

*Connectedness, Identity and Alienation in some Italian Novels and Films Depicting
Contact between People from Italy and People from Countries Other than Italy in the
21st century*

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The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013



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This paper originates from two main observations:

- i. more criticism exists on narratives written by foreign residents in Italy on their experience than on fiction including migrant characters written by Italian authors;
- ii. even ideologically progressive writers have at times depicted foreigners in restricted or negative ways, so I have been looking, and I have found, representations of positive interaction between new residents and previously established residents.

The paper will first provide a summary of some data and problems connected with immigration into Italy, next it will outline modes of literary representation, and finally it will focus on portrayal of migrants by some Italian authors.

One consideration to start with is the fact that Italy was a country of emigration until the 1980s, a decade during which this pattern changed and migrants started to arrive in Italy in significant numbers, mainly to find better living conditions, but also due to the favourable geographical position of Italy in the Mediterranean which is close to former communist states and also North Africa, areas from which many people have emigrated in the last three decades. In some cases Italy is seen as a first stop towards further movement to other EU countries while in other cases it is considered a final arrival point. Meanwhile, Italians have continued to migrate even though numbers are lower than in the past. In the 21st century, Italian transnational travel, tourism and study exchanges have been common, especially among people aged from 18 to 38. Whereas Italian emigration is mentioned in passing it is not an aspect of the problem analysed in this paper. Allow me therefore provide some details on the presence of immigrants in Italy.

The number of non EU foreign residents more than doubled over nine years. It went from 1,549,373 to 3,600,000 in 2012, thereby forming about 6% of the total number of residents in Italy¹. Various bills were brought into law over those years in order to regulate migratory fluxes by granting access to a limited number of people from countries outside Europe: this consists of 100,000 access permits in 2011 but illegal migrants should also be added to this even though their precise number is not easy to determine. These laws also control work permits, family reunions, expulsion, and other matters.²

¹ http://www.stranieriinitalia.it/attualita-istat_triplicati_in_dieci_anni_gli_immigrati_residenti_in_italia_16527.html.

² Law 943 (1986) introduced rules on subordinate work and expulsion of illegal migrants. Law 39 (1990), or Legge Martelli (after the name of the Minister who signed it), introduced some civil rights for non -EU migrants. Law 40 (1998), named Legge Turco-Napolitano from the members of the PD (the centre-left Democratic Party) who created it, ruled on the conditions at which, after five years of stay in Italy, permanent residency can be given, and norms were written on health assistance, family reunion, discrimination, and other aspects of the migrants' condition (cf. <http://www.altrodiritto.unifi.it/ricerche/minori/cimmino/cap2.htm>). The 1998 bill was predominantly open towards integration and widening of rights for migrants, but law 189 (2002), known as Legge Bossi-Fini from the names of the centre-right main proposers, subsequently revised the previous rules by introducing "Centri di permanenza temporanea" (temporary hostels) for migrants before their credentials are established, collaboration with the police of other states to prevent illegal immigration,

The majority of migrants come from Romania (they formed 21% of the total in 2011), followed by non EU Albania, Morocco and China but other nationalities are also represented. The reasons for migrant travel are similar to those observed elsewhere and derive mostly from poverty to searching for work, political problems and asylum from war situations. A minority move for other reasons such as employment at multinational companies and a wide variety of personal motivations. The levels of education are 40.9% who obtained a High School Certificate, and 9.2% who were awarded a University Degree. In 2012, the unemployment rate among migrants was 12%, four points higher than Italians.³

The extent of un-connectedness and alienation are clearly seen in the fact that migrants are not always welcome in Italy. Despite the above-mentioned progress with the legalisation process, many migrants are often underpaid, they carry out difficult and heavy work and are often compelled to work in the black economy. In addition they often experience prejudice and hostility. In 2008, Italians were almost equally divided: 44.5% saw migrants as a threat while 44.6% believed they were a useful resource. 35.1% thought they presented a danger for national culture, identity and religion,⁴ and 36% viewed them as a destabilizing factor in the employment sector.⁵ A further 50.7% stated that it was mainly migrants who made crime figures swell.⁶

As regards identity, Abdelmalek Sayad, in his theory of immigration, correctly insists on the attitude of host societies to keep migrants temporary and separate despite the fact that temporariness is a vague notion after years spent abroad.⁷ This approach is not unusual in Italy and obviously threatens the process of elaboration of identity of outsiders between their native and acquired countries.⁸ Among the political parties, Lega Nord (the Northern League) is opposed to non-European immigration, and segregation measures were taken by some local authorities in northern Italy.⁹ By contrast, a number of voluntary associations,

and work permits given to people who have Italian job contracts before traveling. Re. recent fluxes of migration into Italy, cf. the official website of the Italian Department for Internal Affairs: <http://www.interno.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/temi/immigrazione/sottotema00101/>.

³ http://www.stranieriinitalia.it/attualita-istat_triplicati_in_dieci_anni_gli_immigrati_residenti_in_italia_16527.html

⁴ Much like 33.5% in the UK, but much above the 22% of France.

⁵ This percentage was 36.6% in Germany, and 47.7% in the UK.

⁶ Compared to 21.6% in France and 36.6% in Germany. For all data in this paragraph cf. Demos-Polis, <http://www.demos.it/a00217.php>.

⁷ A. Sayad, *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité*, vol. I: *L'illusion du provisoire* (1991), Paris, Raison d'agir, 2006. Cf. the present writer's review at <http://cartescoperterecensionietesti.blogspot.ie/2013/02/adbelmalek-sayad-limmigration-ou-les.html>

⁸ Re. the various aspects of identity formation and interaction with host-country cultures, cf. in particular Kim Young Yun, *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*, Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi, Sage, 2001.

⁹ For instance a wall was built in Padua to separate foreigners from Italians.

mostly of Christian, humanitarian and left-wing orientation, offer support through charities and defend civil rights. Integration is encouraged by initiatives such as language learning and special school curricula.

It is clear that the long-term trend in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, is towards an increasingly pronounced multicultural society.¹⁰ It is difficult to imagine a way back from the resulting process of intercultural hybridization which goes with globalization.¹¹ According to a 2009 OECD report, “immigration brings new ideas, new energy, new connections” but it “brings challenges, too”.¹² Hopefully Italian society will be able to deal tolerantly and humanely with this in the future.

When moving on to literary representations of energy and challenges posed by migration, it should first be noted that fiction and poetry have been written both by migrants and Italian authors.

Strangely, perhaps, more literary/sociological criticism can be found on migrant authors rather than on Italians who write stories about or including migrants. This is why more time is devoted in this paper to the latter. However, let me provide some basic information starting with authors who originally came from outside Italy.

In the 21st century, narratives have been written in Italian or, with the contribution of Italian co-authors, by non-European migrants. This type of fiction has been given different names. In 2006 Raffaele Taddeo defined it as “letteratura nascente” (newly-born literature, or emerging literature) to indicate its novelty as well as its potential for development. Other definitions were also adopted such as the successful “letteratura della migrazione” (migration literature), a phrase which was used in Taddeo’s own subtitle,¹³ and “letteratura migrante” (migrant

¹⁰ Among the numerous supporters of this view cf. J.C. Guillebaud, *Le commencement d'un monde. Vers une modernité métisse*, Paris, Seuil, 2008: “Que nous le voulions ou non, nous serons pluriels et métis [...]. Il va s’agir [...] de s’ouvrir à la différence sans renier pur autant ce que nous, Occidentaux, nous sommes et ce que nous croyons encore” (p. 13).

¹¹ On hybridization, cf., among others, M.M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2005, a volume where processes of cultural imperialism and cultural globalization are examined and seen in the context of power rather than simply pluralism. In this book the mixing of cultures is analysed from a critical perspective.

¹² “Immigration brings new ideas, new energy, new connections that are reflected in our daily lives in thousands of ways – we eat Italian pizzas, Indian curries and Japanese sushi, we shop in late-night corner stores run by hard-working immigrants, and many of us work for or interact daily with businesses created by migrants of great vision and energy. But migration brings challenges, too. In many societies, not all newcomers have managed to integrate successfully. Children may struggle in school, parents may not find work or may do jobs that do not make best use of their skills, and whole families and communities may live on the edge of the social mainstream. With recession gripping on the world economy, these problems are likely only to grow. Immigrants are at particular risk of losing their jobs during downturns and, even when economies do recover, their job prospects tend to be worse than those of natives.” (B. Keely, *International migration: The human face of globalization*, The Organization for Economic Development - OECD, 2009).

¹³ This phrase is also adopted by A. Gnisci in *Nuovo planetario italiano. Geografia e antologia della letteratura della migrazione in Italia e in Europa*, Troina (Enna), Città aperta, 2006.

literature). Let us consider some of the theoretical approaches used by critics to analyse this type of literature.

Taddeo exhibits a sociological framework. Many of his reference texts are autobiographies, often focussing on rejection and clashes in communication with Italians. Most of the authors he mentions are from Senegal and other African countries, Latin America and Iran, but also from other nations. Some of these are Fatima Ahmed, Adrian Nazareno Bravi, Pap Kouma, Tahar Lamri, Salah Methani, Igiaba Scego, Laila Waidia, Bijan Zarmandili.¹⁴

Jennifer Burns adopts categories of interpretation based on the concept of exile, but she also includes this genre in the Italian literary canon.¹⁵

Giuseppina Commare discusses migrant literature within the wider context of Europe. She sees it as a “factor of integration” with the objective being to “reach freedom from the heavy legacy of colonialism, and deconstruct a Euro-centered vision of the world”. Therefore migrant writing represents a “peaceful literary revolution”.¹⁶

Inspired by Paul Ricoeur, Paola Cordellicchio concentrates on the concepts of identity and otherness, and uses a plural typology of the foreigner who, to varying degrees in different texts, can either be the exiled, the tourist, the pilgrim, the migrant or the vagabond.¹⁷

The Italian discussion on literature of migrant origin has been partly different from the main post-colonial concerns found, at least initially, in English and French-speaking cultures. Nonetheless some postcolonial interpretations could be adopted in relation to writers from countries colonized by Italy. The most prominent of these is Erminia dell'Oro whose citizenship is both Italian and Eritrean.¹⁸

¹⁴ R. Taddeo, *Letteratura nascente. Letteratura italiana della migrazione. Autori e poetiche*, Milano, Raccolto edizioni, 2006. Cf. also the review of present author at <http://cartescoperterecensionietesti.blogspot.ie/2013/02/raffaele-taddeo-letteratura-nascente.html>.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Burns, “Exile within Italy: Interactions between past and present ‘homes’ in texts in Italian by migrant writers”, *Annali d’italianistica*, 20, 2002, pp. 369-84. She examines three novels written by migrants living in Italy: Salah Methani’s *Immigrato* (co-written with Mario Fortunato, 1990), Mohsen Melliti’s *Pantanella* (1992), and Ron Kubati’s *Va e non torna* (2000). On stories of migration also see C. Chiellino, *Parole erranti: emigrazione, letteratura e interculturalità: saggi 1995-2000*, Isernia, Iannone, 2001.

¹⁶ G. Commare, “La letteratura migrante come fattore d’integrazione europea”, *Quaderni europei*, 7, 2008. http://www.lex.unict.it/cde/quadernieuropei/linguistiche/07_2008.pdf. Original Italian of the three translated passages: “fattore d’integrazione”; “liberarsi finalmente dalla pesante eredità ideologica del colonialismo, di decostruire la visione eurocentrica del mondo”; “rivoluzione pacifica della scrittura”.

¹⁷ P. Cordellicchio, *Vite sospese: letteratura e identità nell’esperienza del migrante*, http://www.babelonline.net/home/002/editoria_online/cinema/cardillicchio.pdf.

¹⁸ Cf. Taddeo, cit.

Additionally, in a country like Italy which has been marked by centuries of foreign invasion, literary works have been produced in Italian and other languages by regional Italian minorities even though these texts are predominantly seen as an aspect of the Italian canon.¹⁹ Finally we find a rich and varied literature of Italian emigration not only to places outside Italy but also from the South to the North of the country. But let us remain within the main boundaries of this paper and move on now to the depiction of migrants by Italian writers.

There have been some controversial portrayals of non-European residents by Italians. Among the most popular work in this respect, Roberto Saviano's and Edoardo Nesi's representations of Chinese communities can be mentioned.

In his international best-selling documentary narrative *Gomorra*,²⁰ which is mostly about the *Camorra*, or the Neapolitan Mafia, Saviano, who states he was a witness to the events he narrates, devotes space to illegal Chinese activities in Naples in the area of textiles. He illustrates how illegal immigration takes place, how factories operate in breach of Italian labour law and how competition with the *Camorra* is organized. The representation of the Chinese is negative, not because Saviano expresses racism (on the contrary he reveals sympathy for them on a social and human level) but because the Chinese are depicted as a separate community whose members do not always speak Italian, who live in their own way and are therefore completely alienated from Italian society. Co-operation with local people would seem to be not possible because of their often illegal status but also due to racism as demonstrated in the episode of a Chinese young woman who is killed by an Italian for refusing to have sex with him. In short the impression that the reader gleans is partly that the Chinese Mafia is powerful and is committed to the denunciation of injustice from Italian racists, but no alternative ways of life are shown. One might therefore believe that this is what the Chinese experience in Italy, whereas the reality is very different and there are many diverse and prevailing forms of totally legal activities, integration and successful participation in the economic and social life of their adopted country. This is probably one of the reasons for the protest by representatives of the Chinese community in Italy against Saviano's presentation of their situation.

In his own memorial documentary narrative, *Storia della mia gente (Story of my people)*,²¹ Nesi describes the situation of the Chinese in Prato, a town which used to be characterized by a myriad Italian textile and leather companies, most of which gradually, since the 1980s, fell apart due to recession and Chinese competition.²² The Chinese are now the predominant entrepreneurs in Prato. Nesi

¹⁹ Taddeo appropriately quotes Carmine Abate in this respect. He comes from an Albanian community of Calabria where the Arberesh language is spoken along with Italian and Calabrese dialect. In his novels and short stories these linguistic dimensions cohabit. In addition, some of his narratives include travels to Germany, where several of his characters from this area had to emigrate, temporarily or permanently, in order to find work.

²⁰ Italian original title *Gomorra*, Milan, Mondadori, 2006. English translation by V. Jewiss, London, MacMillan, 2007.

²¹ Milan, Bompiani, 2010.

²² "[...] il rompicapo economico secondo il quale, mentre il distretto pratese e tutta l'Italia del tessile manifatturiero sono entrati da tempo in una crisi forse irreversibile [...], si è installata una delle

shows the preoccupation of the local people who once again express high levels of rejection since, he writes, “your town has become the town of the Chinese”.²³ An episode of violence is described - a punching session between a young Chinese man and an Italian man. Nesi takes care to show how wrong both competitors were in resorting to violence, and he underlines the racism of the Italian men involved in the brawl. Like Saviano, Nesi does not express either racism or *a-priori* rejection, yet he represents the Chinese as a stereotyped group of people who work in alienated conditions in restricted space and over long hours, in dirty factories. They barely communicate with Italians and live their lives separately. Even though the intention is to document real life, we are once again left with the impression that the Chinese experience in Italy is exclusively characterized by such negative dimensions but this too is not true. However, there are passages where human sympathy is expressed: “How could one not identify with them? It is hard not to think of the time when you, too, were far from home. It seems inevitable to feel mercy for them”.²⁴

A transitional work, indicating a passage from mere description of otherness and separation to representation of interactive communication of feelings between different communities, is *Io sono Li (I am Li)*, a film directed by Andrea Segre. Here, too, the Chinese community is represented as working in alienated conditions with individuals controlled by those who allowed them journey from China to the town of Chioggia, a poor area in the Venetian lagoon. However, the stereotyped approach is not exclusive, in fact one of the main characters is a Chinese woman, Shun Li, who falls in love with Bepi, a migrant from Serbia. Bepi has integrated into Italian society, speaks the local dialect and is accepted by his colleagues, the native Chioggia fishermen. Li attempts to break away from segregation and move towards interaction and communication. However an intimate relationship between Li and Bepi is not acceptable to both communities, so the protagonists have to struggle against prejudice for the right to see each other. Sentiments are prominent here. The Chinese intermediaries are shown as demanding in terms of work requirements from their employees but they keep pacts they make, for instance when they pay Li's son's flight from China after Bepi secretly gets rid of her debt for her. Finally, the main characters here are both from the lower class, and this, too, encourages solidarity and breaks the cliché of the migrant as an invader. Segre suggests that both the locals and the migrants have similar problems and that they could solve them better through solidarity as opposed to segregation. The director is faithful to his explicit statement of poetics: “[I am concerned with] apparently minor realities to which

comunità cinesi più grandi d'Europa, che si mantiene e prospera arruolando manodopera clandestina e confezionando capi d'abbigliamento con tessuti che importa dalla Cina, perché i tessuti prodotti dai pratesi son troppo cari, e ha tutto il diritto di marchiare i propri cenci *Made in Italy*”.

²³ “La tua città è diventata la città dei cinesi”.

²⁴ “Come non immedesimarsi? Come non pensare a quando anche tu sei stato lontano da casa? Come non provare pietà?”.

the grand narratives of the mass media do not grant a voice, yet they often represent the most important, deepest and most humane point of view”.²⁵

It is precisely on the basis of this kind of intellectual commitment, grounded on illustrating the universality of the human condition, mutual understanding and civil rights, that interaction takes place positively in a number of works by Italians which, while assuming that difference between cultures exists and can be a source for enrichment and curiosity, also subtract migrants from the label of otherness and portray them instead as complex individuals and fellow colleagues, friends, lovers whereby the main point of communality with locals is that they are human beings. The angle here is multicultural and cosmopolitan. One example of this is Mariolina Venezia's story "Rivelazione all'Esquilino" ("Revelation on the Esquilino Hill").²⁶

This novella is set in the area of Vittorio square in Rome, near the Termini railway station, a neighbourhood mainly inhabited by people from outside Europe as well as Italians. The narrative voice is partly the objective third person, but more often a number of Italian characters tell their experience of life in the area in the first person, thus expressing their subjectivity which initially includes prejudiced observations of their migrant neighbours, seen through the magnifying lens of otherness, at best as strange because they are different from Italians, and at worst as individuals who should go back to their country of origin. Rosaria, a young woman whose family was originally from Sicily, in other words local Italian immigrants, gradually develops a sentimental interest for Amar, a young man originally from India whose father owns a take away shop. Rosaria undertakes an easy and logical itinerary of evolution from diffidence towards the migrants to involvement and respect. Her father tries to prevent the relationship by undermining Amar's father's business - he plants a mouse in his shop, then reports him to the police for lack of hygiene and so the Indian's take away shop has to close down. But a process of rethinking subsequently takes place in the Sicilian who starts reflecting on the fact that he was himself an immigrant, and also that perhaps if his skills as a cook and those of Amar's father are joined together they would be able to co-operate in order to fight poverty and unemployment. This is exactly what they finally do: they open a Sicilian-Indian take away and stop preventing their children from going out together. This story is especially interesting for a variety of reasons. It shows an itinerary of change from prejudice to appreciation of difference to the point of changing it into co-operation and integration into one another's cultures. This novella indicates that the underclass exists both among Italians and migrants and the responsibility lies not with the new residents but with the injustice of the social and economic system in which both they and Italians live. The author Mariolina Venezia also suggests that our world is cosmopolitan and hybridized and that mutual integration is the best option for peaceful cohabitation.

²⁵ “[Mi occupo di] realtà apparentemente minori, cui la grande narrazione mediatica non concede spazio di parola, ma che rappresentano spesso il punto di vista più importante, più profondo, più umano. È la loro dignità che metto al centro dei miei racconti”. (Interview to A. Segre by F. Fusco, http://www.movieplayer.it/film/articoli/andrea-segre-parla-di-io-sono-li_8590/).

²⁶ Rome, Nottetempo, 2011.

Other interesting entries could be discussed in this contexts, but are only mentioned here to remain within the given space constraints. Some examples of films are G. Amelio, *La stella che non c'è* (2006) where an Italian goes to China for work and becomes aware of that country while collaborating, and finally becoming romantically involved with his female interpreter; E. Crialese, *Terraferma* (2011), which shows protection of illegal migrants from Italians; and E. Olmi, *Il villaggio di cartone* (2011), an allegory of the human condition seen through the member of a group of illegal migrants. Among novels, one might mention works such as M. Balzano, *Pronti a tutte le partenze*, where a substitute teacher shares a flat, and friendship, with a Chinese and a Moroccan in total normality and collaboration;²⁷ and P. Capriolo, *Caino*,²⁸ where a female migrant working in a rich house is assaulted by the owner and killed, and she is depicted as a sacrificial victim, also able to communicate with God in fantastic ways. Among short stories one could mention texts such as E. Rea, *L'occhio del Vesuvio (le avventure di un povero polacco di talento)*,²⁹ where the protagonist has admiration for the working skills of his Polish carpenter and the two of them co-operate and make friends.

In conclusion, may I reiterate that the moment will have to come when the migrant is no longer seen as the other and that no need will be felt to underline prejudices of an ethnic nature. Rather the migrant will be seen as a fellow human being who is empowered with full civil and political rights and understood as someone who lives across cultures and can therefore enrich the culture into which he/she has moved.

Additionally, a number of other aspects, on a literary level, deserve attention, such as the problem of the innovation of canon through the insertion of updated thematic elements; influence of globalization on the creation of fictional characters; literary representation of the multicultural society; and mutual intertextual references between migrant and non-migrant narratives.

²⁷ Palermo, Sellerio, 2013.

²⁸ Milan, Bompiani, 2012.

²⁹ In *La comunista*, Florence, Giunti, 2012, pp. 69-139.

