

## Inscribing the ‘Other’ as co-author: Migration, Identity and civil society in contemporary Italy.

Dr. Francesco Melfi  
Cleveland State University  
USA  
E-mail: ayham1@aol.com

### Introduction

This essay, written by an Italian, focuses on two pioneering literary works produced by writers who immigrated to Italy from Arab countries. They learned Italian and began to inscribe the ‘Other’ as co-author in a brand new world of Italian letters. I review this new literature and explore how these works have enriched recent debates on emigration in general while helping reshape old attitudes toward national minorities. These questions are even more cogent today, I think, in light of the recent dramatic events that have been taking place across the Arab world. In my view, these events invite a philosophical reflection on *antecedents* in the larger Mediterranean area and the recognition that intellectual homelands have grown supranationally. After all, weren’t Arab immigrants writing in European languages also among those who paved the way for a general awakening of a new Arab consciousness? Arabs are our neighbors and increasingly among our fellow citizens. Their cultures have contributed enormously to the Mediterranean world and to European history in general. The Arab popular revolutions underway are only the last if the most magnificent event in a long history of intellectual cross-fertilizations around the shores of *Mare Nostrum*, our shared sea. How specifically, in what new ways will they impact this exchange in the future? Having all this in mind we may begin to re-assess both the novelty of immigrant writing in Italian as well as its continuing impact on Italian identity. Naturally, this study is framed within an Italian context already froth with exploding contradictions arising from the tortuous history of Italy as a unified State. The picture that emerges in the end is one of exciting possibilities for a new type of Italian literature born out of these many intersecting strands. Clearly, my view throughout is that at bottom Italian Self rests on an idea of national identity itself borne out of *in-* and *out-*migrations. I submit that this may also be true of the newly growing Arab Self.

### Always a *locus* of *in-* and *out-*migrations Italy tries to redefine her-Self: history, identity, and civil society.

From the earliest times Italy has been a land of migrants, both *im-* and *e-*migrants. These *in-* and *out-*movements have branded the Italian psyche forever. Italians not too long ago were wont to say about themselves *siamo un popolo di emigranti*, we’re a people of emigrants. Often an easy entry point on the route to Northern European countries, Italy has become increasingly a final destination for scores of migrants from all over. Not surprisingly, this reversal has produced a drastic change in the ways today Italians view *in-* and *out-*migrants. The novelty of these new migratory waves, however, lies in the fact that they have been carrying onto our ancient Lavinian shores a growing number of people from the educated classes who have learned Italian and under a multiple array of stimuli both internal and external have started writing in Italian. This is in itself new in a country that used to think of herself as culturally homogeneous. Equally important is the fact these immigrants have begun carving a space for themselves, an *in-between locus*, in which they can acquire a freedom that would probably be denied to them in a total Italian or Arab social and cultural environment.

Fortunately, for years cultural and political ferments of all kinds have been animating the streets and the squares of Italy, where students, workers, professionals, young, women, minorities, and immigrants inhabit the *paese reale*, the ‘actual country.’ This is a slice of society wedged between the *paese legale*, the site containing the political institutions, and the civil society proper. These people contribute to what many Italians define as the *healthy and sound* portion, the *parte sana*, of Italian society and this portion continues to respond to new migration waves with solidarity and a deep sense of humanity. This is the part of Italian society that embraces immigrants most consistently. Over the last two decades the presence of immigrant voices in Italian letters has grown both in number and quality. The names of Salah Methnani, Salwa Selim, Rula Jebreal, Younis Tawfik, Mohamed Ghonim, and Youssef Wakkas are familiar to all well read Italian readers today. These are among those more than twenty Arab writers who write in Italian today. They contribute poems, short-stories, novels, columns and scholarly essays. Their homelands include Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, the Maghreb countries, and Palestine. They are positioned squarely in the national debate intervening in the media on all issues regarding immigration, civil society, national culture, the Arab world, and issues of identity.

The May 2008 issue of *Quaderni Radicali* tellingly bears the title, *Democratic and liberal Arabs: what's odd about this?*<sup>1</sup> This issue that contains contributions by Italian and Arab migrant writers and professionals powerfully chips away at some of the layers of that *senso comune*, those commonly held clichés that have been let gone unchecked for long. This is one example of how migrant intellectuals join the *parte sana* in our civil society and help reinvigorate it. These intellectual developments have not been taking place on the margins of Italian literature. Rather, like DNA strands the literatures written by immigrant and native writers have become and stand intertwined in a give-and-take of healthy and amazingly enriching reciprocal influences. The result has been the emergence of a *new type* of Italian literature. As *Arbëreshe* writer Carmine Abate wrote with his usual foresight a few years ago, Italian literature has become increasingly multi-cultural and has increasingly turned into a forum of self-affirming new identities helping Italians themselves reformulate their own.<sup>2</sup> We are witnessing a process in which all kinds of boundaries are being pushed further and further away. A remaking of Italian literature is underway due to all kinds of imported migratory stimuli. Reading this new literature gives me, myself an emigrant from Naples, a wonderful sensation.

As I read, each page of this new literature, in fact, magically chips away for me at that old small petty conservative provincial Italy we Italians call *Italietta*, born of an ever malfunctioning Italian State. This is the same *Italietta* that forced so many Italians from the South to uproot themselves and emigrate to Northern Italy and Europe or across the Atlantic in the hope of a better life. I am ecstatic. The more I read the more this *Italietta* I hate recedes under my very eyes. (Will it ever disappear?) This is some of the good stuff that has been emerging within the Peninsular *parte sana*. Of course, this has been all along the goal of *Kuma'*, an on-line magazine devoted to “creole-ize and decolonize” the world of Italian letters.<sup>3</sup> The magazine has been around since the 1990s and is currently funded by the important university of Rome *La Sapienza* which also backs financially the research institute *Basili*, a data bank for immigrants who write in Italian, a unique research center in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Both of these initiatives are the brain child of Taranto born scholar Arnaldo Gnisci, the universally recognized doyen of multi-cultural and comparative studies in Italy.

With over thirty ground-breaking works of scholarship to his credit in both the comparative and cross-cultural fields Gnisci has been specifically the active promoter both nationally and internationally of countless projects concerning what he calls the *letterature della migrazione*, the literatures of migration. In addition to this, his website *Voci dal silenzio* (voices from silence) publishes interviews with immigrant writers. Gnisci also publishes immigrants' original works in a magazine and a publishing house he has founded. This web site remains a key virtual locus for intervention and debate amongst immigrants themselves as well as between these and native Italian writers. Of course, this is exciting because it confirms a new trend. If Italians are interrogating themselves about their own identity so are immigrant writers asking questions about theirs. Having been carving an intellectual locus on Italian soil for themselves these writers have been writing themselves into a new fabric adding in so doing to the growth of a new canvas, a new national cultural identity. What are the odds these migrants and the *parte sana* are struggling to “remove” from our hearts and minds?

### Removing what?

Natives and immigrants write under conditions that have always been complex for everybody. These are, if possible, even more so today. This is a context continually complicated by contradictions that have never been allowed to find an appropriate historical resolution. The celebrations in preparation this year for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Italian unification may serve as a grand example for this. Two political statements about Italy have haunted the country for the last century and a half and still haunt today's Italian elites. The first was pronounced during the 1815 Congress of Vienna by Austrian minister Metternich and the other by Piedmontese modernizing brain Cavour in the aftermath of the *impresa dei Mille*.<sup>5</sup> What did these two men say that stuck so famously in our mind haunting us to this very day? Metternich defined Italy as a mere “geographic expression” while Cavour in the aftermath of the Piedmontese conquest of the Peninsula literally said “Now that we have made Italy we need to make the Italians.”

<sup>1</sup> *Quaderni Radicali* n. 101, Bimestrale, anno XXXI, Speciale Maggio, Il Riformista, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Arbëreshe* is a member of the Albanian national minority that has lived in Italy since the Ottoman conquest of Albania in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Their communities are mainly located in the South of Italy. They speak an older form of Albanian. A famous *Arbëreshe* was Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian Marxist and founder of the Communist Party of Italy.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about *Kuma' Creolizzare l'Europa* check [www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/kuma.html](http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/kuma.html).

<sup>4</sup> For *Basili Banca Dati Scrittori Immigrati in Lingua Italiana* see [www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/basili2001/](http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/basili2001/) The website also hosts *Voci dal Silenzio* I mention further down in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Literally “The 1000 Man Campaign” it refers to the 1860 military campaign orchestrated by the then Piedmontese King Victor Emanuel II and materialized by adventurer Garibaldi of a conquest by a *thousand* Red Shirts of the southern Neapolitan “Kingdom of the Two Sicilies,” which covered a good half of the Italian Peninsula.

The pendulum oscillating between these two assertions still resonates very loudly in Italy today. The *Lombard League* only in 2008 came out during the electoral campaign of that year with a shocking poster sporting the head of an American Indian man in full regalia thus depicting Italians as Native Americans forced on reservations by seemingly endless waves of immigrant hordes about to take over the country.<sup>6</sup> The image of an American Indian served to bring home the following message written across the poster: “They too suffered immigration. Now they live on reservations. Think about this.” Isn’t it disgustingly cheap to “use” and semiotically turn the dramatic historical condition of another people into a debasing cliché? And to do what with it? To make a fascist/white-suprematist point and turn immigrants into a plotting horde of barbaric oppressors? If in their deranged mind the Leghisti try to exert pressure for splitting the country using immigration as a scarecrow their fellow neo-Fascist colleagues in the Berlusconi-*esque* government coalition, on the other hand, wield nationalism as their own private cause and present themselves as the guardians of the unity of the fatherland. Isn’t it sad to see once again the *return of the repressed* surfacing so ignominiously barely sixty years after the Fascists destroyed *their* ‘father’-land? Are *these* also among the charming and folklore-*ish* Italians Americans love so much? I wonder.

Always divided and always a pawn between a democratic and an authoritarian vision ever since her “unification” in 1860, Italy recently revisited once again her own recent past with an event that spurred another national debate on identity. In 2010 the film *Noi credevamo* (We believed) by director Mario Martone was shown at the Venice Film Festival *Mostra del cinema*. It retells the Italian *Risorgimento*, the political “rise again” movement that inspired the Italian unification. However, the film retells it from the very different viewpoint of those who lost, i.e., the democratic and republican wing of that movement and the viewer is left to ponder and wonder whether we could have indeed had a different, more functional country. Really, could we have? Reviewing this entire history as one of *in*-and *out*-migrations Italians may give themselves yet another chance. On condition that the *parte sana* is able to impose an art of government that redeems in Horkheimer fashion the expectations of the past, particularly those nurtured by the *partigiani* of the Italian *Resistance* against the Nazi and the Fascists. In that time the *parte sana* stood up and won only, of course, to lose again betrayed as it was by those whom it had believed. Can the *parte sana* win again and hold onto its own victories ...? Antonio Gramsci famously wrote about the necessity for Italy to go through an “intellectual and moral” regeneration that should trigger the combined creative forces unleashed by the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. Much later, Pier Paolo Pasolini postulated the need for an *anthropological* trans-formation of the Italian people. Could the solution be the rise of a new *alter/native*?

### **With migration bound with identity can you make an “alter/native” out of an “Italian”?**

In a healthy departure from these Berlusconi-*esque* characters and their deep irrational fears, the *parte sana* assumes everybody’s Italian identity as a given extending it to all new immigrants. Can this be a case in which a literature that has overcome its narrow limits and struggling to remake itself into one with newer and larger horizons prefigures the affirmation of the idea of a real nation we have not had so far despite the efforts of her best men and women, a nation that is actually democratic and fearlessly open to all? Aren’t the many recent immigrants also importing into the Italian civil society together with their ancient and great civilizations also what we badly need: that boundless sense of freedom, creativity, courage, dignity, and trust in the future all of which Arabs are finding again every day and every night standing up all together on Tahrir square, in Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Iraq braving their own police, their petty bloody rulers, as well as all kinds of lurking foreign invaders? Wouldn’t this marvelous injection of enthusiasm and trust in the future make our *parte sana* even *piu’ sana*, even sounder? But in extending Italian identity to the “other”, the migrant, is also the voiced if implicit acknowledgement that Italians have always been themselves *in*- and *out*-migrants. In fact, to many Italians the *other* is still and simply the other *migrant*. For a country like Italy in which even Roman historians freely accepted their own status as descendants of ancient migrants to Italy Gnisci’s understanding of the recent history of Italian literature as essentially defined by a plurality of literatures also born of migration seems to fit the macro- historical context perfectly. However historically true, this discourse is resisted in many quarters. When asked how Italians who saw generations of their own emigrate north from the south as well as from Italy to distant lands across the globe as late as the 1970s, Abate, himself an emigrant to Germany and an Arbëreshe at home, laconically makes a point in a recent interview:

<sup>6</sup> *Lega Nord*, also called *Lega Lombarda*, (Northern/Lombard League) is the name of a powerful Italian right-wing racist political party that emerged in the Northern region of Lombardia. It advocates federalism and/or secession from Italy. It has formed a “Northern Parliament” and has called for the establishment of *Padania* or Padan Republic in the North. It is a decisive partner in the Berlusconi center-right coalition in power. The name *Padania* is derived from the “Po” (*Padus* in Latin) River Valley. The members of the Lega are called *Leghisti* (*leghist* is singular). To view the poster on line Google: “la lega arruola l’indiano per la campagna elettorale 2008”.

“Because we have had a long history of migrations (which to me seems not quite finished yet), we should feel more solidarity with the people coming from outside. The problem is right there. Those coming from outside also remind us well too graphically of who we were, who our fathers and our grandfathers were. This is exactly what we want to forget. Perhaps if we were able to re-assess our emigration history and our emigrants more positively our attitude towards foreigners in Italy would change.”<sup>7</sup> Historically, the ferment within the *parte sana* is also the result of many different exciting developments on the intellectual front that have found large political and civic resonance as well as support among the many different and transversal layers of that vast in-between area called in Italian *sinistra diffusa*, the un-organized, spread-out and *multi-verse* political left. The intellectuals behind these events are scholars and writers with various self-identities denoting both recent and older migrants, that is to say, both immigrants and native Italians. The interesting question that arises all the time, of course, is: who is Italian these days? Are the *Sinti*, the *Romani* who have lived for centuries in the Peninsula not Italian?<sup>8</sup> How about the French and German minorities? Are they not Italian? What about the *Griko* (Greeks), the *Arbëreshe*, the Slavic and Jewish communities that have for centuries been inhabiting the Peninsula alongside the “Italians” of their time who in turn also were the diachronic and synchronic descendants of various former and more ancient migratory mixtures? Are all of these not Italian?

So then why should the *Rom*, unfortunate *in-* and *e-*migrants par excellence, be seen today differently at this particular stage of a long long historical continuum of *in-* and *out-*migrations on Italian soil? Because some of them are “nomads” rather than sedentary? Do we take the time to understand why Romani communities ‘are’ nomadic? Is it possible that they feel forced to be so? Supposing it depended entirely on their will (and it *does not*), even in that case shouldn’t a viable democracy, that is, one grounded in the satisfaction of people’s needs, make room for everybody no matter what one’s life-style, gender, class, race, provenance, language, culture, and type of “self”-determination is? Isn’t Italy a part of *Europa dei diritti*, the Europe committed to citizenship rights for all, as everybody in Italy claims? How about inherent and inalienable rights? Don’t we all possess these? Alexian Santino Spinelli, himself born and raised in a Romani Italian environment and the first University professor of Romani culture and language in the world – he teaches at Trieste University -- has published in 2003 an eloquent and much needed history of the Romani people, *Baro romano drom*, the long Romani journey. He writes poignantly: “Romani culture can be fully appreciated only if we step out of our ethnocentric perspectives and above all if we stop automatically associating it with all kinds of debasing situations, poverty, and lawlessness: we must not mistake social phenomena for culture ...”<sup>9</sup> *Sante parole*, blessed words.

I find the link established throughout the civil society between Rom/ani and migration very much telling of how the most recent migratory waves have sharpened the debate in Italy around a redefinition of who is Italian. In doing so they have already begun to change attitudes and perceptions of “the Other” both on a social and a literary level. “Siamo tutti migranti,” we are all migrants, says writer Christiana de Caddas Brito who emigrated from Brasil. A more recent novel by Ivory Coast writer Emmanuel Tano Zagbla bears a title that speaks volumes in this context, *Il grido dell’Alter/nativo* (The Scream of the AlterNative). Here the native is assumed to encompass whoever is *alter*, other, thus contributing to a notion of *alternative* native-ness that comes naturally with all kinds of differences and seeming oppositions within. This is the notion that increasingly seems to project and reflect the political mood and the intellectual proclivities within both of the largely overlapping *parte sana* and *sinistra diffusa*.

### **Mezzogiorno and Migrant Imagination**

*Si dice che Tangeri deve assomigliare a Napoli, meno grande, meno sporca, meno impazzita ma con altrettanto mistero.* (They say Tangeri must look like Naples: less big, less dirty, less crazy but equally mysterious).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Basili*, my translation.

<sup>8</sup> Historically, the Romani world comprises different ethnicities with their diverse but related languages, cultures, and locations: Rom, Sinti, Manouches, Kale and Romanichals. Rom and Sinti both live in Italy. One of the prejudices afflicting the Romani is their alleged “nomadic” life-style. Their nomadism has never been a vocation or a cultural trait but the result of the systematic persecutions on the part of all States. Assuming a “sedentary” life-style has never been a problem under favorable social and political conditions. As A. S. Spinelli writes: “what matters is to be respected and not assimilated, to be accepted on the social level without being obliterated.” Alexian Santino Spinelli, *Baro romano drom: la lunga strada dei rom, sinti, kale, manouches e romanichals*. Meltemi, Roma: 2003. P. 56. Fortunately, more books have appeared in Italy in recent years setting the record straight about the Romani among which: Burhan Hasani e Lorenzo Monasta, *Vite costrette: un viaggio fotografico nel campo Rom del Poderaccio*. Introduzione di L. Piasere, Ombre Corte, Verona, 2003; Leonardo Piasere, *I rom d’Europa: una storia moderna*. Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2004; Giulio Soravia, *Rom e Sinti in Italia: breve storia della lingua e delle tradizioni*. Pacini, Regione Toscana, Pisa, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Alexian Santino Spinelli, *Baro romano drom*, p. 185. On the next and last page of his book, Spinelli adds finally “‘The other’ really is ourselves, to be afraid of the other means essentially to be afraid of ourselves.” My translations.

<sup>10</sup> Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Dove lo Stato non c’è. Racconti italiani*. Einaudi, 1991, p. 22. My translation.

We all saw the Spanish film *Biutiful* and the American movie *Beautiful Country*. Indeed a lot of good movies have come out internationally during the last few years documenting and presenting to the public what often is the drama of the “middle passage” en route to the West and the tragedies that after the lucky landing (*when it so happens*) may accompany immigrant life to Europe, and Italy in particular.<sup>11</sup> Paraphrasing Marx, immigrants are often stepping into a situation not of their own making and forced to make their own history therein under conditions often not of their own choosing. The shores the immigrant hopeful sail to are, of course, those of our *Mezzogiorno*. Geographically and culturally, this area accounts for half of Italy, the pre-1860 Kingdom of Naples. Historically and morally, it describes the “*Questione meridionale*”, the unresolved *Southern Problem*, a problem that sums up all the contradictions and distortions Italy has been made to endure as a forcibly unified State since 1860. It is in these beautiful and underdeveloped lands of *Mezzogiorno* that most immigrants land, survive often degrading hardships, and where some of them write. Here chronic underdevelopment, corruption, a State that has renounced its duties towards its citizens, spread-out crime (mafia) are the rule. How do *this* Mezzogiorno and the new immigration size each other up?<sup>12</sup>

In 1989 Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun was invited by Pasquale Nonno, the director of the Neapolitan newspaper *Il Mattino* to tour the South of Italy and jot down his impressions of the places he saw. After what became a wonderful if painful but exhilarating journey documenting the drama, the tragedy and the beauty and the humanity of a people wonderfully abandoned by the State the famous writer in the end collected his stories in a book he aptly titled *Dove lo stato non c'è* (Where there is no State), that is, no sanctioned rule of law. Does this title surprise us?<sup>13</sup> Ben Jelloun's book of Italian stories echoes for me another great book written fifty years earlier by a great Italian writer, Carlo Levi, who in 1935 – as the Fascists were gassing and torturing thousands of Ethiopians in their land -- wrote *Christ stopped at Eboli*. Levi was a Turinese Communist condemned by Mussolini to inner exile for his antifascist activities. He was sent to a small village of poor peasants in Lucania, the Italian deep South. His book is the record of the sorrowful but grand moment of discovery by a Northern Italian, an antifascist, and a Jew of *un altro mondo*, “another world.” “Nessuno ha toccato questa terra se non come un conquistatore o un nemico o un visitatore incomprensivo”, Levi wrote.<sup>14</sup> “No one has come to this land except as a conqueror, an enemy, or a visitor devoid of understanding”.<sup>15</sup>

This is a land “cut off from History and the State”, a land where Christ never came “and neither did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason, nor history.” Levi's and Ben Jelloun's narratives still echo each other powerfully sixty years later. As Egi Volterrani, who traveled with the Moroccan writer as a guide, makes it clear in his preface to *Dove lo stato non c'è* traveling through the Italian South brings home to us readers the point that “reality supersedes imagination.” “Since I decided on the sequence in which Tahar would see places, situations, and people, I was able to witness the violence he felt and his deep feeling of outrage and profound sadness that comes from a sense of impotence when facing a complex, dramatic reality which naturally had a lot of positive potential but which instead appeared to him to be continually degrading, incomprehensibly impervious to any external stimuli or incentives.”<sup>16</sup> This calls to mind Levi's description of the people he found in Lucania. Here is Levi again: “We're not Christians,” they say. “Christ stopped short of here, at Eboli. ‘Christian,’ in their way of speaking means ‘human being,’ and this almost proverbial phrase that I have so often heard them repeat may be no more than the expression of a hopeless feeling of inferiority.

<sup>11</sup> In passing, isn't the ancient metaphor that identified the Western cardinal direction, the *Occident*, -- where the sun “falls, dies, is killed” -- with the place of death or murder all too cogent here? Isn't this, alas, still an ad hoc metaphor today for many boat people en route to Italy? In the blog “Cado in piedi” Oliviero Beha has recently called the Mediterranean the “cemetery of migrants.”

<sup>12</sup> Nobody in Italy has forgotten the book titled *Gomorra* (a reference to *camorra*, the local brand of mafia) by young and daring Neapolitan journalist Umberto Saviano. A film based on his book was shown all over Europe and the US last year updating the public on the latest events that have been deepening even more the *divario*, the historic *gap* in development between *Mezzogiorno* --spoiled of its infrastructures and stopped for a century in its development in 1860 -- and a panting Northern Italy tail-gaiting under Euro duress the strong economies of Northern Europe. Of course, the criminal and political ills afflicting the South now afflict to a degree the North as well. Do Neapolitans, Italians and immigrants live in a state of law or in a country dominated by criminal interests?

<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, the *parte malsana*, the unhealthy portion of society, along with their racist leghisti blames the South for everything. For instance, they blame the Neapolitans for what the media routinely call *emergenza rifiuti*, ‘garbage emergency,’ referring to the scandalous mountains of garbage which the present government has not so far thought its civic and moral duty to remove from the streets and the neighborhoods of Naples. Isn't this a case of blaming the victims? Of course, the League keeps silent on its own waste export business to Naples with all the environmental and human catastrophe awaiting us ... *What does the government do?* Berlusconi spends his time with eighteen-year old girls and passing laws that grant him legal immunity! Not too long ago Berlusconi was caught with an eighteen year old immigrant girl from North Africa whom he famously even lied about saying she was Mubarak's niece?! *Whaaat?* Does any of this make sense? Italy's motto these days seems to be “I pray thee, ask no question.”

<sup>14</sup> Carlo Levi. *Cristo si e' fermato a Eboli*. Einaudi, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Carlo Levi. *Christ stopped at Eboli: the Story of a Year*. (Frances Frenaye, transl.) Levi Press, 2008, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Egi Volterrani, *Prefazione*, in Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Dove lo Stato non c'è*, p.p. VI-VII. My translation.

We're not Christians, we're not human beings; we're not thought of as men but simply as beasts, beasts of burden, or even less than beasts, mere creatures of the wild. They at least live for better or for worse, like angels or demons, in a world of their own, while we have to submit to the world of Christians, beyond the horizon, to carry its weight and to stand comparison with it."<sup>17</sup> But the essence of these echoes go beyond the devastating discovery of having gazed upon *another world*. Luckily, in both writers the discovery of certain "facts, similar situations and traditions" aroused similar feelings of enthusiasm and sympathy as much in the Northern Italian as in the Moroccan writer. Tellingly, Ben Jelloun found that in the South of Italy "people and their life styles were almost identical with those in his own native land on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean." It is precisely this common humanity found the same on opposite sides of the Mediterranean that makes the drama of our *Mezzogiorno* even more poignant. Tahar Ben Jalloun's book contains, in fact, an episode that connects *in nuce* his travels through the wonders of a *Mezzogiorno* imaginary with the *Questione meridionale* enriched with yet more horror, the hell immigrant life can be in Italy. This episode has branded the recent history of immigration to Italy. This is the story of Jerry Essan Masslo (1959-89), a South African political exile who in 1989 after a perilous and dramatic odyssey finally reached Italy only to be denied political asylum by the authorities. He was viciously murdered at Villa Literno by a gang of criminals. His death sent shock waves through Italy. Demonstrations took place all over the country and the unions demanded a State funeral for Jerry.<sup>18</sup> Ben Jalloun laconically comments:

The State is the foreigner here. It dares not even show up ... The State is absent, Roma is absent, those who own the tomato farms and hire African laborers are absent. They don't think they hired men but tools that don't need to eat, nor sleep, nor satisfy natural needs.<sup>19</sup> Again surfaces the theme of a most criminal and dehumanizing absence, the absence of the State in the lives of its citizens... a State, that is, the rule of law for all. In this situation, immigrants are those the most exposed to lawlessness. Again, the words uttered by Lucania's peasants to Carlo Levi in 1935 "we're not Christians..." reappear in the words of Tahar Ben Jelloun's testimony of 1989: almost the same words, we're not humans, we're tools, at best. The topos of the voyage through an imagined *Mezzogiorno d'Italia* expected to be as fabulous as everything associated with the West but unveiling another and bitter self is again evoked in the drama of another hopeful and unsuspecting immigrant, Salah Methnani, a college student from Tunisia. This student knows English and Russian and some Italian taught him by an immigrant father whose descriptions of the Europe he saw enchants little Salah. One day, at 25, with a degree in modern languages and literatures he sails over to Sicily with all kinds of European dreams and expectations in his head.

At the start of his Arabian Nights adventure he jots down a dignified affirmation of self-identity: "I'm leaving as an North African emigrant or as any young man desirous to know the world."<sup>20</sup> By page 25, however, the voyage of discovery has already turned Salah into an immigrant with all the debasing hurdles this implies. Painfully he has come of age in the West: "I am no longer that young man desirous to travel and know things. No: all of a sudden, I realize I have become the usual North African man without a job, homeless, and illegal."<sup>21</sup> Methnani's book was the first *racconto-testimonianza*, eyewitness report/inside story from a migrant hellish existence. Salah travels South to North through Palermo, Naples, Rome, Florence, Padua, Turin, and Milan in search of the mythical "rich and humane" West harped on by his middle class dad. Unsurprisingly, he encounters the same degraded humanity described by Carlo Levi and Tahar Ben Jelloun. "I have no desire to end up in one of those dumps that make up this local Casbah: I went and looked inside. Terrible. They live like animals there."<sup>22</sup> Like Ben Jelloun, Salah also finds his whereabouts comfortingly familiar: "As soon as I came out of the Central train station in Naples I felt again as if I were home, in Tunisia. North Africans everywhere. Chaos everywhere."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Carlo Levi, *Christ stopped at Eboli*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Jerry had been prophetic. "I thought I would find in Italy some living space, breath of civilization, a welcoming attitude that would allow me to live in peace and nurture the dream of a future without barriers nor prejudices. Instead I'm disappointed. If you are black in this country you become a problem. Racism is here: bullying, harassment, daily violence against those who demand only solidarity and respect. We, the people from the Third World, have been contributing to the development of your country. Apparently this carries no weight. Sooner or later one of us will be killed. Then you'll know we exist." From an interview the TG2 news program *Nonsolomero* broadcast during his funeral. Jerry's murder engendered such an outcry that finally legislation was passed (Legge Martelli) in support of all political refugees.

<sup>19</sup> Tahar Ben Jelloun, P. 31.

<sup>20</sup> Mario Fortunato/Salah Methnani. *Immigrato*. Theoria, Roma-Napoli, 1990, p. 14

<sup>21</sup> Mario Fortunato/Salah Methnani. *Immigrato*. Pp. 25-6. The word Methnani uses in Italian to describe his illegal status is *clandestino* (clandestine), a word historically laden with meaning. During WWII *clandestini* were the Antifascist patriots and the word had a positive, humane, and heroic connotation. Today, the horrors and the lawlessness plaguing immigrant lives have erased those connotations acquired in the war of liberation and associated, instead, this word with the scandal of human non-existence.

<sup>22</sup> Mario Fortunato/Salah Methnani, *Immigrato*, p. 21. This and all following quotes from this book are my translations.

<sup>23</sup> Mario Fortunato/Salah Methnani, *Immigrato*, p. 39.

Quickly the young Tunisian takes Naples at one glance and reaches his verdict: “I’m beginning to see that Naples is not like Tunis. It’s more like Pretoria.”<sup>24</sup> In the next paragraph he reaches infamous Villa Literno: “The town is really small: one square and two roads. I feel the tension in the air: it’s not been long since a young man of color was murdered here.” This epitaph-like all too graphic reference is not lost on any Italian or immigrant reader here. Clearly, the young man of color was Jerry Essan Masslo. But Salah is an intellectual specifically enamored with language and predictably a translator. In the end he quite naturally re-conceptualizes his human experience by way of a *trans-latio* that lands him in a world of dramatic and unexpected contradictions that defy facile labels as well as the comforting Manichean oppositions of good and evil, black and white, right and wrong, North and South, native and foreigner, European and non. Methnani shares with us an Italy he now understands as a multi-faceted reality, a cocktail mix of racism, humanity, brutality, and solidarity. It is helpful here to translate the short but incisive commentary advertised in the flaps of the book and obviously meant to provide the reader with a co-authored public “Id” preview of the story.

According to the view inscribed in here, the conclusive image Salah has of the West as he has experienced it in Italy in the end is one of “chaos and undefined borders where racism also pits immigrants against each other and where marginalization may even band *meridionali* (Southerners) and immigrants together against the *settentrionali* (Northerners). In short it is the image of a society still in search of new interpretive tools and life styles that may help making sense of the sudden irruption of desires and needs of which he has no memory in his life experience.” The long and tortuous voyage ends with Salah, novel Odysseus, returning home mature and with a new reconstructed self. A co-author in his own right, Salah updates his dad about Italy and leaves again ready for his new Kairouan destination where he can finally live his own life. His last word in the diary he has been writing all along is ‘ciao’ written across the page followed by a farewell to his readers: “Pensai che il viaggio cominciava adesso”, “I thought that my real journey was just about to begin.”<sup>25</sup> Thus ends Salah Methnani’s deeply felt narrative.

### Co-authoring a newer “native” Identity as a common Locus of Inter-textuality

Salwa Salem (1940-1992) was a Palestinian and a woman. She was also a teacher, an intellectual who immigrated to the West with her husband, learned Italian and wrote an incredibly inspiring book titled *Con il vento nei capelli. Vita di una donna palestinese*. An English translation of her book appeared recently with the title *The Wind in My Hair*.<sup>26</sup> Salwa Salem fit the typology of both *parte sana* and *sinistra diffusa* perfectly: she engaged in feminist activism, worked with the unions, was active in the Arab community, fought for civic and immigrants’ rights. Her life, her experience as an exile *ab origine* suffered many times over, her social commitments, her ontology, her writing, even her self-definition as a middle class woman *sans frontieres* exemplifies, in my view, what I call the rise of supranational homelands of intellectual intercourse in the Euro-Mediterranean area. Quasi-neutral loci, these are ideal for the remaking of a more appropriate individual and collective self. Of course, these develop as a result of that Mediterranean civilizational exchange continuously emerging from our *in-* and *out-*migrations.

Reading Salwa Selim’s Italian narrative is in itself a work of *trans-latio*, a work of transposing languages, cultural patterns, times, yearnings, dreams, sufferings, graphic scenes and understandings from one dimension to another. And yet, Salwa makes that crossing from one shore to the other of Mare Nostrum completely intelligible for me by using a terminology all too familiar to me and the Italians of my generation, a precise choice of sets of bi-univocal correspondences in which I can’t help recognizing my-*self*, my past, my immediate historical and ideological *antecedents*. Eerie as it may sound, I find myself feeling a similar sense of profound familiarity in reading this narrative, with things and moments and events so intimately recognizable to me as perhaps have been the places, the people, and the customs on the other, opposite shore of the Mediterranean to Tahar Ben Jelloun and Salah Methnani. At the beginning of her story Salwa is a little girl in Kafr Zibad. Kamel, her father is fighting the British who “ruled Palestine with an iron fist.” Here is the beginning of a list of profound semantic correspondences: Kamel is a *partigiano* in the Palestinian *resistenza* against the English invaders. Throughout the words *partigiano*, *resistenza*, *clandestinita’* and *amnestia* cadence the rhythm of her narrative.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Mario Fortunato/Salah Methnani, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Franco Fortunato/Salah Methnani, *Immigrato*, p. 130.

<sup>26</sup> Salwa Salem. *Con il vento nei capelli. Vita di una donna palestinese*, a cura di Laura Maritano, Giunti, 1994. Salwa Salem/Laura Maritano. *The Wind in My Hair*, transl. by Yvonne Freccero, Interlink Books, 2006. Laura Maritano contributed the important and in-depth introduction to the book while Elisabetta Donini appended a moving memoir of Salwa’s last years at the end of the book titled “Ogni volta, l’emozione di un inizio nuovo: ricordi di Salwa nei suoi ultimi anni.” Both authors were Salwa’s friends and, as I understand, *compagne di lotta*, fellow-activists. All citations here are taken from the Italian edition and are my translations.

<sup>27</sup> *Clandestinita’* describes the political armed underground fighting against the Fascists and later in WWII. It was the heroic world of the anti-Fascist *partisans* joined by men and women, young and old.

The story, stocked with all the episodes typical of World War II narratives, with their strong anti-Fascist flavor, sounds just like so many tales we heard growing up in Italy from our once *clandestine* parents and uncles and aunts about our communist *partisans* leading the Italian *parte sana* of the time in an epic armed *Resistenza* against the Nazis and their Fascist collaborators. But our tales always ended well with Mussolini captured, shot, and then hanged in Piazzale Loreto in Milan like the common criminal he had been. After that our historical memory progresses with those unforgettable images that kept us spellbound while watching time and time again Italian Neo-Realism movies. But Salwa's stock of memories doesn't end happily for in 1948 the *Nakba, il Disastro* (the Disaster) struck.<sup>28</sup> And as I keep reading I hear as I did all the times my mom was relaying to me her war time stories of Naples under siege and being routinely bombed. *Correvamo sotto le bombe* was her refrain, we had to run under the falling bombs. Here both raconteurs, Salwa and my mom, use the same words. The same anguish returns. I visualize: *i bombardamenti, i disordini, la sirena, le urla, le sparatorie nelle strade, gli eccidi, i morti, il terrore*, etc.<sup>29</sup> I can still visualize events I never witnessed personally such as rape scenes, wholesale slaughter, babies, women, and old people massacred, sounds of machine guns everywhere, massacres in the villages ...

These always carried with them, however, in my mind the unmistakable and gratuitous random violence of which only the Nazi and Fascists were capable. Their victims were our heroes and our champions of a better heroic humanity, one that was incontrovertibly and absolutely right: communists, socialists, democrats and Jews. In the *partisan* world the word "Jews," *ebrei*, itself conjured and summed up (as it still does for my generation) the grandeur of the righteous anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi struggle. But in Salwa's story this doesn't happen either. Following the semantic traces of this memory trail I can't help wondering what my life would have been had our *partisan* war stories continued like Salwa's, if the war had not ended but had instead continued with another vicious and brutal invader arriving from nowhere and dashing for ever our *partisan*-fathers', mothers', uncles' and aunts' greatest hopes of freedom and justice in a finally liberated Italy, if the trust in the final victory of all those who had died under torture in Fascist prisons and Nazi concentration camps had not been redeemed by our parents' struggles, heroism, sufferings and fortitude, and had finally not been rewarded ... Then what? Then I would feel exactly like Salwa and the East to West 180 degree *translatio* of that history would be accomplished. A new identity that enables us to co-author a new becoming in our Euro-Mediterranean world ought to address how historical memory feels and structures the collective *us* on our different and opposite shores. *Disastro*, the Italian word Salwa uses to translate *Nakba*, in Latin means "going against the stars" and this is what people in Palestine in 1948 must have taken it to mean: complete and uncomprehensible shock. Salwa tells how at the same time they heard about the Holocaust: "We heard about the inhumanity to which Jews had been subjected during World War II". And she comments: "but we wondered why we had to be the ones who had to pay for the horrors committed by others." Finally:

"It was hard for us to understand that in one moment everything was lost, that on our land now stood a new state, with new people who had never seen Palestine, who did not know her traditions, her language, her land, her scents. It was too devastating a tragedy."<sup>30</sup> The narrative goes on: the experience of the exile, teaching Arabic in Kuwait, the *Second Disaster* in 1967, going West to Austria, and her move finally to Parma, Italy. This is the beautiful and heart breaking narrative of a courageous woman who often finding herself at the intersection between tradition and emancipation, opposing political, social, and religious polarities always chooses freedom: she demands the right to study, to read Arab and Western classics, to work, and choose whom to marry. Salwa is the *'ala hall shari* in the title, an Arabic expression she translates into Italian as "con i capelli sciolti" (wearing her hair loose) and which carries a negative connotation for *ragazze troppo libere*, "young women who enjoy too much freedom."<sup>31</sup> Salwa, a free woman, at home in many cultures and languages, an exile, an Italian, and a Palestinian at the same time embodies for me this new type of intellectual who struggles for justice, for her own happiness, for her own Palestine and she can do that because she has acquired a new sense of her-Self. Speaking of her own children she says: "I wanted them to learn about what made them different and that not being Italian was something that enriched them."<sup>32</sup> *In*-and *out*-migrations, it seems, can produce identities perfectly at home with all kinds of diverse worlds because they are rooted in a much larger sense of origins that continues to develop through all our life experiences. In the end, we are mostly ourselves when our Self is as large as the worlds we inhabit.

<sup>28</sup> *Nakba, the Disaster*, denotes in Arabic the loss of Palestinian lands in 1948 and the establishment on them of the State of Israel.

<sup>29</sup> *bombardamenti* bombings, *disordini* unrest, *sirena* siren, *urla* screams, *sparatorie nelle strade* street warfare, *eccidi* massacres, *morti* the dead, *terrore* terror.

<sup>30</sup> Salwa Salem, *Con il vento nei capelli*, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Salwa Salem, *Con il vento nei capelli*, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Salwa Salem, *Con il vento nei capelli*, p. 158.



**In fine: prefiguring a new Euro-Mediterranean Home?**

Wouldn't it be marvelous if the immigrant and the native intellectual and labor forces swelling the *parte sana* of Italy were able to envision themselves as a part of an all encompassing Mediterranean home of supra-national and supra-cultural civilization feeling at home with all differences while at the same time transcending them? An open society with no more historical distortions, no more Souths, no more mafia and no more corrupt elites kept in place by a ruthless and inhumane imperialist economy, no more slavery, no more fears, no more isolated struggles, no more lands without a government for their citizens, no more *other-s* ... A world like this has been envisioned by countless generations of *partigiani* and antifascists, educators, union people, women, student, peasant and worker organizers for years all around the Mediterranean area. This world is possible. It has been seen thousands of times with ever better focusing lenses. It has also been tried ever since 1870 in Paris each time bringing us all nearer a modern, freer and more just *al-madina al-fadila*, the *Virtuous City* dreamed by Al-Farabi. This is the same world dreamed of, yearned and sought for by immigrant writers in Italy. This common civilizational area, split time and again by colonialisms of all sorts itself, has existed for a few thousand years with its boundaries drawn and redrawn many times over by the Mesopotamians, the Persians, the Hellenists, the Romans of all kinds, the various and long-lived Muslim Caliphates the last of which took an unprecedented world war to kill. Has the moment arrived for the re-envisioning of this broad area anew by all its peoples for a new enlightenment and a new renaissance benefitting all its citizens and all its cultures? Again, can a new "creolized" literature in Italy pave the way to do just that along with the concomitant general Arab re-awakening in course?