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Rethinking Diaspora through Borders: Contemporary Somali Literature in English and Italian

IN HER AUTOBIOGRAPHY *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010; *My Home Is Where I Am*), Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego describes an exercise of imaginative mapmaking she performs during a family gathering at her house in Rome. Following her mother's suggestion, Scego draws a map of Mogadishu, the city her parents fled in 1969 at the beginning of a two-decade-long dictatorship, and starts sticking on it Post-it notes with names of places in Rome, the city in which she was born: "Scrissi nomi di quartieri, piazze, monumenti: stadio Olimpico, Trastevere, stazione Termini, e così via. Appiccicai tutto intorno alla mia Mogadiscio di carta. Poi, io che non so disegnare, tentai di disegnare i miei ricordi. Lavorai per ore. Tracciai linee, sagome, ombre. Ritagliai giornali. Feci scritte" (36; I wrote names of neighborhoods, piazzas, monuments: Stadio Olimpico, Trastevere, Stazione Termini, and so on. I glued everything around my paper-made Mogadishu. Then, although I can't draw well, I tried to draw my memories. I traced lines, shapes, profiles. I cut newspapers. I wrote sentences).[1] As the two cities get juxtaposed, Scego's gesture counters the repression of the historical presence of Rome in Mogadishu and of Italian language and culture in Italy's former colony. By making Italy's colonial occupation of Somalia traceable on the material surface of her map, Scego interlocks two geographies and their shared histories, so as to question assumptions about feeling at home in them. Remapping these two affective and material spaces means estranging the reader from Rome and—metonymically—from the geography and history of the nation, as well as from their symbolic fabrication. Scego thus reconfigures the cultural and material geographies of the Somali diaspora as spatial and historical records resurfacing in the urban palimpsest of Rome. In drawing attention to the boundaries that fictitiously separate Somalia from Italy and Rome

[1] Unless otherwise noted, translations from Italian are mine.

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from Mogadishu, this cartographic exercise perfectly encapsulates the main problematics that structure my discussion: first, the centrality of practices of border production and contestation in the works of authors of the Somali diaspora; and second, the multifaceted nature of the borders along which Somali diasporic writers negotiate complex aesthetic strategies, traumatic political histories, and deep affective investments.

As instruments of spatial regulation, borders structure the social and political configuration of the places we traverse every day and determine if and how different subjects can move across them. Modern political communities have relied on the creation of borders to construct what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari defined "striated space," in which mobility is policed by devising "fixed paths in well-defined directions, which restrict speed, regulate circulation, relativize movement" (386). These processes, which used to define the spatial coordinates of the nation-state, have in the last decades progressively adapted to transnational migrations without losing their regulatory force. Most important, the unrelenting integration of the world economy into a capitalist system has not led to the triumph of the nomadic subjectivities that the two French philosophers had hailed as agents of border disruption. On the contrary, we are witnessing today an unprecedented "proliferation of borders" (Mezzadra and Neilson 1)—flexible tools that not only have become necessary to the management of economic flows of increased magnitude but also are constantly mobilized to define political communities, distinguish citizens from aliens, and delimit civil rights.

Drawing new borders is an activity that, when understood in its most immediate, that is, in its territorial sense, has traditionally been the prerogative of cartography. In turn, modern cartography has relied on literature to validate its structuring of space. During the nationalization of European vernaculars, because the territorial boundaries of the nation-state were thought to encompass national languages, literature became the central imaginative scaffolding for the demarcation of the political space of the nation. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued, the normative process of bordering that began with the rise of European nationalisms strengthened the disciplinary ties between literature and cartography (520). As a consequence, writers and intellectuals started to address with more urgency the multiplication of boundaries of and among cultures, whether to buttress or contest them. Progressively, literature has developed a preoccupation with borders—what we might define as a border consciousness—that the current rise of new forms of nationalism has made even more pronounced. Particularly in diasporic literatures, narrativity and cartography have proven to be inseparable. Karen E. Bishop has noticed that there is "a constitutive relationship between exile and mapping"—what she calls "the cartographical necessity of exile" (1). Bishop's ideas strikingly resonate with Appiah's assertion that, today, "the condition of so much contemporary fiction and poetry, accordingly, involves a kind of cartographic crisis, an emergency in the map room" (520). To delineate this crisis, locate it historically, and analyze how contemporary literature has engaged with it, this article turns to the literature of the Somali global diaspora, which has placed borders at its political, imaginative, and symbolic core.

The coupling of the two adjectives *Somali* and *diasporic* already highlights the contradictions of bordering as a definitional practice. Whereas *Somali* refers to a locatable territory with presumably homogeneous linguistic and cultural features,

that is, to an entity that could be intuitively circumscribable, *diasporic* involves a movement of dispersion and evokes a global dimension that is more problematic to delimit. The tensions inherent to the juxtaposition of these two antithetical designations are of course common to any literature of diaspora, but they become particularly glaring in the Somali case. This is because the postindependence history of Somalia, up to the present, is a testament to the vulnerability of the postcolonial nation-state (see Lewis): given Somalia's political and territorial instability, the assumed coincidence between a geographical domain and its cultural and literary expressions is particularly tenuous. Therefore, when I speak of *Somali diasporic literature*, it is crucial to consider the contradictory pulls that characterize any attempt to delimit its purview. If, on the one hand, the question of Somaliness involves the definition and articulation of a minimally coherent identity through cultural and linguistic attachments (due to the absence of a stable political entity), on the other hand, diaspora points to the imperative of framing that identity in a transnational perspective. In this sense, transnationality problematizes the presumed cultural homogeneity of Somaliness and highlights the cross-cultural overlappings with the locations in which this literature has been produced and received during and after its diasporic dispersal.

Drawing from a crucial point made by Brent H. Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora*, I approach Somali diasporic literature at the intersection of an abstractionist aspiration to unity and a concrete, differential understanding of diasporic experience. To analyze the multiple and often competing practices of black internationalism, Edwards introduces, via Stuart Hall, the concept of "articulation" (11), which allows him to stress both the "functional unity" (11) of diaspora and its divergent actualizations, which depend on variable contextual determinants, such as cultural positioning, class, and gender. In my analysis of literature written by Somali authors I focus specifically on two of those articulations, removed from each other in both time and space yet unified by structural and narrative continuities deriving from a shared attempt to narrativize the diasporic experience through an engagement with practices of border production. To the first articulation belong the works of Anglophone writer Nuruddin Farah, particularly the Blood in the Sun trilogy, of which I analyze the first book, *Maps* (1986). The second articulation consists of a series of texts (novels, autobiographies, and short stories) published between 1994 and 2015 and written in Italian by authors born in Somalia or of Somali origins: Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego.[2]

To understand how these two articulations of Somali diasporic literature participate in the contemporary literary system we might resort to a metaphor that Alexander Beecroft has used to characterize the interactions of cultural, aesthetic, and sociopolitical factors in the constitution of world literature—a system that, he argues, functions like an ecology. In a book tellingly titled *An Ecology of World Literature*, Beecroft argues that only by considering texts as part of larger environments can we account for the impact of multiple factors that determine where and how

[2] In terms of genre and form, the literary production of Somali diasporic writers is heterogeneous, ranging from prose to poetry and from fiction to nonfiction. Most of their fictional texts have strong biographical elements and are significantly influenced by Somali orature. In this sense, their reflection on borders is also formal, as it involves the rejection of strict generic boundaries and the reformulation of canonical categories of literary expression.

literature is produced, its circulation, and its symbolic underpinnings. Dissatisfied with previous theorization of world literature that relied on economic metaphors and vocabulary, Beecroft introduces the ecological lens because, he believes, "ecology is more comfortable accepting that the complexity may be inherent to the system" and better suited to describe the "interactive nature" (18) of external inputs. Beecroft is certainly right in insisting that the combined impact of disparate forces—political pressures, sociocultural circumstances, aesthetic strategies—has been regrettably underestimated in recent literary scholarship on world literature. At the same time, understanding contemporary world literature as a system does not necessarily flatten its complexity. Therefore, in my analysis of Somali diasporic authors, I refer to the collectivity of their works as a literature within a world literary system while using Beecroft's theorization as a cautionary warning against privileging one determinant (whether literary, political, or historical) over the others.[3] Acknowledging the interactive nature of diverse forces on literary expression is particularly important in the Somali case, since the political instability of the nation, the recurrent flows of migration to other countries, and the composite dynamics of affiliation among its writers have helped produce a literature heavily shaped by geopolitical determinants and historical conditionings.

Somali diasporic literature is thus particularly suited for an analysis that considers multiple exogenous forces defining the structural limits of literary expression and for determining, to use Pierre Bourdieu's vocabulary, the "objective potentialities" (235) and "space of possibles" (234) available to writers at specific historical moments. This space of possibles depends on constraints internal to the literary field but also—most remarkably in the Somali case—on historical or political pressures that transcend the specific rules of the literary game and that respond to cultural dynamics, political pressures, and colonial histories. Consider Farah's decision to adopt English as his main language of literary expression. After a period of bilingual writing, he stopped using Somali in 1973. On the one hand, this choice—rather common among writers that opt for a dominant language over a marginal one—was dictated by conditions specific to the world literary system, in which visibility and symbolic capital depend heavily on the language chosen for aesthetic expression. On the other hand, it is equally necessary to consider nonliterary factors: first, the fact that the publication of his Somali novel *Tallow Waa Talee Maa*, which began to appear in serialized form in a government newspaper in 1973, was discontinued because of political censorship in the same year (see Farah, "Why I Write" 1596); second, the sociolinguistic conditions in which he developed as an artist, which led to his fascination for the written word at the expenses of an oral tradition that, as Farah has declared, "was everywhere around me" ("Celebrating Differences" 710); and finally, the very history of the Somali language, which was alphabetically codified only in 1972 and could not provide Farah with literary models for fiction writing. A similar system of interconnected determinants has

[3] In the case of Somali diasporic literature this would mean, for instance, considering Somalia a "failed state" (political condition) whose lack of literary and cultural institutions has prevented the formation of a national literature, in the modern/hegemonic/European sense—a claim that completely neglects Somalia's millennial tradition of oral poetry (literary-historical condition).

informed the adoption of Italian for literary expression by Somali-Italian writers: the fact that they were educated and/or socialized in Italian, the symbolic prestige of the colonial language and their own social position as children of the native intelligentsia, the politically motivated intention of being recognized as active cultural participants in Italy, and, once again, the status of Somali not only as a language of orality but also as one in which aesthetic prestige and literariness are prerogatives of poetry.[4]

To all these interlocked forces that have shaped the literary choices of Somali diasporic writers, their own biographical trajectories as exiles and migrants must be added. Nuruddin Farah was born in Somalia in 1945, obtained a bachelor's degree in India, returned to Mogadishu, and lived there until 1974, when the dictator Siad Barre declared him persona non grata. He has lived in exile since. His novels have been widely translated, he was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1998, and he has received ample critical attention by postcolonial scholars.[5] Because his first novels were published by Heinemann in the African Writers Series, the imprint through which African authors entered the world literary stage in the 1960s and 1970s, Farah has enjoyed both global visibility and symbolic recognition. He embodies an exilic condition that, as Edward W. Said repeatedly clarified, involves the heightened lucidity and intellectual curiosity of the writer forced to reflect on his or her displacement, and yet, it is first and foremost a "condition of terminal loss" (137), a "truly horrendous" (138) experience of material and affective estrangement from one's perceived home. These antinomies emerge in Farah's inflexible commitment to writing about Somalia: in spite of, or perhaps because of, his physical removal from the place he famously defined "a country of my imagination" ("Country in Exile" 713), Somalia has never ceased to be his main affective and narrative horizon.

The ethical responsibility of keeping Somalia imaginatively alive expressed by Farah becomes, in the writings of Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego, a catalyst for reconsidering Somali identity and its national history in relation to Italy's colonial past, linguistic space, and cultural politics. Differently from Farah, who is a widely known male author writing in a hegemonic language, Fazel, Ali Farah, and Scego are migrant women who have experienced intertwined forms of exclusion based on race, gender, and cultural belonging.[6] Shirin Ramzanali Fazel was born in Mogadishu in 1953, fled Somalia in 1971, and moved to Italy. Having resided in several countries, she now lives in England. Cristina Ubah Ali Farah was born in Italy to a Somali father and an Italian mother in 1973 and moved to Mogadishu in 1976, where she lived until the outbreak of the civil war in 1991. She then returned to Italy and lived there until 2013, when she

[4] This is how Ali Farah explains her choice of Italian: "Not only is Italian my mother tongue (or the tongue of my mother), but also the language of my formal education. Somali was formally codified less than fifty years ago, and its most prestigious literary form is poetry, not prose" (Jacobson).

[5] Derek Wright, one of the major critics of Farah's work, edited *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah* (2002), a voluminous anthology that collects several essays testifying to increasing critical attention to Farah among postcolonial scholars, particularly after the 1998 Neustadt Prize.

[6] For a thorough discussion of the relevance of race and gender in the works of Somali-Italian women writers, see Contarini, "Letteratura migrante femminile" and "Narrazioni, migrazioni e genere."

moved to Belgium. Igiaba Scego was born in Italy to Somali parents who had also escaped Barre's political persecution and, unlike all the other writers, has resided in Italy all her life.

Because Somalia was an Italian colony, Fazel and Ali Farah attended Italian schools in Mogadishu, while Scego was raised in a bicultural environment in Rome. For all of them, Somali identity is conceptually and affectively foundational, but it is also coupled with an equally strong sense of belonging to the social and cultural domain represented by their second mother tongue. Understanding this ambivalence is crucial for assessing their position in the Italian literary field: if, on the one hand, Somali-Italian writers are still struggling to reach a wider reading public and to be recognized as an integral part of contemporary Italian literature, on the other hand, their perceived or imposed outsidedness has been leveraged to obtain symbolic recognition and has contributed to validating their presence in Italy's literary field. Furthermore, it is important to stress that all these authors, just like Nuruddin Farah, belong to an educated group of migrants who possess the cultural means to give form, aesthetically, to the trauma of uprootedness. As Farah himself has remarked, "a writer is not a refugee" (*Yesterday, Tomorrow* 50) because a writer still possesses "the privilege to create another country out of his or her sense of displacement" (49), and, it should be added, to receive cultural and symbolic recognition for having done so. Somali diasporic writers thus thematize an existential condition that Piera Carroli and Vivian Gerrand have called "nomadic subjectivity" (100) so as to transform it into acts of literary and political citizenship. At the same time, however, they cannot fail to grapple with their often problematic position as spokespersons, or with the symbolic gains that such position has afforded them.[7]

The central premise of this article is therefore that the entanglements of literary-specific strategies and extrinsic conditions, both responding to national dynamics and global pressures, determine the heterogeneity of Somali diasporic literature, where diaspora remains the central invariable, the definitional axis around which these authors negotiate their investment in—and the boundaries of—different social, political, and affective frameworks. It is in this sense that distinct articulations of Somali experience, in being linked by the same attempt to aesthetically rethink diasporic experience, can be seen as instantiations of what Edwards calls "difference within unity" (11). At the same time, I suggest that such unity does not depend solely on a biographical or imaginative association to diaspora; it is also determined by a fundamental preoccupation—both thematic and formal—with practices of border production. Because the notion of diaspora itself is premised on the delimitation, whether territorial or cultural, of a domain from which one has been forcibly removed, Somali authors give form to their diasporic condition by exploring the notion of border in all its semantic and epistemological modulations.

[7] In my analysis, I do not approach Somali-Italian writers through Carroli and Gerrand's lens of "nomadic subjectivity" because, first, although they discuss a form of grounded nomadism based on the theories of Rosi Braidotti, I find the notion of nomadism still connoted with an abstract sense of uprootedness that has more to do with a cosmopolitan aesthetic than with the concrete experience of migration; and second, the "nomadic" approach privileges synchrony and neglects sociological questions, whereas my aim is to focus on diachrony, historical determinants, and pressures coming from the configuration of the literary field.

Farah's *Maps* investigates the formation of personal and political identities in Somalia during a time of geopolitical turbulence and connects this territorial instability to the social unrest internal to the nation, as well as to the psychic collapse of its subjects. Fazel's engagement with the condition of *meticciato* (mixed racial identity)—first tolerated (if not encouraged) and then legally repressed during Italy's colonial occupation of East Africa—addresses the interrelated productivity of legal, cultural, and ontological boundaries during long historical cycles. Finally, Scego and Ali Farah challenge the material and imaginative separation between Somalia and Italy by remapping the intersecting geographies and histories of Rome and Mogadishu.

In all these texts, borders are shown to be crucial in the constitution of political subjectivities and for regulating the interactions of social constituents. To use Étienne Balibar's apt phrasing, they fulfill a "world-configuring" (79) function by actively determining the limits of agency and the possibility of movement of different classes of subjects. The works of Farah and of Somali-Italian authors thus suggest that borders, rather than being simply geographic or territorial artifices, are first and foremost "epistemological device[s]" (Mezzadra and Neilson 16) that shape the configuration of social spaces while simultaneously establishing mental and cognitive hierarchies, which are in turn used to reinforce material inequalities. Somali diasporic literature can thus be defined as a literature of the border, in which the combination of historical conditionings, political pressures, and aesthetic strategies generate highly complex literary artifacts that, in addressing the contemporary relevance of border epistemologies, ought to be more visible in contemporary accounts of world literature.

Self, Nation, and Form in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*

Farah's engagement with practices of border production for the imagination of the self within a political collectivity is the narrative and conceptual foundation of the Blood in the Sun trilogy, comprising *Maps* (1986), *Gifts* (1992), and *Secrets* (1998). Particularly in *Maps*, the reflection on identity and borders—or identity *as* borders—is so prominent that it encompasses and blurs multiple fields of meaning production, generating what Derek Wright has defined "a puzzling indeterminacy" ("Mapping" 100), through which the novel purposefully confuses the literal and the metaphorical, the physiological and the spatial, the personal and the national. *Maps* retrospectively chronicles the story of Askar, a young Somali intellectual torn between his deep affective attachment to his Oromo-Ethiopian (and Somali-speaking) foster mother, Misra, and his political dream of an ethnically homogeneous Somali nation from which she would be excluded. Set during Somalia's reconquest of the Ethiopia-controlled Ogaden region in 1977, *Maps* entwines the cartographic and political stakes of this failed attempt to reconstitute Greater Somalia with the personal and corporeal bonds between Askar and Misra.[8] In the first half of the novel their physical intimacy is of such intensity that images of symbiosis, if not fusion, abound, as when Askar, tucked into "the oozy warmth between

[8] Simon Gikandi has argued that, in line with postcolonial fiction of disillusionment, the central triad that structures the novel—without leading to a compensatory solution—is "nation, body, and text" (457).

[Misra's] breasts" or between her opened legs, feels as if he was her "third breast" or "third leg" (24). Progressively, Askar distances himself from Misra: he enters adulthood through the circumcision ritual, is sent from Kallafo in Ogaden to Mogadishu to escape the imminent war, and finds in the motherland a substitute for his foster mother. Askar's journey is an intellectual maturation toward the nationalist dream of a united Somalia, which in turn involves the metaphorical murder of Misra, as well as the possibility of his complicity in her actual assassination (of which the reader is informed toward the end of the novel) after her alleged betrayal of the Somali National Front.

Within Farah's extensive oeuvre, *Maps* is certainly the novel that has received the most significant critical attention. Scholars have focused on its allegorical structure, whether to unveil it or to contest it (see Wright "Parenting"; Hitchcock 90–139); on the connections among nation, gender, and traumatic testimony (see Cobham; Brown); and on its critique of postcolonial ethnocentrism in favor of a third space of political empowerment (see Kazan). Building on some of these studies, I want to shift the focus to the literary and political problematic of bordering—a question that most critics discuss but fail to identify as the structuring core of the novel. In this sense, my main contention is that Farah articulates two different practices of border production so as to register their respective failures: in the first case, by way of Askar's psychic-formal collapse; in the second, by diegetically foreclosing a political option that had been historically suppressed. I thus read *Maps* not only as a formally complex exploration of identity, as it has been often interpreted, but also as a foundational text that continues to shape Somali diasporic literature in its engagement with border epistemologies.

Throughout the novel, Askar's main preoccupation is to locate himself in a stable ontology—in a dream that precedes his political awakening, he asks himself, "Who am I?" (45)—through the delimitation of a national geography: defining who he is thus becomes inseparable from answering the question he candidly asks Misra when the two are living in the peripheral region of Ogaden: "Misra, where precisely is Somalia?" (116). As news that the Somali forces have launched Ogaden's invasion, Askar's identification with the newly discovered motherland translates into the material gesture of redrawing the map of Somalia: "And so, with his felt pen, using his own body, he redrew the map of the Somali-speaking territories, copied curve by curve, depression by depression" (101–2). Farah's insistence on the bodily dimension of this scene, in which territory and being merge into each other, makes explicit what Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson define as "the ontological moment of production connected with tracing borders" (35). In devising a world that coincides with his national and linguistic affiliations, Askar is simultaneously producing a political self and naturalizing the cartographic fabrication of the nation-state.

This gesture finds its explanation in Askar's conversations with his uncle Hilaal, who provides him with the political and cultural rationale for the invasion of Ogaden. Because during the scramble for Africa the Somali-speaking area of Western Africa was divided and occupied by the British, the Italians, and the French—and the Ogaden was later assigned to another imperial power, Ethiopia—the Somali nationalist cause embraced by Hilaal might be interpreted as an anticolonial struggle, and Askar's cartographic redrawing as the cultivation of a Fanonian national

consciousness. The problem is that the truth produced by Askar's map, just like the truth of the colonial mapmakers, is a cartographic inscription of his ideological dispositions, which does not correspond to the social and linguistic reality being mapped.[9] *Maps* thus gives form to the nationalist dream of reconstituting Greater Somalia, only to show that its cartographic invention is premised on the erasure of the material conditions of the Ogaden region, whose cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity throws into sharp relief the erasures on which Askar's ideological war is premised.[10]

The collapse of Askar's certainties is formally rendered through the alternation of first-, second-, and third-person narration in each chapter of the novel. In so doing, Farah transforms Askar from an agent of border production to a fragmented subject, striving but unable to constitute the national self he theorizes. This is a consequence the "psycho-political schizophrenia" that makes him "never quite able to live with the indeterminacies of his situation" (Masterson 152). In other words, the cartographic, corporeal, and political borders that Askar tries to erect throughout the novel, rather than fostering his psychic and narrative stability, end up triggering his own collapse. But Askar's inability to locate himself within stable geographies of meaning is as narrative and formal as it is a consequence of specific historical and sociopolitical conditions. His breakdown depends, from a historical perspective, on the complicity of the colonized bourgeoisie with dictatorial leaders, a risk Frantz Fanon has vigorously warned against (113–15). In a novel in which Siad Barre is never explicitly mentioned, it is the bourgeois intellectual Hilaal who voices the political project, championed by Barre's regime, of reunifying Greater Somalia. Askar's psychic instability is further heightened by a kind of geopolitical schizophrenia peculiar to Somalia's history. When Barre launched an offensive in Ethiopia-occupied Ogaden, the Soviet Union, which had economically supported Barre's regime up to that point, decided to switch sides and to provide military aid to Ethiopia. In a typical Cold War domino effect, Barre sought support from Western powers, to no avail. By alluding to these events throughout the novel, Farah correlates Askar's border anxiety to the geopolitical and territorial rearrangements affecting the Horn of Africa as a consequence of Cold War disputes. At the same time, it is not coincidental that the novel is set in Kallafo, the Ogadenese town where Farah himself grew up. As he has repeatedly declared, being a Somali-speaking subject in a region materially and culturally colonized by several imperial powers (Arabs, British, Italians, Amharic-Ethiopians) meant perceiving himself "as the unnamed, the divided *other*, a schizophrenic child living in the age of colonial contradiction" ("Childhood" 1264).

Just as this first practice of border production is framed at the intersection of historical, geopolitical, and biographical determinants, *Maps* articulates a second option, associated with Misra, as a potential alternative that gets diegetically

[9] Despite Hilaal's insistence on the Somali cultural and linguistic homogeneity, as Wright acutely points out, "there are actually a few 'pure' Somalis in the novel and those who exist are surrounded by people of Oromo, Qotto, Boran, Adenese, Arab and Ethiopian extraction" ("Parenting" 180).

[10] Ethiopia's claims over Ogaden are no less problematic, as most of the Somali-speaking community perceives Ethiopian rule as imperial domination. The region was formally annexed to the Ethiopian Empire in the late nineteenth century and later colonized by the Italians and the British, who returned it to Ethiopia at the end of World War II (see Lewis 56–62, 130–31).

foreclosed. Misra's trajectory stands as a synecdoche for what this novel, as well as Somalia's and Ethiopia's respective nationalisms, must eradicate from their imaginative and political purview. The offspring of a marriage between an Oromo servant and an Amharic nobleman who abandons them after she is born, Misra grows up speaking Amharic, learns Somali, and—at the time she is raising Askar—frequents two men, the Ogadenese Somali Uncle Qorrax and Aw-Adan, a Qotto teacher of Arabic. As Derek Wright points out, Misra "has access to and concourse with all of the fertile neighboring microcultures and tribal nationalisms by which the Ogaden is hedged around and diversified, in spite of its narrowly ethnocentric efforts to resist them" ("Parenting" 180). As a member of the Oromo minority, oppressed alternatively by Ethiopians and by Somalis, she is forced to assume, as Hilaal acknowledges, "Somali or Amhari identity," despite the fact that, for instance, "Oromo form over sixty per cent of Ethiopia's population" (*Maps* 170). At the same time, she cannot be included in Askar's nationalistic fantasy because she is also partially Amharic. As her corporeal connection to Askar is severed, she is progressively exiled from the diegetic space, and we are informed of what happens to her during the war mostly through hearsay. Falsely accused of having betrayed a group of Somali fighters, she is gang raped and subsequently flees Kallafo for Mogadishu, where she is hospitalized and undergoes a mastectomy. At the end of the novel, her body is found on the shores of Mogadishu, her heart having been removed before the murder. Indeed, the excision of Misra from the narrative space of the novel and from Askar's ideological project could not have been more literal. In *Maps*' scheme of symbolic correspondences, Askar's psychic reaction to historicopolitical uncertainty finds its counterpart in the way Farah literally maps on Misra's body the mutilations engendered by ethnicist fantasies, which progressively deprive her of her breast, her heart, and finally her life.

Most of the critical appraisals of *Maps* concur that Misra represents a narrative and ideological space that Askar, Somalia, and the novel itself cannot comprehend. For Peter Hitchcock, she is "exorbitant" (101); Michelle L. Brown claims that she defies the norms of "gendered nationalism" (126); Wright sees her as a "floating signifier, zoned into many stereotyped figures" ("Nations" 202); Francesca Kazan argues that she belongs to the "'third world' of the nurturing body" (260). All these characterizations of Misra are reasonable. However, they do not satisfactorily address the very premise of her incommensurability, that is, the fact that she is continuously produced and redefined by processes of bordering. Misra is both figuratively and materially a space to appropriate through the inscription of boundaries, in forms of territorial claims over the Ogaden or through ethnic purifications of her identity.

"I am a border woman," famously wrote Gloria Anzaldúa in her preface to *Borderlands*. "It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions," she continued. "No, not comfortable, but home" (19). The Ogaden, similarly to the area between Northern Mexico and Texas where Anzaldúa grew up, is portrayed in the novel as a borderland, a contested space alternatively defined and subdued by colonial, nationalistic, and imperialist claims. And Misra, just like Anzaldúa (and unlike Askar), is the only character capable of negotiating the contradictions inherent to her condition, which the Somali nation-state cannot accommodate.

Misra represents a possible community that the nation-state has been historically unwilling to recognize. Her eradication registers not only the specificities of the Somali diaspora to which Farah belongs but also, more broadly, the ideological premises of a particular (and destructive) kind of nationalistic imagination. Rather than aprioristically condemning the nation qua fiction—as Wright suggests in his reading of this novel ("Nations")—Farah suggests that it is the state itself that should guarantee legal existence to a diverse spectrum of subjects, as well as fostering inclusive modes of citizenship. Consider how Askar reacts when he receives from Hilaal his new Somali "*carta d'identità* (identification card)": "From the way he gave it to me, you would believe he was entrusting to me a brand-new 'life.' Here you are, he seemed to say, with another life all your own, one that you must take good care of, since it is of paper, produced by the hand of man, according to the law of man" (*Maps* 171). This legal rebirth is precisely what Misra is being negated because of her ethnically and linguistically marginalized status. In stressing Misra's exile outside the legal boundaries of political existence, Farah thus makes another crucial distinction. As several scholars of border studies have repeatedly stressed, practices of border disruption are not intrinsically virtuous or necessarily conducive to greater equality.[11] In turn, often social visibility depends on legal processes of inclusion and recognition of juridical status. As a corrective to well-intentioned but myopic arguments for borderlessness, Farah is drawing attention to a finer distinction between, on the one hand, practices of border production aimed at establishing monocultural hegemony and, on the other, composite projects that involve the contestation of ethnic or linguistic boundaries, as well as the creation of a legal framework that would guarantee social inclusion and redress socioeconomic unevenness. In giving literary form to these two divergent possibilities, *Maps* locates them within a system of forces that ultimately determine their outcomes: the first option is correlated to geopolitical schizophrenia and psychic collapse, while the second gets delineated and gradually neutralized in the diegetic space as a way of registering its historical foreclosure.

Maps thus encourages us to reflect on the pervasiveness of bordering processes for the construction of the Somali postcolony. It does so from a position of outsidedness, a biographical and ontological condition that constitutes another crucial determinant affecting Farah's thematic and formal choices. In this sense, Kazan aptly notes that "to be a Somali outside Somalia, writing prose rather than poetry, and in English rather than Somali, is to be triply outside" (256). Farah embodies a diasporic consciousness developed simultaneously along form, language of expression, and geocultural positioning. It is at the intersection of these axes that his novels give form, in Edward W. Said's terms, to a contrapuntal imagination derived from "a plurality of vision" (148). But although Farah's exilic consciousness offers a vantage point from which to observe Somalia's modern history and literary imagination, it would be simplistic to posit a radical outsidedness and neglect how literary postcoloniality and diasporic expressivity have been incorporated into a global literary system that thrives precisely on transnational inclusivity. It is within this system that Farah has acquired the symbolic authority that allows him to aspire to

[11] On the contrary, border disruption can facilitate the flows of global capital and buttress economic hierarchies. For a useful recapitulation of this argument in relation to African contemporary fiction, see Crowley (9–19).

reconstruct the unity of the Somali diaspora, as he has done both through fiction writing and in his nonfictional memoir *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, where he has collected the testimonies "of a nation of narratives held to ransom" (viii). In other words, this imaginative work is possible because one of the decisive features that transforms the dispersal of a population into a collectively recognized diaspora is the presence "of an elite group of cultural and political brokers," whose works "give the homeland ultimate salience within diasporic consciousness" (Quayson and Daswani 3). Within the literary networks of the Somali diaspora, Farah's brokerage and symbolic recognition have become a model for Somali-Italian writers, who have been negotiating their position within the Italian literary field and their contribution to Italy's culture according to similar dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, imposed or claimed outsidedness, and ambivalent incorporation.

The Somali-Italian Articulation: Between Inclusivity and Alterity

Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego give form to a Somali diasporic consciousness that varies according to their diverse biographical trajectories, linguistic education, and expressive intentions but that shares an ambition to unity and a strong sense of intradiasporic connection. Because they have been struggling to emerge from the margins of the literary field, Farah's recognition as a cultural broker and a representative of Somaliness in the world has been a strategic opportunity for them to gain artistic legitimation and visibility. Scego quotes Farah's *Yesterday, Tomorrow* in her epigraph to *La mia casa è dove sono*, thus aligning her work to Farah's imaginative reconstruction of a homeland ravaged by decades of civil strife. Ali Farah, too, has used a passage of *Yesterday, Tomorrow* as one of three epigraphs of *Madre Piccola* (*Little Mother*; 2007); moreover, when asked about her literary models, she has declared: "I still remember when I first listened to Nuruddin Farah at a conference in Rome. At the time I was still a student and I didn't know anything about postcolonial writers, let alone Somali writers. So I started devouring his novels, I read them all" (Hassan 3). This comment is particularly significant in that it captures the symbolic relevance of Farah's works for the articulation of the Somali diasporic experience, as well as the transnational networks that his literary and institutional activities have fostered. (Farah has held academic positions in Africa, Europe, and the United States and has traveled extensively for conferences and book presentations.)

Overt references to Farah's works and declarations of literary indebtedness thus testify to the transnational dimension of the Somali diaspora and to the pivotal roles played by mediating literary authorities. At the same time, Somali-Italian writers have deployed strategies that are specifically tailored to seeking recognition in the Italian literary field. The most widely practiced is the explicit engagement with writers that any Italian reader would unmistakably perceive as part of the national canon. Fazel, in *Lontano da Mogadiscio/Far from Mogadishu* (1994), stresses her familiarity, acquired during her colonial education, with symbolic figures of Italy's national-political unity—Garibaldi and Mazzini—and with Italian classics: Pascoli, Dante, Pirandello, Pavese (42, 57, 58). Scego, in her latest novel, *Adua* (2015), models her style on an established tradition of literary expressionism, inaugurated by Dante's *Divina Commedia*; the highest authority in Italian letters is also explicitly

evoked through a direct quotation from the *Inferno* (27). Finally, in Ali Farah's *Madre Piccola*, the last chapter is written in the form of a letter the protagonist sends to her psychoanalyst—the device around which Italo Svevo, the most renowned Italian modernist, had constructed *La coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno's Conscience*; 1923).

These strategies have wider implications for the fraught dynamics of reception of Somali diasporic literature in the Italian literary field, where it is usually analyzed as part of a highly contested body of writing that has been variously termed by critics as *letteratura della migrazione*, *italofona*, *minore*, *postcoloniale*, and *afroitaliana* (literature of migration, Italophone, minor, postcolonial, and Afro-Italian). The emergence of this literature at the beginning of the 1990s—when Italy transitioned from being a country of emigration to a destination for migrants and experienced massive transformations of its social fabric—has triggered a heated debate about the status of contemporary Italian literature and the unstated criteria of admission into its canon.[12] As disagreements about the most pertinent definition for these writings already suggest, the central critical predicament involves the delimitation of an epistemological space of expression for authors that thematize migration and diaspora from a position of multiple belongings. It is, in other words, a question of borders. But it is also, crucially, a question premised on a fundamental ambivalence, for the creation of definitional and expressive boundaries oscillates between two opposing tensions: strategic convenience and reproduction of marginality.

On the one hand, by delimiting *letteratura della migrazione*, critics have reinforced its exclusion from the domain of literary fiction; this has led to a regrettable disinterest in its formal properties in favor of its supposedly ethnographic or anthropological value. Following a logic of exoticist curiosity through which postcolonial fiction is often marketed and read in the West, the literary production of Somali-Italian writers has been often used to promote a kind of neoliberal multiculturalism that carefully ignores, first, the racial hierarchies and power imbalances that structure the relations between self-proclaimed native and migrant communities, and second, intersecting inequalities along lines of class and gender.[13] When not excluded from serious analysis because of a presumed lack of aesthetic refinement, these writings have been, in Giuliana Benvenuti's words, "repressively tolerated," that is to say, subjected to an inclusion that is really "a mere ploy for a kind of 'hospitality' that reinforces—like a self-serving mirror—[Italy's] colonial image" (70). This has led to dubious editorial choices: Fazel's *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, when it was first published in 1994, was prefaced by an introduction written by an Italian journalist whose main intent was to applaud Italy's patronizing hospitality.[14] Similarly,

[12] For major critical studies of *letteratura della migrazione*, see Quaquarelli; Pezzarossa and Rossini; Contarini, Pias, and Quaquarelli; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo; Morace; Mengozzi; and Domenichelli and Morace.

[13] This is what Graham Huggan calls the "anthropological exotic," a concept that "invokes the familiar aura of other, incommensurably 'foreign' cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the 'foreign culture' itself" (37). Rhiannon Noel Welch, in her analysis of Fazel's *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, further notices that this text partially contributes to the reproduction of a "rhetoric of hospitality" (216) in the name of neoliberal tolerance.

[14] Prefaces by Italian journalists and writers, as well as coauthorships, were widely employed in the first phase of this literature's emergence. In 2013, *Lontano da Mogadiscio* was republished in a bilingual electronic edition.

Scego had to abide by her editor's decision to include, at the end of her first novel, *Rhoda*, a list of Somali recipes, which, she has claimed, "devalued the novel and had nothing to do with the story I had written" (Brioni, "Intervista").

Although these practices have contributed to the marginalization of Italian-Somali writers, claiming a literary and cultural identity that is radically other has had unquestionable benefits in terms of visibility and access to publication.[15] In this respect, Chiara Mengozzi has argued that migrant authors currently writing in Italian are caught in a structurally inescapable "double bind," deriving from the simultaneous desire and impossibility to sidestep socially produced expectations or to challenge the mechanisms that have led to "the reproduction of a stigma" (80) while securing channels of expression and publication venues. This ambivalence—one of the defining features of Somali-Italian literature—is visible in the contradictory attitudes that authors themselves have voiced toward *letteratura della migrazione*, a moniker that has been alternatively claimed and refused. Scego has been the most vocal against this designation, which, she has written, "risks reducing complex texts to the level of testimonies" ("L'incursione"). Interestingly, her hope that this literature will be granted full "artistic citizenship" in Italian letters is framed within an international competition against a hegemonic literary space (Anglophone literature) that has already incorporated postcoloniality as mode of aesthetic expression: Italian literature, Scego wishes, will be finally able to boast its own Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith. Scego is rejecting a definition that is perceived as limiting in the Italian context but that can be transformed into a symbolic vantage on the world stage. In aspiring to become literary spokespersons of a condition of diasporic postcoloniality, Somali-Italian writers are thus acknowledging the violence implicit in the expectations that a writer will be able to give voice to a heterogeneous community and to the extremely complex and diversified experience of migration, but also the responsibility and symbolic gains that this role entails (see Comberiati 47–68).

Circumscribing Somali-Italian literature—and ambivalently appealing to its outsidedness—has thus certified its literary existence while simultaneously hindering its full inclusion into contemporary Italian literature. As a consequence, Somali-Italian writers have often demanded, in Ugo Fracassa's words, "the neutralization of qualifying adjective (migrant) in favor of the absoluteness of the substantive (writer)" (183). Yet, the experience of uprootedness remains the fundamental premise of their literary activity—and one of the reasons they have been generating critical interest and divergent reactions in the first place. Whether in the contested space of writing and migration or in the oscillation between a desired inclusivity and the recognition of alterity, the Italian articulation of Somali diasporic literature centers on the production or contestation of boundaries. Bordering processes determine the position that Somali-Italian writers occupy in the literary field, as well as the ambiguities inscribed in the desire for an inclusivity that would not flatten a symbolically profitable alterity. At the same time, as I discuss in the next section, geographical separations, ontological and legal zones of liminality, and linguistic margins are constantly thematized as strategies for drawing attention to

[15] For a discussion of the role of small publishing houses in the promotion of Somali-Italian literature—and in the dissemination of exoticist portrayals of Africa—see Gerrand 123–49.

Italy's colonial occupation of the Horn of Africa, the central historical determinant that ties the political histories of Somalia and Italy and that defines these writers' diasporic consciousness.

Remapping the Interlocked Histories of Somalia and Italy

Italy's colonization of Somalia began with commercial treaties in the last decade of the nineteenth century and reached its military and political peak during the fascist era, up to 1941, when Britain took control of all the Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa. After the fall of fascism, the United Nation entrusted the newly elected Italian government with a mandate of trusteeship (Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia) over the former colony. Colonial relations between the two countries were thus prolonged for another decade (1950–60), under the guise of cultural and economic guidance. It is not my intention here to delve into the complex history of Italy's colonization of the Horn of Africa, which has been rescued from historical oblivion thanks the groundbreaking work of Angelo Del Boca. Suffice it to say that, as of today—and despite an increasing influx of migrants from formerly colonized countries—a collective and serious reflection on the meaning and legacy of Italy's colonial experience has not occurred, nor does it seem in the agenda of any major political party, educational initiative, or cultural institution. Scholars have conceptualized this reluctance to revisit a decisive period of Italian history by evoking Italy's "colonial unconscious" (Ponzanesi 52) and "colonial amnesia" (Mellino 91), that is, a deliberate repression, instrumental to the perpetuation of racial, economic, and epistemic hierarchies that had been enforced during the colonial period and were never deconstructed after it. Within this framework, the writings of Somali-Italian authors articulate a diasporic imagination premised on the peculiarities of Italy's postcoloniality deriving from, first, Italy's history of intranational unevenness (the never-solved "southern question"); second, the massive impact of postwar migrations and contemporary refugee crises that have reshaped Italy's social fabric; and third, Italy's geographic position in the semiperipheral European South and at the center of the Mediterranean cultural basin. Coming from a border space that has been traversed by converging routes of "migrating modernities" (Chambers and Curti 387), the literary works of Somali-Italian authors suggest that to give form to a diasporic condition means to engage with the world-constructing function of the boundaries that regulate the interactions among social communities. This is done along three main axes: identity, language, and urban cartography.

In relation to identity, a key figure that several of these writers mobilize to explore the ontological implications of bordering is the *meticcio*, a term that, during the colonial period, was used to identify the child of an interracial union between an Italian colonist (typically male) and a Somali citizen. As Giulietta Stefani has carefully detailed in *Colonia per maschi*, these mixed-raced children found themselves in a position of social liminality, rejected by the native community and not recognized as legitimate children by the Italian parent. Their situation became particularly dire during the fascist era: whereas in the first wave of colonial expansion fascist propaganda encouraged interracial unions in the name of a patrilineal propagation of an imagined Italianness, the progressive diffusion and endorsement,

among fascist ideologues, of theories of biological racism led to a series of laws between 1937 and 1940 that prohibited any relation between colonized and colonizer and to an "aggressive media campaign" (Stefani 159) against the condition of *meticciato*. This new legislative framework further aggravated the isolation of mixed-race children, and even after the fall of fascism, the social stigma did not disappear.

Shirin Ramzanali Fazel's *Nuvole sull'equatore* (*Clouds over the Equator*; 2010) chronicles the bildungsroman of a *meticcio* girl during Italy's trusteeship administration of Somalia (from 1950 to 1960) and shows the historical continuities that tie the fascist period to the successive decades, when *meticci* (plural for *meticcio*) were sent to Catholic missions and shunned from civil society. As a character in Ali Farah's *Little Mother* explains, *meticci* were also called by Somalis *cyaal missioni* (227), a bilingual epithet created by combining *cyaal*, the Somali word for children, with *missioni*, the Italian word for missions: as the material space of exclusion gets inscribed into the linguistic expression, the latter becomes in turn a marker of identity. Giulia, the protagonist of Fazel's novel, embodies the liminal condition of a subject who, similarly to Misra in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*, has been traversed by epistemic boundaries that sanction her marginalization from multiple social collectives. Abandoned by her Italian father and reluctantly sent to a remote Catholic mission by her Somali mother, Giulia navigates the construction of her unassimilable identity through nonlinear movements across different cultural spaces (see Brioni, "Forgotten Italians" 197). At the end of the novel, after having completed her colonial education in another Italian school, she joins the Somali diaspora in Rome as a "Italian girl with a dark skin . . . wondering what would become of her" (181). This connection with the postcolonial moment—when the enthusiasm for a newly gained independence (in 1960) was shattered by Siad Barre's military coup (in 1969)—is not casual, as it is meant to trace a historical trajectory that starts with the fascist rule in the Horn of Africa and reaches the present moment of global migrations. In this sense, as Miguel Mellino has argued, "the coloniality of the Italian national formation prepared the terrain for the contemporary racialization of international migration" (88). By interlocking the histories of Somalia and Italy through the bildungsroman of a *meticcio* girl, *Nuvole sull'equatore* thus draws attention to the legacies of racialized narratives in the construction of Italy's colonial other. These narratives, which had been disseminated and legally enforced during fascism, were never eradicated from the national consciousness in the postwar period.

The figure of the *meticcio* is crucial for this kind of historical revision, as it epitomizes the intersection of racial, legal, and social boundaries that have prevented a collective reflection on the shared histories of Somalia and Italy. Furthermore, the temporal trajectory traced by Fazel's novel activates a series of correspondences between the past and the historical present that testify to the cross-temporal and epistemic compass of bordering practices. Indeed, the convergence of linguistic, legal, and ontological coordinates used to delimit the condition of *meticciato* can be compared to the mechanisms of exclusion through which children of migrants are currently negated full participation in the social and political construction of Italy's national community—Italy's legislation on citizenship is still based on *jus sanguinis* (literally, "the right of blood"), a biological conception of national belonging

premised on a supposedly organic connection among ethnicity, language, and culture. The legal hurdles that children of migrants have to face to be granted Italian citizenship—and their consequent exclusion from the body politic of the nation—must then be understood within a wider framework founded on persistent yet historically flexible bordering practices, which Somali-Italian writers constantly thematize to register their political genealogies and contemporary repercussions for the organization of the social.

Bordering processes aimed at locating Somali diasporic identity outside the racial and cultural boundaries of a presumed national homogeneity become decisive for the linguistic strategies that Somali-Italian writers have deployed in their texts, where the circulation of languages is linked to the urban geographies and the political histories of Somalia's and Italy's capital cities, Mogadishu and Rome. By engaging with practices of border production along the interlocked axes of language and cartography, Somali-Italian literature challenges paradigms of linguistic and spatial belonging to rethink Somali diasporic consciousness within social and material geographies of nonpossessive inhabitation. This is done, primarily, by using multilingualism strategically: in juxtaposing Somali and Italian on the written page, these texts construct a space of linguistic inhabitation that cannot be organically possessed. Consider *La mia casa è dove sono*, in which Igiaba Scego explores her fraught relation to the two linguistic and cultural spaces in which she was educated and socialized and frames her own literary self-positioning through a profound metalinguistic consciousness. This is the autobiography's opening paragraph:

Sheeko sheeko sheeko xariir.

Storia storia oh storia di seta.

Così cominciano tutte le fiabe somale. Tutte quelle che mia madre mi raccontava da piccola. Fiabe splatter per lo più. Fiabe tarantinate di un mondo nomade che non badava a merletti e crinoline. Fiabe più dure di una cassapanca di cedro. Iene con la bava appiccicosa, bambini sventrati e ricomposti, astuzie di sopravvivenza. (11)

Sheeko sheeko sheeko xariir.

Story story oh story of silk.

All Somali fables begin with these words. Fables my mother used to tell when I was a kid. Mostly *splatter* fables. Fables of tarantism, coming from a nomadic world that did not care for sophistication. Fables rougher than a cedar chest. Hyenas drooling, babies disemboweled and recomposed, survival tricks.

Right from the very first lines of her narrative, Scego draws unexpected connections between the languages and cultural traditions she is mobilizing. She does so by including a reference (in English) to a foreign film genre (splatter) that has become part of global film culture. Most significant, Scego here interlocks Somali's orature and its fables to the vernacular tradition of tarantism—an oral, pre-Christian set of rituals from Southern Italy that, after being rediscovered and popularized in recent years, stands as a reminder of the internal unevenness and fragmentation of Italy's own cultural traditions. In this way, as the boundaries between what is supposedly alien to Italian and what has been absorbed into it get blurred, this passage emphasizes the spuriousness of Italian, its foreignness to itself, as it were.

The fundamental aporia inscribed in Somali-Italian authors' linguistic choices can be understood by drawing on Jacques Derrida's reflections on language and belonging: because a language cannot ultimately be owned, Derrida suggests, it

"exists asymmetrically, always for *the other*, from the other, kept by the other" (40). The asymmetries that structure the relation between Somali and Italian are interrogated by constructing a language that has come from the other—traumatically received as a colonial "gift"—and that has been resignified to show the impossibility of possessing it. In so doing, Somali-Italian authors reject the canonical paradigm of postcolonial fiction, in which the colonial language is appropriated and used to "write back" (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). Because linguistic production and exchange happen relationally, and because the speaking and writing self cannot claim possession of a language, it would be futile to speak of appropriation. At the same time, going beyond an oppositional stance for the creation of a shared space of nonpossessiveness is functional to the transformation of linguistic relationality into aesthetic and symbolic capital—a narrative tactic that mirrors the ambivalences between outsidedness and demand for inclusion that operate at the level of field dynamics.

As a consequence, while such categories as native, foreign, citizen, and immigrant cease to be defined by boundaries of linguistic identification, the reader is asked to approach the narrative space thus constructed as uneasily inhabitable. The metaphor of inhabitation seems to be particularly adequate here for two reasons: first, because of the etymology of the verb *to inhabit*, which derives from the Latin *habitare*, the frequentative form of the verb *habere* (to possess). In this sense, Somali-Italian literature severs this etymological tie by articulating ways of inhabiting a language without possessing it. Second, this verb is crucial also because this call for dispossession moves from language to the concrete places where language circulates, thus linking linguistic inhabitation to the contingent, historical dwelling in space.[16]

In "Rapdipunt" ("Punt Rap"), a short story by Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, the juxtaposition of Italian and vernacular expressions from the Roman dialect through the voices of Somali-Italian diasporic characters mirrors the dense realism of the setting, a series of marginal sites in Rome being traversed by subjects that are engaged, as Caterina Romeo has noted, "in remapping urban spaces as loci of cultural signification" (102). Just as the title of this short story combines through a neologism the northeastern region of Somalia, Puntland, with the underground hip-hop culture of Rome's peripheries, Ali Farah's latest novel, *Il comandante del fiume* (*The Captain of the River*; 2014) entwines the mythical river of a Somali legend to the Tiber in Rome. As the young Somali-Italian protagonist Yabar embarks on a transnational journey to shed light on his family's past, the Tiber becomes the central point of reference for the interrogation of his diasporic identity—a symbolic geography for meaning production as well as a lived, social environment.

This connection between linguistic and urban spaces is powerfully formalized in the mapping exercise with which I opened my discussion, where Scego locates the Somali diasporic experience within the concrete geographies of contemporary Rome. In juxtaposing her memories of a city devastated by Barre's dictatorship and by the following civil war with familiar places in Rome where she grew up, Scego transforms what might have been simply a recuperative and nostalgic project

[16] For a discussion of inhabitable spaces as symbolic sites where migrant writers negotiate language and belonging, see Pezzarossa.

into a world-producing gesture. Moreover, each chapter of her autobiography is dedicated to a place in Rome to which Scego feels emotionally attached, and each of these sites, which the reader might perceive as familiar and recognizable, is transfigured as a space constructed and inhabited by several others, continuously resignified through accumulating layers of history. Consider, for instance, the fifth chapter, titled "Roma Termini," the main train station in Rome. Its name evokes the pomp of the Roman Empire: *termini* is a reference to the nearby baths (*terme*) of the emperor Diocletian. Yet its architecture was redesigned during fascism in a nostalgic, pseudo-imperial style, and in the 1990s the station and its surroundings became a social center where the Somali diasporic community would gather.

In decolonizing the spatial coordinates that structure a naturalized perception of the city, Scego constructs a reader-dweller who is asked to recognize the impossibility of possessive inhabitation: Rome, a city that is perceived as transparently and quintessentially Italian, is shown to be foreign to those who are unable to read the traces of its colonial history. Inhabitability, Somali diasporic writers ultimately suggest, depends on a sensibility that is simultaneously spatial and historical: the spatiality of remapping practices links diaspora to concrete sites of social negotiation; in turn, these sites become necessary for apprehending the contemporary moment of global migrations within a longer historical trajectory.

Conclusion: Borders and Dialogism

Through the spatial entanglement of linguistic, cultural, and political geographies, Somali diasporic literature shows that bordering processes operate on multiple representational and analytical levels and that addressing the complex negotiations around those boundaries means engaging with the political histories that have determined their production and enforcement. Furthermore, just as the cartographic dimension of bordering gets formalized through imaginative remapping, so too the boundaries that fragment social and national collectivities are transposed into narrative and textual structures. One could say that Somali diasporic authors give form to the social heteroglossia that Mikhail M. Bakhtin had identified as the key feature of novelistic imagination. Yet, they do so not in the narrow sense in which Bakhtin's theories are often mobilized by literary scholars, that is, as a celebration of the novel's ability to represent different voices, discourses, and social groups. Instead, in these texts the representation of heteroglossia is meant to draw attention to competing social and ideological interests that get expressed linguistically. In other words, Somali diasporic writers recuperate the original sense of Bakhtin's dialogism in its full sociopolitical dimension, thus treating the novel as "a dialogized representation of an ideologically freighted discourse" (333).

What is at stake here is the very definition of *diaspora* as an ideologically saturated category and as a material condition of being in the world. The text that most acutely captures these fraught dynamics is Ali Farah's *Madre Piccola*, a novel that explores the boundaries circumscribing Somali diasporic experience, as well as those that fracture it internally. Although focused on the intersecting lives of two cousins, Domenica-Axad and Barni, who grow up in Mogadishu but are forced to escape at the beginning of the civil war in 1991, the novel entangles the lives of

several other diasporic subjects and constructs a complex narrative through the continuous refraction of words, voices, and accents. In doing so, Ali Farah represents diaspora as an unstable process of dialogic reaccentuation. Each narrating voice—Domenica-Axad, Barni, and Tageere—reevaluates by retelling (and inevitably transforming) past events from his or her youth in Mogadishu or from trajectories of Somali migrants around the globe. As the reader apprehends the intersections, gaps, and contradictions among these narratives, the diasporic experience emerges simultaneously as unified by a shared sensibility of uprootedness, but also as deeply fractured along class, gender, racial categories, and linguistic affiliations. If the chapters narrated by Tageere center on the sense of alienation of the communities of Somali men unable to reconstruct effective modes of cultural belonging, Barni's and Domenica-Axad's narratives oscillate between the difficult pursuit of gender solidarity and the obstacles posed to their psychic stability by racial discrimination (in the West) and by clan politics (in Somalia).

Madre Piccola thus formalizes two crucial aspects of Somali diasporic literature: first, the social and cultural boundaries that fragment different understandings of the experience of diaspora; and second, the dialogic reaccentuation in which every attempt to articulate it artistically is involved. This novel can be seen as a synecdoche for Somali diasporic literature as a whole: a complex and internally fragmented space of expression that reminds us that, rather than merely contesting borders, literature can provide the means for working through them by understanding both their historical genealogies and their ideological motivations. In this sense, what makes the Somali case particularly relevant for current theories of world literature is its textured way of illuminating how borders are constituted and continuously negotiated at the messy convergence of aesthetic and political vectors. This ultimately means that any discussion of the current configuration of the world literary system has to carefully consider not only how practices of border production and contestation affect the very conditions of possibility of literary expression but also that contemporary literature is challenging our naturalized perception of territorial, linguistic, and cultural boundaries in order to articulate new and historically conscious modalities of belonging.

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