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Writing About Migration in Italy Today: New Challenges for Contemporary Italian Literature

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Abstract

Nowadays, a new generation of Italian writers feels compelled to create a new literary space which takes into account all the social and cultural changes taking place in our society, in contrast to the fake belief in a conformed and standardized world and the rhetoric of the invasions. Authors such as Giuseppe Catozzella, Fabio Geda, Francesco Casolo, et al have decided to narrate through the topos of the journey the reasons why thousands of people coming from Africa and the Middle East leave their countries to move to Europe. The production of literary texts on the migration waves appears to give an answer to the many deaths and dramatic events happening daily in the Mediterranean. Such tragedies have been of great impact on public opinion, so as to push writers to testify on behalf of the migrants. Starting with some Italian novels, I will firstly analyze the historical, cultural, and social meaning of the word "journey". Then, I will reflect upon literature, by favoring a geocritical interpretation of such texts.

Keywords: migration, journey, geocriticism, border

Introduction

The recent world migrations have been changing the economic, social, and cultural attitudes of Europe and the rest of the globe. The migration phenomenon has appeared as a consequence of economic globalized imperialism, in which different aspects converge, thus helping people understand the cultural and social backgrounds of this era. The term "Globalization" takes on a positive meaning within the financial elites and for the economy, while it represents a source of fear and violence among all those categories who live at the margin of society, like the

poor, the unemployed, and the migrants. The reason is that globalization deals with inclusion, work, and health, but it worsens marginalization, isolation, and racism. The Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has been criticized for painting a too optimistic picture of globalization in *Modernity at Large* (1990). In a subsequent work, titled *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), Appadurai goes back to the topic, by showing the negative effects of globalization and pointing out how violence on a large scale is a specific feature of today's culture. The crucial question the author wishes to answer in this essay is "why are we seeing a virtually worldwide genocidal impulse toward minorities, whether they are numerical, cultural, or political minorities?" (Appadurai 2006, 40). In recent years, this and other questions promoted the study of ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities, of the processes of racialization and gendering, the revision of the concepts of identity and culture, and the analysis of cultural transformations generated in particular by the inheritance of colonialism, mass migrations, and global migrations.

One of the key topics that has been consistently debated in postcolonial and migration literature is exile, migration, or immigration, according to each case and period. Such transnational practices, along with the innovations in transport and communication, bring a new perspective to the peoples and the communities' imagination where the slogan "Forget the nation" turns into a collective identification feeling. It must not come as a surprise if a large number of intellectuals and scholars of human and social sciences have become enthusiastic about studying the phenomena of the borders and their social, cultural and Identity consequences. These originated from the ideas of both deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which have become undeniable features of our society. For example, with the concept of *ethnoscape* Appadurai suggests a dynamic perspective of the identities and cultures in constant and current evolution in a post-national era:

> [...] the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.[5]

The latest developments in such critical and academic debate on transformation in Italy have taken shape based not only on what has been occurring in the Mediterranean with the recent migratory waves, but

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5   "Ethnoscape" is a term coined by Arjun Appadurai in his essay "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" (1990).

also on Italy's position and identity within a new European and global scenery. This argument leads to a reflection upon contemporary literary production which includes contemporary Italian, postcolonial and immigrant writers who, thanks to their works, have contributed to switch the way Italians interpret their own culture and society. The postcolonial Italian critics, represented by popular scholars, like Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, who edited the book *L'Italia Postcoloniale* (2012; 2014), identifies a plethora of topics, social practices, and cultural productions in contemporary Italy which started in colonial times and have been perpetrated to this day which are specifically postcolonial. Therefore, it is possible to claim that literature has become a powerful investigative tool in understanding changes that have been happening in post-modern societies. Literary texts possess an extraordinary communicative strength and, what is most important, literature tout court develops and renews itself inside the too often traumatic and inhuman "system" known as migration, exile, postcolonial conflict, and diaspora. This contribution aims at defining the Italian literary production generated by the recent transition of African and Middle Eastern migrants towards Europe with the idea of showing through the literary representation of the migration Journey [*Viaggio*],[1] how complex and varied it is today. If we also add the recent cultural phenomena described in the *Border Crossing, Mestizia* and *Frontera*[2] categories to labels such as "migration literature", "migrating literature," and "postcolonial literature" it will be easy to understand the validity of our argumentation. As Philippe Moreau Defarges wrote in *Introduction à la Géopolitique*: "the knowledge of space [...] is indissociable from the economic, cultural, and political evolution" (Moreau Defarges 14). Even if the phenomenon of migrations is "ancient like humankind itself, with its expeditions, adventures, conquests, exodus, and colonization" (ibid. 21), the escape of millions of people towards Europe in the 21st Century provides a new shape to this centennial culture. Up until the last Century the term Migration mostly described the populations' relocations and the changes of territories. However, this translation now takes on a variety of meanings and representations which will bring a scholar to ponder some questions which cannot be answered easily. When a debate around migration ensues, this is generally about fluxes and waves, and invasions. In the opinion of American sociologist Ulrich Beck, the word Flux does not only denote "human fluxes," but it also

1   The term Journey (with capital J) can be found in the novel *Non dirmi che hai paura* (2014) by Giuseppe Catozzella.
2   Check the expression *Border Crossing* by Zaccaria Paola on http://www.studiculturali.it/dizionario/dizionario.html. Accessed 19 June 2019.

includes "[the fluxes of] information, goods, specific marks, cultural symbols" (Beck). The aspects of "interdependence" and "convergence" contributed to shift the sense of belonging to the nation and to disseminate linguistic traits and cultural features of a people beyond national borders. New literary alleys which reject essentialism and the tendency to provide a cultural identity with a stable content are then created. As Doris Sommer in *Language, Culture and Society* wrote, "globalisation has broken the romantic enchantment of one home, one language, one nation. Reading, writing, and speaking — verbal creativity in general — often cross nation boundaries and thereby transgress the lines of proper (or proprietary) language" (Jay 16).

Globalization brought about a sort of *transnational turn* in literature, by turning space into a fluid, heterogeneous, many-sided, and perspectival whole. In his introduction to *Global Matters*, Paul Jay wrote:

> Since the rise of critical theory in the 1970s, nothing has shaped literary and cultural studies more than its embrace of transnationalism. It has a productively complicated the nationalist paradigm long dominant in these fields, transformed the nature of the locations we study, and focuses our attention on forms of cultural production that take place in the liminal places between real and imagined borders. (Ibid. 1)

Identifying literary works and authors solely based on geographical, linguistic, and/or cultural criteria would then be a mistake. These debates recall Bertrand Westphal's geocriticism, a literary method which studies the aesthetic representation of human spaces while trying to show how mobility has modified our representations.[3] In *La Géocritique. Réel, Fiction* (2007), comparative literature Professor at the University of Limoges, Westphal, noted that contemporary migratory fluxes delineate space in a mobility that has probably become a chronic characteristic of our time. The forced or postindustrial economic migrations allow people to move, either freely or illegally, through those fluid and solid spaces in different countries and continents. However, it would be naive and anachronistic if one considered the border-crossing phenomenon as a peculiarity of a global era, namely as a phenomenon only limited to a postmodern and a postindustrial condition. In an article titled *Le scritture degli altri. Appunti sulla letteratura in migrazione*, Michele Cometa showed how literary productions have always been characterized by the crossing of borders since the Romantic period, so much so that nomadism is a key element in

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3 For an in-depth analysis on geocriticism the following is recommended: Westphal (2007; 2011; 2016; 2019).

understanding what is meant by the term literature, at least in the West (Cometa 197-213). In the definition of the theoretical fundaments of geocriticism, the French scholar wonders whether a permanent state of transgression has been established. Such transgression would make each space a substantially fluid and nomadic whole (Deleuze and Guattari). Indeed, in the French comparatist's opinion the study of the relations between the world and the text, the referent and its representation, reality and fiction – all subjects geocriticism deals with- allows one to "delve in the human spaces that mimic arts use through texts and images and within texts and images and at the same time explore cultural interactions related to them."[4] In that sense, Michel De Certeau might have probably claimed with enthusiasm what is literature if not writing about Others anywhere? What would happen if the locals began writing about the Others instead of the foreigners? In this "quick, plural, and contextual" scenario, the Italian contemporary literature on migrations takes on an important role. The genre delineates a variety of narrators on the global scene capable of giving voice and body to migrants, whether they might be men, women, or children who live or lived the Mediterranean border, its crossing, and its (not) overcoming.

The Italian Literary Production on "Migrations of Current Times"

The birth of a cultural production sensitive to the migrating experience in Italy, dating back to the beginning of the 2010s, is asserted in a historical and political context where border patrolling, racism, and xenophobia are amplified in the imagery of people on rafts attempting a new *Middle Passage* in the Mediterranean. In light of the recent political uproars and conflicts in many African and Eastern countries, an increasing number of Italian writers felt the need to look somewhere else, thus considering counter-narratives on what many now call "migration emergency," "European refugee crisis," or "migration invasion." The writers' goals are to denounce the migration policies on the one hand and to correct the mediatic narrative on landings and migrants on the other. Such reflections lead researchers to ponder on the reasons why writers testify on behalf of the migrants. As the IDOS report revealed in 2015, the migration shifts are so evident that not only

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4   Westphal (2007), p.13.

do they "force us to reflect upon inequalities around the planet,"[5] but they also warn us to examine more closely their historical, political, and economic causes, as well as the ethical and cultural impact they have had and will have in society in the future. The Italian journalist Alessandro Leogrande, who passed away prematurely in 2017, but who is still considered one of most significant and influential voices in contemporary Italy, believed that writing on migration did not only mean the deconstruction of the anti-immigration rhetoric built by the Western world. It also meant consulting colonial ghosts, the historical and political responsibilities of the ex-colonized countries because, as the author wrote, "our ex colonies are some of the main open bellies for the contemporary Western Africa. The starting point of many journeys of hope have been at the same time sung and glorified as if they had been Italian soil, on which a new empire would have set its ground" (Leogrande). Bringing a testimony means making these personal, painful, and inhuman stories universal, so that they could be accepted, shared, and absorbed by the communities in all their complexities and uniqueness.

Specifically, the year 2015 marks a deep transcultural change in political, cultural, and social history in Italy and Europe. If it is true that the number of shipwrecks and deaths in the Mediterranean has exponentially increased in 2015 and 2016, on the other hand a rich and varied cultural production on "migration of the current times" (Adamo) has taken place. Both Italian and foreign authors started experimenting with narrative, stylistic, and thematic "alternative" models which finally detach themselves from an ordinary model of portraying reality exclusively founded on stereotypical and conventional images and landscapes.[6] Two of the most dramatic events in this period, two "human catastrophes," are worthy of mention. The first one was the Lampedusa shipwreck on October 3rd, 2013, which caused 368 deaths, of whom 360 were from Eritrea and 8 from Ethiopia, while the second was the "tragedy in the Sicily canal," in the night of April 18th, 2015 where more than a thousand-people perished at sea. If, aside from the tragic and unique nature of the events, one takes into account that the number of deaths and the nameless victims cannot be estimated, it will be possible to understand the complexity of the phenomenon, as well as to comprehend the necessity of building a different narrative on migration compared to the predominant stories on siege and invasion.

5   See Guglielmo Loy, "Migranti: Idos, Less than 24 Million in the World: This is What Emerged in the Statistical Immigration Report in 2015," in *Uil Unione Italiana del Lavoro*.

6   One can think of the imagery of the black Venus. For an in-depth analysis on this aspect one can refer to Romeo (50-69).

In the *Sinking in the Mediterranean* conference which took place in Split on September 19th, 2019, from which this contribution has been extracted, Sergia Adamo claimed: "These are people who did not have a voice until the 2010s. People are talking about it today simply because our coasts are infested by corpses announcing that the situation has gotten worse." 2015 seems to be an important date for the migration issue from a qualitative and quantitative standpoint. On the one hand the number of landings, deaths, and losses have been on the increase, on the other hand the new migrating routes, the safety operations at sea to save lives and the fight against illegal immigration, and the NGO commitment in the Mediterranean seem in some way to have awoken the European consciences on the issue of the borders and migration. The French anthropologist Michel Agier who has been dealing with the migration issues at the borders for years, noted that Europe has responded to the emergency in two ways. One is that in Europe, governments such as the French and the Italian ones has carried out a sort of "policy of indifference towards the world's problems" (Agier), while the other is that citizens, NGOs, and humanitarian associations have been rallying for migrants by lending a helping hand without being truly heard by politicians and by the media. A concerned and informed reader or listener immediately perceives that the untrue rhetoric of the invasions and "clash of cultures" is hidden behind the public debates on migration. Therefore, they recognize an "institution-alizing" space in literature, where it is possible to understand what is really happening in the Mediterranean and in Europe. In 2014, the book *Non dirmi che hai paura* by Giuseppe Catozzella was published by Feltrinelli, and in the same year won the Strega literary award for youth. In it, Catozzella described the true story of Samia Youssuf Omar who escaped from Somalia under Al-Shabaab, and took on a long and dreadful journey towards Europe. Firstly, he crossed the desert of Sudan, then the desert of Libya, and finally crossed the insidious waters of the Mediterranean Sea in an unstable boat similar to all of the boats that shipwreck on a daily basis. In 2016, Feltrinelli also released the novel *Stanotte guardiamo le stelle* by Francesco Casolo, written in collaboration with the Afghan boy Alì Eshani who left with his brother for Europe in the 1990s. A few years earlier, in 2010, Fabio Geda published *Nel mare ci sono i coccodrilli*, a novel based on interviews to Enaiatollah Akbari, about whom he recounted his life experiences, from his birth in Afghanistan to his arrival in Italy. Unlike the first "participative autobiographies" (Romeo) of the 1990s, the author of these books was joined by a migrant co-author who had taken that journey and who could write, directly or not, about his incredible life experience. For example, in the book *Stanotte guardiamo le stelle,* the protagonist said

that he had crossed Afghanistan. Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Greece, and had ended up crossing the Mediterranean and reaching Italy after five years of peregrinations and roaming. In the 21st Century, the picture of the immigrant seeking to adapt to the welcoming country, featured in migration literature in works such as *Immigrato* by Mario Fortunato and Salah Methnani, and *Io venditore di elefanti* by Oreste Pivetta and Pap Khouma, is substituted by the nomad, the adventurer, the migrant who illegally crosses the national borders and goes through the desert and/or the Mediterranean, smashing walls and obstacles in search for a place where he or she can fulfill his or her dreams of a happy and healthy life. This image has been legitimized in the Italian contemporary literature in novels such as *Nel mare ci sono i coccodrilli, the true story of Anaiatollah Akbari* by Fabio Geda, *Non dirmi che hai paura* by Giuseppe Catozzella, *Stanotte guardiamo le stelle* by Francesco Casolo and Alì Eshani and shared as visual arts in films like *Terraferma* by Emanuele Crialese, *Io sto con la sposa* by Gabriele del Grande and *Fuocoammare* by Gianfranco Rosi. In these fictional works relating the travel narrative, the testimony, and the autobiography, the authors told tales of the tribulations of contemporary migration by highlighting the traumatic aspects of the journeys and the stubbornness of the migrants in transgressing the spatial, temporal, and symbolic divisions of the world. If the migration and postcolonial literature written in Italian by migrant writers is deeply rooted in the experience of migration and marginalization within the welcoming communities, the attention of the contemporary Italian writers shifts in the specifics towards the migrating trajectories to show how *the routes* and the *roots* (Clifford) participate in building the shape of the (post)modern migrants, the "dark spot crossing the borders on the geographic maps while dissolving their shapes" (Chambers 7). As these (inter)national examples show, the history of migration journeys allows one to learn and understand better the globalized world in which we live. Indeed, these are works which depict and describe events, places, people, and stories "that really took place" (Fussel) and that have the capacity to inform reality on Anywhere else of the Others. If it is true that traveling moulds the personality of the traveller to perfection by broadening his or her mind to knowledge and discovery (Leed), then these texts constitute the ideal ground on which it is possible to elaborate a new definition of "travel literature" which might take mobility into account and the cultural and social transformations that the planetary shifts bring to contemporary society. Starting from some Italian novels we will make a reflection on the spatial and cultural meaning included in the word "journey" to draw our conclusion at a later moment.

Journey: A Fluid and Polysemous Concept

The word "journey" is commonly intended as the act (of moving) "to move or go from one place to another. The semantic plurality given to the idea of the Journey, conceived rather as a practice than a literary genre, permits one to overcome the boundaries established by the genre itself and to develop a new debate on the matter. First, one must consider that literary critics gave several meanings and representations to such an idea. If this seemed to possess a mostly moral dignity aiming at the spiritual achievement of the individual in the Middle Ages, in contemporary times it refers to travellers' experiences, denoted by the many traditions of migration, diaspora, exile, eradication. The "pilgrim warrior" is replaced by a new homo *viator* who is compelled to leave his or her birthplace to move to the territories of "surmodernité" (Augé). This shift produces a significant number of reflections on the person, on their identity, on their culture, on the Other, on the World, that is, and includes as many thoughts as the meetings that can be generated. In this sense travel literature, along with the migration issue, presents itself as a territory of "germination" (Zaccaria) which is both multiple as a privileged place of expression and (self)affirming of a new world. Domenico Quirico wrote in *Esodo*: "it is the great Migration. It may change the world, but it will be part of us when we realize that. A new People will live within us" (Quirico 8).

In trying to define these travel writings, one realizes that the application of the metaphors of the journey to migrants raises a series of problems that lead to the following questions in a researcher's mind: What is meant nowadays by the word "journey"? What are the cultural consequences of the human shifts? How is the geographic component included in a literary debate focused on the journey and migration? It is firstly important to underline that by the term journey one means a series of practices of crossings which translate non-equivalent shapes and experiences, such as tourism, trade, migration, exile, diaspora, and lands of borders. As James Clifford points out in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, the term "journey" describes samples of spatial practices which normally are absent from itineraries dictated by *glocal* logics (see Robertson), other than being rested on a connotation of class, gender, and race with all the privileges related to these, like means of transport, documents, borders. Consequently, the word "journey," as Clifford intends it, results in being inadequate in describing the contemporary migration practice. In our opinion, this demands a "translating term" which might be more fluid and transitory that may be able to translate at the same time the social and cultural changes taking place in our society. The words "adventure,"

"diaspora," "exodus," and "nomadism" seem to respond in a more appropriate way to the contemporary migrating practices as intended by our contemporary writers. However, such descriptive terms are interchangeable in the effort of describing either the *routes*, namely the itineraries, the trajectories, the real and imaginary routes taken by a migrant, and the *roots*, as the communities and one's homeland evoked by the migration itself. Even if the term Adventure emphasizes the physical challenges as well as the picaresque and spatial dimensions of migrations, it cannot hold the conveyed cultural weight as opposed to the argument around diasporas. Clifford said: "A journey reveals a range of physical and spatial practices. They produce knowledge, stories, traditions, behaviours, music, books, journals, and other cultural expressions" (see Clifford 44). What is clear is that when we prefer one term rather than another, there is always something people tend to miss, but at the same time there are concepts that one acquires. This has been clearly explained in the Italian language with the pun translator-traitor. However, considering how complex the phenomenon is, we are not going to consider any term as exclusive.

In the first issue of *Diaspora* (1991), Khaching Tölölian wrote that "We use 'diaspora' provisionally to indicate our belief that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, ethnic community. This is the vocabulary of transnationalism, and any of its terms can usefully be considered under more than one of its rubrics" (Tölölian 3-7). In fact, words like diaspora, exile, and exodus are used today to indicate any forced or voluntary migrations of individuals and groups who were forced to leave their countries for external reasons, such as poverty, political or religious persecutions, discrimination, wars etc. Diaspora was once considered and defined as a way to rebel against the rules of national States and the claim by the locals. In globalized times diaspora has turned into a fluid metaphor typically associated to mobility, shift, and crossing tropes (Clavaron 56). Is it possible to apply such meanings to contemporary literature? Even if the journey is often neglected in favor of the departure and arrival representations by migrant and/or postcolonial authors, some sources, albeit in a meager number, can be found. These can be helpful to pinpoint the specific features of human fluxes, as the example of the Martinica-born poet Édouard Glissant or by the British sociologist Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) highlight. With the idea of Black Atlantic, for example, Gilroy hinted at a hybrid postmodern diaspora as opposed to the imagery of the single root (Glissant) and the rhizome, borrowed by the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari:

> Le rhizome connecte un point quelconque avec un autre point quelcon-
> que, et chacun de ses traits ne renvoie pas nécessairement à des traits
> de même nature [...]. Penser en réseau, c'est penser la multiplicité des
> échanges, de flux déterritorialisant et prolifères. Ce n'est pas penser le
> territoire comme centralisé, mais comme réticulaire, la communication
> comme fluide et liquide. (Deleuze and Guattari)

Transferring this model to the contemporary Mediterranean model
and consequently to literature, means considering that geocultural
area as a diasporic space, open to dissemination and *métissage*, to
otherness and variety. Today, the nautical breakout by millions of
people from Africa and the Middle East evokes the forced migration
by the Africans in the condition of illegal black slavery, that is "that
long forgotten human fuel that had been supported by European cap-
italism" (Gilroy). Sometime later, the African and Eastern populations
– Libyans and other Africans, along with the Afghans, Iraqis, Syrians,
etc. – are still considered, mostly due to the media, by a large part of
Westerners as some sort of animals, trash-people who live a narrowed
middle passage as it is possible to read in the following excerpt by *Non
dirmi che hai paura*:

> Fifteen hours are endless if you know you are close to the goal, if you
> have been on a journey like I have for the past one and a half years, in-
> cluding Addis Abeba. In stillness for fifteen hours, with the adrenaline
> rush in me, it is a time one cannot even picture. It is as if at the end of
> a race when one is this close to reach the finish line one slammed into
> an invisible wall. Someone got crazy, someone else started mentioning
> Allah. The traffickers came down to the jetty, there were six of them. They
> restored the peace with their sticks. *Hawaian*, shut up. "If you scream,
> we will never get to Italy, they say." (Catozzella 222)

A similar representation should not come as a surprise if one considers
that the Western opinion has often seen the world as contradictory,
opposing men to animals, the colonizer and the colonized, the civi-
lized and the savage. One must not forget that the animal was used
as a derogatory metaphor to designate the otherness and *sauvagerie*
of the colonized, so as to form a category that includes all the victims
of European colonialism. Such a condition is presented again today
with the representation of the contemporary migrant, who is seen as
imprisoned, camping out, and crammed into spaces of exception in-
doors, or sometimes outdoors, by the actions of the nation States and by
the international community. Recently, we have witnessed the recent

rescue operations at sea and the closing of the harbors and borders of some European States. As Geda wrote in *Nel mare ci sono i coccodrilli*:

> It was a sort of stable, large and with an extremely high rooftop, a stable that hosted clandestine instead of cows. We Afghans were put next to the Pakistanis for sleeping and this was not a good idea. So, that night a brawl occurred for the lack of enough room [...] We were locked in there for four days. (Geda 97)

If these texts show the persistence of a certain colonial condition, it is also true that they give visibility to those who still do not have a power of representation, that is those who are excluded or at the margins, and migrants, So, common stories of cultures and lost, complex, invisible traditions in the traumatic experiences of crossing the Mediterranean towards Europe are intertwined. Such literary texts also have a strong documentary and sociological value, in addition to a literary one, as they inform reality on the specific and peculiar characteristics of the contemporary migrating fluxes. The description of the journey reveals the "contact zones" (Pratt), namely the social spaces in which one's identity and sense of cultural belonging are constantly negotiated when in contact with different places and cultures. As Mary Louise Pratt said: "I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today."

Considering the term "journey" again, an alternative is presented by comparatist Graziella Parati who wrote in *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*:

> A destination presupposes a journey that metaphorically, and in practice, translates, that is moves across borders and betrays them. It involves a process of remapping geographical and cultural terrains that overflow the bounds of national lines. In fact, a destination culture is also imbricated in wider processes of globalization. (Parati)

The scholar uses the English term *journey* — which cannot be easily translated in other languages — to underline the process of geographical and cultural *remapping* implied in every kind of shift. As Eric Leed wrote in *The Mind of the Traveler* (1991): "journeying is a qualitatively different event from departures and arrivals, because it is an experience of movement through the borders and in *space* [...]" (Leed). The application of such reflection to that contemporary literature interested in migrating processes leads one to consider the migration

journey as a constructive and dynamic process through which one can experiment the "threshold space" in a geocritical sense. By such expression one intends borders, liminal spaces, interstitial passages, contact zones, etc. Even if the novels in our corpus present themes and narrative/argumentative processes representing postcolonial and migration literature, the attention of the contemporary authors is geared mostly towards the narrative of the circumnavigation of the migrants. Indeed, in Leed's opinion, the journey is "a central rather than a peripheral force in historical transformation" and "the creation of local, the mapping of territory, the territorializing of humanity are achievements of mobility [...]" (ibid.). However, if for the American sociologist "the structure of the journey" is articulated in three moments, departure, journey, arrival, for the contemporary authors what matters is the representation of the journey, why, how, where, and when (and if) the migrants arrive in Europe. Such an aspect gives the migration journey writing an unusual prestige, because it "provides important insights into the many encounters and exchanges currently taking place between cultures, and into the lives being led, and the subjectivities being formed, in a globalizing world" (Thompson 2).

If the Odyssey represented the ultimate *nostos*, that is the journey back to the homeland, as well as the temporal narration of a linear shift, the post contemporary nomads instead do not go back to their beloved "Ithaca." Their shift is neither linear, nor circular, but it is formed by a multitude of trajectories which are often unpredictable, by escape lines oriented towards a non-coming or a different future. "Where are you going?" Fabio Catozzella asked Enaiatollah several times during his interview in *Nel mare ci sono i coccodrilli*. Such question announces that the movement operated by the young Afghan boy is projected ahead in space and time, towards an indefinite horizon that the narrator wants to recount, describe, and understand, but is unknown to the traveler. What hides behind this simple naked line? Probably, a promise, or simply a call warning people of the presence of a repertoire of paradoxical narratives, as well as of the necessity to listen. "This is it. The hope for a better life is stronger than any other feeling. For example, my mother decided that knowing I was in danger away from her, but on a journey to a different future, that I was better off this way, instead of being stuck in the same old fear" (Geda 73).

A Geocritical Reflection upon Journey, Migration, and Literature

It is evident that the world has been entirely mapped, but when one claims that a map corresponds to a territory it means giving up the variety of wonders and experiences of the world on a geocritical standpoint "to go in search of the real truth in real life, albeit illusory, which might be universal, atemporal, and absolute," as Westphal wrote (2019, 9). In an era in which "shared spaces" are becoming a more widely discussed topic and the idea of space disregards a specific area, while painting some cultural pictures – as Appadurai claims – the very concept of space needs to be tuned to a literary point of view. "Challenging" the idea of space in a worldly context means that scholars will face an aenigma, having to open the doors to other possible and plausible worlds where the novel would be catalyst. Then, one should find alternative journeys and off-beaten tracks, as well as finding uncharted routes to understand the importance that deterritorializing and reterritorializing hold today in (de) construction of the world's space and in the evolution of genres and literary works.

Returning to literary texts, such process is developed around two main themes, crossing and the building of a new "imago mundi" [world picture]. The former is seen as a practice of crossing geographical, cultural, social, and linguistic borders. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa wrote: "Borderlands are *physically* present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldúa). In fact, a border is not to be exclusively intended in its traditional sense, as the Latins identified as *limes*, that is the geographical demarcation line between what is safe and what is not, between us and them, between locals and foreigners. On the contrary, this takes on an ontological value of great importance, as its crossing allows the individual to experiment the tangible world, and its "roughness." Indeed, Leed wrote that "boundaries are made by those who cross them." As French sociologist Michel Maffesoli illustrated in his study on nomadism "on est d'un lieu, on crée, à partir de ce lieu, des liens mais pour que celui-là et ceux-là prennent toute leur signification, il faut qu'ils soient, réellement ou fantasmatiquement, niés, dépassés, transgressés. Il s'agit là d'une marque du sentiment tragique de l'existence: rien ne se résout dans un dépassement synthétique, mais tout

se vit dans la tension, dans l'incomplétude" (Maffesoli 73).[7] The journey, when it is seen as a crossing, allows those who make it to reflect upon themselves and upon their surrounding world. By moving from place to place, a nomad becomes aware that more than one culture, location, and homeland exist. To Patrick Chamoiseau, wandering leads people towards the "relational world":

> Nulle étrangeté, nul étranger, dans la Relation. Les éloignements s'y amoindrissent et vont disparaitre. L'exil n'existe plus vraiment. Les diasporas bourgeonnent et prennent rhizomes en des métasphoras où s'accumulent plein de citoyennetés. Les cultures, les religions, les langues, celles dont on est originaires mais aussi toutes les autres, ne sont plus de corsets invisibles que l'on charroie à vie. (...) La mise en Relation nous emporte un à un, et nous transforme en permanence. L'altérité ancienne – agressive, terrifiante – n'a plus de place. (Chamoiseau 97)

Consequently, crossing represents a rite of passage towards building a new relational and rhizomatic identity. It is the result of multiple crossovers, of numerous cultural contaminations and creolization occurring in the contact zones where the journey itself becomes a facilitator. Michel Agier wrote in this regard: "depuis ce lieu-là, les mondes de la mobilité et du déplacement, j'observe les sociétés qui regardent les migrants" (Agier). In his opinion, the identity of the wanderer is not only defined by his or her relationship with the other, the diverse, but it is also defined by the ideas and words we own and we use to describe and talk about it. Such expressions are some narratives, models of representation of reality that have been repeated and forced until they have become the only accepted and feasible ones. On the other hand, nowadays these representative models need to be revised, because they are no longer suitable and valid to explain the historical and cultural complexity of the contemporary migration phenomenon.

In a geocritical perspective, crossing might be considered as the perceiving means, other than the key factor to determine the physical condition of the traveler through which migrants perceive themselves, their surrounding environments, and other people. This way, they highlight the variety of experiences and representative spaces depicted in several texts. As Henri Lefebvre wrote in *La Production de l'espace*: "Il n'y a donc pas d'un côté l'espace global (conçu) et de l'autre l'espace fragmenté (vécu) comme il peut y a voir ici un verre ou un miroir brisé.

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7   "One is in a place and relations start to form in that place. To make them acquire all their meanings, they must be denied, overcome, transgressed, whether in real life or in fantasy. It is a sign of a tragic feeling of existence, nothing is resolved in the fake overcoming, but all is lived in tension and lack of achievement."

L'espace 'est' à la fois total et cassé, global et facturé. De même qu'il est à la fois conçu, perçu, vécu" (Lefebvre). For example, prisons are claustrophobic, unhealthy, and dark spaces where the contact with the other is often violent and painful resounding with the voices of sorrow. In such situation, the other has no alternative but to become an enemy or a friend, with no possible negotiation. As a matter of fact, those writers who describe contemporary migrations, confirm the strength of circumnavigating as a process of knowledge and privileged tool to understand otherness, whether it be ours or belonging to the other. Catozzella wrote in *Non dirmi che hai paura* "That was the Journey. They looked at us as if we were worthless, as if we were things moving from one place to another" (Catozzella 178). Then, the space would be expressed through the characters' and the authors' points of view, based on their reactions to the space of the other and its inhabitants. In this way, the crossing of the Mediterranean and/or the desert is to be intended as a system of recommendations and representations upon which the individuals project their histories, imageries, and aspirations. Related to this topic, Arjun Appadurai wrote in *Modernity at Large*:

> Instead, what is implied is that even the meanest and most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanizing of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities are now open to the play of the imagination. Prisoners of conscience, child laborers [...] no longer see their lives as mere outcomes of the givenness of things, but often as the ironic compromise between what they could imagine and what social life will permit. Thus, the biographies of ordinary people are constructions (or fabrications) in which the imagination plays an important role. (Appadurai 1996, 54)

In the texts the space of representation becomes then an indicator of a specific physical and existential condition on the one hand, while on the other is becomes the creative force of new imageries in the other. The protagonists oppressed by war, by poverty, or dictatorship in their countries find themselves in a tensive and suspensive status oscillating between the experiences of living here and remembering/wishing another place and between a dystopic present and a utopic future. They will find themselves in an interstitial position, meaning that they will live a «third space penetrated by all the forces that are born and that express themselves at the border between the two worlds» (Westphal). More precisely, it is a meeting place with varied experiences drawing an *ici* (here) and an *ailleurs* (there), the same to the diverse, a local event to a global one. In Agier's opinion it is necessary to learn how to observe the border again, with its interstitial space where the other and the different are. As the will to trace lines,

to divide, and create layers in the surrounding space persists, "the imagination field will narrow, and so will its melody":

> Que des frontières, en effet. Que des méridiens, que des parallèles. Que des barreaux qui donnent à l'espace une mesure trompeuse. N'as-tu donc des hémisphères sur les yeux? Il en est tant. Au nord, l'hémisphère boréal, au sud, l'austral, au milieu un équateur qui rime avec sécateur. L'un serait riche beaucoup, passionnément, à la folie, l'autre le serait un peu, pas du tout. Il est un autre regard sur la cage qui répartirait les méridiens entre hémisphères ouest et hémisphère est, de part et d'autre du méridien de Greenwich. (Westphal 2016, 13)

When applied to literature, such evidence leads us, firstly, to consider why the necessity of preserving uniqueness and diversity in national literatures is crucial. Then, what is equally important for the emerging of new global literary forms needs to be taken into account. In a shifting and fluid context of globalization, such literary texts focusing on both the journey and migrating issues lead art and literature to redefine the investigative range, to escape the clichés and stereotypes spawned by the traditional maps of our cultural and geographical maps. This is also an invitation for the scholar to wander in a space where real and imaginary worlds coexist. Such space is called literature.

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