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Transnational Time: Reading Post-War Representations of the Italian Presence in East Africa

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ABSTRACT

Developing from a discussion of the importance of placing Italian culture in transnational perspective, this article addresses the representation of the Italian presence in East Africa during the colonial period and in the decades following the Second World War. It looks at the writings of Erminia Dell'Oro, Nicky Di Paolo and Gabriella Ghermandi. It argues that our ability to see these writings as a complex evocation of multi-faceted material and psychic realities is enhanced if they are read in the light of recent theoretical work that has explored how the spectre of the past returns to trouble both individual consciousness and the collective imaginary. The article contends that by reading representations of the Italian presence in East Africa in this light we can gain a greater sense of how they attempt to represent the individual's participation in some of the most deeply layered transnational social practices.

KEYWORDS

Eritrea; Ethiopia; memory; haunting; transnational temporality; colonialism

Introduction

Though it is easy enough to witness the increasingly evident effects of globalization and even, perhaps, to anticipate a post-national future, few would seek to deny the fact that we live within national frameworks. If one needed evidence of the enduring power of the nation not only as an organizational structure but as a force within the collective imaginary, then the level of support that was received by the advocates of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union provides that proof in abundance. Clearly, the national paradigm remains strong; but however powerful nations may be in defining how we see the world and our place within it, they are only part of vastly more complicated realities. No one would deny that we live within economic, cultural and religious systems or, to use Clifford Geertz's term, 'webs of signification' that stretch back, in many instances, across millennia.¹ What is sometimes referred to as the transnational turn within the academy 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.² Whether it addresses zones of linguistic or cultural translation, the co-existence of multiple realities or the

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¹See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

²See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016), first published 1983. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilizations*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), pp. 53–54. For an analysis of the increasing attention towards the transnational within Italian studies, see Emma Bond, 'Towards a Trans-national Turn in Italian Studies?', *Italian Studies*, 69: 3 (2014), 415–24.

production of shared values and traditions across national borders, academic inquiry of this kind emphasizes how the world that through our everyday activity we create – and which at the same time continually acts back on us – is defined by the inseparability of the national and transnational.³

If we accept that the humanly constructed world does not respect the borders that we seek to impose upon it, then not only do we think differently about the ways in which the spaces of past and contemporary societies were and are organized and apprehended but we also think differently about our sense of time. We become more conscious of the range of conflicting temporalities that jostle uneasily with one another in the present; our perception of the past, similarly, shifts according to the questions that we ask of it; and our attempts to grasp – or even to anticipate the future – are more alive to the undercurrents that flow between cultures and, by so doing, trouble – or in some cases dramatically alter – the stability of a given cultural formation. Thinking about the transnational leads us, unavoidably, to explore how selfhood is shaped both in the past and in the present; or rather, it leads us to question how we frame our understanding of the perpetual motion of self-creation, the subject's ongoing adaptation to and development within the dynamics of the surrounding world. If subjectivity is about negotiation, performance and appropriation, then all of these 'technologies of the self', to quote Foucault, increasingly occur within transnational or transcultural contexts.⁴ Indeed, the pace of globalization is now such that we are all conscious that we inhabit a world in which we are, all of the time, moving between sign systems and that cultural, and to an extent linguistic, translation is not simply a temporary and specialized activity but, more and more, an inevitable and habitual practice of the everyday. If we think in terms of the transnational we are likely to develop a sharper awareness of how what we commonly refer to as culture can be seen a series of interlocking processes and practices that are continually in movement, defined not – as we might expect – by their unitary characteristics but more by their very hybridity.

The focus on transnational phenomena sharpens our perception of how cultures are in a continual process of transformation as well as encouraging us to see the changes to the world that surrounds us in diverse perspectives. But such an emphasis also brings into focus how the narratives that we use to sustain our sense of identity – and the identifications that we make about other people – are inevitably caught up within the turbulence of intercultural contact. In a world, therefore, that may appear more and more to elude the apparent stability of the national paradigm, it is not just our processes of ratiocination that are prone to the influence of the transcultural but our insight into our emotions, our memories, our sense of belonging, our imaginaries, even our most intimate thoughts concerning the course and potential meanings of our lives.

If the transnational is an inescapable phenomenon it is also a mode of inquiry, a series of questions that we ask of the world that surrounds us and that we bring to our scrutiny of the ever-changing interior life of the individual.⁵ The adoption of a transnational or transcultural approach does not imply any degree of excessive concentration on the present at the expense of the consideration of other moments in the course of human history: when understood as a methodology, the transnational brings questions that can be posed of any period in time and it is singularly appropriate to the changing realities of what we refer to as Italy. One might even suggest that an emphasis on the transnational or transcultural – because it is essentially concerned

³Influential cross-disciplinary studies of the transnational include: *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, ed. by Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Stephen Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁴Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: Seminar, Selected Papers*, ed. by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). See Chapter Two, 'Technologies of the Self', pp. 16–49.

⁵For an exploration of the meanings associated with the term transnational, see Derek Duncan's analysis in the 'Audio Words' section of the TML website: <http://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/media-collection/events-workshops/> [accessed 1 December 2017].

with the intensely complex and often imperceptible modes in which cultures come into contact with one another – does not promote an excessive concentration on the contemporary but rather the desire to unmask the unfolding of processes that lie behind what we refer to as the present.

It is undeniably the case that such issues as the impact of the migratory flows across the Strait of Sicily, the growing and increasingly visible Islamic communities on the Italian mainland, the nationalist backlash created by Italy's changing demographics are all subjects of urgent transnational inquiry.⁶ But any attempt to examine the full significance of these issues, as well as the futures that they are likely to give rise to, must seek to place their occurrence not only within a concatenation of historical events but also within shifting cultural and social formations. By attempting to interpret the significance of happenings that are the subject of national and international media attention within a much wider timeframe leads us to ask new questions of the past and to consider, in new perspectives, events which – though they may have occurred in a past that in some respects appears very distant – continue to influence our imaginaries and, therefore, our modes of behaviour in ways that may escape our fully conscious understanding.

In the context of a present that is increasingly shaped by the proximity and inter-layering of cultures – not only through ongoing practices of exchange in all fields of human activity but through the exigencies of global trade and through the enforced mobility of whole groups of people – the depth of our insight into the way in which colonialism, in the centuries of its global history, has shaped the world in which we live and continues to exercise a concealed influence upon the realities that we inhabit becomes a matter of crucial importance. In seeking to grasp the full extent of this legacy, we are impelled to examine how the temporality of colonialism does not belong exclusively to the past, we are impelled also to examine the foundations on which the whole edifice of colonialism rested: the hierarchical notion of culture, the imposition of one set of practices over another, the fanatical elevation of a sense of national belonging, its justificatory rhetoric and the legitimization of racism and violence. But our inquiry into the operation and legacy of colonialism must also be centred on how the encounter between one culture and another, however extreme the inequalities operating within such an encounter, alters the very cultures concerned, creating new practices and new ways of being in the world. When Mary Louise Pratt speaks of the contact zone, she does so as a place where cultures do not simply meet and grapple with one another but elide to create new cultural formations.⁷

It is true, of course, that the timescale of the Italian colonial experience was far shorter than that of other Western European empires: in the words of the historian, Angelo Del Boca, the Italian empire, in comparison with that of Britain or France, was born late and died early.⁸ But even within the relatively circumscribed period of Italian expansionism, there is no shortage of examples of cultural transference. If we look at the representation of Italian rule over Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in the latter part of the 1930s, then we certainly see a coercive regime that depended on the brutal suppression of resistance, but we also witness the development of Italian Fascism's 'Islamic policy', the presentation of Mussolini as the 'Protector of Islam' and even the definition of Italy as an Islamic power.⁹ Despite what latter-day apologists for Fascism may wish to believe, the idea of Italian culture prevailing over other cultures while remaining

⁶For a recent collection of essays on this subject, see *Destination Italy: Representing Migration in Contemporary Media and Narrative*, ed. by Emma Bond, Guido Bonsaver and Federico Faloppa (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015). For a series of interventions, including those of Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Marina Warner, on how we approach transnational Italian cultures, see the recordings of the conference 'Transnational Italies: Mobility, Subjectivities and Modern Italian Cultures', held at the British School at Rome, 26–28 October 2016, available in the media collection section of the website: <http://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/> [accessed 14 December 2017].

⁷Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2003). For work on the Italian context, see *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); *Shifting and Shaping a National Identity: Transnational Writers and Pluriculturalism in Italy Today*, ed. by Grace Russo Bullaro and Elena Benelli (Kibworth Beauchamp: Troubador, 2014); *Italian Mobilities*, ed. by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁸Angelo Del Boca, 'L'Impero', in *I luoghi della memoria: simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, ed. by Mario Isnenghi (Rome-Bari: LaTerza, 1996), pp. 417–37 (p. 419).

essentially unchanged in the process is radically problematized by the deliberate and acknowledged appropriation of elements of the religious and ritual language of the areas of North Africa and the Middle East over which Italy sought to expand.¹⁰

But these are only some incidences within a wider pattern of the merging of cultural practices in the course of Italian involvement beyond the Mediterranean both before and after the Second World War. One of the most important features of Italian post-colonial literature is that it provides us with the opportunity to study many others. Though this corpus is not extensive, it does contain a number of works that have attained both recognition and critical attention. By focussing on the representation of temporality within this body of work, we can see that separate traditions of thought and behaviour tend to come together in ways that are rarely straightforward. When dealing with the legacy of colonialism, we can also see how the consciousness of past events with all their human consequences are subject to rapid shifts of emphasis, to destabilizing shocks of perception, and to complex and troubling processes of rememory.¹¹

The essential point is that our understanding of issues both of historical importance and pressing geopolitical concern – as they are refracted through literature – is significantly enhanced by the intersection of separate but related modes of inquiry. A movement away from a national paradigm enables us to see the density of connections that lie beyond national boundaries. The consideration of how such connections are implicated in the history of colonialism sharpens our awareness that the colonial past is closer to us than we might care to imagine. If one can attempt to bring together the insights of recent writing on the transnational with the intuitions of postcolonial theory, one can add a third body of critical writing to our interrogation of the interlayering of past and present and that is the work on spectrality which has, roughly since the 1990s, occupied an established position not only within literary and cultural studies but also within such disciplines as history, sociology and psychoanalysis. This body of related theoretical inquiry posits the phenomenon of haunting – understood conceptually and metaphorically – not simply as a general occurrence characterized by a series of common elements, but a highly differentiated category of human experience.¹²

It is in the light of these considerations that one can read Italian post-colonial literature as a means of advancing our understanding of how deeply people's lives are embedded within the paradoxes of transnational temporalities. Or, more precisely, of how the spectre of the past infiltrates and disturbs the present; of how the individual's unknowing participation in some of the most basic practices of society can be transformed into a sense of anxiety; of how the subject can be shaken by the sudden apprehension of the way in which reality is structured and experienced; of how the inequalities of power within transcultural encounters can be experienced through the very consciousness of the passage of time; and, lastly, of how subjectivity can be seared with the traces of relations with other people.

⁹On the effects of Fascist policy in Libya, see Muhammed T. Jerary, 'Damages Caused by the Italian Fascist Colonization of Libya', in *Italian Colonialism*, ed. by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 203–09.

¹⁰On the subject of the appropriation of the language and symbols of Islam within orthodox Fascist rhetoric, see Charles Burdett, 'Mussolini's Journey to Libya (1937): Ritual, Power and Transculturation', in *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Culture*, ed. by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 150–70. For an example of the transference of elements of the empire, see Barbara Spadaro, 'The Italian Empire "at Home": Fascist Girls, Imperial Propaganda and the "Racialized" Memory of Italy (1937–2007)', in *Women in Transnational History: Connecting the Local and the Global*, ed. by Clare Midgley, Alison Twells and Julie Carlier (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 117–44.

¹¹The term 'rememory' is taken from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987). See Roger Luckhurst's analysis of the novel in *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008) pp. 90–97 (p. 94).

¹²For work on haunting, see *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. by Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, ed. by Esther Peeren and Maria Del Pilar Blanco (New York: Continuum, 2010).

The Writing of Dell'Oro, Di Paolo and Ghermandi

Although, as I have suggested, the corpus of Italian post-colonial literature is relatively circumscribed, it can be extended to include the largely autobiographical collections of writings that appear in the publications of the former inhabitants of what were Italy's colonies.¹³ Thus, alongside the work of writers of established or growing reputation like Alessandro Spina or Igiaba Scego, there is a wealth of textual material that awaits more sustained inquiry. For the specific purpose of examining the representation of time, however, I would like to concentrate on three texts by writers whose work on the multi-faceted legacy of the Italian presence in East Africa is acutely sensitive to the nature of the subjective insight into entangled temporalities.

Among those writers who have used literature to record their own experiences and the wider context in which those experiences occurred, Erminia Dell'Oro is probably the most well-known.¹⁴ She was born in Asmara in 1938 where she spent the first twenty years of her life before moving to Italy. As a writer, she has experimented with various genres, including children's literature, but her work has consistently focussed on the transition from colonialism to post-colonialism in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Her 1988 text, *Asmara addio*, is a fictionalized autobiography that recounts the childhood, adolescence and early adult life of Malena Conti within the changing reality of post-war Eritrea.¹⁵ In the evocation of Malena, Dell'Oro draws on her own experiences of growing up in Eritrea, but frequently varies the narrative style to consider earlier stages within the history of the colonization of Eritrea. Dell'Oro's subsequent text, *L'abbandono: una storia eritrea* (1991), uses the form of the novel to explore the question of inter-racial sex in the colony and the lives of Italo-Eritrean children in the wake of the withdrawal of Italian influence.¹⁶

Nicky Di Paolo has written extensively on the history of Italian involvement in the Horn of Africa and, though the value of his work has been recognized (his novel, *Hakim*, for example, won the Internazionale Emigrazione prize for literature in 2005), it deserves to be better known outside Italy.¹⁷ He was born in Eritrea in 1942, where he studied medicine, and was resident there until 1968 when he returned to specialize as a nephrologist at the hospital in Siena. He has maintained close ties with his country of birth, visiting regularly throughout the war with Ethiopia, and publishing a series of books, both fictional and non-fictional, on Eritrea and East Africa. His books include *Eritrea: Madre Bahr*, and with Alberto Vascon, *Abissinia: Impero nascosto*.¹⁸ His most recent work of fiction, *Semira e i fiori dell'Eritrea* returns to the theme of the Eritrean war of independence.¹⁹ The novel *Hakim* draws closely on his years of medical training in Asmara in its representation of the friendship of its main protagonist, Marco Delandi, with the two principal Eritrean characters of the novel, Tesfai and Misan, who share many of the same experiences in the rapidly changing political climate of post-war Eritrea: Tesfai studies medicine with Marco in Asmara and Siena; Tesfai's sister, Misan, while a close friend of Marco, does not return his romantic feelings. Throughout the novel, the border between fiction and reality is unstable, as Di Paolo writes in the *premissa* to the work: 'I fatti raccontati in questo libro sono in parte realmente accaduti. Sono stati cambiati di proposito i nomi di tutte quelle persone che avrebbero potuto avere delle reserve nell'essere nominate' (*Hakim*, p. 1).

¹³See note 27.

¹⁴For a recent analysis of the significance of the work of Dell'Oro, see Giuliana Benvenuti, 'Memoria e metissage nel romanzo italiano postcoloniale e della migrazione', in *Memoria storica e postcolonialismo: il caso italiano*, ed. by Martine Bovo Romoëuf and Franco Manai (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 115–36.

¹⁵Erminia Dell'Oro, *Asmara addio* (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1988).

¹⁶Erminia Dell'Oro, *L'abbandono: una storia eritrea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991). On the themes that *L'abbandono* addresses, see Derek Duncan, 'Italian Identity and the Risks of Contamination: The Legacies of Mussolini's Demographic Impulse in the Work of Comisso, Flaiano and Dell'Oro', in *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, ed. by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 99–125.

¹⁷Nicky Di Paolo, *Hakim: quasi quasi torno in Eritrea* (Milan: Wichtig Editore, 1994).

¹⁸Nicky Di Paolo, *Eritrea: Madre Bahr, il paese del mare* (Cosenza: Edibios, 2012); Nicky Di Paolo and Alberto Vascon, *Abissinia: Impero nascosto* (Cosenza: Edibios, 2011).

¹⁹Nicky Di Paolo, *Semira e i fiori dell'Eritrea* (Cosenza: Edibios, 2015).

Gabriella Ghermandi belongs to the succeeding generation: born in Addis Ababa in 1965, she moved to Bologna in 1979. In parallel with her career as a writer, she is a renowned performer of narratives adapted from the Ethiopian oral and musical tradition. Her reading performances are usually accompanied by music and revolve around a series of historical events.²⁰ Her most well-known text, *Regina di fiori e di perle* was published in 2007.²¹ Like the works of Dell'Oro and Di Paolo, it draws heavily on the biography of its author and its narrative framework allows for the uncovering of past moments from the history of Italian involvement in East Africa. Mahlet, the fictional protagonist of the novel, growing up in Debre Zeit, close to the capital of Ethiopia, listens to the stories of her extended family and the people with whom she comes into contact as her life takes her first to Addis Ababa and subsequently to Italy.²²

Each of the texts to which I have referred uses a variety of means to communicate the significance of the passage of time. To begin with, the temporal structure of each work shows how the fictional life history of its protagonist(s) is shaped by what occurs in the surrounding environment. Within this timeframe, the protagonist either looks backward to earlier moments in the family or group history or forward to a time beyond the narration of the events with which the novel is immediately concerned. Thus, within an apparently straightforward narrative logic, the perspective on the individual and collective experience of time is continually changing. But what is most significant is not the changing perspective but the dramatic and tragic nature of the events that are recounted.

The history of Italian involvement in East Africa is, naturally, only part of much larger stories. In Eritrea and Ethiopia, the movement towards modernity in the twentieth century has been accompanied by enormous upheaval and loss of life.²³ In Ethiopia, the eruption of Fascist aggression in the 1930s, the attempted annexation of Eritrea in the wake of the Second World War, the ousting of Emperor Haile Selassie (1974), the brutal suppression of opposition during the government of the Derg (1974–87) have all left a deep imprint upon the country.²⁴ In Eritrea, the effects of rapid colonization, involvement in the Second World War, and the thirty years (1961–91) of the country's war of independence with Ethiopia have left the same kind of imprint. In her history of Eritrea, *I Didn't Do It for You* (2005), the journalist Michela Wrong suggests that the suffering that the country has witnessed over the course of the latter part of the twentieth century is of such magnitude that its victims 'crowd around in their multitudes, threatening to engulf the living'.²⁵

In *Asmara addio*, Dell'Oro provides a chronology of the Italian presence in East Africa. The book refers to the history of the first Italian settlers in Eritrea, to the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the entry into the Second World War and the rapid collapse of the imperial ambitions of Fascist Italy. It chronicles the period of the British administration of Eritrea from 1941 to 1950 and subsequently the Eritrean war of independence in the wake of Emperor Haile Selassie's annexation of the country in 1962. Di Paolo's *Hakim*, similarly, is focused on the period after the end of the

²⁰For more information, see: <http://www.gabriella-ghermandi.it/writing/?qq=biografia> [accessed 14 December 2017]. For her performance in 2016 at the event on 'Identities in motion' at the University of Warwick, see: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/modernlanguages/academic/postgraduate/panzarella/identitiesmotion> [accessed 14 December 2017].

²¹Gabriella Ghermandi, *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007). The postface is written by Cristina Lombardi-Diop. On the significance of the work of Ghermandi, see also Martine Bovo Romoëuf, 'Vers un canon postcolonial multiculturel: les cas paradigmatiques de Gabriella Ghermandi et Martha Nasibù', in *Memoria storica e postcolonialismo*, ed. by Bovo Romoëuf and Manai, pp. 83–103.

²²On the multivocal nature of the work of Ghermandi, see Gregoria Manzin, 'Colonizing the Novel: Voice and Choralities in Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle*: Moving Beyond to Redefine the Boundaries of Italian Literature', *Spunti e Ricerche*, 26 (2011), 108–25.

²³For an account of the extent of the violence after the formal end of the invasion of Ethiopia, see Ian Campbell, *The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame* (London: Hurst, 2017).

²⁴See Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

²⁵Michela Wrong, *I Didn't Do It for You: How the World Used and Abused a Small African Nation* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005). See Chapter One, 'The City Above the Clouds', pp. 1–23. For the cost in human lives of the thirty-year conflict, see the chapter, 'Arms and the Man', pp. 311–30. Wrong states that, in the struggle for independence, Eritrea probably lost between 150,000 and 200,000 to conflict and famine.

British administration of the ex-colony and on the early years of the Eritrean struggle for independence against its more powerful southern neighbour, but it ranges across the whole history of Italy's involvement in the Horn of Africa while looking forward in time to the end of Eritrea's war of independence. The narration of Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* begins later, towards the end of the 1980s and it evokes the atmosphere in Ethiopia in the final years of Mengistu's military dictatorship, while through the stories that are told to Mahlet – the work's central protagonist – it moves back in time to recover the history of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia as it was experienced by those who lived through its different phases.

In documenting the nature of encounters as they occurred in the dramatically changing reality of Eritrea and Ethiopia at specific times in the history of both these countries, the texts are a highly revealing source of empirical information.²⁶ They tell us about the spaces of interaction between members of different communities, about the nature of that interaction and about the everyday details of life both in the private realm of the family and in more public institutional frameworks. They tell us about the atmosphere in the wake of the Second World War and the period of peace which followed but they also speak of the worst excesses of violence in the Italian occupation of Ethiopia and which occurred as a result of Ethiopia's attempted annexation of Eritrea. The writing is itself part of an extensive corpus of representations which stretches across all media – whether that is the publication of journals, the writing of non-fictional memoirs or the production of documentaries – a corpus that allows us to gain a deeper understanding of all the facets of the legacy of the Italian presence in East Africa.²⁷

Tempting though it may be to see the history of Italian involvement in the Horn of Africa as divided into sharply delineated periods, the processes that are at work in the development of a sense of national consciousness, that allow a particular economic system to function, or that lead to strife between communities rarely obey a temporal structure that is either discrete or straight-forwardly linear. Within any society, the appearance of stable and predictable succession of events is largely illusory and, rather than following a tendency to look for signs of continuity, it is more appropriate – as Russell West-Pavlov suggests – to look for signs of an inter-related and overlapping network of dynamic processes.²⁸ Within societies that have recently experienced the effects of colonization and/or occupation, the troubled interweaving of temporalities is greatly accentuated: though a given societal framework may lose its hegemonic status or even its legitimacy, it continues to act within the present; the psychological debris of former utopian projects can continue to influence collective imaginaries; memories of past injustices retain their power to haunt the world of the everyday.

Thus, the most important feature of each text is not the wealth of information that it delivers but how it represents the extent to which people are caught up within developing material and non-material systems. The most important feature of each text is how, in other words, it asks its reader to consider the way people's experiences are shaped by the interlocking of processes all of which develop at a different pace. Though we can read these texts in many ways – identifying with the characters and the dilemmas that they face – an essential part of our reading must be concerned with the manner in which the writing leads us to develop insights into the way in

²⁶In addition to their work as writers of fiction, Dell'Oro and Di Paolo have written on episodes in the history of East Africa. Both also write for *Il Corno d'Africa* (<http://www.ilcornodafrika.it/>) [accessed 11 November 2017], the principal purpose of which is to provide historical, literary and geographical information on the area formally subject to Italian influence.

²⁷One source of information on the life of Italians in Eritrea is the journal *Mai Tacli* which, since the 1970s, has published articles, memories, photographs and short works of fiction on the transnational history of the community. A series of documentaries on the presence of Italians in Eritrea and of the Eritrean community in Italy is another important source of information. See, for example, the documentary by Patricia Plattner, *Hotel Abyssinie* (Geneva: Late Night Production, 1996) and the more recent production by Alan Maglio and Medhin Paolos, *Asmarina* (Italy: Independent, 2015). For an analysis of the significance of this body of documentary production, see Gianmarco Mancosu, 'Discourses of *Impegno* and Italian Colonial Legacies: Reassessing Times, Spaces and Voices in Documentaries on (Post)Colonial Mobility', *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, 6:1 (2018), 33–48.

²⁸Russell West-Pavlov, *Temporalities* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 52.

which deep-laid processes – with effects that have the potential to shatter people’s lives – are not simply observed as they unfold across time but operate through people’s very mode of perception and cognition.

If we approach the texts following this reading strategy, we are inevitably led to question how a social order, with all its inequalities and all its inherent precariousness, is constructed and maintained and we are also led to question how elements of collapsed social systems return to play upon the psychology of an individual or the imaginary of a group. It is on these three issues – the subjective perception of a changing social order, the end of a societal framework that has previously been taken for granted, the imagined persistence of a delegitimated societal order – that I wish to concentrate for the remainder of this essay. It is, of course, true that the experience of such temporally related phenomena as the feeling of the uncanny or the sensation of the mind being prey to the disturbing – and potentially menacing – persistence of traces of the past are prolonged psychological responses to the experience of a very wide spectrum of destabilizing or traumatic events. The specificity of the experiences that are conveyed through the post-war corpus on the Italian presence in East Africa lies within the very nature of Italian expansionism and its legacy: the rapidity of the development of the empire under Fascism; the brutality of the imposition of its system of values; its demise during the Second World War; the restoration of the former societal order; the beginning of the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict with all its enduring sorrow and upheaval.

In considering the perception and effects of a change to the social order, it is as well to work from the premise – as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman discuss in their work on the social construction of reality – that an order of knowledge, though relative to a particular socio-historical situation, appears to the individual as the natural way of looking at the world. Or, in their words:

Compared to the reality of everyday life, other realities appear as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality marked by circumscribed meanings and modes of experience. The paramount reality envelops them on all sides, as it were, and consciousness always returns to the paramount reality as from an excursion.²⁹

In its very structure, the novel or autobiography, in following the emotional and intellectual development of one or more characters, necessarily explores how those characters are embedded in their socio-historical situation and how they receive, replicate or, in certain circumstances, challenge the collectively agreed upon norms and interpretations of the society of which they are part.

Works by writers like Dell’Oro, Di Paolo and Ghermandi tend to be structured around the central protagonist’s apprehension of the social reality that surrounds them. In *Asmara addio*, the figure of Malena Conti, whose life story is relayed to us through both first- and third-person narration, functions at least in part as the vehicle through which we see the social and cultural environment of Eritrea from the late 1930s to the 1970s. But, as I indicated earlier, the most significant detail is that Malena is located – in ways that often remain opaque to her and to the narrative consciousness that relates her story – within the web of power structures that she observes. In the chapter of *Imagined Communities* entitled ‘Official nationalism and imperialism’, Benedict Anderson refers to the importance of class within the functioning of a colonial system.³⁰ In *Asmara addio* we see Malena’s participation in the class structure of post-colonial Eritrea: we see her family enjoy the privileges of the Italian community of Asmara and able to rely on the support of Eritrean domestic workers to make frequent excursions to the countryside around the city or to the seaside in Massawa to partake in numerous sporting and other leisure activities. Indeed, in its evocation of the rhythms of life in the former Italian colony, the book shows that at

²⁹Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Open Road, 1966), p. 25.

³⁰Anderson, pp. 85–115.

many levels it belongs to the body of recorded memories that has found expression in journals such as *Mai Tacli*, which from the 1970s to the present has published the reminiscences and life stories of former Italian inhabitants of Eritrea and which, to a degree, has perpetuated a nostalgic, depoliticized notion of the Italian presence in Eritrea in the years following the end of the Second World War.³¹

Malena participates in her world through the identifications that she makes, through the desires that she expresses and through the realizations that she comes to; the intensity of the evocation of the character's interior world in part explains why the text, like Dell'Oro's subsequent novel, *L'abbandono*, has proved such an abiding source of critical fascination. But another reason for the extent of scholarly attention that the work attracts is, I would contend, the subtlety with which it addresses the theme of time. Dell'Oro manages to convey the impression of an unchanging succession of everyday routines while simultaneously suggesting the fragility of the context in which those routines occur. All the while, we are aware that the world that is remembered belongs to the past and the recall of its memory is accompanied, as is implied by the title of the work, by feelings of longing and bereavement. Within the action of the work itself, the apparent stability of the micro-community of Asmara becomes increasingly shaken as events of geopolitical significance gather momentum. While the greater part of the novel focuses on the immediate post-war years, the tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia is always in the background and in the latter part of the text the consequences of Ethiopia's attempted annexation of Eritrea define the pace of the narrative just as they do in Nicky Di Paolo's *Hakim*.

Though they draw, quite transparently, on their authors' experiences, *Asmara addio* and *Hakim* are, it is worth stressing, works of fiction and, as such, the most powerful means that they deploy to explore the working of time is the representation of relations between characters. In both works, the narrative consciousness explores the main protagonist's reactions to the external world and a large part of that exploration concerns the perception of the various Eritrean characters who are essential to the development of the story. This is not the space to analyse all the facets of the inter-subjective encounters as they are portrayed in the two works, but rather to refer to those instances where the narrator draws the attention of the reader to the main character's awareness that the figures that he or she encounters are locked into the movement of forces, the potential consequences of which are at best only partially understood.

In *Asmara addio*, the dispersion of the Italian community defines the life story of Malena; she observes the effects of the community's decline in those around her, but she also senses how the system of privileges on which the community's life-style has been built is perceived by many Eritreans. In the description, for example, of Abeba, who comes to work briefly for the Conti family, it is clear that her silence and unwillingness to socialize, are intended as an act of criticism towards her employers; an act of criticism that indicates her understanding of the role that she unwillingly performs within the extended history of Italian colonialism. If Abeba's behaviour displays a consciousness of the timeframe of the Italian presence in Africa, it also shapes her involvement in the development of Eritrean national autonomy and her future role as a resistance fighter. The narrator writes:

Quando dopo molti anni vidi su un giornale italiano la fotografia di un gruppo di guerriglieri eritrei riconobbi immediatamente la giovane donna con pantaloni, camicia e berretto verde, il cui viso era diventato ancora più bello e più fiero. Pensai che non c'era da sorprendersi, quello era il suo posto da sempre. (p. 208)

Within the depiction of the character of Abeba, there is therefore the temporality of the protracted end of Italian colonial involvement in East Africa but also the temporality of Eritrean independence and suffering. The same model of people caught within the consequences of a social

³¹Del Boca characterizes *Mai Tacli* in the following terms: 'Per gli "asmarini" di *Mai Tacli*, l'impero era stato un momento magico, per di più vissuto negli anni radiosi della giovinezza. Questa sublimazione di un'epoca e di una terra era dettata più dal sentimento che dalla ragione'. Del Boca, p. 436.

framework that advances in directions of which they are not necessarily aware underscores the representation of many other characters in *Asmara addio*. Lisetta, for instance, the child of an Italian father and Eritrean mother suffers a tragic fate when her father abandons the family to return to Italy. Indeed, the same interest in how individuals are either surreptitiously or dramatically ensnared in the unfolding of vast processes motivates the action of Dell'Oro's *L'abbandono*, which picks up and develops a number of the themes that are present within *Asmara addio*; the emphasis, in the latter novel, being on the entrapment of the individual's subjectivity within the socially constructed meanings of race.

In tracing the post-Second World War history of Eritrea through the perceptions of a group of Eritrean and Italian characters, Di Paolo's work *Hakim* shares many formal and thematic similarities with *Asmara addio*. The work does, however, use the conventions of characterological construction quite differently. By focussing on the main protagonist's relationship with the Eritrean characters Tesfai and Misan (who, like Marco, occupy an interstitial position between fiction and non-fiction), Di Paolo simultaneously explores the cultural differences in the theory and practice of medicine and in the understanding of gender and sexuality. He also deliberately uses the voices of his characters as a mode of historiographical interpretation: through the manipulation of dialogue, the work sets out a vision of the legacy of Italian colonialism, the gradual dissolution of the Italian community and the development of Eritrean national sentiment.

Within the understanding of Eritrean history that is laid before us, there is little attempt to conceal the positionality of the writer: Di Paolo writes as a member of the former Italian community in Eritrea and the novel's interpretation of the Italian presence over more than half a century in the country, though not uncritical, is favourable; the coincidence between his experiences and those of the fictional character Marco are not denied; the depth of the information that is conveyed – whether that is on the administration of Eritrea, the stages of the war with Ethiopia, the characteristics of the landscape – draws extensively on Di Paolo's non-fictional writing.³² As a work of fiction, the achievement of *Hakim* lies in the way in which the characters are created through their perceptions of one another, through their attempts to understand the sets of cultural norms and practices that define their lives and through the mutual witnessing of their participation in a chain of events that will lead the principal Eritrean characters of the story towards oblivion.

Dialogue is used in the novel as a means of charting the younger Eritrean characters' developing understanding of and engagement in the conflict against Ethiopia, their sense of the impact of Italian colonial rule, and their perception of the way in which colonial attitudes endure. It is frequently the case, for example, that the assumptions of various characters are revealed through their sense of spatiality; or rather, their notions of place betray the degree to which their habits of thought and behaviour are part of collective constructions that are only very slowly susceptible to change. At one point in the novel, Tesfai reacts angrily to one of the assertions made by Marco on what the connection with Italy has brought to Eritrea:

Prendiamo tuo padre ad esempio che è un bravo commerciante e dà lavoro: un individuo molto utile al nostro paese, parla le lingue del luogo, rispetta le nostre leggi, ha il desiderio che questo paese progredisca, ma ha una visione globale ancora insufficiente: lui sta vivendo in una piccola Italia con usi, costumi, necessità, leggi della sua gente, fingendo di non sapere che a soli tre chilometri da Asmara esistono paesi che hanno ancora una struttura arcaica e di europeo proprio nulla e che la maggior parte degli eritrei, pendolari, lavorano in città, ma vivono ancora esattamente come gli antichi abissini, ben lontani dalle vostre consuetudini. (p. 73)

In this instance, the figure of Tesfai functions as a means of reflecting back on the Italian community's sense of itself. The most important insight here is that the individual's participation within the movement of society through time is experienced most strongly – because unconsciously – through everyday spatial experience. The inability of the father to see the world of the

³²See the collection of writings by Di Paolo for *Il Corno d'Africa*.

Italian community as located in time and therefore as contingent is coupled with an inability to see the diversity of many Eritreans' experience of reality. The father's unthinking location within a distinct set of practices is a powerful indication of how the overlapping of different temporalities can remain, in the ordinary functioning of society, opaque.

The novel's inquiry into the nature of transnational time exploits all the devices of fiction including the role of the third-person narrator. Throughout the course of *Hakim*, the narrator implies a knowledge of the whole arc of time in which the protagonists live and the significance of this knowledge becomes clear in the epilogue that is centred on the consequences of the war to maintain Eritrean independence. Within the epilogue, there is an evident slippage between the fictional and the non-fictional and between the voice of the narrator and that of the author. There is, equally, a slippage in the status of characters whose lives we have followed and whose identities we, as readers, have constructed. Victims of the struggle of which they were part, they become evocations or memories:

Tesfai, Misan ed Abarrà sono scomparsi nel nulla. Ato Makonen, lo zio di Tesfai morì nel 1979, ma da due anni non aveva più notizie dei nipoti e niente di più è riuscito a sapere Marco nei suoi viaggi in Eritrea.

Centinaia di migliaia di eritrei, uomini e donne, sono morti per liberare la loro terra dall'ultimo colonizzatore, che, benché africano, inspiegabilmente si è rivelato più crudele dei suoi predecessori europei. (p. 430)

In writing in Italian on Eritrea and Ethiopia, there are many recurrent thematic emphases: the shattering of societal structures that had once seemed paradigmatic or permanent, the consequent sense of temporalities playing against one another, the consciously motivated or unbidden recovery of moments of historical or personal time, the flickering awareness of voices that insist that their stories are not simply narrated but are emotionally experienced, re-mediated or even embodied. The recurrence of a range of inter-related thematic concerns is, unsurprisingly, echoed by similarities in the language and in the structure of the writing. Within many texts, the motif and language of haunting recurs. As I have suggested, the whole of Di Paolo's *Hakim* can be read as an anguished attempt to recover the voices of the dead. In Dell'Oro's *Asmara addio*, the dislodging of an apparently settled order is conveyed through the repetition of the sensation of the shifting of the ontological status of reality.

At key points in the narrative of *Asmara addio*, language indicative of recently experienced or impending loss is conveyed through allusions to the spectral. This is particularly the case in the latter part of the novel where the micro-community that has been evoked starts to disintegrate, provoking differing inflections of a similar sense of disturbance. The writing suggests a growing sense of disorientation, an estrangement from familiar structures, a disassociation with a formally prevalent sense of self. In speaking of the emotions experienced by those members of the Italian community who have been repatriated, Dell'Oro writes:

Era come essere stati sbalzati all'improvviso in un mondo sconosciuto ed ostile; come aver perso lontano la propria identità; e non sapere più chi si era, come l'uomo che aveva smarrito la sua ombra e non poteva vivere senza [...]. I nostalgici si cercavano fra loro, si riunivano per soffrire insieme il bel tempo andato, per rievocare tutto ciò che ormai era un nulla. (p. 172)

When recounting, her growing sense of uncertainty concerning the future of the world that she is used to, Malena imagines:

C'erano fantasmi per le strade di Asmara, li vedevo attraverso le nebbie di un'epoca che il passato stava portandosi via. Sentivo nel petto un senso di soffocamento, era come se mi stessi smarrendo in una vita senza più finestre sul mondo. [...] I fantasmi formavano una lunga processione e ognuno portava il cero, che si stava spengendo, del ricordo della vita sull'altipiano. (p. 249)

When trying to describe her distress at leaving the familiarity of her surroundings:

C'era un'altra me stessa che mentre lasciavo quei luoghi restava su isole di bianco corallo, su monti sospesi nell'aria. Era come una lacerazione, una ferita dolente separarmi da quell'io che non mi avrebbe seguito e che già mi mandava le immagini che mai sarebbero morte. (p. 263)

When visiting the cemetery in Asmara, shortly before leaving Eritrea, the narrator evokes the following scene:

Il tempo non passa per le immagini incorniciate dei morti, soffia solo una patina gialla che appena le adombra, e nel ricordo i defunti rimangono sempre come quando eran fra noi. [...] Dalla scala su cui ero salita per arrivare alla lapide voltai il capo a guardare il giardino dei morti, e da ogni tomba si alzava un'incerta figura e ne sentivo la voce, e tutti insieme, nella loro fuggevole storia, erano la città che nasceva fra le ambe, gli anni dei sacrifici e gli anni della spensieratezza, erano i saluti e sorrisi e 'buon anno' per le strade del centro [...] i lunghi giorni a morire su un letto in camere scure. (p. 297)

In *Asmara addio* as a whole, it is through the exploration of Malena's character that the transcultural nature of her society and its movement through time are revealed. But this point needs further explanation.

In all the instances above, the writing reveals how the character is imbricated within the social structures that surround her and how perceived changes in the surrounding social environment lead to changes of mood and changes of self-understanding. Yet, in describing the thinning numbers of the Italian community in Eritrea, Dell'Oro is not only enumerating a series of sensations and an increasingly intense feeling of melancholy; she is describing how one mode of societal organization succeeds another and how the collapse of a recognized social structure carries with it an alteration of collective consciousness. In their work on the *construction* of reality, Berger and Luckman evoke the precariousness of any social structure and how, for it to act as a guarantor of what is ordinarily perceived as reality, it needs constantly to be sustained by human labour and belief.³³ When the prevailing set of norms that underlie a given society begin to vacillate not only does that society start to lose its internal coherence and its appearance as reality, it starts to assume the qualities of a spectral figuration, a phenomenon that, simultaneously belonging to past and present, mediates imperfectly between the individual and the collective.

Throughout *Asmara addio*, the sense of a society that is disappearing with bewildering effects on its members is strong and in those passages towards the end of the novel when Malena witnesses the disintegration of the social fabric around her it is consistently portrayed through the language of haunting – with all the concomitant suggestions of the uncanny, the disquieting and the anxious. What is striking about the extracts that I have selected above is not the repetition of words suggestive of the eerie effacement of ontological distinctions, but the collapsing of a paramount sense of reality and the exposure of the subject to the terrifying sense of solitude that ensues when the individual suddenly experiences the fragility of the world of which she is part.

The writing of Di Paolo and Dell'Oro alerts us to those instances when an apparently settled temporal order is dislodged and when time itself is – to reiterate Derrida's quotation of the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the beginning of *Specters of Marx* – 'out of joint'.³⁴ The writing makes us aware of the instability of the individual subject within shifting symbolic or social orders and it encourages us to consider the architecture of concepts and practices that sustains any societal construction. If the writing suggests the precariousness of individual identity and its dependence on the impermanent structures that lie outside the self, it also suggests how the subject can be haunted by surmounted models of society, aware of the injustices in their framing of categories of race, gender or class, and sensitive to the voices – whether they belong to the living or the dead – of those who have experienced the full force of an inimical social configuration.³⁵

³³Berger and Luckman, pp. 19–28.

³⁴Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–2.

³⁵For a more recent fictional rendering of the return of the colonial past to trouble the psychology of characters, living in the present, see Igiaba Scego's novel, *Adua* (Florence: Giunti, 2015).

In Gabriella Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* the notion of haunting is embedded in the very framework of the story. The first-person narrator of the novel, Mahlet, displays from a young age a gift for listening to the stories of the lives of others and it is this gift that marks her out, in the eyes of Yacob, her relative of advanced years, as suited to the task of gathering the testimonies of those who lived through the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. It is Yacob who defines her vocation:

Un giorno sarai la nostra voce che racconta. Attraverserai il mare che hanno attraversato Pietro e Paolo e porterai le nostre storie nella terra degli italiani. Sarai la voce della nostra storia che non vuole essere dimenticata. (p. 6)

It is through the encounters that he prepares for her that she listens to the stories of the generation of Ethiopians who experienced the invasion of their country. The relationship between Yacob and Mahlet is central to the text and, to begin with, it is based on the telling of the events of the past. But the novel is anything but a simple accumulation of stories and the relation between the two should be seen less as a device that enables the delivery and reception of stories and more as one that facilitates a discourse on the nature of storytelling. The conversation between the two, though its beginnings are straightforward, becomes increasingly complex and, above all, it continues *after* the death of Yacob; his figuration returns to visit Mahlet through her dreams and she, attempting to make sense of the nature of his communication, struggles with an imperfect understanding of her role as witness, listener, reader and narrator.

The dramatization of the nature of storytelling is important, but no less important is the process of self-realization that Mahlet undergoes. The novel implies throughout that, to become meaningful, stories need to be constructed and lived through the emotions and the psychology of their listener. Many of the stories that are told recount the horror of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia during the very apex of Fascism and their effect is to haunt Mahlet with images of the violent imposition of an implacable social order.³⁶ The vicarious experience of the lives of others and the assumption of the role of narrator of other people's stories inevitably alters Mahlet's sense of selfhood. She becomes aware of how private memory can become public and of how the sustained social violence enacted by the application of the race laws, though a feature of the colonial past, continues to stalk the present in the persistence of attitudes governed by the reliance on racial stereotypes.³⁷ She also becomes aware of how intergenerational transmission is neither direct nor linear and that the full complexity of transnational time is graspable only through narrative. Perhaps above all, she develops the consciousness, not only within her daily habits of thought and imagination but also in the very way in which her dreams are structured, that the stories that are told to her are not extraneous but essential to her subjectivity. The novel concludes with her address to the reader:

Poi un giorno il vecchio Yacob mi chiamò nella sua stanza, e gli fece una promessa. Un giuramento solenne davanti alla sua Madonna dell'icona. Ed è per questo che oggi vi racconto la sua storia. Che poi è anche la mia. Ma pure la vostra. (p. 251)

In many ways, the life story of Mahlet as it is represented in *Regina dei fiori* demonstrates the routines of the everyday: we see her domestic circumstances in Debre Zeit, the conditions of her employment, her move to Addis Ababa and subsequently her decision to study in Bologna. But what Mahlet exemplifies is how the everyday – with all its concealed assumptions about the nature of time – can be disrupted by the unfamiliar, placed in disturbing perspectives, shown in all its contingency.³⁸ A good example of this occurs as she listens to the stories that are recounted to her

³⁶See, for example, the description, within the story of Yacob, of the murder of the Italian soldier, Daniele, and his Ethiopian partner, Amaraech. Ghermandi, p. 54.

³⁷For passages on the brutal articulation of the purpose of the race laws, see *Regina dei fiori*, pp. 44 and 48.

³⁸On the spectrality of the everyday, see Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002).

close to the Cathedral of Saint Giorgis in Addis Ababa. On returning to her parents' home, she speaks to her father:

'A Giorgis in tutti questi giorni, mentre attendevo Abba Chereka, ogni mattina qualcuno è venuto a raccontarmi del tempo degli italiani!' 'E...!', incalzò lui. 'E...! In Italia sono convinti di essere passati di qui in gita turistica e di aver abbellito e ammodernato il nostro paese pidocchioso con strade, case, scuole. Non sai quante volte me lo sono sentito dire.' 'E tu che ne pensi?', chiese lui. [...] 'oggi so cosa direi. Tutto ciò che hanno costruito lo abbiamo pagato. Anzi, abbiamo pagato anche le costruzioni dei prossimi tre secoli' [...] e mentre parlavo sentii che un fuoco di rabbia mi si accendeva nello stomaco. Stentavo io stessa a riconoscermi. (p. 198)

What is recounted here is an apparently simple interchange between Mahlet and her father on contrasting views of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. Yet, the closer we look at the passage and the context in which it occurs, the more we become aware of how deeply an understanding of time changes the significance of space. The church itself, damaged during the Italian occupation of the city, situated within the Piazza area of Addis Ababa opposite the statue of Menelik II and close to the statue of the Abuna Petros is a site of enormous historical significance.³⁹ But it is Mahlet's identity as a listener, receptive not only to the content of the stories that she hears but the way in which they are told, that transforms her sensitivity to the impact of the past on the material reality of the present. Through a re-imagining and a re-telling of the stories that she hears, she develops a peculiarly heightened sensitivity to the individual and collective narratives that are intrinsic to the place that she inhabits. Her sensitivity is attuned not only to the complex mosaic of Ethiopian national sentiment but also, as the above passage makes clear, to the justification – expressed spatially – of Italian expansionism. The depth of her sensitivity to the implications of the stories that are told to her lead to an understanding of how the autonomy of the present is circumscribed by the intersection of temporalities, how – in the words of Stephen Frosh – the present does not exist as 'a separate point in time uninformed by past and future: it is always transient, in process, so always saturated with the sounds and sights of memory and expectation'.⁴⁰

Conclusion

I began by pointing to recent work on the transnational and how it encourages approaches to the study of culture that are sensitive not only to the ways in which the national and transnational are bound together but how inequalities of power operate within the present with its manifold legacies from the past. In societies that have witnessed the effects of colonialism, the transnational assumes a range of specific meanings all of which can be investigated further by examining a wide range of representations. Literary works such as those by Dell'Oro, Di Paolo and Ghermandi are one means by which we can grasp the working of temporality in transnational contexts. It is through the resources of literature that these writers make us aware of the working of social structures and how they imprison individuals not only in the events in which they participate but also in their habits of perception and interpretation. Above all, the works allow us to see how social processes move through time and how modes of apprehension are subject to alteration.

Though the positionality of the authorial voices of Dell'Oro, Di Paolo and Ghermandi differs, each writer addresses the history of Italian involvement in East Africa from a particular angle and each writer places that history in a certain perspective. The emphasis in Dell'Oro and Di Paolo is on the gradual dissolution of the Italian community in Eritrea and the effects of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war while the emphasis in Ghermandi is on the recovery of the significance of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Yet, however different the focus of

³⁹The Abuna Petros (1892–1936) was a martyr of the Ethiopian resistance to Italian occupation. For details of his trial and execution, see Ciro Poggiali, *Diario AOI* (Milan: Longanesi, 1971), pp. 74–77. The diary was published posthumously.

⁴⁰Stephen Frosh, *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 40.

each text, all three writers – in the portrayal of the central protagonist of each novel – represent subjectivities in continual change. In part, that movement concerns the location of each protagonist within the shifting social and cultural formations in which they are involved. In part also, that movement concerns the processes through which they develop an enhanced consciousness of the voices of the people whose lives have been defined by the course of Italy's colonial and post-colonial engagement in East Africa. The principal characters – themselves only thinly veiled figurations of their authors – witness the persistence of voices from the past, shifts in the sense of their subjectivity, the feeling of their autonomy being compromised. These affects are registered in the exploration of feelings of uncanniness in Dell'Oro, in the reconstruction of the lives of the dead in Di Paolo and in the exploration, central to the whole of the work of Ghermandi, of the possession of the central protagonist by the transgenerational stories of which she becomes the bearer. In all three novels, a sensitivity to the haunting voices of the past is not only a mode of apprehension of transnational time or a means of restoring historical complexity to the experience of the everyday but is in itself constitutive of subjectivity.

All three novels dwell on the narrator or character's sense of something that is presumed to be past or surmounted continuing to exert an insidious or unacknowledged presence on the intrusion of the spectral within the real or the sense of reality losing its everyday contours and suddenly beginning to seem *out of time*. The intensity of the awareness of temporal dislocation that the texts represent leads us to question the experience of transnational time, its modalities, its challenges to the experience of personhood, and its continual merging of the past, present and future. It is true that one of the aims of the body of writing to which the three novels belong is to uncover the complex temporalities of colonial and post-colonial experience, but the texts also illuminate a moment of the wider and ongoing temporality of Italian mobility. The very fact that the novels are written in Italian heightens our awareness that language itself is part of the movement of people, ideas and practices; the very medium, in other words, through which the narratives are conveyed bears the imprint of past mobilities, of enforced displacements and of the merging of cultural experiences. If we are to take the analysis of transnational time further, then at least part of that enquiry entails exploring in greater detail the way in which language itself betrays the temporalities in which it is enmeshed. But such an inquiry also seeks to examine how the events and stories that are relayed through the prose of writers like Dell'Oro, Di Paolo and Ghermandi are part of the much longer histories of transnational Italian cultures.

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