

Nostalgia and Hybrid Identity in Italian Migrant Literature: The Case of Igiaba Scego

Camilla Erichsen Skalle

1. *In/Visible migrants and the humanistic disciplines*

Today's challenging refugee and humanitarian crisis at the borders and shores of Europe, prompted by tragic developments in countries like Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan, has increased media attention to migration issues. Photos of overcrowded boats in bad conditions, of adults and children desperate to cross the Mediterranean, have become familiar to us; interviews with refugees fleeing from war, poverty, political or religious persecution, some of them to be granted asylum or residence permits, some destined to live in limbo waiting for a forced return to most uncertain conditions, touch us on a regular basis.

Moving and tragic impressions like the ones described above, figure side by side with what the mass media often seem to label a *wave*, *masses*, or an *invasion*, labels which, according to the art and media theorist Pamela Scorzin (2010), make the migrants both *visible* and *invisible* at the same time:

One the one side they [the migrants] are made highly visible in the sense and form of actually being stamped and stereotyped, as strange and exotic foreigners, into a certain widespread and long-standing cliché, such as the well-known waves and floods of poor, hungry, strange and unskilled dangerous aliens; and on the other side, they are virtually made invisible as individuals and human beings, each with their own dreams and wishes, their hopes and desires. (Scorzin 2010, 102)

While the mass media document the arrival of migrants, interview politicians and policy-makers, and warn their audience of the human tragedy on display as well as the possible danger the so-called *wave* of migrants might represent, the humanistic disciplines have a different, but crucial role in the interpretation and analysis of the societal phenomena of migration: by examining the aesthetic and cultural expressions which present and discuss the migrant's position, the Humanities have the ability to shift attention away from the apparently anonymous masses and the raw number of migrants onto the individual expressions of the migrant experience. Thus, by performing linguistic, historical, literary, symbolic, and cultural analysis of cultural and aesthetic expressions, the Humanities contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the world today, thereby reaffirming the disciplines' relevance and importance. By looking beyond the statistics, and by drawing attention to the (deeply) personal experience of migration, the Humanities, then, offer an important additional and broader understanding of the issues connected to the current migration situation and the migrant's position, a position which is often described as being between *here* and *there*, *home* and *away*, and *hybridity*.

The arts, in contrast to the political discourse, as stated by Mieke Bal and Miguel A. Hernandez-Navarro, "open up the possible visibility of situations, issues, events and people and leave its viewers or readers to enact that visibility; to answer that call by seeing" (2011, 14). Federica Mazzara, in an analysis of spaces of visibility for migrants, more specifically spaces of visibility for migrants arriving on the island of Lampedusa, shows that there is little room for the individual migrant in what she calls the *border spectacle*, borrowing the term from the anthropologist Nicholas De Genova (2002). In her essay, Mazzara seeks to challenge and change the media-created representations of migrants by presenting, and thus giving space to, stories of migrants who have succeeded in becoming *subjects of power* by gaining visibility through aesthetic and cultural practices. In order to reorganize what she calls the "realm of the visible" (Mazzara 2015, 460), Mazzara affirms the need to change "the position and the roles of observers and observees, in order to gain different perspectives" (2015, 460). One way to accomplish this, according to Mazzara, is through the arts:

The aesthetics has a reinvigorating potential of disrupting and challenging any representational system that aims at reducing migrant subjectivities to mere bodies without words and yet threatening in their presence as a mass, a multitude, a haemorrhagic stream of anonymous and unfamiliar others. (Mazzara 2015, 460)

The island of Lampedusa, Mazzara states, becomes a space of both *visibility* and *invisibility*. The spaces of visibility are those where the migrants and those who support them succeed in humanizing and individualizing “the real actors of the Mediterranean passage: individuals with name, features, and stories,” whereas the spaces of invisibility are those in which “the migrants are (de-)identified as mere bodies, masses, numbers” (Mazzara 2015, 452). The spaces of visibility, in Mazzara’s opinion, are represented by different kinds of art practices “where migrants find their own subjective way of expressing their traumatic experience, becoming the political actors of their own counter-discourse” (Mazzara 2015, 453), thereby giving the migrants the opportunity to problematize or perhaps even change stereotypical and/or mass-media mediated images. Migrant aesthetics and cultural practices can thus become a counter-act to what Mazzara defines as the dehumanization of migrant bodies, that is performed by both legal and political discourse, which is then “reinforced in their public representations, where these mass-mediated bodies become monetarily perceptible, yet only as a mass” (Mazzara 2015, 458). Mazzara’s representation of the legal and political discourses as unequivocally dehumanizing may be too clear-cut, but her claim that the role gap between the observers and the observees needs to change is nonetheless valid. Novels, films, ready-mades, graphic novels, performances, and so on, which thematize the migrant condition and situation, can, in my opinion, bring forth a complementary and critical response to the mass-mediated images and to the political discourses about migration which surround us every day. The aesthetic and cultural sphere, therefore, can represent *resistance* to dominant discourse and by resisting dominant discourse it holds potential for *radical* change. The aesthetic and cultural expressions may be capable of changing the representational system by giving voice to the individual migrant’s experience and history, and the humanistic disciplines play, as previously stated, a crucial role in the un-

derstanding of these expressions due to their focus on such objects and their distinctive methodologies.

2. *Nostalgia and hybrid identity in Italian migrant literature: the case of Igiaba Scego*

Italy is one of the European countries most affected by the contemporary migrant crisis, but the newly arrived migrants are far from the only migrant presence in Italy. Historically, Italy has been a country of mass-emigration, and did not become a country of immigration until the 1990s when Albania fell apart and thousands of Albanians tried to reach the Italian South-Eastern coast. Even though Italian society has become fully multicultural in recent decades, it is still considered quite homogenous, which consequently accentuates the difference between the Italian *us* and the migrant *them*. By taking on Mazzara's challenge and expanding the realm of the visible, this paper seeks to participate in the reorganization of the migrant representational system previously outlined. The texts analysed in this article, do not directly thematize the ongoing humanitarian crisis, nor are they written by an author who herself has migrated to Italy. Nevertheless, as I set out to demonstrate in this article, they highlight the potential for creating a counter-discourse such as migrant art practices might be said to have.

In this paper, I will, more specifically, discuss the concepts of nostalgia and cultural identity in Italian migrant literature.¹ Nostalgia, from the Greek *nóstos* (return home) and *álgia* (pain), was originally a seventeenth century medical diagnosis for those suffering from severe homesickness, and the concept is often used by scholars of migrant and post-colonial literary theory. But what is home in contemporary migrant literature? How can one long for a home that one can no longer remember, or that one has perhaps never even lived in? How does nostalgia influence the migrant's local, national, and cultural identity? One of the authors who examine questions like these is the Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego, a second-generation migrant living in Rome. Scego was born in Rome in 1974 to Somali parents who were forced to flee from Somalia after the Siad Barre

1 In the following I use a definition of migrant literature based on content: it is not mandatory that the author of migrant literature has herself experienced migration. Migrant literary texts are rather those which represent and debate the migration situation and issues associated with it.

coup in 1969. Scego, who holds a PhD in pedagogy and collaborates with major Italian newspapers and literary magazines that take up migrant topics, is one of the most prominent voices in the Italian public debate on issues such as second and third generation migrant's situation, racism, and cultural identity. My analysis of nostalgia and cultural identity in Italian migrant literature will be based on readings of two of Scego's short stories, "Dismatria" ("Exmatriate") and "Salsicce" ("Sausages"), both published in the short story collection *Pecore nere*² (*Black Sheep*) from 2005, as well as her autofictional novel *La mia casa è dove sono* (*My Home Is Where I Am*), published in 2010.

3. Hybrid identity

Scego draws greatly on her own experience as a second-generation migrant in all of her literary works; her protagonists are often of Somali background, possibly experiencing the same challenges and dilemmas that the author herself has encountered. These protagonists contest homogenizing conceptions of identity and belonging, and represent instead, to quote Carine M. Mardorossian's description of migrant art, a "cosmopolitan, transnational, and hybrid vision of life" (Mardorossian 2002, 17). Thus, her protagonists destabilize and challenge any antithetical conception of the relationship between *here* and *there*, between the culture of origin and the one of destination. Scego's texts, therefore, seem to put on display and thematize Homi Bhabha's claims about hybrid identity in *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994 [2004]). The concept of hybrid identity, which is one of the most recurrent theoretical concepts in post-colonial theory, is a critique of essentialist ideas of notions such as *culture*, *nation*, and *identity*. The term, which is borrowed from horticulture, refers to a mixing of cultural characteristics, narratives, identities, languages, and so on, and hybridity, in Bhabha's understanding, becomes a sort of counter-narrative which deconstructs the dominant discourse and culture.

As previously stated, Scego's texts seem to present literary characters of hybrid identity, and in the following I will discuss more closely how her protagonists destabilize and enrich the concept of cultural identity

2 Both "Salsicce" and "Dismatria" are published in the short story collection *Black Sheep* which also include short stories by three other migrant female authors writing in Italian (Ingy Mubiayi, Laila Wadia, and Gabriella Kuruvilla).

by emphasizing hybrid identity and the sense of belonging. The following quotation is taken from the conclusion of *My Home Is Where I Am*. The autofictional novel narrates the history of Igiaba's family, a family dispersed all over the world, and the account starts with Igiaba meeting her brother and cousin who live in Manchester. In order to remember the Mogadishu of their childhood, they try to draw a map of the city as they remember it. The map drawing and all the stories about family members, put Igiaba's identity to a test:

What does it mean to me to be Italian... [...]
 I had no answer. I had a hundred.
 I am Italian, but also not. I am Somali, but also not.
 A crossroad. A junction.
 A mess. A headache.
 I was a trapped animal.
 A being condemned to eternal anguish.
 Being Italian to me means... (Scego 2010 [2012], 159)³

The narrator cannot find a simple answer to the question, and the identity questioning makes her suffer like a trapped animal or like someone lost at a crossroad not knowing which direction to take. When she tries to put into words what it means to her to be Italian, she cites the short story "The Cardinal's First Tale" (1957) by Karen Blixen:

I remember that a lady asked the Cardinal: "who are you?". The Cardinal replied: "Allow me to answer you in the classic manner, and to tell you a story." [...] It was better to do as the Cardinal: try to tell the story up until then [...] Here I have tried to tell the shreds of my story. Of my paths. Shreds because the memory is selective. Shreds because the memory is like a shattered mirror. We cannot (nor should we) glue together again the pieces. We shouldn't try to make a beautiful copy of it, sort the pieces, clean them of every imperfection. Memory is like a doodle. (Scego 2010 [2012], 159–60)

In order to say something about her identity, the protagonist needs to tell the bits and pieces of her life story, emphasizing the connection between

3 All translations from the Italian are my own, if not otherwise indicated.

identity and a shredded memory that is neither linear nor unequivocal. The map drawing that the family performs together becomes a graphic interpretation of the personal memories they have of the lost Mogadishu of their childhood. When Igiaba, at a later stage in the novel, recovers the map in her apartment in Rome, she realizes that it is not yet complete; the signs and indications of her Roman memories of places and events are missing. She then starts to make a palimpsest of memories on the sketched map by attaching sticky notes with memories of Rome to the map of Mogadishu, concluding the novel with the image of the two-folded map: “[...] my map is a mirror of these years of change. It is not a coherent map. It is the center, but also the periphery. It is Rome, but it is also Mogadishu. It is Igiaba, but it is also you” (Scego 2010, 161). The map becomes a representation of the protagonist’s identity made up of memories of places and events. On the one hand, this is what characterizes the migrant’s identity, while on the other, as Igiaba states in her concluding remarks, this is what characterizes the human condition: The map is a representation of Igiaba, but also a representation of us.

The notion of identity is also questioned in the short story “Sausages” (Scego 2005b) in which the protagonist, a young Italian-Somali woman, is having an identity crisis following the introduction of the Bossi-Fini law in 2002. This law harshly tightened the Italian migration legislation and was criticized both by the UN and by other Italian politicians. As the protagonist asks herself whether her Italian passport is evidence enough of her Italianness, she recalls her interview for Italian citizenship in which she was asked if she felt more Italian or more Somali?

that vile question of my damned identity! More Somali? More Italian? [...] I don’t know what to answer! I have never “fractioned” myself before [...] Naturally, I lied. I don’t like doing it, but I had no choice. I looked right into those bulging eyes of her and said: “Italian.” And then, even if I’m as black as coal, I turned red as a beet. I would have felt like an idiot even if I had said “Somali.” I am not a 100% anything. I never have been, and I don’t think I can be now. I think I am a woman with no identity. Better yet, a woman with several identities. (Scego 2005b, 28)

The young woman is unable to make a clean-cut choice between an Italian and a Somalian identity, stressing instead the fact that she has multiple identities. To explain this to herself, she sums up 13 things which make her feel Somali:

Let's see: I feel Somali when 1) I drink tea with cardamom, cloves and cinnamon; 2) I pray five times a day facing Mecca; 3) I wear my *dirah*; 4) I burn incense and *unsi* in my house; 5) I go to weddings where men sit on one side and get bored, while on the opposite side, women dance, have fun, eat...in short, enjoy life; [...] 8) relatives come to visit, from Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Holland, Sweden, Germany, the Arab Emirates, and from a long list of places that for reasons of space I cannot list here—all relatives uprooted, like us, from our country of origin; 9) I speak Somali and add my two cents worth in loud, shrill tones whenever there's an animated conversation; 10) I look at my nose in the mirror and I think it's perfect; 11) I suffer the pangs of love; 12) I cry for my country ravaged by civil war; 13) Plus 100 other things I just can't remember right now! (Scego 2005b, 29)

When she has finished the list of things which make her feel Somali, she does the same for the things which make her feel Italian:

I feel Italian when: 1) I eat something sweet for breakfast; 2) I go to art exhibitions, museums and historic buildings; 3) I talk about sex, men and depression with my girlfriends; 4) I watch movies with the following actors: Alberto Sordi, Nino Manfredi, Vittorio Gassman, Marcello Mastroianni, [...] Roberto Benigni and Massimo Troisi; 5) I eat a 1.80 euro ice cream: chocolate chip, pistachio, coconut without whipped cream; 6) I know all the words of Alessandro Manzoni's poem, *Il cinque maggio*, like any other Italian; [...] 8) I choke up when I look into the eyes of the man I love, hear him talk in his cheerful southern accent and know there is no future for us; 9) I rant and rave for the most disparate reasons against the prime minister, the mayor, the alderman or whomever happens to be the president; 10) I talk with my hands; 11) I weep for the partisans, all too often forgotten; [...] 13) plus 100 other things I can't keep track of! (Scego 2005b, 29–30)

The two lists identify things which make the young woman feel simultaneously Italian and Somali, replacing any understanding of identity as *either or*, and underscoring instead the fact that the two (or even more) identities co-exist without favouring either of them. In this way, both the short story's and the autofictional novel's protagonists destabilize the idea of a fixed and uniform identity, and both stress instead the fact that identities are a result of different cultures, places and stories.

4. *Nostalgia and the concept of home*

Nostalgia, as previously mentioned, was originally a seventeenth century medical diagnosis for those suffering from severe homesickness, and the concept has been adopted by several scholars of migrant literature. But what is home in contemporary migrant literature? How can one long for a home that one may never have lived in? In the following, I will discuss these questions based on how nostalgia, homesickness, is depicted in the literary texts by Scego presented in this paper.

In the previous section, we have seen that Scego's protagonists cannot choose between cultural identities; rather they combine the many expressions they identify with, while cherishing different elements in them. But what emerges when the protagonists reflect upon concepts such as here and there, home and away?

4.1. *Home and migration*

In both *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Ahmed et. al 2003) and "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement" (Ahmed 1999), Sarah Ahmed discusses the relationship between migration and identity by problematizing the concepts of *home* and *away*.⁴ "What does it mean to be-at-home" (Ahmed 1999, 338), Ahmed asks herself, introducing her discussion of the concept of *home*. In order to examine the relationship between migration and identity, she urges her readers to reflect upon the differences between being at home and being away without considering home as a "purified space of belong-

4 Ahmed also warns the reader about the danger of turning the migrant experience into a metaphor of "transgressive and liberating departure from living-as-usual in which identity (the subject as and at home) is rendered impossible" (1999, 332). To think of the migrant experience as a metaphor of an ontological condition would, in Ahmed's opinion, water down the significance of the migration which literally takes place.

ing” (1999, 339), or “identifying home with the stasis of being” (1999, 340) as some of the theories which she criticizes seem to do.⁵ In the introduction to the more recent *Uprootings/Regroundings*, she stresses that “Rather than thinking of home and migration as constituted through processes that neatly map onto ‘migrating’ and ‘homing’, uprootings/re-groundings makes it possible to consider home and migration in terms of plurality of experiences, histories and constituencies” (Ahmed et. al 2003, 1–2).

In the words of the sociologist Avtar Brah, home is “the lived experiences of locality, its sound and smells” (Brah, 1996, cited in Ahmed 1999, 341), and Ahmed takes up Brah’s definition when she discusses how space and place penetrate our senses:

The immersion of a self in a locality is hence not simply about inhabiting an already constituted space (from which one can simply depart and remain the same). Rather, the locality intrudes into the senses: it defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers. The lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*. (Ahmed 1999, 341)

Thus, home is seen as being *inhabited by space*, and Ahmed compares home to a second skin which lets us both touch and be touched by the world which surrounds us. She further states that the conception of home as a second skin “suggests [that] the boundary between self and home is permeable,” as well as “the boundary between home and away” (Ahmed 1999, 341). Conceiving of the concept and the feeling of home as a second skin allows Ahmed to consider migration not only as a dislocation in space, but also in time: “‘the past’ becomes associated with a home that it is impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present. The question then of being at home or leaving home is always a question of memory, of the discontinuity between past and present” (Ahmed 1999, 343).

5 Like, according to Ahmed, Ian Chambers and Rosi Braidotti.

4.2. *Home as a second skin in Scego*

Many of Scego's protagonists illustrate what Ahmed says about the physical aspect of being-at-home, and in the following we will consider some examples of this.

In the short story "Dismatria," a young Italian-Somali woman is invited to a traditional Sunday brunch with her family, but she meets them with a heavy heart because she is hiding a secret desire from them: She is tired of the temporary way of life her family lives. She wants to buy a flat, but is terrified to tell her mother, who is a more nostalgic migrant, living with all of her dearest belongings in a suitcase while awaiting their return to Mogadishu. The mother is afraid of breaking the bonds to Somalia, bonds symbolized in small, and seemingly strange, objects such as magazines, old paintbrushes, ragdolls, and unused floppy discs, which she keeps with her in a collection of suitcases.⁶ In contrast, the protagonist is painfully aware of the fact that today's Somalia is not what they used to know; it is a country torn apart by civil war, and impossible to return to. She thinks of the separation from Somalia as a state of being orphaned:

We are *dismatriates*, someone had cut the umbilical cord that tied us to our motherland, to Somalia. And what does an orphan usually do? She dreams. And so did we [...] Somalia, that dreamed, cherished, and desired land, survived only in our daydreams, in the women's nightly chatter, in the smell of our food, in the exotic scents of our hair. (Scego 2005a, 11)

While in "Dismatria," Somalia, the motherland, only survives in their memories and dreams, in *My home is where I am*, the streets of Mogadishu survive in the form of the sketched map:

I am a crossroad, I guess. A bridge, a tightrope walker, someone that is always in balance and never is. At the end, I am only my story. It is me and my feet. Yes, my feet... [...]

6 It is worth noticing, though, as it turns out at the end of the short story, that the protagonist's mother also keeps a few things, like a packet of spaghetti, a toy parmesan made of plastic, some dirt in a small plastic bag, in her suitcases, things which will remind her of her time in Rome when she can, eventually, return home to Somalia.

I am not born in those streets. I did not grow up there. They didn't give me my first kiss. They haven't disappointed me deeply. Yet, those streets felt like mine. I had walked them myself and I reclaimed them. I reclaimed the streets, the statues, the few streetlights [...] I reclaimed that map with force [...]. She was mine, that lost Mogadishu. She was mine, mine, mine. (Scego 2010 [2012], 34–36)

The scents, the flavors, the sounds, and the streets are important attributes in the identity making of Scego's protagonists, connecting identity not only to feelings, but also to a physical experience of space and place.

The title of Scego's autobiographical novel, *La mia casa è dove sono* (*My Home Is Where I Am*), may be read as a paraphrase of the expression "home is where the heart is" ("la casa è dove si trova il cuore"), and this slight shift in meaning may exemplify Ahmed's claim regarding the notion of home being something internalized or like a second skin. The feeling of *home* is created in a physical relationship with the place you live in: the smells, colours, streets and such. While Ahmed warns of the danger of fetishizing the concept of home, as may be the case for some of the characters in Scego's writing, especially those of the first generation, the author's protagonists seem to be conscious of the physical aspect of being-at-home. While the mother in the short story "Dismatria" for years has painfully been longing for a forever lost Somalia, never letting herself fully take part of the Italian reality out of fear of losing her motherland forever, her daughter represents a different solution to the dilemma of mixed identity: by combining her two heritages and not giving precedence to one of them, she is able to feel at home in the streets she recognizes as her own. It is not nostalgia which determines her sense of home and away, belonging and estrangement, so much as it is the physical presence of the body.

5. Conclusion

By focusing on the individual experience of cultural identity, Scego gives voice to the migrants whom the mass media call the *masses*, the *wave* and so on. She represents a transethnic and transnational voice in Italian literature, and shows that identity is not something static, but rather something that changes from context to context, from day to day, and something that doesn't exclude other expressions or feelings of belonging. The

answer to the question “who am I?” in her texts, is revealed through a story of the bits and pieces of memories of places and sensations. The migrant subjects of Scego’s literary work, the *dismatriates* as she calls them, are not like the mythological hero Ulysses who, after decades of traveling, finally comes home to his patient wife Penelope and his kingdom Ithaca. Their return is instead performed through memories, dreams, scents, and traditions. The fact that Scego’s protagonists will never be able to return to Somalia does not mean that they do not feel Somali anymore; and their longing for a lost Mogadishu does not mean that they reject their Italian identity. The two identities can co-exist in the same person, dialoguing and promoting cultural understanding. Thus, Scego’s texts emphasize that it is essential to allow apparently different identities to play together in order for the subject to acquire a sense of a coherent self. Through something similar to Bhabha’s *third space*, her protagonists achieve a deeper and clearer self-knowledge.

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