶

The crude exposure of the unequal power relations at work in the former colony based on socially constructed distance of races runs against a Lusotropicalist or nostalgic trend, challenging Portuguese colonial memory and adding a divergent perspective to the historical archive. Isabela rejects the colonizers' xenophobic attitudes and steps aside from their close-minded ideas, not only through a sharp use of irony towards the whites but also through a strong sense of shame towards her own father, who is the personification of colonialism. As the author of the memoir says in an interview added at the end of her book's first editions: "O colonialismo era o meu pai" (Figueiredo 21). The rhetorical use of hypallage ("honestas casas," literally meaning "honest homes") accentuates the contrast between the ideal

Portuguese family imagined by Salazar's famous trilogy *Deus/Pátria/Família* [God/

⁴²⁵ "He was a good man, a respectful man"

⁴²⁶ "I'd heard this all my life. Go ahead, talk to me about the kind and gentle colonialism of the Portuguese... Yeah, why don't you tell me that old wives' tale. People don't change. A white who lived under colonialism will be a white who lived under colonialism until their dying day. And all my truth is treason to them. These words, treason. An insult to the memory of my father, but my father and I get along just fine with his memory" (Figueiredo, *Notebook* 131).

Fatherland/Family] and the actual ‘dishonesty’ and unscrupulousness of colonial men towards their (often forced) lovers and their wives. It is within this context that Chiziane says that colonialism is male (“Preface” 17) and thus white women were “as primeiras grandes vítimas deste sistema cruel” (Figueiredo 18),⁴²⁷ supported by Christianity and patriarchy. Despite being subjugated by the phallogentric power of their male counterparts, white women still rely on the agency granted by their white colonizer privilege. Without that agency that comes with adulthood, Isabela as a child feels subjugated by the patriarchal effects of colonialism. Remembering her own father screaming and hitting Ernesto, one of his black employees at his electricity company who had missed work, Isabela feels powerless and puts herself with the group of the oppressed: “Queres fazer o quê da vida? Safanão. Soco. E a mulher e os filhos e o bairro todo, e eu, estávamos ali, imóveis, paralisados de medo do branco” (Figueiredo 52).⁴²⁸ Her father also gives money to Ernesto’s wife, which Chiziane interprets as “a melhor forma encontrada para disciplinar o sexo do homem negro” (Figueiredo, “Preface” 20).⁴²⁹ Back in the car, where Isabela’s father asks her in his typical tone of voice if she is tired and wants a drink, she is unable to react: “Olho-o, não respondo. Aquele homem branco não é o meu pai” (53).⁴³⁰ The comparison of the father’s racial hatred speeches with Guantánamo loudspeakers (118) is a powerful metaphor that epitomizes their irreconcilable perspectives on colonialism:

⁴²⁷ “the first great victims of this cruel system”

⁴²⁸ “What are you doing with your life? Shove. Punch. And the wife and children and whole neighborhood, and me—we stood still, paralyzed by our fear of the white man” (Figueiredo, *Notebook* 58).

⁴²⁹ “the best way to sexually discipline the black man”

⁴³⁰ “I look at him but don’t answer. That white man is not my father” (*Notebook* 58).

O meu pai não me arrancou ao que eu era e pensava [...] Eu poderia ter ouvido a lengalenga vinte e quatro horas por dia nos altifalantes, como um prisioneiro em Guantánamo, e não teria mudado um centímetro. (118)⁴³¹

Even then, and despite distancing her present self from the colonial community of her youth, the narrator Isabela cannot escape shared guilt for her silence before acts of colonial domination. Although she was just a child, she writes, “Digo nós porque eu também estava lá” (Figueiredo 23).⁴³² Narrative oscillation between first and third person reveals this difficulty in positioning herself. Her in-betweenness is echoed by other authors who write from diasporic Régine Robin’s concept of “l’entre-deux”: “Incurable, je n’écis que d’un lieu, celui de l’« entre », l’entre-deux, l’entre-deux-océans, l’entre-deux-langues, l’entre-deux-idéologies” (Robin 29). The split identity of Rui is less visible than Isabela’s since he often repeats what others say in order to show the panoply of sentiments about the end of the empire. His conflicted inner self is sometimes visible, though, when he separates himself from the returnee community. During Angola’s Independence Day, on November 11th, 1975, the adult returnees in the hotel wear mourning clothes to grieve the loss of their homeland, in the face of which Rui says, “Eu não tenho fumo, não sei o que é justo, não tenho orgulho, não tenho vergonha, e nem sei do que falam. A única coisa que sei é que mataram o meu pai” (Cardoso 154).⁴³³ While Rui does not take direct blame for his community’s wrongdoings and subscribes to racist ideology, Isabela cannot escape shared guilt for colonial domination, despite being combatively against the racial discrimination that she witnesses.

⁴³¹ My father couldn’t drag me out of what I was and thought. [...] I could’ve listened to the spiel blaring from loudspeakers twenty-four hours a day, like a prisoner in Guantánamo, and I wouldn’t have budged an inch (*Notebook* 118).

⁴³² “I say us because I was there” (Figueiredo, *Notebook* 35).

⁴³³ “I’m not mourning, I don’t know what’s fair, I’m not proud, I’m not ashamed, and I don’t even know what they’re talking about. The only thing I know is that my father was killed.”

Southern Anxieties

Remembering one of Mussolini's imperial speeches from 1936, Maryam, indignant, tells Zuhra in her audio recording: "D'imperiale quell' Italietta lì non aveva niente, era solo un cumulo di gente famelica, di gente che non sapeva chiedere scusa" (Scego 107).⁴³⁴ In a correspondingly critical tone, the attitude of Italians towards Somalis is discussed by Taagere in *Madre Piccola*, who says:

L'Italia mi piace, è vero. Ma gli italiani. Gli italiani mi sembrano degli spacconi. Mezzi africani anche loro, mezzi africani come noi, si danno tante arie. Ci trattano così, spazzatura che pretende. (81)⁴³⁵

The detrimental diminutive of Italy used by Maryam underlines the superiority complex of the former metropolis vis-à-vis the former colony of Italian Somaliland. In opposition to the majestic tone of imperial speeches, the portrayal of Italians as 'ravenous' reminds us of the poverty line that splits Italy in a North-South axis, famously termed by Antonio Gramsci as the 'Southern Question,' which motivated large waves of emigration from meridional Italy to different parts of the world. Lidia Curti, Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo develop Gramsci's discussion by addressing both Southern Italy and the former African colonies as subaltern places in relation to Northern Italy. This internal divide sheds light on Taagere's perception of Italians as 'half-African,' which establishes a 'racializing' gesture related not as much to race as to social status. In an analogous way, pinpointing the peripheral continental position of Portugal, both Rui and Isabela are shocked at the

⁴³⁴ "There was nothing imperial about that little country of Italy, it was just a mass of ravenous people, of people who did not know how to apologize"

⁴³⁵ "I like Italy, it's true. But the Italians, they seem to be bullies. They are half-African just like us [Somalis], but they are full of themselves. They treat us like that, rubbish taken for granted"

backwardness of Lisbon, which contrasts starkly with the image of “um império tão grande” (Cardoso 84)⁴³⁶ carefully constructed by imperial narratives taught in schools and through their parents’ memories. Isabela echoes:

A metrópole era suja, feia, pálida, gelada. Os portugueses da metrópole eram pequeninos de ideias, tão pequeninos e estúpidos e atrasados e alcoviteiros. [...] tão pobres de espírito esses portugueses que ficaram [...], curtidos de vinho do garrafão. Feios, sombrios, pobres, sem luz no rosto nem nas mãos. (Figueiredo 123)⁴³⁷

Lars Jensen argues that the decentring of “privileged narratives of colonialism and imperialism” opened up by Latin Americanists (Mignolo, Dussel) exposes “an inner European racialisation that operates as a parallel discourse to race in the colonies, where the Mediterranean becomes part of a not-quite-white, not-quite-right discourse” (Jensen 70). This ‘racialization’ of Southern Europe manifests itself in an inferiority complex fuelled by fears of being the ‘others’ of Europe. This anxiety is sublimated during colonialism, when Mozambique, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Somalia are charged with a panoply of negative assumptions which would feed the Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian empires’ egos, virtually bringing them closer to Northern European models. Here lies a fundamental incongruity. On the one hand, these empires are intimidated by their ‘minor’ European position whereas on the other hand, they make an effort to depict their colonial projects in Africa as ‘minor,’ subaltern, innocent, and benevolent. In the postcolonial moment, and facing the absence of colonies, immigrants have replaced the formerly colonized in this

⁴³⁶ “such a large empire”

⁴³⁷ “Portugal was dirty, ugly, pale and freezing. The Portuguese from Portugal had minds filled with small ideas, oh how small and stupid and backward and scheming they were! [...] so mean-spirited these Portuguese who stayed, marinated in jug wine. Ugly, cheerless, poor, all light gone from their faces and hands. So small” (*Notebook* 123).

process of ‘othering’. In the case of Portugal, there is also an extra layer of ‘minority,’ as illustrated by Eduardo Lourenço when he mentions the lack of political and cultural autonomy of Portugal vis-à-vis Spain, evident in the “sessenta anos ‘filipinos’” (27),⁴³⁸ and England (31), symbolized by the *Ultimatum*, as national traumas that establish the subalternity and dependency of that country in relation to the rest of Europe. He explains that:

Para fugir a essa imagem reles de si mesmo (“choldra”, “piolheira”) Portugal *descobre* a África, cobre a sua nudez caseira com uma nova pele, que não será apenas imperial, mas imperialista, em pleno auge dos imperialismos de outro gabarito. (Lourenço, *O Labirinto* 30)⁴³⁹

The case of the Portuguese returnees illustrates well these anxieties. When they arrive in Portugal, mostly from Angola and Mozambique in the 1970s, they are perceived as ‘others,’ as “bodies out of place” (Ahmed 16) in Portuguese society. In this regard, Daniel de Zubia Fernández explains that, “In fact, they were regarded as outcast people in Portugal, as a type of ‘Other’ who had established themselves in the ‘overseas provinces’ and set out to live next to the Africans” (Fernández 7). After a childhood spent in Angola and Mozambique, teenagers Rui and Isabela, respectively, flee their homes in Luanda and Maputo and move to Portugal, an inhospitable homeland where they are pejoratively labeled as ‘retornados’ [returnees]. As Isabel David explains, the returnees were a “symbol of a dictatorial regime that had to be forgotten” (David 122). This population wave arrives in

⁴³⁸ This refers to the period between 1580 and 1640, when Portugal was under the control of the Spanish crown, following a succession crisis.

⁴³⁹ “To escape this petty image of itself (as ‘scoundrel’, ‘filthy’), Portugal *discovers* Africa, covers its own nudity with a new skin, which is not only imperial but imperialist, in the height of imperialisms of a higher level”

Portugal when the country is “turning to European integration, as ascertained by the bid to become a member of the then European Economic Community in 1977” (122). The returnees are thus seen as ghosts of an imperial past and a potential hindrance for European membership. They become thus a scapegoat that diverts the colonial blame from the central powers in Lisbon onto the settlers who occupied the former colonies.

Their social status feeds the idea of an inferior race which is diametrically opposed to the imagined embodied whiteness of mainstream society, which received them with suspicion and xenophobia. On the first day of classes, Rui’s teacher is surprised by his blond hair and blue eyes, as if to qualify as a returnee he needed to be of a darker shade (Cardoso 144). Faced with the loss of the colonies, the ‘other’ represented by Africans is replaced by the returnees in the national imagination, who see in them “portugueses de segunda” (30)⁴⁴⁰ and hold them accountable for the end of the empire. Rui realizes that this ‘othering’ targeted at returnees is harsher towards girls than boys, which is revealing about the differences of life in Angola vis-à-vis life in Portugal constrained by dictatorship and its strict patriarchal rules; the geographical distance from the Portuguese mainland allowed for the development of more progressive views in terms of fashion and of gender equality in the former colonies:

Estar na metrópole ainda é pior para as raparigas, os rapazes de cá não querem namorar com as retornadas. [...] os rapazes de cá dizem que as retornadas lá andavam com os pretos. E as raparigas de cá não querem ser amigas das retornadas para não serem faladas, as retornadas têm má fama, usam saias curtas e fumam nos cafés. (143)⁴⁴¹

⁴⁴⁰ “second-class Portuguese citizens”

⁴⁴¹ “Being in the metropolis is even worse for girls, the boys here don’t want to date the returnees. [...] the boys here say that the returnees went there with the blacks. And the girls here don’t want to be friends with the returnees to avoid gossip, the returnees have a bad name, they wear short skirts and smoke in cafes.”

This passage refutes the Lusotropicalist myth and shows how racism and racialization are put into practice against the returnees through the association of Africa with a sense of contamination and, consequently, the idea of girls coming from the African continent as tainted and deprived of their sexual and national purity.

Both Rui and Isabela describe the attitudes they encounter upon their arrival in Portugal. With his mother and sister, Rui arrives in a country that does not welcome them. Without any possessions or a place to go, they are housed by the Portuguese government in a five-star hotel in the affluent town of Estoril as a measure of coping with the increasing number of homeless returnees arriving in the country during that period.⁴⁴² However, they are not treated as regular hotel guests and are not deemed worthy of the hotel's luxuriousness:

Os empregados não nos querem cá e não gostam de nos servir. Acreditam que os pretos nos puseram de lá para fora porque os explorámos, perdemos tudo mas a culpa foi nossa e não merecemos estar aqui num hotel de cinco estrelas a sermos servidos como éramos lá. (Cardoso 91)⁴⁴³

In an even harsher tone, narrator Isabela is faced with accusations of having exploited black people: “Eu tinha andando a roubar os pretos. Julgava que me iam lavar os pezinhos com água de rosas?! Isto não eram as Áfricas!” (Figueiredo 171).⁴⁴⁴ The national defeat of having lost the empire is embodied by the returnees. As Isabela reports, people make comments such as, “[...] esses retornados, tão altivos como príncipes que perderam o trono [...]” (200).⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² Even though official records are not available, Bruno Machado's research suggests that the number of returnees from Africa is situated between five hundred thousand and one million.

⁴⁴³ “The waiters don't want us here and don't like to serve us. They believe that the blacks kicked us out because we exploited them, we lost everything but it was our fault and we don't deserve to be here in a five star hotel being served as we were there.”

⁴⁴⁴ “I'd been stealing from blacks. Did I think they were going to wash my dainty feet with rose water?! This wasn't Africa!” (Figueiredo, *Notebook* 34)

⁴⁴⁵ “those returnees, haughty as princes who have lost their throne”

But even if received with suspicion by her relatives, at least young Isabela is hosted by family members. She spends half a year in the house where her father had grown up, with her paternal grandmother, who still lives in dire conditions, without sanitation facilities or hot water, in a house shared with chickens, pigeons, doves and sparrows (176, 177) in the town of Caldas da Rainha (181). Rui realizes with disappointment that his Portuguese relatives are not interested in welcoming him and his family: “Ser retornado de hotel [...] é mau porque quer dizer que não há sequer um familiar que goste de nós o suficiente para nos querer em casa” (Cardoso 124).⁴⁴⁶ The owner of the hotel where Rui’s family stays, disguised under a mask of cordiality, implies that the returnee guests need to learn how to behave: “Não é que ache que não se sabem portar, não estou a dizer nada disso. Ninguém nasce ensinado e o que não se sabe tem de ser aprendido e há hábitos que mudam de sítio para sítio” (69).⁴⁴⁷ The owner’s numerous condescending comments suggest a perception of being superior in relation to these ‘other’ Portuguese coming from the African continent, whom she portrays as “vândalos” (178)⁴⁴⁸ and “exploradores dos pretos” (166).⁴⁴⁹

Just as Portuguese or Italian emigrants were once ‘racialized’ in North America and other parts of the Western world, so were Portuguese settlers in Africa upon their arrival in the former metropolis after the Carnation Revolution of 1974. Unlike the narrative adopted by Salazar’s regime, which endorsed one grand Portuguese transnational “Nação,” grounded on “solidariedade entre as províncias ultramarinas e a metrópole,” all “parte integrante do

⁴⁴⁶ “Being a hotel returnee [...] is bad because it means that there isn’t even one family member who likes us enough to want to host us”

⁴⁴⁷ “It’s not that I think that you don’t know how to behave, I’m not saying that. No one is born knowing everything and what we don’t know we have to learn and there are habits that change from place to place.”

⁴⁴⁸ “vandals”

⁴⁴⁹ “exploiters of black people”

Estado Português” (Salazar 409),⁴⁵⁰ in fact “those Portuguese who were born in Africa were treated as second-class citizens—even the whites” (Henriques). In her book *Racismo em Português*,⁴⁵¹ journalist Joana Gorjão Henriques explains:

Estabeleceram-se diferenciações, mesmo entre os portugueses que nasciam na metrópole e os que nasciam nas colónias como Angola, que ficaram cunhados como ‘portugueses de segunda’. O próprio bilhete de identidade permitia uma diferenciação entre o português que nascia na metrópole e o que nascia no território ultramarino. (Henriques 45)⁴⁵²

This discussion on ‘racialization’ reminds us of the precariousness of hierarchizing along racial, social, gender, or cultural lines. In the same way that the returnees started integrating Portuguese society and becoming ‘de-racialized,’ other immigrants keep being perceived in Portugal, Spain, and Italy according to prejudiced regimes of difference, as chapter 3 illustrates. As Vega-Durán pertinently argues, “Spain has developed a historical amnesia about its own past as a land of emigrants” (xiv). And the same argument can be extended for Portugal and Italy (Wright 14). It is time that we challenge the worn out discriminatory categories of difference that support these countries’ national grand narratives and deal with the silenced traumas formed therein in productive ways, using the memories of the past as reminders of our human condition. One fundamental step in this idealistic project implies new ways of representing the South, which cannot be separated from a decolonial approach to the writing of Africa, recognizing, with Pius Adesanmi, that “[a]n Africa produced by a

⁴⁵⁰ “Nation”, “solidarity between the overseas provinces and the metropolis”, “an integral part of the Portuguese State”

⁴⁵¹ *Racism in Portuguese*

⁴⁵² “Differences were established, even between the Portuguese born in the metropolis and those born in the colonies like Angola, who were coined as ‘second-class Portuguese.’ The identity card itself made a distinction between the Portuguese who were born in the metropolis and those born in the overseas territory.”

reimagined and remapped ideological terrain is the only weapon that the continent has against xenophobia” (Adesanmi 279).

Against the West and its Colonial and Imperial Legacies

On the one hand, we have seen how the rewriting of representations of Africa is done through a criticism of Portuguese and Italian colonialism that operates as an exercise of historical redress, as undertaken by Scego, Farah, Figueiredo, and Cardoso. On the other hand, there is a rewriting process in some texts that happens through a recontextualization of topics stereotypically ‘African’ such as black magic (Mekuy, Nsue, Cardoso), female genital mutilation (Scego, Farah), and polygamy (Chiziane, Mekuy, Nsue), practices that are culturally translated and de-exoticized. I will use the case of polygamy to illustrate this process, showing how Chiziane, Mekuy, and Nsue offer informed and nuanced views that counterbalance prejudiced Western ideas about the role of men and women involved in this type of practice. Unlike Scego, Farah, Figueiredo, and Cardoso, there is not a direct attack of colonialism here, but instead, a broader criticism of uneven power structures that reveals the clash of cultures provoked in the aftermath of colonial contact. The indirect references to Spain (and Spanish colonialism), via the allegory of Europe or the West, seem to follow the tendency of other Equatoguinean authors. Raquel Vega-Durán argues, about Guinean writer Donato Ndongo Bidyogo, that he homogenizes Spain, taking it for Europe, which she reads as an act of talking back when she says that “he thus presents the readers with a homogenizing view of their own country —perhaps as a counterpart to Europe’s homogenizing views of ‘Africa’” (Vega-Durán 213). This is illustrated in Nsue’s text by the

replacement of allusions to Spain and the Spanish missionaries present in Equatorial Guinea at the time of the narration with general references to Europe and “el blanco” (Nsue 198). Similarly, as Adam Lifshey observes, “*Ekomo* ignores national existence altogether in favor of tribal and continental identifications” (Lifshey 175). The narrator does not refer to Equatorial Guinea but instead zooms out to “madre África” (Nsue 108) or in to specific ethnic groups, like the Bubi. If we remember that the creation of African nation-states results from “boundaries [which] were arbitrarily drawn on African maps in the chancelleries of the imperial powers in Europe” (Boahen 96), we might understand Nsue’s strategy of abiding by African ethnic or continental identifications to the detriment of colonial-invented national borders (like the current official name of the country) as a subversive act of colonial erasure. In other words, she ‘unscrambles’ the European scramble for Africa.

Augustine Nwoye explains that there are two types of polygamy practiced in Sub-Saharan Africa: one instigated by social prestige, the other one by family distress, usually linked to infertility issues (Nwoye 383). He notices, though, that most scholars focus on the first type, which assumes that the African man is a sufferer of “sexual incontinence” (Burke quoted in Nwoye 384) and that “Africans (in becoming civilized) would have to progress from the rule of custom to the rule of law, from polytheism to monotheism, and from polygamy to monogamy” (Nwoye 384). In *Ekomo*, the narrator Nnanga conveys the detrimental effects of Catholicism for the family of Oyono, a man who becomes polygamous due to his first wife’s infertility. After frequent visits to “la misión de los blancos,” the man is told that if he wants to convert and get baptized he needs to choose one of his four wives and abandon the remaining ones (Nsue 117). Realizing the incompatibility between his two

cultures, Oyono understands that to save his soul simultaneously means to condemn himself (124). Ndong Akele, the elder presiding over the deliberation at the village's *abáa* (117), after listening to the man and each of his wives' arguments about which one should become his exclusive wife, abruptly interrupts the session to angrily ask: "¿Cómo sabéis que podréis entrar en el terreno sagrado de los blancos si aquí en la tierra no os dejan entrar en sus casas?" (126).⁴⁵³ In disbelief, he adds, "Porque si os dejan entrar en el cielo sólo será para ser sus criados o sus esclavos" (127).⁴⁵⁴ Here, the discussion on polygamy appears as a means to trace a larger criticism of the European presence in the country, through missions, and the antagonism between European and African Bantu cultures. All of Oyono's wives have a say in the matter but ultimately it is in the man's hands to make the final decision.

In *Niketche, uma História de Poligamia* by Paulina Chiziane, there is not only a criticism of Western institutions but also a subversion of the conjugal system in which a group of five women find themselves. Ana Mafalda Leite interprets this work as a criticism of contemporary polygamy and the ways in which it has progressively obliterated the rights that women traditionally had (*Literaturas* 70). Like in Nsue's text, there is a strong criticism of Catholic patriarchy and its monogamic promotion of "informal" polygamy (Chiziane 97). Tony, married to his first wife, practices adultery, instead of following traditional polygamy, explained by the character of Tia Maria as a project of social democracy where "[c]ada mulher [tem] a sua casa, seus filhos e suas propriedades" (73).⁴⁵⁵ Unhappy with their lack of privileges brought by the arrangement, the five women organize a conjugal parliament,

⁴⁵³ "How do you know you will be let into the sacred whites' terrain if they won't even let you into their house here on earth?"

⁴⁵⁴ "Know that if they'll let you enter heaven, you will be their slaves or servants"

⁴⁵⁵ "each wife has her house, her children, and her properties"

through which they plan to convert Tony's adultery, a system popularized under colonialism, into its original form of polygamy, slowly inverting the power relations through their female alliance: "[c]inco fraquezas juntas se tornam força em demasia" (143).⁴⁵⁶ In a radical inversion of traditional gender roles, the group of women starts resembling a political organization, creating their own sources of income and organizing meetings to decide the "escala conjugal" (128).⁴⁵⁷ The husband becomes a mere "estafeta" (128),⁴⁵⁸ passed around amongst his wives. Finally recognizing the failure of the social structure, "O Tony ajoelha-se aos nossos pés e humilha-se. Somos cinco rainhas em tronos de areia" (236).⁴⁵⁹ The financially emancipated wives end up all gradually abandoning the husband, who loses his "capital de desejabilidade" (Heinich 83).⁴⁶⁰

In a text more openly committed to an exercise of ethnographic work and research, clearly outlined in paratextual elements (such as introductory remarks and notes), Mekuy's *Tres Almas para un Corazón* is narrated by Rita Maldonado Obono, the author's alter ego (21), who transcribes interviews with a man and his three wives about their polygamous arrangements. The narrator promises that "Este libro está basado en personas y hechos reales" (11)⁴⁶¹ and later confirms that "Nada que no sea verdad saldrá en el libro" (103).⁴⁶² The same clash of the Bantu and European cultures seen in Nsue and Chiziane is reinforced here, starting from the titles of the interviews, where Catholic terminology is used to acknowledge polygamy's issues: "Primera confesión" (27), "Segunda confesión" (101),

⁴⁵⁶ "five weaknesses become one powerful force"

⁴⁵⁷ "conjugal shifts"

⁴⁵⁸ "baton" [used in relay races]

⁴⁵⁹ "Tony kneels at our feet and humiliates himself. We are five queens in thrones of sand"

⁴⁶⁰ "desirability capital"

⁴⁶¹ "This book is based on real people and real events"

⁴⁶² "Nothing that is not true will come out in the book"

“Tercera confesión” (151), “Cuarta confesión” (221).⁴⁶³ The text recontextualizes the custom, offering historical context that explains it as a family and social practice linked to agricultural modes of production (280). The legitimation of polygamy is not only done through educational explanations but also through a narrative of change and progress that situates the author, the characters, and Guinea in an emergent global and sophisticated context.

Characterized by Zulema as “una mujer culta e inteligente, y sensible [...]” (127),⁴⁶⁴ Rita identifies “*a medias*” with “*una mujer occidental*”⁴⁶⁵ due to her multicultural background that combines “*raíces africanas*”⁴⁶⁶ and a Western education (224). Unlike Tony, whose deviant behaviour is described through animalizing or morbid terminology,⁴⁶⁷ Santiago discusses the importance of “reason, [la] capacidad de pensar” (Mekuy 221). In his explanation of the social context in which he practices polygamy, he makes use of a language of development, progress, and global village, referring to Guinea as a “*fusión*”⁴⁶⁸ due to the coexistence of “*tradiciones ancestrales*”⁴⁶⁹ related to the Fang culture and “*costumbres europeas*” (230).⁴⁷⁰ Instead of highlighting the role of tradition, he refers to Guinea as “un país [...] emergente, en cambio hacia la modernidad, con muchas posibilidades” (241).⁴⁷¹ In the context of progress and women’s emancipation, symbolized by the character of Aysha, the modern wife who leaves the family to continue an informal relationship with Santiago from New York

⁴⁶³ “first confession,” “second confession,” “third confession,” “fourth confession”

⁴⁶⁴ “an educated, intelligent, and sensitive woman”

⁴⁶⁵ “half-identifies” [with] “a Western woman”

⁴⁶⁶ African roots

⁴⁶⁷ Tony “ronca como um sapo” [snore like a frog], “lança um grunhido” [grunts], “massa de carne” [mass of flesh], “Parece um cadáver” [looks like a corpse], “rosna como um canino” [growls like a dog] (Chiziane 30-31).

⁴⁶⁸ “fusion”

⁴⁶⁹ “ancestral traditions”

⁴⁷⁰ “European habits”

⁴⁷¹ “an emerging country, shifting towards modernity, with many possibilities”

(189), polygamy is presented as a practice that was complicated by contact with other cultures, but whose origin is well-founded, despite punctual ‘inhumane’ rules (55) that subjugate women. The wind of change is announced by Melba, Santiago’s first wife, who believes that “La mujer no puede ser un objeto cuya única función sea la procreación y suministrar placer al marido. En una sociedad moderna y avanzada esto tiene que cambiar, ya está cambiando” (86).⁴⁷² Focusing on the fundamental role of education, Melba hopes that her “testimonio”⁴⁷³ might teach girls that “vivir debe ser decidir en libertad” (86).⁴⁷⁴

In all of these discussions on polygamy, women gain a voice, be it through the conjugal parliament in Niketche,⁴⁷⁵ through the community reunion presided by an elder at the *abáa* in *Ekomo*, or through the set of interviews that compose Mekuy’s text, rejecting uninformed narratives about African customs in particular, and the writing of Africa on a broader level.

What Can We Do With the Past?

Chiziane’s provocative sentence, “Branças ou pretas, fomos todas castradas” (Chiziane, “Prefácio” 16),⁴⁷⁶ implies not only the control of women’s bodies by patriarchy, Catholicism, and colonialism but also women’s historical lack of power to speak about taboo topics such as sex and to inscribe their gendered versions of the past into mainstream narratives.

Positioning herself face to face with Figueiredo, she says: “Ambas reconhecemos que a humanidade atravessa as fronteiras de uma raça” (17).⁴⁷⁷ In a resonant manner, the very last

⁴⁷² “Women cannot be treated as objects whose only functions are to procreate and to provide pleasure to the husband. In a modern and advanced society this has to change, it is already changing”

⁴⁷³ “testimony”

⁴⁷⁴ “to live is to have the freedom to decide”

⁴⁷⁵ For a broader discussion on women’s emancipation in Chiziane’s oeuvre, see Pimentel 2012.

⁴⁷⁶ “White or black, we, women, were all castrated”

⁴⁷⁷ “We both recognize that humanity crosses the boundaries of race”

scene of *Oltre Babilonia* presents Zuhra sitting on the toilet, reading a magazine article about a frog whose resilience saves her from drowning. She observes the star-shaped blood stains in her underwear, realizing that she has recovered from colour blindness associated with trauma and can finally see the red of her blood again:

Dentro la costellazione, la sua storia di donna. E dentro la sua storia, quella di altre prima di lei e di altre dopo di lei. Le storie si intrecciano, a volte convergono, spesso si cercano. Tutte unite da un colore e da un affetto. (456)⁴⁷⁸

Zuhra proposes that the colour that connects the intertwined stories of women moves past ‘ethnic identifiers’ or racial lines and is situated on the private and shared experience represented by menstrual blood.⁴⁷⁹

This chapter’s emphasis on ‘subaltern knowledges’ contributes to the historical re-inscription of those who suffered from what Patricia Hill Collins’ intersectional theory names “multiple forms of segregation” (277) across various racial, gender, and class coordinates. Countering the solemn tone of official historical narratives, materialized in speeches, mainstream media, memorials, textbooks, etc., these texts focus on micro-histories which reveal cracks and gaps in macro-historical accounts thus offering perspectives to help us live in the present with a renewed knowledge from the past. The abundance of informal and oral genres (letter, interview, audio-record) insists on the importance of shifting our focus away from the grand narratives that memorialize the past and sediment it into glorifying, neocolonial, and paternalistic narratives and invites us to look at the violence, discrimination,

⁴⁷⁸ “Inside the [blood] constellation she sees her story of a woman. And inside of her story she sees that of other women before her and others after her. Stories intertwine, sometimes converging, often searching for each other. All united by one colour and one affection”

⁴⁷⁹ For an interpretation of this passage, see Laura Lori (2013).

and unequal gender and racial power relations of the past and the present with a critical eye. These texts open the path to help rectify oppressive narratives in general, and the narratives of colonialism in Africa in particular, doing the urgent work of historical redress, and acknowledging that power relations inherited from colonial history are still strongly felt today. These writings, produced at “border crossings,” give shape to new cultural and literary production by pursuing inter/transcultural dialogue in the “new spaces, histories and languages” (Seyhan 4) in which they are produced. Azade Seyhan believes that the definition of culture is also being reshaped by these new literary interactions that shift from local to global and from stable to uncertain.

Hirsch underlines the taxing effect of a traumatic past on a community that shares a postmemory and has to deal with

mourning for a lost world, the impulse to repair the loss and to heal those who have suffered it, anger about the absence of public recognition, frustration in the face of our own ignorance and impotence. In short, the inheritance of a trauma that survives the survivors, overwhelming the present and hijacking the future. (Hirsch, *Debts*, 222)

Trying to conceive of ways to move beyond these negative emotions, she pertinently suggests that we ask “what we can *do* with this persisting legacy? How can we move forward toward a future that recalls past crimes without being paralyzed by them and without perpetuating a culture of fear and denial, of nationalism and ethnocentrism?” (*Debts*, 223).

Insisting on the importance of remembering, Susan Sontag emphasizes the eloquent function of “atrocious images” in ‘speaking’ about “what human beings are capable of doing” (Sontag 115). This haunting nature of the past via representations of trauma is productive insofar as it

helps us channel inherited vulnerabilities into solidarity and connectivity beyond ethnicity and identity lines (Hirsch, *Debts*, 223). This is, according to Hirsch, what it means to pay one's debts to the past, more than simply "listening to [our ancestors and] retelling their stories" (221). In a comparable vein, Farah's *Madre Piccola*, through Barni's letter to her cousin Domenica Axad, draws attention to the need to forgive in order to move forward. Reinterpreting the folk tale of the ungrateful son (Farah 153), Barni explains:

È questo il senso de la storia. Non quello che vedono tutti, che i vecchi vanno rispettati se si vuole essere rispettati da vecchi, ma che il cerchio va spezzato, che bisogna avere il coraggio di perdonare e di rompere il circolo. (Farah 154)⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁸⁰ "This is the meaning of the story. Not what everyone perceives it to be, namely that old people should be respected if you in turn want to be respected in old age, but that the circle must be broken, that you have to have the courage to forgive and break the circle" (Farah, *Little Mother* 134).

Conclusion

The texts by Igiaba Scego, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, María Nsue Angüe, Guillermina Mekuy, Paulina Chiziane, Isabela Figueiredo, Dulce Maria Cardoso, and Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida represent different postcolonial *situations* resulting from the colonial projects of Italy, Spain, and Portugal, in Somalia, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique, and Angola. Their heteroglossic use of language critically engages with lingering imperial narratives of race, gender, nation, and identity, questioning idealized versions of the past and pointing to fresh ways of understanding both history and the present.

I have shown the political implications of writing in languages that once were the vehicles of colonial oppressions. The astute interweaving of Somali, Fang, Kimbundu, and other African languages, in texts written in Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese sheds light on tensions created by recent migration, diaspora, and globalization, which require plural definitions of mother tongue, identity, and belonging. The lateral illumination arising from the comparison of these different texts has also confirmed that definitions of ‘minor’ and ‘major’ languages and histories are relative and constantly shifting. Those African languages that were once colonized are now performing decolonial gestures against Eurocentrism and Western patriarchy whereas former colonial languages (Italian, Portuguese, Spanish) are being permeated by new forms of cultural and economic dominance, illustrated by the omnipresence of the English language. However, as Kwame Anthony Appiah pointedly remarks, “People who complain about the homogeneity produced by globalization often fail to notice that globalization is, equally, a threat to homogeneity” (101). Indeed, the processes of globalization set in motion in the fifteenth century, and now manifest in the

internationalization of the English language as well as in cosmopolitan circuits of cultural exchange have exposed difference and otherness. The metaphor of the world as Babel, not in the original sense of a tower of incommunicability but as an area of mutual engagement and possibility, based on the fundamental role of linguistic and cultural translation, is an apt framework for thinking about these literatures. They give visibility to ‘minor’ languages and cultures, both European and African, and highlight the importance of translation as a privileged lens to establish a conversation among different people about linguistic and cultural diversity. In his work about the ethics of cosmopolitanism, Appiah draws attention precisely to the notion of ‘conversation,’ which he sees as not only “literal talk” but also as “a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others” (85). He proposes that it is “conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association” (xix) that allows for a true sense of cosmopolitanism, which is a “universal concern and respect for legitimate difference” (vx).

Even though the examined texts promote these cosmopolitan conversations, they also demonstrate how dialogue is often interrupted by national narratives of homogeneity that, masked behind promises of conviviality, conceal representations of the ‘other’ and discrimination schemes inspired by colonial storylines. In my discussion of the politics of the ‘racialized’ hair and body, it becomes apparent that raced and gendered stereotyping prolongs the diasporic condition of Afro-descendants living in Southern Europe who, lacking social acceptance, search for alternative geographies of belonging. These are embedded in fluid, liminal spaces, that can be either very localized (as suggested by the sites that Yabar and Sissi map out and occupy in Rome), more global (such as Afrocentric transnational affiliations), or

even metaphorical (like writing and language). Conversely, the questioning of definitions of ethnicity, origins, and places of belonging also probes Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian national discourses and puts forward an emphasis on the multiply-inscribed subjects, in terms of languages and cultures, that constitute these societies today.

I have also looked at these texts as sites of embodied memory, where national traumas from the past are discussed, and representations of Southern Europe and Africa are uncovered and rewritten. The texts counter different types of historical amnesia and bring silenced and oppressed voices to light. Spanish narratives of identity, even when they are based on ideas of “plurality” (Vega-Durán xv) and ‘hispanidad,’ tend to erase any connection to Africa or to immigrants of African origins who might have Spanish as a mother tongue as a result of Equatorial Guinea’s colonial history. Italy’s shorter colonial episode in Eastern Africa, which ended in defeat, is also removed from national definitions, and, when mentioned, it tends to be portrayed in a glorifying light that depicts Italians as ‘brava gente,’ thus dismissing its numerous human rights violations (as uncovered by the historiographic studies of Del Boca, and other scholars, as well as by the works presented here). Even though shorter in duration, Ben-Ghiat reminds us, Italian colonialism “had no less impact on the development of metropolitan conceptions of race and of national identity, and it was certainly no less violent” (267). In Portugal, the colonial imagination has been replaced with new post-imperial ideas (‘Lusofonia,’ CPLP,⁴⁸¹ PALOP⁴⁸²) founded on the Portuguese language as a uniting factor. Many scholars (Almeida, Margarido) have accused these projects of neocolonial intentions due to their dismissal of the power dynamics that they seek to perpetuate. At the same time,

⁴⁸¹ Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa [Community of Portuguese Language Countries]

⁴⁸² Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa [Portuguese-speaking African countries]

we could also look at these organizations as means of curbing the international impetus of the English language. At any rate, the Lusophone texts analyzed here press on the aftermath of decolonization, a sore spot for a country that has anchored its image more in its former colonies than within its own geographical borders. These amnesias and silences are linked to anxieties of Portugal, Spain, and Italy about their own subaltern and ‘racialized’ position within Europe, which, in reverse, they apply towards their own citizens of African heritage—and other communities. The mental image of these Southern European countries is updated by textual accounts that go against their homogeneity and benevolent mythic narratives. These texts also rewrite representations of Africa that break with the colonial/postcolonial continuum.

By putting a transnational ‘minor’ model of the South into practice, we might be surprised at the number of entanglements between texts written in different countries by writers of the same generation, such as Igiaba Scego and Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, for example. Their texts, different on many levels, nonetheless share similar ways of speaking, common references to international events and figures, and a preoccupation with asserting their Italian and Portuguese affiliations, respectively, while also securing their Somali and Angolan heritages. This is one example of how going beyond the national can help us understand the postcolonial conditions across the Mediterranean. An important next step in these transversal illuminations would be to translate these works from Portuguese to Italian and vice-versa, as well as into English. I also see much more comparative potential than what I could explore in this dissertation across the works of Paulina Chiziane and María Nsue, who each contributed to Mozambique and Equatorial Guinea, respectively, the first novel

written by a woman. Both pertaining to Bantu cultures, their texts, despite being written in Portuguese and Spanish, share customs, uses of language, and concerns with women's emancipation that position them side-by-side. At the same time, sometimes a common national root can also contribute to explaining certain textual experiences, as is the case of Igiaba Scego and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, who both include in the fabric of their texts the erudition of Somali oral culture.

The situatedness of this project, written in English and presented to a North American university, should not go unnoticed. Indeed, despite the 'minor' framework followed in the dissertation, it still goes through the major global language. However, this can be taken as an advantage. As Ferreira highlights, "tem sido na língua imperial da globalização hegemónica (o inglês) que se torna possível procurar e fazer alianças associadas a uma agenda de Estudos Subalternos" ("Articulações" 155).⁴⁸³ In this case, it is the English language that allows me to present these dialogues between 'minor' literatures. Furthermore, it is not my contention that the Anglophone view of postcolonial studies should be dismissed because this would only perpetuate the problem I am trying to tackle by provoking yet another erasure. My aim is instead to give visibility to other contexts that also define postcolonial studies. As an apology for translation and diversity, I made the decision of confronting the reader with these 'minor' languages within my English text, for instance, through the provision of passages from case studies in the original language first.

As these works continue to be translated, one promising avenue for future research would be to investigate their politics and economies of circulation. In particular, I would be

⁴⁸³ "the imperial language of hegemonic globalization has been the vehicle for the establishment of alliances associated with an agenda of Subaltern Studies"

interested in the marketing strategies embedded in paratextual elements as well as in the ways in which translations themselves empower or anthropologize authors and their multiple national belongings. This might involve a closer look at the strategies that publishers and different agents use to linguistically and culturally translate these texts to suit different markets. As African literary markets grow, I would also be interested in the comparative reception of these texts in Angola, Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea, and Somalia, as well as in other African countries. A different research direction is related to the analysis of literatures in Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian in other diasporas, different from the former metropolises and former colonies. How does being a migrant writer in a country without any direct link to colonial history affect the uses of ‘minor’ and ‘major’ languages (including mother tongues)? How does the experience of migration affect relationships with history? And how does the migrant experience shift ideas related to racism, sexism, and xenophobia? Ultimately, I would expect to continue to carve a place for Lusophone, Hispanophone, and Italophone postcolonial writings in the larger field of Postcolonial Studies.

Through a comparative analysis of ‘minor’ postcolonial discourses and literatures, we can tackle the essential role that colonialism has played in the formation of national identities. Moreover, we can reflect on the reconfigurations of cultural spaces within societies of the South in order to understand the fundamental role of the postcolonial condition in contemporary experiences of migration and diaspora. The literatures being produced in borderlands resulting from these colonial histories, be they diasporic, migrant, or even locally produced (in former metropolises and former colonies) draw attention to the urgency of

looking at the specificities of *place* and the new perspectives on European identities created thereof, marked by plurilingualism and a coexistence of cultures and cultural forms.

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