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Raise Your Voice: The Multicultural Question and the Birth of Migrant Literature in Italy

Abstract: At a time when Italian society is experiencing a surge of ethnic intolerance and xenophobia, the paper addresses the question: “what role can migrant literature play in creating a multicultural society?” In so doing, the paper continues the debate opened in the 50th issue of this journal concerning the anthropological relevance of migrant literature. It shifts the analysis to Italy and looks at the period of fast demographic, legal, and cultural transformation that occurred between the 1980s and the 1990s. This is the moment when Italy turned into an international destination for global migration; a change that also required a cultural change in the country in terms of multiculturalism. Thus, the paper explores the birth of Italian migrant literature and presents the main steps in the development of this genre, which encompasses both bottom-up and top-down initiatives. The analysis suggests migrant literature is a key cultural medium through which the new migrant communities have negotiated their cultural presence in the country and created a bridge and a comprehensive cultural framework within which the different cultures of the new Italians can coexist and mix with the old ones. In this respect, the development of migrant literature can be read as a tool for integration and a fertile ground for cultural innovation. At the same time, the analysis also points out the power relations that underpin the process of cultural creation and the strategies used by migrants in order to achieve legitimacy.

Key words: migration, Italy, migrant literature, voice, multiculturalism, cultural integration

Introduction

The fiftieth issue of *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* makes an interesting contribution to the debate about migration by bringing to the fore the potentialities offered by the analysis of so-called migrant literature through the lens of anthropology (Antonijević 2020). Migrant literature is a literary macro-genre that includes all works written by migrants in the language of the country of new settlement. This body of literature encompasses works of different

genres, from novels to autobiography, from poetry to folktales, that shed light on different aspects of everyday life and ordinary affairs of migrant communities, providing material to investigate crucial themes of the contemporary debate, such as cultural and social integration, political participation, use of the public space. In particular considering the European context, migrant literature provides elements to understand better the extent of the anthropological change that is transforming Europe from a continent of nations and nationalisms (McDonald 1993; Shore 2000) to a new multicultural ethnoscape (Appadurai 1996, 33).

Multiculturalism was the focus of much debate in the social sciences in the 1990s, and, in the last decade, has gained new prominence with the intensification of migratory movements in Europe and the Mediterranean (Andersson 2014; Barlai, Fahrnich, Griessler, & Rhomborg 2017; De Genova 2017; Fontefrancesco 2012; Hewitt 2013; Zanfrini 2018). It describes the existence of an ethnoscape (Appadurai 1996, 33) based on the juxtaposition of a plurality of traditions and ethnic groups within the borders of the same locality or country. Until recently, it was used to define the active policies that could “truly promote pluralism, the peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures, and equal citizenship” (Prato 2009, 16). However, more recently it has been profoundly criticized. As suggested by Prato (2009, 2), “even among those who in principle advocate multi-culturalism, criticism has been expressed of policies that continue to exoticize ‘otherness’ [...]. Stronger critics argue that multiculturalism is a basically divisive concept that ultimately favours one community over another, fueling competition and conflict”. Multiculturalism has also become a political term aimed at defining a set of different actions, often with contradictory meanings. The term is used, on the one hand, to denote actions to promote intercultural communication and encourage hybridizations and synergic cultural developments. On the other, it denotes a way to stress the differences between ethnic groups and to foster a fundamental, socio-cultural competition between them, even at the risk of exacerbating more or less dormant conflicts (Cotter, 2011). With such a variety of approaches and meanings, the semiotic richness of this term makes its definition particularly elusive (Vertovec & Wessendorf 2010). Although the anthropological community has started again, in the last decade, to question the meaning of this term and its relation to the new context of global migration (Baumann & Vertovec 2011; Vertovec 2010), such complexity expresses the profound sense of a society that is still trying to deal with and give meaning to its own fast-changing ethnic horizon, to build the backbone of a new, culturally plural, society.

The recent surge of ethnic intolerance and xenophobia that characterizes contemporary Europe (Barlai et al. 2017) demands new answers concerning models of organization of an increasingly multi-ethnic society, and above all it poses questions concerning how to promote a constructive dialogue among the

different ethnic components that are part of contemporary society. Thus, the answer appears to be bound to how migrant communities establish a relationship with the host culture, and how they are able to find their voice.

The paper addresses these questions by looking at Italy and the birth of its migrant literature in the 1980s-1990s, to make sense of the many cultural and political contradictions we are experiencing (Giordano 2008; Syring 2009). It opens with a historical focus on the social transformation concerning the migrant experience in Italy in this period, then presents the early experiences of migrant literature in the country. Analysing the dynamics that underpin the birth of migrant literature in Italy, the paper discusses how this genre represents a first attempt to create a public voice for the new component of Italian society; a process that involves both bottom-up and top-down initiatives. It asks what kind of space was left for the voice of migrant communities; how this space was negotiated; and what is the contribution of the migrant voice in creating a new, multicultural Italy.

This contribution was originally drafted during my service at the University of Mary Washington. After that first experience, my research has continued the investigation of cultural integration and multiculturalism both from a theoretical perspective (Fontefrancesco 2012; Fontefrancesco et al. 2019) and through applied projects (Fontefrancesco 2019; Fontefrancesco & Voza 2020; Fontefrancesco & Zocchi, In press). In this paper, I go back to the original work to investigate how migrants started creating their voices in Italian society. I want to thank prof. Federico Schnider and prof. Dragana Antonijević for their support that motivates me in this work.

The Historical Framework

In Italy, the tradition of books written by migrants about immigration and their native culture is recent. It originated in 1990, when the country was first touched by international mass migration (Comberiati 2010). Until the post-WWII period, Italy was mostly a country of emigrants, heading to northern Europe, the Americas, and Australia (Bravo 2013). Moreover, the decolonization process of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, and Somalia, stated in the 1950s, generated only a limited migration to the “homeland” (Proglino 2020): overall, the phenomenon was limited to a few hundred people per year, generally middle or upper class coming to Italy for business, tourism, and study (Bonifazi 1998).

The situation changed in the 1980s, at the end of the Cold War, and found Italy without a real tradition of and preparation for migration management, as well as with outdated national legislation on migration, which dated back to the 1940s.

The early flows were predominantly from Africa, predominantly from the Maghreb. While the newcomers were able to find jobs in sectors Italians were deserting, such as fruit pickers, tanners, caregivers, and peddlers (Bonifazi 1998), the rise of immigration led to social and cultural tensions between new and old Italians, mainly caused by the lack of habit in dealing with the ethnic diversity of the host population, the inability to understand and anticipate the needs of the newcomers, as well as an increasing preoccupation with the difficulties arising from the economic crisis that the country was facing (Perrino 2019).

A landmark in the history of migration in Italy was an event that occurred on 25th August 1989 (De Cesaris & Impagliazzo 2020). In Villa Literno (CE), a delinquent gang tried to rob a group of migrant agricultural workers. During the robbery, Jerry Masslo, one of the migrants, was shot. Masslo was a political refugee from South Africa. In Italy, he found a job as a tomato picker in Villa Literno. There he had a role as a local activist for immigrant rights.

His death provoked a deep national debate that led to the reform of the overtly outdated immigration law. In particular, Claudio Martelli, the Deputy Prime Minister, promoted a campaign to reform the national legislation. The results of the initiative matured in a few months. In February 1990, the Parliament approved a new immigration law promoted by the Deputy Prime Minister: Legge 28 Febbraio 1990, n. 39. Conversione in legge, con modificazioni del decreto-legge 30 dicembre 1989, n. 416 recante norme urgenti in materia di asilo politico, di ingresso e soggiorno dei cittadini extracomunitari e di regolarizzazione dei cittadini extracomunitari ed apolidi già presenti nel territorio dello stato. Disposizioni in materia di asilo [Law n. 39, 28/2/1990. Passage into law of the Ministerial Decree n. 416, 30/12/1989, containing urgent norms concerning political asylum, access and stay of non-European citizens, and settlement for non-European and stateless citizens already in the country. Norms concerning asylum.], better known as “the Martelli Law”. The law was an important step forward for the country and an attempt to control and monitor immigration in the face of an emergent scenario of intensification of inbound flows. It created a new system of permits for incoming migrants and an easier protocol for regularizing the status of people already illegally present in the country.

In the ‘90s, the migration flows from Eastern Europe intensified due to the end of the Cold War policies, the fall of socialist regimes, economic instability, civil unrest, and war (Brusa 1999). In particular, the unexpected, fast, and intense migration from Albania, starting in 1991 had the deepest impact on the political debate (Mehillaj 2010).

In March of that year, Albania held the first democratic elections that marked the end of the socialist regime led by Ramiz Aija. They also signalled the beginning of Albanian migration to Italy, with 24,000 Albanian refugees arriving in

Italy within the span of three days. Faced with this emergency, the Government opted for granting them political asylum, providing them with work permits. The flow did not stop. Between the 7th and 8th of August, a new wave of migrants arrived, crammed in a small fleet of decrepit civilian boats. In the two days, more than 15,000 Albanians docked in Bari. The local football stadium was used as a temporary reception camp, while helicopters were dropping off food and water. Riots erupted among the migrants, protesting against the dire conditions. The protests continued while the building was severely damaged. Five days later, the Italian government started a repatriation initiative: 17,466 Albanians were airlifted back to their home country and given \$40, and a new T-shirt and a new pair of trousers.

During the crisis, Italian televisions and newspapers were swamped with images and stories from Bari and what was reported as the “Albanian invasion” (Mehillaj 2010). They deeply shocked the Italian public, inflaming the debate with a mix of compassion and repulsion. Above all, they highlighted the need for further legal reforms and the substantial lack of preparation of the Italian society in facing the new cultural, economic, political, and social challenges constituted by the management, reception, and integration of migration flows.

In the following years, the political debate continued oscillating between solidarity and rejection. A new immigration law was approved on 6th March 1998: Legge 6 Marzo 1998, n. 40. Disciplina dell’immigrazione e norme sulla condizione dello straniero [Law 40, 6/3/1998. Immigration regulation and norms about the state of foreignness], also known as “Turco-Napolitano Law” after the names of the Minister for Solidarity, Livia Turco, and the Home Minister, Giorgio Napolitano. It was aimed at fighting illegal migration through a new process of authorization based on a principle of progressive acquisition of rights. However, considered too permissive by the conservatives, the law was abrogated a few years later. On 30th July 2002, the conservative majority in the Parliament approved Legge 30 Luglio 2002, n. 189. Modifica alla normativa in materia di immigrazione e asilo. [Law 189, 30/7/2002. Changes in immigration and asylum policy.]. The law was called “Bossi-Fini”, after the names of Umberto Bossi, Minister for Institutional Reforms and Devolution, and Umberto Bossi, Deputy Prime Minister, and is still in force today. It restricts the legal possibility of accessing the country through a stringent quota system and a severe criminalization of illegal migration.

The Bossi-Fini Law marks the end of a decade in which the Italian political system and society encountered global migration and a multicultural society and developed the early tools to cope with it; a period in which the birth of migrant literature should be contextualized.

The Birth of Migrant Literature

The birth of migrant literature can be set in 1990 (Naletto 2000). Literature arrived after other media had already attempted to introduce the public to the reality of migration. It was the case of *Pummarò*, a TV movie directed by Michele Placido, that tells the story of a Ghanaian tomato picker and portrays the dire conditions of employment, and the racial prejudices and social taboos migrants experienced once arrived in Italy (Forgacs 2001).

Immigrato [Immigrated] by Salah Methnani and Mario Fortunato was the first migrant novel published. Written by two journalists of the Italian newsmagazine *L'Espresso*, the book relates the life of a Tunisian immigrant who leaves his home to get to know the world outside. Having arrived in Europe, he faces the reality of discrimination. Set in France, Italy, and Tunisia, the novel depicts the migrants as men with their own humanity, culture, and dignity, against the caricature-like representation provided by widespread racist stereotypes, and points out the difficulties migrants experience during their journey as well as in their life in their new countries.

The same year, Pap Khouma and Oreste Pivetta published *Io venditore di Elefanti. Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano* [I, Elephant Seller. A forced life between Dakar, Paris, and Milan]. The book is the autobiography of Pap Khouma, a Senegalese peddler. It describes the author's experiences as a street-seller, showing the difficulties he experienced in Italy and in Senegal, and, addressing the Italian debate about the causes of migration, the book remarks that "the misery, the desire for freedom and for knowledge [are] the principal reasons for the departure" (Naletto 2000, 47).

Immigrato and *Io venditore di Elefanti* were acclaimed by the press and achieved publishing success. For a short time, major publishing houses were interested in the subject of migration and started publishing volumes about the migrant condition written by migrants, such as *La promessa di Hamadi* [Hamadi's Promise], by Saidou Moussa Ba and Chiamatemi Ali [Call me Ali] by Mohamed Bouchane both published in 1991. However, the events of 7th and 8th August, and the rising tension around the theme of migration, marked an end to this initial editorial trend.

Since 1993, migrant literature has become a macro-genre mostly cultivated by NGOs active in the field of cultural integration, such as Mani Tese and Nigri-zia, or small and local publishers, like Terre di Mezzo, Eks&Tra, Fara, Edizioni Lavoro. In this respect, the history of one of these publishers, Edizioni dell'Arco, is particularly relevant. It was founded in 1989 as the university press of IULM University in Milan. In 1994, the publisher started printing the magazine *Solidarietà Come*, edited by the NGO "Gruppo Solidarietà Come". Building on this experience, Edizioni dell'Arco launched a book series, one of the earliest

of its kind, dedicated to migrant writers. Besides this first innovation, Edizioni dell'Arco was particularly interesting in terms of the methods they used for selling their publications. The publisher decided to sell its books not only through more conventional outlets, such as bookshops or via the internet, but also in the streets, as is common in West Africa. To distribute and sell its publications, Edizioni dell'Arco employed over 400 migrants who peddled the books across Northern Italy, where most of the migrant population lives.

The mid-1990s saw a series of innovations in migrant literature, first of all from a linguistic perspective. Early migrant novels, such as *Immigrato* and *Io venditore di Elefanti*, as well as other titles, such as *Volevo diventare bianca* [I Would Like to be White] by Nassera and Alessandro Atti di Sarro (1993), and *La memoria di A* by Saidou Moussa Ba and Alessandro Micheletti (1995), were published by migrant writers with the help of Italian co-authors. The language used was a standard literary Italian, and little space was left for expressing the actual creole language used by migrants in their everyday life. *Pantanella. Canto lungo la strada* [Pantanella. The Song Along the Street] by Mohsen Melliti (1992) is the first novel that wanted to portray the emergent new language of the migrant community through the stories of migrants that squat in an abandoned factory. Starting with Melliti's work, migrant literature explored and employed new stylistic tools to describe the migrants' lives and cultures. For example, in Melliti's next work, *I bambini delle rose* [The Children of the Roses], two different stories of migration are told by the protagonists, Nico, a Roma, and Lyn, a Chinese, in Italian, employing baby-talk and words and stylistic elements derived from their native languages in order to depict their cultural backgrounds, dreams, hopes, adventures, and everyday life.

While the language of migrant literature changed and expanded in order to cover new and unexplored registers, it also experimented with new literary genres, such as poetry and folktales, in a strong attempt to move from the description of the experience of migration and present the native cultures of the migrants to an Italian audience. This is the case of the poetry collection *Nhindo nero* [Black Nhindo] edited by Ndjock Ngana (1994) or the fairy tales collection *Numbelan* [Numbelan] by Gadjji Mbacke (1996).

At the end of the 1990s, migrant literature had evolved into a complex mosaic of different literary genres; books printed by minor publishers with limited, often mostly local, circulation. This emerging picture suggests the pervasiveness of a social fact (immigration) and a cultural phenomenon (migrant literature) mostly in the large urban centers and the North of Italy. Moreover, it points at the attempt of the migrant communities to achieve full and autonomous cultural and social legitimacy in a country that had difficulties in accepting its new, multicultural character. Above all, the dynamics linked with the birth of migrant literature suggest a difficult dialogue between new and old Italians;

the unfolding of a cultural field pervaded by what Kossi Komla-Ebri (2000) termed *imbarazzismi*, *embarracisms*: a neologism that depicts the combination of embarrassment and racism that characterized a common attitude to cultural diversity spread across the country in post-Cold War Italy.

Writing for Legitimacy

While writers always live in their time, their works answer the questions and needs of their society (Escapirt 1992). Even more, the emergence of a new literary macro-genre answers and expresses the transformation of a society and its actors.

The birth of Italian migrant literature did not emerge from a pre-existent post-colonial tradition, as happened in the United Kingdom or in France (Mardorossian 2002). It is an original production that stems from the deep and sudden transformation of the Italian ethnoscape that occurred at the end of the Cold War. From the early novels, although many works are permeated by a sense of nostalgia for the native land (Skalle 2017), Italian migrant literature dealt with the difficult dialogue between native and Italian culture the condition of the migrant involves (Cinnare 2006) and a denouncement of the precarious condition of the migrants in contemporary Italy (Curti 2007).

In a country characterized by strong regionalist tensions (Bravo 2013; Schneider 1998), migrant literature contributed to presenting first-hand the reality of migration into the country and to creating a fertile ground for a substantial cultural and social legitimacy of the migrant community. In particular, as suggested by Anita Virga (2019), these works contributed to de-racializing the idea of “Italianness”, opening a path, although contested (Berrocal 2010), to multi-cultural development.

The history of the birth and the early stages of development of migrant literature shows an interesting dynamic that underpins the process of cultural legitimation of migrants. This is characterized by a sudden U-turn. The history of the early books, published by large publishers and widely debated in the national press, suggests the development of a top-down legitimation via co-optation of difference, promoted by the political and cultural elites of the country. This process came to a halt with the reaction to Albanian immigration, with a move away from the large publishers, leaving migrants to face a process of legitimization through resistance and testimony. This process developed with a bottom-up approach, having as protagonists the migrant community as well as actors of the third sector involved in the field of cultural integration. If this marginalization precluded migrant literature from being a national, unifying, and hegemonic phenomenon of cultural legitimation, on the other hand it allowed free experimentation with new artistic and linguistic forms. In this context, migrant litera-

ture became one of the ways in which the voice of the migrant community was created and expressed.

Finally, the debate concerning multiculturalism highlights the importance of the legitimization through which a cultural community negotiates its presence within a complex society. The research suggests migrant literature is one of these tools. In particular, the birth of migrant literature in Italy suggests the role of this genre in creating a bridge and a comprehensive framework within which the different cultures of the new Italians can coexist and mix with that of the old Italians. In this respect, it can be read as a tool for integration and a fertile ground for cultural innovation. The research, however, also points to the power relations that underpin the development of this literature.

Where after 1991 the migrant community has been left without access to the main cultural channels, the process of legitimization and multicultural construction has developed through the colonization of novel, marginal spaces by new cultural minorities. These outlets, however, have proved functional in continuing a dialogue between new and old Italians, but not in fully building complete intercultural awareness in the entire Italian population. Still, after thirty years, migrants have to cope with embarrassments of a different kind in Italy; a reality that points out the responsibility of political and cultural elites for not having guided the country into a full process of multicultural development. Despite this, the voice of the migrants, full of hope, suffering, and potentialities to express, is there, in the pages of migrant literature, to be heard and fully turned into a resource for further social and cultural development.

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Podigni svoj glas: pitanje multikulturalnosti i rađanje migrantske književnosti u Italiji

U trenutku kada italijansko društvo potresaju uzburkane strasti zbog etničke netolerancije i ksenofobije, tekst postavlja pitanje: kakva je uloga migrantske literature u stvaranju multikulturalnog društva? Čineći to, ovaj članak predstavlja nastavak debate otvorene u 50-om broju ovog časopisa a koji se ticao antropološke relevantnosti migrantske književnosti. Usmeravajući analitički pogled ka Italiji, osvrćem se na period brzih demografskih, pravnih i kulturnih promena koje su se dogodile tokom 80-ih i 90-ih godina prošlog veka. To je bio trenutak kada je Italija postala međunarodna destinacija za globalne migracije, što je bila promena koja je zahtevala da i država prođe kulturnu transformaciju ka multikulturalizmu. U tom smislu, članak ispituje rođenje italijanske migrantske književnosti i prikazuje glavne etape u razvoju tog žanra koji je obuhvatio inicijative obostrano i odozgo na dole i odozdo ka gore. U analizi se sugeriše da je migrantska književnost ključni kulturni medijum pomoću koga nove migrantske zajednice pregovaraju svoje kulturno prisustvo u zemlji, stvaraju most i sveobu-

hvatni kulturni okvir unutar koga različite kulture novih Italijana mogu da žive i mešaju se sa starom, postojećom kulturom. U tom smislu, razvoj migrantske književnosti može se shvatiti kao sredstvo za integraciju i plodno tle za kulturnu inovaciju. U isto vreme, analiza ukazuje na moćan odnos koji povezuje proces kulturnog stvaranja i strategije koje migranti koriste da bi stekli legitimnost.

Ključne reči: migracije, Italija, migrantska književnost, glas, multikulturalizam, kulturna integracija

Lève ta voix: question de la multiculturalité et de la naissance de la littérature migrante en Italie

Au moment où la société italienne est secouée par des passions violentes en raison de l'intolérance ethnique et de la xénophobie, le texte pose la question suivante: quel est le rôle de la littérature migrante dans la création de la société multiculturelle? Ce faisant, cet article se présente comme une continuation du débat ouvert dans le n° 50 u de cette revue et qui concernait la pertinence anthropologique de la littérature migrante. En orientant mon regard analytique vers l'Italie, je me penche sur la période des changements démographiques, juridiques et culturels rapides qui ont eu lieu au cours des années 80 et 90 du siècle passé. À ce moment-là l'Italie était devenue une destination internationale pour les migrations globales, et ce changement exigeait que l'État vive une transformation culturelle en direction du multiculturalisme. En ce sens, l'article examine la naissance de la littérature migrante et rend compte des étapes principales dans le développement de ce genre qui a englobé des initiatives mutuelles, du haut vers le bas et du bas vers le haut. Dans l'analyse est suggéré que la littérature migrante est le médium culturel clé à l'aide duquel les nouvelles communautés migrantes négocient leur présence culturelle dans le pays, créent un pont et un cadre culturel global à l'intérieur duquel les différentes cultures des nouveaux Italiens peuvent vivre et se mélanger avec une culture ancienne existante. En ce sens, le développement de la littérature migrante peut être compris comme un moyen d'intégration et un sol fertile pour l'innovation culturelle. En même temps, l'analyse rend compte d'un rapport puissant qui lie le processus de création culturelle et les stratégies utilisées par les migrants pour acquérir leur légitimité.

Mots clés: migrations, Italie, littérature migrante, voix, multiculturalisme, intégration culturelle

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