



Autori, opere e percorsi “minori”
della storia letteraria italiana

2

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« Forse un’esagerazione della maestra: *borderline* in fondo significa soltanto “frontiera”, al di qua o al di là dipende magari da come ti trattano ».

CLARA SERENI, *Manicomio primavera*

La collana, a larga vocazione internazionale, propone una lettura innovativa di opere, autori e percorsi letterari italofofoni (con particolare attenzione agli ultimi tre secoli, ma non solo) che, per diverse ragioni, non sono entrati a far parte del canone nazionale. A partire dalle riflessioni di Deleuze e Guattari sul concetto di “letteratura minore” e da quelle di Said sulla formazione esclusiva del canone, i testi presentati sono a firma di scrittori ancora poco noti, sono opere non studiate o dimenticate, generi o modalità di scrittura originali. Con l’idea che un ripensamento delle letterature nazionali sia oggi quanto mai necessario.

The collection, with a great international vocation, wants to propose an innovative reading of Italian literary works, authors and literary paths (with special attention to the last three centuries, but not only), which, for various reasons, are not entered the national canonization. From the reflections of Deleuze and Guattari on the concept of “minor literature” and those of Said on the exclusive formation of the canon, we will try to propose texts that are still unknown writers, forgotten works, genres or original writing modes. With the idea that a rethinking of national literature is as far as needed today.

Vai al contenuto multimediale



**Italy and the Literatures
from the Horn of Africa
(Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti)**

Beyond the Language and the Territory

edited by

**Daniele Comberiati
Xavier Luffin**

contributes by

Emma Bond, Monica Jansen, Alessandro Jedlowski
Linde Luijnenburg, Lorenzo Mari
Sara Marzagora, Teresa Solis





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A Carla Macoggi

Mia madre era la mia stella polare,
sì, ma il Nord non è stato indicato
sempre dal medesimo.

Carla Macoggi, *Kkweya*

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Introduction

Literatures of the Horn of Africa

DANIELE COMBERIATI, XAVIER LUFFIN¹

The idea for this book comes from a conference organized at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB, Belgium) on 19 and 20 September 2013. This conference explored the literature of the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti) and its relation with Italian and European cultures. Afterwards, we decided to publish a collection of essays, each one dedicated to either a particular dimension of this literature or culture or to a single writer. The chapters of this book do not correspond to the proceedings of the conference. Rather, the conference was the starting point for a deeper examination of the literatures of this area of the world. It also prompted some fresh thinking about contemporary writing such as when and in which cases we should use theoretical concepts such as “postcolonial”, “migrant”, “transnational” or “multilingual”. In the last decades, writers from the Horn of Africa have developed an important literature characterized by some defining features, such as multilingualism (national languages, French, Italian, English and Arabic) and the notable voices of the diaspora’s authors, especially from the second generation of migrants (in Europe, North America, the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula).

The main concern of the book will be to analyze contemporary writing highlighting the choices it has made in terms of language, considering its impact on national literature, exploring its interaction with contemporary history and looking into the personal lives of the authors. We shall review the growing recognition and dissemination

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of this writing in Africa, and its bearing on other areas where the author's adopted language is spoken (i.e. in French-, English-, Italian- and Arabic-speaking countries). We shall also consider the relations, or lack thereof, between the authors themselves. For instance, do authors originating from the same country but writing in different languages and now living in different countries know each other? Do they interact? Our initial thoughts on the subject focused on Italian literature (authors such as Uba Cristina Ali Farah and Gabriella Ghermandi), but we then decided to extend the scope of our analysis to include other writers and other languages. The book therefore contains essays on Dutch, American, French, Tigrinya and Amharic writers from the Horn of Africa.

Ranging across the Horn of Africa as a large geographical and cultural area, this collection considers the works of the writers of this diaspora as well as the political, human, cultural, literary and linguistic bonds between them and their places of abode. Even for the second generation of émigrés, the bond is very strong. The literature of the diaspora in some senses enlarges the geographical/cultural area. The writers form a sort of literary community whose cultural and literary affinities are stronger than their historical and ethnic backgrounds. As the collection unfolds, the sequence of discussions reflects on a number of features distinguishing contemporary writing: the hybridism between different languages, the links between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, the way literary language is used, the mixers of literary categories, and their interpretation of history. Moreover, the discussions which follow address the question of postcolonial studies not only in terms of the relationship between former colonizers and colonized, nor even in terms of a rereading of colonial history and culture; rather, it considers how the links between colonial and postcolonial elements in the Horn of Africa have generated new epistemologies from previously voiceless subjects.

The overriding idea is that we can observe a kind of "Interliterary Community" among Horn of Africa writers, precisely because the links between colonialism, postcolonialism and diaspora remains so close. In 1995, Dionýs Ďurišín proposed to substitute the concept of "National Literature" with the concept of "Interliterary Community", where the interliterary connections are more important than the na-

tional environments². This “Interliterary Community” is characterized by an internal and external dynamism arising from the different literatures that compose it and from its links with other literatures. Dionýs Ďurišin’s suggestions have opened up a discussion on the role of literature and culture in the process of national identity-building. The Horn of Africa thus provides a literary space in which we can discuss and re-define national identities. It affords us an opportunity to reflect on the connections between literature, the nation, and geo-political borders.

We can use different criteria to organize our understanding of this literature: generational (Gabiella Ghermandi and Maaza Mengiste are from different generations to, for example, Abdourahman Waberi or Abu Bakr Hamid Kahhal); geographic (are writers from Eritrea different from writers from Ethiopia? Do they still produce national works or have the literatures of the Horn of Africa become part of a pluralist identity?); or theoretical (these writers might be analysed in terms of postcolonial, African, English, French, Italian, or Dutch Studies). In addition, these different criteria are overlapping, indicative of the complexity of the narratives whose range covers matters of transnationalism, postcolonialism and globalism. The literatures of the Horn of Africa suggest a «vanishing present», to use Spivak’s words.³ Indeed, the literatures of the Horn of Africa make up a complex lens with which to consider the broader undertakings of contemporary literature itself. The writers discussed in this collection (authors writing and publishing in Arabian, Italian, French, English, Dutch, and in some of the original languages of the Horn of Africa, such as Amharic and Tigrinya) show us the trajectory of this diasporic literature, which is at once hybrid, national, transnational and local. Since the turn of the new millennium, migration studies with regard to the Horn of Africa have focused on the continuity between internal migrations, civil wars and colonialism as well as transoceanic and trans-Mediterranean migrations⁴. Furthermore, emigration and the colonization of the Horn

² D. ĎURIŠIN, *Theory of Literary Comparatistics*, Slovak Academy, Bratislava 1984.

³ G.C. SPIVAK, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999.

⁴ I.M. LEWIS, *A modern history of the Somali. Revised, updated and expanded*, Ohio University Press, Athens 2003; W. JAMES, E. KURIMOTO, D.L. DONHAM, A. TRIULZI, *Re-mapping Ethiopia. Socialism and after*, Ohio University Press, Athens 2002.

of Africa have recently been analyzed as interrelated phenomena.⁵ The implications of all of these lines of vision will be developed and, in some cases, interrogated.

The collection is divided into two sections. The first, *Cultural Issues: History, Nation-building, Italian Colonialism and Literatures of the Horn of Africa*, analyses some theoretical aspects (nation-building, the role of literature and cinema, the history of the Horn of Africa) and some general themes such as female genital excision or reflections on the diaspora. The second section, *The Languages of Literature: Dutch, Italian and English*, focuses on specific studies of different writers. The works of Nuruddin Farah, Uba Cristina Ali Farah, Carla Macoggi and others are analysed and discussed here. The whole collection begins with a historical introduction to the idea of the Horn of Africa and how it received its name.

The first chapter by Sara Marzagora, entitled “On either end of modernity: Ethiopian writers on history and social change at the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century”, considers the emergence in the last two decades of an Italoophone literature by Ethiopian writers. This literature has been explored by scholars for its contribution to contemporary Italian literature and the Italian public debate on postcolonialism and multiculturalism⁶, but less so by scholars of Africanist and African Studies. Marzagora examines the field from the point of view of Ethiopian studies and investigates the relationship between Amharic literature in Ethiopia and the literature of the Ethiopian diaspora in Italy. For example, Gabriella Ghermandi in her *Regina di Fiori e di Perle* is willing to challenge a recurrent trope in Amharic literature, the moral condemnation of women who had relationships with Italian soldiers at the time of the occupation, which is a recurrent theme in, for instance, Mekonnen Endelkachew’s works. Secondly, her description of the cultural alienation of foreign-educated Ethiopians shows strong similarities with, among others, some of Heruy Welde-Sellase’s novels on the same topic. Finally, the emphasis on the military as opposed to the cultural aspects of colonial exploitation is in line with the centrality of warfare in the Ethiopian historiograph-

⁵ K. FUKUI, *Ethnicity and conflict in the Horn of Africa*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1994.

⁶ C. LOMBARDI-DIOP, C. ROMEO, *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012; G. PARATI, *Migration Italy: the Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2005.

ical narrative. The chapter compares how Amharic-language novels and Italian-language novels by Ethiopian writers represent Ethiopian history, especially with regard to ethnicity, religion and class. It explores in detail how the Ethiopian “nation” is conceived of very differently way by Ethiopian-based and diasporic authors.

The title of the second chapter, “Somalia is a Caribbean Island. Reflections on Transnationalism and Failed-State Fiction in Somali and Haitian Postcolonial Literatures” refers to the title of a book written in Italian and published in 2010 by Somali author Mohamed Aden Sheikh, *La Somalia non è un’isola dei Caraibi (Somalia is not a Caribbean Island)*. Aden Sheikh wrote as a sort of postcolonial reply to the widespread Italian ignorance about its colonial past in the Somalia. The chapter title inverts Aden Sheikh’s phrase, however, because its goal is to highlight the transnational links between Somali and Haitian postcolonial literatures. By analyzing the works of Nuruddin Farah and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel (from Somalia), and Dany Laferrière and Marie Chauvet (from Haiti), the chapter describes a form of «failed-state fiction» common to both literary traditions⁷. In the place of neo-colonial discourses about postcolonial national failures, the chapter proposes a different theoretical framework based on of minor «transnationalisms», as described in the eponymous anthology of essays edited by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih.⁸

The last chapter of this first section, “Ethiopian cinema and the politics of migration: the work of Tewodros Teshome and Dagmawi Yimer” by Alessandro Jedlowsky, explores how Ethiopian cinema from 1960 to now has contributed to a re-thinking of the colonial past and the independence era. With reference to Tewodros Teshome and Dagmawi Yimer films, Jedlowsky shows how the brief, but very intense Italian colonization (1936-1941) changed the direction of Ethiopian history up to and including the present day. Contemporary Ethiopian films demonstrate how important the film industry was to forming the idea of “new” nation in the collective mind. Directors such as Tewodros Teshome produced films that dealt with the social and political changes in the country following its independence. Jedlowsky examines how cinema has been used for propaganda, anticolonialism and entertainment, considers the thematic concerns of diaspora direc-

⁷ J. MARX, *Failed-State fiction*, «Contemporary Literature», 49, 2008, pp. 597-633.

⁸ F. LIONNET, S. SHIH, *Minor Transnationalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 2005.

tors, and looks at the links between cinema and literature in these countries.

The second section opens with the discussions of Teresa Solis and Monica Jansen who analyze authors writing in Italian. In the chapter entitled “Writing as a way of healing: Carla Macoggi’s novels”, Teresa Solis considers the work of Carla Macoggi, an Ethiopian/Italian who writes about her “mestizo” identity. Monica Jansen, in the chapter “Relational and Translational Practices of Postcolonial Citizenship in Kaha Mohamed Aden’s *Fra-intendimenti*”, looks at labor insecurity, emigration and how these are reflected in the short stories of Italian/Somali writer Kaha Mohamed Aden. The following discussions concentrate upon Somali and Ethiopian diaspora writers. Emma Bond focuses on one of the most famous Ethiopian-born writers, Dinaw Mengestu, who in 2010 published his first novel *How to Read the Air*. Bond also considers Claude McKay, a Jamaican writer, one of the seminal figures in the Harlem Renaissance. In the last chapter, in order to show other examples of transnationalism, Linde Luijnenburg introduces us to Dutch-Somali, Dutch-Eritrean and Dutch-Ethiopian writers (Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Yasmine Allas, Sayadin Hersi and Zeinab Jumale) and describes the substantial Somali, Eritrean and Ethiopian communities in the Netherlands, while looking also at the civil war, exile and human rights. This is one of the first overviews of these writers who are otherwise divided by generation, styles, and themes.