WRITTEN COMMUNITIES: INTERROGATING GLOBAL CULTURE THROUGH ITALY’S NEW POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN’S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation looks at recent Italian postcolonial fiction by women as a means to interrogate global communities. Emerging after an unprecedented influx of immigrants to Italy, and almost sixty years after the dissolution of Italy’s colonial empire, this literature presents a postcolonial perspective mediating both a neglected colonial past and the cultural pluralism of contemporary Italian localities in the wake of globalization. This dual focus complicates our understanding of global culture through a postcolonial perspective rooted in the Italian-East African encounter. I contend that reaching the global through the specificity of postcolonial literatures gives a sharper snapshot and deeper cross-section of minority communities of difference beyond a national politics of affiliation. More specifically I look at the recent novels of Erminia Dell’Oro, Igiaba Scego and Cristina Ali Farah, and the ways in which their texts, both postcolonial and feminist in scope, become processes of the social imaginary that perceive community through difference.
The first chapter looks at Dell’Oro’s fiction and how she endows her protagonists with the ability to re-shape colonial society through the creation of new mythologies that allow them to navigate between spatial divisions and propose new social spaces exempt from binary racial divisions. The texts in consideration are Asmara Addio (1988), L’abbandono. Una storia Eritrea (1991), La gola del diavolo (1999).

In the second chapter I look at two works of Scego, Rhoda (2004) and Oltre Babilonia (2009), and how they argue for an alternative to the therapeutic telling associated with overcoming trauma, and suggest instead a productive mode of living with unresolved trauma. Relating through trauma, and particularly through women’s literary representations of such trauma, creates macro-diasporic communities that offer new insight into trans/postnational identities.

The third chapter considers the civic potential disclosed to networks of women in the Somali Diaspora through a reading of Ali Farah’s novel Madre piccola (2007). Looking specifically at what I call the ethics of motherhood in Farah’s works, I argue that through a recoding of the responsibilities traditionally reserved for the private sphere that female subjects in diaspora are able to realign the contours of Somali civil society beyond the state through life-narrating.
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INTRODUCTION: POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES AND GLOBAL COMMUNITIES

The delayed arrival of a postcolonial literature in Italian is directly tied to Italy’s migration history. Long viewed as a country of emigration, with nearly twenty-five million Italians leaving the peninsula in the first hundred years of the official nation, Italy is now dealing with a swift and difficult shift to a country of immigrants.¹ Since the 1970s, Italy has become a destination for more than four million migrants originating from Eastern Europe, Asia, South America and Africa.² Such an influx of peoples and cultures has challenged the notion of a homogeneous Italian national identity, an already flimsy concept ignoring as it does the deeply rooted regionalism still prevalent in Italy. A growing body of literature from these minority communities is also re-defining the Italian national (and linguistic) landscape as one of diversity. As global migration trajectories more frequently intersect in Italy, the local neighborhood becomes an important locus of encounter and social change, and literature becomes a means to mediate these cultural collisions and imagine alternate social realities that extend beyond national borders. The Italian historian Alessandro Triulzi characterizes the recent shift to immigration as a “new postcolonial encounter” that stirs up long-dormant notions of Italian racial

¹ Italian emigration statistics taken from Luigi Favero’s and Graziano Tassello’s “Cent’anni di emigrazione italiana (1861-1961)” in Un secolo di emigrazione italiana 1876-1976. (Roma: Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1978). Some scholars stress that looking at contemporary immigration to Italy requires an engagement with Italy’s emigration history. For instance, Gian Antonio Stella points out in his work, L’orda: Quando gli albanesi eravamo noi. (Milano: Rizzoli, 2003), that Italians should remember the racism, discrimination and violence that welcomed Italian immigrants dispersed throughout the world in the 19th and early half of the 20th century, in order to avoid becoming themselves the oppressors to the millions of immigrants now coming to Italy. Caterina Romeo argues that to understand both past and present migration history, to and from Italy, that past emigration and contemporary immigration need to be looked at as a continuum to fully understand the scope of these events and how they influence Italian culture. For more see: Rewriting the Nation: Migrant and Post-Migrant Women Writers in Italy. (Dissertation: Rutgers University, 2006).
superiority fostered under fascist colonial propaganda (Displacing the Colonial 430). A new-felt anxiety about the “other” brings Italian colonial history, a much neglected and misremembered period, once again to the fore, and influences the relationships defined by both national and local politics. Though many of the early literary productions written by migrants in the 1990s function as a means of resisting such forms of xenophobia, more recent fiction specifically linked to Italian colonialism and migrants from East Africa, better unsettles Italy’s historical identity as a benevolent colonizing nation, and exposes the multiple layers of otherness that exist in contemporary Italian culture.

Emerging on the heels of an unprecedented demographic change, and almost sixty years after the dissolution of Italy’s colonial empire, this literature presents a postcolonial perspective mediating both an unacknowledged colonial past and the cultural pluralism of Italian localities in the wake of globalization. The peculiar Janus-like quality of this literature allows for an interesting and complicated look at global culture through a postcolonial perspective rooted in the Italian-East African encounter. In a moment when national paradigms have given way to transnationality, nomadism and cosmopolitanism as new templates of global subjectivities, I contend, instead, that reaching the global through the specificity of postcolonial literatures enables a sharper snapshot and deeper cross-section of minority communities of difference beyond a national politics of affiliation. This dissertation looks at the recent novels in Italian during the period between 1988 to 2009 of Erminia Dell’Oro, Igiaba Scego and Cristina Ali Farah, and the ways in which their texts, both postcolonial and feminist in scope, become processes of the social imaginary that perceive community through difference. Though many of these authors directly address Italian colonialism, their texts move beyond mere colonial
critique to ruminate upon various forms of otherness and community in local and global contexts. In the following pages I argue that the communities depicted within these novels serve as models of innovative socializing processes that more precisely address the postnational contemporary context.

In this introduction I will first map out how literature is a space within which communities, rooted in difference, may be imagined. Pulling from definitions of globalization that favor cultural movement grounded in the local (Appadurai, Parati), I argue that literature is a process of social imagining which promotes local heterogeneity, where multiple minor cultures can influence major host cultures. I will then discuss how looking at such a process through the optic of postcolonial studies, a body of research already concerned with difference, complicates and expands our understanding of these minority cultures. Examining the specific Italian relationship to colonialism and postcolonial legacies is particularly fruitful, as interest in the much-neglected colonial period coincides with an unprecedented inpouring of immigrants to Italy in the last thirty years. This concomitant phenomenon links discussions of colonial racism to contemporary anxieties about global migrations. Lastly, I introduce the female perspectives characteristic of the six novels under consideration, and discuss the ways in which Dell’Oro, Scego and Ali Farah point to narrative as a means of structuring society, thereby creating novel communities (through myth, trauma and motherhood) that transcend national models of affiliation for a more global approach to community. In the following section I introduce Benedict Anderson’s notion of the ‘imagined community’ as a point of departure for my subsequent look at communities.
I. The Contradiction of Community

*Community cannot for long feed on itself; it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered brothers.*

Howard Thurman, *The Search For Common Ground*, 1971

No other study reveals the ambiguous and imaginary quality of the community better than Benedict Anderson’s exegesis on nationalism in *Imagined Communities*. Though almost thirty years old, Anderson’s thesis on the birth of the concept of nation remains a useful point of departure for studies of postcolonial cultures, globalization and, of course, contemporary community formation. It also serves as the theoretical beginning of my subsequent look at the mechanisms of community in the colonial and postcolonial world. Anderson’s interpretation of nationalism, a notion, he argues, that did not exist in its contemporary sense until the 18th century, captures the heart of the community paradox. “All communities… are imagined,” he notes and adds, “communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the *style in which they are imagined*” (emphasis mine 6). His focus of course, is the way in which the nation has been historically imagined as a community: “It is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (emphasis in original 7).³ For

³ Though Anderson presents his argument on various fronts, only two are of interest to this study: European Nationalism, and Colonial Nationalism. In the European case, he suggests that nationalism emerges as print-capitalism rises. The print market essentially had to take the whole of its customer base into account and print either the languages of the realm, or the language that would most sell, creating, in essence (at least in Europe), a national language. Therefore, a merchant in one area of the realm could imagine himself part of a larger community of merchants within the same “national” territory as he read the paper, knowing that he is part of a larger like-minded public. Yet in the colony, the nation is imagined into being by the settler class that is not permitted ingress into the higher echelons of metropolitan society, and so, they look to their own class as separate and different, and then incite a national sentiment within the colony (all
Anderson, internal difference does not threaten the cohesive power of national community. This homogenizing imaginary, particular to nation-states, privileges unity over diversity. Yet, as I will argue shortly, in the wake of globalization, such spaces of iniquity become the crucibles of culture, creating new ways of imagining communities well beyond the national model.

What happens when the national no longer suffices to unify the many societies within its borders? In other words, what happens when the nation is no longer ‘a deep, horizontal comradeship,’ when differences puncture the imaginary patina of the nation? Is it possible to imagine communities through difference? These are the questions of a postcolonial world, witnessing the failures of national liberation movements and burgeoning diasporas that diminish the value of national paradigms to define the mechanics of global communities. An understanding of contemporary global culture, suggests postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha, calls for a “radical revision in the concept of human community itself,” (The Location of Culture 8) and “requires that we first evaluate how globalizing nations deal with ‘the difference within’ – the problems of diversity and redistribution at the local level, and the rights and representations of minorities in the regional domain” (LC xv). Bhabha’s model of community stresses diversity over unity, and moves between local societies within, beside and across national borders. Yet, how might we understand such communities of difference? It is clear that the national paradigm can no longer encompass the lives of all those within it. There is a poverty of inhabitants) in reaction to the exclusionary influence of the imperial power. What Anderson essentially ignores is the rise of anticolonial nationalisms that came well after the period of interest in his work. These national movements are documented by Frantz Fanon, and discussed later in this dissertation, but were modeled after the European example, and thus, became, through various economic and political factors, a shadow of the former colony ruled not by military force, but by economic dependency.
theoretical language associated with global identities and communities that are constantly in flux and simultaneously part of micro-social structures (local neighborhoods) and macro-social identifications (ethnonationalisms, diasporas, etc.). I suggest that one way to approach a new global communal paradigm is through rooted postcolonial fictions that simultaneously engage specific colonial histories (shaping the local social order), but also show how to move beyond them (addressing affiliation beyond national borders). Before moving on to the specific literary case studies of this project, I find it necessary to map out my own theoretical posture regarding new theories of community. Drawing upon Anderson’s notion of the imagined community, I now look at how contemporary scholars reformulate this concept within global and postcolonial contexts, and how literature functions as a direct expression of this new imaginary.

II. Global Imagination and Destination Cultures: Guiding Terminology

In the introduction to the 2001 collection *Globalization*, socio-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai suggests that globalization is:

a world of things in motion…The various flows we see – of objects, persons, images, and discourses – are not coeval, convergent, isomorphic, or spatially consistent…The paths of vectors taken by these kinds of things have different speeds, axes, points of origin and termination, and varied relationships to institutional structures in different regions, nations, or societies. Further, these disjunctures themselves precipitate various kinds of problems and frictions in different local situations. Indeed, it is the disjunctures between the various vectors characterizing this world-in-motion that produce fundamental problems of livelihoods, equity, suffering, justice, and governance. (5-6)

Departing from the Andersonian model of a ‘deep, horizontal comradeship,’ Appadurai is here suggesting that globalized culture is primarily characterized by disjunction and a
vertical kinetic relationship between global and local communities. Though globalization implies a First World, Western hegemony (the economic center dictates the nature of these flows and vectors), there are also other local minor currents of movement that reveal the discrepancies that such a system promotes. Unlike the national that espouses “celebratory multiculturalism,” as Robert Young points out, which runs counter to “the real situation of many minorities who experience oppression in their everyday lives,” the global, at least by Appadurai’s definition, is distinguished by internal inequalities (Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction 24). The inherent friction caused by the continuous movement of globalized populations and information is not without its benefit. Again, Appadurai elucidates:

If globalization is characterized by disjunctive flows that generate acute problems of social well-being, one positive force that encourages an emancipatory politics of globalization is the role of the imagination in social life. The imagination is no

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4 Sankaran Krishna makes a distinction between the terms globalization, globalism and neo-liberalism. For Krishna, the term globalization implies the far-reaching economic and cultural effects of an increasingly entwined socioeconomic interdependence between certain nations. Globalism and neo-liberalism, on the other hand, imply a politico-economic focus, marginalizing the cultural or social consequences. I will use globalization and globalized as Krishna presents them as linked to the process encompassing various aspects, including the cultural, of the phenomenon. For more on Krishna’s take on contemporary global culture see Sankaran Krishna. Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-First Century. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield. 2009).

5 Philosophies on globalization abound. Though there is no true consensus, the issue of how the local relates to the global seems to be central to understanding globalization. The Derridean concept, or what he calls mondialisation, is a basic contradiction that notes the existence of technological advancements on a global scale, but rejects the notion of greater democratic equality because of them. Therefore, globalization as a process of balance does not exist. See “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides.” Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, suggests that globalization is essentially a communication between local cultural diversity and economic homogeneity, such that diversity and homogeneity may be passed back and forth. Ultimately, he suggests that the homogenizing tendency will win out. See “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue.” The Cultures of Globalization. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). In the 2000 book Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest that globalization is not an ordered system, but it isn’t simply random either. Instead, it is the result of juridical processes stemming from international organizations like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and, of course, the United Nations. I have chosen to use Appadurai’s concept that deals primarily with the cultural ramifications of the globalizing process, as it more precisely speaks to how literature may intervene in such processes.
longer a matter of individual genius, escapism from ordinary life, or just a
dimension of aesthetics. It is a faculty that informs the daily lives of ordinary
people in myriad ways: It allows people to consider migration, resist state
violence, seek social redress, and design new forms of civic associations and
collaboration, often across national boundaries. (6) 

His call to the imaginary rescues Anderson’s model of ‘imagined community’ from
within the national context and acquaints it with the complex movements of globalization.

In this figuration, the imagination is a process of social interaction and interpretation,
distinct from fantasy and inspired genius. The multiple flows that comprise globalized
culture contribute to a new style of imagining community marked by a movement from
the ground up, or from the local to the global. Appadurai explains this with the following
example: a call center employee, working in Mumbai for an American company,
imagines himself as part of Mumbai society, but also, simultaneously, somewhat part of
American society even though he is physically outside of any American geographic space
(The Right to Participate 43). This negotiation of multiple cultural spaces within the
same locality – the act of thinking globally – has the potential to reconfigure the global
from a local perspective. 7 Such imagining brings local inequalities (violence, racism,
economic disparity, etc.) into contact with various global processes (economic, technological, communicative, cultural), and therefore is a means to interrogate the many disjunctures associated with globalization.

One shortcoming of Appadurai’s ‘grassroots globalization,’ is its reliance on economic relationships. Even in his example, it is only through the economic necessity of outsourcing that gives rise to the possibility of belonging to multiple cultural spaces at once. Homi Bhabha suggests that restricting global differences to economic criteria ignores other forms of diversity. He warns that this form of global difference:

- celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies. States that participate in such multicultural multinationalism affirm their commitment to ‘diversity’, at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consist largely of educated economic migrants – computer engineers, medical technicians, and entrepreneurs, rather than refugees, political exiles, or the poor. (Bhabha LC xiv)

Though Appadurai restricts his examples to the privileged class, he does recognize that “deterritorialized” populations are most able to perform this new mode of imagining (Disjuncture and Difference 38). The multiple displacements of migrants, immigrants, refugees, ex-patriots, etc., rely upon flexible social networks that shift and change within each new host country. These groups bring a much wider range of cultural spaces to each locality, and create what Graziella Parati calls destination cultures. Parati’s research is specific to the Italian case, whose late shift to a country of immigration has brought with it challenges in legislation and assimilation, and growing xenophobia. In her 2005 book, Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture, Parati claims that:

Italian destination culture is the site in which the construction of one homogeneous imagined community connected to a traditional concept of national

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8 For more on the term deterritorialized see Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983.
identity with the bounds of national lines cannot be sustained. A destination presupposes a journey that metaphorically, and in practice, translates, that is moves across borders and betrays them. It involves the process of remapping geographical and cultural terrains that overflow the bounds of national lines. (72)

Such a culture creates the possibility of cross-pollination, contamination or imbrication between both the host culture and the many minority cultures that have come into contact with it through the various trajectories of global migrations. The destination culture is a locus of negotiation that generates (or imagines) new models of community formation within a global framework.

In Parati’s theory of destination cultures, literature takes the most effective form of Appadurai’s imaginative process.9 “Writing,” she asserts, “becomes a means to assert a migrant’s position as interpretive subject and to reject the essentializing definition of migrants presented in political rhetoric” (14). The creative space of literature becomes, for the migrant, a means to imagine him/herself as a participant in the social make-up of the host country in ways beyond the flattening categories of straniero or extracomunitario, and even allows minority authors to “imagine changes in power that cannot be translated into practice” (88). This literary space looks at internal otherness beyond profit margins, and brings the experiences of the disenfranchised to the public domain.10 Such literature is also a way to re-imagine an origin culture as it confronts

9 Though Appadurai implies that literature is part of a high-culture genius production that the everyday person does not have access to, he does use Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses as a model of how the imaginary works in the global community. He also looks at Julio Cortázar’s magic realism as a means of disrupting normal perceptions of community. Therefore, through the specific filter of Parati’s destination culture, I will include literature as an example of this process of imagining as well.

10 A parallel can be made between Parati’s destination culture and Appadurai’s notion of “Trojan Nationalism.” Appadurai suggests that new nationalisms can emerge from interactions between minority communities that challenge the notion of the traditional nation-state. Though Parati’s destination culture is a space where multiple minorities interact, the difference lies in the active work for recognition by the national community. For Appadurai such internal forms of nationalism, or what he terms non-territorial affiliations, are not seeking national recognition in
multiple cultural spaces in this new locale. The outcome of these collisions, according to Parati, is “a new hybrid culture that is the result of both the changes brought to a local culture by incoming people and the influence of that Western culture (with internal hybridizations and pluralism) on incoming cultures” (71). In other words, destination culture is a two-way street negotiated through literature. Moreover, Parati suggests that encounters between immigrant and Italian cultures create “Processes of cultural hybridization [that] connect Italian otherness (filtered through the Italian experience of migration) with migrants’ difference” (13). Thus migrants bring Italy face to face with her emigrant past, emphasizing the sameness associated with migrations from a century ago and today. We will see that destination culture is also the site of encounter between Italy and a forgotten colonial past. While connections to Italian emigration highlight qualities of sameness, confronting the amnesia surrounding Italian colonialism underscores difference. I will return to this process later on in the introduction.

Though Parati’s destination culture is a useful concept through which to see Italian local cultures, she mainly focuses on migrant literature, that is, a literature written by migrants or those closely linked to the migrant experience. Migrant texts, concerned with talking back and seeking agency within a national culture, are clearly different from postcolonial texts that seek to historically situate these migrations as part of an Italian/East African postcolonial process. Furthermore, Parati characterizes the literature

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11 There are, of course, writers that do not fit into this category. Though Parati uses the term “migrant” to talk about destination culture, she admits that it is an inadequate term and even documents writers that break this mold in her work Migration Italy. Some authors grew up in Italy and, therefore, know Italian as a first language, and others are children of migrants and
of her study as a minor literature in the Deleuzian/Guatterian sense, stressing that these texts documenting migrant experiences within the host country’s language, are often not native Italian speakers. The postcolonial writers that I analyze in this project are all native Italian speakers, and therefore are not minor in the same way. While I agree that “the value of a minor literature authored by migrants lies in its ability to tell the story of a destination culture that connects local and global cultural changes,” (103) I venture beyond it to suggest that postcolonial literature deepens this connection.

I have drawn upon Appadurai’s reconfiguration of the imaginary as a means to negotiate the multiple cultural spaces brought into contact by globalization. I have further outlined Parati’s privileging of literature as the most effective form of this process of imagining within local communities (or destination cultures). Parati is also an introduction to the Italian case, which is the focus of my literary investigation. Though both of these theories inform my analysis, they fall short in addressing a postcolonial and feminist approach of the imaginative social process. I now look at how postcolonial and feminist studies complicate and enrich my study of literature as a transformative social faculty.

III. Theoretical Frames: Postcolonial and Feminist Discourses

Qualcuno potrebbe osservare che negli ultimi tempi la globalizzazione si sarebbe sostituita al postcolonialismo, o almeno sarebbe sul punto di farlo. Personalmente, ritengo che la globalizzazione sia una risposta al postcolonialismo.

Itala Vivan, Ibridismi postcoloniali e valenze estetiche, 2003

immigrants. In this dissertation all three of the authors have different relationships to migration. Dell’Oro is an Italian colonial who migrated to Italy as a young woman in the 1950s, Scego was born in Italy to Somali exiles and Ali Farah was born in Italy but grew up in Somalia.
As texts that expose and challenge power systems and social invisibility, postcolonial literature has the potential to expand the question of “difference in equality” (Bhabha LC xvii). In the multiple crossroads of destination culture, adding a postcolonial cultural space complicates our look at how such sites impact the process of thinking globally, and imagining communities beyond the homogenizing space of the nation.

Examining the relationship between the global and postcolonial is not a clear-cut exercise. Like globalization, a multi-faceted process involving many definitions and internal contradictions, postcolonial, as a term, is fraught with complexities. In some ways the postcolonial directly feeds into the globalizing process, as Itala Vivan suggests in the epigraph of the previous page. The dismantling of old colonial systems followed by the emergence of new nations in the wake of anti-colonial nationalist movements and decolonization processes, and the failure of these systems, directly influence the trajectories of human motion and global capital. On the other hand, postcolonialism as an intellectual enterprise has also opened an interdisciplinary discussion “tra i centri metropolitani e le vecchie periferie coloniali...in cui voci, storie e letterature sommerse e marginalizzate vengono portate in prima linea” (Ponzanesi Il postcolonialismo italiano 25). Although the postcolonial moment has paved the way for massive migrations and economic colonial structures, the postcolonial perspective has opened up terrain within which to challenge those systems and bring disenfranchised voices to the fore.

Much of the debate surrounding the term postcolonial stems from its problematic relationship to history. The morpheme post implies a chronology, a progression from one epoch to another, and therefore suggests that the postcolonial is a move beyond an era of widespread colonialism. Many scholars have challenged this reductive definition as
inadequate in its inability to account for the vast differences between colonialisms, or the contemporary iterations thereof. For some, like Ruth Iyob, the postcolonial is “a repository of the past in the present,” and represents a fluid and continual engagement across time and space (256). Others, like Anne McClintock suggest that the only way to avoid flattening colonial histories into the term, requires, “A proliferation of historically nuanced theories,” that might “enable us to engage more effectively in the politics of affiliation, and the currently calamitous dispensations of power” (emphasis in original 96). Therefore, the postcolonial, aside from being a problematic temporal signifier, is also a general engagement and interrogation of relations of domination in past, and present forms, through their multiple and distinct occurrences. In this vein, Robert Young contends that the postcolonial is an active tool of intervention that “attacks the status quo of hegemonic economic imperialism, and the history of colonialism and imperialism, but also signals an activist engagement with positive political positions and new forms of political identity in the same was as Marxism or feminism” (Postcolonialism: an Historical Introduction 57-58).


13 Assuming a postcolonial perspective in scholarly work requires that intellectuals clarify their positions regarding the subjects that they study. In my case, I am not Eritrean, Somali or Italian. As a white, middle-class American woman, I risk relying upon, and adding to, Orientalist assumptions about these cultures and their histories. Though I recognize the problems with my own subject-position, I also understand that as a field postcolonialism has grown and moves forward primarily within American and British academies. In the particular case of Italy, the majority of work on Italian postcolonialism emerges from progressive academic circles, and though it is gaining wider scholarly attention, it remains marginal. One way to mediate these subject/object dialectics is literature. Gayatri Spivak points out that “History deals with real events and literature with imagined ones” (In Other Worlds 335), and therefore taking literature as an object of study distances the scholar from any essentialist discourses related to the event itself.
It is this last sense that is of most interest to my study of postcolonial literature, which serves as a means of changing societies through depicting unconventional and minor communities capable of challenging various forms of domination (patriarchy, bureaucracy, racism). Literature is both a projection of the iniquities of contemporary society and a means to imagine communities beyond them. Depicting characters in transit, often unhomed and traumatized, as central and socially active people, imagines a new kind of cultural space born of anguish and alienation. Homi Bhabha elucidates further on the power of literary communities in V.S. Naipaul’s texts:

It was the ability of Naipaul’s characters to forbear their despair, to work through their anxieties and alienations towards a life that may be radically incomplete but continues to be intricately communitarian, busy with activity, noisy with stories, garrulous with grotesquerie, gossip, humor, aspirations, fantasies – these were signs of a culture of survival that emerges from the other side of the colonial enterprise, the darker side…moving in-between cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language. (LC xiii)

In contrast to Appadurai’s economic diversity, here we see the particular power of a minor culture characterized, not by its economic impact, but rather, by its transformative and innovative mode of creating communities in between cultures. In other words, imagining through the postcolonial is also a means of reaching and exposing those cultural spaces denied recognition both historically during colonialism, and in contemporary global economies. Though postcolonial is a rather complicated term to separate from globalization processes, looking at postcolonial novels that imagine social formations based on difference, provides a useful framework to expose the ‘disjunctures’ and remaining inequalities of the global system (and strategies to resist them).

The slight step away from the ‘real’ somewhat alleviates the conflict between the critic and what he/she studies.
As an imaginative process, such literatures develop within the intersecting concerns of race, gender and class. Therefore, postcolonial novels may engage feminist, ethnic and diasporic theories simultaneously giving a fuller depiction of disenfranchisement, and the many forms it takes.\textsuperscript{14} We will see that for the writers in this study that a feminist perspective emerges strongly in their literary projects. As women who showcase primarily female experiences in their works, these authors perform a literary form of postcolonial feminism that looks at colonial experience and its legacies through gender. Such an inflected female approach to postcolonial fiction “creates discursive spaces for a woman’s self and agency, thus forging through their fiction new ‘postcolonial’ attitudes” (Ahmad 15). Therefore, a postcolonial perspective is also a means of challenging patriarchal systems in both colonial and contemporary contexts.

My examination of postcolonial feminist literary approaches to globalization has its roots in Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the female subaltern. Though I discuss her work in detail in chapter three, it is important to introduce it here as another framing text. In her foundational essay \textit{Can the Subaltern Speak?} Spivak traces how the banning of sati, the self-immolation of widows, by the British in 1829 as barbaric, and the nativist reaction claiming that it is a sacred rite, merely enact what she famously calls, “white men saving brown women from brown men” (93). The woman in this colonial equation is an object, and her voice is not accounted for in either argument. Thus, she is a subaltern, a disenfranchised subject without access to social mobility, and, in this instance, she is

\textsuperscript{14} Azade Seyan in the recent work \textit{Writing the Nation}, suggests that the most effective subject position for writing ‘across-cultures’ is the diasporic. Seyan’s work maps out a productive diasporic counter-culture emerging between nations or what she calls the paranational: “communities and alliances…that exist within national borders or alongside the citizens of the host country but remain culturally or linguistically distanced from them and, in some instances, are estranged from both the home and the host culture” (10). Instead of constructing culture around the notion of diaspora, I propose that we do it instead around the postcolonial.
without a voice, and, more importantly, she is without a means to counter either of the suppositions that define her actions. This absence of female counter-narrative extends to contemporary situations as well as Spivak makes clear:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into the pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world’ woman caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development (*Revised Edition* 61).

Spivak proposes ways of emerging from subalternity through civil channels, a point that I will elaborate upon in relation to Cristina Ali Farah’s works in chapter three.

More recently, Uma Narayan has taken a similar practice to task in her work on cross-cultural understandings of feminism. Placing the discussion on domestic violence in a global setting, Narayan suggests that there remain national contexts that distort and shape narratives about women, and so distance the similar experiences of dowry-murder in the Indian context, and domestic murder in the United States.¹⁵ Such distorting national contexts restrict a cross-cultural understanding of such events as they happen in different cultural environments. Narayan summarizes: “The ways in which ‘issues’ emerge in various national contexts, and the contextual factors that shape the specific issues that are named and addressed, *affect the information that is readily available for such connection-making* and hence our abilities to make connections across these contexts” (emphasis in original 86). Though she suggests that perfect cross-cultural dialogue is an imaginary, she does point out the challenges that national contexts pose, and stresses to the need to go

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¹⁵ I realize that pulling from studies comparing the United States and Southeast Asia are not direct correlations to the Italian case. Though I do rely on both Spivak and Narayan for theoretical models, I will also draw from Italian and African models as well.
beyond them. Though Narayan does not specifically address how cross-cultural connections work in destination cultures, I will look at one possibility in my third chapter, suggesting that such communities bring this process closer to fruition.

For some theorists, even the flexibility of destination culture is inadequate to account for female subjectivities. Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti proposes nomadism as an alternative to restrictive cultural affiliations. For her, the global city does not hold the possibility of new identities as it does for Appadurai and Parati. Instead, she suggests that a rootless nomadic existence is the only way to mediate globalized, postnational culture. “The point of nomadic subjectivity” she suggests, is to identify a line of flight, that is to say a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner, but within these categories. The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the terms of this political interaction. (Transpositions 60)

Braidotti locates this transformation within relationships: “Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections,” she suggests (Nomadic Subjects 35). Though the notion of locating political agency within individual female relationships is appealing, and will resurface in this dissertation in chapters two and three, the complete disavowal of a sustained cultural affiliation is only plausible for privileged subjects, and not for migrants or refugees, whose quotidian existence and mobility are directly related to the

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16 Though Narayan suggests that there is no way to achieve inter-cultural understanding of these women’s experiences, this is a step toward theorizing feminism through a global perspective. There is a recent flurry of theories shaping a contemporary discussion of how to bring a feminist perspective to globalization without imposing Western feminist thought upon other local approaches. For more on recent debates about feminism and globalization see: Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives, 2nd Edition. (New York: Routledge, 2010) edited by Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim. Some, like feminist philosopher Jennifer Eagan, suggest that finding ways to address global feminism require a sort of cosmopolitanism that works between Eastern and Western experiences of feminism. For more on Eagan’s rumination on feminist approaches to philosophy see “The Feminist Desire for a Primordial Place, or Why Feminist Philosophers Avoid the Issue of Globalization.” Globalization 5.2. (2005).
state, official documentation and border control.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, the nomadic paradigm disengages with the postcolonial, which is rooted in specific cultural interactions. Despite Braidotti’s hearty embrace of a globalized, rootless community, Parati’s model of destination culture serves as a better locus of transformation for feminist and postcolonial relationships.

I have briefly looked at how postcolonial perspectives engage and interrogate systems of domination in historical and contemporary contexts. I have further suggested, through Robert Young’s emphasis on active intervention, that postcolonial literature works as a means of both showcasing minority cultures, and imagining them into the social landscape of the destination culture. Lastly, I mapped out how a feminist approach further elucidates the field of otherness within local contexts, and generates new female postcolonial identities. I’ll now move to look at the specific context of Italy as a destination culture, and how the postcolonial is bound to the question of migration.

IV. Italy as Destination Culture

Il passato coloniale del nostro paese – al contrario di quanto è avvenuto in altre nazioni – non è ancora <<passato>>, non è entrato cioè a far parte della memoria diffusa e

\textsuperscript{17} Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet, in the book \textit{Minor Transnationalism}. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), warn that completely ignoring the physical barriers of national borders overshadows the true reality of the disenfranchised. They criticize nomadism and postnationalist theories for their impossibility and limited privileged membership. In their place, Shih and Lionnet argue for a minor transnationality: “Unlike postnational or nomadic identities that are relatively unmoored from the control of the state and bounded territories, minor transnationality points toward and makes visible the multiple relations between the national and the transnational. It recognizes the difficulty that minority subjects without a statist parameter of citizenship face when the nation-state remains the chief mechanism for dispersing and regulating power, status, and material resources” (8). Their remedy is to think in terms of the transnational, which “can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center” (5). Such peripheral communities do not depend upon national cultures, but they necessarily unfold within the space of national borders. In this sense, Shih and Lionnet’s minor transnationalism intersects with Parati’s destination cultures, yet extends beyond and across national borders.
condivisa del paese.

Alessandro Triulzi *La costruzione dell’immagine dell’Africa e degli Africani nell’Italia coloniale*, 1999

The delay in postcolonial literary production and its connection to immigration politics makes Italy a particularly apt case for looking at how postcolonial literatures shape global localities. The recent burgeoning of postcolonial literature in Italian comes on the heels of a massive influx of more than four million immigrants to the peninsula in the last thirty years. Thus many of Italy’s postcolonial authors are migrants or children of migrants from formerly colonized territories, and their literary productions add to an already established body of migration literature. Simona Wright suggests that this earlier tradition “spurred a process of decolonization,” in an Italy that scarcely remembered a colonial history at all (97).

Italy's imperial expansion into the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia) began during the 19th century "scramble for Africa" among European powers. Though

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18 The terminology surrounding those who leave their native country for another because of economic or political reasons (i.e. poverty, civil war) varies. The general term for someone who leaves a home country for another, is migrant; a term that may also imply émigré, immigrant, nomad, itinerant or even traveler. These terms are not, however, free of political meaning as the legitimacy of the migrant/immigrant living in the destination culture is much more important than for the traveler. Some scholars suggest a difference between immigrant and migrant emphasizing a political/ permanent resonance with immigrant that is less common with migrant (Alessandro Dal Lago). This taxonomy becomes even more varied when speaking about children born of migrants/immigrants. I have seen terms such as second-generation, post-migrant (Caterina Romeo), hyphenated identities (i.e. Somali-Italian etc.) and even New Italians etc. These terms however still do not encompass the specific case of children born of parents from different nationalities who are bi-cultural, bilingual, and may or may not have dual-citizenship within these categories. Jacqueline Andall makes a hyphenated distinction between children of immigrants (African-Italians) and children of mixed families (Afro-Italian) (191). For the purposes of this work, I will use migrant to discuss those who have physically left one country for another. I will also shift between using second-generation and post-migrant to define those children born of immigrants or migrants, the former emphasizing the parental relationship, the latter emphasizing distance from the act of migrating to the destination country. Though these terms are problematic (see Paul Gilroy’s *After Empire* Routledge, 2004), they are still necessary in discussions of postcolonialism and globalization. I should also note here that the writers identify themselves differently. Dell’Oro introduced herself to me as a second generation “Italo-Eritrea,” and Scengo prefers not to be categorized though refers to herself as a child of Somali immigrants.
Italy did acquire both Eritrea and Somalia through progressive expansion and local treaties, imperial Italy did not emerge until Mussolini’s aggressive 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, a campaign closely wed to a Fascist national identity. Italy’s East African empire was short-lived and fell in 1941, during World War II, with the British defeat of Italian and Eritrean forces in Ethiopia. At its height, the Empire included Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia, Libya, Albania, the Greek Dodecanese islands and Chinese Tientsin. By 1943 Italy was stripped of all colonies. Despite this short reign, the Italian presence left a lasting cultural imprint (schools, universities, public works projects, architecture, etc.), particularly in Eritrea and Somalia, evident well after decolonization.

This colonial past has, until recently, remained largely relegated to the margins of Italian historiography. Despite the popular belief that Italy’s colonial campaign was benevolent and marginal compared to other Eurocolonialisms, in reality, the East African colonies became the site of apartheid governance that provoked instances of sanctioned violence (Del Bocca; Labanca). In addition to the dearth of accurate information, the lack of a significant migration of ex-colonial citizens to Italy delayed any real investigation into racial ideologies disseminated under the empire.

That is, until recently, of course. Without an official process of decolonization in Italy, it isn’t surprising that, fifty years later, when Italy became a host country for many

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19 Eritrea was the result of slow inward expansion and government purchases from local landowners. Somalia (Italian Somaliland) was acquired through various negotiations and treaties. Libya was the result of war declared against the Ottoman Empire in 1911, and the Greek islands were acquired with the victory of that war. Tientsin was a concession granted to Italians after the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. Ethiopia (1935) and Albania (1939) were part of Fascist Italy’s imperial program. For more on Italian colonialism see: Angelo Del Boca. *Italiani in Africa Orientale*. Vol. 1-4 (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1976-1987); Nicola Labanca. *Oltremare: Storia Dell’espansione Coloniale Italiana*. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005); and Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller’s edited collection *Italian Colonialism*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.)
immigrants from Africa, long-dormant colonial ideologies began to emerge. Italian

historian Alessandro Triulzi notes the following:

As wave after wave of ex-colonial subjects escape difficult situations at home and
seek refuge in present-day Italy, an idealized and assertive colonial memory is
being revived among the Italian public. Feelings of cultural and racial superiority
are thus re-emerging within Italian society and dictate the terms of the new
postcolonial encounter between ex-metropolitan citizens and the disenfranchised
ex-colonial subjects who have come to live among them. *(Displacing the Colonial
Event 430)*

The majority of the ‘disenfranchised ex-colonial subjects’ are not from former Italian
colonial territories, but as Triulzi suggests, these first waves brought unchallenged
notions of the “other” to the fore, and by doing so, initiated a cultural decolonization
process.  

20 Such a process implies a dialogue between the past and the present, something
that has been greatly delayed in Italy’s case. Nicola Labanca notes: “It is now almost
sixty years since the end of an experience that, for Italians and for the African peoples
who found themselves subject to Rome, lasted almost an equivalent of sixty years.
Colonialism and post-colonialism find themselves one in front of the other” *(History and
Memory of Italian Colonialism Today 30)*.

A literature of migration emerged shortly after the immigration boom,
contributing to a new Italian destination culture. These early works, published in the
1990s, addressed the realities of living as a migrant in an unwelcoming Italy. Although
some migrant literature may be considered postcolonial in scope, like Pap Khouma's *Io,
ventitore di elefanti* (1990) and Nassera Chohra's *Volevo diventare Bianca* (1993), they

20 In *Modernity at Large*, 1995 Appadurai argues against the specificity of colonialism to engage
what he calls 'postnational' cultures. I am here suggesting that, in Italy’s case, through literatures
depicting specific colonial landscapes, the discursive power of the destination culture is amplified.
were often written "collaboratively" or with the help of an Italian editor.\textsuperscript{21} In addition many of these authors, although originating from former African colonies such as Senegal and Algeria, were not historically linked to Italy's colonial history. Thus, though these texts represent an important moment of literary production in Italy, they cannot be approached with the same questions of agency, language, identity and history that inevitably arise in the relationship between Italy and her former colonies. These early works open up a colonial imagination in Italy that postcolonial novels will then challenge.

Departing from this early migration literature, Italy’s postcolonial literature is characterized by autonomous authors, hybrid poetic language, primarily fiction and female perspectives.\textsuperscript{22} The recurring topoi of displacement and diaspora contextualize these novels within the global framework of migration, but their continued engagement with colonial and postcolonial systems necessarily investigates the specific social landscapes of encounters between East Africa and Italy. This specificity works against homogenizing practices of lumping all ‘disenfranchised ex-colonial subjects’ into the same formerly colonized category. Algerian and Senegalese experiences of post-French

\textsuperscript{21} The choice for many of these migrant writers to use Italian was to circumvent the use of the language of the colonizer, which for many was French. Yet, this choice was also a compromise, as Italian is also a Western language of power. In addition, the mediation of a native speaker compromised the voice of the “subaltern,” contaminating it with a Western style. Some writers such as Khouma, who worked with Oreste Pivetta, welcome this as a necessary and fruitful hybrid phase in the evolution of migrant literature, and others like Chohra, who worked with Alessandra Atti Di Sarro, feel a distortion occurs. For further reading on this subject see Parati, \textit{Mediterranean Crossroads} (Madison: Fairleigh Dickenson U Press), 1999 and Romeo, \textit{Rewriting the Nation: Migrant and Post-Migrant Women Writers in Italy}. (Dissertation: Rutgers University, 2006).

\textsuperscript{22} I am defining Italian postcolonial fiction as a literature written by an author linked to former Italian colonial territories that often adopts an overtly anti-colonial tone. There are other works that I would consider colonial such as travel narratives emerging from the colonies written by Italians like Dino Buzzati and, overtly exotic works such as Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti’s \textit{Mafarka il futurista} (1909), or the contemplative work of Ennio Flaiano, \textit{Tempo di uccidere} (1947). And still other writers from non-Italian colonial spaces such as Fausta Cialente, Enrico Pea, etc. The writers of this study have all emerged recently and are highly critical of Italian colonial and postcolonial relationships.
imperialism are distinctly different from Eritrean and Somali experiences of post-Italian imperialism, and such differences shape the ways that these cultures interact with each other, and with Italian society. In fact, looking at minority cultures in Italy through the precise optic of postcolonialism more fully engages (and implicates) Italian politics and history. Literary scholar Sandra Ponzanesi points out that a look backward at colonial history gives us keener insight into contemporary Italian society: “La rivisitazione del periodo coloniale italiano esplora non soltanto le origini delle tassonomie razziali, specifiche alle politiche di apartheid durante il regime fascista, ma anche la protrazione di tali sistemi di rappresentazione fino al momento attuale” (Ponzanesi, Il postcolonialismo 28).

It is clear that a postcolonial perspective brings the specificities of minority cultures into sharper focus, and that investigations into colonial culture reveal useful insights into contemporary relationships between minority cultures and dominant national cultures. Though this aspect is important, I am more interested in how the texts work to move beyond simply making such differences recognizable in destination cultures. Dell’Oro, Scego and Ali Farah not only present a fuller and female picture of minority culture, but they propose innovative strategies of community building that go beyond the center/periphery, local/global binaries to forge novel cultural relationships based specifically on narrative.

V. Dell’Oro, Scego and Ali Farah: Invented Mythology, Transdiasporic Trauma and Motherhood

My literary analysis works within these ever-shifting boundaries and the inherent paradoxes of the destination community. The contemporary global moment complicates a
simple notion of the community in and beyond national taxonomies for a more layered and shifting politics of affiliation. The continual negotiation between decolonization, mass migration and diasporic identities calls into question the homogenizing practice of thinking the nation from above, and necessitates a new method of imagining to account for ever changing demographies, hybrid cultural spaces and growing and collaborative minorities changing the very make-up of the local communities. In the following chapters, I look at three case studies that present examples of how literature and narrative influence non-national social formations. These writers are the freshly minted members of Italy’s new postcolonial culture. Though they are all part of the postcolonial community, I venture to say that it is simply not enough to valorize them as writers who have links to former Italian colonies. Their works are indeed important in this inaugural position in and of itself, but as literature they are also, I argue, representative of a more specific group of writers who interrogate the notion of community in the colonial and postcolonial setting through a markedly gendered perspective. Thus, though each author addresses the colonial past or its legacy in contemporary Italy, the main thrust of this argument lies in how they imagine inventive and diverse communities based on unconventional criteria. Dell’Oro looks to adolescence as a space of cross-cultural contact in a strictly divided Eritrea, Scego examines postcolonial and diasporic cultures through a traumatic lens suggesting that unresolved trauma is a means of relating multiple diasporic communities and Ali Farah directly challenges a more ardent patriarchal tradition for national cultures living beyond a nation-state. It is through such unorthodox modes of relating, moored to a postcolonial Italian context, that these novels are able to imagine local communities as spaces of intervention.
In my first chapter, I look at the colonial city in Ermina Dell’Oro’s fiction through a dismantling of Frantz Fanon’s Manichaean framework as it pertains both to its geographic and psychic embodiments. For Fanon, the colonial city/psyche is opposed to reconciliation, and thereby creates an impasse represented by the impossibility of nothing less than antagonistic relationships between colonist and colonized. Dell’Oro challenges Fanon’s Manicheanism by allowing her protagonists to intervene in the divisive psychology of colonialism through the creation of new non-affiliated mythologies. Endowing her protagonists with the ability to re-shape social forms through an imaginative process also allows them to navigate between spatial divisions and create new social spaces exempt from colonial hierarchies. Dell’Oro’s novels focus on how young women perform this imaginative re-ordering of colonial society. I will look at three of Dell’Oro’s novels: Asmara Addio (1988), L’abbandono. Una storia Eritrea (1991), La gola del diavolo (1999).

In the second chapter I move slightly away from colonial spaces to look at two works of Igiaba Scego, Rhoda (2004) and Oltre Babilonia (2009), and how they showcase contemporary diasporas in Italy that call for a more complex understanding of how trauma shapes such communities for women. Scego’s texts argue for an alternative to the therapeutic telling associated with overcoming trauma, and suggest instead a productive mode of living with unresolved trauma. Such strategies might supplant or supplement the role of testimony/narrative championed by contemporary trauma theory for the perseverance of contemporary diasporic communities. In addition, relating through trauma opens up wider matrices of association among multiple diasporas,
creating macro-diasporic communities that offer new insight into trans/postnational identities.

Continuing my inquiry into the particular social mechanisms of diaspora, the third chapter considers the civic potential disclosed to networks of women in the Somali Diaspora through a reading of Cristina Ali Farah’s novel Madre piccola (2007). Looking specifically at what I call the ethics of motherhood in Farah’s works, I argue that through a recoding of the responsibilities traditionally reserved for the private sphere, theorized by Gayatri Spivak and Adriana Cavarero, that female subjects in diaspora are able to realign the contours of Somali civil society beyond the state.

Ultimately, these texts document the robust possibilities of thriving and politically engaged communities within the destination culture. Though each of these texts unfold within particular national geographies of Italy and either Eritrea or Somalia, their reach goes well beyond.
Chapter I: Changing the Colonial Mythos: Dichotomies in Erminia Dell’Oro’s Fiction

As the first of three case studies examining postcolonial literary models of community formation, Erminia Dell’Oro’s novels serve as a complicated introduction to colonial relationships, and their aftermath. Her work is often criticized for its Eurocentric point of view, and its impossibly divided landscape between white colonials – a subject position that she shares – and the indigenous population living on the fringes of the Eritrean metropolis. Though I do not deny the presence of such categories in her work, what I look at in the following analysis is how Dell’Oro seeks to avoid the very binary oppositions (material and psychic) that her protagonists face as young women growing up in a segregated colony. I address, with particular interest, the ways in which youth and gender shape the communal experiences of these protagonists, who create fantastic mythologies to free them from rigid social categories, as well as to root them to a sense of place and community. These myths, I argue, introduce alternative narratives about the colonial encounter that allow for non-antagonistic contact between colonials and Eritreans. To guide my look at Dell’Oro’s urban spaces, I initially draw upon Frantz Fanon’s notion of psycho-affectivity, a process by which colonial apartheid engenders a psychological constriction to white and non-white identities. By investigating how this process functions for marginal communities of women that exist within segregated colonial sectors (such as settler and second-generation colonials, *madame*, and their biracial children), Dell’Oro demonstrates the potential of this psychic activity to undermine the divisive mechanisms of colonialism.

Dell’Oro’s novels are particularly suited to a discussion of binaries and their undoing, as her subject position and texts, occupy an ambiguous zone between
European/African, Italian/migrant, colonial/postcolonial. On one hand, her texts inaugurate the beginning of a literature of critique, revisiting the largely marginalized Italian colonial period in East Africa. On the other hand, as a white Italian who lived and grew up in Eritrea, her subject position raises questions about the legitimacy of her prose to speak for her indigenous characters. This chapter addresses both the problems as well as the ingenuity of Dell’Oro’s colonial novels, *Asmara addio* (1988), *L’abbandono. Una storia Eritrea* (1991) and *La gola del diavolo* (1999). Throughout this series, Dell’Oro carefully marks out contact spaces that become spaces of exchange across the colonial divide. Though these zones are, for Dell’Oro, measured through mythological and adolescent criteria, they do envision a reality, however brief, based on mutual respect, curiosity and communion. These texts also introduce a specifically female point of view regarding colonial and postcolonial relationships.

**I: I The Manichaean City**

Dell’Oro introduces readers to the urban divisions of colonial Eritrea quite early on in her first novel, *Asmara addio* (1988). Speaking about the capital she writes:

> Cappellini, velette, pipe, bastoni...Era l’Asmara dei bianchi, e sul Corso Mussolini, divenuto poi Corso Italia, allora non passavano gli eritrei. Se ne stavano, quelli urbani, ad Abbasciaul, alla periferia di Asmara, a sopravvivere nella loro secolare miseria e si organizzavano come potevano, per ricavare qualche centesimo dagli uomini bianchi, venendo in città a vendere uova e pollame, e i bambini impararono presto, come i disperati bambini di tutto il mondo a cui l’estrema miseria dà qualche lezione di sopravvivenza, a tendere la mano per chiedere baccisc, la mancia. (22)

Here, Dell’Oro sums up white Eritrea with descriptions of refined fashionable objects, and then quickly contrasts it with the urban Eritrean’s concern with food and scarce resources.

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23 *Asmara addio* was originally published in 1988 and again in 1993, but the quotations in this chapter are from the 1997 edition.
change, objects of survival. In Dell’Oro’s colony, the native periphery is entirely dependent upon the charity of the European center. This description might be taken straight from Frantz Fanon’s version of the Manichaean city in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961):

The ‘native’ sector is not complementary to the European sector…The colonist’s sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It’s a sector of lights and paved roads, where the trash cans constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed-of leftovers…The colonist’s sector is a sated, sluggish sector, its belly is permanently full of good things. The colonist’s sector is a white folk’s sector, a sector of foreigners.

The colonized sector, or at least the ‘native’ quarters, the shanty town, the Medina, the reservation, is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people. You are born anywhere, anyhow. You die anywhere, from anything. It’s a world with no space, people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together. The colonized’s sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The colonized’s sector is a sector that crouches and cowers, a sector on its knees, a sector prostrate. (4-5)

I have quoted these sections at length because, despite the almost thirty years that separate their publications, both Dell’Oro and Fanon begin their narrative discussions of colonialism with the same urban divide. Moreover, because critics have consistently focused on Dell’Oro’s racial binaries, which will be discussed below, I find it necessary to engage Fanon to introduce the nature of colonial racism before I demonstrate how her novels transcend it.

At the outset of her first novel, Dell’Oro introduces Asmara as a city unequivocally bisected: white and native, European and Eritrean, colonist and colonized.

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24 My quotations are from the 2004 re-print.
25 Fanon’s works are experiencing something of a renaissance recently. For instance, in the 2004 translation of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Homi Bhabha suggests that, “The time is right to reread Fanon” (xi). For Bhabha, Fanon’s legacy is not violence, as Hannah Arendt suggests, but rather the lasting relevance of the psycho-affective. He suggests that Fanon’s work should be contextualized, instead of seen as an appropriable manifesto toward anti-colonial action in violence. In addition to the 2004 translation of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Richard Wilcox came out with a new translation of *Black Skin, White Masks* in 2008. Fanon’s work resonates even more in the wake of the recent revolutionary Arab Spring, as it documents the difficult process of nation building in the aftermath of passionate popular revolution.
These oppositions, visible in her following novels as well, attract many critics who, despite appreciating the aim of these works to address a much-neglected period of Italian history, take issue with such intractability. For instance, Grazia Sumeli Weinberg suggests that the juxtaposition of characters in opposing sectors “accentua le discrepanze tra le due razze, tra due culture che rimangono in verità sempre separate,” (57) making Dell’Oro’s work “essenzialmente eurocentrico” (63). Graziella Parati notes Dell’Oro’s attention to Eritrean characters, but, at least for Asmara addio, stresses that the central focus on a privileged white protagonist and her family only reinforces colonial categories: “Consequently, an inevitable dichotomy is created between the ‘whites’ and the ‘others,’ a dichotomy that in this narrative context cannot be destroyed” (Italian Fathers 190). Addressing Dell’Oro’s later novel, L’abbandono, Laura Harris claims that, “While Dell’Oro’s narrative proves useful to contextualizing race in regards to nationality, its narrative construction of diaspora and hybridity threatens to become reactionary as it is ultimately predicated upon essentialized racial definitions” (605). Speaking of the same novel, Sandra Ponzanesi suggests, “Dell’Oro tries to portray the colonial encounter in which the Italian and African world do not really meet, or communicate” (Paradoxes 146). Even those like Loredana Polizzi, who recognize the space of childhood as a means to avert these barriers in the novels, claim that such a tactic “externalizes the conflictual elements of the colonial situation,” and in essence, ignores racial differences altogether (156). Though I recognize these divisions in the novels, there are also, prevalent within the texts, attempts to undermine them. In order to move beyond these characterizations, I first look at how such structures function in
colonial society, and then I pinpoint the strategies that Dell’Oro adopts to bypass, not ignore, or highlight, such dichotomies.

To arrive at how these strategies are born, I once again turn to Fanon as a necessary point of departure. For Fanon, the divisive mechanisms of the Manichaean city are also evident in the psychologies of its denizens. This correlation unfolds within the space of what Fanon calls the psycho-affective realm, or the unconscious space where notions of moral, social and communal structures take shape. This is also the psychic territory within which Dell’Oro’s characters negotiate, and, I argue, unsettle rigid social hierarchies. Before turning to the particularities of Dell’Oro’s brand of psycho-affectivity, we must first understand how urban boundaries find their way into the mind. According to Fanon, the psycho-affective process mirrors the official spatial division of the city into European and native spheres, as it restricts the development of identities to white and non-white categories. In other words, the individuals within this structure can only define themselves in relation to the dominant culture as either, of that culture, or opposed to it. Therefore, if white culture “identifies the black skin of the Negro with impurity,” it follows that the colonized peoples “accept this association and so come to despise themselves” (BSWM ix). Such self-loathing is, according to Fanon, the pathology of the psychic process under the constraints of colonial racism. It is worth noting here that Fanon does not leave room for the possibility of categories beyond white or non-white, like mixed-race children, or even settler colonials, both of which I will be discussing shortly.

There are two important aspects of the psycho-affective that are central to my analysis below: its importance to adolescent development, and the role of myths as
models of moral and social behavior. That is to say that, for young subjects, ingress into adult society is contingent upon the knowledge, gleaned from cultural narratives disseminating dominant ideologies, of the moral and social frameworks that order reality. Fanon gives us an example from his own Antilles: “In the Antilles, where the myths are the same as in Dijon or Lyon, the black child, identifying himself with the civilizing authority, will make the black man the scapegoat for his moral standards” (*BSWM* 171).

The role of dominant cultural narratives (in this case in the form of comic strips and children’s stories) is to establish a moral infrastructure according to which relationships develop. Because this young boy does not yet know of the racial divisions that dictate his own society (he is young and has spent most of his time with his family), his immediate identification is with the “just” hero. Yet, this association includes a secondary racial coding that binds moral character to race, and so, blackness is conflated with immorality.26 Our young Antillean has established this system, based on a dominant mythology, before he even ventures out alone into the world. What he finds out, of course, at the first contact with white society, is that he is, in fact, not-white, and therefore, according to the formula of his psycho-affective process, he must also be ‘immoral’. For Fanon, the impossibility of reconciling both a moral and black identity under colonialism (and even after), creates a crisis for the colonized that results in anxiety, shame, self-loathing and even violence. Though Fanon does not explicitly address how this aporia functions for women, the absence of a female heroine precludes identification with the moral authority, much in the same way that race does. Along with race, gender needs to

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26 Fanon calls this process “cultural imposition,” and it works to devalue native mythology as well: “The customs of the colonized, their traditions, their myths, especially their myths, are the very mark of this indigence and innate depravity” (7). For more see *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove, 2004).
be enfolded into an analysis of psycho-affectivity, particularly in relation to Dell’Oro’s fiction, that documents both white settler and black indigenous female characters as they negotiate colonial society.

While Fanon’s work on psycho-affectivity still serves as a valuable source in understanding colonial and postcolonial relationships, he is ultimately unable to move past the very dichotomies that he exposes.27 His theories don’t take into account the varied cross-section of communities that exist within and between colonial sectors, and he essentially avoids considering gendered differences in the psychological development, or social formation, of colonial subjects. Such issues are of interest to various postcolonial scholars coming after Fanon, and they introduce a whole new vocabulary of processes intent on subverting colonial dichotomies. Theories of creolization, métissage, mestiza, and hybridity, to name but a few, work under the assumption that colonial encounters create new exchanges, languages, relationships, and/or cultures that do not neatly fit into the colonizer/colonized dyad.28

27 Ibid. For Fanon, the only way to overcome this crisis is to annihilate the dichotomy, i.e., the colonial sector: “To dislocate the colonial world does not mean that once the borders have been eliminated there will be a right of way between the two sectors. To destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonial’s sector, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory” (6). This is why his works are often seen as incendiary. For me, Fanon’s solution of colonial violence countered with revolutionary violence, does nothing more than perpetuate a divisive system of us/them. Thus, his thinking ultimately remains locked within an impossible dichotomy.

28 Though this is not an exhaustive list of such theories, this is a general explanation of some of the most influential. Edward Kamau Braithwaite’s The Development of Creole Society (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) suggests that there is a dual process, called creolization, of acculturation (planned) and interculturization (unplanned), whereby the imposed dominant culture is also adulterated and influenced by the dominated culture. Édouard Glissant in his work, Caribbean Discourse (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 1989), uses creolization to propose the linguistic process of resistance that develops when language changes, takes on inflections of both dominant/dominated culture, to form a conflictual relationship that ideally leads to cultural parity. There is also the notion of métissage examined by Françoise Lionnet in his work, Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portrait (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), a work that speaks to the racial intersection evident in children of mixed-race parents, he suggests that such a population signifies a trespassing that disrupts the clean divisions of societies divided by race. Along the same lines, Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of mestiza, theorized in her book,
Though I will not here detail the evolution of such theories, I would like to point out that all of these terms describe a process, instead of simply a state of being, through which colonial polarities are undermined. Though it is tempting to use these terms to discuss Dell’Oro’s work, I suggest instead that we continue to look to the psycho-affective realm as the space of subversion. Instead of a psychological system that inevitably locks the individual into impermeable compartments (white or non-white male), I see the psycho-affective as a malleable interior process that has the potential to re-configure and re-define moral frameworks externally. For instance, when subjects come from in-between communities, those that Fanon virtually ignores – like settler colonials, meticci and women – the dominant white/European mythos is not necessarily the primary source material for the psychic ordering and rationalization of social reality. When the cultural narrative changes, it becomes possible to construct a different mode of interaction based on a new value system that doesn’t necessarily perpetuate racial and gender barriers. This is precisely what I see at work in Dell’Oro’s novels. For the young female protagonists, the psycho-affective process relies heavily on the narrative process.

Each of Dell’Oro’s characters, whether settler colonial or meticcia, is compelled to create Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007) first published in 1987, defines a crossover identity that exists in the borderlands between cultures that redefines gender, nationality and language. There is also the idea of hybridity, valorized as a result of the space between cultures, a notion espoused by Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 2006). Robert Young, in his Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race (London: Routledge, 1995), points out that the term hybridity comes from a negative notion of difference and inferiority based on spurious science on race in the 19th century and suggests that, despite positive deployments of the term, it always carries with it these racial meanings. Most of the recognition of such fluid and transformative processes are reserved for Dell’Oro’s second novel, L’abbandono, a novel about an Eritrean madama, a colonial concubine, and her biracial daughter. Sandra Ponzanesi characterizes L’abbandono as an example of métissage, and Igiaba Scego, whose works are the focus of Chapter II, suggests that Dell’Oro’s characters are borderland characters within Anzaldúa’s framework. Graziella Parati, speaking about the same work suggests that the protagonist is part of a hybrid culture. Though I agree that this text more overtly showcases communities beyond colonial barriers, I also valorize Dell’Oro’s other texts as examples of some of the same processes.
new mythologies that run counter to dominant ideologies shaped by a patriarchal politics of oppositions. Such texts help to re-configure and re-define a confining reality. In valorizing the transformative nature of narrative within the novels, Dell’Oro also nods to the importance of her own attempt at dissolving colonial boundaries, challenging false myths about Italy’s colonialism, and bringing to light a female perspective through writing.

I:II Chipping Away at the Colonist Monolith in *Asmara addio*

*What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.*

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994

The ‘in-betweenness’ of the settler child is the focus of Dell’Oro’s first novel *Asmara addio* (1988). The novel, broken into two books, begins with Milena’s paternal and maternal genealogies, documenting the adventurous spirit of her grandfather and father planting roots in Eritrea, as well as the uncertain migration of her Jewish mother’s family to the colony in flight from the racial laws in Italy.\(^\text{30}\) This first section chronicles the migration history of Milena’s family that did not coincide with military occupation. Dell’Oro is at pains in this novel to show the differences, particularly within the white sector, in order to break up the monolithic perception of colonialist identities. At the same

\(^{30}\) Although not in the scope of my analysis, Dell’Oro offers a parallel narrative of the Jewish Diaspora in her colonial novels. For more on this see Brigitte Le Gouex, "L’Africa Di Erminia Dell'Oro." (Narrativa 14 (1998): 309-26), and Igiaba Scego "La Ricostruzione Dell'immaginario Violato in Tre Scrittrici Italofone Del Corno D'Africa." (Diss. Università Degli Studi Roma Tre, 2008).
time, she fully takes advantage of a postcolonial position to expand her narrative beyond her protagonist. For instance, although this text primarily follows the migrant history of one Italian family’s experience in the colony, it often unmoors from the tale for hindsight historical passages and poetic interludes. The novel shifts voices between chronicler, memoirist and mythic bard, and pieces together an elaborate patchwork of narratives that span the tenure of Italian presence in Eritrea (1882-1943).

The protean style of this first novel further works to compromise the dichotomies associated with colonial narratives written by the victors about the losers. Loredana Polizzi notes that “Dell’Oro’s work is a complex tissue of narratives written from different perspectives: she adopts both the voice of the colonizer and the colonized,” and thus is able to offer a broader picture of various colonial experiences without privileging one over the others (153). This prismatic approach notes Erica Johnson “allows Dell’Oro to traverse different subject positions, and to tell radically different stories about East Africa” (179). These stories are ‘different’ in their dual perspective (colonizer/colonized), but they also document specific sub-communities within these subject positions that further develop the cross-section of colonial life. It is also important to stress that, as one of the few Italian settler women to write fiction about Italian colonialism, Dell’Oro establishes a female presence, and style, within an up-to-this-point masculine novelistic tradition. Cristina Lombardi-Diop suggests that “Italian colonial literature was born as a male genre,” and as such, narratives written not only by women authors, but also about women in the colony, add an important perspective to the literature (ItaliAfrica 173). Dell’Oro writes from a postcolonial perspective, and her texts also serve as a link between strictly colonial literature (written by Italians who had been in the colony), and
contemporary postcolonial fiction (written by African or African-Italians from the formerly colonized territories). Sandra Ponzanesi in her 2004 work, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture*, asserts that “Dell’Oro functions as an in-between author connecting the accounts of the colonial time by writers like Ennio Flaiano, Mario Tobino, Curzio Malaparte, and Dino Buzzati with the postcolonial encounters offered by new immigrant writers. Dell’Oro, who is an insider/outsider, offers a perfect gendered introduction to this new tradition” (145). It is clear that her personal experience as a female white settler, growing up in colonial and postcolonial Eritrea, shapes her narrative style that is meant for an Italian public. Dell’Oro, through a paratactic focus on marginal social subjects and untraditional narrative styles, is able to transgress colonial dichotomies for a more nuanced look at colonial society and postcolonial modes of narrative.

The novel, a highly personal tale of maturity, is also the platform from which Dell’Oro reveals a violent account of Italy’s 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, replete with aerial gas bombings, water supply poisonings and civilian casualties. The difficult pairing of a coming of age story, told by a young protagonist, and a controversial re-telling of the Italo-Abyssinian war, renders the novel disjointed in places. Though the shifting subject positions do not allow for a unified narrative to emerge, the experimentation in this first novel does work to clarify the protagonist’s subject position as between the two dominant cultural influences of her life. Dell’Oro sets out to tell the story of an Italian girl growing up in the colony, but she rejects a European/masculinist approach in her fragmented style that oscillates between genres, in the re-writing of military events from an Eritrean point of view, and in her protagonist’s disorienting origin myth disavowing any dominant cultural text in the psycho-affective process. Below, I trace the development of these
strategies in the in-between/ambiguous literary universe of Dell’Oro’s first novel.

I.III The New Mythologies of Settler Colonials

The protagonist of Asmara addio, Milena, occupies an ‘in-between’ cultural space within the specific social and political partitions of fascist colonial life. Milena is born in the 1930s to an Italian family that had settled in Asmara in the 19th century. As a third-generation Italian in Eritrea, she is more attached to the place of her birth, than the origin of her ethnicity. Though she is a colonial, and grows up in a transplanted European community, Dell’Oro is careful to point out that her protagonist should not be equated with all colonizer culture. She qualifies Milena’s Italian identity as that of an old colonial, in order to drive a wedge between the pioneering families settling the colony before Fascism, and those that came pouring into the colony after the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia: “In Eritrea rimasero i vecchi coloniali, alberi che in quella terra avevano messo profonde radici” (90). In truth, colonial society was rarely realized as two clearly defined cultural spheres. Just in the colonizer community alone there were officials, officers, workers, farmers, those fleeing fascist persecution, and adventurers, all comprising a less than homogeneous white community (Stefani 69). The children of these colonials further complicated the matter and created what Robert Young defines as the ambiguous space of the settler colonial:

Settlement also led to the creation of a category of colonial which gets blurred by the English word ‘colonizer’, which can be applied to settler and administrator indiscriminately: here the French term for the colonial settler or farmer, colon, now Anglicized, preserves a useful distinction. The colons quickly found themselves in-betweens: neither the centre, the metropolitan government, the indigenous natives whom the colons would for the most part slaughter, expel from their own lands, or exploit as a labour force, and from whose perspective the colons and the metropolitan government would be equated. This results in the
ambivalent position today of those who descend from European settlers in former settler colonies: are the non-indigenous people in the former colonies… colonizers or colonized? (Postcolonialism: an Historical Introduction 19)

The colons, or what I will hereafter refer to as settler colonials, are not exempt from the prejudiced and violent operations of colonialism, but Young here raises an interesting point about future generations. Though we might assume that each subsequent generation inherits the mantle of colonial superiority from the parents, it is not altogether clear how much of this legacy trickles down. Moreover, these children likely have no memory or even contact with the metropole, and so they consider Africa their home. This ambiguity extends to settler women as well. As Cristina Lombardi-Diop notes, on the one hand, colonial women found themselves “new sovereign subjects of colonial modernity,” in a society far from the patriarchal homeland, but on the other hand, as women they were left without any official means of social authority (Writing the Female Frontier 14). As such, the few Italian women in the colony occupied both dominant (white) and subordinate (female) societal positions. Both Young’s assertion that descendants might oscillate between identifying as colonizer and colonized, and Lombardi-Diop’s claim that women’s roles were ambiguous, opens up new avenues of investigation regarding the colonial city, paths that Dell’Oro traverses with the character of Milena.

Confined to the developed European zones of Eritrea, Milena is denied a visceral knowledge of the land and the people native to it. This of course resembles Fanon’s Manichaean city, where European children are shielded within mini-versions of the metropole transplanted to warmer climes. Though Milena does not transgress the urban boundaries, we will see that in the later work, La gola del diavolo, the protagonist is more often outside of the European quarter than not. But here, in colonial Asmara, Milena is
only given access to these spaces through the domestic workers, and through her own imagination. She remedies her immovable reality by writing herself into a creation myth thereby stitching herself into a pantheistic Eritrean mythology, and in the process, re-configuring, through the psycho-affective, a model of social ethics according to new cultural parameters. In this first-person account of a primordial pact with God, the beauty of Modok, the island of birds, becomes the impetus for Milena’s birth, thus deeply linking her to Eritrean geography:

Allora io, turbata da tanta bellezza, chiesi a Dio di farmi nascere. Possibilmente vicino a Modok. Dio mi promise che mi avrebbe accontentata ma prima doveva sistemare alcune cose. Per miliardi di anni continuai a scrivergli per essere sicura che non si dimenticasse della promessa. E finalmente Dio mi accontentò. Non volle farmi nascere a Modok perché era l’isola degli uccelli, ma c’erano luoghi, non distanti, dove poteva inventare la mia vita. (11)

The ‘I’ of this passage will eventually give way to other narrators that relate episodes from different historical moments, but here, at the opening of the novel, Dell’Oro makes it clear that Milena’s very identity is deeply bound to the geographic space of “Eritrea,” that is, an Eritrea characterized in mythic terms. Such terms might also suggest that this relationship to Eritrea is feminine in that it begins before birth, and before language, i.e., before she enters into the patriarchal symbolic (a social order even more dismissing of women under fascism and in the colony).31 This pre-birth origin scene also eschews any connection to human history, and therefore to a Eurocentric colonial ideology. This is clearly not a European origin tale, and it surely is not a version of local Eritrean folklore. This in-between, or invented origin tale, establishes a link between this young colonial

and the physical space that is Eritrea, and, as Brigitte Le Gouex points out, “fa emergere la forma di un io narrante emanato dall’Africa” (309). Milena’s pantheism is, I suggest, a way of carving out a new mythology that disavows the consignment of a sole affiliation at her birth. With the power to transform her psychic connections to geography, Milena therefore has the ability to re-define her relationships to the people that inhabit that geography as well.

To further dislocate her affiliations, Milena seeks the friendship of the female domestic servants like Turù the laundress whose face “era una carta geografica…di rughe…che formavano isole e continenti, canali in cui scorrevano fiumeccioli di sudore” (23). Turù’s organic relationship to Eritrean topography is inscribed upon her face, thereby giving Milena access to the unknown and unknowable terrain of a natural Eritrea. This bodily representation of cartography stands in direct opposition to the masculine colonial desire for mapping territory. In Dell’Oro’s literary world, those with a direct claim on the land are born with these natural landscapes as physical markers of legitimate ownership instead of the unreliable and changing boundaries of man-made paper maps. The body/map is also a conflation of the geographical and sexual desires bound up in European colonialism. In other words, Turù’s body is exploited twice: once as the metaphorical representation of Eritrea, and again physically as a colonized woman. Milena is also exploiting Turù’s body to gain access, but as a curious girl seeks to understand the fascinating world that surrounds her. We might consider that the gaze of this settler child contains within it both the traces of a violent inheritance, and the possibility of a relationship not reliant upon antagonism. Unlike the polarizing white gaze of Fanon that initiates a psychic crisis, Milena’s scrutiny of Turù is meant to bring them
closer through a shared knowledge of the outside, non-white territories. The children of colonizers inherit their predecessors desire to know or possess Africa, but, at least in this case, it is an altogether different and gendered desire that does not threaten violence, and, notably, recognizes this Eritrean’s natural right to the land of her birth. In fact, Milena seems almost envious. Turù’s association with geography betrays her connection to her homeland, but Milena, unable to claim association with Africa through her own European facial features, must seek another way to establish this connection. She does this by diluting the prominence of her “Italianness” through myth, as we previously noted, and through a redefinition of her social milieu.

On one hand, the work is about Milena’s struggle to understand her place in a multiethnic Asmara amidst dueling cultural influences, but on the other hand, it reaches well beyond the conscious limits of the protagonist to grapple with questions about colonial chronicle and postcoloniality. The mythic relationship established between Milena as a child, and the Eritrean landscape, serves to create an alternate means of affiliation, but also excludes the complex and often violent interactions predicated on colonial relationships that define the adult world. Milena’s youth gives her access to the possibility of manipulating psycho-affective relations, but it also “provides a sort of safety valve, a protection from the full-blown irruption of History into the child’s world” (Polizzi 155). These realities push in upon Milena's first-person narrative through interjected third-person historical accounts. Within these sections of the text, the historical and social realities challenge the protagonist's sense of belonging to both cultural camps (Italian and Eritrean), and shed light on the violent points of contact
between them. While leading up to a genealogical narrative about Milena’s ancestors, an omniscient narrator inserts a quick summary of the Italo-Abyssinian war:

Nel 1936 Mussolini conquistò l’impero. Non fu una Guerra di conquista ma di aggressione. Sull’Etiopia piovvero dagli aeroplani i gas distruttivi seminando terrore e morte, fu avvelenata l’acqua di centinaia di pozzi e del lago Ascianghi, feroci battaglie scossero la tranquilla terra d’Etiopia dove nei giorni maledetti gli indigeni videro arrivare i diavoli alati. (33)

Though now accepted, the claim that Italians adopted methods of chemical warfare against the Ethiopians during the war provoked harsh criticism in 1988 when *Asmara addio* was first published. This matter-of-fact introduction to Italy’s imperial expansion stood in contrast to perpetuated myths of Italians as "brava gente" or Promethean colonizers founding an “Impero di pace…civiltà e umanità” (Mussolini 1936). In reality, the Empire instated strict apartheid policies that criminalized miscegenation and institutionalized racial segregation. This history is surprisingly damning, and is presented as if it were a piece of colonized memory, a story that Dell’Oro admittedly wanted to tell:

Arrivata in Italia mi ero accorta che quasi nessuno conosceva la storia delle colonie italiane in Africa. Era una fetta del nostro passato di cui nessuno sapeva o voleva sapere nulla. Le nostre colonie erano piccole, perse in fretta, popolate soprattutto da fascisti…non c’era letteratura su questo argomento, come negli altri paesi europei. Così, quando sono tornata a scrivere, mi sono messa dalla parte


In this novel, Dell’Oro is bringing the colonized version of colonialism into a European context. She is also challenging the traditional limits of women’s colonial prose that typically documented “detailed descriptions of private matters, personal interactions, domestic details, and, more generally, non-scientific objects of interest,” leaving the subjects of heroism, war and politics to the men (Lombardi-Diop *Writing the Female Frontier* 14). Dell’Oro instead shifts from a personal account of quotidian colonial life to the violent histories of Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. This historical account, moreover, comes from a place well outside of Milena’s frame of reference and is overtly critical of Italy’s colonial warfare tactics. Therefore, Dell’Oro assumes the role of historical narrator, with the help of noted colonial historiographer Angelo Del Boca, correcting outdated notions of Italy’s expansion in the Horn of Africa, as well as invalidating perpetuated myths about “good” colonialism.

Dell'Oro manipulates this personal/historical dialectic to widen the scope of her postcolonial literary project and to go beyond the limits of biography. Yet, the personal and historical meet most effectively in the digressions that follow the parallel lives of the Eritreans working in Milena's home. In one example, taken from Del Boca, the poisoning of Lake Ascianghi is told again from an Eritrean point of view. The episode opens the chapter and begins with ellipses, “… I feriti, intorno al lago Ascianghi (il lago Ascianghi fu avvelenato dagli italiani, con l’iprite, nella Guerra del 1936 contro gli etiopici), si trascinavano verso l’acqua, tentando di scavalcare i corpi morti” (149). The mid-sentence commencement suggests repetition, or a continuous narrative, as if readers have just
interrupted. As the episode unfolds, it becomes clear that this is a recurring dream of
Elias, an Eritrean working for Milena’s father, about his father, Zegai’s death:

Zegai, l’eritreo che aveva combattuto in Etiopia la sua battaglia contro gli invasori, strisciò fino alla sponda del lago. La sete gli consumava il cervello…Ma ora l’acqua c’era là, a portata di mano, e il lago immobile rifletteva il viso devastato di Zegai, gli occhi allucinati che lo fissavano. Zegai baciò l’acqua e sentì le labbra brucianti rinfrescarsi e la gola placarsi. Fu un attimo. Dolori atroci gli contorsero lo stomaco e altri come lui stavano bevendo urlarono al cielo, al Dio che era altrove. (150)

This is not the historical postcolonial narrator writing corrected versions of European
history, as in previous chapters, nor is this Milena’s retelling of the tale, in fact she is
absent altogether from these pages; instead this is an internal narrator repeating the tale of
Zegai’s death over and over again in a dream. The constant repetition of the name Zegai
and epic vocabulary (battle, invaders, heavens, God) resemble an oral history and, in fact,
the story of his father's death is meant to be passed on so that his descendants will not
forget "l’assassino di suo padre e di raccontare ai figli ed ai figli dei figli, perché la
memoria dell’ingiustizia non andasse perduta” (151). This narrative serves as a base text
in the psychosocial development of Elias’ children. It is a mythology that takes shape in
the psychic processes of his children that then formulate possible distinctions between
eenemies and friends. Utilizing only this cultural text to order moral and social
frameworks leads to Fanon’s impasse. Instead, Dell’Oro qualifies Elias’ social position
within the colony, just as she did with Milena. Elias is representative of a particular class
of Eritreans that work for Italians, and thus is himself occupying an ambiguous position
between Italian and Eritrean cultures. Elias remembers the Italians as murderers, but is
still able to work with Milena’s father, an indication that he, too, makes a distinction
between Italian settlers and fascist soldiers. Elias is able to maintain a Fanonian sense of
injustice, while at the same time, recognizing that there are differences between the colonizers and the settlers. This intersection is less illustrative of a critical thread in the novel, and more of a means to unveil the potential communicability of this ‘in-between’ colonial space (the space of psycho-affectivity) negotiated through the many characters that occupy it.

Though Elias’ story illustrates the need for identifying the micro communities within the colonial system, it is also a very masculine narrative about the memory and suffering of the family patriarch. In this first novel, Dell’Oro limits the interaction of her protagonist to the few women that work in her home, and most of them are defined, unlike Elias, through Milena’s gaze. There is, however, one Eritrean woman who stands out, Abeba. Replacing another house worker, with whom Milena had an easy rapport, Abeba is cold, obstinate and closed-off. She does not submit to Milena’s gaze, but instead turns it back toward the young girl: “Era silenziosa, diffidente, desiderosa di imparare e di vivere in un mondo dal quale noi eravamo esclusi, perché eravamo bianchi, eravamo i padroni e quindi diversi, e sembrava che lei ci tenesse a fare notare che la <<diversità>> non era la stessa che sentivano verso di noi gli altri domestici” (129). Abeba, unlike Elias, rejects the subtle differences within the white community. She shares her life with them out of economic necessity, not in any attempt to participate in the in-between communities that develop outside racial distinctions. Abeba is a precursor to one of the protagonists in Dell’Oro’s later novel L’abbandono, where the damages of such divisive thinking are detailed. In all of her novels, Dell’ Oro tries to stake out an intermediate space where in-between characters can interact without the threat of crisis or psychic damage.
I have established Dell’Oro’s strategies of navigating the white spaces of the colonial divide through both the scripting of new un-affiliated mythologies and untraditional modes of storytelling. In her subsequent novels, mythology functions in similar ways for her child protagonists, but unlike Milena, both protagonists physically break urban colonial barriers, as the author’s reach extends further into native Eritrean territory.

I.IV Women, Children and the Consequences of Madamismo

Dell’Oro takes the life of an Eritrean-Italian woman she met in Italy as the subject of her next work of historical fiction, *L’abbandono. Una storia Eritrea* (1991). The shift to the other side of the colonial divide gives her a different perspective through which to work the historical narrative into the personal, and it most clearly gives her a platform to criticize colonial racism in the form of the meticcio or mixed-race child. In this second novel, Dell’Oro adopts a more traditional model of writing, but instead of focusing on one protagonist, she splits it between a mother and daughter. Unlike in *Asmara addio*, Dell’Oro is able to address larger historical issues such as madamismo (relationships between indigenous women and Italian men) and meticciato (the social group of bi-racial children) through the experiences of her female protagonists, Sellass and Marianna. Although these two women share the same temporal reality, they experience that reality, created by colonial circumstances, quite differently. In other words, the racial affiliations of these two characters, though in the same family, create divergent psycho-affective realities. The suffering of the mother who absorbs and then blindly wields violence, gives

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34 Dell’Oro not only builds upon this woman’s story for her novel, she also publishes versions of letters that the woman wrote to South Africa searching for her Italian father who had abandoned the family during the war.
way to her daughter’s agency in a chronologically and culturally postcolonial world.

Dell’Oro underscores this relationship by highlighting the impossibility of cultural communication between Italian men and Eritrean women, while at the same time introducing a unique social and international mobility for the children of these incompatible unions in the postwar period. On one hand, with Sellass, Dell’Oro illustrates the psychological damage of Fanon’s Manichaeanism, but on the other hand, she shows the possibility of averting this crisis and finding avenues of social mobility for the next generation of women.

I.V Madamismo and the Colony

Dell’Oro chooses to focus on an almost invisible colonial community in Eritrea, native women and their children. Giulietta Stefani in her study of masculinity and colonial culture, *Colonia per maschi*, sustains that though the colony was overtly conceived as a masculine space, occupied and managed through a masculine desire, there were various relationships between Italian men and native women, based on mutual affection:

i rapporti degli italiani con le donne africane sembrano conoscere un’ampia gamma di possibilità e di caratteristiche: dagli incontri occasionali con le prostitute al concubinaggio con le “madame”, i colonizzatori scelgono di relazionarsi con le donne locali secondo bisogni, intenzioni e atteggiamenti diversificanti, contrassegnati per la maggioranza da una visione patriarcale e razzista, ma che talvolta si mescola anche a sentimenti di simpatia, affetto e amore, come emerge da alcune testimonianze autobiografiche. (29)

Of these possible encounters, the relationships between Italian men and Eritrean *madame* are the most ambiguous, as the practice itself was regarded, in some instances, as mere prostitution, but in others, as a form of marriage. In *L’abbandono*, there is a portrait of a
historically they remain largely unaccounted for. In the
absence of official census information, it is not possible to estimate the number of
madame at the height of Italian occupation, yet even without an accurate number, the
community of mixed-race children born of these unions “still forms and important
component of the Eritrean social landscape” and serves as a physical reminder of the
frequency with which these unions occurred (Barrera 4).

I.VI Exploited Mothers and Unclaimed Daughters in L’abbandono

Dell’Oro’s novel L’abbandono. Una storia Eritrea attempts to give voice to the
figure of the madama and subsequently her meticcia daughter in Eritrean society. The
work is divided into two narrative threads; the first follows the love story of Carlo, an
Italian worker, and Sellass, a young Eritrean woman, during the fascist colonial period in
Eritrea. The second documents the fallout of Carlo’s abandonment of the family,
particularly for Marianna, their daughter. The text spans life in Eritrea from the
inauguration of Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI) in 1936, through the end of postwar
British custodianship in the 1950s, and frames the intimate lives of the characters with
only brief historical indices. Despite the absence of historical exposition, the tensions
playing out on the more local stage reflect the larger forces that push in upon the central
narrative. Sellass thus becomes one of the many Eritrean woman abandoned and
Marianna is one of the thousands of meticci left in the colony. Through the suffering of
this mother/daughter pair, Dell’Oro is able to metonymically articulate the lasting and
far-reaching effects of Italy’s colonial program upon women and their children.

In a gesture that contrasts the distinctively white community of the previous novel,
here Dell’Oro paints a picture of the port city Massawa, a bustling heterogeneous colonial
space, charged with the possibility of intercultural contact: “Negli anni in cui Mussolini costruiva l’impero coloniale Massaua era una cittadina piena di vita; i musulmani, gli ebrei, gli indiani, i greci, tutti si davano molto da fare nei vari commerci, squadre di operai eritrei affiancavano gli italiani nella costruzione di ferrovie, strade, edifici” (10).

This is a budding colony of workers, both Italian and Eritrean, toiling away as employees in the construction of a city that will eventually divide them. In this Massawa, it isn’t difficult to imagine a community of continual exchange, a veritable mixing and clashing of various cultures, races and languages. This pre-1936 urban chaos does not last long, and eventually the city will begin to order itself according to race, but Dell’Oro begins her tale of miscegenation in a period where such relationships were of no great concern.

When they meet, Sellass and Carlo draw upon diverging conceptions of commitment that stem from very different cultural traditions (and therefore very different conceptions of social and moral functions in colonial society). In this sense, Sellass’ understanding of madamismo is perhaps most in line with the Eritrean concept of temporary or dämôz marriage, the practice of “marriage for pay” (Barrera 15). Often mistaken for concubinage by Italian missionaries in the colonies, it was instead a distinct practice, having a strict set of rules codifying the marriage that included the following: provision of living expenses for the woman, fidelity, legitimization of children born of

35 In her book, Colonia per Maschi: Italiani in Africa Orientale: Una Storia Di Genere. (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2007), Giulietta Stefani argues that there were many forms of masculinity present in the Italian colonial structure that undermined the Eurocentric claims to superiority. Though racial difference was to become the organizer of colonial society after 1936, before that, often, Italian men and Eritrean men would work side-by-side in the arduous work of building roads and laying track. There is also the homosocial environment of the Italian military that employed many Eritreans and Somalis, called ascari, who enjoyed a privileged social position. Because Italy’s early colonial settlements were a result of a demographic plan, most of the settlers were poor and from the South and initially not that much better off than the indigenous. Nicola Labanca makes a similar argument for the petit blancs in his chapter “Nelle colonie,” in the collection Storia dell’emigrazione Italiana – Arrivi (2002).
the union and financial support of the children even after the period of cohabitation (Barrera 16). It may be that many Eritreans like Sellass considered madamismo a form of dämòz marriage, which at least held the promise of some economic security, particularly for the children. Of course, the reality of these unions occurring within the racial hierarchy of the colony led to the manipulation of these practices such that “Italians systematically violated the customs that informed such marriages, meaning that thousands of Eritrean women and their children were left without economic support” (Barrera 17).

This, of course, is what will happen to Sellass, but her initial understanding of such a union is made clear through her interaction with Mariam, a contemplative shell diviner who can speak to the dead. The mythic characterization of the elder matriarch, who is all-seeing and all-knowing, underscores the deeply spiritual nature of her predictions, which become an education for Sellass, and a source of cultural narratives. At the same time, Mariam’s predictions delineate the mystic realm as a font of Eritrean knowledge in direct contrast to Eurocentric modes of humanistic knowledge. Mariam foresees Carlo’s arrival: “Un uomo verrà dal mare…e tu sarai la sua donna,” a prophetic announcement that immediately provokes a proleptic response, “Io no servirò mai gli uomini bianchi…loro vengono nel nostro paese e noi non dobbiamo servirli” (14). The patient Mariam permits her young student this outburst but continues, “Tu sarai la sua donna…non la sua serva” (14). The distinction between woman and servant is not slight in this instance, as it comes on the heels of Sellass’ patriotic refusal to serve the colonizer. Therefore, to make such a clear differentiation is also to rank these two female roles, such that being the woman of a white man is better than being a servant in a white household.
It would seem that Mariam, Sellass’ surrogate mother, sees madamismo as a form of 
dämòz marriage, and therefore makes this distinction or at least does so to forestall the 
inevitable pain she sees in Sellass’ future. We might see this as an attempt to reinterpret 
the actions of the colonizer in colonized terms, thereby asserting some semblance of 
control over reality; after all, women in the colony had few options before them. At an 
indistinct point, presumably the moment of the Ethiopian invasion when Eritrea shifts 
from a settler colony to an imperial colony, Mariam sees only blackness, a future beyond 
the limits of Eritrean understanding. This incomplete fortune hides Sellass’ and Eritrea’s 
exploitation by the Italians in both sexual and military relations in the colony. It is 
important to note that this is the only moment in the text when Sellass voices an anti- 
colonial opinion. Hereafter all of her individual responses will be mitigated through her 
relationship to Carlo and her children, when she is essentially absorbed into pre-defined 
social roles.

Sellass does in fact meet Carlo, and becomes his proud woman, bearing him two 
children, living happily in a beautiful house by the sea. Her conviction that the union is 
akin to a marriage contract is made clear later in the work when, visiting her family 
village just after Carlo promises his return, her sister accuses her of being “una povera 
ingenua bambina che un uomo bianco ha usato per qualche tempo” (59). Sellass’ reply 
betrays her initial belief that the relationship is more than simply a random affair, but also 
reveals her fear that her sister is right: “Io tornerò con lui…quando la Guerra sarà finita. 
È un uomo buono, ama molto i bambini e non tornerà al suo paese…io non sono la serva 
dei bianchi…i bambini sono i figli di un bravo uomo italiano che provvede a me e a loro, 
abitò in una bella casa, lui è molto generoso e ama la nostra gente” (59). Her defense of
Carlo’s good nature rests upon his providing for her and, more importantly, for the children, recalling the responsibilities of the husband in temporary Eritrean marriages. Despite this defense, the repetition of the initial resistance to madamismo as becoming a servant to a white man belies the underlying fear of total abandonment.

On the other hand, Carlo’s characterization of his relationship with Sellass reveals a fascination and mild arrogance in line with masculine colonial ideology. When he first sees Sellass, he is reminded of the gazelles that gracefully escape him, “Capi che l’aveva spaventata e temeva che lei fuggisse via, come una di quelle gazzelle che vedeva attraversare i sentieri” (31). Carlo’s is not a description of the savage and oversexed African woman. However, though he is not aligning her with popular scientific descriptions of the Hottentot Venus, this male gaze objectifies her. During this period of Italian colonialism, native women were often considered beautiful animals and “seductive historyless objects” (Paradoxes 125). Like Fanon’s displacing white gaze that banishes the black colonial to immorality, Carlo’s gaze follows a tradition of desiring male gazes that objectify black indigenous females. Sellass is, for Carlo, a precious creature that solicits tender feelings, but despite his persistence and ephemeral happiness in their relationship, he admits in the face of the encroaching war, “non posso restare a farmi ammazzare per quella ragazza” (emphasis mine, 63). His affection certainly has limits, particularly when the colonial administration steps up anti-miscegenation enforcement after 1936. During an inevitable interrogation by Major Donati, Carlo voices his progressive opinion, “Io non credo, signor maggiore, che questa gente non abbia

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36 The Hottentot Venus is the nickname for Saartjie Bartman, a South African woman used as an example to discourage miscegenation in the 19th century. The image was resurrected in Italy in 1938. For more on the scientific characterizations of race under Fascism see Barbara Sorgoni. “‘Defending the race’: the Italian reinvention of the Hottentot Venus during Fascism.” Journal of Modern Italian Studies 8.3 (2003): 411-24.
sentimenti. Hanno solo il colore della pelle diverso” (44). He is questioning colonial social divisions, as his life with Sellass has enabled him to essentially imagine a domestic social space not reliant on racial distinctions. Whatever Carlo’s belief regarding racial parity, his actions speak to a fear that leads him to shed his familial obligations and save only himself. In the end, he does exactly what the Major tells him to do: “Alla donna potreste lasciare qualcosa, a questa gente basta poco per vivere, e dimenticano in fretta” (44-45). Carlo sends Sellass and the children to her family village with some money and a promise to return at the end of the war. As he tries to leave as a stow-away, the British forces capture him. In route to a prison camp the Japanese torpedo his ship. Carlo is one of the few survivors to eventually reach the camp in South Africa. Readers learn later that after the war he remains in South Africa, marries and has two children. Dell’Oro’s characterization of Carlo as a well-meaning but ultimately weak man is less damning than it could have been, but by showcasing the possibility of loving relationships, which flourished during the period, she is able to then show the far-reaching traumatic consequences of the seemingly benign betrayal.37 In the absence of his presence to legitimate her choices, Sellass becomes doubly marginalized, never officially accepted by the Italian community, and rejected from the indigenous population as a traitor.

37 Irene Zanini-Cordi’s book Donne sciolte: abbandono ed identità femminile nella letteratura italiana (Longo, 2008) suggests that the position of abandonment might be read as a space of empowerment, instead of a space of lack. The abandoned woman is in charge of her own destiny. Zanini-Cordi recuperates abandoned figures of Italy’s literary tradition and re-interprets them through this feminist lens. Though Sellass might look upon her situation as a moment of empowerment, she is ultimately consigned to servitude in his absence. Her character isn’t able to recuperate the anti-colonial independence barely visible at the opening of the novel, and instead she re-lives her abandonment daily. Zanini-Cordi acknowledges this in her reading of the novel when she ultimately states, “Sellass, nel dolore dell’abbandono ma, soprattutto nella sua condizione di colonizzata, non trova una voce (72). We will see that in the very different context of the Somali Diaspora in Cristina Ali Farah’s works, the focus of chapter three, abandonment is, in fact, seen as an empowering release from patriarchal social constraints.
Madamismo essentially relegated these women and their children to a life on the periphery. The attempt to breach the divisions of colonial society (i.e. to recode madamismo as marriage) fails.

Beyond destroying the parental relationship, Carlo’s departure also reshapes the relationship between Sellass and her daughter, Marianna. After first being rejected by her sisters as a traitor who produced “bastardi” by an “assassino italiano,” Sellass is forced to move to Asmara to find work to support the family. Her options are few. As an Eritrean woman, she could either find work as a domestic servant in an Italian household or marry. Not willing to place herself again in a vulnerable position by a man, she chooses to become that which she had once scorned, the servant of a white mistress.\textsuperscript{38} Realizing that there is no place for her children in postwar Eritrea, Sellass seeks to educate them in a Catholic Italian school, but for this privilege, or charity, allowed to them by their Italian heritage, Marianna must pay a heavy price. As the first-born, she bears the brunt of her mother’s anger at her father. Each evening that her mother returns from a humiliating day at work, Marianna’s face becomes more and more a symbol of Carlo’s betrayal. Internalizing the impotence of her position as an Eritrean woman in a European dominated Eritrea, Sellass begins to beat her daughter, a reminder of her exploitation and abandonment:

Ogni sera aveva un assurdo desiderio di picchiare Marianna, di insultarla, faceva un grande sforzo per controllarsi e spesso non ci riusciva. Una forza selvaggia le esplodeva come un uragano nella testa e si placava solo quando Marianna

\textsuperscript{38} This is the price that Sellass pays in order to keep her children. One other option would be to give her children to the Italian orphanages, essentially giving up her right to them. Cristina Lombardi-Diop documents the travel narratives of Italian settler colonial Rosalia Pianavia Vivaldi, in which she is able to find a public space of authority through her work helping the meticci. But Vivaldi harbors no sympathy for the mothers. For more see Cristina Lombardi-Diop \textit{Writing the Female Frontier: Italian Women in Colonial Africa 1890-1940}. Diss. (New York University, 1999).
piangeva. Poi nella notte, sentiva un sordo dolore nel petto, una pena profonda, e cercava di dimenticare nel sonno la fatica del vivere in quella miseria, i singhiozzi di sua figlia, il volto di lui che vedeva guardando Marianna. (111)

Unable to return to the anti-colonial woman of her youth or continue to champion the benevolence of the Italians in defense of her family, she retreating into solitude and silence, her spirit eclipsed by the weight of the Manichaean system. With this abandonment, suggests Irene Zanini-Cordi, “il personaggio di Sellass non è più fruibile come focalizzatore della narrazione perché non riesce a raccontare, raccontarsi: è bloccato” (67). Sellass loses an identity, her own will forfeit so much that the anger felt at her required role as caretaker to her mistress’ Italian children can only be relieved by the suffering of her own child. Sellass unwillingly unleashes her fury for Carlo upon her daughter, and she “punishes her for her diversity” (Ponzanesi, Paradoxes 151), essentially making Marianna a victim of the colonial encounter as well.

The exploitation of Eritrean women in the manipulation of madamismo is also inscribed upon Marianna’s body, her light skin and dark hair mark her identity and bar her from entering into any community in Eritrea – there is simply no corresponding public space for her in a culture of dichotomies. Marianna begins life in the harmonious sphere of a dual-heritage only to be thrust into a void between them when her father leaves. Her attempts to claim a place within one of them with an Italian boyfriend unveil the painful truth about her own origins: “Quella notte Marianna non riuscì a dormire. Pensava a Gilberto e capiva che non l’avrebbe mai portata sul corso; l’avrebbe tenuta nascosta come qualcosa che non si vuole mostrare perché si ha vergogna. Si sentiva umiliata e il pensiero tornava a suo padre che aveva abbandonato Sellass ed i bambini” (219). The revelation of her father’s shame helps her to understand the reasons for her
mother’s transformation. This humiliation and shame are remainders of Fanon’s psycho-affective disorder, when reality succeeds in throwing the psyche into an identity crisis. Marianna will avoid the anguish of her mother, but not without difficulties. In the shadow of Sellass’ pained outbursts, punctuated by the phrase “come ha potuto,” Marianna cautiously engages the social environment of the Asmara slums. Initially hopeful about finding companionship with the children on her street, her presence in this wholly indigenous quarter provokes only ridicule; the children throw stones and yell out “meticci schifosi, meticci” (83). Not welcome in the open with Gilberto in the European quarters, and rejected by the marginalized children of the Eritrean back streets, Marianna retreats into herself and creates a universe populated with stories about ants, bushes and birds. She, like Milena in Asmara addio, creates a pantheistic universe that she may turn to for comfort. Though unlike Milena, who is clearly able to reside comfortably in the European sector, Marianna has no cultural center, and without any access to cultural myths (or anything, including food) she is forced to invent her own mythos. Dell’Oro points to narrative creativity as a source of liberty from the constraints of Marianna’s local reality, but also alludes to the expansive power of literature in the larger context, valorizing her own work in its aim to open a dialogue about the realities and legacies of Italy’s imperial program for women.

Marianna’s imagination allows her to transcend the boundaries of Asmara, but Elsa, an old street vendor of anghera, Eritrean flatbread, shows her how to see beyond racial hierarchies and effectively re-boot her psycho-affective process. Like Mariam’s spiritual lesson on dämòz marriage for Sellass, Elsa teaches Marianna and her brother Gianfranco that to be labeled meticcio is not an insult, “Non c’è niente di male…a essere
meticci, anzi voi siete più fortunati perché avete il padre bianco e la madre nera così state nel mezzo” (89). The liminal existence, hitherto provoking shame, at once becomes something special:

Dio impastò il primo uomo come io impasto il taff, lo mise a cuocere ma venne la pioggia e spense il fuoco, così l’uomo resto troppo bianco. Allora Dio ne fece un altro; ma si distresse, perché Dio aveva sempre tante cose da fare, così la cottura troppo lunga bruciò l’uomo che diventò nero; allora Dio stette molto attento e ne fece uno del colore giusto, che era quello che stava fra il bianco e il nero. (89)

Elsa’s creation myth allows Marianna to be proud of her difference, not as an aberration of humanity, but as the model for perfection. Marianna finds solace in this new mythology that is between. As a surrogate mother, Elsa represents an alternative response to Sellass’ bitterness in the wake of abandonment. She too lived and had children with an Italian man, and she too was abandoned, but he took her only daughter with him. Left behind and reduced to selling bread on the streets, this former madama still retains her Italian name and helps Sellass’ children find strength in their unique position as in-betweens. Elsa is a victim of the colonial system like Sellass, but she accepts the impossibility of her movement in the world, and instead embraces the freedom that that system offers her daughter.

The valorization of her existence also pushes Marianna to explore her “Italianness.” Elsa allows her to speak Italian, and later she celebrates Christmas with Gianfranco by decorating the small bush in the courtyard, resurrecting the lost traditions of the culturally mixed home of her childhood. The newfound identity is met with scorn from her mother, who attempts to deny Marianna any claim to European descent. At the end of British custodianship in Eritrea, mixed-race children producing written claims to legitimacy from an Italian parent were granted Italian citizenship. Sellass withholds
Carlo’s note of paternity, erasing his claim upon the children that he abandoned. For Sellass the destruction of the document restores to her an independence lost by the disgrace of his flight. She virtually re-erects racial barriers. He was not willing to claim them as his in the face of impending war; therefore by destroying that legal right she is able to symbolically eradicate his very existence. The gesture is also an attempt to remind Marianna that Eritrea “è il tuo paese…la tua terra,” but by punishing her daughter for that other half, Sellass’ reminder falls on deaf ears (233). The last violent act of stripping her daughter of half of her identity forces Marianna into her own independence as she persuades her brother’s Italian employer, another surrogate parent, to give her his name. The gift of a new name, and new identity (and life-narrative), leads Marianna to Ethiopia and then to Italy, where she marries and has children of her own.

It would initially seem that Dell’Oro’s celebration of Marianna as the in-between postcolonial subject, able to live beyond the confines of the stifling social and racial hierarchies of the former colony, requires a complete erasure of a female Eritrean voice in both Sellass and the Eritrean part of herself. Such a conclusion would in essence corroborate Fanon’s claim that there is no possibility for reconciliation, even for a child with equal claims to both constituents. Though the narrative does not document Marianna’s life in Italy, there are moments in the novel that allude to a less than perfect world beyond Eritrean borders. As Marianna announces her new name and imminent departure to her mother, Sellass hurls a final insult that unveils the far reaching and lasting consequences of the Italian colonial encounter, particularly for Eritrean woman: “spero che tu non debba dargli niente in cambio di questo favore” (231). The exchange for access to Italian society is sex as it had been under colonialism and as it is now at the
close of British custodianship. The initial encounters between native women and Italian men demonstrated the high price of this exchange, and Sellass alludes to the continued price to be paid by the next generation of women who seek legitimization in a the larger postcolonial world. Although Marianna does not sell herself for the carpenter’s name, Dell’Oro’s narrator points out that many others were not so lucky: “Altre ragazze si erano prostitute per avere quel nome che le avrebbe reso cittadine italiane, dando loro la speranza di potere abbandonare il paese e cercare una vita migliore in un mondo, speravano, in cui non ci sarebbero stati pregiudizi di razza (231). Dell’Oro knows that this is a false hope, one that would have been particularly evident in Italy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the novel was published, as racial tensions flared after a massive influx of immigrants and migrants to the peninsula from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. Despite Marianna’s escape, she will find herself in an Italy that is less than welcoming, where legacies of fascist colonial rhetoric persist in informing race relations in the former metropole. Jacqueline Andall notes that the ambiguity of the biracial position remains in colonial as well as in contemporary Italian settings: “These children occupied an ambiguous position in the colonial setting as they were not fully recognized as either Eritrean or Italian. Eritrean-Italians also occupy a somewhat ambiguous position as not fully falling within the category of extracomunitari but also not fully included as Italian citizens” (200). Even so, Marianna manages to gain access to a larger community without becoming a victim, and “consequently rejects the feminine identity and the role as powerless victim of her biological mother who also sees the daughters as a mirror image of herself, that is, another victim” (Parati Italian Fathers 193). Marianna does represent the agent in the colonial exchange, able to manipulate her bi-cultural identity to find a
better place for herself, but Dell’Oro also subtly reminds readers that her road will be a difficult one in an Italy not used to racial difference within its peninsular borders.

*L’abbandono* succeeds in seamlessly enmeshing the personal stories of Sellass and Marianna with the larger consequences of Italy’s imperial program upon indigenous women and children in Africa. It also approaches the female subaltern point of view with the character of Sellass, and her budding anti-colonial sentiments, but these are fleeting moments in the text, and she is subsumed by the larger possibilities of her daughter’s mobility. Marianna is granted access to a changing world because of her shifting cultural, racial and national affiliations. She must inhabit simultaneously both cultural spaces. She, a very symbol of the postcolonial moment, is Dell’Oro’s heroine of a newly multicultural world of porous national boundaries. Graziella Parati adds:

> In her quest for a definition of her self, Marianna succeeds in creating a space where hybrid, personal traces, or her private identity are complemented by hybrid, public, or multinational traces that allow her to become officially the citizen of both a Western and a non-Western country. The sphere thus constructed is the result of an act of *mètissage* that entwines public and private spheres and attempts to destroy the dichotomized portrayal of black and white identities, of oppressors and oppressed. (194)

But the price of this newly found freedom, defined in this text as access to the Western world, requires the further silencing of the indigenous female, pushing her deeper into the margins.

I.VIII Fantastic Morality: Colonial Childhood in *La gola del diavolo*

*I believe we need to become a child again to understand certain psychic realities.*

Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952
Shifting genres once again, Dell’Oro’s third work unfolds in the realm of children’s fiction, where her prose becomes more fantastic, imbued with myth, legend and morality, and a muddy fluctuation between Catholic and native influences. Local legends about the Devil’s Gorge and the waking dead rest safely beyond the pages of the novel and the steps of the young protagonist, but their absence permeates the tale and moves the characters closer to the adult world. The story follows Lù a young Italian girl born in Eritrea under Fascism, and her quest to find the Devil’s Gorge, a mythic ravine on the outskirts of Asmara. Her journey brings her into contact with many other young colonial citizens, including an abandoned Italian pauper girl, a mendicant and disabled Eritrean orphan, a sickly Greek boy and other Italian boys from her neighborhood. Lù never reaches the gorge, but in the end is able to fully understand the social and cultural differences that separate her from the rest of her friends. This awareness also affords her a deep understanding of the realities of the other side, through her relationship with Aptè, the orphaned beggar. More than any of the other novels, La gola clearly shows how childhood allows for unlikely relationships within the colony.

“Here,” Loredana Polizzi claims, “[courtyards, streets, markets, playing fields] relations are negotiated by the children themselves, and historical circumstances are at least distorted, if not rendered invisible” (155). Though this is true to a certain extent, unlike for Milena in Asmara addio, whose protective surroundings shielded her from the brutal realities of colonial life, Lù’s safe world is breached by the violence of a crumbling colony. This is evident in one example where Dell’Oro revisits the August 1946 Sudanese massacre of Eritreans in both texts. In Asmara addio the Sudanese soldiers

39 “A minor incident was enough to spark off a conflagration; and this occurred on August 28, 1946 when three Sudanese soldiers were assaulted and one of them was stoned to death. A few
come looking for Eritreans at Milena’s door, but Meret, the cook, is safely hidden. The event threatens to destroy perceptions of a safe and secure home, as this very adult reality breaks open the physical and metaphorical door of Milena’s adolescence, and forces her to recognize existing ethnic violence. This same episode in La gola del diavolo, is slightly changed, and Lù’s experience is tragic, and moves her to a more profound understanding of cosmic injustice. Unlike the close call in the first version of the massacre, this time the brutal event directly disrupts the security of Lù’s home as Bri, the Eritrean housemaid, not much older than Lù, is murdered in the streets. Her death occurs after the cease-fire order, but when Lù’s father inquires about further action from the police, they send him home, as this is not a European conflict. Dell’Oro articulates in the narrator’s voice the lesson learned, "Nessuno pagò per la morte di Bri…La giustizia degli uomini non si mette mai dalla parte dei più deboli, degli emarginati, dei diversi. A loro viene tolta la voce” (65). Bri’s murder awakens Lù to the violent ethnic clashes that surround her European safe-zone (and more importantly to the persistence of racial and ethnic prejudice within both white and black communities), and introduces an awareness of arbitrary justice. She discovers that justice is not a universal right, something that Fanon, reminds us the colonized has long known, “The colonized subject wastes no time lamenting and almost never searches for justice in the colonial context’’ (WE 43).

Dell’Oro infuses this second protagonist with a sense of guilt, and by extension recognizes her own role as advocate for the voiceless (recalling Elias’ dream of his father and subsequent call for justice), but despite this new awareness Lù is still not able to do

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hours later, a fully armed company of about 70 SDF [Sudanese Defense Forces] soldiers marched into the streets of the Eritrean quarters of the city and shot wantonly leaving behind 46 killed and 60 wounded” Tekeste Negash. Eritrean and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience. (Uppsala, Sweden: The Nordic Africa Institute, 1997) 42.
anything within the narrative to effect change. Dell’Oro herself, however, does amplify the role of the Eritrean in this work. Though Lù can do nothing for Bri, or any other Eritrean for that matter, the recognition of inequality is at the very least an awareness of the absurdity of the adult world.

Like in her previous colonial novels, *La gola* hinges on the actions of an in-between character, Aptè, an Eritrean orphan who befriends Lù. With this character more than any other Dell’Oro attempts to invert the racial hierarchies inherited by colonialism. This social capsizing is only possible within the framework of the “complicità che c’è fra i bambini quando si incontrano la prima volta,” and thus is restricted to the adolescent realm of possibility (116). Childhood solicits an instinctual assumption of equality, as political and cultural rules governing social interaction have not yet been learned, and the psycho-affective is still a fluid, evolving space. Therefore, an Italian and Eritrean child can meet without the added political and social prejudices that come with adult interactions. Lù shares the spotlight with Aptè, her unlikely Eritrean counterpart, a choice that belies Dell’Oro’s growing sense of social responsibility as a writer, “Ho voluto dargli un ruolo di protagonista di risarcirlo di una vita vissuta nell’ombra” (*El Ghibli* 2003). Aptè is indeed pulled from the oblivion of his silent suffering (he is based on a real Eritrean boy), and placed firmly in the role of savior in Dell’Oro’s text. He is the spiritual guide that leads Lù through the Eritrean quarters to the periphery of the city. Lù’s own fears of the unknown and dangerous world outside of the city walls dissolve in his presence, “Lui non poteva perdersi e sapeva evitare i pericoli” (55). This seven-year-old Eritrean mendicant who must use makeshift metal crutches to walk, gives the protagonist lessons about life in the colony that she is not able to receive in her European
school. His physical hybridity of half boy, half metal alludes to the half human, half deity Christ, and his life of suffering in poverty ends in sacrifice. The Christological characterization of Aptè becomes overt by the end of the novel when Filèpos, the monk who raises him, describes his first days: “In quel piccolo essere con una parvenza di vita, destinato, dicevano tutti segnandosi, a raggiungere subito il cielo, gli occhi grandi, profondi, guardavano intorno con un’espressione già adulta. Il bambino sembrava consapevole che aveva un ruolo assegnatogli” (117). The boy’s wisdom and generosity are examples for even the most pious of men living on the high plains, and his awareness of his own destiny of suffering endows him with a seemingly religious vocation.

The importance of his character is obvious in the first paragraph, as he is present in the protagonist’s opening dream about the object of her desire, the Devil’s Gorge, that mirrors Milena’s Modok in Asmara addio, and serves as a parallel/opposing space:

Nel sogno scivolava lungo la parete del baratro. Gli arbusti si protendevano per afferrarla, le pietre rotolavano verso l’oscurità.
Svegliandosi Lù si rannicchiava sotto le coperte per difendersi dalle insidie del buio, per allontanare il sogno, ma le immagini le aveva ormai dentro e non riusciva a ricacciarle negli angoli da cui erano emerse.
Aptè lo stortio, le andava incontro trascinando le gambe, spostandosi con le mani appoggiate su rudimentali congegni di latta.
‘Dove vai, Aptè?’
‘Aptè, dov’è la gola del diavolo?’(7)

This is not the Eritrean creation myth, but instead the underworld, a chasm outside of town where the locals claim to hear the voices of the dead, where the protagonist believes that she will hear her sister (Johnson 204). This dream is a mirror into Lù’s psychosocial process. Homi Bhabha suggests that the psycho-affective is “a place of social and psychic mediation” that “involves emotions, the imagination or psychic life” (WE xix). By imagining both Aptè and the gorge, she is essentially entwining her social ethics to
Eritrean morality (through the boy’s spiritual function) and mythology (the local stories of the gorge). The gorge is an inversion of Milena’s Modok and unlike her spiritual awareness of the island; Lù’s connection to Eritrean geography is contingent upon her actual relationships with the people of the land. She learns of this place from Obai the fortune-teller in town, from Ascalù, her grandparents' laundress, and from Aptè, who eventually saves her from the perilous journey. Despite Lù’s absence within the Eritrean mythology, her relationships with the indigenous population outside of the home endow her with a deeper concrete knowledge. Her friendship with Aptè in particular allows her to see the social disparities inherited from old colonial systems: "Stavano in silenzio, in due mondi diversi. Lù avvertiva un confuso senso di colpa nei confronti di Aptè, e il bisogno di farsi capire, ma non trovava le parole” (68). This sense of guilt emerges from a miscommunication across unfair cultural borders that “per un capriccio del caso o chissà quale ignorato disegno, le era fra i privilegiati, protetti da altri destini” (20). The irrational divisions of the adult world, however, do not seem to be valid in childhood, and Aptè becomes her guide, and her equal.

Despite the messianic identification, Aptè still remains excluded from European spaces, and helps Lù navigate the environment only beyond the Italian quarter. Lù may have access to different regions of Asmara, but she inevitably returns to the privileged space of the home, which renders "any movement she makes beyond her immediate neighborhood ... transgressive" (Johnson 201). Despite Lù’s vehement assertions that Aptè is her friend, she must constantly defend the relationship to her parents, who see him as a mere beggar, and Aptè in turn, is warned about this dangerous friendship from Obai, the fortune-teller and surrogate mother. "Ora,” she says, "sono amici…ma
These adults only see the binary oppositions that lie between these characters, and, as adults, are blind to the authenticity of their friendship. The friendship will in fact never be tested in the adult world, as Aptè sacrifices his own health, and subsequently life, to save Lù from the dangers of a sudden torrential downpour on the path to the gorge. Aptè’s sacrifice inverts the social hierarchy, and the beggar becomes the king, but this gospel is written by Dell’Oro who, by the very act of writing, asserts her privileged place above her subjects. In the end, the elevation of a disabled Eritrean orphan isn’t a perfect attempt at subverting racial hierarchies.

Despite obvious limitations, this novel clearly illustrates the possibility of empathy between various factions of Fanon’s divided city for children. It also, if we return to Fanon’s example of cultural imposition through French comics, serves to present to young Italians a different kind of hero in Aptè.

I. IX Dell’Oro’s Colonial Fiction as Destabilizing Agent

Taken individually, these three colonial novels chip away at the monolithic categories of the traditional colonial dichotomy. By showcasing the various possible identities (settler, worker, meticci) housed under the headings colonizer and colonized, these texts make the case for a complex and multi-textured community with varying ethics and modes of relating to others. Though many of the indigenous characters (Sellass and Aptè) pay dearly for their relationships, the result of such transgressions lead to future opportunities of moving beyond divisive colonial ideology. As a body of texts read together, Dell’Oro’s unconventional and shifting style, keen on showcasing young female characters, provides a female perspective to traditional colonial narratives. It also serves
as an introduction to the subsequent burgeoning of postcolonial literature written by women, to which the following two authors of this study significantly contribute.
Chapter II: Reading Cures and Empathic Communities: Igiaba Scego’s New Traumatic

In the previous chapter I demonstrate how Dell’Oro’s texts bypass colonial binary oppositions for a nuanced look at colonial relationships, particularly for women. In this chapter I look at how Scego’s texts propose new methods of navigating the traumatic experience in postcolonial diasporas. Specifically, I investigate the ways in which trauma shapes the diasporic experience across generations, and, particularly, how the act of reading (as opposed to the act of telling) allows for a gendered look at trauma. I first detail the foundational concepts of contemporary trauma theory, and then discuss how Scego departs from such characterizations. What I ultimately argue is that Scego’s traumatic paradigm reconfigures the experience of trauma as a productive and unifying space that encourages creative connections between victims.

Scego’s texts are primarily concerned with the traumatic consequences of the Somali Diaspora for women in the same family. For Scego, born in Italy of Somali exiles, the Somali Diaspora begins after the fall of democracy in the late 1960s, and escalates beyond the outbreak of civil war in the 1990s. Her account of this relatively recent diaspora focuses on the crucial nascent stages, through the tensions between the generation of migrants and refugees that fled Somalia, and their daughters coming of age in exile. These first migrants experience the physical and emotional trauma of the brutal events leading up to, and directly following the expulsion, while their children only experience this trauma from the distance of Italy as host country. By homing in on how trauma functions within, and defines, communities of women beyond Somalia (and Italy), I map out Scego’s traumatic model that builds cross-cultural communities through trauma.
II.1 Beyond Shattering Tropes and Narrative Cures

Scego’s novels *Rhoda* and *Oltre Babilonia* are about trauma, multiple traumas, to be exact. Taken together, the works could be characterized as a collective attempt at *working through* for three generations of Somalis in exile. The landscapes of trauma range from ruthless political repression and colonialism, to rape and suicide, and traverse the geographies of Italy, Tunisia, Somalia and Argentina over eight decades. The sheer diversity of these experiences makes it impossible to synthesize their happening, and subsequent haunting of the characters, such that one cannot simply say that these works are about sexual assault in contemporary Rome, any more than one could say they are about Italian colonialism in East Africa. These works do represent a very ambitious cross-section of trauma as experience in both the individual and collective realms, and their force lies in what they say about *living with trauma* (particularly for women), rather than in any insight they might give into the specific circumstances of the traumatic events themselves.

Navigating through this complicated literary universe requires some guiding principles of trauma theory that serve as the substructure for Scego’s particular model of the traumatic.⁴⁰ Scego’s brand of trauma springs from the notions of dissociation and abreaction, central processes in recent theories of trauma in the humanities that rely

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heavily on Freud. Dissociation, what Michelle Balaev calls the “shattering trope,” refers to a psychic splitting that disrupts the way an individual perceives the self and the environment (149). This trope became a defining characteristic of trauma studies in the humanities in the 1990s and still remains central to literary trauma. Though there are various studies on dissociation, I begin my look at the phenomenon through Cathy Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). Caruth describes post-traumatic stress disorder as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event” (4). Though in this description Caruth suggests that the psychological response is only *sometimes* delayed, in her subsequent work this delay becomes the defining characteristic of the traumatic experience. Even with recent detractors, Caruth’s focus on the delay remains central to trauma studies and to my look at Scego’s traumatic model. For Caruth, dissociation is precisely the temporal gap between the physical and conscious experience of a traumatic event and the subsequent

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41 Though I will not be engaging Freud, his work is at the center of all contemporary discussions (and criticisms) of trauma theories. As early as 1895, in a work written with Josef Breuer, “On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena,” Freud hints at dissociation related to repression in his female subjects. It is interesting to note here that trauma studies begins with female victims (and sexual violence) before it ever becomes a tool of looking at post-traumatic stress disorder in veterans (primarily male). Freud suggests that trauma is not neurological, but psychological, it represents a psychic change in the mind. It isn’t until *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in 1920, that he formulates a theory on the origins of trauma as a threat to life that comes too soon, and subsequently is experienced only belatedly. In a later work, *Moses and Monotheism*, published in 1937 during his exile in England, he suggests that trauma is a process of remembering and forgetting, and that it is possible to inherit trauma unconsciously and collectively.

42 There are scholars who propose radically different psychic processes related to trauma. For instance E. Ann Kaplan identifies three different theories related to brain function and trauma: 1) Dissociative model that I have been discussing above, that suggests that the memory of the original event is inaccessible, 2) The dissociation & cognition model asserts that there are victims that consciously experience the trauma and can remember it as normal memory, but the memory causes traumatic dissociation, and 3) The third model deals with the process whereby the victim, during the traumatic experience, becomes or takes part in his/her own victimization. These models suggest that there are various and unexplored modes of the traumatic experience that have yet to be applied to trauma studies in the humanities. For more see: Kaplan. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
emotional and psychic apprehension of it. Since the initial trauma is unexpected, it does not give the mind time to emotionally process what has physically happened. This rupture creates a psychic wound that Caruth explains thus: “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event that … is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness” (Unclaimed 4). Caruth stresses that since the experience is inaccessible to the conscious mind, there is, also, a linguistic gap associated with the psychic split, and therefore it becomes both the unknowable and unsayable event.

The pathological expression of trauma comes after the event itself, as the psyche tries to retroactively comprehend what has happened, precisely, after it has happened. This particularity is what Caruth calls belatedness:

The pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself—which may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally—nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (emphasis mine, Trauma 4-5)

Such possession manifests in various ways, such as anxiety, flashbacks, compulsion, nightmares, etc. In Scego’s texts, it takes numerous forms: colorblindness, self-destructive behavior, impotence, silence and isolation. It is also, notably, a possession by an image or event that is ultimately unknowable. The event, even through it has the power to possess or haunt, is only ever an approximation, since the true moment has been missed. Thus, in Caruth’s figuration, history is always outside the reach of trauma, as “the traumatized…carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves
the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (*Trauma* 5). Scego adheres somewhat to the “shattering trope” of trauma, as most of her characters clearly exhibit the multiple ruptures of this model (temporal, psychic, linguistic, social). We will see that the majority of her protagonists are “possessed” in ways that make it impossible for them to fully participate in family or community life. Though Scego doesn’t propose a radically different mode of the psychic process of dissociation, she does suggest that there may be ways to take advantage of this unique psychological split to form interesting and productive relationships between victims.

The timeless, historyless aspect of Caruth’s trauma model is slightly challenged by the abreactive process, the second framing concept of trauma pertinent to my study. Though such a theory forms the basis of psychoanalysis, its application in the humanities in relation to trauma happened only in the wake of extensive work on post-traumatic stress disorder in the 1980s and 1990s, which thereafter produced an interdisciplinary boom in trauma studies.  

Research conducted by scholars like Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman on the role of narrative and trauma for Holocaust survivors, add a new psychological depth to trauma studies opening up channels of interest to literature and film as modes of testimony. This shift hinges primarily on the role telling the story of trauma as a means to gain conscious control over its shattering effects, as well as to broaden the public understanding of catastrophic events in history. Laub defines the role of speaking for the traumatized victim thus:

This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony

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43 Trauma studies flourished after the 1997 publication of Denise Grady’s “War Memories May Harm Health,” in the *New York Times*, which essentially unequivocally claimed that stress affects the brain, trauma became the new method of inquiry across various disciplines.
of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim (69).

The post-traumatic process of telling is, therefore, one way to try and know the unknownable trauma of which Caruth writes. Telling the story of trauma essentially pulls it from the unknowable depths of the unconscious to the curative conscious realm, thereby giving the victim “some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective,” as Dominick LaCapra notes (90). Although Laub, and others, diverge from Caruth’s unspeakability, the bigger departure is in how testimony, as a public act, engages history in ways that Caruth suggests are impossible. For Laub, the relationship between the victim and the listener creates a kind of new knowledge that may supplement or stand beside historiography:

> While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma—as known event and not simply an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge de novo. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the last time. (57)

Testimony, as an example of abreaction, is bound to the historical circumstances within which the trauma happened, and consciously links the victim to the event as history. It also requires the active participation of a listener. Scego’s novels struggle with the role of testimony as a means of asserting control of an unmastered past, but also as an irreversible connection to a larger historical narrative that thereafter, defines the individual experience of trauma.

There is one final aspect of trauma that Scego engages in her novels: transgenerational transmission and its relation to collective and historical traumas.
Caruth’s and Laub’s contrasts above will bear different fruits for this concept as well. On one hand, Caruth suggests, “It is because violence inhabits, incomprehensibly, the very survival of those who have lived beyond it that it may be witnessed best in the future generations to whom this survival is passed on” (*Violence and Time* 25). In other words, a fuller understanding of the effect of violence (notably not of the event itself) is most visible in the inherited act of survival through generations. Caruth characterizes trauma as a haunting, a phantom or revenant that can continue to affect future generations. The result of such a process over time is the creation of a culture of trauma that shapes entire ethnic communities, like formerly colonized populations, the African American population in the States and diasporas. On the other hand, Laub and Felman, through the process of testimony, suggest that trauma narratives can “recreate and abreact the experience for those who were not there—the reader, listener, or witness can experience the historical experience first-hand” (Balaev 152). This second example of transgenerational transmission is tightly linked to the specificity of history, and creates an origin from which the traumatic experience may emanate to affect individual and cultural identities. It also suggests that trauma is not necessarily bound to its primary victim, and can reach others through vicarious trauma. Scego recognizes the potential of these transmissions for her characters as both diasporic and ex-colonial subjects, but she also sees the danger in defining individual trauma from the outside.

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44 Both Kaplan and Irene Visser suggest that the transgenerational aspect of trauma is the most useful to apply to postcolonial studies. Emphasis on how the phylogenic model can link postcolonial communities together through shared and inherited traumatic memories is appealing to postcolonialists that stress the importance of historical and cultural contextualization. Though I see how this model is useful in such a literary context that negotiates power and disenfranchisement, I also think that limiting a fiction to this process also diminishes the unique experiences of individual trauma. For more see Kaplan’s *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005) and Irene Visser’s “Trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies” in *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47.3 (July 2011).
Scego acknowledges the elusive and inexpressible nature of trauma, as well the phylogenetic peculiarity of passing it down, particularly for trauma related to catastrophic events, but ultimately these frameworks fall short. The ambiguous relationship to history and the overarching assumption that all traumatic experiences follow this same process undermine their efficacy as theoretical tools of investigation. The formidable cross-section of trauma showcased in Scego’s novels challenges these traditional modes to account for all of her characters’ experiences. Some of them are victims of mass violence like civil war and political oppression, while others suffer from less public traumas like domestic abuse and rape. Despite these differences, all of these traumas house a gendered element (and most of them are women), a characteristic that goes unaccounted for in Caruth or Laub’s models. Scego’s traumatic paradigm instead, rejects fragmentation altogether and unseats the central role of recuperative testimony. In her novels, she demonstrates the unifying potential of the traumatic experience and points to literature as an alternate source of gaining mastery over the past. This particular model of trauma, moreover, is a specifically gendered experience rather than a diasporic or collective one. In the following analysis, the literary expression of this mode of trauma fully emerges, and, I argue, presents a compelling case for new methods of community formation within the context of trauma.

II.II Unheard Testimony vs. Productive Reading in Rhoda

45 There have been theories to address gendered trauma, but many of them emerged after these foundational concepts, with the exception of Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. (New York: Perseus Books, 1992), and, of course, Freud’s early work on hysteria.
The protagonist of Scego’s 2004 novel is dead. From the very beginning of the novel, she is sealed away in the cold comfort of a tomb. Though her corporeal form is slowly breaking apart, her mind continues to ruminate upon the details of a tragically lived life. She is aware of the footsteps that tread lightly on the ground above: her cousins’ ever more infrequent vigils. If they could but listen, they would hear the voiceless syllables of Rhoda’s final testimony. Only readers are granted this privilege, as Rhoda’s postmortem meditations intercut the parallel tales of the bewildered living searching for answers in the silence. At its most bare, Rhoda is a novel about the silencing of testimony in trauma’s wake. Yet the deliberate focus on Rhoda’s speechless confession suggests a different reading of the novel that challenges the central role of testimony for both trauma victims and the diasporic communities of which they are part.

Dori Laub warns that, “the absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (68). In this case, Rhoda’s story has been annihilated (at least within the novel). Though it exists as part of the community of chapters that physically comprise the novel, it stands apart, unable to penetrate the interweaving narratives of the living. Hers is the story that no other characters will ever hear; it is the testimony without an empathic listener. Rhoda’s unheard story threatens to both deny her any relief from a particularly acute traumatic neurosis, and exclude her participation in the story of the Somali Diaspora. Silence is pernicious, particularly when associated with trauma and diaspora. Rhoda doesn’t tell her story, and so she can gain no control over the powerful compulsions that lead her to death. Rhoda doesn’t share her story, and so that absence surely weakens the collective Somali
identity, that, as a diaspora is generated “in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (Brah 444). And yet, if we read closely, Rhoda’s story is not completely tragic.

The traumatic event that is the source of Rhoda’s swift and precipitous fall is her forced relocation to Rome from Mogadishu in 1990: “Non so se esiste un ‘ora x’ in cui si succedono le cose e dove la nostra vita prende una piaga strana, definitiva. Se esiste, allora la mia ‘ora x’ scattò un giorno d’estate del 1990” (35). The imminent collapse of the Siad Barre regime led to a chaotic scramble for power and the eventual bitter eruption of civil war. The rising tide of ever more violent crimes made the capital city an increasingly dangerous place in the 1990s, particularly for young women. One evening, Rhoda accidentally learns that her uncle Daud has planned for her relocation to Rome the following morning. Though acting in the best interest of his niece, Daud’s plan to spring the full shock of this one-way journey on her just before departure amplifies the unexpected force of the upheaval.

Rhoda’s advance knowledge of the involuntary migration bewilders her, “Partire? Lasciare Mogadiscio? Per Sempre? Sul mio volto passarono mille emozioni” (39). She has fewer than twenty-four hours to process the meaning of this news and say goodbye to her loved ones, her beloved city. She has no hope of swaying her uncle, but she decides to rebel and chance one last trip through the streets of a dangerous Mogadishu to see her beloved Tonino. There are two aspects to this rash flight to see him: a budding precocious sexual energy and the willingness to expose herself to danger for this desire. Though she succeeds in saying goodbye to her first love, she simultaneously introduces both sexual and violent elements into her experience of this trauma. Scigo presents Rhoda’s trauma
through a prism of various sources: the betrayal of her uncle, the loss of first love, and the acknowledgement of danger on the streets of Mogadishu. Thus her consequent neurosis will reflect fragments of each element and complicate an easy mapping of her particular experience of trauma. In addition to these individual components of Rhoda’s ‘ora x’ there is also a loss of autonomy that strips her from her place within a community: “Quello che odiavo – lo capisco ora meglio – era la possibilità di non poter tornare indietro, la possibilità di non potere scegliere se vivere o morire nella mia patria” (23). Rhoda cannot choose to stay and be part of this violent chapter of history, instead she is to be spirited away, as if plucked from the very book that is Somalia. This rupture, more than the others, is what compels her to return to Somalia, but, again, her testimony remains unheard, and so, ultimately unclaimed.46

In the ensuing fifteen years in Italy, Rhoda tries to recreate the circumstances of the original trauma in her relationships. Conflating the moments that led to her unwilling departure, Rhoda seeks out instances of betrayal, loss, desire and exile. She finds them all in Gianna, a mature Italian woman who sells exotic teas. From the grave, Rhoda admits that, “Per molto tempo ho pensato che a perdermi fosse stati Gianna, il suo rifiuto, la sua incapacità di amare. Ma con senno di poi capii che il mio caos interiore aveva radici profonde, profondissime e che Gianna era solo un sintomo. Quella storia non fece altro che accelerare la mia caduta” (163). In Gianna, Rhoda is able to re-experience all the anguishing phases of her abrupt expulsion from her homeland. They unexpectedly meet;

46 Raffaele Taddeo in an article for the online magazine El Ghibli suggests that the impossibility of Rhoda’s recovery is linked to a missing Oedipus function: “La comunanza dei sentimenti che Rhoda prova per Roma e l'Italia … fa sì che si possa pensare quasi ad una funzione edipica mancata e proprio per questo all'impossibilità di Rhoda di ritrovare la sua autonomia, la sua identità strutturata.” While such a reading is interesting, and parents are always problematic in Scego’s texts, I do not see Rhoda’s story as ultimately tragic. For more see “L’espressione letteraria nelle seconde generazioni” 5.22 (2008).
Rhoda acquiesces to all of Gianna’s whims; one night, despite her apprehensions, Rhoda acts upon her sexual feelings for Gianna; Gianna repels her, insults her, and kicks her out forever. The formulaic recreation of her initial exile does not bring clarity, only repetition in the extreme: Rhoda thereafter becomes a prostitute, daily reliving, through the violence of sex, the forfeiture of autonomy and banishment from the community (sister, aunt, friends, lovers, etc.). Rhoda’s possession, if we are to use Caruth’s characterization of traumatic repetition, exhibits various fissures or ruptures associated with the shattering model, but we also have a gendered element that shows up often with Sc ego’s characters.

The most extreme expression of her compulsion to repeat her last traumatic night in Somalia is her return. This decision, like her adolescent choice to risk her life to see Tonino one last time, brings with it the chance of new violence. In the last attempt to quell the ‘caos interiore’ that has plagued her long absence, Rhoda boards a flight to the war zone. Vivian Gerrard suggests in her reading of the novel that Rhoda suffers from “chronic nostalgia for life in Somalia,” and that her return, “gives her a sense of purification of the soul” (282). Though Rhoda’s return to Somalia marks a period of abstinence, I would not go so far as to suggest that she is ‘purified,’ as such a reading suggests a full measure of reconciliation. Homecoming does not restore to her complete authority (she is murdered)—just as her dangerous farewell to Tonino was not able to change the inevitable events—Rhoda’s return grants her the peace of death. Returned to the earthen arms of Somalia, Rhoda is at last able to give her testimony, but without an ‘empathic listener’ Laub suggests that her story is ‘annihilated.’ This might be true, as even in death Rhoda does not find peace: “Possibile che esista una seconda morte? Un oblio più atroce della morte stessa? Cosa saremo noi umani senza i nostri ricordi, la
nostra memoria?” (160). One might be tempted to read this novel as a fatalistic view of the diasporic experience, but Scego stops short of this characterization.

Within the enclosed universe of the novel, Scego hints at the possibility of a different kind of traumatic experience that doesn’t call for Rhoda’s testimony. In the midst of Rhoda’s unheard narrative she suddenly remembers a poem by Emily Dickinson: “Penso a Emily Dickinson. C’era una sua poesia che leggevo sempre nei miei bui giorni di perversione” (160). In the darkest of Rhoda’s hours, Dickinson’s words became a salve as the poet, “sapeva parlare alla mia anima tormentata meglio che chiunque altro. Meglio, a tratti di me stesso. La morte, la vita, le mie ossessioni, c’era tutto in lei di me” (161). The poem, quoted in its entirety in the novel, speaks to Rhoda in life, as it does in death, as Dickinson’s voice in “I heard a fly buzz” also comes from the grave. And like the speaker’s in this poem, Rhoda’s voice too, will be preserved for others who might read it in the future. What this brief recognition of Dickinson’s poetry signals is the unifying power of literature through time and space. That the wildly different circumstances of these women’s lives can converge in this poem, suggests that these women may also be able to occupy the same space of trauma, and therefore, a reclusive white woman living in New England mourning loved ones and a fearless Somali exile returning to a war zone can find common ground through trauma. This recognition in Dickinson also re-defines the collective community of which Rhoda is part. Now, her trauma is part of the story of female trauma that can reach well beyond the limits the Somali situation. Literature essentially offers a sense of solidarity free of temporal and social constraints, impossible with testimony. In her next novel Scego
amplifies the role of poetry in the creation of a trans-diasporic community that is able to better confront the difficulties of living with trauma inherent in all diasporas.

Literature emerges a second time in the text to connect Rhoda and her younger cousin through the same act of reading. One evening, Rhoda hears the soft voice of her cousin reading at the edge of her grave. The book that this young girl has chosen is one that Rhoda left behind in 1990. It is, as Rhoda finally recognizes it, “IL MIO LIBRO…Lo avevo fatto io. Avevo raccolto le favole che si tramandavano oralmente in famiglia e poi per ogni favola avevo fatto un disegno” (111). There have been many cousins attending Rhoda’s grave, but this experience with her younger female cousin is the only one that creates connections between the living and the dead. That Rhoda’s story is not written in the book is significant. We’ve just seen how Scego substitutes the power of reading for the recuperative structure of telling, and this is an example of such a replacement. This is a book about sharing and reading. Rhoda collected these fables into a catalogue, cared for and cherished in her absence by her younger cousin, who now brings it to the grave to share it once again with her. That this exchange only happens between women is significant, suggesting that this is somehow a female mode of communication through the act of reading. This reading and the memory of Dickinson together, balance the destructive consequences of her silent testimony. In Scego’s traumatic model reading does not bring mastery, but instead, community.

Though I just demonstrated how the novel diegetically addresses the role of literature in trauma, I have not yet discussed the role of the novel itself as literature. Though I allude to a parallel between Dickinson’s postmortem speaker and Rhoda (and therefore Scego’s nod to her own novel as a similar mediating text), there is also a
possible allegorical reading of the novel that addresses the role of trauma literature within a collective context. For trauma associated with catastrophic events affecting entire communities, testimony necessarily takes on a collective significance. The individual experience of violence becomes one of many similar experiences happening within the same space and time. Though such narratives give insight into the emotional experience of massive events, they also, necessarily, subsume the intricacies of the individual trauma.

Trauma literature as a genre:

provides a picture of the individual that suffers, but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an ‘everyperson’ figure. Indeed, a significant purpose of the protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race, or gender, have collectively experienced massive trauma. In this regard, the fictional figure magnifies a historical event in which thousands or millions of people have suffered a similar violence, such as slavery, war, torture, rape, natural disaster, or nuclear devastation. (Balaev 155)

Within the novel, Scego takes Rhoda’s traumatic experience out of the specific historical context of Somali Diaspora by silencing her testimony. Rhoda is, instead, placed in the more inclusive community of female victims through literary means. In this way, Rhoda’s personal experience of trauma maintains its force and individual integrity, without it collapsing into the overwhelming story of war. Yet, even with Scego’s unwillingness to absorb her protagonist’s story into history, she is still able to address the particular Somali situation through allegory. Though it should be noted that this allegory, reaching back to colonial Somalia, still provides ample distance from her protagonist’s experience to flatten it. Embedding the story of the nation into the story of her protagonist also stresses the readerly function of trauma literature. I am not suggesting here that these novels serve as examples of written testimonies. They are fiction, and as such, are able to function in ways that go beyond the victim/witness relationship. Within Scego’s
traumatic framework, reading does have the potential to unite otherwise separated entities. In the allegorical register, the novel works to broaden the scope of Italian and Somali history as a shared and antagonistic experience of colonial trauma.

In the allegorical reading of the novel, Rhoda’s story might also be the story of Somalia, a correlation made explicit, “Io per lei era Somalia perduta,” (118). This is Rhoda’s estimation of how her aunt Barni sees her rapid deterioration. Barni herself characterizes her niece’s decline as self-immolation and sacrifice brought about by inconceivable factors (31). Such auto-destructive behavior suggests that only the Somali people are to blame for the decline of democratic Somalia, and the rise to power of a communist regime, but if we follow our interposition of Rhoda for Somalia, the blame must rest at the feet of trauma. As with Rhoda, Scego suggests that the event that precipitated all subsequent chaos in Somalia is the loss of autonomy.

Somali writer in exile Nuruddin Farah locates this traumatic event in colonial Somalia: “I came to understand that colonial subjects die a kind of death when they lose the birthright to define themselves in the terms of their birth, as they are made to respond to the multiple identities imposed upon them by others: when they are forced to see themselves as someone else’s invention” (51). Colonialism wrests from native populations, through violent means, any right to dictate their future. The consequences of colonialism reach well beyond its official tenure. I’d like to pause on one example of this in the history of Somali border formation because it directly addresses the consequent reality of the diaspora; namely that, because Somalis could not originally imagine themselves as part of a self-defined national territory, the consequent understanding of a Somali collective identity had to take a different route. In the specific case of Somalia
previously imposed colonial borders came into direct conflict with established indigenous communities. During the 19th century, European powers divided the Somali territories among Britain, Italy and France, with the region of the Ogaden, primarily inhabited by Somali nomads, ceded to Ethiopia. At the end of colonial rule, the Ogaden did not return to independent Somalia, an act that led to an unsuccessful war against Ethiopia in the 1970s to reclaim this lost population. In essence, because the Somali people never had the chance to define the limits of their own nation, they continually strive to regain that autonomy, an act that leads only to more violence, trauma and, unfortunately, the failure of the Somali state and its disintegration into warring factions. In Scego’s interplay between Rhoda’s individual story and the colonial allegory embedded within it, Rhoda does not simply become the ‘everywoman’ of the traumatic experience of Somali violence. Because the allegorical component reaches back two generations beyond her protagonist to colonial Somalia, Scego is here suggesting that Rhoda is, instead, a possible inheritor of this trauma. Though I return to transgenerational trauma in the next novel, here, it allows the novel to be both individual and collective without dissolving Rhoda’s personal story into a consuming colonial narrative.

In this analysis of Scego’s first novel, I have shown how literature, both as an act of production and an act of consumption, serves as one possible alternative to testimony in the mediation of trauma. I now move to her 2009 novel Oltre Babilonia, a work that explodes the role of literature in the diasporic context.

II.III Suspended Testimonies in Oltre Babilonia

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated
into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.


In *Rhoda* Scego shows how literature shapes communities within trauma through empathic channels that ultimately cancel out the need for traumatic testimony. In *Oltre Babilonia*, Scego continues to confront the limits of *telling* alongside the potential of *reading*. Like Rhoda, Zuhra and Mar, both daughters of the diaspora, pull on literature or film to structure their experience of trauma. But as children of migrants, theirs is a different experience of trauma that is not so tightly bound to the history that shapes their parents’ experience. For the migrant generation (the parents), there is already a historical record on file that pinpoints the origin of trauma, and attests to the masses of traumatized in its wake. Testimony, for these parents, becomes a process of not just surviving trauma, but also a means to supplement the historical record through transmission. Moreover, because of the particular nature of diaspora as a consequence of traumatic events (civil war, colonialism, political repression), these testimonies serve yet another purpose: a means to contribute to, and pass down a collective diasporic history. Since testimony serves such a central role for this generation, as we will see in the text, Scego doesn’t eliminate it, instead she points to the limits of such a model to properly account for the myriad individual experiences that happen both in relation to, and independent of,

47 "This means that the multiple journeys may configure into one journey via a confluence of narratives as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. It is within this confluence of narrativity that ‘diasporic community’ is differently imagined under different historical circumstances. By this I mean that the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (Avtah Brah 444).
catastrophic events.\textsuperscript{48} For the migrant generation, adhering to the abreactive model that essentially risks re-living the event, obliterates the individual specificity of their own traumas, and threatens to contaminate the younger generation of diasporic subjects. I will go into these aspects further in my analysis below. By delaying the transmission of these testimonies, Scego creates a space, or gap, within which the younger protagonists can forge alternate paths through and even beyond the shattering effects of trauma. What they eventually demonstrate is a productive mode of the traumatic, unmoored from geo-historical specificity, that unites women across cultures and diasporas in a shared (empathic) experience of living with (not working through) trauma. I begin my look at the novel with the testimonies themselves, and then move to alternative models of negotiating trauma for subsequent generations.

It is fair to say that \textit{Oltre Babilonia} is preoccupied with testimony. It is, in fact, a collection of confessions made either in writing or recorded on tape for the eyes and ears of a younger generation. For instance, Maryam Laaman, a Somali-born émigré to Italy, registers the moments of her adolescence in the glow of 1960 Somali independence, and its swift decline, on an old tape recorder for her daughter Zuhra. There is also the poet Miranda Ribero Martino Gonçalves, an Italian-Portuguese Argentinean in exile in Italy, who inscribes into a journal the horrors of the Argentinean Dirty War of the 1970s, and the disappearance of her brother and his fiancé, for her daughter Mar. Elias, the absent father of both of these daughters, records the story of his parents’ experience under the abuse of Italian colonialism in the 1940s. This indirect family dialogue spans three

\textsuperscript{48} In fact, this is a debate that Freud wrestled with as early as 1920. He was initially reluctant to apply his theories on hysteria to “malingering” soldiers because, for him, peacetime violence and wartime violence should be addressed differently. For more on this see Kaplan.
generations and touches upon the violent national histories of Somalia, Argentina and even Italy.

On a personal level, these stories meant for the younger generation serve as a means to gain a conscious understanding of events that are incomprehensible (i.e., exile, forced migrancy, alienation) and how they resonate within the larger contexts of civil war, political repression and colonial legacies. The collective and catastrophic nature of these traumas binds their victims to the time and place of their happening. The looking back that these victims continuously perform prohibits any participation in the present. We see this socio-temporal rupture expressed in various ways within the novel: Maryam becomes an alcoholic, Miranda compulsively writes poetry about other national tragedies and Elias severs ties to all loved ones. They also have difficult relationships with their daughters and are absent, unapproachable parental figures. In some ways, their testimonies are attempts at connecting with their daughters, but they also threaten to “contaminate” them, to use one of Caruth’s characterizations, by integrating them into a collective experience of trauma (Balaev 151). The varied and fragmented nature of these testimonies is illustrated in the discontinuous structure of the novel. Each testimony spans multiple chapters and is intercut with the others’ testimonies to create, at least for the reader, a broken cross section of various catastrophic events. Through this halting, drawn out process, Scego delays the unfolding of these testimonies to readers. In choosing delayed methods of address, tape recorder and journal, Scego also delays the transmission of these testimonies to their intended listeners within the pages of the novel.

Within the testimonies themselves, traumatic rupture is signaled by their struggle with beginnings. For instance, Maryam Laamane has trouble sticking to the story, and
Maryam is reluctant to fix her memories in the recorder, a machine that can essentially repeat them over and over again – and without a present listener, this becomes, as Laub warns, “a re-experiencing of the event itself” (emphasis in original 67). Despite the risk of re-traumatization, she persists. She speaks, records, rewinds, listens and in essence re-lives these experiences yet again. Once committed to the recording, Maryam then struggles to find the words:

> Non so perché, comincio a raccontarti dal mezzo…ma non sono mai stata brava a rispettare l’ordine del tempo e delle parole. Howa Rosario se ne lamentava sempre. Diceva che con me le storie non hanno né capo né coda, che non si capisce niente, che è una fatica stare dietro. Ma tu fallo, Zuzu, stai dietro a mamma, sto facendo uno sforzo per mettere tutti insieme questi frammenti di noi. (101-102)

There are two notable aspects of Maryam’s difficult incipit: the impossibility of linearity and chronology, and the appeal to Zuhra (Zuzu) to follow the splintered narrative. Maryam also identifies these fragments as ours, clearly enfolding Zuhra into the story as well. The disregard for the order of time and words demonstrates the temporal-linguistic gap theorized by Caruth’s unknowability and unspeakability associated with traumatic neurosis. The appeal to her daughter locates both a listener and a victim in Zuhra. That is, Zuhra can serve as an empathic listener to whom Maryam may transmit her story, but she is also, by virtue of her familial connection, the next generation to whom “traumatic experience is tranhistorically passed across generational gaps, primarily through verbal or written acts of remembering” (Balaev 152).

Though the phylogenic model connects victims across generational gaps, it is a community that forfeits individuality, a relinquishment made evident as Maryam’s act of
remembering continues. Maryam’s trauma is attached to her relationship with Elias. Her testimony lingers on the details of their young courtship in the bright days of Somali’s new independence. The touching tale of their immediate chemistry and happy early marriage sours in the aftermath of democracy’s downfall. Elias is in danger and must flee to Italy as a political exile with his young wife and their newly born daughter Zuhra. Though this migration is, like it was for Rhoda in the previous novel, difficult, the full force of Maryam’s suffering comes only after Elias’ abandonment. This young single mother in exile simply cannot comprehend the circumstances of his betrayal, in fact, her testimony only approaches this event, the true unknowable source of her suffering. Though Maryam has essentially skipped over the precise origin of trauma, her testimony continues without it. In Maryam’s case, Scego suggests that the collective aspect of trauma has denied space within testimony for personal and distinct experiences of trauma.

Maryam is not the only victim seeking an empathic listener in her daughter, for Miranda Ribero Martino Gonçalves, too, looks to her daughter Mar for this role. Miranda is a survivor of the 1970s Dirty War in Argentina, when thousands of suspected subversives were rounded up, interrogated and tortured. Many of them simply “disappeared,” presumably killed by the military regime. After the disappearance of her brother, Miranda fled Buenos Aires for Italy. The particularity of her traumatic neurosis is exhibited in her poetry, where she obsesses over similar events in other national histories. Miranda’s trouble with chronology lies less in beginnings and more in the need to re-work, revise and smooth out the narrative in all its painful detail:

Perdonami, non riesco a riannodare i fili della mia strana vita in ordine cronologico. Ho qualche difficoltà con il tempo. Sarà per l’abitudine a rovindolare la lana del tempo, sfilarla la tela, ritesserla, trovare i nodi, scucire di nuovo, eliminare i nodi. Non volevo imperfezioni. Però nel mio caso è
impossibile. Solo non voglio che un giorno, quando non ci sarò più, tu scopra delle cose di me che non ti piacciono. Non voglio che pensi che tua madre fosse una carogna mentirosa. (182)

Notwithstanding her continued work, she is never able to finish the story, and admits imperfections and untruths. She is worried about her own credibility, and does not trust her own memories. Miranda, not surprisingly, like Maryam, struggles approaching the emotional core of the traumatic experience that is distinctly separate from historical record:


For Miranda, the facts are not enough. She does not want to know what happened to the thousands who simply disappeared in Argentina, rounded up into trucks, beaten, tortured and then killed, instead, she wants to enter into their pain, something that the historical record cannot give to the survivors. In this case, she is not the victim, but the would-be listener, willing to hear the stories of those who were made to disappear. She is never able to hear these stories. Her brother never returns, and his fiancée, after reuniting with Miranda for a few years in Rome, swallows bleach.

Of all characters in the novel, Rosa, the fiancée is the victim most silenced by her speechless survival. Hers is a life void of any testimony save the last statement made by her suicide, her mouth agape in the moment of death not to speak, but rather, to expel a
thick choking fluid. If we look at Rosa as a version of Rhoda, her reticence should not signal tragedy. Though her torture was severe, and her dissociation almost total, when she hears Alberto Tatti’s Radio 77 program about Africa, she is present, hanging on his every word. Miranda describes Tatti as “un poeta dell’etere suburbano” and that to follow along “Era un po’ come seguire Frodo Baggins nella ricerca dell’anello maledetto” (307). Tatti is a radio-poet taking Rosa on adventures through African landscapes, as if the Dark Continent were Tolkien’s Middle-Earth. Even for Rosa, whose survival is a daily struggle, literature (or radio-literature, as Miranda’s descriptions suggest) establishes connections between various cultural sources, and eases the experience of living with trauma. Therefore it is no surprise that when Tatti’s Africa goes off air, she dies. Miranda, the would-be listener, laments Rosa’s silence. But silence, for Scego, does not necessarily signal failure or tragedy, as we have seen with the character of Rhoda. With Rosa’s story, Scego suggests that Miranda should be a reader, instead of a listener to get at the heart of trauma and pain.49

Elias’ is the last of the three deferred testimonies, and his intended audience is both Zuhra, his acknowledged daughter with Maryam, and Mar, the unmet daughter born after his brief romance with Miranda. Elias’ personal history is shaped by the absence of his own father’s testimony, which leads him to follow suit with his own children. His is a markedly masculine tale. Like Maryam, Elias, too, finds it difficult to begin: “Ma come si comincia a raccontare una storia? Dall’inizio credo, dal protagonista. Ma sono io il protagonista?…qual è l’inizio di un individuo? Non mi è poi così chiaro. La sua nascita? O forse qualcosa che la precede?” (62). He cannot start with his own birth and life, but

49 This experience of reading is not an example of vicarious trauma, that is, a secondary traumatic reaction to reading about catastrophic or traumatizing events. There is clearly something else at work in Scego’s traumatic reading.
settles instead on his parent’s story. This personal genealogy enmeshes his parents’ tragedies into his own identity, suggesting that these memories are also part of his transgenerational inheritance. Elias continues the same survival of his father, adding to it his own personal experiences of violence. Though his own trauma is part of a newer war in Somalia, echoes of his experience collide with the memories of his father, Majid, at the dawn of World War II in Italian occupied Somalia. With Elias, or rather, with Elias’ passing down of Majid’s story, Scego illustrates the role of testimony for the larger Somali family, as it becomes part of the narrative of victimization that is not limited to one era or generation. Elias makes this clear in his recording to Zuhra:

Cara Zuhra, forse tu volevi da me la mia storia. Volevi sapere cos’ha fatto tuo padre. Quali luoghi ha visitato, quante persone ha incontrato, quali tragitti ha percorso. Lo so di averti raccontato un’altra storia. Ma non ne potevo fare a meno. Sono stato un fallito. Un sarto da niente. Non sono riuscito ad amare le donne che mi hanno amato, non sono riuscito a condividere con voi figlie i miei giorni. Ho il rammarico per il tempo perso. Non ho il rammarico però, di avervi messo al mondo. Volevo farti sapere che la tua storia di donna è legata a una storia più antica. Non so se ti sarà utile. In un angolino di me spero di sì. Ho deragliato, lo so. Ma sai, non sono mai stato capace di raccontare storie. Non sono capace di niente, in verità. (431)

The danger of passing these stories along to give meaning also restricts the meaning of subsequent traumas to this narrative. Again we see Scego stressing the limits of testimony as a complete means of confronting trauma. The consequences of this inheritance leave Elias unable to do anything, or to participate in any productive way in the present. He even refers to himself in third-person. Elias insists on his inability to narrate his own experience, without first orienting it through an account of his father, Majid. Majid’s struggle to survive in the aftermath of a rape by Italian and German SS soldiers in the 1940s is experienced by Elias, and though the traumatic event itself is not part of Elias’ reality, the subsequent survival of his father is. Majid, who is haunted by the memory of
the event, is thereafter unable to form intimate relationships, or to enact revenge (both acts that would reassert his masculinity), and so he disappears. His father’s method of survival by cutting himself off from all his loved ones becomes a model for Elias, who carries out the repetition of the father in the subsequent generation: ‘Non sono riuscito ad amare le donne che mi hanno amato’, like his father before him. Since both father and son refuse to acknowledge or confront the traumatic past, they can now “only relive [it] as haunting memory in real life, at once through the actual return of the trauma and through its inadvertent repetition, or transmission, from one generation to another,” (Laub 67). Elias’ repetition of his father’s reliving of the traumatic event suggests the same potential for Zuhra, though Elias hopes that by telling her about the inheritance awaiting her that she might be able to recognize her own story within it, and better manage the inherited post-traumatic disorder. Elias’ story serves as an example of how even testimony, which promises some control over the cognitive chaos associated with trauma, is challenged by the contagious quality of traumatic inheritance. We might also consider Elias’ trauma, inherited from Majid, to be a masculine exercise that does not allow for networks or communities of trauma victims to take shape. Both the father and the son alienate themselves. That Elias suggests to Zuhra that his testimony might help her understand herself as a woman alters the role of testimony here as a tale of warning through which Zuhra may be able to find an alternate way of confronting her own trauma.

With the three labored testimonies of Maryam, Miranda and Elias, Scego struggles to find a balance between the individual and collective experiences of trauma. In the previous novel, Rhoda, Scego was able to bypass this complication through allegory, essentially reserving the collective or historical meaning for literature, while
still showcasing a full expression of her protagonist’s individual experience. In this novel the diversity of cultural histories and experiences prohibit a clearly defined allegorical function, and so Scego must find other ways to address the personal/collective dilemma. It is clear from these testimonies that a traditional abreactive model is not sufficient. Instead, Scego suggests that a fuller understanding of trauma (individual and collective) may reside in a productive model of the traumatic. Breaking from their parents, Mar and Zuhra instead turn to literature and film as means of expanding their understanding of the traumatic experience. Through this process of reading trauma from other sources (that are not testimony) they establish a community of female victims from various collective histories.

II.IV Delayed Revelations and Present Peregrinations

With the previous characters Scego establishes a clear reliance on testimony. What is notable, however, is that though more than half of the novel is steeped in these spoken or written traumatic histories, they remain suspended narratives that do not reach their intended audience at least within the novel proper, much like Rhoda’s posthumous memories in the previous analysis. Instead, these indirect conversations mediated on paper and through tape are juxtaposed with the present peregrinations of the daughters, who unexpectedly meet in Tunisia. Zuhra and Mar, both young adults, experience their own development within the novel, quite independent of their parents’ confessions. They are also both suffering from their own traumatic experiences. Zuhra’s arrested sexuality is a residual effect of her rape as a young girl; Mar is slowly recovering from an emotionally abusive relationship that ended in her lover’s abrupt and unexpected suicide.
The incongruity between the delayed earnestness of the elder generation’s disclosures and the active ability of the younger generation to look forward without them sets up another rift in the experience of trauma across generations, and this is the gap that Scego’s new model takes advantage of. Scego does not completely interrupt the transmission of the parents’ stories, and it is safe to assume that eventually these narratives do, in fact, reach the daughters, who can subsequently then fulfill their roles as listeners. They are, however, doubly delayed. These testimonies are not directly articulated; they are recorded or written. The confession from a distance eliminates the emotional vulnerability inherent in any contemporaneous exchange with a listener. It also introduces the possibility of eliminating the mistakes, pressing the rewind button to erase or to shape the narrative. In essence, the indirect transmission of the traumatic testimony denies the listener his/her role in the creation of the narrative. The therapeutic functions of the telling are still fulfilled, as these parents are quite confident that, eventually, there will be an empathic listener in their daughters. It is rather, the listener who loses out in this exchange since he/she is denied direct participation. But, as we will see, this missed opportunity becomes the catalyst for creative means of negotiating traumatic life.

Scego demonstrates these new avenues through Zuhra’s and Mar’s alternative strategies of “rooting” and “routing” (Gilroy 1987 qtd in Clifford 452) “deployed in transnational networks built from multiple attachments” (Clifford 452). Instead of having one identity bound to a lost national narrative as their parents did, Mar and Zuhra are able expand the borders of their own identifications beyond the limits of both an imagined Somalia and the geopolitical specificity of Italy as host country. Mar is herself a member of multiple diasporas, as her mother notes, “Ah Mar, quante città contieni dentro di te.
Venezia a poi Lisbona, Buenos Aires, Mogadiscio, Roma. E chissà quante altre” (240).

This incomplete list is only an acknowledgement of affiliation by descent (parents, grandparents, great-grandparents) – but Scego makes it clear that Mar belongs to other communities and even geographies beyond her bloodline. Her story is not bound by any cultural origin or by intergenerational trauma, she is simply a member of too many cultural histories to privilege just one. This is evident in Mar’s affinity for Tunis: “Qui Tunisi, qui Africa sostenibile…Finzione. Quasi uno scherzo. Come lei, Mar Ribero Martino, una simulazione continua. Un po’ Africa, un po’ America Latina, un po’ Europa,” (326) and yet, in Africa Mar “si sentiva a casa, perché di fatto non era casa di nessuno” (330). Mar’s ease in this new shifting, contradictory geography that is home to no one is illustrative of her unmoored, un-fixed sense of self – she is nomadic in the Braidottian sense. Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti celebrates this multiple affiliation as the nomadic. Braidotti elucidates, “becoming nomadic marks the process of positive transformation of the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances” (*Transpositions. On Nomadic Ethics* 83). Studies of this text like the recent article by Piera Carroli often pull from such theories of nomadic subjectivity to point to a positive and productive “redrawing of Italian boundaries” facilitated by the post-migrant's flexible and multiple social, national, and cultural affiliations (205). Though it is tempting to see Braidotti’s nomadic model as a process of identity formation in a global community, her theory falls short of accounting for the specific experience of trauma, and also only works for those subjects who are able to freely move across borders. Although Scego moves away from imprisoning her characters within specific historical coordinates, she is not here suggesting that Zuhra and
Mar should completely remove themselves from the Somali community. Instead, her characters exhibit multiple rooting through various cultures, which creates a web of attachments. In fact, in Mar’s continually moving, but comfortable existence she forges a closer relationship to the Somali diasporic community through Zuhra – whom she meets by chance in Tunis through the shared experience of learning Arabic. Though they are unknowingly sisters, even without this knowledge there forms between them a sense of solidarity that is familial through linguistic means. Zuhra begins to call her *abbayo*, “Abbayo significa sorella. É Somalo. La lingua di tuo padre. Mi ha detto Miranda che tuo padre era somalo, come mia madre” (386). This new epithet establishes a place for Mar within the community of the Somali Diaspora, but it also speaks to a sisterhood that transcends the genealogical and replaces it with a solidarity that celebrates a female black identity. In fact, the central metaphor for this relationship is Mar’s hair. Initially battered and burned straight, Mar is eventually convinced, through Zuhra’s assurances and assistance, that her curly hair is beautiful and should be free to exist naturally. Scego tends to define communities through the larger categories of gender and race, and by doing so she avoids too culturally specific criteria. In other words, by cultivating this relationship through the relatively large and loosely defined categories of black and female, Scego can create networks across national and ethnic affiliations. By widening the scope of such relationships, Scego’s characters can recognize the many communities (gendered, national or ethnic) of which they are part.

Before Mar is able to connect with Zuhra through this shared experience, she first has to confront her own trauma. The sudden suicide of her lover Patricia, coupled with prolonged emotional abuse and an unwanted abortion, mark Mar’s landscape of trauma.
After Patricia’s death, Mar begins to see her in various places: “Non aveva mai creduto ai fantasmi. Però Patricia non era un fantasma. Era parte di lei, era diverso. Se fosse un fantasma, avrebbe avuto schizzi di sangue e cervello dappertutto. L’orbita spaccata a metà. Il bulbo oculare penzolante. Se Patricia fosse stata un fantasma Mar avrebbe avuto paura di lei. Però non era un fantasma. Era una sua proiezione. Una fantasia macabra” (73). The sudden appearance of Patricia, as she was in life, haunts Mar, not as a ghost, but as a manifestation of her own inability to understand the suicide. Mar is also haunted by the sound of a mini-heartbeat – the child that she aborted for Patricia. These hallucinations characterize Mar’s experience of the psychic wound. Mar doesn’t feel the need to speak about her pain, instead she turns to an unlikely source in film. At Patricia’s funeral, Mar is the invisible widow, as Patricia’s family never accepted the relationship, but she makes her presence known in an emotional outburst over the casket. This outburst is not a public expression of her pain: “Peter Sellers in realtà non si chiamava Peter, ma Richard Henry Sellers…Era il fratello a chiamarsi Peter…Ha interpretato più di cinquanta film. Il mio preferito resta Hollywood Party, in cui interpreta una comparsa indiana, Hrundi V. Bakshi, un tipo che ne combina di tutti i colori” (77). Mar does not try to articulate her pain, but rather, her affinity for Peter Sellers’ films. Though this may seem bizarre, it highlights the important role of these films for Mar’s process of mourning (and dealing with trauma). Her favorite film resonates with her sense of alienation and cultural displacement (the main character is a clumsy Indian actor played in blackface by Peter Sellers). For Mar, this film stands in for an expression of loss, and it will also replace her need to articulate the circumstances of her own traumatic experience. In Scego’s novels the process of reading contextualizes suffering within a larger and
highly varied community (one that draws from myriad sources and media), and happens without the precise need of conscious mastery associated with testimony. Reading essentially allows Mar to live productively with an unmastered past. Indeed, it will be Mar’s continued experience of trauma that allows her to recognize the same in Zuhra.

Zuhra, like her stepsister, must also contend with an absent/waylaid family narrative. Zuhra’s story is perhaps most exemplary of a productive but unmastered trauma, and it frames the unconventional conversations within the chapters proper in a prologue and epilogue. Structurally, these peripheral sections are the before and after of Zuhra’s journey and they give order to an otherwise sprawling novel. She begins by recognizing what she calls “l’esilio di me da me” as “una cosa incompiuta” (8). Although she has grown up and works in Rome, writes in Italian, speaks like a Roman (she is also a practicing Muslim and houses her relatives in transit – she is comfortably of both worlds), there are entire components of herself that are missing, occluded by the deep un-navigated waters of her past. In Zuhra’s case, without access to a family archive (trauma or otherwise), her immediate reaction to trauma is to close herself off from intimate relationships, as both of her parents had done.

As a young girl Zurha is raped by a school porter: “Stavo alle elementari, in collegio, e avevamo un bidello che chiamavamo zio…che poi zio non è la parola giusta, è che per i Somali tutti sono zii o zie, anche i bidelli bianchi…alla fine non ci capisci più niente, non sai se uno è zio per davvero, un parente o solo qualcuno che meglio non metterti vicino…”(10). Enclosed within this memory of sexual abuse is the admission that even her heritage failed her. The particular Somali tradition of using family titles for community members renders this violation more acute and blights her trust not only of
men, but also of her family and even larger community. This physical violation stunts her sexual maturity, signaled by her colorblindness to the color red (the hues of passion and pain), and also halts an exploration of her Somali identity. The betrayal of her culture, both in its inability to warn her and her family’s silence in the aftermath, shapes part of her ‘exile’ from herself. The other part is a fear of femininity. She suffers epileptic seizures when she attempts to be intimate with men. Her willingness to seek out intimate relationships also ensures the process of repetition. Until she is able to come to terms with the assault, she will continually experience the unconscious reactions to her inability to comprehend the initial violent event. This is also part of her ‘exile from herself,’ perpetuated by the impossibility of consciously knowing and mastering the past.

The process of her healing begins with literature. Specifically, it starts with Rafael Alberti, with whom she feels a particular affinity: “Quel Rafael in esilio a Roma e la Spagna intera mi ricordavano troppo l’esilio di me da me” (8). Not simply his work, but the imagining of his presence in Rome makes her recognize her own isolation. He is, in essence, the first exile that she can relate to – and he is not Somali. He is not the only poet on Zuhra’s mind; she is a fan of the Argentinean Miranda Ribero Martino Gonçalves. When Zuhra meets Miranda in a classroom in the school for Arabic, she already knows her, “Io quella donna con i capelli lisci questa Miranda Ribero Martino Gonçalves, la conoscevo bene. La conoscevo prima che lei aprisse la bocca o mi guardasse…Io a casa, a Roma, avevo tutti i suoi cinque libri di poesia” (172). Miranda, whose poetry, pulling from an eclectic font of minority sources fascinates her, particularly the poem Lontano da Mogadiscio: “Ci trovi echi di catalano, italiano, portoghese, inglese, francese…ci sono anche parole arabe e stranamente c’è il somalo” (237). Though Miranda cannot tell her
own story, as indicated earlier, she does attempt to approximate it in the appropriated fragments of others like her. Her work evidences Avtah Brah’s characterization of the diasporic community as a “text of many distinctive and, perhaps, even disparate narratives” (444). As a writer Zuhra identifies with Miranda’s vocation, but the content of poetry also serves as a surrogate trauma narrative that enables her to braid her own stories of pain within another’s. The chorus of languages where each alphabet “apre altri mondi,” broadens Zuhra’s understanding of trauma (29). Moreover, Miranda’s unabashed appropriation of them (including from Somalia) prompts Zuhra to say of her, “Mi sarebbe piaciuta una zia così,” thus establishing her own definition of the term aunt apart from the widely given Somali signification that haunts her memory of rape (237). This statement also conjures into being, with Mar, a primary genealogy brought together by expressions from multiple diasporic journeys (Italy and Portugal to Argentina, Argentina and Somalia to Italy, Spain to Rome and Argentina, etc).

With this restored access to the past achieved through the physical journey across Tunisia, and the psychic journey through Miranda’s collection and re-elaboration of other’s traumatic experiences, Zuhra is able to productively live with (not completely work through) trauma. In the epilogue, her progress is signaled through a reading of the feminine within a small stain of menstrual blood. In this small spot Zuhra is able to see her own story as a woman, and then as a member of a Somali community of women: “Dentro la costellazione, la sua storia di donna. E dentro la sua storia, quella di altre prima di lei e di altre dopo di lei. Le storie si intrecciano, a volte convergono, spesso si cercano. Tutte unite da un colore e da un affetto” (456). Through her relationships with Miranda and Mar, and not through her testimony, Zuhra sees the multiple iterations of the
traumatic in the larger, specifically female, community. Thus for Zuhra, the communion of those struggling with the survival of a traumatic event serves the same function as the ‘witness to the trauma witness’ in that they let her story resonate with an “other” (or others) without the explicit process of articulation. Through this process, Zuhra becomes herself a better listener, or reader of the stories of others, and is subsequently then able to see those stories as part of the larger collective narrative of the trans-diaspora.

Zuhra’s construction of a genealogical connection through poetic channels containing alternative narratives of diaspora allows her to continue to participate in the re-invention and revision of her own Somali community in exile, an essential element in the perpetuation and continuity of Somali ethnicity outside of Somalia. Yet it also inevitable expands and makes porous the boundaries of such an affiliation creating collisions, integrations, dilutions and transformations with other diasporic minority communities. Thus for the post-migrant living in exile, the inheritance of the knowledge of trauma, coupled with the personal experience of new traumas creates a unique opportunity within the space of continued suffering. Exploiting this space might give insight into both distinct Somali narratives, but also those of other diasporas. Caruth suggests that trauma may, in fact, be one way to look for a better understanding of diaspora in general: “In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as simple understanding of the past of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (Caruth 11). Scego’s traumatic model might provide the means to go beyond Babylonia, that is, far beyond the trauma of diaspora.
What I have shown in this chapter is how Igiaba Scego’s texts undermine the central role of testimony for experiences of trauma. Furthermore, Scego demonstrates in these texts that literature (as an alternative form of participation in the larger community narrative) and unresolved trauma (as a shared suffering across cultures) serve as an adequate, and, at times, more effective means of unifying members of the diaspora and beyond. Rhoda’s brief solace in poetry, and Zuhra’s alliance on the words of exilic poets secures a place for literature in the process of recovery. Yet, what is more intriguing is how victims of trauma, particularly the second generation, are able to manipulate the space of pain to forge relationships with other victims creating a trans-diasporic community of women, who aren’t necessarily constrained to their collective affiliations.
CHAPTER II: ACTS OF RECOGNITION: CRISTINA ALI FARAH’S ETHICS OF MOTHERHOOD

Moving beyond the previous chapter’s investigation of Scego’s bibliotherapy, this chapter considers the civic potential disclosed to networks of women in the Somali Diaspora through an analysis of Cristina Ali Farah’s ethics of motherhood. Working within the nexus of Spivak’s ‘self-synecdoche’ and Adriana Cavarero’s ‘whoness’, I argue that through the common act of recognition inherent in both of these theories, that Ali Farah’s characters, through the recoding of the private sphere as public (particularly through mothering), become collectively, agents with social and political valence within the culture of diaspora.

Like Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ali Farah is part of the Somali Diaspora; a child of mixed parents, she was born in Italy and grew up in Somalia. Her own diasporic narrative begins in the aftermath of the 1990s outbreak of war when she fled with her son to Italy. Ali Farah’s narratives contemplate the difficulties of communication across countries, oceans and continents through the specific filter of female family relationships (and the

50 Throughout the chapter I will be employing both civil and civic as adjectives to describe the abstract body politic of a community, a definition that is notably distinct from the official state or nation. That is, the civic/civil community may exist in the absence of the nation-state. Though there are nuanced differences between the terms (civic implies the non-military functions of a polity, and civil implies more strongly an interaction between members), I draw upon the similar definition of both as relating to a community or occurring within a community. Furthermore these terms also suggest the public or popular space where political interaction may take place.

51 The term agency in this context, does not necessarily translate to official political participation per se. I use this term to refer to the potential of the individual to enact change through social or political channels within a given community. In the feminist framework within which I have deployed the term, this also means the ability for women to shape the future of the community as a socio-political unit (which may stand separate from the structures of the state). Such agency, “necessarily expands the very meaning of ‘political’ and of what constitutes ‘politics,’” Karen Offen recently suggested in her article, “The History of Feminism Is Political History,” Perspectives on History. May 2011. Web. June 15, 2011. Therefore, the power or agency lies more in the ability to shape the future and to dictate the terms of the collective narrative and less in the immediate attainment of rights, though it follows that such rights are to come in the future.
destruction thereof). Ali Farah’s works tend toward a poetics of motherhood, often showcasing the vicissitudes of the experiences of mothers, daughters and maternal figures of the diaspora. By reading the act of mothering within her texts through the framework of Spivak’s contemporary subaltern and Cavarero’s narrative whoness, I ultimately illuminate the civic possibilities of the female space, divorced from the state, that render women the authors of diasporic communal life.

III.I Who is the Subaltern? Spivak and Cavarero’s Recognition of Civil Society

To see a missing person, or to look at Invisibleness, is to emphasize the subject’s transitive demand for a direct object of self-reflection, a point of presence that would maintain its privileged enunciatory position qua subject.

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994

Early on in Cristina Ali Farah’s 2007 novel *Madre piccola*, Barni, a Somali midwife living in Rome, meets with an Italian journalist who is writing a feature on the Somali community. Barni begins the interview with a story—as her interviewer well knows—recently covered by the media about a shipwreck, “Mi perdoni se la prendo alla larga. Ma si ricorda del naufragio di un mese fa? Delle salme dei nove somali trasportate a Roma? Della celebrazione di funerali in Campidoglio?”(14) These nine Somalis—who were/are also illegal immigrants—are given a state funeral, replete with official condolences from the mayor on one of the most visible Italian landmarks that served historically as the locus of Italian civic government. This most public of spectacles is reserved, at least when speaking about this community, for the dead. That is, these nine illegal aliens are only visible to the larger Italian public through the tragic circumstance of death. The forgotten objects of their lives, Barni notes, “Borsetta, quaderno, fotografia,
scarpa di cuoio, biberon, camicia, zaino, orologio, stringa,” the possessions that, “scrivono una storia,” are lost in the sad swell of the Mediterranean (15). That these nine may only puncture the screen that separates the citizen from the refugee in death, further silences their unique stories; these lives are flattened into one unhappy experience of migration. The recognition of the Somali in the Italian public sphere is possible for the dead but what, as Barni finally asks, about the living? (17). Ali Farah answers us quite simply; the living are invisible.

The fate of invisibility for those in diaspora, the central question of Ali Farah’s work, is also a fundamental question for postcolonial critics from Fanon to Bhabha.\(^{52}\) Studies that look to the contemporary disenfranchised subaltern, or the invisible person cut off from access to social mobility and official recognition, are bound to the specific circumstances of globalization, failed decolonization and neoliberalism, much like the subjects themselves.\(^{53}\) Rosi Braidotti suggests that, “The global city and the refugee camps are not dialectical or moral opposites: they are two sides of the same global coin. They express the schizoid political economy of our times” (*Transpositions* 60). Though Braidotti’s solution to this problem, discussed elsewhere, in female nomadism is utopian, her observation remains an interesting point of departure for both its political and gendered characterizations of kindling agency within the disenfranchised subject.\(^{54}\)

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\(^{52}\) Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 2004); Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2006).

\(^{53}\) Gayatri Spivak claims the following in “Diasporas old and new: women in the transnational world.” *Textual Practice*. 10.2 (1996): “The story of these nations can be incanted in the following formulas since the Industrial Revolution: colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, transnationality. In the shift from imperialism to neocolonialism in the middle of this century the most urgent task that increasingly backfired was the very establishment of a civil society. We call this the failure of decolonization. And in transnationality possibilities of redressing this failure are being destroyed. I do not think that it is incorrect to say that much of the new diaspora is determined by the increasing failure of a civil society in developing nations” (248-249).

\(^{54}\) See the introduction to this dissertation.
Enfolding both of these characterizations (civic and feminine) into her work, Gayatri Spivak’s evolving theorizations on the subaltern remain an essential framework to engage invisibility, though Spivak might better call it *unrecognizability*.\(^{55}\) In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” a foundational text originally published in 1988, Spivak reveals that the problem is not found in silence, but rather in the inability for other subalterns to understand the female subaltern’s speech: “She ‘spoke,’ but women did not, do not ‘hear’ her” (22). In the closing example of the polemical article, Spivak locates the problem of female subalternity in the unrecognizable message of Bhubaneswari. Bhubaneswari, an active participant in the fight for the national liberation of India, unable to carry out her duties as a rebel assassin, and realizing the importance of secrecy, hangs herself. This suicide is initially read as the tragic result of an illicit love affair and possibly an unwanted pregnancy. Only with time, however, does the true meaning of her death emerge in a letter written to family members. Yet, what is most tragic in this tale for Spivak, is not her death, but rather the *unrecognized* message that Bhubaneswari leaves with her very body: she waited for menstruation to hang herself so that her death could not be read through the filter of passion. Yet, “in the immediate context, her act became absurd, a case of delirium rather than sanity” (63). Though Bhubaneswari is not, perhaps, a true subaltern, (she had access to some forms of social mobility through her participation in national liberation) Spivak points out that the women who knew her were,  

\(^{55}\) I will be using Spivak's evolving definitions of the subaltern here. In early use Spivak claims that when she employed the term *subaltern* she was referring to the person who did not have access to social mobility, using woman as one example. Later the term shifts as new subalterns are “permeable,” that is that third-world subjects are now “visible” and even exploited by International Civil Society (this is an illusory term for Spivak). Therefore, the new subaltern is characterized by a lack of political agency, a definition that Spivak even extends to the lazy American electorate. In the case of this chapter, many of the characters that might be considered subaltern are actually the children of the first subalterns who do have some social privileges that their predecessors did not. See Spivak’s *The Trajectory of the Subaltern* (2008) for more information.
and in their inability to *read* or *recognize* her message, they essentially erased it, let it disappear with her and inscribed her within the heteronormative social narrative – women as reproductive subjects – that would silence their message too, make them invisible. We will see that in the very different context of the Somali Diaspora in Ali Farah’s novel, women utilize their bodies to speak in a similar fashion, and like Bhubaneswari, their messages are, initially unheard.

Indeed, what makes the subaltern the subaltern is this lack of recognition. Though there is obvious despair in Spivak’s 1988 piece, she has dedicated the last twenty-odd years to learning how to change this unrecognizability. In a recently revised edition to “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she asserts her answer to the problem of subalternity as follows: “When a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony” (65). What might make the subaltern visible or her message recognizable is therefore, the necessary access to and communication with a civil community. Such communication requires reciprocal recognition first between the subalterns themselves, and second between the individual and the abstract civic body (whose mechanisms may remain, for Spivak, separate from the state or nation). Thus in more recent discussions of the subaltern (or better the *new* subaltern), there is an obvious shift in Spivak’s definition that includes the characteristic separation of the will of the individual from civil society (*The Trajectory of the Subaltern*, 2008).^56

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^56 Spivak’s ideal is seemingly impossible, a fact that she admits openly. It is simply not enough to say to disenfranchised women for example, “*You want democracy? Then go and vote!*” because they simply do not have the relationship to this abstract notion of the state nor an understanding of the correlation between the state and individual rights. In other words, in an ideal world the state works for the civil rights of the individuals – not the other way around, and grasping this relationship is what brings the subaltern out of subalternity and into the possibility of hegemony.
Mending this rift, that is, granting political visibility to the subaltern, requires what Spivak calls the “metonymisation” or “synecdochisation” of the self (Scattered Speculations 483). Such an act is possible only with the understanding that the individual is part of a whole – that is, the subaltern is not alone, but is one of many that can collectively determine the function of the abstract civil community (that is ideally in service to the citizen), and therefore create networks and infrastructures that may recognize subalternity and alterity (Scattered Speculations 483). In other words, the act of self-synecdoche changes the way that the private/individual subject is recognized as an agent within a public/civil system (Diasporas 262). This shift then creates the circumstances of recognizability for the individual subaltern (like Bhubaneswari) within the larger community (the women) who may then, as a collaborative entity gain access to the political systems that they may begin to also recognize the condition of unrecognizability and, perhaps change it.

Having just introduced Spivak’s evolving notion of subalternity, I’ll now turn to Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero for a closer look at one way this process of self-synecdoche might work for women. I allow myself to pivot from postcolonial theories of subalternity to Italian feminist theories of identity along the axis of recognition. Cavarero, whose work has developed concomitantly with Spivak’s, is also preoccupied with the notion of recognition, particularly within the female community. In the 1997 work Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti, Cavarero spells out her philosophy of narrative agency and takes the whole of Western philosophy to task: “Alla generale assenza di spazi politici,” she writes, “dove ciascun essere umano possa esibire agli altri
chi è, si aggiunge, per le donne, la pervasività di un ordine simbolico dove è il soggetto androcentrico a definire in vario modo cosa esse sono: madri, mogli, corpi fruibili, etere infermiere” (78). Access to a public/political sphere resides in overturning this prescriptive mode that diminishes the ‘chi’ for the taxonomic power of the ‘cosa.’ In Cavarero’s characterization we see the echo of Bhubaneswari’s actions only interpretable within the reproductive heteronormativity of patriarchal society. Such restriction compresses the uniqueness of the female individual (the who of which Cavarero speaks) into faceless categories (or the whats) of mothers, wives, caretakers, etc. Only with the recognition (or performance) of the individual (who) in the public realm, can political agency be attained.57 How then, can this be achieved for the woman if inroads through the patriarchy are inaccessible? Returning to Spivak, we might ask this in another way: How can the woman metonymize herself so that she may be recognizable to others in the public space?

The answer, for Cavarero, lies in narrative, but more specifically in the recognition of the who as synchronic individuality through reciprocal life-narrating. Her philosophy of narrative unfurls in the act of exposure and recognition, a necessary condition for the exchange of life-narratives. In other words, each individual appears before an “other” as a “unique and unrepeatable” self that also has a distinct story (Italian Feminist Theory 93). Cavarero’s specular ontology might be distilled into one principle: “perché all’esperienza per cui l’io è immediatamente, nel sapore irriflesso dell’esistere, il sé della propria memoria narrante, corrisponde la percezione dell’altro come il sé della propria storia” (Tu che mi guardi 49). This revealing relationship relies upon a reciprocal

57 Cavarero draws heavily from Hannah Arendt, particularly from The Human Condition. 1958.
desire to narrate one’s own life story, and to also have one’s own life story recognized by
and narrated by the “other.” As we will see later in the chapter, Ali Farah’s text is a rich
catalogue of such desire as each character seeks the recognition of the narrating self in
the other.

What I have just defined as Cavarero’s specular ontology is still not sufficient to
grant the female subaltern access to the public scene; there remain two crucial aspects of
her philosophy of narration, namely, female narratability and the politicization of the
private. For Cavarero, mastery of this narratability, contingent upon the gaze of the
“other,” is reserved for women. Engaging the whole of Western philosophical discourse
in Tu che mi guardi, Cavarero suggests that the philosopher, a man, errs in his constant
attempt to universalize. Thus Oedipus is wrong when he answers the Sphinx’s riddle with
the all-encompassing ‘Man.’ According to Cavarero, it would have been better for him to
recognize his own individual story in the riddle; it would have been more accurate to
answer ‘It is I.’ “Il discorso sull’universale,” she explains, “con il suo amore per l’astratto
e la sua logica definitoria, è da sempre una faccenda per soli uomini. La scissione fra
universalità e unicità, fra filosofia e narrazione, segna sin dall’inizio una tragedia

58 Graziella Parati also uses Cavarero’s chi and cosa for her look at Italy’s literature of migration. Parati suggests that Cavarero’s insistence on a relational subjectivity through narratives provides an interesting framework for cinema. “Film,” Parati suggests, “that places the story of the individual migrants at the centre of a visual narrative talks back to convenient representations, currently at the centre of political discourses, of migrants as an invading mass. In fact, in film migrant characters and their voices embody that uniqueness that allows transforming whatness into whoness” (19). Though I do draw on Parati’s notion of destination culture discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, my use of Cavarero’s whoness and whatness in this chapter differs from Parati. While Parati is concerned mostly with the migrant generation, those who are true subalterns without access to any form of political or social recognition in Italy, I am more interested in the kind of culture created for the next generation, the children who are able to more forcefully participate in the construction of a destination culture. For Ali Farah’s characters, the end goal is not solely to be recognized by the destination culture (i.e. within the Somali Diaspora of metropolitan Italy) but to also take a defining role in the future of the community as women. For more on Parati’s use of Cavarero see Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
maschile” (72). If philosophy is a masculine domain, then narrative must be well within the purview of women:

Da sempre, l’attitudine per il particolare fa di esse delle narratrici eccellenti. Ricacciate, come Penelope, nelle stanze dei telai, sin dai tempi antichi esse hanno intessuto trame per la fila del racconto… Antica o moderna, la loro arte si ispira a una saggia ripugnanza per l’astratto universale e consegue a una pratica quotidiana dove il racconto è esistenza, relazione e attenzione. (73)

In the ability to recognize the individual narratives of quotidian experience, women are better narrators, and are better equipped to see the “other,” as well as their own stories reflected in the uniqueness of the “other.” The emphasis on the individual is paramount to this project, as it begins to dismantle the flattening system of the what, or imposed groupings privileging only one possible (or even universal) aspect of the person.

Women may be great storytellers, but our next dilemma emerges in the necessary public realm of politics, to which they seek access. If politics, as an extension of philosophical thought, is traditionally characterized as a movement from the universal to the individual—politicians propose rights and legislation for all citizens who then benefit individually—how might women participate from the private sphere? Again, the answer, for Cavarero, inhabits the act of narration, where the narrative space becomes the political space, “L’attivo rivelarsi agli altri, con atti e parole, offre uno spazio plurale e perciò politico all’identità, confermandone la natura esibitiva, relazionale e contestuale. In altri termini, chi ciascuno è lo rivela agli altri quando agisce al loro cospetto su un teatro interattivo dove ciascuno è, al tempo stesso, attore e spettatore” (Tu che mi guardi 34). The theatrical nature of narrating to an “other,” is already a political gesture in that it positions the individual within a plurality and creates, as it were, a public. The act is also interactive insofar as the act of narrating is a reciprocal exchange, creating the peculiar
duality of the individual as both actor and spectator. I’ll go so far as to suggest that only
the private sphere can create this simultaneous individuality and plurality as the
traditional political space reserved for the public realm cannot oscillate thus between two
seemingly opposing conditions. The exchange of life-narratives through corresponding
recognition essentially politicizes the private space: “come se il narrare questa storia di vita fosse un’azione politica” (79). The private has been recoded as public through the
revealing quality of life-narratives. What need happen now in this politically charged
territory is Spivak’s metonymization, or the imagining of the uniqueness of the self as
one of many unique and insubstitutable agents able to change the very contours of the
civic structure.

Though I have traced a neat sequence from Cavarero’s private political to
Spivak’s metonymization, there is one point of conflict between these theories that must
be addressed before moving on. Spivak’s process of self-synecdoche inspires in the
subject a sense of community that is the awareness of a communal authority to appeal to
larger civil structures of the state, that is, for the individual to imagine him/herself as part
of a bigger whole. Cavarero on the other hand, points out that her ethics of relation resists
collective identities altogether:

Quella che abbiamo chiamato etica altruistica della relazione non sopporta invece
empatie, identificazioni, confusioni. Essa vuole infatti un tu che sia veramente un
altro, un’altra, nella sua unicità e distinzione. Per quanto tu sia simile e consonante, la tua storia non è mai la mia, dice questa etica. Per quanto siano

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59 Homi Bhabha even recognizes the spatial shift of the political brought about by the intersection
of feminism and metropolitan migrant culture: “By making visible the forgetting of the
‘unhomely’ moment in civil society, feminism specifies the patriarchal, gendered nature of civil
society and disturbs the symmetry of the private and the public, but become disturbingly
supplementary to them. This results in redrawing the domestic space as the space of the
normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the
personal-is-the-political; the world-in- the home” (15). Quoted from The Location of Culture.
Though I recognize the apparent contradiction, what remains central to both principles is the necessary recognition of the individual that subverts the imposition of universal categories. Spivak calls for a de-transcendentalization of such categories, or *whats*, and her imagined communal sense might be read as the potential of a political narrative made up of the various interactive experiences of each individual reality of subalternity. In other words, by focusing on both recognition and narrative, there is the possibility to avoid dissolving the unique subject into a faceless collective in a body politic; instead, these subjects gain access to institutional structures through an understanding of a simultaneous existence of each person who contributes uniquely to the same political narrative.

In summary, I have taken Spivak’s initial emphasis on recognizablity as a means and a result of gaining access to a civil society for female subalterns. I have further employed Cavarero’s emphasis on reciprocal life-narratives as a means to gain this access, or to transform the private female space into a political space. Building upon these theories of female agency, I now turn to an example in Cristina Ali Farah’s works. Specifically, I look at how motherhood serves as a catalyst for the recognition essential to Cavarero’s specular ontology and to Spivak’s civil society. In other words, Ali Farah’s characters as female subalterns (ex-colonial Somali migrants and post-migrants of the diaspora) are able to, through an ethics of motherhood based on narratives of recognition, think of themselves as powerful agents within the larger Somali community.
III.II The Ethics of Motherhood

Many of Ali Farah’s works showcase mothers and daughters, an observation of which she is well aware:

Molti mi hanno detto che la mia è una scrittura femminile, per come l’intimità femminile e la maternità emergono dai miei testi, e perché le protagoniste principali sono sempre donne. In realtà non si tratta di un progetto cosciente, è stato un percorso spontaneo, legato alle mie maternità e al fatto che in Somalia ci fosse una grande condivisione tra le donne, anche quando questo spazio era quello dell’intimità. (Comberiati 55)

Though admittedly more autobiographical than feminist in scope, her work tends to unfold at the intersection of motherhood and migrancy and uncovers the ways in which one influences the other. Her own story reflects this dual experience, which is marked by multiple migrations: from Italy to Somalia in 1976, fleeing Somalia with her son in 1991, settling in Hungary until finally returning to Italy in the late 1990s. Her poetry and prose explore the realities of such journeys for women in particular, and spins webs of transnational narratives that keep disparate communities and families together despite legal and emotional issues that physically keep them apart.

Although her texts often feature maternal bonds, her works are not exclusively about the mother/daughter pair, but expose the nuanced relationships between women of various situations in Somalia and in the diaspora. Ali Farah’s work, like Scego’s in the previous chapter, is cross-generational to some extent in that its narrative extends to the parental generation through the memories of the children, who then, of course, have children of their own. Ali Farah chooses protagonists that are post-migrants, a generation of individuals who remember migration, but are slightly removed in a way that their parents are not. They are the generation that ushers in a brood of new diasporic subjects with no recollection of the homeland. Vivian Gerrand suggests that this central
generational role linking Somalia to Italy is the crucial experience that re-connects the shared colonial history of these two nations. For Gerrand, Ali Farah and writers like her “can bring the commonly covert Italian colonial legacy back into focus” (Representing Somali Resettlement 274). Though I do not disagree, I think that valuing this text solely a means to remember and reinterpert the past diminishes the novel’s overt emphasis on contemporary modes of female empowerment, and it shifts the noted focus on diaspora to the margins of a larger colonial narrative. Keeping the reading within the contemporary diasporic context, the cross section of various generations (though there is a clear emphasis on the post-migrant) instead enables a progressive look at how these women move from being invisible or subaltern, to becoming actors in the political economy of the diaspora. This multi-generational process is necessary, suggests Spivak, addressing the specific circumstance of the female diasporic subject:

    The disenfranchised woman of the diaspora – new and old – cannot, then, engage in the critical agency of civil society…For her struggle is for access to the subjectship of civil society of her new state: basic civil rights… But perhaps her daughters or granddaughters – whichever generation arrives on the threshold of tertiary education – can. (Diasporas 252)

Thus, once the immediate exigency of legal status is gained, future generations can, “think of themselves collectively, not as victims below, but agents above” (Diasporas 252). In other words, the process of self-synecdoche or metonymization, in the specific context of diaspora, spans generations. This is evident particularly in the novel as the children of migrants, those who have gained official and legal status within Italy, are most vocal in establishing the community of mothers, but there are also those members who still seek “official” legitimization. Therefore, the sense of Somali solidarity is not contingent upon citizenship per se, a term that loses meaning in the absence of an original
nation-state. Even without the official mechanisms of a state, there is still the abstract notion of the civil polity that might relate individuals together in a communal cultural narrative.

Before turning to the novel, I tarry briefly here on one of Ali Farah’s poems that serves as a convenient introduction to the ethics of motherhood that emerges prominently within my analysis. Through a brief examination of the 2006 poem “Strappo” I show how this ethic is related to Spivak and Cavarero’s concern for recognition, a notion that is then developed further in the novel. Echoes of both Spivak and Cavarero and even Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro are evident in the poem where individuality is recognized, but then integrated into a community of women. The poem speaks about a young woman who is of mixed parentage, and her experience being the only one not infibulated among a group of Somali women:

Nel gruppo di donne,
Sono di madre europea,
questo mi distingue …

The absence of a subject in the opening line indicates how thoroughly part of this community the speaker is, or will become. It also signals the initial possibility of invisibility – she might simply be one woman among many women. Yet, in the following lines the persona breaks from the group and doubly distinguishes her individuality by asserting a singular subject position “I” and then by accentuating her difference by way of her European mother. It is significant that her difference is articulated through the mother, instead of simply stating that she is herself half European, as this reveals the tension of that relationship, one that threatens to exclude her from this group of women. Biological mothers are often difficult figures in Ali Farah’s oeuvre. Furthermore, that the
distinction is cultural, this speaker’s alterity extends to the essence of her femininity – her female anatomy. Because of her European lineage, she has not, as we assume the others have, partaken in the Somali tradition of infibulation, and is thus physically unlike the rest. We might consider this a version of Bhubaneswari’s speech with the body; the persona proclaims her otherness (and uniqueness) by means of her apparent (as in appearing to these other women) difference. The willingness to expose herself thus makes her vulnerable, but also reveals her who, her individual self, that, “corresponds to an existing being of flesh and blood that simply appears to another’s sight and who shows him/herself to be such. Unique and unrepeatable (Cavarero, Italian Feminist Theory 93).

The tension of the first stanza and also the shame that springs from her difference dissipates by the second half of the poem:

Ci laviamo con le altre donne.  
I miei figli sono i loro figli.  
Voglio tenere insieme tutti i pezzi.

She fully bares her singularity, and shares even the intimate/private spaces of life with these women. There is an indication, however slight, that points to subgroups within the community. Structuring the ‘we’ against ‘the other women’ signifies a mixing of various types (the interaction of many what or external affiliations or even generations). Yet, so fully is the exchange that these sub-groups do not ultimately obliterate the individual. In other words, what creates the foundation of this community, that inherently shares the

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60 Igiaba Scego suggests that Ali Farah’s works are examples of Gloria Anzaldúa’s frontier writing. As a child of both cultural traditions Ali Farah (and the persona of this poem) negotiates various cultures to flesh out the contours of a distinct diasporic identity. Scego also reads Ali Farah within the framework of Paolo Freire’s notion of the pedagogy of the oppressed that turns the oppressed into oppressors. Scego, like Vivian Gerrand, values Ali Farah’s text for its unwillingness to forget or cancel out the past. My reading moves beyond this value to analyze the novel as feminist novel within the dual context of Italian and Somali culture. For more on Scego’s reading of Ali Farah see “La ricostruzione dell’immaginario violato in tre scrittrici italofone del Corno D’Africa: Aspetti teorici, pedagogici e percorsi di lettura.” Diss. Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 2008.
common factor of motherhood, is the singularity of each as she participates in the shared act of mothering. Placing the mother at the center of this relationship echoes Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro’s concept of *affidamento* based on the mother. For Muraro, “il saper amare la madre mi ha dato o restituito l’autentico senso dell’essere,” and therefore only through a relationship to the mother can a true sense of being in the world (as a woman) develop (25). In the 1991 book, *L’ordine simbolico della madre*, Muraro maps out a form of socializing based on the mother-child relationship in order to establish a rapport that exists independent of the male social symbolic. The process of *affidamento*, or entrustment, calls for a nurturing relationship between women that recognizes and validates each participant’s contribution to modes of relating that are specifically female. With this model, based on the hierarchical structure of the mother-child relationship, Muraro attempts to claim a space of exchange for women by essentially bypassing the androcentric philosophical tradition altogether. In this poem Ali Farah points to the mother as the central figure in her version of female relationship, and so we can consider the relational ontology depicted in her works a form of *affidamento* as well.61

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Indossare l’abito con le altre.
Senza di loro, vecchie ed adolescenti,
stopie e bellissime, bianche e nere,
io non esisto.
Sono donna finché loro esistono.
(Ai confini del verso 30-31)
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61 Muraro’s *affidamento* is often criticized for the hierarchical nature of the relationship between women, but the core of her argument resides in the original relationship between the mother and the child, and therefore, is necessarily hierarchical. I have suggested that Ali Farah’s female relational ontology based on motherhood could be a version of this entrustment, though I should point out that Ali Farah’s model is often missing the biological mother, and instead, looks to relationships *between* mothers, which shifts the focus and avoids hierarchy.
By the end of the poem Ali Farah has fully mapped out a heterogeneous and solid female community that continually recognizes individuality. Here the vast array of differences suggests the far reach of this female network of individuals. The closing lines reveal the inner-workings of these constituting relationships as the “I exist” hovers above the “they exist,” unique and yet unified. These relationships do not simply represent a community, but a way of situating oneself in the world through others. That is, through the act of continually revealing oneself to these others, who are also revealing themselves to the persona, she may see her story as one of a stronger collective narrative. She has essentially, through mothering, metonymized herself, though there is no hint of political potential in the poem.

It is noteworthy that this poem does not hinge upon the mother/daughter dyad (one divergent aspect from Muraro’s *affidamento*), but, rather, it moves beyond. The women in this community relate to each other as mothers, but for the speaker, the biological mother remains outside, not part of this process of formation, and is in fact the very reason for her initial shame (her mother’s European traditions forbid infibulation). The exclusion of the mother, I think a complete erasure of the primary maternal bond, but rather by focusing on the experience of motherhood instead of a specific experience of daughterhood, Ali Farah is underscoring the potential for a collective form of mothering that privileges neither the mother nor the daughter; after all, this is a shared experience. We can take away from this poem the codes of Ali Farah’s ethics that signal the shared act/narrative of mothering as an example of both Muraro and Cavarero’s philosophies that open up the possibility of Spivak’s civic agency across generations.62

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62 It is also noteworthy that such an ethic emerges most clearly in the poetic realm, a much more intimate and aural mode of writing than prose. In *For More than One Voice: Towards a*
III.III Madre piccola: In Search of a Narrating M/Other

In Barni’s story of the nine drowned Somalis, Ali Farah foregrounds the desire of her protagonists to make their stories heard lest they too be washed into the oblivion of migration. Her characters oscillate from states of visibility (citizen, legal immigrant, kin) to invisibility (refugee, migrant, enemy) as each searches for an “other,” to whom he/she may reveal his/her unique story. The novel shifts between the three protagonists: Barni an obstetrician living in Rome, Domenica Axad a Somali-Italian filmmaker living an itinerant life, and Taageere an unreliable father moving from place to place. Each chapter becomes a confession between a protagonist and an absent or non-speaking listener. Here Cavarero’s notion of specular ontology is again helpful in understanding that, “we know the who of ourselves and others through the narratives and processes of constructing our life stories” (Italian Feminist Theory 23). Therefore, these are conversations not only for the benefit of those who listen, but also for the confessors themselves. In the act of speaking to an “other,” their stories, their lives take on the dimensions of the real and quite possibly the visible. The three protagonists are intimately connected (Barni and Domenica Axad are cousins, Domenica Axad and Taageere get married), but the novel also touches the stories of their friends, acquaintances and extended families to give depth to the depiction of diaspora and to underscore the entangled nature of their lives.

Philosophy of Vocal Expression. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), Cavarero suggests that poetry, “rather than stand in opposition to writing, as happens in the studies focused on orality, in this case [the poetic case] the voice stands in opposition to language—that is, to the disciplining codes of language, to grammar and syntax, to the ‘Law of the Father’ (132). A poem is musical and allows for playful subversions of grammar and syntax in ways that also suggest a defiance of the patriarchal symbolic as the model. Though Ali Farah eventually turns to the novel as the place to articulate this ethic, we might think of this poem as a poetic prelude to the novel, and as such, its very inclusion in the overall narrative (as a supplementary piece) disrupts traditional novelistic (and masculinist) models.
Though the novel succeeds in showcasing the multitude of individuals of the Somali Diaspora, the most significant relationship, and the only one capable of specular recognition, is between Barni and her cousin Domenica Axad. These cousins, separated at the age of ten for almost twenty years, yearn to be heard, to be seen, to be recognized; a fact evident in their myriad and overt statements of this desire: “Vuole che gliela racconti?” (24); “Sto raccontando come un’onda, su e giù, su e giù. Spero che lei riesca a seguirmi, comunque” (27); “Come faccio a essere sicura che mi riconosca? ... Riconoscerci?” (47); “forse un po’ di pace. Raccontarti tutti gli abiti indossi” (98); “Mi riconoscerrebbe? Così lontane le nostre strade, desidererei che si incontrassero, finalmente in mezzo” (101); “Mi accetterai, infine?” (135); “Ti devo raccontare la continuazione della storia” (181); “mi auguro che raccontare... la mia storia possa aiutarmi a diventare quella persona intera e adulta che desidero essere” (224). Seen through these fragments, the novel is a document of a reciprocal desire to narrate one’s own life, and to hear one’s life narrated from the mouth of another. Though they are not always addressing each other in these chapters (they do so in a few) their mutual desire to speak and see one another is pervasive. The twenty-year separation due to the outbreak of war, only witnesses their multiple attempts at regaining this lost relationship, this missing mutual recognition.

In the following analysis of Ali Farah’s 2007 novel Madre piccola, I follow the missteps of Barni and Domenica Axad in search of recognition to their eventual reunion, a finale that culminates in a newfound agency built around the act of mothering. Throughout the reading, I make connections to the processes of self-synecdoche and reciprocal narrating to bolster my claim that only through the act of recognition (and in
this case this identification is directly related to motherhood) can the female diasporic
subject make claims to a civic agency within the diaspora. Furthermore, I make a parallel
argument that this agency is essential to the survival of the community whose men have
lost a connection to the civil mechanisms of the diaspora.

The basis of the central bond between Domenica Axad and Barni is, not
surprisingly, a moment of recognition. Domenica Axad begins her story with her
childhood memories of Barni, and recalls one particular afternoon in Mogadishu on the
eve of a summer trip to her mother’s home in Italy. She laments the foreignness of her
Italian name on the lips of her Somali cousins: “Domenica, Domenica! E mentre mi
chiamaio io ricomincio a vedere gli occhi di Barni che mi fissano così vicini. Allora io le
dico, abbayo [sister] io non voglio più chiamarmi con questo nome che fa ridere tutti e lei
dice, non ti preoccupare d’ora in avanti ti chiamerai Axad, come il principio (3).
Domenica is the daughter of an Italian mother and Somali father, and her exotic
Europeanness sets her apart from the brood of cousins growing up together in Mogadishu.
Barni, whose father along with Domenica’s studied in Italy, is the only other cousin that
speaks Italian, and their relationship is, from the beginning, “una sorellanza elettiva”
(240). In this scene it is as if Domenica begins to see Barni for the first time as the only
one that is truly seeing her in return. In this moment of possible crisis – for Domenica’s
foreign name disrupts her sense of belonging – Barni becomes the desired “other” who
recognizes the uniqueness of her cousin before her. Barni not only recognizes her cousin,
but she begins to re-write her life-narrative by giving her a new name. Names are
important to the unity of the self as Cavarero points out, “ciascun essere umano, fin dalla
sua nascita, ha un nome proprio che accompagna tutta e intera la sua vita come una sorta
di unità ‘vocativa’ della sua unicità” (*Tu che mi guardi* 29). Therefore, when one is asked *who are you?* the name comes first to introduce the unique story to follow. Yet, in this circumstance, the name Domenica alone fails in giving such ‘vocative unity.’ Barni’s act essentially re-stages the naming ritual at birth to include, as Domenica Axad claims “la mia seconda anima, lasciando un segno permanente nel mio stesso nome” (239). In this opening scene, Ali Farah sets up the highly relational quality of her protagonists’ subjectivity that thereafter, “remains difficult to figure out, and throughout the story remains a work in progress,” (De Maio *Introduction to trans. Little Mother* xxii)

Barni becomes the narrating “other” in this introductory scene, but more importantly, through this act of naming, she also becomes a surrogate mother to her younger cousin. This assumption is reinforced in the sequence of Domenica Axad’s life-narrative, as she begins her own story with Barni:

*Soomali baan ahay* [Somali, I am], come la mia metà che è intera. Sono il filo sottile, così sottile che si infila e si tende, prolungandosi. Così sottile che non si spezza. E il groviglio dei fili si allarga e mostra, chiari e ben stretti, i nodi, pur distanti l’uno dall’altro, che non si sciolgono. Sono una traccia in quel groviglio e il mio principio appartiene a quello multiplo. Il mio principio è Barni. (1)

If we follow Cavarero’s direction we can see that Domenica Axad’s life-story begins only because of Barni, who has heard and participated in this very narrative. Though the protagonists live very connected lives, knots held together despite the far reaching diaspora, the story cannot begin without this “other” to whom the narrator has already revealed herself (and to whom she continuously reveals herself). This foundational reciprocal relationship is traditionally, for Cavarero (and also for Muraro), the charge of the mother, “oltre a essere colei da cui l’esistente viene, la madre è anche l’altra alla quale, per prima, l’esistente appare” (*Tu che mi guardi* 32). Yet, in Domenica Axad’s
origin story the mother is absent and Barni has taken her place as the first “other” to whom Domenica appears. Moreover, Barni has doubly usurped the role of the mother through the bestowal of a more appropriate name.

Assuming the role of the mother also ensures for Barni a place within the tangle of knots that is Domenica Axad’s life-story. Victoria Burrows suggests that the figuration of the knot is also a representation of the mother-daughter bond, a useful characterization for our look at this atypical “birth”:

On one hand, the knot suggests both the dense complexity and relational circuitry of the mother-daughter relationship, which comprises separate subjectivities that are loosely tied together, bodily and psychically. These subjectivities are interwoven and intertangled with one another, joined but separate, the same and other, ambivalently fused by a sense of difference and commonality. On the other hand, the metaphor implies that there are untapped imaginative and theoretical spaces that can be brought into being when constitutive threads are unwound and re-configured. (1)

A shade of Cavarero’s emphasis on the who of each individual, that is also in a relationship with others (a community) emerges in this passage. Burrows also suggests that new modes of relating in this way are possible through the reconfiguration of strands – a realignment that Domenica Axad has employed by beginning her story, not with her mother, but instead with Barni.63 We might assume that this process works in reverse as well, that is, that Barni’s story begins with Domenica Axad, as it is clear from the original passage that the younger cousin sees Barni as well, and recognizes her “maternal”

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63 The knot figures in Luisa Muraro’s work as well, which echoes but diverges significantly from Cavarero. The metaphor of a tangled string of knots balled up into a nest relates to Muraro’s concept of female genealogy such that, “Relationships make us be who we are, we are the relationships, beginning with the maternal relationship, from which we get life and the word, together. It is necessary to know, furthermore, that in every relationship are knotted one hundred other relations, in an intricate and fascinating web,” (80) although for Ali Farah, the biological mother, despite being an important figure in the community of women, is absent in this origin story. Quoted from “The Passion of Feminine Difference Beyond Equality” in Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: equality and sexual difference eds. Parati, Graziella and West, Rebecca. (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses. 2002).
role in the scene. I return to Barni’s particular brand of the maternal later in the chapter, but I necessarily move beyond the harmony that this originary narrative establishes to examine the consequences of breaking the narrative cycle, which subsequently pitches these two women into a constant search for this lost recognition.

III. IV The Optimal Subaltern: Domenica/Axad’s Destructive Manipulation of Invisibility

In the previous section I suggested that Domenica Axad’s story begins in the reflexive gaze of Barni’s recognition. I now document the twenty-year estrangement from this constituting gaze that begins in Domenica Axad’s optional de-metonymization. That is, Domenica refuses the privileges of her European connections to become a true member of the Somali Diaspora – she essentially choses to become a subaltern.

Domenica Axad’s transformation into Axad, a chosen name eschewing any connection to her Italian nationality (she has dual-citizenship), begins in her final trip to Mogadishu many years after her initial relocation to Rome. The ill-advised timing of the trip, and complete incognizance of the severity of the situation surprise the young woman, whose memories of the city do not correspond to the destruction and violence that she witnesses in front of her. Her brief, but violent sojourn in the city of her youth ends in the welcome companionship of her cousin Libeen (instead of Barni), who quickly ushers her onto the last scheduled flight out of the war zone. Libeen is the first surrogate “other” through which Domenica Axad, now only Axad, seeks recognition. It is a damaging relationship: “per lui ero come pasta d’argilla da modellare. Ero la sua appartenenza. Dei miei passati poco gli importava…All’inizio lui per me era fonte a cui abbeverarmi. Incautamente” (103). Libeen’s selective recognition only reads the Somali half of her,
and denies any value to that other half. Yet, we know from the beginning, from her given name, that who she is comes from both the cultural inheritances that she receives. In other words, her life narrative cannot be abridged for it to truly tell her story.

Not only does Libeen deny this part of his cousin, he tries to shape it to fit his own version of what she should be. In a crucial moment pregnant with the possibility of true recognition, Libeen’s blindness becomes evident. At a wedding Axad dances freely with the other guests, to the dismay of some Somali women who think it crass. Libeen too, disapproves, “Era lì, poco distante, che ridacchiava. Solo a un tavolo, con la sigaretta in mano e la sua espressione di scherzo. Mi osservava, senza distogliere lo sguardo, sin dal principio. Come corpo suo” (104). His mocking gaze does not see her, but rather, it seeks to own her. Furthermore, the explanation for his scorn legitimizes not seeing as a necessary social convention, “Loro [White, non-Muslims] ti fanno vedere una gamba, così, la schiena. Il corpo non ha valore. Ma sognare una donna è diverso. Tu la sogni splendida, intera, per te. Non vedi e puoi sognare” (104). I do not mean here to critique Somali social conventions, instead I am suggesting that Libeen’s imposition of only a Somali social protocol as the moral compass along which Axad’s life-narrative should develop, erases the other constituents of her moral/social universe that also include Western practices. That he does not also belong to this community should not matter, he should still be capable of recognizing that she also inhabits that different socio-cultural space. Instead, Libeen professes the value of invisibility. The act of imagining the appearance of the woman instead of accepting her as she appears, denies her any uniqueness or authenticity. Thus Libeen is not capable of really seeing Domenica Axad, he can merely imagine her as Axad, a name that corresponds to no one. Their entire nine-
year relationship might be summed up in Libeen’s continual, but incorrect question, “Cosa ti interessa diventare?” (emphasis mine 112) instead of who would you like to be?

The former Domenica Axad, now Axad, who has made herself a subaltern tries, like Bhubaneswari to be heard through her body. Since she is not truly recognizable to Libeen, she seeks a different kind of audience: a public that might read the small self-inflicted wounds on her arms. “Qualsiasi oggetto appuntito mi serviva,” she admits, “A incidermi, a vedere il colore del sangue. Ragnatele di segni sulla mia superficie. Mi chiedevano cosa mi ero fatta, in molti. Sussultavo: segreti svelati. Ma sai, ero talmente separata. Non riuscivo a parlare. Le braccia coperte da maglie lunghe, solo le mani si vedevano, intarsiate” (99). By exposing her body, even just the carved-up hands, Axad performs her desire to be understood through this painful writing of her ‘segreti svelati.’ Her auto-mutilation is a clear cry for recognition that is unheeded: “Era forse per dichiararmi che mi incidevo con tanto accanimento? Non è per segnare una presenza che esistono i riti di iniziazione?” (246). Hers is an overt desire to be counted, to be seen as an existent, implying that this rite of hers, unrecognized as it was, has signaled instead an absence – she is literally trying to write herself into being.

The depth of Axad’s invisibility reaches its apex with her complete relinquishment of official identity. She offers her passport to those without travel visas, so that they may freely cross Western borders. Her unique identity that enjoys the institutions of civil society as a citizen becomes also the multiple identities of other female subalterns. She is no longer distinguishable as unique and unrepeatable on “official” registers. This shift is significant because it showcases the possibility of backward progress in the process of metonymization, whose ultimate goal, Spivak
reminds us, is visibility in the body politic. Axad no longer sees herself as a distinct individual within the civic structure of a community (in either Italy or Somalia), instead she is relegated to anonymity, an invisible, unheard subaltern. Thus, there is always the risk of falling once more into subalternity even for the agent of civil society. In Axad’s case, when she is no longer recognizable, and her story no longer acceptable to the chosen “other,” she can no longer sustain access to this privileged subject position. Ali Farah shows us in Axad’s story, that Spivak’s self-synecdoche works both ways and remains an unstable and volatile form of agency.

Domenica Axad begins to reconcile the pieces of her identity that had been fragmented by a series of half-recognitions. Her journey back toward self-unity and narratability is jump-started by her new sister-in-law Luul, pregnant, destitute and freshly disembarked on Italian shores. Domenica Axad’s new husband and Luul’s brother, Taageere is left in America; legal issues (his divorce from the first wife Shukri is not officially recognized by Italian law) detain him. Domenica Axad goes in his place reclaiming once again the freedom of mobility that Italian citizenship grants her. She is already using her access to civil constructs to help Luul, who has access to none, and is ultimately forced to give birth in a burned out, abandoned car. When she first meets Luul, she also encounters Shukri, her husband’s first wife, and the mother of his son. This unlikely reunion of a sister and her sisters-in-law becomes the foundation of a relationship built on the mutual recognition of motherhood, for Domenica Axad too, is pregnant.

That this unlikely family of mothers (which will be made even bigger by the eventual inclusion of Barni as “little mother” or aunt) showcases a new family unit that
relies little, if at all on a patriarchal figure. This community recalls the collective in “Strappo,” that values distinct individuality through the communal act of mothering. Mothers are privileged subjects for Cavarero, as they are witnesses to the undeniable who of the infant: “Chi è unico, appunto, è anche uno nell’atto stesso del suo esibirsi. Lo è innanzitutto alla sua nascita, quando è già un chi senza ancora essere un che cosa, quando, nel suo nuovissimo inizio, è un’unità unica di cui ancora non si può predicare né la molteplicità né la frammentazione né la discontinuità” (Tu che mi guardi 96). When Domenica Axad discovers her pregnancy, she happily anticipates her role as the first to whom her baby will appear as a distinct and whole existent. In addition, through Shukri, she finally regains the participation of Barni as the habaryar, the “little mother” or aunt in Somali, in the project of raising her son, thereby reinstating her as an active author in the shared/mutual narrative of mothering. We might consider this society of mothers a version of Cavarero’s feminine symbolic order, similar to Muraro’s affidamento, from her earlier work In Spite of Plato, where she suggests that the mother recognizes in the daughter the possibility/power of the generative process. She suggests that, “The female gender, in which birth is embodied, calls for a relationship of gazes between similarly female creatures. It demands that gender itself be a common horizon of recognition for every woman, so that birth, which has already happened, can (but does not have to) happen again” (64). In knowing that every woman and man is born of a woman, who is born of a woman, who is also born of woman, the mother’s knowledge that this process might continue with her daughter roots her in a female genealogy. This understanding of female generative power (that is, not merely that of being a vessel as subsequent philosophy would propose) also uncovers a female genealogy within which a woman can
“conquer and keep … [her] identity” (Irigaray 421). For Ali Farah, it isn’t necessarily the mother/daughter relationship that provokes this sense of rootedness, but instead the potential of birth seen in the collective act of mothering. We will see below that for Barni, the recognition of such power/genealogy is possible through the mere witnessing of birth.

III. V The Unconventional Mother: Barni and the Omnipotence of Midwifery

Barni’s journey is not one toward invisibility, but rather it is one of progressive blindness. Like the tragic Oedipus, who fails to recognize his own story in the riddle, Barni fails to see her complicity in the divisive dimensions of civil war reaching beyond the confines of the nation. She claims to denounce the absurdity of kin based hatred that has ushered in the failure of the Somali state. Only through her sustaining role as a midwife, who bears witness to the irrefutable uniqueness of each newborn, can Barni ultimately recognize her blindness, and subsequently an “other,” to whom she may recount this story.

Though Cavarero extends the privilege of recognition to the mother, the midwife, who facilitates the birth is also privy to the mother’s unadulterated whoness. Barni admits, “Madri ne ho viste tante, in quel momento, in balia del corpo, del dolore sradicante; tu ne vedi la vera natura. Privilegio non da poco. L’istinto prevale? Non per tutte. Il velo cade, ognuna pesca nei recessi della propria anima. Quello che trova a volte è innominabile. Ma accompagnarle, poi le accompagno solo i primi giorni. Dei neonati conosco solo l’inizio della vita” (147). Thus the privilege of the midwife is to recognize the essence of individuality and unsubstitutability of both the mother and the child, as they too, recognize themselves. Such a revelatory moment of complete exposure for the mother in
The care of the midwife, and the child in the care of both women, produces the constituent elements of specular ontology, but with one striking difference: the midwife is not part of the reciprocal circuitry. Barni is thus outside; she is the omnipotent facilitator of new life-stories. She understands this power and it becomes one way for her to tell her story, even though it is not a recognizable narrative to the other characters involved:

E per una come me – che madre non sono e che ho avuto a malapena una madre frammentata in tante donne – curare, occuparmi degli altri, è un modo per mantenermi salda a terra. È come un sentimento di onnipotenza, mi fa sentire invulnerabile. Quando curi qualcuno sei tu che hai il coltello dalla parte del manico. Sei tu che dai sollievo. Sei tu che decidi come vanno fatte le cose, a modo mio. Sono gli altri che dipendono da te. Sono gli altri che hanno bisogno del tuo sollievo. Sono gli altri ad accettare le cose fatte a modo tuo. (33)

The decisive action of a midwife whose very profession requires that she repeatedly recognize the uniqueness of her patients, recalls Barni’s early decision to assume the power of naming for Domenica Axad. In that first exchange, Barni’s authority as one who sees the wholeness of Domenica before her, is noted, and establishes the shared exposure and acceptance shaping the relationship. Obstetrics provides an echo of that originary exchange. Though Domenica Axad eventually reinserts Barni into the narrative cycle by inviting her to help raise her child, there is another precursory “other” that re-establishes the possibility of Barni’s participation in a relational mode of subjectivity. It is through Ardo that Barni learns of her own blindness.

Barni is not aware of the duplicity of her perception. She believes that she is capable of seeing everyone for who they truly are. It is what she does for a living, after all. Wasn’t she the only one to see the benignity of the wrongly accused Maxamad? Didn’t she discover that his ‘act of terrorism’ was in fact, an act of compassion to save a young mother from fire? Was she not also quick to condemn the damaging influence of Somali
genealogies to the Italian media? She boldly announced to the interviewer that they did not matter, at least not to her: “Gli anziani conoscono a memoria il loro albero genealogico fino alle origini, almeno così dicono. Ma è argomento di cui non voglio parlare, è una ragione di conflitto radicata nella gente. Non ne faccia menzione. A mio parere sono tutte congetture, le genealogie, gli alberi, le radici (14). Her denouncement of patriarchal genealogies allows her to use a different mode of self-narration that is based on recognition of the female genealogy through her work as a midwife. Barni fancies herself a discerning individual, which is why, when she meets Ardo for the first time, it initiates a crisis.

When Barni first sees Ardo, the tall, elegant woman wearing a striking yellow headscarf, she does not acknowledge Barni: “Volevo salutarlo con lo sguardo, ma lei no, non mi guardava” (149). If Ardo did in fact see Barni, then her refusal of acknowledgement can only be read a judgment. For Barni, who is well seasoned in the act of recognition, this refusal is unacceptable, as it precludes either party from seeing the who of the other. If one is not recognized as an individual, is not seen, then he/she cannot truly see the other. What develops instead is a relationship based on the external definitions or whats, which is precisely what happens..

Shut off from the exposing nature of the reciprocal, recognizing gaze, Barni tries to glean something of this woman from the superficial bits and pieces in view:

La ragazza è salita proprio di fronte a me. Imperterrita, continuava a non guardarmi e io la miravo e la rimiravo per polverizzarla con gli occhi. Sarà stato questo. O forse più di tutto un particolare da cui non riuscivo a distogliere lo sguardo, qualcosa che non mi permetteva di distrarmi. Erano un paio di orecchini pendi enti che don dolavano, avanti e indietro, avanti e indietro. Da capogiro. Due orecchini d’oro puro in filigrana finissima. Al centro, incastonato, un occhio di tigre. Erano gli stessi?... ero sicura che quegli orecchini mi fossero appartenuti. (emphasis mine 150)
Barni does not accept Ardo’s refusal (and remember this is simply an imagined refusal), and so she tries to force some kind of recognition upon the woman through a violent gaze. The result in this forceful, one-sided scrutiny is certainly a recognition, but one that paradoxically finds Barni’s own eyes staring back at her in the gaze of the tiger-eye earrings, jewelry that she believes belongs to her family. Barni’s desire to be recognized by this woman is so great that she creates the illusion of narrative exchange in her pulverizing gaze; she basically tells her own story to herself in place of Ardo’s. Unlike Oedipus’ error, which lies in his inability to discern his own story in the Sphinx’s riddle, Barni’s mistake happens through the impossibility of seeing herself in her own narrative. She has thus become the narrating “other” and the spectator at once, without however the intervening and productive presence of another person. In other words, she tries to perform Cavarero’s process of reciprocal recognition independently; naturally, it fails.

The story of these earrings metabolizes the life-narrative of Ardo, so that even after the two women meet and speak to each other, the relationship continues to progress along the structure of a predetermined plot. Barni believes that these earrings, that she recognizes to be her mother’s, must have come to Ardo through sinister means since they were originally stolen from her by soldiers from an opposing clan. Thus, she deduces, Ardo must also be her enemy. In a chance encounter Barni probes Ardo’s history to corroborate her suspicion, “Abitavi a Mogadiscio,” she asks and then makes a distinction between her own flight in 1991, and those that were permitted to remain until 1993, when Ardo left, “Me ne sono dovuta andare subito, all’inizio del ’91. Sai com’era la situazione per quelli come noi. Quelli che sono rimasti a Mogadiscio sono stati tutti ammazzati! Solo le famiglie che controllavano la città sono potute restare…Ardo ha avvertito
l’accusa” (167). In the consuming desire for recognition, Barni has become blind, unable to see the uniqueness of the woman before her as it has dissolved into the very categories of genealogy that Barni professes to abhor. Ardo is the one to reveal Barni’s error, “La cosa più brutta che ha creata questa guerra è l’odio tra di noi” (168). Since Barni has not thus far been able to truly see Ardo, the revelatory power of her words go unheeded as well.

What ultimately breaks the spell is the birth of Ardo’s baby (and the re-establishment of the female genealogy). Much later Barni sees her again, this time at the hospital during a dangerous pre-term labor and the possibility of a breach birth. Though elsewhere I have established the non-participatory but revelatory function of the midwife, in Ardo’s case it is different, she acknowledges Barni’s presence in the birth process, “Io ho visto gli occhi di Ardo, come occhi che si aspettano di vedermi” (181). This is the first revelatory gaze between the women, as Barni registers the fear in the young mother’s eyes. After this crucial moment, the baby, as if playing a part in this theater as well, miraculously turns itself, and Barni delivers a healthy baby girl into Ardo’s arms. The privileged access to exposed individualities that extends to midwives, coupled with Ardo’s invitation to become part of this life-narrative, finally reveal to Barni the treachery of her blindness. Once again free of the masculine mode of self-narration, i.e. identification through the father, she can again take note of the female genealogy revealed to her in the birth of Ardo’s daughter. Now, seeing Ardo for the first time becomes, “il momento per chiederle degli orecchini” (183). Ardo tells Barni the story of the earrings. They were a gift from an ageing Italian signora, whose previous *badante* had left the earrings behind. The banality of this story, something that Barni had already
suspected, releases her from the contract of rancor that dictates family loyalty, “Ardo smetteva di essere il mio capro espiatorio” (182). Through the painful, but ultimately redemptive relationship between Barni and Ardo, the old ways of relating based on clan divisions and revenge give way to a much more intimate friendship facilitated by the physical act of childbirth: “Quello era il momento giusto per cominciare tutto da capo … Tutto dal principio, costruire una vita dal principio. Si può ricucire una rete di esistenze costruita in più di due decenni di vita?” (182). Like Domenica Axad’s re-tangling of knots to begin with Barni, Barni here, sees the possibility of reconfiguration through the shared and mutual act of relating through her relationship with Ardo.

III.VI Agency Against Patriarchy: Considerations on the Civil Structures of Diaspora

Ali Farah’s novel clearly showcases the pitfalls of unrecognizability within the divergent trajectories of her two protagonists Barni and Domenica Axad. She also overtly signals the space of motherhood and the acts of mothers as true places and deeds that foster the reciprocality and revelation necessary for the narrating of life-stories. Yet what I have yet to touch upon in this analysis is the nature of access to the civic structures of the diaspora within this ethics of motherhood. With Domenica Axad and Barni’s reunion, there is restored the specular ontology based on narrative that Cavarero champions. This narrative space is, as Cavarero points out, already political, and may serve as the locus of the transformative process of metonymization that Spivak so values. What is interesting about Ali Farah’s version of this political awareness is that it hinges on the act of mothering.
Spivak warns that the “third-world” woman of the diaspora is “the site of global public culture privatized: the proper subject of real migrant activism. She may also be the victim of an exacerbated and violent patriarchy which operates in the name of the old nation as well – a sorry simulacrum of women in nationalism” (*Diasporas* 252). She is the subaltern that so many international organizations of the West want to “save” from the very patriarchy that inscribes her into an ever more zealous national narrative. This is also the case for Somali women of the diaspora, like Barni, Domenica Axad, Luul, etc., who are caught between small freedoms in host countries, and traditional strictures and scorn from their fathers, brothers, husbands and cousins. Spivak does not trust the overly benevolent reach of Western institutions that desire to give the so-called “third-world” woman access to a civil society that recognizes her and from which she may demand services and rights. This can only be the result of a desire born in the subaltern herself, through which she may redirect the focus of a civil polity divorced from nationalist/patriarchal agendas.

Fostering this female desire becomes all the more important in a diasporic culture that is in the throes of a masculine crisis. Speaking about the necessary presence of women in the diaspora writer and Somali exile Nuruddin Farah writes:

I doubted if my brothers or I would be as committed to taking care of our aged parents as my sisters had been…Part of me was relieved that the generous-spiritedness of our womenfolk never failed to allay our worse fears, the women mending the broken, healing the wounded, taking care of the elderly and the sick, martyrly women, forever prepared to sacrifice their lives for the general good of the entire community. Another part of me was in a murderous mood as I thought about the disastrous consequences of the civil war, without a doubt the work of men, as all civil strifes have been throughout the history of humankind. I asked myself: what would become of us without the mitigation, the kindly interventions

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64 For Spivak these are the institutions of the International Civil Society that impose dominant modes of political democracy and civil rights upon developing nations without success.
of our women? (5)

As the unraveling of the national fabric takes its toll on the men who have been stripped of political agency, the women seek to mend what is left in the wake of such rage. There is also for the men, concomitant to this loss of agency, an ever more ardent reliance on outdated traditions that restrict the very work of edification that women have begun. Ali Farah herself elucidates:

Siccome appunto nei paesi occidentali c’è l’idea che i costumi con il tempo in qualche modo evolvano, cioè che le nostre nonne fossero più chiuse di noi, le nostre madri più chiuse, e che mano a mano in certe cose le donne si liberino e che l’emancipazione femminile abbia un cammino in salita. Invece in paesi come la Somalia, che hanno la guerra da molto tempo, esistono delle forme di chiusura, cioè ci sono donne che nei loro paesi sono sempre state libere, hanno sempre avuto una mentalità molto aperta e improvvisamente si trovano catapultate in una società in cui non si riconoscono e che non le riconosce e quindi per istinto si chiudono. (Sagarana)

It is not insignificant that an increasingly restrictive cultural space renders women unrecognizable to themselves and to larger society. Cutting them off from avenues of recognition makes them subalterns, and therefore denies to them social mobility and freedoms that they had previously enjoyed. In the specific case of Somalia, women have a rich history of advocacy and political involvement. Beginning in 1959 the Somali Women’s Association and the Somali Women’s Movement fought for political voice in the newly independent Somalia. Though most of these organizations dissolved after the rise of Siad Barre’s regime, the Women’s Section of the Supreme Revolutionary Council and the Somali Women’s Democratic Organization did enjoy modest success in the

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65 For more on Somali women and peace-keeping see Judith Gardner and Judy El Bushra in Somalia the Untold Story: The War through the Eyes of Somali Women. (London: Pluto. 2004). They suggest that women are at the ‘centre of suffering’ as always part of two clans (the husband’s and father’s) and because of such a dual loyalty, the women are often messengers between clans.
1970s educating women throughout Somalia and fighting for equal rights in marriage and the workplace. Though these movements were at the mercy of a repressive regime, they did represent a persistent concern for women’s rights. In the aftermath of the fall of the regime women were less and less visible in politics as clan-based political systems took over, essentially relegating women to peacekeeping and caretaking roles. Today women in Somalia are working together to create safe havens for their families, and some are organizing outside of the country in order to intervene when the violence subsides. These contemporary women’s movements within and around Somalia are primarily working to stabilize their communities and to gain minor access to political spaces. Those in the diaspora on the other hand, like Barni and Domenica Axad, look to a much greater role in politics in both the host country as well as in the very civil community of diasporic Somalia. Though these women may not return to Somalia, they are, at the very least, constructing affiliations and avenues toward political visibility that might translate to a new Somali diasporic culture in the West (Gardner & Bushra 178).

Within the novel, Domenica Axad’s emotionally abusive relationship with Libeen is not the only example of such a social regression; the novel is rife with examples of damaged relationships sacrificed to the ideals of family tradition. For example, Shamsa, Libeen’s sister, is ostracized from the family, and more importantly from the family’s support because she and her five children leave her emotionally abusive husband. Despite her husband’s abuse, her brothers and sisters do not come to her aid once she leaves him prompting Domenica Axad to ask, “Non riuscivo a spiegarmi perché la mia gente, che credevo così solidale, sta abbandonando questa ragazza a se stessa?” (117) There is also

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the story of Saciid Saleeban’s two women. His family sends him an eighteen-year-old bride from Somalia from the “stesso schieramento genealogico,” despite his vehement protests that he is in love with another woman of a different family tree (122). Though Saciid attempts to fashion a life beyond the reach of an oppressive tradition, he cannot. Even Barni cannot escape the return of old rules. Her husband, also a doctor, leaves her because he cannot bear the fact that she is the sole earner of the household. He takes flight under the false pretense of their incompatible genealogies. All of these women who find themselves abandoned in the diaspora are, according to Barni, better off than the men, “É così difficile per i nostri uomini inventarsi un ruolo. Ridefinirsi. Adattarsi. Accettarsi. Umiliarsi. Perché vede, per noi donne, alla fine, quelle coordinate fisse, la casa, la quotidianità, la maternità, l’intimità dei rapporti, sono come paletti che ci salvano dallo smarrimento” (33). Barni’s emphasis on the domestic space as a grounding space also becomes, as we will see, a space to bypass the old systems to invent new modes of structuring a national community that does not self-destruct.

Barni and Domenica Axad are forging new ground in their version of the new Somali family, and through a capsizing of the traditionally confining role of motherhood, they are creating avenues to political agency by redefining the future of the diaspora itself. They are raising Domenica Axad’s boy together, without the father. They also draw comfort and support from the larger network of mothers like Shukri and Luul, who are also raising their children without fathers. They are, through the act of mothering, redefining the future of Somali cultural/civic space that does not/ cannot rely on men. Barni recognizes this newfound agency in the closing pages of the novel,
cura di qualcuno? Gli uomini si sentono inutili, il loro nome genera conflitto e non occupano più il luogo delle decisioni. Lasciamoli senza pertiche e smettiamo di proteggerli, vivere nella mollezza non ha mai dato benefici. (264)

Women find access to the political in the private realm that structures the everyday narrative of their shared lives, and this process need not change in the absence of the official frameworks of power or the nation-state. The simple and revelatory reality of living as a woman (or mother in this case) in the world is enough to spark the movement from subject to agent. This shift is clearly evident in Barni’s last call to leave the men behind, to sketch out the contours of a new diaspora directed by women.

I end this final chapter with Spivak’s account of the national mother figure as she relates to language, motherhood and the nation:

The role of women, through their placing in the reproductive heteronormativity that supports nationalisms, is of great significance in this general temporizing narrative. When we are born, we are born into the possibility of timing, temporalization—we are in time…Our first language almost seems coeval with this, for we are also born into it…Since it is usually our mothers who seem to bring us into temporalization, by giving birth, our temporizing often marks the particular intuition of origin by coding and re-coding the mother, by computing possible futures through investing or manipulating womanspace. The daughtership of the nation is bound up with that very recoding. Another example of temporizing towards the future that will fall due is of women as holding the future of the nation in their wombs. It comes from the obvious narrative of marriage. Language, mother, daughter, nation, marriage…the task of the literary imagination in this contemporary is the persistent de-transcendentalizing of such figures. In other words, if you study this graphic as text, you can keep it framed in the imaginary, rather than see it as the ineffable cultural ‘reality’ that drives the public sphere, the civic structure that holds the state. (Nationalism 43-44)

The temporal chain of language, mother, daughter, nation, marriage – is, as Spivak points out, the structure of reproductive heteronormativity. Women are associated first with language as they are the subjects who give language and narrative to children, secondly they are mothers who produce mothers-to-be (or sons of the nation) who will imagine a future only within womanspace as mothers and wives. For Spivak, keeping this
‘graphic’ in the imaginary de-transcendentalizes it. The new order demonstrated in Ali Farah’s novel changes the content of the narrative (it no longer contains patriarchal genealogies), it re-casts the role of the mother as a generative and creative subject, and it essentially allows for a re-imagining of Somali culture from a female perspective. Ali Farah’s characters have, through language/narrative (Cavarero’s specular ontology), turned womanspace into a political space, where marriage loses structural significance in the continued civil functions of the diaspora, essentially re-imagining the inner-workings of the Somali community abroad. This last echo of Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities is fitting as what this literature has begun to do, like print capitalism did for European nationalism, is to allow for a public recognition of a new mode of imagining, not only within the Somali community, but also within a contemporary heterogeneous Italian community. The limit of this imagined female community is not bound by official borders or cultural attachments, but instead upon a network of mutual recognitions and communications that point to a different kind of potential for political and social intervention. This imagining takes place within the unique space of the destination culture, a meeting place between Italian and diasporic affiliations. It is only within this space of exchange and collision where national cultures (patriarchal in scope) meet and are transformed. Though it might not be possible to imagine a national model based on matriarchal modes of relation, it is possible within this transformative space to imagine a community based on recognition, narrative and mothering.
Conclusion: Confronting Tradition and Circumventing Anxiety

All of the writers showcased in this dissertation look to narrative as a means to establish female communities. Dell’Oro’s protagonists draw upon imaginative mythologies to re-configure the psychosocial. Scego’s post-migrants escape crushing histories of diaspora through a communal form of bibliotherapy. Ali Farah’s diasporic mothers find civic agency in the intertwining nature of life-narratives. These diegetic examples delineate how narrative intervenes and shapes the everyday lives of their female characters, much in the same way that I argue these texts function in the specific space of Italian destination culture. Yet, how does this strictly feminist postcolonial approach challenge established literary traditions? I end this project by suggesting that postcolonial women’s literature unsettles the traditional literary canon, predominantly written by men, from within the novelistic tradition itself. This internal unsettling, as I will discuss below, is distinct from contemporary theories of Italian women’s literature.

As literary texts in Italian written by and predominantly about women, the novels discussed in this dissertation belong to an Italian literary tradition.\textsuperscript{67} Though I have argued for the importance of these works to the larger postcolonial and global context, there is yet another community that these works engage: the Italian literary canon. The central role of narrative and literature within these works of fiction is, in this particular community, a way of confronting an androcentric and racially homogeneous literary tradition. That the new Italian postcolonial literature is by-and-large a female

\textsuperscript{67} Though all of the novels in this dissertation are concerned with past and present Italian / East-African encounters, the novels discussed are clearly for an Italian reading public. Unlike postcolonial novels written in English, that inevitably enjoy a wider readership beyond the former metropole, these texts, though enjoying modest international recognition, are primarily designed to address an Italian speaking public. There are some bilingual texts, like those published by Sinnos, a publisher specializing in multi-lingual publications. For example Scego’s first novel \textit{La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock} (2003) in Italian and Somali, or Ribka Sibatu’s book of poetry \textit{Aulò! Canto Poesia dall’Eritrea} (1993) in Italian and Tigrinya.
phenomenon gives us the unique opportunity to see an emerging genre shaped by a definitively female perspective from the beginning. To be clear, I am not suggesting that these writers seek recognition in any national literary catalogue, to the contrary, I think that they demonstrate a new style of confronting literary traditions (both Italian and postcolonial) that map out an intriguing feminist theoretical approach to fiction and how it functions within society.

I would like to spend the rest of this conclusion reflecting on current theories about the Italian novelistic tradition, and the ways in which women writers are re-shaping it. I would then like to suggest that the authors of this dissertation, by their unique position as inaugural postcolonial women writers, engage both the postcolonial and Italian tradition in more overtly transformative ways. I ultimately contend that Dell’Oro, Scego and Ali Farah can be both examples of contemporary Italian female authors as well as postcolonial authors. I also suggest that adding the postcolonial perspective in this context challenges patriarchal literary traditions beyond the Italian context and therefore remains a productive distinction that, I believe, enriches our understanding of contemporary literary studies. I will close with a very brief look at one last postcolonial novel by Gabriella Ghermandi, the 2007 work, Regina di fiori e di perle, to demonstrate how the postcolonial feminist view challenges the patriarchal canon differently than other contemporary Italian novels written by women.68

In the recent work, A Multitude of Women: The Challenges of the Contemporary Italian Novel, literary scholar Stefania Lucamante suggests that contemporary Italian

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68 There is a lot to wade through when differentiating between a mainstream (if it can be called that even now) Italian literature written by women, and a minor literature that is considered postcolonial written by women. In reality, all of these women are Italian citizens and are vocal about not being categorized by restrictive labels.
women writers, since the 1990s, have called for a “new epistemology of the novel” that “far from being devoid of meaning and ideological stances, can only benefit from a positive deviation from literary and ideological orthodoxy” (3). Moving toward a fresh approach to the Italian novel through a distinctly female lens, Lucamante claims that women are highly expressive and quick to buck tradition, and above all, their works tend to be a direct reflection of contemporary society (3). This description fits well with Dell’Oro, Scego and Ali Farah, although, as I have discussed throughout this dissertation, theirs is a contemporary society that goes well beyond Italian national borders.

Lucamante engages predominantly gender as a means to re-envision canonical communities, and therefore does not investigate how race and ethnicity factor into what she terms a hybrid phase of women’s literary production in Italy.\(^{69}\) Though her theories do not directly address migrant and post-migrant women writers, her approach is a useful point of entry for modes of interrogating patriarchal literary traditions.

Lucamante’s innovation emerges from her theory of a hybrid phase of literature written by women, developing out of the feminism of the 1990s.\(^{70}\) This contemporary phase of literary production seeks a “new order beyond the patriarchal” that is also “a site for expressive research and discussion of social issues regarding youth, family and women” (13). Thus Lucamante’s post-feminist, post-1990s novelistic tradition is shaped by a need to engage sociological concerns mixed in with a theoretical project of a female

\(^{69}\) While Lucamante restricts her analysis to non-migrant or post-migrant women, Adalgisa Giorgio’s volume *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women.* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002) does address the demographic changes brought about by global migrations through Europe.

\(^{70}\) Following Elaine Showalter’s model of women’s artistic production in the Anglo-Saxon tradition in, *A Literature of their Own* (1998), Lucamante maps out three phases: 1) The imitative phase, where early artist mimic the masculine models available to them; 2) The phase of protest against these models and social norms and 3) The phase of self-discovery, a complex search for identity through artistic means. For more see Lucamante’s introductory pages.
symbolic. At the heart of this hybrid phase is essentially the establishment of a female literary genealogy modeled after Luisa Muraro’s concept of *affidamento*. Though Lucamante stresses that Muraro’s hierarchical female relational ontology does not succeed as a sociological practice, she does introduce a form of literary entrustment that creates a counter-canon of women writers reaching back through literary history. In some ways we might look at Scego’s establishment of a global library of female trauma writers as an example of literary entrustment. The difference is, of course, Scego’s models come from various genealogies that are not specific to Italy, that rupture the nationally bounded dynasty of which Lucamante speaks. It is noteworthy that the peripheral position reserved for postcolonial women’s fiction within Lucamante’s genealogy enables those texts to push the notion of a literary entrustment even further.

Along the same lines as Lucamante, Irene Zanini-Cordi argues in her work, *Donne sciolte. Abbandono ed identità femminile nella letteratura femminile*, that one way to look at contemporary female characters is through a re-contextualization of classic women archetypes like Ariadne, Dido and Medea. Structuring her analysis along the concept of abandonment, Zanini-Cordi suggests that re-interpreting it as something other than a masculine absence also allows us to read abandonment differently in contemporary texts as well. Unlike Lucamante, Zanini-Cordi does include the postcolonial as representative of innovative and contemporary models of her re-imagined trope, although she only engages Dell’Oro. When approaching the female character in literature she argues that there are two options: “inventarsi nuove figure, oppure… *rubare* le figure al contesto storico-culturale in cui sono state pensate” (emphasis in original 11). The first suggests a creative process that elaborates feminine spaces within pre-established
masculine societies, much like the authors in this study have done. The latter hints at eschewing patriarchal culture altogether, like Lucamante’s literary *affidamento* espouses. What ultimately results is a dual process that both snatches classic female characters from their patriarchal literary prisons and re-envisions them into new figures within contemporary society.

While Lucamante begins her theoretical work with Muraro’s texts, Zanini-Cordi looks to Adriana Cavarero as a model, or perhaps a foremother of her own critical vocation. Cavarero’s *Nonostante Platone* is the clear inspiration for Zanini-Cordi in its unabashed theft of female characters from the rigid masculine philosophical contexts within which they find themselves. Cavarero is unapologetic about her act of theft and points out that it is a necessary, if problematic, enterprise, as the original context denies the possibility of female expression or even the space to conceive of a female symbolic order (123). Re-interpreting, from what little evidence is available in classic mythological texts, Cavarero essentially points to a distinctly female presence in Western philosophy and literature, from Penelope’s anti-masculine weaving-room to Demeter’s power of reproduction, read as a positive generating force instead of the a bringer of death and decay.

What all of these contemporary theories about Italian literature by women have in common is the recognition of female precursors. Whether searching for such mentors as models of literary production or as origins of a female philosophical space, Lucamante, Zanini-Cordi and even Cavarero and Muraro all seek to establish themselves in relation to the ‘multitudes of women’ that have come before, to borrow Lucamante’s title. These theories of philosophical archaeology and literary innovation (the two processes of this
female genealogy) seek to establish a female symbolic order outside the dominant masculine order. Based on language, or what Muraro calls “il dono della madre,” (L’ordine simbolico della madre 37) these approaches to literary production are, taken together, a means of circumventing a Bloomian sense of anxiety confronting contemporary writers, as well as a method of unsettling the dominant signifiers of femininity in male canonical texts. As such, they also enact a form of dismantling the master’s house with tools that do not belong to the master’s toolbox, as Audrey Lorde has suggested. Instead, by locating this symbolic within a hierarchical but non-antagonistic relationship to the mother, or foremothers, these theoreticians define a female symbolic space outside the trajectory of a masculine canonical literary tradition. On one hand it establishes a counter-canon, but on the other hand it essentially keeps female intellectual and artistic production beside and therefore still marginal in relation to the patriarchal canon.

In the specific case of Italian postcolonial literary production by women, there is a much different genealogy at work. Though postcolonial literature is certainly not mainstream, it is a body of work that ensures both local (Italian) and international readers. The relatively late development of Italy’s postcolonial literature comes when an already established field of postcolonial literary studies exists, and therefore the tools of valuing such texts as aesthetic and social objects are readily available to scholars and writers alike. Moreover, Italian postcolonial literature is remarkable as a decidedly female production


within a Western linguistic tradition. Thus, the dominant voice shaping Italy’s postcolonial literary production is female. This phenomenon leads to the paradoxical situation for these writers as dominant and foundational voices in an emerging field, and as peripheral writers within both the Italian patriarchal canon and the alternative female literary genealogy. That there is not already a repository of postcolonial female narratives from which they can draw in the Italian context inevitably makes Lucamante and Zanini-Cordi’s literary entrustment impossible for these writers, at least in the postcolonial context. Yet, we have seen that as women writers, they too are preoccupied with female literary communities. How do Italian postcolonial texts by women arrive at the female symbolic without an Italian literary genealogy? I will examine how one text does so in the following section.

II. Marginalizing the Patriarchal: Masculine and Feminine Silence

Gabriella Ghermandi, the child of an Eritrean mother and an Italian father who grew up in Ethiopia, approaches Italian colonialism through a chorus of Ethiopian female voices. Taking up both the colonized and feminine subject position, she weaves a multitude of stories together into the central narrative of the young Mahlet, growing up in the communist regime of 1980s Ethiopia. Mahlet is unaware that when she grows up she will become a writer, publishing forgotten tales of war for an Italian public, but before this happens, she must first collect the untold stories of her people. This is the basic structure of the 2007 novel that serves as a written archive of African oral narratives for a Western audience. Though there is much more at work in the novel, I want to focus on one very brief passage that illustrates the relationship of this postcolonial text to the
Italian literary canon. In one story following the life of a young Ethiopian rebel girl,
Ghermandi essentially re-writes the central episode of Ennio Flaiano’s 1947 novel *Tempo di uccidere*. The young girl is sent to bathe in the river with Tariku, the son of the female rebel leader, when an Italian soldier approaches:


This brief and decisive exchange occurs without words and this young girl does not even have a name. The anonymity and silence of this young Ethiopian bather, the defining characteristics of Flaiano’s female character, do not inhibit her agency in any way. She prevails and in less than a page essentially confronts and conquers the Italian literary canon.

Flaiano’s novel is part of an early production of colonial novels emerging during and directly after the war. *Tempo di uccidere* is one of the first literary critiques of Italian colonialism. It follows a few days in the life of a fascist soldier deployed to the Ethiopian front in the 1930s. One day the soldier sees a young Ethiopian woman bathing in a stream. He confronts her, seduces her, and accidentally shoots and kills her in the night. The
subsequent pages of the novel grapple with the soldier’s guilt, represented by a grotesque un-healable wound on his hand. Though unique in its critical point of view, the female character remains a voiceless victim of war, making the novel more about white guilt than a colonized experience. Ghermandi’s re-writing of Flaiano takes the circumstances of the original (i.e. the silenced bathing woman) and puts a gun – a symbol of masculine power – into her hand. We might read this re-writing as a parricide, brought about by a sense of Bloomian anxiety on the part of the author, but the very presence of the master’s tools in the gun suggests, I argue, a different interpretation, namely that traditional novelistic practices (i.e. the Italian novel) can be unsettled through the very symbols/tools of masculine authority. The novels considered in this dissertation appropriate masculine traditions to create female spaces as well, albeit in a less overt way. Dell’Oro adopts the historical voice and heroic narrative typically reserved for male war narratives in Asmara addio. Scego gives room for the individual integrity of domestic and sexual abuse re-aligning her look at trauma with Freud’s original and abandoned theories connecting hysteria and sexual abuse. Ali Farah’s women embrace motherhood as a means to preserve Somali ethnonationalism, a highly masculine concept. These texts successfully negotiate masculine spaces within a male-dominated novelistic tradition to make arguments for female communities. They are, in this sense, enacting a new form of feminist engagement within a literary context.

In the afterward to Regina di fiori e di perle, Cristina Lombardi-Diop suggests that the power of this re-writing holds up a mirror for Italian society:

Leggere Regina di fiori e di perle come un testo postcoloniale scritto dopo sessant’anni e alla luce di Tempo di uccidere, serve a capire che il periodo coloniale e quello presente rappresentano le metà speculari di una dimensione sdoppiata; insieme i due romanzi ricompongono realtà complementari ma di cui è
While Italian postcolonial literature certainly does open up channels to a forgotten or unknown past and the novels of the colonized provide a fuller picture of East African and Italian colonial history, there is also a clear usurpation evident in this specular relationship. Ghermandi enacts a look backward – casts a gaze through the historical mirror – through female eyes, and as such, she not only reflects a female experience of colonialism, but she also sends back an image of females wielding the master’s tools. The women of her novel occupy masculine roles, carry dangerous weapons, become war heroines, and they do it while also being mothers, sisters and wives, suggesting that the tradition of postcolonial female writers too is able to comfortably occupy the masculine space of the Italian novel, without conforming to its notions of femininity. In the end, this novel and those that I have discussed in this dissertation, suggest that it might be possible to occupy a female symbolic space atop the ruins of the master’s house.
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