The British Academy

Journal of the British Academy, 10: 1–19
https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010.001
Posted 30 June 2022

The transnational study of Italian culture and the ghosts of empire

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British Academy Lecture in Modern Languages, 7 May 2019

Abstract
The article begins by looking at developments within Modern Languages and reflects upon the importance of the move towards the consideration of cultural and social phenomena in transnational perspective. It suggests how the 'transnational turn' can be interpreted within the disciplinary field and, in this context, refers to the work of the large project 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages' (2014–2018), part of the AHRC's Translating Cultures research theme. The article looks at how a transnational approach can advance the move to decolonise research and teaching in the subject area and at how it promotes understanding of the proximity of the colonial world. Drawing upon the example of creative writing on the expansionist phase of Italy's history, the article explores how the ongoing legacies of colonialism can be addressed within an approach that is centred on the traces of past instances of mobility and displacement. It concludes by pointing to the need for the transmedial study of the ghosts of the Italian empire.

Keywords
Transnational, colonialism, transcultural, spectrality, mobility, displacement, identity, border.

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Introduction

Recent global events – whether they concern the increasing evidence of the acceleration of climate change, the continued documentation of instances of racially motivated discrimination, the likely legacy of the pandemic – can leave no doubt as to the necessity of understanding all the interconnected aspects of mobility and immobility, the movement of people and the movement of ideas, practices, and artefacts.[1] The hidden legacies of the enforced displacement of people, the enduring effects of centuries of colonial activity, the likely consequences of accelerated processes of globalisation are everywhere apparent. The magnitude of the world's inequalities is revealed by the migratory flow of people and by the populist backlash against migration that is often orchestrated by ruling elites; the pandemic has exposed the interdependence of even the most distant communities while also fuelling nationalist rhetoric; the accelerating pace of global economic systems plays a significant role in causing the threat of impending climate catastrophe. The gravity of the issues imposes the need for every disciplinary area to consider its objects of study, its methodologies, and its areas of application and to ask whether they are sufficiently alive to the nature and consequences of mobility.

In this context, one of the most significant developments within the humanities and social sciences over recent years has been the move to the global or the transnational. What is sometimes referred to as the transnational turn – given particular emphasis by well-known works by figures such as Arjun Appadurai, Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, Steven Vertovec,[2] to mention just a few examples – has meant that there is an increasing body of work that encourages us to think in terms of longer temporalities and to perceive the entanglement of cultures, to become aware of forms of connection stretching across the boundaries of apparently stable imagined communities, to see ideas, with their material consequences, circulating in different directions, and to interpret cultures, to paraphrase Tzvetan Todorov, as alluvial plains that are traced by the intermingling of the multiplicity of practices that is the inevitable consequence of human mobility.[3] However powerful nations, with their bureaucratic, educational, and security systems, may be in encouraging or coercing how the world is seen and experienced, they are no more than part of economic, cultural, and religious systems which have moulded human being in the world for centuries, in some instances, if not millennia.

There is no one definition of the term transnationalism. Indeed, most commentators agree that it is a term that encompasses a range of concepts and assumes specific meanings according to the context in which it is used. For Stephen Vertovec, in his wide-ranging exploration of the uses of the concept within the study of society and culture, the emphasis on long-distance and mobile networks can refer to social morphology, that is, how identifiable social formations extend across the borders that nation-states seek to impose; it can refer to forms of conscious understanding of subjectivity that are distinguished by 'multiple identifications, de-centred attachments, transformations of identity and memory'. The term can also refer to modes of cultural production that are characterised by syncretism, hybridity, bricolage, and which manifest, at every level, forms of cultural and linguistic translation. The term can equally refer to reconstituted notions of a sense

[1] The article develops from the British Academy Lecture in Modern Languages, 'Transnational Italian Culture and the Ghosts of Empire', delivered on 7 May 2019.
[2] Appadurai (1996); Lionnet & Shih (2005); Vertovec (2009).
[3] Todorov (2010).

of place and how the very idea of spatiality might be conceived.[4] For Ann Rigney and Chiara De Cesari, the transnational proposes a gaze that, in their words, 'begins with a world without borders, empirically examines the boundaries and borders that emerge at particular historical moments and explores their relationship to unbounded arenas and processes'.[5] With specific reference to literary studies, Paul Jay sees the transnational turn as beginning in earnest 'when the study of minority, multicultural, and postcolonial literatures began to intersect with work done under the auspices of the emerging study of globalization'.[6] The essential point is that the move towards the transnational, broadly defined and open to varying interpretations and inflections, promotes the study of sets of practices occurring in all spheres of human activity as they spread across borders and as they give rise to multiple realities that define the parameters in which life is lived. It ensures that research promotes the development of a global consciousness that is alive to the interdependence of shared pasts and futures and to the diversity of histories, positionalities, and perspectives.

A major challenge is how the study of the national – present at the core of many departments within the disciplinary area of Modern Languages – can be combined with the study of the transnational, and how the framework of the field as a whole can be more attuned to practices of human mobility and cultural exchange.[7] If we draw too close a link between territory and culture, we imply that cultures are self-contained entities and, perhaps unwittingly, subscribe to rather than critique a number of nationalistic narratives. Further, if we are to address the urgent challenges of decolonising the curriculum, then it is imperative that we address the issues surround what Nina Glick Schiller and Andreas Wimmer have defined as methodological nationalism.[8] Indeed, there are those who argue that we should dispense altogether with the notion of national boundaries and offer courses that examine the development of culture in global terms, concentrating on the movement across time of people, practices, and ideas as they have shaped the humanly constructed world and, crucially, as they have perpetuated inequalities that continue to haunt the present and – perhaps irreparably – to compromise the future. The argument is powerful and it is persuasive – it is beyond doubt that courses should address the interdependence of global pasts and futures.

Yet, one of the obstacles that the disciplinary area of Modern Languages faces, especially when it comes to constructing courses that follow a de-territorialised model, is that the programmes in which we tend to teach are based on developing a linguistic, cultural, and historical competence in a given area, however carefully one attempts to demonstrate the (historical, social, and economic) contingency of that area. A potential solution to the problem is not to sacrifice one of the features that distinguishes the field, but to insist on the fact that inquiry into the tightness with which linguistic and cultural practices are woven together in determined spaces at specific moments in time is, primarily, a means of gaining an enhanced knowledge of the multiplicity of practices that obtain within a given area and how they are all indicative of forces that transcend any narrowly conceived notion of border. The global cannot be understood without a notion of the local or without an understanding of the tension between the national and the transnational.

[4] Vertovec (2009: 4–13).
[5] De Cesari & Rigney (2014), Introduction.
[6] Jay (2010: 2).
[7] For the importance of the two major funding initiatives 'Translating Cultures' and the Open World Research Initiative, see the reports of both schemes, available at https://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/about-us/news/translating-cultures-theme-final-report and https://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/about-us/news/open-world-research-initiative-showcases-value-modern-languages [accessed 22 February 2022].
[8] Glick Schiller & Wimmer (2002).

Italian studies

If one is approaching the disciplinary field from this angle, then studying Italian offers a very relevant case in point. It is certainly possible to argue that in looking critically at Italy one is examining a concentrated example – created both by geographical circumstance and by the momentum of material forces – of the mixing of cultural and social practices.[9] Situated at the centre of the Mediterranean, close to the north African coast and to the Middle East, Italy has for centuries been the ground of imperial activity and has only relatively recently been united as a nation state. It has witnessed huge internal migrations in the aftermath of the Second World War and, more recently, is a point within one of the most significant migratory flows of the present.[10] Furthermore, it has witnessed one of the largest diasporas in human history, with tens of millions of people emigrating from the country between the 1880s and the 1930s. Inquiry into Italian mobility opens, therefore, the door to the study of communities throughout the northern and southern hemisphere, to the continuities and discontinuities of their connection with Italy, and to the pace at which they develop new forms of linguistic and cultural expression.[11]

The aim of the large project 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Mobility, Identity, and Translation in Modern Italian Cultures' was precisely to examine the forms of mobility that have defined the development of modern Italian culture. Concentrating on exemplary cases, representative of the geographic, historical, and linguistic map of Italian mobility, and working with a wide range of partners, the project looked at Italian communities established in the UK, the US, Australia, South America, Africa, and at the migrant communities of contemporary Italy.[12] Focusing on the cultural associations that each community has formed, the project examined the wealth of publications and materials that are associated with these organisations: journals, life stories, photographs, collections of memorabilia, and other forms of representation. It sought to explore how the understanding of 'Italianness' is articulated in different historical, geographic, and social contexts, as well as through different linguistic codes, and modes of textual or visual expression.

Among the outputs of the project was the exhibition *Beyond Borders: Transnational Italy*, which was shown at the British School at Rome (October-November 2016) and then, in different formats (2017–2018) in London, New York, Melbourne, Addis Ababa, and Tunis.[13] Bringing together the work of the researchers with the photography of the project's artist in residence, Mario Badagliacca, the exhibition was prepared as a series of installations in virtual reality.[14] Intended to appear as a domestic environment, divided into rooms that correspond to a shared sense of living spaces, the 'house' in which visitors to *Beyond Borders* were invited to enter was presented, metaphorically, as the space that culture and language offer us to 'inhabit' our lives and relations with other people; it demonstrated how the most basic features of our cultural and linguistic identities are continually in movement and in translation, and how what we refer to as Italian language and

[9] On this subject, see Bond (2014).
[10] See Bond *et al.* (2015).
[11] On this subject, see the introductory section to Burdett (2018).
[12] For a full list of the researchers of the project, see: https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/about/people/ [accessed 22 February 2022].
[13] The trailer of the exhibition is available on the website of the project.
[14] The volume *Italy is Out* (Badagliacca with Duncan, 2021) is the fruit of the collaboration between Mario Badagliacca and the project 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages'. Badagliacca visited some of the project's key locations conducting interviews with Italians or people of Italian descent before photographing them in familiar locations.

Italian culture exceed geographical/territorial confines and operate through a constant process of rewriting and reworking of familiar ideas of tradition, nation, and narration.[15] *Beyond Borders* was not simply a visual display. In its various forms (photography, interviews, documents), the material culture of the exhibition allowed the stories (whether they are those of the people who the researchers met, or the stories of the researchers themselves) to emerge and the visitor to participate in the experience of the exhibition.

Part of the work of the project was to encourage thinking concerning cultural translation across the educational sector, and to this end it conducted research revealing the centrality of a variety of language practices, ranging from multilingualism to translation, in migration contexts and multicultural societies.[16] The project co-produced research with Community High Schools in Edinburgh and developed methodologies aimed to embed the awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity within pedagogy, from primary to adult education.[17] It has also attempted to see how work of this kind can be embedded within the higher education sector. The principal means of doing so has been the development of the book series, *Transnational Modern Languages*, that has developed from the sharing and developing of ideas through the workshops, conferences, and activities of the project. The series is intended to explore how one can move beyond any reliance of the nation state as an organising principle; how the study of language and culture needs always to be seen as inseparable; how one can foreground the coming together of methodological approaches in the study of languages and culture in all their mobility and dynamism.[18] Intended to be student focused, each book is not complete in itself but is designed to be an opening onto a mode of study and to various bodies of scholarship. The texts in the series are intended to be interact with one another and they are anchored by the core volume *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook* which sets out to introduce key concepts within the study of the disciplinary field and which demonstrates the relevance of Modern Languages as a mode of linguistic and cultural analysis.[19]

One fundamentally important question is how far a transnational approach, such as the one that is outlined above, contributes to the drive – experienced with particular intensity within the arts and social sciences – to decolonise both methods of research and teaching practice. There are various ways in which that question can be addressed. Firstly, an emphasis on the transnational and the transcultural promotes the exploration of how knowledge of a given occurrence is always situated within sets of practices, within networks of power, and within systems of privilege. A cultural phenomenon of whatever type, a literary/non-literary text, or an instance of visual culture is necessarily always positioned within changing, overlapping, and continuous social, economic, and other configurations. A mode of analysis that concentrates on mobility is well equipped to uncover the mechanics of power that operate, often insidiously, within the way in which a given text or image communicates. The concentration on the complex and multi-faceted

[15] For further information on the development of the exhibition, see the articles by Duncan (2019), Gravano (2019) and Grechi (2019).

[16] This part of the project led to the policy report by Burdett *et al.* (2018).

[17] It is this element of the project, under the direction of Derek Duncan and Loredana Polezzi, that was developed together with the University of Namibia through the Global Challenges research funding, more specifically, by investigating the role of multilingualism in primary education and in the training of health professionals in Namibia. See Burdett *et al.* (2018).

[18] The blog posts on the website of the series https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/series/series–13275/ [accessed 22 February 2022] indicate the ideas behind each of the texts and how the series is intended to expand well beyond the initial set of volumes.

[19] Burns & Duncan (2022).

acts of translation involved in the representation or analysis of any kind of mobility encourages awareness of how human beings are situated in the systems of which they are part, how the complexity of their psychology reflects that involvement, or what Ania Loomba, in her study of colonialism and post-colonialism, refers to as 'the relationship between material and economic processes and human subjectivities'.[20]

The second point that it is important to make in response to this question is that in seeking to go beyond types of study that rely on the notion of culture as a kind of container (binding that which lies within its borders as a coherent whole), a transnational approach encourages sustained inquiry into questions of methodology.[21] In research which – to refer to the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith – pursues decolonising methodologies, the awareness of the extent to which means of pursuing knowledge are imbricated within systems of power with longstanding imperial antecedents is one of the most important motivations in seeking to develop ways of knowing that are fully reflective on the nature of their origins, structure, and purpose.[22] If one is attempting to see a given phenomenon as it takes shape across the habitual boundaries of language and culture, then one is necessarily engaged in an analytical activity that seeks to deploy a multiplicity of perspectives and that refers to a range of, sometimes contrasting, cultural settings, speaking positions, and theoretical frames.[23]

The third point, closely related to the second, is that a transnational approach which situates mobility at the heart of its inquiry and the modes of power relation that have been, are, and will be operative in motivating forms of displacement, clearly promotes understanding of the effects of centuries of colonial activity.[24] The analysis of temporality can, naturally, be centred on a variety of points. It can focus, for example, on the continued dynamism and the ongoing effects of processes that originate in hierarchical modes of societal organisation whose function is to ensure the economic benefit of one group over another. Alternatively, it can focus on the ways in which the same deep-laid processes make themselves manifest both within contemporary society and within the subjectivities of individuals, disrupting any notion of the linear progression of time or the easy separation of past, present, and future.

The key point is that the analysis of instances of past and contemporary mobility alerts us to the pervasiveness and the persistence of colonial modes of thought, it directs attention to the |nature of continuing examples of discrimination, and it indicates how any reader or spectator is caught up within societal processes of extremely long duration. Rather than seeing historically definable instances of mobility as discrete phenomena, a transnational approach seeks to place them in contiguous perspective. The ability to see the long shadow cast by coloniality is of crucial importance in addressing instances of past and contemporary mobility as apparently disparate as migration to the United States, settler colonialism in South America, or contemporary reactions to the migratory flow across the Strait of Sicily.[25] Lastly, a transnational approach to works of creative writing that address the realities of colonialism facilitates an understanding of two of the most

[20] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 3rd edn, p. 4.
[21] See, for example, Astrid Erll's inquiry (2011a) into memory not as a category that can be understood with reference to a single culture but as a 'truly transnational phenomenon'.
[22] See Smith (2012).
[23] The foundational study on the transcultural is Ortiz's (1940) work.
[24] On the global effects and continuing consequences of the 'colonial matrix of power', see Mignolo (2011).
[25] For examples of recent works which trace the multiple connections between networks and types of mobility, see Fiore (2017) and Ricatti (2018).

striking concerns of these works. The first is their concentration on questions relating to temporality; or, more specifically, the way in which the texts are almost without exception preoccupied with the continuation of happenings through diverse phases of time. The second is their contention that the issues that they explore are not confined to episodes that can be easily delimited, but are central to the consideration of the whole of any cultural formation.

Creative writing on Italian colonialism

It is on creative writing on the history of Italian colonialism that I wish to concentrate, arguing that an interpretation of this corpus that focuses on the representation of the interweaving of different types of mobility – and the power structures on which these types of displacement are based – fosters awareness of the depth at which the past, with all its hierarchies and pervasive forms of coercion, continues to impinge on the present. Luisa Passerini has argued that 'literature serves to throw bridges between history and memory while reminding us of the significance of both' and that it can often anticipate themes that are only later appropriated by historiography.[26] In the light of this insight, I also wish to suggest that inquiry into the texts' contrasting modes of communication and the radically shifting ways in which they position the imaginative engagement of their readers serve both to open new areas of inquiry, and to suggest methodological innovations in the way in which we approach how the legacies of colonialism are threaded into the transnational movement of people, repeated activities and ideas in the present.

One of the most striking aspects of literary representations of Italian colonialism that have appeared over recent years is, without question, the depth with which such texts are concerned with temporality. In the expanding corpus of works on the evolution of Italian expansionism, every phase of that evolution has been the subject of a literary exploration of one type or another. The early phase of Italian expansionism, when from 1889 Italy established a colonial presence in Eritrea and shortly afterwards it sought to do the same in Somalia, is the background to the works *Il tempo delle iene* (Turin, Einaudi, 2015) and *Albergo Italia* (Turin, Einaudi, 2015), published by the well-known writer of detective fiction, Carlo Lucarelli.[27] Italy's invasion of Libya in 1911, which met with the fierce and protracted resistance of the Arab-Berber population,[28] is the subject of the extensive literary production of Alessandro Spina (1927–2013), elements of which have recently been published in English.[29] The Italian invasion of Ethiopia, launched in 1935 at the very apex of the power of Mussolini's regime, has been represented through multiple forms of creative writing since the end of the Second World War.[30] Among the most compelling accounts of the realities of imperialism and resistance to have been published in recent years are Gabriella Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* of 2007,[31] Marco Consentino, Domenico Dodaro and Carlo Panella's novel of 2017, *I fantasmi dell'Impero*, and Maaza Mengiste's 2019 evocation of the horrors of the

[26] Passerini (1999). See also Erll (2011b).

[27] For an analysis of how race and colonialism were integral to modern Italian national culture, see Welch (2016). For an analysis of work of Lucarelli, see Triulzi (2013).

[28] On the consequences of the Italian invasion of Libya, see Ahmida (2006).

[29] Alessandro Spina, the pen name of Basili Shafik Khouzam, was the winner of the Bagutta prize in 2007. His most well-known collection of work, *I confini dell'ombra*, was published in 2016 by Darf Publishers (London), translated by André Naffis-Sahely, as *The Confines of the Shadow*. For a recent study on Spina's work, see Dagnino (2016).

[30] For a discussion of how the invasion and occupation have been represented in writing in Ethiopia, see Marzagora (2018).

[31] On the significance of Ghermandi's novel, see Manzin (2011).

invasion, *The Shadow King*. The transgenerational nature of the experience of colonialism has been brought powerfully into focus by Igiaba Scego's work of 2015, *Adua* (Florence, Giunti) and by Francesca Melandri's novel *Sangue giusto* (2017).[32]

As intricately crafted acts of communication intended to enhance an intellectual and emotional awareness of the significance of a critical phase of Italian history, the ways in which each text addresses the past's relationship to the present are highly complex. As works of fiction, governed by conventions regarding character, setting, and plot, they represent events as they are seen, experienced, lived, suffered, and subsequently elaborated from *within* the subjectivities of the protagonists of each novel. The essential point is that what the texts are intimately concerned with is the relation between societal organisation and individual psychology; in their focus on this, they illuminate how certain patterns of thought and behaviour have a lengthy pre-history and an enduring legacy. One approach that allows us to gain a greater purchase on how the writing addresses the endurance through time of the realities of colonialism is to read the texts with reference to key insights from social constructivism on the relationship of the individual and society. Or, to put this point slightly differently, to look at what the texts are communicating in the light of a methodological approach drawn from the social sciences that explores the constructed nature of both reality and the individual. In their foundational work on the social construction of reality and the processes that occur through time within that perpetually occurring construction, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that we need always to see society not as partaking in the inert givenness of nature but as the product the outpouring of human activity into the world.[33] Once externalised, the material and conceptual products of human labour attain an objective facticity that acts back upon their original producers, being absorbed as a given set of realities into their thought processes, imaginings, and habitual modes of behaviour in what Nancy Ammerman describes as 'a social matrix of micro-interaction and macrostructures'.[34] In thinking about the range of meanings that are conveyed by creative writing on the history of Italian colonialism, it is true to say that the works are deeply concerned with the ideological impulses and fantasies of collective aggrandisement that led to the *externalisation* of the expansionist vision of reality; that they are concerned with the many forms of violence and coercion that the *objectification* of that vision entailed; and that they are deeply preoccupied with how that reality, once it attained a material facticity of its own, was and has been subject to a multi-dimensional process of *internalisation*, absorbed, that is, in the layers of consciousness, memory, feeling, and perception of those who were, or who have been, closest to it.

Looking at the texts with reference to theoretical thinking on the mutual dependence of the collective construction of reality and the interior world of the individual sharpens appreciation of one of the primary claims of creative writing on Italian colonialism, namely that no appreciation of Italian culture is possible without an awareness of this episode in Italy's past. It is worth, therefore, looking at how the writing serves to clarify our understanding of the movement of the different phases of the production of specific realities and how it helps us to see how this movement is experienced from radically different ethnic, economic, and social positions. Following this line of inquiry, a good place to begin is to look at how the writing provides a vantage point from which to see how a body of imaginings that aimed to configure the material world were the subject of an

[32] For a recent study of Melandri's text, see Burdett (2020).
[33] See Berger & Luckmann (1966).
[34] Ammerman (2020).

extraordinarily rapid process of externalisation. In bringing the sequence of events that defined the expansionist chapter of Italian history to the attention of as wide a public as possible, fiction on colonialism serves a function that is separate but nevertheless akin to that performed by works of historians on the crimes committed during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. The intention is, in other words, to ensure a widespread and meaningful awareness of the past. The title of Ian Campbell's work (2017), *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame*, makes this very clear. However, as already indicated, creative writing encourages an awareness that is not achieved through historical reconstruction, but through a narrative involving the dramatic interaction of a relatively circumscribed set of characters. The elaboration of the imperial vision and its eventual externalisation do not, therefore, emerge primarily as an historical process that can be documented through archival research, but as a collective project that is the product of, at the same time as it is threaded into, the psychology of individuals.

A very good example of this is presented by Francesca Melandri's text, *Sangue giusto*, the theme of which is the gradual and to some extent chance realisation on the part of the novel's main protagonist, Ilaria Profeti, that her father, Attilio, has been involved in the atrocities committed in the wake of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The action of the novel moves continually between 2010, when Ilaria starts to inquire into her father's background, and the late 1930s – the time he spent in and around Addis Ababa as part of the Italian occupying force. What Melandri does is to place the fictional character of the father in the presence of individuals who played a prominent part in the imposition of Italian rule in Ethiopia. Thus, the novel engineers encounters between its fictional character, Profeti, and people like Rodolfo Graziani, Governor-General of Italian East Africa from 1936 to 1937 and renowned for the brutality of his suppression of all forms of resistance, and the well-known anthropologist, Lidio Cipriani.[35] In such scenes, the reader is invited into a space in which one hears a dramatic rendering of their official pronouncements. Such pronouncements are accompanied by the author's recreation of elements of their character and behaviour that can be deduced from archival records or from statements contained in the writings of their contemporaries. At one stage, Profeti is invited to assist Cipriani in the preparation of the Abyssinian pavilion for the planned exhibition of Italy's overseas territories in Naples:

> La Mostra d'Oltremare [...] vetrina internazionale del redivivo Impero Romano, sarebbe durata più di un anno. Mussolini non aveva lesinato risorse per costruirla. [...] Ai piedi della Torre del Partito ("alta quarantasei metri!") la colossale statua della Vittoria Fascista [...] imbracciava il fascio littorio come una mitragliatrice. Nell'edificio centrale, un gigantesco affresco di Mussolini su un destriero immacolato dominava la riproduzione a grandezza naturale della galea di Marco Querini, caposquadra dell'ala sinistra alla battaglia di Lepanto: efficace rappresentazione dicevano i notiziari, "della millenaria supremazia della civiltà di Roma nelle terre d'Oltremare". (*Sangue giusto*, p. 305)

> The Overseas exhibition […] the international showcase of the reborn Roman Empire, would last for over a year. Mussolini had spared no resources to put it in place. […] At the foot of the Tower of the Party ('forty-six metres high!') stood the colossal statue of the Fascist Victory […] holding the Fascist Lictor as if it were a machinegun. In the central pavilion, a huge fresco of Mussolini on an immaculate horse dominated life-size reproduction of the galley of Marco Querini, the commander of the left wing at the battle of Lepanto: an effective representation, according to the news reports 'of the millennial supremacy of Roman civilisation in the lands overseas'.[36]

[35] For a history of the development of Italian anthropology during the years of expansionist colonial activity, see Sòrgoni (1998).

[36] The translation of the quotation is my own.

The cumulative effect of seeing the imperial project through the eyes and in the language of some of those who played such a significant role within its building is that we see the empire not simply as a geopolitical reality in the process of construction but, to some degree, as the externalisation of collectively orchestrated emotions. The reported speech of a figure like Cipriani or Graziani reflects an individual appropriation of collective sentiment: within the speech of Graziani, we see the need for self-affirmation, the fantasy of grandeur, the predisposition towards violence, the worshipping of power, and the desire to humiliate and oppress the other.[37] What writing of this kind also does is to suggest ways in which we can read accounts of empire that were written at the moment of its creation, doing so in such a way that we interpret them not as commentaries, intended to convey information about what was in the process of occurring, but as clues for understanding the range of emotional investment in the notion of empire.

There is, however, a further point that is crucial in establishing that colonialism cannot be seen as a parenthesis within the Italian experience. Though the liberal administrations that preceded Mussolini's regime had certainly pursued expansionist policies, it was during fascism that imperialism reached its apogee. Indeed, any attempt to understand the phenomenon of Italian fascism without seeing the extent to which it was intertwined with the purpose of expanding Italy's borders can only go so far. The intention of the regime to rupture existing social structures in order to transform the material world of Italians and their subjective experience of that world was accompanied from an early stage with the dramatic process of fashioning new realities in Italy's overseas territories. Furthermore, as a movement that placed enormous emphasis on the anticipation of a better world to come, fascism sought to draw huge propagandistic benefit from its imperial endeavours. Italian East Africa, by virtue of its rapidly changing physical environment, was presented as a mirror of national life under fascism and as a site where the power of the state, together with the forceful imposition of the structures of the modern world, could be experienced to the full. Vast exhibitions were staged and planned to be staged on the Italian mainland with the intention of presenting Italians with a vision of the magnificent future to which fascism was directing the country. Within this narrative of future Italian greatness, reflections on the power of ancient Rome and images of its enduring legacy abounded, suggesting that Mussolini's Italy was *visibly* in contact with the example of imperial Rome.

If it is true that any effort to separate fascism from imperialism is likely to prove futile, and if, therefore, it follows that Italian colonialism draws from the same complex of imaginings, beliefs, philosophies of self-understanding, and perceptions, then it is true to say that, like fascism, colonialism is deeply ingrained within Italian culture. Or more precisely, it is true to say that, like fascism, the Italian colonial experiment was a dramatic externalisation of tendencies that were buried very deeply within the cultural configurations that collectively we refer to as Italian, and which are, even now, by no means extinct. Part of the reason why the first volume of Antonio Scurati's fictionalised biography of Mussolini, *M. Il figlio del secolo* (2018), has achieved such a high level of success lies in the fact that its particular manner of representing the unfolding of history brings to the fore the role played by individual psychology in the elaboration of ideologies that subsequently affect the whole of a society.[38] In a precisely analogous fashion, in works that use the medium of fiction to explore the ramifications of Italy's past as a colonial power, the emphasis

[37] All these features are abundantly in evidence in Graziani's own writings (Graziani 1932; 1937; 1948).
[38] Scurati (2018).

on human agency provides a powerful lens through which to see the realities of colonialism and their endurance through time.

Accepting that creative writing on past expansionism shows how the workings of colonialism reflected the human nature of their construction and perpetuation, the writing also asks its reader to consider how the products of collective human imagining become objectified within the structures of societal organisation, solidified in architectural structures, in collective practices, and in the repetition of daily routines. It may well be that a vision of national grandeur that pulled together past, present, and future was central to imperialism as it reached its apex under fascism. But the ideal society, the vision of which was enshrined in exhibitions, in public speeches, and in elaborate mass rituals depended upon the appropriation of another sovereign state, the subordination of those who resisted, and the establishment of a hierarchy between settler and indigenous populations, and cannot, therefore, be defined as anything other than as a racialised utopian fantasy that was subsequently enacted.[39] To speak of the process by which the extension of Italian rule across the Horn of Africa was made a reality is to speak of a process that was characterised by unremitting violence.

It is the role of archival research rather than fiction to document the meaning of the suppression of resistance in the wake of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia and the genocidal extent to which those acts of suppression were prepared to go. What creative writing allows its reader to do is to gain a vicarious experience of the layers of brutality involved in the establishment of the new imperial order. Or, more precisely, what it has the facility to represent, perhaps more effectively than other media, is the range of positionalities that people are forced to occupy when confronted with the forceful imposition of ideologically motivated constructions of reality. In work on the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, one encounters, on the one side, representations of figures who identify entirely with the coercive imposition of a radically new order. Part of each novel's inquiry is concerned with those elements of human psychology that allow participation in acts of violence intended to facilitate the creation of new realities. On the other side, one encounters figures whose stories represent the circumstances in which resistance takes place. The drama at the heart of each narrative derives not only from the alternation between the drive to exert power on one hand and resistance on the other, but from the exposure of the opposing interior worlds – and the realities that they give rise to – of the protagonists of each novel.

At least part of the acclaim that Ethiopian-American writer Maaza Mengiste's work *The Shadow King* (2019) has received is due to the depth and the subtlety with which it addresses these issues. Set at the very moment when the assertion of Italian rule in East Africa was at its most ferocious, the novel unsparingly evokes the role played by racially motivated violence in the new world that was being created. It is, however, resistance that is the primary focus of the novel and the meaning that it assumes in the life stories of the novel's principal characters. Rather than resistance assuming a generic meaning for all those involved, it has very specific meanings for each person depending on the subject positions that they occupy with regard to interlocking systems of power. Much of the action of the novel is seen from the perspective of Hirut, a recently orphaned young woman who has joined the household of the aristocratic leader, Kidane, and his wife, Aster. As a member of the household of one of the commanders of the Emperor Haile Selassie's army, she experiences, at the front line, what it means when one social reality seeks to impose itself with shocking and unrepenting violence upon another. As an orphan whose social standing has been sharply diminished

[39] On the history and legacy of Italian colonialism, see: Ben-Ghiat & Fuller (2005) and Chelati Dirar *et al.* (2011).

by the death of her parents, she experiences the imminence of the invasion from a familial setting in which there are severe limitations on what she can and cannot do. And she experiences an episode of national extremity as a woman, who has to contend with the identifications, inferences, and assigned patterns of behaviour that are made on the basis of gender.

The Shadow King, as its many reviewers have pointed out, is an intricately crafted narrative that sees the shaping of a moment of enormous historical significance – the attempted translation of a gargantuan imperial fantasy into the working of an imposed social order – through the complex range of positionalities that people inhabit.[40] In the afterword to the text, Mengiste briefly describes the writing process and some of the sources of her inspiration. She refers to her great-grandmother, Getey, who answered Haile Selassie's call to resist and, though very young, went to war. Thus, a figure like Hirut is both a composite and a means of pursuing an epistemological inquiry through the medium of literature. In her literary creation there are the stories of Ethiopian women whose actions can be traced from archival and non-written sources or, in the words of the author, women who 'even today have remained no more than errant lines in faded documents' (*The Shadow King*, p. 426). Her story, as it is represented in *The Shadow King*, is built around the questions that she asks herself at the very height of the novel's action, 'what do girls like her know about rebellion, what do girls like her know about resistance, what do girls like her know but how to live and obey and keep quiet until it is time to die?' (p. 307). As a character, she functions as a means of exemplifying the intersectional consequences of the subject positions of people who lived through a sequence of cataclysmic events. She also provides a viewpoint from which the operation of various systems is placed in startling perspective.[41]

Of the forces whose operation she witnesses through her acts of defiance, clearly the most prominent is the dynamic societal process that, depending on racialised hierarchical thinking and associated practices and behaviours, sets one community above another.[42] When, in the action of the story, she is captured and imprisoned following a clash between Italian and Ethiopian troops, the extremity of the forces in whose midst she is situated emerges with a clarity that is horrifying. The prison in which she is detained is not a place that functions according to any principle of international law but a space that has been constructed to mask a programme of indiscriminate killing. The description of the prison and the macabre principles by which it functions is not, of course, intended as a literal representation of a real space but as a means of evoking the massacres that occurred in the wake of the Italian occupation of East Africa and the mentality by which they were sanctioned. Carlo Fucelli, the commandant of the prison, serves as a means of dramatising how an individual psychological disposition could mesh with the collective imperial project: he exemplifies the belief that the construction of a glorious future justifies the deployment of any means for its fulfilment; he shows reserves of sadism that can easily be unleashed for what is perceived as the pursuit of the common good; he demonstrates the ease of the transition from an individual to a collective sense of self.[43] The description of the circumstances in which Hirut and her fellow

[40] See, for example, Alex Clark's review of *The Shadow King* in the *Guardian*, 18 January 2020.

[41] An approach to Mengiste's text based on the work of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw on intersectionality would be highly productive. On Intersectionality, see Cho *et al.* (2013).

[42] Resistance assumes a variety of meanings in the text but one of those is the defiance of existing categories. There is a link to be made between the nature of resistance to fascism as it is represented in the text and as it is represented by women resistance fighters in Italy during the Second World War. On this subject, see Liliana Cavani's documentary, *La donna nella resistenza*, 1965.

[43] The enhanced experience of affect, the diminished sense of rationality, and the shift, basic to fascism, from an individual to a collective sense of self are all in evidence. For Freud's theory of the forces that ego endures when subject to the pressures of the crowd, see Freud (1921).

prisoner Aster are photographed and of how images of them are disseminated among the Italian troops is a dramatic representation of the objectification of African women that occurred throughout the period of Italian expansionism.[44] Lastly, the evocation of the situation reveals how everything within the new environment is racialised. Ettore Navarra, the soldier who is tasked with taking photographs of Hirut and Aster, is Jewish and is himself the object of mounting discrimination. As they stare at each other through the lens of the camera, we are asked to consider how each is positioned within a connected sequence of inimical framings of identity. Mengiste writes:

> This is what Ettore sees when he looks at the girl: That there is a dying away that happens in a breathing body. There is a tumble into oblivion that occurs while we are still inclined toward movement. Hirut cannot stop blinking and mouthing an inaudible word. She is swaying and bending to the ground. (p. 349)

Recent works of fiction on the story of colonialism in the early part of the 20th century provide us with a highly sophisticated mechanism for understanding how the expansionist project is bound up with the history of cultural and social configurations that we can refer to as Italian culture. The work provides us with a means of considering how ideas and imaginings are projected onto the material world, and how those ideas and fantasies are objectivated so that they become reality. Fiction also provides us with a vehicle to understand the infinitely complex process by which that world is internalised by the individual, made subjectively real, incorporated into the structures of consciousness.

One means of understanding how the process of translating a given external reality into subjective experience continues over lengthy stretches of time, is to refer to the concept of haunting. By doing so, one is not trying to conjure up, in any simple way, a notion of the apparition of the dead in the world of the living, or the eerie replaying within present time of an event that happened at a significant juncture in the past. Rather, in raising the concept of haunting, one is referring to an established body of theoretical literature and evoking a collection of related images and narrative processes that capture the experience of a radical disjunction in the linear sequence of time and the consequent unfolding of deep-laid psychological disturbances.[45] Or, rather, one refers to a concept that enables us to attain greater purchase on the sudden or gradual sensation of reality ceasing to seem stable or predictable, of the sense that established ontological distinctions have been disrupted, or the feeling that events that, though rationally consigned to the past, appear to exercise an unnerving and unexplained agency in the here and now.[46] Perhaps most suggestively of all, the use of the concept of haunting provides not only a means of exploring deeply troubled emotional states but of investigating the very operation of subjectivity. One might go so far as to say that the language of haunting, with its facility for charting the cognitive disturbance generated by what is unfamiliar or the ease with which it associates memory with fear, provides an indispensable key for unlocking how the internalisation of disturbing cultural or social constructions is transmitted over succeeding decades.

All of the works to which I have so far referred are, to some degree, epistemological tools for exploring the disconcerting processes through which the internalisation of the world created by the

[44] On this subject, see Iyob (2005).

[45] Two examples of works that address the question of haunting as a psychological and sociological phenomenon are Frosh (2013) and Gordon (2008).

[46] On this notion of the exercise of agency, see Fisher (2017).

Italian expansionist project as it reached its apex in the 1930s is transmitted from one generation to another. Ghermandi's work, *Regina di fiori e di perle*, is explicitly concerned with the uncovering by one generation of the life stories of another. In Scego's novel, *Adua*, a similar dynamic is at work although it explores different life experiences. The structure of *Adua* functions as a means of interrogating the intersection of a series of highly coercive structures and how the functioning of the external world that these create is internalised by the individual. The novel takes the form of two overlapping stories. One follows the father, Mohamed Ali Zoppe, a Somali whose exceptional linguistic proficiency leads him to act as an interpreter working for the Italians during the 1930s and subsequently involved in the invasion of Ethiopia. The other story, delivered by his daughter, Adua, traces her early life in Somalia, her troubled relationship with her father, her decision to seek a new life in Italy, and the progress of her dream of pursuing a career in cinema.

The novel involves the reader not only in the gradual revelation of how each character internalises the world of which they become a part, but in an exploration of how the experiences of father and daughter are mutually reflective and influence the interpretation of each other. The story of the father traces the path that led him to become involved with the apparatus of Italian colonial rule and records his experience of its laws and its mode of operation, its everyday brutalities, and its patterns of discrimination. Above all, it charts the searing impression that this world makes upon his subjectivity, it records his feeling of betrayal, and his uneasy relationship with his daughter. Towards the end of the novel, he is increasingly portrayed as haunted by his own consciousness.

> Quello che non capiva, Zoppe lo disegnava. Quell'uomo giallognolo era la sua coscienza che prendeva corpo. La zia Bibi glielo aveva sempre detto: "La nostra coscienza ha un viso".[47]
>
> Whatever Zoppe did not understand, he drew. That yellowish man was his conscience which was assuming a form of its own. Aunt Bibi had always said to him: 'Our conscience has a face'.

Adua's story, as Lucy Rand explores in her work on the subject, bears the traces of the shame felt by her father.[48] In the harrowing narration of the betrayal of her dreams of following an acting career in post-war Italy, there is an echo of the brutal reality in which her father found himself enmeshed decades before. The world of cinema, in the debased version to which Adua is exposed, replicates the exploitative and viciously male-centred nature of the colonial enterprise. Remembering her experiences, Adua describes her sense of self:

> In Somalia ero una ragazzina piena di sogni e voglia di vedere il mondo. Loro in pochi mesi mi hanno manipolata, seviziata, usata, trasformata. Mi sembrano passati anni, non mesi. Mi sento tanto vecchia, quasi decrepita.[49]
>
> In Somalia, I was a young girl full of dreams and the desire to see the world. In a few months, they had manipulated, tortured, used, and transformed me. Years not months seemed to have passed. I feel so old, almost decrepit.

It is in the final pages of the book that Scego reflects briefly on the resonances of the story that her novel has told. She refers to her own family history and the fact that her grandfather acted as a translator in Somalia during the years in which Italy pursued its expansionist programme with the greatest indifference to international opinion. She refers also to some of the authorial decisions that

[47] *Adua*, e-edition, location 1395. The translation is my own.
[48] Rand (2020).
[49] *Adua*, e-edition, loc. 1485. The translation is my own.

determined the structure that the novel ultimately assumed; in particular, the desire to find a literary format that would allow her to place three historical moments in juxtaposition – the colonial period of the late 1930s, the Italy of the post-war economic boom, and the present – and to weave together the stories of three characters who, in her words, 'dance in the architecture of this story'.[50] The intricate format of the novel promotes an understanding of how the experiences of a person who belongs to one generation translate into those of another who belongs to a succeeding generation. The format also promotes an understanding of how the unresolved torments of one figure play out within the psychology of another. The story uses Adua's implied dialogue with the ghost of her father as a means of delving into the layers of her subjectivity, but there is a further dimension to what this dialogue reveals. Through the novel's shifting perspectives, we begin to see that what we are dealing with is not simply how individuals address the repercussions of an event that is securely located in history, but rather how each character is forced to contend with different articulations of a reality that in some fundamental respects does not change. The whole architecture of colonialism is legitimated by commitment to the hierarchical placing of one ethnicity above another through an organised discourse of race. Though, in the Italian case, the colonial edifice collapsed soon after Italy's entry into the Second World War,[51] that discourse continues in people's attitudes, behaviours, and referral to stereotypes. The officially sanctioned racism that Zoppe witnesses persists in the exploitation to which Adua is subject and in the discrimination that her husband, a recent migrant to Italy, suffers. Deeply concerned with the alteration but also the continuation of structures through time, *Adua* is a story of both individual and *societal* haunting.

Conclusion

All of the writers to whose work I have referred use family and family history as a lens through which to see the working of temporality. Specifically, in the novels by Melandri and Scego the recovery of the identity of the father leads to an inquiry into the societies of which both Attilio Profeti and Mohamed Ali Zoppe were a part. The inquiry is pursued along very distinctive lines, but the most significant results are shared. In each case the inquiry leads the daughter to track the traces of a persistent memory and to begin the process of coming to terms with that memory. As characters like Adua and Ilaria explore their respective relationships with the ghost of their fathers, so they develop a renewed knowledge of their subjectivity and the nature of their own being in the world. But there is more to the apparition of the figure of the father in the mind and the imagination of the daughter; a ghost does not appear simply to tell a story from the past but to impress the relevance of that story upon the living and to convey a sense of menace that comes from the future. The very apparition of the ghost changes how the configuration of reality is seen: 'time', in the words of Shakespeare quoted by Derrida, is 'out of joint'.[52] What the sensing of the presence of the dead reveals to the living is that the same cultural and social mechanisms in which they were enmeshed, whether as victim or as perpetrator, continue to operate within the present though in attenuated and much more surreptitious forms. Ways of thinking of colonial derivation continue to exercise a powerful, though concealed and largely unacknowledged, influence on the ways in

[50] *Adua*, e-edition, loc. 1901.
[51] For a detailed history of each phase in the history of Italian colonialism, see Labanca (2002).
[52] Derrida (1994).

which ideas regarding the nature of the identity of Italian society and its future direction are represented and disseminated. Images with strongly colonial connotations are embedded within political discourse, within practices of memory, within perceptions of diversity and within attitudes towards mobility and migration.[53]

One of the primary roles that creative writing performs is to use the immense resources of the medium as a means to illuminate, as a light does in a mineshaft, processes that are occurring at the very deepest level of a culture and which are occluded within the everyday bustle of a society. If its role is seen in this perspective, what the corpus of writing on Italy's colonial past reveals is that mechanisms of thought and association that while, at one level, *are* confined to the past, nevertheless continue to have a strange, concealed, yet detectable agency in the everyday reality of the present. Part of the reason why the presence in urban spaces of statues of figures who played a role within the history of slavery or within some of the worst excesses of imperialism, excites such a degree of popular protest is not explained only by the depth of revulsion for the nature and scale of past human injustice, though that is of course its primary motivation. It is explained also by the fact that symbols articulate with belief structures and imaginaries: a publicly sanctioned monument does not only confer legitimacy on a type of memory but upon the worldview of which that memory is a part. The danger of not exposing the connotations of commemorative symbols is that the imaginaries of which they are a part can otherwise be seen as a legitimate part of the story of a collective and part also, therefore, of the store of past examples on which contemporary society draws in order to decide its pathways towards the future. It is easy enough to see how the external reality of a society that condones the public display of the symbols of past regimes can rapidly begin to seem uncanny in its equivocal relation to a past and indeed menacing in its toleration of markers of injustice.

Any of the multiple ways in which the texts can be read alerts us to the role that they fulfil in revealing how the spectre of the colonial past continues to haunt the present. Yet the work that they accomplish is, of course, achieved in concert with the other media with which the authors communicate and the collective projects with which they are involved. The suggestion that is made in Melandri's novel, *Sangue giusto*, that the past is not simply the past, but a potential reflection of the future is carried forward in her collaboration with the filmmaker Sabrina Varani in the documentary, *Pagine nascoste*.[54] Ghermandi's work as a writer and as an oral historian is accompanied by her theatrical work and her extensive collaborations with Ethiopian and Italian musicians in performances that evoke the tragedy of occupation and the impetus behind resistance.[55] Similarly, Scego's work as a novelist goes together with an extensive journalistic output, including articles for the *Guardian* and *Internazionale*, and numerous collaborations with documentary filmmakers.[56]

The purpose of alluding to the multifaceted nature of the cultural production of each author is twofold. It is first to suggest that the texts do not only open up areas of inquiry for academic research

[53] Indications of this are given extensively in Bond *et al.* (2015); in Brioni & Gulema (2018); and in Deplano & Pes (2014).
[54] In Varani's documentary, *Pagine nascoste* (2017), Melandri and Scego visit instances, including a monument built to commemorate Graziani, of the resurgence of colonial thinking.
[55] For details of Ghermandi's Atse Tewodros project, see https://www.gabriella-ghermandi.it/music/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/AtseTewodrosProject-booklet.pdf [accessed 21 January 2022].
[56] For an account of the dimensions of the work of Scego, see the page on the author, compiled by Simone Brioni, on the website of the Centre for Contemporary Women's Writing at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, https://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-study-contemporary-womens-writing/ccww-languages/italian/igiaba-scego [accessed 12 November 2021].

to explore, they also direct attention to the kinds of knowledge that are created through the exploitation of the properties of different media. It is secondly to suggest that the question of the interrelation between media and the development of enhanced societal consciousness is a fitting object of research in itself. Indeed, if one is attempting to explore the legacies of colonial activity, especially the way in which they are present within the fabric of contemporary society, and if one is attempting to do so in a range of perspectives, then research into the transmedial communication of knowledge is of undeniable importance. Despite the growth of academic interest in the history of Italian expansionism, the chapter is not an established part of public consciousness; it does not figure prominently in the school curriculum, and it does not inform the debate on highly topical questions such as migration to Italy, the enduring presence of diffuse racism in today's Italy, or the country's response to Black Lives Matter. For that situation to be reversed and for critical awareness of the legacy of colonialism to be developed, the convergence of scholarly and creative engagement with the material traces of the past is necessary at every level. By analysis of the modes – literary, visual, and performative – through which the colonial past is represented, by inquiry into the persistence of images and ways of thinking of colonial derivation, and, crucially, by bringing these areas of inquiry and practice into dialogue with one another through the engagement of groups across society, one can fully engage – at a level that is both societal and transnational – with the ghosts of the Italian empire.

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To cite the article: Burdett, C. (2022), 'The transnational study of Italian culture and the ghosts of empire', *Journal of the British Academy*, 10: 1–19. https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010s1.001

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk