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Contemporary Albanian-Italian Literature: Mapping New Italian Voices

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CONTEMPORARY ALBANIAN-ITALIAN LITERATURE:
MAPPING NEW ITALIAN VOICES

by

ANITA PINZI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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This work thematically analyzes literary texts written in the Italian language by Albanian migrants in the last three decades. This recent body of works is here defined as Contemporary Albanian-Italian Literature. It is analyzed in its literary and theoretic specificities, while being placed in the larger contexts of both Italian Migration Literature and Italian Literature. Four major themes – namely memory, borders, language, and body – are analyzed through relevant critical theory in the areas of autobiography, post-colonial studies, Mediterranean studies, gender studies, and translation studies to show how Albanian-Italian literature lives at the intersection of multiple literary and theoretical discourses. While investigating a new migrant aesthetics which resonates of other migrant voices, this work registers both the birth of a post-communist narrative in Italian and the extension towards the East of the Italian post-colonial discourse. It is here argued that Albanian-Italian Literature, through its literary themes, socio-political implications, and linguistic displacement is giving a transnational quality to Italian Literature, intertwining it with a broader discourse on world literature.

Table of contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One – <i>Memory: From Autobiography to History</i>	12
Chapter Two – <i>Borders</i>	72
Chapter Three – <i>Language(s)</i>	110
Chapter Four – <i>Migrant Bodies</i>	157
Notes for a Conclusion	203
Bibliography	208

Introduction

The body of works broadly defined as Italian Migration Literature is a recently-formed, complex and evolving field in Italy, a nation that during the 1980s increasingly became a destination country for migrants coming from many parts of the world. The consequent ethnic and socio-economic transformation of the country was soon reflected in its literary community, with the first Italian-language publications by immigrants appeared during the early 1990s. During those years, authors such as the Senegalese Pap Kouma and Saidou Moussa Ba, the Moroccan Mohamed Bouchane, the Brazilian Fernanda Faria di Albuquerque, and the Franco-Algerian Nasser Chora published diary accounts of their experiences as immigrants in Italy, cooperating for linguistic purposes with Italian journalists or writers. Their works – now defined as the first round of Italian migration literature – rapidly attracted Italian scholars' interest within the Comparative Literature field.

Armando Gnisci, in his works *Il rovescio del gioco* (1992) and *La letteratura italiana della migrazione* (1998), first remarked on the social and literary value of a considerable and increasing number of immigrant voices adopting Italian as their literary language. Since then, this newly created literary material has been increasingly discussed – in Italy as well as abroad – for its definition, social and aesthetic value, recurrent tropes, and relationship to the larger Italian literary canon. Scholarship on this literary body has therefore been growing parallel to it, mapping these new narrative voices, which today count among their ranks nationally and internationally well-established authors whose

works are published by major literary houses in Italy and translated into numerous languages. This new literary material has provided, and continues to provide, an opportunity to investigate crucial literary and social elements, such as the relationships between these new Italian voices and the Italian literary canon, Italy's postcolonial legacy, and a new framing of historical and contemporary Italian emigration.

Within this diverse literary arena, the analysis presented here examines the works of Albanian migrant writers who have used the Italian language as a primary tool to express their narrative voices. Literary production by Albanian authors in Italian constitutes the most numerous collection of works among migrant voices, and according to BASILI, the online database for tracking migration literature, started by Armando Gnisci at the University of Rome "La Sapienza," those published, active authors now number greater than thirty-five. Among them are several whose works have been translated into multiple languages and have achieved national and international recognition. In terms of genre, Albanian authors have produced a multifaceted group of works, encompassing novels, short stories, poems, and extending beyond written artistic forms to additional media such as photography, videos, documentaries, and films.

Clearly, this is a very diverse set of works that offers a multiplicity of literary themes and forms and these can be analyzed through a number of theoretical lenses. This exploration is therefore not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the material. Instead, it is meant to draw out the major themes that the genre offers through the critical trajectories that it encourages, and thereby to evaluate the aesthetic and socio-politic relations this new literary material entertains within itself and with the Italian literature and culture from which it borrows the language. The similarity in linguistic choices, as

well as the recurrence of particular themes and critical trajectories with which this material engages, suggest the birth of an Albanian-Italian body of works, the specifics of which this examination intends to map.

As per the title of this analysis, this newly formed set of works is here referred to as contemporary Albanian-Italian literature. As with any definition, its informing reasons need to be explained and its limits must be made clear. This material is consistently contemporary, since, as mentioned before, it has all been produced in the last thirty years. With the exception of the works of writers from the historical Arbëreshë communities in the south of Italy, the great majority of the material analyzed is a direct outcome of the 1990s Albanian migration to Italy that followed the fall of communism in the country.

On one hand, these contemporary voices, along with other migrant expressions from other parts of the world, constitute the literary mirror of the ongoing transformation of Italy's social fabric, an ethnic, linguistic, and religious shift that became visible in the 1980s, and that bore its first literary fruits in the early 1990s. On the other hand, these contemporary voices draw and shed light on a network of literary, economic, military, and political interactions between Italy and Albania which are rooted in a much longer history. Therefore, the Albanian migration of the 1990s and the literary productions that stemmed from it are the ground for a double reflection: while they register the beginning of a new era of relations between the two neighboring countries' cultures and economic systems, they also register the existence of a long historical Albanian-Italian trajectory constituted by a multilayered interaction which has been centuries in the making.

The Albanian-Italian quality of this material resides in a number of elements. First of all, it is meant to underline the biographical and physical movement from Albania to

Italy that concerns many of the authors analyzed here. While this approach includes the majority of the voices examined, it only tangentially reflects the reality of the Arbëreshë authors, who didn't directly experience the same geographical displacement, instead taking part in it through the historical narratives of their families and communities. This is the case for the Arbëreshë author Carmine Abate, who channels the contemporary Albanian-Italian trajectory through the telling of the displacement of Albanians to the south of Italy in the sixteenth century.

Second, the geographical passage from Albania to Italy largely corresponded to a linguistic passage, as the majority of the authors soon adopted Italian for their literary purposes. The linguistic perspective enriches and challenges the geographical one because authors such as Ornella Vorpsi, Ron Kubati, Elvira Dones, and Anilda Ibrahimini continue to write in Italian, despite their subsequent transition from Italy to other countries in Europe and the United States. Language functions as the unifying force among this varied and numerous collection of works, produced as they are in the same language, Italian, by individuals who are both originally from and now residing in disparate parts of the world. This attachment to the Italian language beyond the geographical boundaries of Italy exposes the extent to which migration is not a linear passage from a place to another – or from one language to another – and encourages us to ask where a destination language is truly located. Through the lived experiences of these multilingual writers, along with their diegetic treatment of language in their works, Italy shifts from being a destination country to being a transitory space in a larger and more complexly articulated migratory project. At the same time, through the use of Italian in a foreign context, Italian literature itself becomes a migratory concept, forcing us to

reconsider the boundaries of such a definition.

The linguistic passage from use of the native Albanian language to the adopted Italian tongue, though largely the case with instances analyzed in this work, does not encompass all the pieces of study. Gëzim Hajdari's translingualism indicates instead a cultivated and researched co-presence of both languages in the creative process, other authors live and work instead at the intersection of multiple foreign languages, and others still were ultimately raised in the Italian language and have a native sensibility towards its regional forms. These authors, though not being strictly examples of the described linguistic Albanian-Italian passage, can be still considered hyphenated literary subjects, insofar as their literary works reflect and articulate the co-existence and negotiation of both Albanian and Italian linguistic and cultural elements. The textual genetics and literary identity of this narrative draw significantly from the traditions of both countries.

The term "literature" in the title of this analysis has been selected mainly to underline how the vast majority of the material consists of novels, short stories, and poetry. Literature therefore is meant to underline the rich universe of words – both graphemes and sounds – that this body of works generously offers. This said, Albanian-Italian production includes visual material, such as photography, films, and documentaries, some of which are analyzed in this work whenever similar themes and critical trajectories offer ground for a productive comparison. Throughout the text, therefore, the term literature is at times replaced by a more comprehensive "narrative."

While the specific focus on the Albanian-Italian literary experience removes this material from a larger migrant literary panorama in Italian with which it linguistically and thematically shares much, it does provide a privileged lens of observation on the many

ties and implications that Italy and Albania have shared over the centuries, and how the legacy of those interactions are still at play in the formation of an Albanian-Italian literary identity.

The Albanian migration of the 1990s has been the most represented in the Italian media, which depicted it in derogatory terms and helped to trigger adverse social repercussions for years afterward. Giving full attention to the literary voices which Albanian migration generated seems therefore a necessary operation to rebalance the public representation of what Albanian migration has been: its reasons, its dynamics, and its outcome.

Proceeding per major themes, this work is divided into four chapters and numerous sub-chapters investigating the most relevant declinations of each major theme. Chapter one, “Memory: From Autobiography to History,” highlights how Albanian-Italian literature is a vast repository of personal and collective, national and international historical memory. The number of autobiographical voices suggests how the text functions as a space of psychological and emotional survival in a situation of physical and cultural displacement. Concerning historical memory, this material elaborates on the harshness of the communist dictatorship that isolated the country for fifty years, a critical take that informs the post-communist value of this set of works. On an international level, the analysis traces the numerous links between Albania and Italy through the centuries. From the presence of the republic of Venice in the Balkans that generated a flux of Albanian nationals to Venice in the fifteenth century, to the Albanian emigration to the south of Italy as a consequence of the Ottoman reconquest of the Albanian lands freed by the national hero Skanderbeg in the sixteenth century, to the Italian Fascist occupations of

Albanian during World War II, this material highlights the rich legacy of cultural and political interconnections between the two countries.

It is in particular the memory of the Italian Fascist occupation of Albania from 1939 to 1945 that opens up this material to a postcolonial reading, thereby contributing to the recently developed discourse on Italian postcolonialism. This discourse, which includes essay collections such as Patrizia Palumbo's *A Place in the Sun* and Daniela Merolla's *Migrant Cartographies*, has been mainly focusing on the north-south trajectory of Italian imperialism, analyzing as it does the literary experiences of authors from the Horn of Africa and Libya. The lens offered in Albanian-Italian works expands the postcolonial discourse to include Italy's imperial expansion towards the East and considers the extent to which the Adriatic trajectory was indissolubly linked to the shaping of the Italian national sentiment.

Chapter two, "Borders," focuses on representations of the crossing of terrestrial and marine borders, and is meant to place Albanian-Italian literature in the complex and multifaceted space of the Mediterranean discourse. In so doing, a viable path is indicated to consider this set of works as part of a southern gaze and agency, as it is theorized by Franco Cassano in *Il pensiero meridiano*. The experience of crossing the borders becomes one of the leading themes and a prevalent aesthetic choice, while also offering a countervailing view onto the socio-political strategies that Italy and Europe have controversially adopted vis-à-vis the management of migration.

Echoing a number of analyses on the Mediterranean area, such as Franco Cassano's *Il pensiero meridiano*, Iain Chambers's *Mediterranean Crossing*, and Rutvica Andrijasevic's *From Exception to Excess*, many Albanian-Italian texts map the

contemporary international cultural and economic dynamics at play in the Mediterranean Sea, highlighting how it came to be a multiply disjointed border and a site of systematic conflict and death. This lens allows the reconsideration of Italy's role in a larger net of international cultural, economic, and human transactions, a role that is informed the tension between the idea of Italy as both a leading northern country and a marginal southern space.

Chapter three, "Language(s)," tackles the complex linguistic universe of Albanian-Italian literature, both at a diegetic and extra-diegetic level, in order to map the creative manipulation of the text through the adopted language and discuss the socio-political implications necessarily linked to the choice of a non-native language. On the artistic side, Albanian-Italian literature shows a wide range of linguistic influences, from standard to regional Italian, and from Albanian to a set of other European languages often used to mimetically reproduce the linguistic intersection of migration. The use of Italian as the primary literary language is a considered artistic choice for many authors, as several of them describing it the ideal artistic tool due to its sonority and musicality. Others consider Italian as an emotional filter allowing for the exploration and expression of feelings that would overwhelm their native language. Lastly, Italian is considered the language of a long and prestigious literary tradition, leading examples of which have been circulating in Albania despite the best efforts of communist censors in recent decades, and it is a tradition with which Albanians and Albanian émigrés have aspired to align.

In this perspective, special attention is given to Gëzim Hajdari's linguistic process, with a close reading of his first translingual collection *Corpo presente/Trup i*

pranishëm. Hajdari's contemporaneous creation in both languages, in a continuous process of self translation, marks the birth of a poetic self that can only exist at the intersection of the two languages. His poetry is therefore the highlight of the Albanian-Italian trajectory that this analysis wants to establish.

The use of Italian also reveals a well-defined socio-political agency. As first stated by Graziella Parati in *Migration Italy*, the use of Italian by migrant writers is a political act, insofar as it serves as a response to a discourse established by the host society, one in which the Other is described in derogatory terms. Appropriating the language of the host country, migrants engage in a dialogue with the host society and reconstitute themselves as narrating subjects. This overturning of perspective through the use of the same language constitutes a space for self-representation, one which gives voice to those who have previously been a passive object and the recipient of a large amount of derogatory media attention.

Language is therefore a tool of power, and as such it is able to connect the Albanian narrative in Italian to a larger discourse on domination. In a postcolonial perspective, analyses in the French and English contexts have shown how the linguistic bond between colonizers and colonized is a double tool for the colonized subject: a vehicle for interacting with the colonizing force and a tool for rejecting its terms. As an example of that approach 'Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, in his works *Decolonizing the Mind*, argues that the rejection of the English language by contemporary contributors to African literature is the only way to regain a space of liberty from the legacy of colonialism. At the same time, however, English remains the very language to communicate that space of liberty to the attention of the colonizer.

Italy participates in this discourse through the experiences and voices of its postcolonial subjects writing in Italian. Gabriella Ghermandi and Igiaba Scego are prime example of authors elaborating a new perspective on the Italian occupation of the Horn of Africa and its contemporary legacy. Albanians writing in Italian complicate this panorama insofar as Italian, for Albanians, conveys a double colonial implication. While in the past Italian was perceived as the language of the Fascist occupiers, its widespread diffusion among Albanians in the 1990s was mostly due to the cultural neo-colonization propagated by the media, which had a fundamental role in shaping the Italian dream for many Albanians. Reflecting on the use of language is therefore a way to map the many critical directions and implications that are at play in the production of this new body of works.

Chapter four, “Migrant Bodies,” investigates the repeated centrality of the body in the migratory context. The body on the page is always socially, ethnically, and religiously marked, as real-life bodies are marked through migration, and it therefore becomes the space of negotiation between belonging and non-belonging. The numerous transformations that the migrant subject undergoes are necessarily experienced through the body. The physical vessel is at times the only homeland possible, in some cases is damaged by national or international violence to the point that it is destroyed. The frequent recurrence of dead bodies in Albanian-Italian migratory texts indicates a widespread and shared sense of uncontrollable destabilization and precariousness of existence, which informs the migratory passage. That instability often turns deadly as a result of the European logic of exclusion and profit which is currently at play in the political economy of the Mediterranean and due to the ethnic clashes that have

characterized the Balkans in recent years.

It is primarily the female body that is represented and exposed, both to patriarchal dominance and to the struggles of migration. For this reason a deeper discourse on gender is offered through a close reading of Ornella Vorpsi's first novel, *Il paese dove non si muore mai*. In this text the female body becomes the privileged space of articulation of multiple tensions, from patriarchy and communist discipline to a shift in meaning in its migration to the West. Recalling feminist analyses such as Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* and Hélène Cixous's *Coming to Writing*, Vorpsi's female body is the primary element of a gender difference that becomes the ground for articulation of political, social and cultural relations. The body is ultimately in constant tension between being a subject and an object, located as it is at the intersection of multiple migratory trajectories, at once coming from, going to, and spanning different spaces.

Contemporary Albanian-Italian literature stands out for the complexity of its themes, and for the numerous critical lenses it applies. As this analysis means to establish, while the complexity of this body of works escapes any systematic categorization, its versatility interacts with many literary fields. Albanian-Italian literature, Italoophone literature, post-communist literature, post-colonial literature, and Mediterranean literature, all are legitimate spaces of literary belonging for this group of works, which contributes to and enriches each greatly. Albanian-Italian works, operating at the margins of the Italian literary canon but using its language, draws Italian literature into a larger discourse of world literature.

Chapter One

Memory: From Autobiography to History

Vlora

Many of the recent scholarly accounts investigating the historical, cultural, political, and economic relations between Albania and Italy – a set of works that marks the birth of a growing contemporary Albanian-Italian discourse worldwide, one which includes a variety of international voices in multiple disciplines such as historiography, anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism – begin their analysis from this same historical event: on August 8, 1991 the Albanian mercantile vessel Vlora arrived to the Italian Southern port of Bari, carrying about 20,000 Albanian migrants. The people on the Vlora were fleeing their native country, Albania, breaking free from an almost fifty-year long communist regime initiated in 1944 by the Marxist-Leninist political leader Enver Hoxha and continued by his political follower Ramiz Alia up to that crucial year 1991. Italy was called to receive and host those fleeing people, a task that revealed the country's political and social inadequacy in matters of hospitality and a shortcoming of perspective that led to infamous days of reclusion of the migrants in the Vittoria stadium in Bari. This moment, out of the many relations between the two countries along the centuries, has been therefore historicized by the contemporary Albanian-Italian discourse as a pivotal moment in the understanding of the ties between the two Mediterranean countries, one that put them into a new historical dialogue after several decades of distance.

It is tempting to use the powerful images of the overloaded Vlora as an icon – images that were so present in the media of those days¹ and recently narrated by the two documentaries *La nave dolce* (2012), by Italian filmmaker Daniele Vicari, and *Anja: la nave* (2013), by the Albanian filmmaker Roland Sejko, as well as by Artur Spanjolli's novel *I nipoti di Scanderbeg* (2012). The Italian clothing brand United Colors of Benetton was one of the first social actors to treat the striking images of the Vlora as an icon, using the vessel for one of its fashion campaigns. In that regard, scholars Russel King and Nicola Mai, in their socio-anthropological work *Out of Albania: From Crisis Migration to Social Inclusion in Italy* (2008) – a thorough description of Albanian migration and a theorization of the Italian process of stigmatization of the Albanian community – state that the Vlora has been used in apocalyptic terms by the Italian media, which used it to create the rhetoric of a national and international “crisis”². Therefore, a misleading language of emergency and threat to international security has been often associated with the image of the vessel.

With no doubt the images of the Vlora and its cargo of migrants are powerful and easily pliable to a set of different discourses. They open up to multiple and more optimistic interpretations. The Vlora easily functions as the metaphor of a complex historical shift both at a national, intra-national and international level. While on an Albanian national level, the journey of the Vlora represents the liberation of the Albanian people from years of dictatorship and isolation, on a global perspective it represents an

¹ Sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago's work *Non-Persone. L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale* (2005) is a thorough exploration of the representations of migrants in Italian media and their role in the arbitrary construction of migrants as public enemies. The chapter “Campagne d'Albania” specifically focuses on the presence of Albanians in the discourse of media and analyses the events following the arrival of the Vlora, and the days of detention of the migrants in the Vittoria stadium.

² As King and Mai show through available statistics, Albanian migration did not simply happen as a consequence of a crisis, but rather in a diverse and dynamic manner during the 1990s.

additional tassel in the overthrowing of the political and economic divide between capitalistic West and communist East. However, in the context of this chapter, which explores the different occurrences of the theme of memory – in both its personal and collective form – in contemporary Albanian-Italian literature, it feels appropriate to give the Vlora an intra-national significance and remark on its relevance in a specific Albanian-Italian trajectory. Therefore, the Vlora is here symbolically elected to represent a “mirror image” for Italy. Its arrival is indeed the moment in which Italy is called to look at its own past and start a slow and difficult process of memory-recovery of the many forgotten ties to its neighboring country, one which in 1991 felt as geographically close as culturally unknown.

The Vlora functioned as the spec(tac)ular image that Italy – its people and its institutions – had to look at and reflect on in order to start answering basic questions, which were arising from that historical moment. Who were those migrants? Where were they coming from? Why were they coming to Italy? That overloaded boat and the dramatic days that followed its arrival can therefore function as a cumbersome historical mirror, into which Italy was indeed “reflecting” itself and its own past. Those images needed to be read through the lens of the crucial political, economic, cultural, and symbolic role that Italy has played in the Mediterranean over the centuries and, in particular, through a specific Adriatic lens made of all those continuous historical interactions with the neighboring Albania. As the growing contemporary Albanian-Italian discourse is progressively revealing, all answers to the questions investigating the reasons behind the arrival of the Vlora would be partial ones, unless they recovered the lost memory of the large spectrum of historical convergences and interactions that Italy and

Albania shared along the centuries.

Reflecting (on) the past

For Italy, the arrival of the Albanians is not just the beginning of a self-reflection aimed at investigating an unexplored Italian-Adriatic trajectory. It also underpins a new reflection on its better-known Intra-European and Atlantic trajectories, in so far as it encouraged the reconsideration of past (and present) Italian migration to the North of Europe and the Americas. An instance of this trend is the totality of works by the Arbëreshë novelist Carmine Abate, through which the author re-elaborates the Fifteenth Century Albanian migration to the South of Italy, merging it with the Italian migration to Germany during the 1950s and later. Similarly, the 1994 film *Lamerica*, by filmmaker Gianni Amelio, constructed a narrative that overlapped contemporary Albanian migration to Italy and past Italian migration to America. The final sequences of the film show an overloaded vessel leaving Albania that the viewer has no difficulties in associating with the recent images of the Vlora. However, those images are immediately re-contextualized by the Italian old character Spiro who, having lost his memory, believes instead that they are finally going to America. In so doing, both Abate's and Amelio's works suggest another declination of the same mirroring process, one that remarks on the similarities between Italian and Albanian migrations even if they occurred in different historical times. Albanian migration is the reflecting surface on which past Italian migration is newly analyzed and rendered to new circulation and meaning.

On a sociological level of analysis, according to Nicola Mai's essay "The Albanian Diaspora-in-the-Making: Media, Migration and Social Exclusion," it is exactly

this dynamic of mirroring of the Italian past of massive migration with the new Albanian migration that lays at the core of the aggressive stigmatization and “othering” operated by Italian media against Albanians. According to Mai, “mirroring” and “othering” are not two separate processes; rather they are the opposite poles of a same social tension. Going hand in hand with the national construction of an internal backward South, Italian emigration was something shameful to be soon forgotten. Therefore, the image of the Albanian migrant was made into the symbol of the Other, because it was too similar to a past self that needed to be forgotten.

What was forgotten? An historical overview

A long process of forgetting and distancing between the two countries was exactly what the arrival of the Vlora revealed. The distancing was a reciprocal historical and ideological process. On one hand, that distance resulted in the erasure of Albanian-Italian relations from Italian history books and intellectual discourse. On the other hand, Albanian communist historiography mainly insisted on magnifying only the memory of the 1939-1944 Italian fascist occupation of Albania, in order to shape the national ideological distrust vis-à-vis the neighboring capitalistic country. A systematic operation of memory erasure and alteration was therefore operated by the historiography of both nations in the years following World War II.

Recent historiography, which emerged in European-American scholarship thanks to a renewed interest in the Balkans after the fall of communism, is counter-balancing that memory removal, bringing back and investigating in depth the relations between the two Mediterranean countries. One example of that historiography trend is Miranda

Vickers' text *The Albanians: A Modern History*, published in 1995. Mapping the Albanian history from the Ottoman Empire to the fall of Communism, Vickers recalls the "Albanian people's long history of subjugation and humiliation," through which she explains "the ruthless character of the Albanian regime" (vii). Vickers' work contextualizes the communist regime through the Albanian history of foreign and repeated dominations of the country, and in doing so her narration also distinctly brings to light all the crucial moments of Albanian-Italian relations across the centuries.

As Vickers highlights, those relations date back to the Venetian control of many Albanian cities, such as Shkodër, Durrës, Lezhë, Ulqin, and Tivar during the twelfth century. The Albanian connection to Venice remained strong in the following centuries and specifically in the fifteenth century a high number of Albanian nationals was reported in Venice, people who were fleeing the expansion and domination of the Ottoman Empire³.

The Albanian presence in Italy continued to increase during the fifteenth century, when numerous Christian Albanians landed in many regions of the Italian South after the death of the Christian national hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu, who, for twenty-five years, had freed Albania from Ottoman dominance. His death was followed by the re-conquest of the land by the Turkish army, generating a massive exodus of people towards Italy. The legacy of that chapter of Albanian-Italian history remains in the still existing numerous Arbëreshë communities in the Italian Southern regions, namely Molise, Puglia,

³ For a deeper understanding of the relations between Venice and Albania, Lucia Nadin's work, *Migrazioni e integrazione; Il caso degli albanesi a Venezia (1479-1552)*, focuses on how the fifteenth century expansion of the Ottoman Empire at the expense of Albanian territories pushed many people to leave the country. Many Albanians found shelter in Venice. Nadin's work is a thorough analysis of the Venetian immigration policy and maps the integration process of Albanians and their contribution to the Venetian humanistic culture, as well as the formation of the stereotype of "the Albanian" in the Venetian literature of the sixteenth century.

Calabria, Basilicata, and Sicily.

While on one hand those communities maintained their language and their customs along the centuries, on the other hand they also became a well-integrated part of the Italian social, cultural and linguistic fabric. As scholars Emma Bond and Daniele Comberiati point out in their introduction to the collection of essays *Il confine liquido* (2013), the Arbëreshë instance underlines the complexity of the Italian identity, one that is far away from being homogeneous and monolingual. Recalling the mirror metaphor previously used, we can therefore say that the Arbëreshë communities function as a viable way to reflect – and reflect on – the multiplicity informing Italian-ness, an *italianità* that a large part of the media and political discourse depicts as endangered by the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity introduced by contemporary migration to the peninsula.

Continuing to pinpoint the historical interactions between Albania and Italy, at the beginning of the twentieth century Italian General Ricciotti Garibaldi, son of the Italian national hero Giuseppe Garibaldi, sympathized for the Albanian national cause, and he served as president of the Consiglio Albanese in 1904. The Consiglio Albanese was an association aimed at gaining Italian support for Albanian national aspirations, namely the liberation from the Ottoman Empire and the constitution of a sovereign nation-state that would gather all the ethnically Albanian territories, such as the Presevo Valley of Serbia, Western Macedonia, Southern Montenegro, Kosovo, and Northwestern Greece, that the Albanians call Çameria. Garibaldi militancy was questioned, however, because in 1897 he had given his support to the Greeks and the Slavs to occupy large parts of Albania. Either way, the political tension and closeness of the two countries at the turn of the

twentieth century was undeniable.

Albania finally reached political independence in November 1912, even though the dream of an ethnic Greater Albania remained unfulfilled. Albania constituted itself as a monarchy under the regency of King Zogu I, whose power during the early 1920s was crucially supported by Italian political forces. That political support led to the growth of Italian interests in Albania and resulted in the Italian Fascist invasion on April 7, 1939, a military occupation that lasted until 1944, when the defeated Italy was forced to retreat from Albania as well as from all the colonial overseas territories.

Free from the Fascist occupation, Albania witnessed the rise of the Communist party under the leadership of Enver Hoxha. As part of that ideological shift following World War II, the new Albanian Communist leadership ordered that Italian soldiers and civilians living in Albania be sent to concentration camps for life-long imprisonment. That part of history too has been removed from history books and the Italian consciousness. It is only in recent years that its memory began resurfacing, mostly thanks to the work of dramaturge Saverio La Ruina. In his theater monologue, *Italianesi* (2011), La Ruina gives voice to the tragedy of the persecution and interment of many Italians under communist rules, along with the pain of their impossible identity. Considered Italian in Albania and Albanian in Italy – once they could finally travel to the motherland, after the fall of communism – La Ruina calls them “Italianesi,” stressing the drama of a continuous sense of displacement.

As the instance of the *Italianesi* underlines, those almost fifty years of Albanian communism were characterized by a rigid ideological conflict with the capitalistic West, as well as cultural and economic isolation originated by the increasing distance from all

the other communist regimes, namely Russia, former Yugoslavia, and China. Despite the isolation, Albania maintained a commercial exchange with Italy, selling its energy resources, such as gas and oil. In her ongoing doctoral dissertation, anthropologist Ajkuna Hoppe is studying how and to what extent the mobility of energy products across Albanian borders challenges the consolidated idea of closure and isolation of Albania during the Communist regime. However, as testified by much post-communist Albanian literature, the isolation and impossibility to leave the country was a reality for almost all Albanian people, and worked as a severe obstacle to the human and cultural exchange between Albania and its neighboring countries.

It is at the end of the twentieth century that we can witness a renewed Italian-Albanian exchange, one that began with the migration of Albanians towards the peninsula as a consequence of the fall of communism in 1991. The opening image of the arrival of the Vlora was neither the first nor the last of the numerous boats loaded with Albanian migrants reaching the coasts of Italy: a movement of people that has been described as either an exodus or a diaspora. The Albanian emigration was thwarted under the Italian and European immigration laws and affected by tragedies such as the shipwreck of the Kater I Rades in 1997, hit by the military ship Sibilla in the Otranto channel killing 108 people. According to a 2007 study by the Italian institution CeSPI (Center for Studies of International Politics), 800,000 Albanian nationals migrated to Italy from the 1990s to the 2000s. According to the same study, along with Italy, Albanian migration concerned a large number of European and American countries, such as Greece, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Germany, Canada, and the United States.

While Albanian migration to Italy did not occur only by boat, the marine crossing

was the most common route. Besides the numbers of migrants arriving via boat, the coverage by Italian media hyper-focused on the marine crossing, thereby deeply and negatively impressing the Italian collective imagination. Albanian migration by boat is not an isolated instance in the contemporary Mediterranean; quite the contrary it is part of a larger and ongoing practice of marine crossing, one which involved and still involves migrants from all over the world and which has transformed the Mediterranean sea into a complex space of intersection of human, economic, political, and criminal forces.

Post-colonial amnesias

The marine crossing, as well as other historical Albanian-Italian interactions, is remembered and articulated in the narrative works by Albanian nationals in Italian language. The Fascist domination is nowadays receiving increasing critical attention. Recent Albanian-Italian scholarship is indeed arguing whether those years can be considered as an eastern segment of the more studied southern trajectory of the Italian colonial experience, and therefore analyzed through the same theoretical lens. The already mentioned collection *Il confine liquido* (2013), edited by Bond and Comberiati, investigates the contemporary Albanian-Italian relations and literature in the larger context of Italian postcolonialism, a rather recent field of study in Italy, which has been focused solely on the memory and legacies of colonialism in the Horn of Africa and Libya. Bond and Comberiati's text underlines how, even though the years of actual domination (from 1939 to 1944) were not many, the Italian expansionistic tension towards the East has been a constant element since the years of the Italian unification as part of the national discourse on its own borders. The war over Trieste, the claim of

Fiume, and the annexation of the Dodecanese islands, are all parts of the same expansionistic tension to the East.

The investigation of the Albanian-Italian ties in a postcolonial trajectory is helpful to reframe the erasure of the memory of Italy's Adriatic connections as a part of a larger context of national forgetfulness. Since the 1990s, scholars such as Armando Gnisci in his work *Poetiche dei mondi* (1999) and Venessa Maher with her contributions to *Italian Cultural Studies* (1996) highlighted a loss of colonial memory that Italy actively pursued with regard to its actions in the colonized areas and its responsibilities towards the colonized communities. There are now several collections investigating Italy's colonial responsibilities and postcolonial legacy in the Horn of Africa, such as *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, edited by Patrizia Palumbo in 2003, *Italian Colonialism*, edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller in 2005, and *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, edited by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan in 2005. As the above works all articulate, at the core of Italy's erasure of memory lies a well-remarked Italian nostalgia for the lost empire, a nostalgia that stems from the forced loss of the colonies after Italy's defeat in World War II. The loss of Albania as a country and all the memory attached to it seems explainable through this same pattern of nostalgia.

In addition to the voluntary repression of historical memory for which Italy is responsible, certainly the long lasting isolation of communist Albania, a country that progressively had taken its distance from all the other communist allies, contributed to the Italian lack of knowledge of its neighboring country. As the Albanian scholar Rigels Halili explains in his essay "Uno sguardo all'altra sponda dell'adriatico: Italia e Albania,"

dictator Enver Hoxha's social realism on one hand and the entrance of Italy into NATO and the Marshall plan on the other hand "sembravano aver centuplicato la striscia di mare che divide i due paesi" (7). The geographical stretch of water, serving as border between the two countries, is therefore a little thing compared to the distance that Halili suggests, one at the same time ideological, economic and cultural.

While that distance may be complete from an Italian perspective, from an Albanian point of view we must instead consider the amount of cultural images that Albanians received since the early 1970s through the illegal reception of Italian television. In this regard Nicola Mai's extensive research repeatedly investigates the centrality of Italian television all along the Albanian migratory arc, first in the shaping of Albanian migration patterns and then its stigmatizing function after their arrival to Italy. Mai highlights that Italian media served as "the only window on the outside world available to Albanian citizens" (2005, 546), and therefore their migratory projects, real or imaginary, were shaped by those images, in conjunction with "Italy's resonance in Albanian past (as the former colonizer)" (2005, 547).

Nora Moll, in her analysis "Il ruolo della televisione nella comunità narrativa italiana-albanese: *I grandi occhi del mare* di Leonard Guaci" (2013), studies how Guaci's novel revolves around the reception of Italian TV in Albania from the '60s to the '90s, and how that contributed to the fall of Communism. She argues that while Italy is a very visible and active force in Albanian daily life, "la società albanese rimane invece sostanzialmente opaca agli occhi di questa stessa comunità produttrice di immagini, musiche, colori, illusioni" (118). That opposition between the mystifying visibility of a country (Italy) versus the forgetful opacity of the other (Albania) is at the core of the

formation of a credulous Albania and an oblivious Italy, which also translates into a deep imbalance of cultural power, opening up to a discourse on media neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism.

Remembering through literature

In 1991, the Albanian migrants on board the Vlora were certainly encouraged by the image of the ideal neighboring country, which they had created through media images. That imaginary Italy was an idea destined to crash against the lack of hospitality that for days forced them into the Vittoria stadium. At the same time Italy, facing the emergency of those 20,000 Albanian migrants, had to acknowledge – along with the insufficiency of its humanitarian intervention – how its memory of the neighboring country had been lost across the same little stretch of sea. That was, therefore, a crucial moment for the two countries on a path to reciprocal awareness. As Halili puts it, the Vlora's arrival scrambled a physically nonexistent barrier, causing a “cortocircuito storico che rimette in discussione le relazioni tra Italia e Albania” (7). The path to reciprocal knowledge, demystification, and recovery of memory between the two countries was activated by the marine migration of Albanians.

Since that pivotal 1991, relevant anthropological and sociological analysis has been done on the relations between the two countries, an expanding Albanian-Italian discourse that has given a valuable contribution to the recovery of the lost memory and that has been shaping the understanding of past and present interactions across the Adriatic Sea. In the field of literary criticism, foundational work has been done in the analysis of major authors such as the poet Gëzim Hajdari and the novelists Ornela

Vorpsi, Ron Kubati, Anilda Ibrahim, and Elvira Dones. Looking at the literary works written by Albanian authors in Italian – in Italy as well as in other countries – provides a viable angle of investigation of past and present interactions, be they historical, cultural, linguistic, or literary, between the two countries. Many are the literary occurrences guided by memory, either personal or historical/collective, that deposited in the post-communist artistic expressions of Albanian émigrés. Along with a larger set of works written by migrants from all over the world since 1990, commonly defined as Italian Migration Literature, the totality of these new Albanian-Italian works proves to be a dense space where personal and collective memory condense and intersect, feeding literary themes and tropes and becoming a theme on its own. The consistent occurrence of autobiographical and collective memory in Albanian-Italian literature traces a complex transformation in Italian literature, one that has autobiographical, testimonial, traumatic, migratory, post-communist, and post-colonial imprints. Moreover, the contribution of Albanian-Italian literature to the national literature resides in the recovery of that segment of trans-Adriatic history that Italy had long forgotten.

Albanian-Italian literature deepens, reframes, and integrates the content and the implications of another set of works written by Italian writers in the last century, such as Manlio Cancogni's novel *La linea del Tomori* (1966, republished in 1993), Mario Rigoni Stern's *Quota Albania* (1981), Raffaele Nigro's short story *Diario d'Albania* (1990), or Serena Luciani's novel *Terremoto a Tirana* (2008). While these works are rare instances in Italian literature, they are fundamental literary pieces in acknowledging Albania's relevance in the Italian history and cultural panorama. The new accounts by Albanian writers, produced as they are by literary subjects who were highly affected by the

unbalanced distribution of political and cultural power within their country as well as in relation to other countries, are the repository of an overthrowing perspective on Italy and its international relations, as well as a wonderfully rich re-writing of a national culture, the Albanian one, in the light of a forming post-communist sentiment.

As will be shown when approaching the specificity of the texts, memory is a versatile element in Albanian-Italian literature, bridging the authors' lived events and emotions with their fictional and narrative worlds. Memory ranges from a personal level, which often entails an autobiographical form, to a historical/collective recalling of events and national myths. The different levels of memory intersect with each other in many instances, mutually informing one another. However, in order to offer the reader a clearer approach to the topic, they will be separately analyzed in the following sections of the chapter.

Autobiographical memories

As commonly argued in literary scholarship of migration, the first phase of migration literature in Italy appearing in the early 1990s mainly consists of autobiographical accounts. Texts such as the Senegalese Pap Kouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti* (1990), Saidou Moussa Ba's *La promessa di Hamadi* (1991), the Moroccan Mohamed Bouchane's *Chiamatemi Ali'* (1991), the Franco-Algerian Nassera Chora's *Volevo diventare bianca* (1993), and the Brazilian Fernanda Faria di Albuquerque's *Princesa* (1994), are diaristic accounts of the authors' experiences as immigrants in Italy. The pivotal narrative elements of the texts are the steps of the writers' migratory journey, the linguistic, social, and economic difficulties encountered in the host country, the struggle

to find a home, and episodes of violence and racism. All these events were orally narrated or sketched out by the migrant writers, while native Italian journalists or writers transformed those lived stories into fully written texts.

Since the appearance of these texts, the literary debate has registered and elaborated on the autobiographical quality of the accounts, initially valuing them for their human and sociological testimony. These texts were indeed telling unheard dramatic life stories, while recording a remarkable shift in the fabric of Italian society. As migrant literature diversified and moved away from the autobiographical telling, the literary debate moved as well towards a literary investigation of figures, metaphors and tropes peculiar to migrant literature, and even the autobiographical forms were reread in the context of a broader research of new poetics. Scholar Jennifer Burns, with her new publication *Migrant Imaginaries: Figures in Italian Migration Literature* (2013), provides the most recent instance of this literary approach, one that focuses on the structure and function of narrative figures in the texts by migrant writers in Italian.

Burns's work is not an isolated case of a literary approach to migrant literature. Franca Sinopoli with her essay "Poetiche della migrazione nella letteratura italiana" (2001) took a similar approach in analyzing the autobiographical form. Analyzing Gëzim Hajdari's *Corpo presente* and Salah Methnani's *Immigrato*, Sinopoli frames the autobiographical discourse as a "poetica del sentire e della transitorietà" according to which all the forces informing the migrants' sensibility are made visible through literary images – "una modalità figurale" (193).

Albanian-Italian texts can be easily placed in the category of migrant literature for the majority of them spring after the migration of the 1990s. However, Maria Cristina

Mauceri, in her essay “Variazione dei temi dello sguardo nei romanzi d’esordio di Dones e Kubati” (2013), points out that the first works by Albanian migrants do not align with many other expressions by migrant writers, in so far as those works are not autobiographies, but rather hybrid texts where life and fiction blend and mingle. While the general trajectory of a migrant author shifting from autobiographical narration to a later fictional production – one that can be traced in much migrant literature across the world⁴ – does not encompass all Albanian migrant writers, it is however true that many are the elements in Albanian-Italian literature that allow an autobiographical discourse. The majority of the works, especially those texts written by first generation migrants, show a strong connection to the authors’ migratory experiences, so that factual and emotional events of the migratory passage seep into the narrative fabric.

Despite the predictable insufficiency of any generalization about a narrative field that counts thirty-eight different and prolific writers⁵ working with different literary genres and stretching to include other artistic forms, we can argue that many Albanian-Italian narratives present themes, tropes, and stylistic choices that allow an autobiographical investigation. The easily identifiable autobiographical element lies in the autobiographical pact, as established by Philippe Lejeune’s first normative description of the genre – a clear identification between author, narrator, and character. While this description fits well the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ western autobiographies on which Lejeune was basing his studies, much literature of the twentieth century operated various degrees of transformation of the genre, and this

⁴ Italian-American literature constitutes an example of the narrative trajectory from autobiography to fiction, as analyzed by Fred Gardaphé in *Italian Signs, American Streets: The evolution of Italian American Narrative* (1996).

⁵ Basili’s link. Not all of them will be systematically analyzed, rather only those allowing us to highlight similarities and discrepancies in the treatment of literary themes and tropes.

coincidence between author, narrator, and character is easily lost in recent and contemporary productions. Limiting the attention to the Italian literary panorama, cases such as Anna Banti's *Artemisia*, and Luisa Passerini's *Autoritratto di gruppo* – to mention two of the many – are relevant examples showing how the experience of the narrating subject transits through the voice of a historical figure, 17th-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi, or through the history of a collectivity, the Italian actors of the cultural revolution of 1968.

Some of the texts under examination present different degrees of alteration of the autobiographical pact. This is the case for Ornella Vorpsi's first novel *Il paese dove non si muore mai*. In this first-person narrated novel the duo author-character shifts from an initial discrepancy, Ornella-Ina, to the autobiographical homonymy, Ornella-Ornella, to eventually proceed to a renewed stage of distance, Ornella-Eva. Such a shift in the character's name, first presented when she is seven, then thirteen and lastly twenty-two, does not undermine the identity of the voice throughout the narration, and the reader clearly sees the same female character behind the different names and changes of age. The central moment of homonymy between the writer and the character though reinforces that identity the moment it brings it outside the text to a different level of identification, the one between Vorpsi's lived life and the character's represented life.

The autobiographical intention conveyed by the coincidence of names is however challenged by the other names of Vorpsi's character in the initial and final moments of the novel. What is, therefore, the value of that challenge? On one hand, this narrative choice reinforces the description of a character in transformation, in so far as Ina-Ornella-Eva is leaving childhood and becoming a woman. On the other hand, a similar narrative

device points at an amplification of the self in a multitude of voices, which is not limited to the triad Ina-Ornela-Eva, but that rather stretches to encompass other female characters in the novel. Diella, Elona, Kristina, Rudina, Denata, Anila, Dorina, Blerta and other women in the text constitute different refractions of the same female universe that Vorpsi's work brings to life, and of which the main character is a fragment. What Vorpsi's text seems then to operate is the rendition of the collective voice of a multiple female subject undergoing the same constriction, punishment, stigmatization, and control under the law of the Albanian communist regime: a collective autobiography.

Vorpsi's text, which uses autobiographical material and shapes it into the autobiography of a female universe in the struggle of being women in communist Albania, opens up to a possible discussion on the interconnections between autobiographical narrative, migration literature, and testimonial narrative. According to John Beverly's analysis "Margin at the Center: *On Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)," one of the aspects of some first person narrated autobiographies is the one of recording through the self an experience which is the testimony for a collective one. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their study *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, remark on the collective value of minor literature: literature written by minorities in a major language. Therefore, some of the first instances of Italian migration literature in general and the Albanian-Italian cases here analyzed seem to respond to Beverly and Deleuze-Guattari's insights, in so far as they often represent personal stories, which are often indissolubly intertwined with the experiences of a collectivity, and, as it will be shown in the next section of the chapter, are often informed by or respond to national and international socio-historical events.

A more striking instance of this personal-collective axis is Elvira Dones's first novel *Dashuri e Huaj*. The text was written in 1995 in Albanian, seven years after the author had migrated to Switzerland, and published in 1997. In the same year, the novel was published in Italian with the title *Senza bagagli*, a different one from the original, which reads instead "Foreign Lover." Maria Cristina Mauceri, in her essay "Oltre il muro: dramma personale e nostalgia conflittuale in *Dashuri e Huaj* di Elvira Dones," underlines the extent to which individual life and socio-political history inform each other in Dones's text, placing the novel in the field of testimonial narrative. The female character, Klea, takes the dramatic decision to flee Albania, leaving her child and the whole family behind, to escape the regime and its surveillance and intimidation. While a more detailed analysis of the rendition of collective and historic memory in this text will be offered in the following section of this chapter, we can already sense all the implications and interconnection between private and collective. Klea's story is her own story, but also the story of a nation under communist political power.

Differently from Vorpsi's text, Dones's novel does not provide any homonymy between the writer and the character, named Klea instead of Elvira. What makes the narration an autobiographical one is rather a selection of events that the author is taking from her lived life and that equally trace the stages of evolution of her character Klea. Dones's own privileged life in Albania as a public figure, her early collaboration with Albanian TV programs, her subversive decision to leave her country and her child in a year, 1988, in which Albanian borders were closed and emigration was considered a crime, and her final asylum in Switzerland are all elements that Dones uses to structure the fictional life of her female alter-ego. In addition to this, Dones has repeatedly stated

in her interviews that her work is openly autobiographical.

Dones's comments about her work as well as the diegetic unfolding of her text push to investigate the reasons behind her autobiographical impulse, and in so doing her narration does not just qualify as autobiographical and testimonial, but also intersects the sphere of trauma narrative. As Dones stated in a conversation with Mauceri, her novel was considered as her "divano dello psicanalista" (93), a place where to go to activate a recollection of personal and collective traumatic memory. The narrative re-elaboration of the trauma has, this way, a therapeutic function for the writer. As scholar Susette Henke states in her analysis of female autobiographical works, *Shattered Subjects* (1999), writing proves to be a healing practice for many women who experienced a variety of traumatic events such as rape, incest, childhood sexual abuse, grief, unwanted pregnancy, pregnancy-loss, or severe illness. Dones's trauma resided in the uprooting of migration, the guilt of leaving her child behind, the fear of political and physical repercussion on her family, and the struggle to go through the request of asylum.

However, there seems to be an additional, collective, layer of trauma in Dones's narrative. As Mauceri underlines, it is pivotal to consider that Dones's text is published in 1997, a crucial moment for Albania, when the fall of pyramidal companies brought the country to the verge of a civil war and generated new numerous migratory waves towards Italy. For Dones, that new historical crisis her country underwent can subconsciously function as the cathartic moment for a previously experienced trauma to emerge. We can therefore say that the moment Dones's personal trauma overlaps with another crucial and traumatic event for her homeland, her first novel finds its literary ignition force, and her private story needs to be made public.

In parallel with these extra-diegetic reasons for Dones's autobiographical and therapeutic impulse, the diegetic unfolding of *Senza bagagli*, even though progressing in a third person voice, moves towards a distinctive autobiographical and therapeutic ending. The final scene of the novel portrays Klea sitting at her desk as she starts typing the recollection of her migratory trajectory, from her life in Albania to her asylum in Switzerland. Thanks to this narrative strategy, the novel creates a diegetic circularity that reinforces the parallel between Dones's and Klea's narrations in an autobiographical direction. Additionally, Klea's text is invested with the same therapeutic quality of the act of remembering and writing, openly revealed in Klea's urge to put her story onto paper. "È giunta l'ora, Linda. Ti ricordi quando dicevi che era inutile perdere tempo a diventare attrice? Che dovevo scrivere dei nostri segreti, storie di gente trascurata, ignorata, a due passi dal mondo? Eccomi qui, pronta ad affrontare l'avventura delle parole" (Dones 273-274), states Klea sitting at her computer.

In the light of trauma literature indicated by Dones's first text, we can also read Irma Kurti's last novel *Tra le due rive* (2010). While Dones's-Klea's trauma springs from the socio-political oppression of the Albanian dictatorship in the late 1980s, Kurti's text is disconnected from any political event and reframes the character's trauma in deeply intimate terms. Kurti's autobiographical text – one which soon informs the reader that the fictional Irma is the same Irma who writes her story – springs from the psychological and emotional disarray caused by the passing of her beloved mother and the consequent decision to leave Albania and permanently reside in Italy.

As the title of the novel suggests, Irma's subjectivity is split "between two coasts," between two worlds. Italy and Albania are in a constant tension throughout the

narration. “Una parte di me desiderava attraversare il mare [...] e l’altra amava la mia terra, la mia patria, dove avevo i miei ricordi e i miei amori. Quando mi trovavo al di là del mare, nella terra dei sogni, in Italia, sentivo che l’altra metà non mi lasciava tranquilla” (Kurti 20), writes Irma, revealing the extent to which the two sides of the Adriatic Sea contend her emotional life. Besides psychological and sentimental reasons, more practical ones complicate Irma’s migration to Italy, such as repeated job difficulties she encounters in Italy that encourage her to go back to Albania. It is only when her mother is treated for cancer and then buried in Bergamo, Italy that Irma permanently chooses Italy over Albania. “Il suo corpo, che ora riposa qui a Bergamo, ha contribuito a farmi sognare l’Italia più che mai, [...] e che non pensassi neanche un momento al mio ritorno in Albania” (Kurti 63). The loss of the mother and the desire to be close to her body is the major element directing Irma’s migratory plans, and it becomes the active element that neutralizes the tension between the two sides of the Adriatic Sea.

In addition to the spatial quality of Irma’s sense of split, we can detect a temporal quality to it, which runs throughout the text and which is articulated in the opposition of a serene and happily familiar past and an excruciating present of dark sorrow, an emptiness that implies depression, sense of fragmentation, and loss of the self. The turning point from the first to the second period of Irma’s existence is the year 2006, as she narrates: “il 2006 sarebbe stato l’anno in cui mi sarei tuffata nel buio, a causa della perdita di mia madre sarei entrata all’interno di un lungo tunnel di dolore, dal quale non sono mai riuscita a uscire, e tuttora ci sono dentro...” (Kurti 34). Losing the mother, therefore, determines for Irma a geographical decision and a temporal laceration.

It is from this state of geographical removal and emotional deprivation, from the

darkness of a double loss that encompasses the mother and the mother-land, that Irma writes her autobiography. The act of writing-the-self functions as the tool that holds together her broken psychological life, a way to treat her pain, while stitching together in a single narration the two dichotomies of the here and there and the present and past. “Quando il dolore mi stava dividendo in due, quando in me non dominava la ragione, io mi rivolgevo ai versi, scrivevo. Questo solo attenuava il dolore che mi stava spaccando il petto, era la mia migliore terapia” (Kurti 116), says Irma, reflecting on the reasons and the value of her writing. Similarly to Dones’s Klea, Irma articulates on her autobiographical pages both her trauma and its therapy. While pain and loss are the splitting forces, narrating her own life is the glue to keep herself together.

Similarly to Kurti, poet Gëzim Hajdari writes from a condition of painful loss. Self-exiled in Italy since 1992 as a consequence of his open political opposition against the ruling party and an assassination attempt, Hajdari undergoes a complete uprooting from his homeland, which is at the same time physical, emotional, cultural and ideological. The laceration caused by having to flee his hostile homeland – a country often described as the mythical figure Medea who devours her children – and the betrayal experienced vis-à-vis the cultural and political entourage to which he had actively contributed founding the Republican and Democratic parties are so deep and irreversible for the poet that his autobiographical exile transforms into the most pervasive literary cipher of his entire poetic production.

As scholar Simona Wright first analyzed in her essay “Esperienza dell’esilio e poesia in Gëzim Hajdari” (2002), and as Andrea Gazzoni later extensively articulated in the collection of essays *Poesia dell’esilio: saggi su Gëzim Hajdari* (2010), since the early

appearance of the poet's literary expression, exile emerges as the most dense and complex element of Hajdari's poetry, one that is at the same time an autobiographical event, an existential condition, and a literary theme. A multilayered red thread that ties together different collections of poems, exile is the element that makes Hajdari's production into an extensive reverberation of autobiographical recollections.

Many of Hajdari's works, such as *Ombra di cane* (1993), *Corpo presente* (1997), *Antologia della pioggia* (2000), *Stigmatate* (2002), and *Peligòrga* (2007), to mention some of the most studied collections, can be grouped for the intimate and passionate interior excavation of the poet into his inner spiritual world of loneliness and sufferance that informs his poetics: a sensibility that begins forming during his childhood and that his abrupt exile exponentially amplifies. The introductory note to the collection *Peligòrga* can serve as a statement on the autobiographical quality of Hajdari's poetry when the poet writes:

“La raccolta *Peligòrga* evoca gli anni di un arco di tempo che va dalla mia adolescenza a oggi, in cui torno di nuovo il ragazzo di campagna di una volta. Sono verso scritti *ieri per oggi e oggi per ieri*. Essi ‘giacevano’ in me da decenni, erano ‘seppelliti’ nella mia pelle [...] così ho deciso di dare volto e voce a questi versi, che hanno sconvolto profondamente il mio io centrale, lasciandomi segni strazianti e indelebili.” (14)

His verses of pain dwell in the poet's body like remote memories do; memories spring out from his past and become the nerves of his poems, erasing every possible distance between memory and poetry.

Hajdari's autobiographical verses indulge on his native region of Darsia and his hometown Lushnje, while they recall with deep affection his mother, Nûr. His poems

depict the region of Ciociaria in the south of Rome where the poet relocated, and recall the familiar singing of the bird *peligòrga*, metaphor of his poetic chant. His poetry elaborates the poet's bilingual poetics that cannot live outside the space of interaction and reciprocal translation between Albanian and Italian. Additionally, his verses sing the torment of the poet's uprooting and irreversible exile.

While all the mentioned collections delve into the intimate and spiritual condition of Hajdari's exile, *Poema dell'esilio/Poema e mërgimit*, a long and bitter "pamphlet" published twice over the years in extended versions,⁶ offers instead an outward glance at the socio-political reasons of that exile. The verses insist here on social, cultural, ethical and political aspects of Albanian society, the country's communist tragedies as well as its contemporary criminal corruption. This 220-page bilingual poem repeatedly weaves together Hajdari's life events and the Albanian socio-historical reality; all the events of the poet's life are here narrated through the lens of past and present national and international history.

While the details of the historical memory will be analyzed in the following section of the chapter, it can be anticipated that the *Poema* reframes Hajdari's widespread autobiographical impulse in an ethical-historical direction, shaping his lived experience into the harsh militant verses of his socio-political denunciation. The laceration of his exile is channeled this way beyond the sphere of his feelings and sufferance, and gives birth to an ethical-historical autobiography. *Poema* is the ground on which the author's exilic "self" is continuously re-negotiated through the re-telling of the dark history of his

⁶ The poet is currently working on a forthcoming third, amplified edition of *Poema dell'esilio/Poema e mërgimit*, which will be published by Besa Editore, in Nardò (Bari) in 2014. Anita Pinzi has translated the book into English, and is seeking for a publisher. Hajdari's major scholar, Andrea Gazzoni, collaborated to the project with an essay.

country.

The re-negotiation of the self stands at the very core of the autobiographical act. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson extensively argued in their work, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narrative* (2001), autobiographical literature accesses memory in order to translate, or re-interpret, the past into a present context. The act of remembering is a way for making meaning of a past in light on the new present context. For this very reason, autobiographical writing is always a narrative space where the subjects negotiate their identity, “re-membering,” so to speak, the many places, times, and trajectories of their lives in a newly assembled narrative body. For the authors here analyzed, whose lives unfold across borders, languages, and cultures, the self is a highly complex blend of elements, which find articulation and new interpretation in their autobiographical literature.

In this light, it seems appropriate to bring a last example of striking negotiation of identity through the narration of the complexity of the self. This is the case for novelist Carmine Abate. Born in the Southern Arbëreshë community of Carfizzi, Calabria, to a family of *Gastarbeiter* migrants to Germany and a migrant himself to several locations including Northern Italy and Germany, Abate brings a particularly hybrid perspective into the Albanian-Italian context here analyzed, one which ties together the Fifteenth-century Albanian immigration to the Twentieth-century Italian emigration, and to the contemporary Albanian migration.

Abate’s extensive production of novels is a mirror of this historical, spatial, linguistic, and cultural complexity. Among the autobiographical elements of his narrative we find all the places that inform his life and sense of self: his native town Carfizzi in the

Italian Southern region of Calabria; Bari where he studied; Hamburg and Cologne where his family migrated and where he taught Italian to migrants' children; and the region of Trentino where he currently teaches. Similarly, his narrative relies on the contribution of different languages such as the Arbëreshë language, the Southern dialects, standard Italian, and German. His novel *Vivere per addizione* (2010), in particular, contains all these elements, articulating the author's multifaceted trajectory into the fluid and cyclic narrative of departures and returns that the character moves through and reflects on. In sharp contrast with Hajdari's impossible return, life-in-migration becomes a circular figure in Abate's work; people leave to return, as they do each Christmas and each summer, and they return to leave again for another "bel giro nel mondo grande" (123). In this endless circulation of lives in motion, Abate includes the experiences of the new migrants to Italy from all over the world to underline how the history of different nations, peoples, and individuals are all parts of the same giant mechanism of life and chance.

As the title of the novel *Vivere per addizione* underlines, migration transforms life into an addition of parts, which are at once all needed, all cherished, all painful to leave, all desired to go back to, all sources of deep nostalgia. These parts are to the author a painful fragmentation of the self, but the narrating subject does not dwell in that fragmentation. He rather seems to find a middle ground to elaborate them into a fluid identity for a possible psychological survival.

Se per i tedeschi continuavo a essere uno straniero; per gli stranieri, un italiano; per gli italiani, un meridionale o terrone; per i meridionali, un calabrese; per i calabresi, un albanese o "ghieghiu", come loro chiamavan gli arbëreshë; per gli arbëreshë, un germanese⁷ o un trentino; per i germanesi e i trentini, uno sradicato, io per me ero semplicemente io,

⁷ Germanesi is a neologism that Abate uses to indicate Italian migrants to Germany.

una sintesi di tutte quelle definizioni, una persona che viveva in più culture e con più lingue, per nulla sradicato, anzi con più radici, anche se le più giovani non erano ancora affondate nel terreno ma volanti nell'aria. (144)

This elaboration of the parts into the fluid life of an individual, the “semplicemente io” of the text, constitutes a strategy that overcomes the sense of uprooting and that defines a re-rooting in multiple contexts.

The above passage, found in the last chapter of Abate's novel, is placed at the end of a narrative journey and can be considered a reflection on the power of narration to build a sense of unity for a self that would be otherwise highly fragmented. Literature therefore becomes the middle ground where all these parts are braided together for a negotiation of the self, which is always re-assembled, including new parts in new additions. Moreover, the autobiographical material used in the text indicates the extent to which memory – as a process that creates meaning – contributes to that narration of the self through one or more migratory trajectories and displacements. Specular to the diegetic choice of Abate's character to move to Trentino, which is the middle ground between Calabria and Germany, where “il Nord e il Sud sono lontani dai tuoi occhi, ma al tempo stesso presenti e mescolati nella terra di mezzo” (141), *Vivere per addizione* stands as an instance of autobiographical literature as the middle ground where the subject can keep together all the fragments of the self.

Similarly to Abate, for all the authors here discussed the migratory passage, beyond the different trajectories and reasons that set it in motion, generates a sentiment of displacement and uprooting. Either complete and unsolved, as in Hajdari's case, or domesticated in the circular alternation of coming and going, as in Abate's case, the

migratory passage remains crucial to the psychological and practical life of the subjects in so far as it creates a split between past and present self. This is a laceration of which their narrative partakes, in the very effort to negotiate, via the support of memories, a new self through the elaboration of the past into the present life. These texts indicate the extent to which the autobiographical telling is closely linked to the rupture they at once enact and try to domesticate and heal, a rupture that is both geographical displacement and emotional loss.

While many instances in Italian migration literature link the autobiographical urge to the first production of an author, some instances in Albanian-Italian literature challenge that pattern in different ways. Kurti indeed authored many other works, mainly poems and songs, before writing her autobiography, this way proving that the autobiographical narration can come later in an author's artistic life as a consequence of a deep emotional disarray, a loss of dear people and familiar places. Hajdari and Abate's instances prove instead that the autobiographical impulse can stretch across multiple works becoming the mark of a poetics, a persistent narrative presence, through which the narrating subject enacts their continuous negotiation of identity.

We can consequently argue that autobiographical memory finds its literary engine in a dimension of displacement and uprooting for the narrating subjects, an emotional universe that is a consequence of their migration and the split that the displacement generates. In this regard, Jennifer Burns's work *Migrant Imaginaries* (2013) equates the emotions felt by the migrant to the "operations of the imagination," according to which emotions connected to migration such as "fear, hope, anger, projection, idealization, nostalgia, abjection, self-satisfaction, love, hatred" (11) regulate the empirical experience

of the migrant and, when literature emerges, lead to a defined set of literary images, which constitute the specific identity of migration literature in Italian. The Albanian-Italian instances here analyzed push Burns's argument to include also a question of life-quality of those images. The autobiographical material invested in the narrative acts is a constant presence that cuts across different literary genres. This narrative of the self finds its ignition force in the formation of a densely thick emotional space generated by migration. Migration and the consequent transformation of the self appear directly connected with the urge to give narrative substance and shape to that self-in-motion through autobiographical accounts.

While on one hand we can trace the need for a psychological survival leading to the autobiographical impulse as shown in these first texts, on the other hand we can interrogate the marketing aspect of this literature, which since its appearance was appreciated for its sociological insights and for its ethnicity. As Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego stated in a lecture at the Graduate Center of CUNY (Sept 2013), if a writer is African, publishers expect her to write about war or to write in a major language like English. The choice of a genre and certain topics over others can therefore be guided by marketing preferences and expectations, with the risks of reproducing the same stories and the same literary images.

Beyond the details of the authors' lives and the stylistic and narrative solution chosen to plot them in their works, what seems to occur for many of them is the transformation and shaping of their subjectivities along the eventful and emotionally disrupting path of migration, which retrospectively furnishes the writers with the raw material to build their narrative. Literature, functioning as it does as a repository of the

self for many Albanian-Italian voices, is the privileged space of articulation of the crucial transformation of subjects in migration. Because this transformation of the self is narrated in Italian, these texts extensively contribute to the national Italian literature and to literature in Italian across the globe, giving them a twist towards autobiographical writing.

Historical memories

The effort to keep separate the analysis of the autobiographical memory from the discourse on historical and collective memory has so far proved a hard task, and we have repeatedly seen the extent to which personal memory is imbricated with collective and historical memory in the works of Albanian-Italian writers. Such constant shifting between personal and collective memories, as Smith and Watson have pointed out, may become a reason for misinterpretation in so far as “autobiographical narratives may contain ‘facts,’ [but] they are not factual history about a particular time, person or event. Rather they offer subjective ‘truth’ rather than ‘fact.’ ” (10)

In line with Smith and Watson, Albanian-Italian texts are not used here to narrate historical events; rather this section relies on the subjective and literary interpretation of historical facts, highlighting the extent to which these texts account for unheard and innovative perspectives on national and international history. These voices, thanks to historical references that are the basis for both the subjects’ national identity and their migratory trajectories, are a valuable contribution which serve to disrupt consolidated mechanisms of historiographic narrative, the result of which has been either the erasure of facts from historical accounts or the recording of them from a politically and culturally

dominant perspective. Like the Albanian storyteller Gojari in Carmine Abate's novel *Il mosaico del tempo grande*, who tells the stories of multi-centenary migrations between Italy and Albania while he lays out the pieces of a giant mosaic, Albanian-Italian literature is a vast receptacle of national and international historical fragments and refractions that generate a new framing of established historical narrative.

The historical memory traceable in Albanian-Italian works is at the same time national and international. It offers indeed a gaze from within the economic, social, cultural and human cost of Hoxha's Communist regime, marking the birth of a relevant post-communist set of works. Contemporaneously, it insists on the telling of Italian-Albanian interactions across the centuries, with particular attention to the Fascist occupation during World War II, giving this literature a remarkable post-colonial taste. Outside the Italy-Albania axis, in some instances this collection of works extends its historical interest to intra-Balcanic relations, such as the war in Bosnia and in Kosovo; it provides an intercontinental gaze to foreign interferences into national business, and lastly pays attention to dictatorial powers from other parts of the world.

Post-communist voices

The most prevalent national historical period emerging from the pages of contemporary Albanian-Italian authors is the second half of the twentieth century, deeply marked by the long ruling of the Communist party. Dictatorship is not just the historical background of the narration, rather it emerges from these pages as a violent living force that permeates all spheres of private and collective life, shaping the intellectual, cultural, and physical existence of the characters. Gëzim Hajdari's *Poema dell'esilio*, narrating the poet's

personal struggles, humiliations and uprooting both under communism and in the new pseudo-democratic era, highlights in details the capillary interferences of political power in all aspects of life, rendering the collective tragedy of a country subjected to “la dittatura più feroce che ci sia stata in Europa” (34).

Ho contribuito al crollo della dittatura albanese
e alla ricostruzione democratica della patria,
perché aspiravo alla libertà e alla bellezza, ma vincitrice
è stata la *nomenklatura* di ieri, macchiata di sangue e crimini di Stato.
E’ per questo che sono in esilio, amici miei. (3)

These are the opening verses of the *Poema*, which position the narrating voice at the intersection of two narrative paths: on one hand the recollection of personal events and emotions of exile, and on the other the account of the subject’s role in the historical, social, and intellectual life of the country. This tension between personal and collective history keeps repeating throughout the text, and it is consistently restated by the last verse of every stanza – a sort of “anaphor of the exile” – that blends together the reasons of the “I” with a multitude of “friends”.

As the author clarified in an interview, “An Ode to Exile,” for the on-line magazine *Warscapes*, these friends “are those who share the mission contained in the poem; those who follow and support [him]; those who listen to [his] voice and share [his] rage, [his] preoccupation and [his] exile.”⁸ Moreover, the “friends” interact with the poet’s narrating voice, thanks to some single verses interposed between the five-verse stanzas. This narrative strategy transforms the “friends” into a choral entity; it is a collective voice, the people speaking. In this way, the personal recollection of events and

⁸ The full interview is available at this link: <http://www.warscapes.com/conversations/ode-exile>

experiences becomes the history of a nation.

The opening verses of the poem already contain the reasons and intentions of *Poema dell'esilio*, framing it as a social, political and cultural accusation in its mission of unveiling past and present crimes. The abusive and criminal power of the old *nomenklatura* was never defeated in so far as the old political and intellectual figures have been recycled in the new democratic establishment. *Poema dell'esilio* has therefore the ethical mission to debunk, reveal, and unmask the past and present wounds of the nation, as well as paying tribute to the forgotten political and cultural figures that imagined and fought for a free Albania. Names of corrupted politicians, names of killed intellectuals and civilians, endless cases of personal and social abuses, cases of goods and human trafficking, episodes of stolen public money, the unspoken violence of communist prisons, and the post-communist collusion of politics and mafia are the factual fragments knitted in Hajdari's rendition of the last century of Albanian history. In this context, Hajdari's poetry carves for itself an ethical mission: the one of educating future generations through the account of the historical and collective memory.

Similarly, the ethical and social power of the act of history-writing is at the diegetic core of Shpend Sollaku Noè's novel *Il confine della nebbia* (2012). In this latest work of the poet and novelist, the events of the Oresti family are indissolubly linked to the historical period in which they live. The narration starts with the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall, follows the arrest of the Romanian communist leader Ceausescu, maps the organization of the Albanian Democratic forces against the monolithic power of the decaying Communist regime, describes the occupation of Tirana's foreign embassies by Albanian asylum seekers, shares the exodus of "boat people" in 1991 and 1992, and

finally ends with the 1998-99 Kosovo war.

Besides the diegetic unfolding of the novel, the reader is also reminded of a past history of the Eastern and Adriatic region, as the narration hints at the era of the Illyrians and their wars against the Roman empire, the Bulgarian invasions, the fall of Byzantium, the Turkish occupation of Albania, World War I and the consequent Fascist and Nazi occupations from 1939 to 1943, to eventually end with the victory of Communism and its fifty years old dictatorial status quo.

In this stratification of past and present history, both Ludovik Oresti, a literature professor, journalist and democratic politician, and his wife Frida Oresti, a state attorney, are active subjects in the recording of history. Ludovik, in his capacity of both writer and journalist, prevalently narrates the daily events that are mapping a historical transformation of Albania in its transition from Communism to Democracy. His commitment to recording history aims at shaping a new socio-political sentiment that could overthrow the political status quo, but which is instead doomed to fail due to the resilience of the old structure. His house is burned to the ground, and some of his collaborators are shot, reasons for which the Oresti family will flee Albania and seek asylum in Italy.

Parallel to Ludovik's work, Frida Oresti, in her role of state attorney, deals daily with the written records of fifty years of communist dictatorship. Frida is asked to revise old criminal dossiers for an eventual amnesty that would mark the first sign of a political shift in Albania. Through the countless dossiers that Frida reads, Noè's novel is able to excavate the details of a tragic past of condemnations, torture, and executions.

Dossier 373: Professore condannato a lavori forzati per aver fotografato dal televisore e fatto vedere ai colleghi la cantante Anna Oxa a San Remo. [...]

Dossier 1025: Ex partigiano, insegnante in pensione, condannato per essersi lamentato della mancanza di pomodori al mercato. [...] Nove anni e mezzo per aver messo in dubbio la salute dell'economia socialista. [...]

Dossier 1445: Direttore della più grande azienda agricola della loro Provincia, messo in manette per aver detto: "la membra del politbüro ha un grosso sedere". Tre anni e mezzo al fresco. (147)

These are just a few minor cases of the many that register the widespread abuse of power at the detriment of a people's cultural and social freedom – and many times at the cost of life – that Frida brings to light. Those dossiers are the hidden side of Albanian collective history, which is restored to public knowledge throughout the text.

Noè's narrative creates the Orestis as powerfully ethical anti-communist figures, which end up paying severely for their subversive role of history makers. Fleeing to Italy, Ludovik's activity as a writer is in conflict with his need to provide for the family, and it is heavily affected by the consistent lack of time. His commitment to history will eventually prove lethal, and Ludovik will die as a war journalist in Kosovo. Frida's exile, in parallel, will cost her her own job since Italian law does not recognize her qualifications as a judge. Unemployed, exile will reduce her to her private role of mother, wife, and housewife.

Frida's destiny of confinement to the domestic space is useful to reflect on how differently the female subjectivity is acted upon, shaped, and limited in its passage from an abusive power to a host(ile) country. Along with Frida Oresti, Albanian-Italian literature offers many other female characters that speak against communism, adding a significantly different perspective on the impact that power has on the shaping of post-communist subjects. The already mentioned Elvira Dones's novel *Senza bagagli* and

Ornela Vorpsi's novel *Il paese dove non si muore mai* are two valuable instances of female writers giving voice to female characters in their struggle with history.

Dones's narrative, which takes place from the years before the fall of Albanian Communism through the civil war in 1997, describes a widespread sense of surveillance that her character Klea experiences both in Albania and in Switzerland, where she seeks asylum. As Maria Cristina Mauceri has analyzed in depth in her essay "Variazioni sul tema dello sguardo," Dones elaborates a narrative in which political figures, secret police, and society at large consistently watch over her character Klea. While the state and society monitoring activity is widespread and collective, it is complicated by a gender distinction. Klea is often confronted or reprimanded by her superiors for being a public figure (she works on TV), for dressing fashionably and seductively, and for being divorced. Communist ideology and patriarchal morality intersect in the control that Klea has to undergo.

Similarly, Vorpsi's *Il paese dove non si muore mai* reverberates the same sense of control, which in this case finds its most persistent expression in the control of the female body. As we will discuss in Chapter Four, the body plays a crucial role in Albanian-Italian literature and in Vorpsi's narrative in particular. In this context it is relevant to anticipate the notion that the female body lives at the intersection of a multiplicity of political, social, and international force; it is at the same time a product of those forces and a canvas on which collective history is imprinted and recorded. The female bodies narrated in *Il paese*, inscribed with the physical marks left by the violence of communist discipline and, once migrated to the West, invested by the violence of the capitalist logic, become themselves speaking historical tools.

These different instances of literary denunciation of communist dictatorship and how it has shaped the history of 20th-century Albania are an important space of agency for the narrating subjects, be they authors or their characters. In these pages the voices escape the muteness and immobility into which dictatorship had forced them. The act of narrating how personal life has been affected in the encounter with the abuses of power and historical events makes them active post-communist subjects. All denunciation of Albanian communism finds articulation through the telling of national and collective history.

The Nation through Myths and Epos

The history of the nation appears in Albanian-Italian narrative also through an elaboration of traditional cultural and literary mythology, through historical founding figures and themes that constitute the basis of a people's identity. This confers an epical character to several works. It is significant to find the major example of mythological elaboration in Carmine Abate, an Arbëreshë author, rather than in Albanian authors. This suggests that the mythology informing a national tradition is also treated as a founding element by diasporic communities. These are images and tropes, "le storie che ci uniscono" (Abate 216), taken from the historical and literary past in order for the diasporic community to reflect on its collective identity and on its own historical (trans)formation.

Abate's novels are populated by many historical and mythological figures, such as the Christian national hero, Skanderbeg, who fought against the Turkish domination, or the mythical figure of Kostantin I Vogel, who, according to literary tradition, stole his beloved woman away from the altar where she was being forced to marry another man.

These and other figures inhabit the fictional past of Abate's novels, which instead always unfold in contemporary Arbëreshë communities. The memory of those figures comes up in popular conversations and storytelling, as examples of life, courage, destiny, faith, migration, all founding values of the Arbëreshë communities. This narrative mechanism gives Abate's work an oral and choral quality, producing pages where stories from the past are collectively shared.

The insistence on founding themes is subject to the risk of becoming celebrative of a fixed identity, singing in praise of nationalism. Abate's use of figures and stories of the Arbëreshë identity avoids though the nationalistic trap; mythology works as a catalyst of an identity that is in continuous redefinition, one that is located at the crossroads of many languages, cultures, and migratory trajectories. *Il mosaico del tempo grande* is a striking example of this hybrid identity. Popas Damis's arrival at the end of 1400, with his people and his pregnant wife – symbol of a new and displaced community that will found the village Hora – is counterbalanced by inverse migratory trajectories; firstly, that of Jani Tista Damis, son of Popas, who returns to Albania to fight against the Turkish domination, and secondly, later in history, that of Antonio Damis, the most recent descendent of Popas, who goes back to Albania both to find the mythical village of origin and to find Drita, the Albanian dancer with whom he has fallen in love.

Once Antonio and Drita are reunited, for economic, social, and political reasons they decide to move together to Northern Europe. In this way they break the axis Arbëria-Albania and inscribe their own migration into the path of many other Italians and Albanians in the Twentieth century, people who left their homelands to seek a better life. It is, therefore, Antonio Damis's migratory trajectory that elaborates, away from

nationalism, the complexity of the Arbëreshë identity. Twenty years later Antonio and Drita's daughter, Laura, returns to the Arbëreshë village of Hora as the living instance of that complexity.

[Laura] sentiva all'improvviso una voglia incontenibile di conoscere quei posti [...] Hora, Shqipëria, Tiranë, Italia, Calabria, Arbëria, la prima Hora. Da quel momento i suoi genitori [...] le avevano raccontato la loro vita, pezzo dopo pezzo, a spizzichi, a frammenti, a mozziconi [...] A Laura era sembrata una fiaba a lieto fine, con i suoi genitori che si volevano bene davvero (di questo era certa) e che ora, sconfitti i cattivi mostri delle loro terre, vivevano finalmente felici e contenti. (137)

The long list of cities, regions, and countries are the evidence of a plurality of geographical origins with which Laura feels connected and which shape her sense of belonging.

To those different places correspond different languages and dialects, such as Italian, Albanian, Arbëreshë, Italian Southern dialect, German, Dutch. Laura, like many other inhabitants of Hora, lives among and across that complexity of communicative codes. Abate weaves those languages in his texts, creating a continuous shift of sounds and transpositions of meaning from one code to another. Chapter Three will analyze the value of language in narrative migratory contexts and the particular linguistic mechanism in Albanian-Italian literature. In this context is appropriate to point out that the mixture of languages in *Il mosaico del tempo grande* is a stylistic choice that makes the text speak in a multiplicity of directions, creating a tension between displacement and belonging, reality and dreams, past and present. The linguistic mixture ultimately reinforces the complexity of the Arbëreshë identity mapping, the multiplicity of trajectories and the many cultural fragments that history has knitted in these diasporic communities.

In Abate's text, all the threads of past and present historical moments are tied together by the storytelling of the artist Gojari, recently arrived from communist Albania, who narrates while working on a mosaic that represents the myth of the foundation of the village of Hora. The character of Gojari, being from contemporary Albania, works as the exponent of the new migration that contributes to the reactivation of ancient memories. Mythological history is used in Abate's text for a continuous interrogation of the contemporary Arbëreshë identity as the most recent elaboration of a long history of transformation.

The epic and choral quality of Abate's narrative can be similarly found in Anilda Ibrahimi's first work, *Rosso come una sposa* (2008). Dora, granddaughter of Saba – the red bride of the title, married when she was nine – is the narrating voice that ties together people's memories to reconstruct the epic of her own family along the line of four generations of women. The long life of Saba unfolds from the Turkish occupation, through the Italian occupation and the resistance to Fascist forces, followed by decades of Communist isolation, until the eventual fall of the regime and the Albanian migration of the 1990s.

These historical moments, marking the cultural, social, economic, and political evolution of the Albanian nation in one hundred years, are also the scaffolding of a private and familial history that needs to be re-assembled in order to explain Dora's present. Albanian migrant to Italy, Dora looks back to the women of her family, and re-thinks her identity in her new social context. The displacement of Dora's migration and the consequent reshuffling of her sense of identity are anchored to a past through a narrative that ties together different lives. Like Abate's Laura, Ibrahimi's Dora is the

culminating product of a layered stratification of familial and historical moments. Her contemporary migrant identity needs to be read in the context of a broader historical trajectory, one that is connected to a past that informs and makes sense of her present.

It is above all with Gëzim Hajdari's latest work, *Nûr: Eresia e Besa* (2012), that the mythological and epic quality of Albanian-Italian literature reaches its most elaborate instance. This "poema drammatico" in two acts is a re-elaboration of the lyrical Albanian tradition. This includes mythical conventions, such as the *Kanûn* honor code and its *Besa* oath, predatory spirits known as *Xhin*, and demi-goddesses known as *Zàna*, but also includes the mythical literary figures of Duruntina, a girl married far from home, and Costantino, her brother who resurrects from the dead to bring her back to their lonely mother.

In the first act, Gëzim is the proud warrior of the Cursed Mountains in Northern Albania, and he has been imprisoned by the Inquisition in an a-temporal Rome, both imperial and Christian, for having taken Jesus's place on the cross. While Gëzim meant this act as a gesture of peace and alliance between neighboring countries and cultures, the Romans consider the act heretical and the perpetrator is sentenced, like Giordano Bruno, to burn in Campo dei Fiori. His fierce mother Nûr, frantic and desperate for the news, asks the powerful spirits *Xhin* to save Gëzim. However, in his youth Gëzim had stepped on the *Xhin*, who have cursed him, and Nûr must give her *besa* that she will give her own soul if they accept to fight. After days and nights of a bloody fight against the Romans, the *Xhin* are defeated and Gëzim is burned.

As literary scholar Andrea Gazzoni states in his afterwards to *Nûr*, Hajdari uses the cultural elements of the *Kanûn*, such as the *Besa*, as a memento of strong moral and

ethical values, which stand in opposition to a time, ours, where the given word has become hypertrophic and meaningless. At the same time, the poet reveals the need to “*tradire e tradurre*” those archaic values in order to give them a new life that must be of some teaching to our times. “Il poeta, in altre parole, deve rivisitare *eretivamente* le sue radici e strapparle alla loro chiusura atavica, per farne un luogo di condivisione e di verità della parola” (133). National literary tradition is therefore fertile cultural ground only when it is disrupted from its own formal and referential strictures, so that it can speak to a new human, cultural and social condition, which is not just national, but rather universal.

The intent of tradition re-adaptation is even more evident in the second act of *Nûr*, where not just singular cultural elements are re-written, but the whole myth of Doruntina. The story of Gëzim and Nûr, whose autobiographical names inscribe the work in the pan-autobiography of Hajdari’s production, merges into this mythical story of the Albanian and Balkan tradition. Gëzim is now a double of Costantino, Doruntina’s brother and the youngest of seven brothers (the myth often reports nine brothers) who have all died at war. Like Costantino, Gëzim resurrects from the dead to bring Doruntina back to her mother from her faraway conjugal home any time the mother wished to see her. After keeping his promise, Gëzim, like Costantino, goes back to the realm of death. This convergence of different narrative lines, which weaves together autobiographical marks and a codified myth, reveals once more Hajdari’s hybridism and challenge to cultural boundaries, necessary to his poetry even when it fully takes from a codified myth. The myth becomes the narrative shell hosting the author-character’s exiled condition and his consistent quest for ethical and universal values, which like in the ancient *besa* reside in the binding quality of the given word.

The re-elaboration of the Albanian mythical and epic material is responsible for a translation of traditional themes and tropes into a new narrative that either guides or informs the present cultural identity of an individual or a collectivity in their encounter with a migratory dimension. Additionally, these texts operate a second level of translation that is strictly linked to the use of the Italian language. Indeed, these texts make those very mythical themes, tropes, and figures migrate from an Eastern/Balkan cultural imagery to a Western one. These texts are therefore responsible for a crucial cultural translation of one literary world into another, infusing the receiving culture with new or, as per the Arbëreshë instance, just locally relevant narrative worlds. This is one of the many contributions of Albanian writers to Italian literature.

International history – for a post-colonial reading

While the articulation of national historical and mythological memory in Albanian-Italian literature made it possible to argue that these texts were fertile ground for cultural encounter, linguistic coexistence, and personal and collective identity transformation, it also made it possible to consider how these texts channel a socio-political intent. The formation of a new post-communist discourse that could be mapped through the analysis of national historical memory, merges onto a post-colonial one, when the focus of the analysis moves to the many occurrences of international historical memories, representations of international collaborations and shared responsibilities.

The depiction of historical relations between Italy and Albania often focuses on the Fascist occupation, a military invasion that lasted from 1939 to 1943, when it was eventually replaced by the arrival of German troops that stormed the country as

retaliation against Italy's change of alliances at the end of World War II. Filmmaker Gianni Amelio in his film *Lamerica* – one of the first works contributing to the Albanian-Italian discourse – places Mussolini's invasion of Albania at the beginning of his narration, framing it as a crucial historical passage through which to read the migratory waves of Albanians in the 1990s. Amelio's film used indeed documentary footage of the Italian military occupation, to remind the spectator about that historical page, the memory of which has been lost.

The memory of this military aggression and these ideological clashes similarly appears in the fabric of Vorpsi's *Il paese dove non si muore mai*. In the course of the novel, set almost entirely in communist Albania, Italy appears periodically in the images of some old postcards or in the dreams of young girls who joke about the feared capitalistic occupation that in the end will make them find Italian husbands. However, it is above all in the memory of old people that the narrative opens up to a recollection of the Fascist occupation.

“A volte [il nonno] mi sta di fianco mentre continuo il mio lavoro, e dopo un po' so che comincerà a parlarmi dell'Italia fascista. – Si stava proprio bene ai tempi dell'Italia, mica questa povertà come oggi, eh quelle belle cose! Adesso non posso neanche esercitare il mio mestiere.” (63)

The passage, ironically celebrative of Italy, functions as an invitation to the reader to reflect historically in order to “remember” the political relations between the two countries that have been instead forgotten. Indeed the passage is to be found in a chapter of the novel that depicts Ornela's grandfather in a dialogue with his old friend Selman, who has lost his memory and believes that it is still the time of World War II. Recalling Amelio's character Spiro, this passage underlines the missing recollection of colonial

relations between the two countries. The narrating voice, which up to this point has been markedly informed by a critique of the violence of communism, opens up here to a post-colonial reading.

Similarly to Vorpsi's text, Anilda Ibrahimi's first novel, *Rosso come una sposa*, only briefly touches upon Italian domination, framing it in a very different picture, one that opens up to reciprocal understanding, hospitality, and affection. Saba and the other women of the village ironically call Italians soldiers *Peppini*, and Saba in particular frames them as children, sons of their mothers who are now worrying about them at war. The narration describes them as harmless, hiding from German soldiers and seeking hospitality from Albanian families in exchange for manual labor. The language of violence in Ibrahimi's work is directed instead towards Germans troops, of which "si raccontano cose terribili. Altro che turchi e greci, per non parlare di quegli allegroni dei peppini" (49). This sentence introduces a long scene describing the ferocity of a group of German soldiers, who execute Saba's three brothers and her pregnant sister-in-law.

While in Vorpsi's and Ibrahimi's texts Italian occupation is only briefly narrated, Leonard Guaci's *I grandi occhi del mare* delves openly into the memory of Italian colonialism, which, in the text, aims at counterbalancing the Albanian people's spreading desire to consume Italian cultural products and lifestyle. Unfolding along several years in the 1980s and early 1990s, the story follows the physical, as well as intellectual and ideological growth of a family of many brothers and their sister Aulona. As they pass from childhood to adult life, forbidden books and illegal Italian TV programs shape their intellectual life and progressively inform their desire to leave Albania for Italy. To underline the depth of the cultural imprint the siblings receive from the TV, Guaci names

his chapter upon Italian singers, politicians, and showmen.

In Manichean opposition to the Italian dream the siblings construct through TV, the oldest brother Libero, a militant communist, soldier and then spy, is the voice that articulates the memory of Italian colonialism in its most aggressive declination.

Il mio odio verso gli italiani non è generato solo da motivi ideologici. È la storia che mi dà il diritto di detestarli. Uno storico contemporaneo, molto in voga di questi tempi in Italia, dichiara che le vittime del fascismo in guerra si possono contare sulle dita di una sola mano. [...] Mai i crimini di guerra sono stati insabbiati e cancellati così volutamente dall'*intelligenza* di un popolo [...] Ho visto le foto dei soldati italiani che mostravano orgogliosamente le teste mozzate dei contadini etiopi, I campi della Croce Rossa bombardati e intere comunità annientate con i gas tossici [...] Così anche in Libia. Così anche in Jugoslavia [...] E qua, da noi, dimenticate che hanno fatto? Non hanno occupato le nostre terre e imposto le loro leggi fasciste, senza che noi lo chiedessimo? Non è vero che Ciano corrompeva i funzionari del nostro re per usare la nostra patria come punto di partenza per altre guerre? Torture, fosse comuni, sterminio, fanno parte anche della storia italiana. (189)

Libero's strong accusations, while highlighting the complicity of Italian intellectuals in the lack of investigation and memory removal of colonial responsibilities, inscribe the Italian occupation of Albania in the larger picture of Italian colonialism, creating a continuity of dominance between the Balkans, the Horn of Africa, and Libya. Bond and Comberiati's text *Il confine liquido*, the first structured post-colonial reading of the international relationship between Italy and Albania, implies exactly the same political and military continuity between these different geographical areas, so that the Italian presence in Albania during Fascism has to be recognized and analyzed through the expansionistic lens of Italian imperialism.

Libero's testimony goes beyond the remembrance of Italian past occupation and

continues into a critique of contemporary relations between the two countries in neo-colonial terms. The neo-colonialist risk to which Libero raises his attention is based on another type of power, the cultural one, which is massively shaped by media circulation.

La televisione che voi volete guardare vi farà ridere, vi farà piangere, vi farà divertire, ma non vi racconterà mai niente del genere. State subendo, senza nemmeno accorgervene, una nuova colonizzazione. Perché è così, culturalmente, che si realizzano le colonizzazioni moderne. (190)

The relevance of media images in the shaping of Albanians' desire for Italy is a trope that has been represented since the early works of the Albanian-Italian discourse, such as Amelio's film *Lamerica*. As Nora Moll underlines in her analysis of Guaci's novel, "Il ruolo della televisione nella comunità narrativa italo-albanese," Libero's attempt to show the siblings, and the reader with them, that the desire of an entire generation of young Albanians has been manipulated in neo-colonial terms neither reflects the intent of the work nor the perspective of the writer. According to Moll, the reception of Italian TV works in Guaci as a device able to create a new narrative community. The concept of narrative community, borrowed by sociologist Paolo Jedlowski, indicates a new space for interactions and ways of communication: a narrative space made of images, sounds, and colors that are able to contest and eventually undermine the national and political communist discourse.

Despite being mitigated by the fact that Libero is not a sympathetic character for the reader, the accusations that he makes against Italy open a counter-narrative on the memory of that historical chapter of colonial violence. That chapter needs to be locally and internationally remembered as a context that can explain or reframe the evolution of

relations between the West and East coasts of the Adriatic Sea.

Framing the 1990s

Albanian-Italian literature explores more recent national and international relations between the two countries, framing as it does the Albanian migratory waves of the 1990s from the point of view of those who experienced Italy's institutional inhospitality. From the arrival of the Vlora, through the smuggling of boat-people, to the tragic shipwreck of the Kater I Rades in 1997, Albanian-Italian literature gives voice to the reasons, dreams, and objectives that set that migration in motion, the obstacles that migrants faced, and the vast range of emotions that traveled with them.

As sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago first discussed in his work *Non-Persone* (1999), the language of Italian media and politics consistently represented the Albanian migration of the 1990s in terms of dangerous otherness and through a resilient culture of inferiority that replicated the discourse underpinning the colonial invasion of Mussolini. The literature under examination is therefore a valuable contribution to deconstruct that negative image and to reframe Albanian migration in a human and individual picture. Insisting on the emotions, struggles, and dreams of migrants, this literature is an invitation to empathize with the characters and their stories, and, in so doing, to learn a different story.

Artur Spanjolli's last novel, *I nipoti di Scanderbeg* (2012), is entirely built around the arrival of the vessel Vlora to Bari and the events of the eight days of chaos and violence that followed as a consequence of an administrative and political logic of control and inhospitality. Spanjolli's last work marks a socio-historical shift in the author's

narrative, which has previously offered stories of ancestral taste, such as *La teqja* (2006), *L'accusa silenziosa* (2007), and *La sposa rapita* (2011). These texts made use of the already discussed regional cultural elements of the *Kanûn* and the *Besa*. *I nipoti di Scanderbeg* shows instead Spanjolli's desire to rethink his people's history of migration as that historical moment turns twenty years old. Spanjolli's commemoration of the Vlora is not an isolated case; it instead aligns with the production of two documentaries, *La nave dolce* by Daniele Vicari and *Anja* by Roland Sejko, both released within a few months of each other and both focusing on the marine aspect of Albanian migration in the 1990s. Such convergence of interests across different narrative genres and by different authors, either Albanian or Italian, indicates a desire to question a previous simplistic discourse on Albanian migration to Italy and restore to it a complexity of perspectives that was missing.

Spanjolli's *I nipoti di Scanderbeg* revolves around the role that the media had in constructing the narrative about the arrival of the Vlora. "C'ero anche io in mezzo agli altri e solo dopo avrei letto gli articoli di cronaca usciti sui giornali e avrei capito meglio nel suo insieme la drammaticità della situazione che vivemmo" (7), says Andi, the main character, at the beginning of his narration. While most of the novel narrates Andi's lived experiences, the end of the book depicts him reading the news after being repatriated and reflecting on the events he has just lived through. Armed with a dictionary that helps his understanding of the Italian language, Andi goes through all the news covering those dramatic days. Thanks to this narrative strategy, the last pages of Spanjolli's novel are a collage of voices weaving together a powerful narrative of poverty, desperation, hunger, inhospitality, and violence.

Andi does not question or criticize the picture rendered by the media; he rather embraces that narrative and recognizes its power to map the complexity of a situation that he has instead experienced on an individual level. Spanjolli's text, therefore, instead of demeaning the work of the media, underlines their centrality and potentiality in reporting reality, in recording stories, and transforming them into history. Andi's cutting and pasting together different sources can be tentatively read as an allegory of the making of historical narration, especially when he claims that "[l'] Europa senza muri e senza confini ricorderà la pena infinita di questo lager" (10). Spanjolli's text acknowledges the power of media in the establishment of historical memory.

In parallel with the collective gaze of media representation, Spanjolli's novel gives a large role to the individual instance as well, focusing as it does on Andi's physical, emotional, and psychological experience of his own migration.

“Quando toccai suolo per la prima volta in questo paese, quindici anni fa, era sera. Io mi trovavo in mezzo alla gente che da ventiquattro ore stava ammucchiata sopra la grande nave *Vlora*. Era piena estate. Ero scalzo [...] Non avevo fame. Durante tutto il tragitto mi ero sentito come se sognassi. [...] I piedi scalzi mi facevano male per il granito del suolo. Avevo il corpo a pezzi. La pancia vuota. Gli occhi mi bruciavano per aver dormito male. (11-22)

Andi's rendition of his migration relies therefore on what the body and the soul felt, as a reminder that even the most articulate and accurate collective narration cannot exist in separation from the physical and psychological experience of the individual.

Ron Kubati's first novel, *Va e non torna* (2004), also relies on the specificity and centrality of the individual experience, in contraposition to a collective representation. The main character, Elton Kodra, is a student in Italy, who makes a living working as

interpreter and translator for a court and police headquarters. His job consists of translating telephonic interceptions of Albanian smugglers crossing the Mediterranean Sea towards Italy. Traffickers, pushers, pimps, murderers, and stories of everyday abuses populate the police interceptions, corroborating a narrative of crime and danger that Italians read on the news.

However, along with the depiction of the criminal underbelly of Albanian migration, Kubati's novel proceeds per numerous flashbacks from Elton's childhood in Albania, the arrest of his father when he was six, and the consequent stigmatization of the entire family as enemies of the people. For that reason, when an adult, Elton is denied the right to attend his first-choice university. As a response, he joins the underground youth's social movements against the dictatorship. After the fall of communism, he gets onboard one of those boats across the sea and migrates, undocumented, to Italy. The narrating voice insists on the struggles of Albanian families under communism, on the affected life of children whose parents were deported, the violence of jails, and the constant risk of being betrayed, fired, or arrested.

In cucina c'è mia nonna. [...] mi solleva per le braccia e mi fa sedere sul divano. Mi fissa con uno sguardo che non si può dimenticare e mi dice: "Povero te. Hanno arrestato tuo padre." Comincia ad andare avanti e indietro, colpendosi la fronte con la mano in modo così forte che sembra voglia aprirla per correggere il suo male. Avevo paura per lei. Io stavo ancora bene. Mi serviva un po' di tempo, per prendere le distanze dalla situazione e comprendere cosa significasse in termini reali. [...] Le cose precipitarono quando mia madre cominciò a piangere, ad urlare e a mandare a quel paese il partito e zio Enver. [...] Vedevo sul viso di mia nonna il terrore. Le tapparelle furono immediatamente abbassate e tutte le porte furono chiuse. (9 -15)

The emotionality of passages like this one encourages the reader to establish an empathic bond with Elton – still a child at this point in the story – and the other characters of the novel, framing the struggles they go through in deeply human terms. The reader is introduced to the tragic past that lies hidden behind those daily stories of crime that reverberate in the media.

The emotional and empathic lens, through which Kubati's novel invites the reader to look at the Albanian presence in Italy, can be considered a strategy to “talk back” and deconstruct a narrative that has been cast upon a community by consistent media representations. As Graziella Parati argued in her groundbreaking work *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (2005), italoophone migrant literature acts as a response, a “talking back,” to normative narratives, which are at the basis of the Italian perception of its own culture, language, and ethnicity. If we push this culturally normative power, which Parati analyzes in literature and cinema, to aptly include media production, we can argue that Kubati's novel weaves a narrative that talks back to pervasive stereotyping forces that during the 1990s strongly linked Albanian presence in Italy to criminality.

Kubati's instance is not alone in reframing the 1990s discourse on Albanian migration to Italy, and other works' contributions will be discussed in future chapters according to the major themes they entice, such as border crossing in Natasha Shehu's *L'ultima nave*, or migrant bodies in Ornella Vorpsi's *Il paese dove non si muore mai* and Elvira Dones's *Sole bruciato*. What has emerged thanks to the novels analyzed above is the importance of Albanian-Italian literature in deconstructing an established narrative about Albanian migration that emerged during the 1990s: a discourse that was established

by Italian media in agreement with a political inflexibility, and that was responsible for simplifying the complexity of Albanian migration, indissolubly and solely linking it to crime. Thanks to the narration of individual migrant experiences and thanks to a sentiment of empathy that this narrative encourages, that image is deconstructed and problematized: Albanian migration is humanized and the historical recollection of the 1990s is enriched with the emotional and physical perspective of the individuals.

Outside the Albanian-Italian axis: for a redefinition of world literature?

Albanian-Italian literature does not limit its attention to historical relations between Italy and Albania. In certain instances it rather underlines the global quality of established dynamics of power. This set of works, bringing to light the ramification of the Western presence in the world at large and focusing on past and present ideological conflicts across the globe, becomes ground for a deeper understanding of contemporary cultural, economic, and political relations. At the same time the memory of international history is challenged, deconstructed, and reframed thanks to the human and emotional gaze that this literature provides.

The already discussed Hajdari's *Poema dell'esilio*, in its urge to unmask the tragedies of the Albanian dictatorial past and pseudo-democratic present, pushes its accusation to include the numerous imbrications that Albania had with the rest of the world, in particular the Western world.

Del resto, furono proprio l'America e l'Inghilterra ad appoggiare la nascita della dittatura comunista di Hoxha nel mio paese, come testimoniano i documenti degli archivi. Questi alleati divisero anche il territorio albanese in zone d'influenza, ma gli albanesi, chiamano padre, quelli che scopano la loro madre.
È per questo che colloquio con l'esilio, amici miei. (p?)

Nelle prossime elezioni politiche del 3 luglio 2005 gli americani già stanno trafficando per riportare al potere di nuovo Berisha! In Albania per mungere una mucca nel villaggio o per nominare un usciere del comune, ci vuole il parere dell'ambasciatore americano a Tirana! Mio Dio, al mio popolo hanno messo il cervello dell'asino!

È per questo che inneggio all'esilio, amici miei. (p?)

Il governo di Nano e quello di Berisha accettarono di mettere nel territorio albanese le carceri segrete, in cui gli agenti della CIA torturavano i cittadini stranieri, calpestando i diritti umani. Tali carceri di tortura sono state scoperte anche in Kosovo. In Albania abitano i misteri più mostruosi dell'Europa di oggi. Non fidatevi dei criminali politici di Tirana.

È per questo che non si separa da me l'esilio, amici miei. (p?)

This harsh critique points the finger at the crucial political interferences of the West in Albanian affairs. On one hand, it hints at past responsibilities of powerful countries such as England, France, Italy, Russia, and the former Austro-Hungarian empire for tearing apart, during the 1912 London conference of the Ambassadors, the territory of the ethnic Albania. On the other hand, it accuses the West for more recent interferences in supporting abusive political decisions and transforming Albania into a space of violation of human rights recognised by the international community.

Though highlighting international responsibilities, Hajdari's voice is far from being nationalist and blindly critical vis-à-vis the world. *Poema dell'esilio* offers instances of how internationalism can be politically and culturally positive, necessary to break free from the stricture of fundamentalist nationalism.

Mi hanno chiamato traditore, fascista, cosmopolita, perchè nelle postfazioni dei miei libri *Ombra di cane* e *Sassi contro vento* avevo criticato il presidente della Repubblica albanese e il suo regime e avevo scritto che l'Albania deve "unirsi" all'Italia per salvare se stessa e il Kosovo.

È per questo che merito l'esilio, amici miei. (p?)

L'Albania non vuole entrare in Europa, perché una volta entrati nella Comunità Europea, non ci saranno più traffici e affari loschi tra mafia, politici e letterati di corte. Lo slogan quotidiano è: "Chi ruba di più!"

L'Albania è la tana dei più grandi ladri e criminali d'Europa.

È per questo che vivo alla giornata in esilio, amici miei. (p?)

What emerges from passages like these is the need for a constructive collaboration between countries, cultures, and languages. International collaboration is not just possible in Hajdari's ethical vision of the world; it rather, and above all, has the crucial and fundamental role to question, deconstruct, understand, and rectify the injustices of the past in order to build a better and ethical future. Hajdari's text serves as an invitation to nations and their people to be aware of their past history and collaborate with one another in order to write a different future history.

Anilda Ibrahim's novel *L'amore e gli stracci del tempo*, and Elvira Dones' novel *Piccola guerra perfetta*, which both look at the 1996-99 war in Kosovo, also speak relatively to the failure of international relations. While the first text focuses on the love between a Serbian man and a Kosovar woman in the context of the ideological hatred and the consequent ethnic cleansing carried out by Slobodan Milošević, the second text highlights the struggle for survival of three women and their families trapped in the city of Pristina during the 1999 NATO intervention. Both texts underline the loss of meaning of history, in its political and ideological decisions, when observed from the point of view of those who underwent the physical, emotional, and psychological aggression of war and genocide.

Sullo schermo c'è il presidente kosovaro Ibrahim Rugova seduto di fianco a Slobodan Milošević, gli stringe la mano, sorridono insieme di fronte alle telecamere della tv di stato serba. Non può essere. Eppure le immagini non

svaniscono. [...] Ibrahim Rugova è il suo ex professore, l'eroe della sua generazione e di tutto il Kosovo, su Rugova lei ha litigato ferocemente con Art. Art è un anti-Rugova, lo considera una figura superata, uno che con il suo pacifismo a oltranza negli ultimi anni ha solo nuociuto alla causa del Kosovo. Rugova che stringe la mano al pazzo di Belgrado: non può essere. Niente ha più senso. (55)

This complete loss of meaning is what Rea, one of the three women in *Piccola guerra perfetta*, feels when facing the absurdity of political decisions, while hatred and death surrounding her relentlessly consume her family and her affections. The distance between the unfolding of historical decisions and the reality of people affected by them is reinforced by Dones's diegetic decision to depict characters in a complete isolation and lack of awareness of what is happening outside the besieged city of Pristina. It is only in occasional and dangerous phone calls to their relatives abroad that the three women can be updated about the decisions of the international forces involved in the war.

Dones's characters know that what the world will remember of this "perfect little war" will be the political decisions, history in its most public unfolding, while the suffering of people and the intimate history of individuals will be instead forgotten; no trace will be left of the fear, terror, brutality, and meaninglessness of death. "È ora che io e te teniamo un diario, altrimenti certe cose ce le dimenticheremo. Qualcuno dovrà raccontare tutto questo un giorno, no?" (62), says Nita to her friend Rea. With these words Dones's text reveals its intent to record a history, which is though a different history, the one of humans, trapped in the gearwheel of international interests and folly.

The Kosovar people of *Piccola guerra perfetta* are not just the victims and witnesses of that particular war. The text instead makes them become the symbols of other victims of crimes against humanity in past and present history.

Altri bambini si avvicinano, circondano il giornalista e il cameramen, parlano in albanese e in abbozzi d'inglese, di tedesco, di italiano. Allungano dei pezzi di carta, si spingono a vicenda per conquistare il cerchio più stretto, sono gli stessi occhi dei ragazzini di Gaza, gli stessi di quelli del Rwanda e della Bosnia. (116)

In the eyes of the most defenseless subjects in histories – children swept away from their homes and their families, confined in refugee camps, seeking for the journalists' help to get in touch with their relatives abroad – other tragedies and other historical crimes are projected. Dones's work therefore encourages its readers to think about history as a reverberation of different histories, tragically crossed by the same red thread of atrocities, ideological hatred, and the failure of international relations.

Like Dones's *Piccola guerra perfetta*, other works in Albanian-Italian literature look outside the axes of Albanian-Italian historical relations. Dones herself in her novel *I mari ovunque* narrates about the Argentinian *desaparecidos*. Hajdari's *San Pedro Cutud* delves into the religious ritual of crucifixion in the Philippines, while his novel *Muzungu. Diario in nero*, maps the complex social, cultural, and political forces operating in Uganda. All these instances of Albanian-Italian literature show how this set of works, opening as it does to the representation of the world at large, becomes for the reader the ground of encounter with different cultures and languages. Carrying new literary images, themes, metaphors, and tropes, as well as an extensive socio-political awareness, Albanian-Italian literature operates an important genetic transformation in the canonic body of Italian literature, making it participate in an international literary discourse. If World Literature, since its first discussion by Goethe in the Nineteenth century, is intended to be a collection of works that have international circulation through

translations, Albanian-Italian works, along with other important experiences of migrant literature in Italian, encourage us to rethink and expand that definition, in order to include works that look at the world, its cultures, its languages, its conflicts, and its collaborations. Such an international dialogue and this richness of elements can be considered as one of the major contributions of Albanian-Italian literature to national Italian literature.

For a conclusion

As this long excursus through Albanian-Italian narrative has shown, this new narrative is a site of articulation of personal, mythical, and historical memory. Through the treatment of multilayered memory, this large set of works encourages a redefinition of individual or communitarian identities, while it offers the opportunity to reveal or reframe national and international events. Albanian-Italian literature is a narrative space that makes Italian literature contribute to different literary discourses, such as migrant autobiography, post-communist literature, post-colonial literature, and cultural neo-colonialism, and ultimately call for a redefinition of world literature.

Chapter Two

Borders

*È sulle frontiere che si misura
tutta la terribile inquietudine
che attraversa la storia degli uomini.*

- Franco Cassano

Albanian-Italian literature, which fits within the largely accepted category of Italian migration literature, consists of a group of narrative voices that started to appear at the end of the 1980s when migrant writers began to articulate themselves in the Italian language. Besides the migration that characterizes the lives of the writers, according to some scholars such as Nora Moll, the definition of migration literature also includes those works that deal with literary themes and tropes connected to the experience of migration. As we observed in the previous chapter, numerous instances in Albanian-Italian literature give voice to autobiographical or fictional migratory experiences, bringing to the page a set of recurrent literary themes such as uprooting, exile, war, linguistic and social marginality, and the tension between alienation and integration, to name the most common. Along with these themes, it is the physical and psychological act of crossing – from one land to another, from one culture to another, from one language to another, from one identity to another – that populates Albanian-Italian literature with multiple images of borders. This chapter investigates how Albanian-Italian literature represents

movement across personal, social, national, and international borders and the contrasting tensions caused within those migrants by the very act of crossing them. In many instances, the crossing of one or more borders becomes the narrative element that articulates the many levels of transformation of the migrant self, so frequently that Albanian-Italian literature can be aptly defined as border narrative.

In Albanian-Italian literature the border is a prolific narrative space that provides the amniotic fluid in which the tale of migration was born. At the same time, geographical, cultural, economic, and jurisdictional spaces and borders, and the act of crossing them, form a complex map of migratory tensions and movements, which necessarily engages in a dialogue with contemporary theorizations of borderlands, frontiers, limits, and margins. As highlighted by Franco Mezzadra in *Diritto di fuga*, borders – and the dynamics they entail – respond to the contemporary need to control the mobility of the international work force in a global context. This chapter will therefore discuss the extent to which Albanian-Italian literature frames borders in general and the Mediterranean border in particular as the major paradigm of globalization, informed as they are by the full range of personal, cultural, economic, juridical, and political tensions; a globalization that this set of works is capable of unveiling in its most sensitive details.

(B) Ordering the Nation

In November 2012 Albania celebrated its first century as a nation. Albania was declared independent from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, after decades of nationalist tensions commonly named *Rilindja Kombëtare* (National Renaissance). This Renaissance movement had been growing stronger since the 1870s as a result of a fear of partition in

the wake of the Russo-Turkish war, and culminated in 1912, when the leaders of the *Relindas*, the Renaissance activists, met in the city of Vlorë and read their declaration of independence. The modern Albanian nation was born.

Founding of the nation soon led to the negotiation of Albanian's borders with existing sovereign states. In 1913 the European powers participating in the London-based Conference of the Ambassadors ratified the independence of Albania from the Ottoman Empire, but at the same time left out relevant portions of the Albanian ethno-linguistic territories. Parts of Montenegro, Chameria, Macedonia, and Kosovo were left out of the fledgling state, and to this day remain so. As Robert Austin points out in his essay "Greater Albania: The Albanian State and the Question of Kosovo, 1912-2001," all the political forces leading Albania since its foundation were either too weak or had too much interest in maintaining the nation within the borders assigned to it in 1913. Albanian-speaking communities have often been the targets of ethnicity-driven aggressions, which at the turn of the twenty-first century escalated in the conflicts in Kosovo (1998-99), Presheva (2000-2001), and Macedonia (2001). Even though the area has been largely stabilized by the intervention of international forces, and the borders between Balkan nations have been pacified, the unification of all Albanian communities is still the leading argument for a revamped pan-Albanian discourse,⁹ as a consequence of the Albanian process of integration in Europe.

While Austin's essay frames the never-fully-realized unification as a result of the lack of effective nationalism in Albania, in particular vis-à-vis its unification with Kosovo – an approach that makes the essay participate in the contemporary discourse on

⁹ For an excursus on Pan-Albanianism, read Alexandra Channer's "Albanians Divided by Borders: Loyal to State or Nation?" in Mabry, T. James and John McGarry. *Divided Nations and European Integrations*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

nationalism and Pan-Albanianism – it also highlights the centrality of Albanian borders, not solely in the shaping of national sentiment within the ethno-linguistic group, but also in the handover of various political powers. Austin indeed remarks that from the democratic state of the origin, through Zogu’s monarchy and Italian Fascist occupation, and beyond through the national isolation of the communist regime and into the contemporary era of democratic statehood, the discussion and negotiation over national borders has been a determinant factor for political parties to gain power or keep it.

Austin explains that the 1912 foundation of Albania was the decision of a very small group of educated leaders, while the bulk of the Albanian ethno-linguistic population was illiterate and linguistically, religiously, and culturally fragmented. As a result, they lacked an effective nationalist sentiment. That national sentiment needed to be built, nurtured, and made to circulate among the population. This approach mirrors what Benedict Anderson pointed out in his 1983 groundbreaking text *Imagined Communities* – a reflection on the growth of nationalisms both in socialist and capitalist states. According to Anderson, nations and their national identities are “cultural artifacts of a particular kind” (15), the product of a historical-rhetorical construction. While Anderson places the birth of nationalisms at the convergence of capital and press and historically frames them as a consequence of the European Enlightenment of the 1700s, he also highlights the extent to which post World War I socialist and revolutionary forces inherited the state mechanisms from the fallen regimes and used those mechanisms to perpetrate a similar nation-based rhetoric. The discursive and rhetorical quality of the nation is therefore at the basis of both the democratic Albania of the late nineteenth century as well as the communist Albania of the second half of the twentieth century.

Working on the founding tropes of such nationalism, Albanian-Italian literature makes it emerge in all its mendacious, oppressive, and violent form.

What, then, are the tropes of Albanian nationalism across time? With what kind of images was that socio-political discourse structured? To what extent has that discourse involved a negotiation over Albanian borders? How is Albanian-Italian literature reflecting on Albanian nationalism and the state's borders? As anthropologist Armanda Hysa points out in her essay "Ethnography in Communist Albania: Nationalist Discourse and Relations with History," the nationalistic discourse of the origins was structured around "the theory of the Pelasgian origin of the Albanians, of the purity of the Albanian race, and of the theory that Albanians [...] fought during their glorious history to survive despite the long periods of slavery under the most powerful medieval empires." (110) This was the mythological foundation used by advocates of independence to shape a sentiment of unity and common cultural-historical identity.

The above nation-shaping discourse underwent a rapid shift in content when communists came to power. Cultural elements such as folk traditions, ceremonial feasts, and the *Kanûn* honor code that had previously been significant factors in national identity were now considered backward habits and were openly fought, and in 1967 all religious practice was abolished. Such transformation was the result of the communist ideological agenda that aggressively reframed and controlled all aspects of life in Albania. The communist era of the Albanian state began soon after War World II and the defeat of European fascism, which allowed the socialist and popular resistance forces to emerge and take control. Fascisms had swept through Europe for decades, and the Italian strain had directly affected Albania through its juridical-political annexation to the Italian

crown and through territorial occupation by the Italian military. In addition to that, Fascism had originally collaborated with, and then replaced, the Albanian monarchy of King Ahmet Zogu (1924-1939). Communist forces were therefore determined to “liberate” the nation from the legacy of both those exploitative regimes, and to completely re-map the Albanian state according to Marxist and Leninist theories and practices. Communism, in their view, needed completely new cultural images on which to build its nation.

Under the new ideological leadership, the social, cultural, and economic discourse was now built around the image of a country that had succeeded in erasing all economic, social, and gender disparities. The communist nationalist discourse therefore celebrated stories and experiences from the national resistance against Fascism, along with an erasure of Western cultures and languages, aptly replaced by an interest in and consumption of Leninist Russian and Maoist Chinese cultures. The post-communist critical intention of some instances in Albanian-Italian literature draws from this constructed image of perfection and from the Russian-Chinese influence, framing them in redundant and hyperbolic forms to create a disproportion of images that leads to irony.

An example of this narrative strategy is to be found in Leonard Guaci’s novel, *I grandi occhi del mare* (2005), where the author indulges in a hyperbolic naming of the members of the Cipi family as heroes of Communism.

Il primo figlio era nato il giorno in cui finì la guerra. Viron era sceso dalle montagne con tutti gli altri partigiani della brigata [...] Aveva sollevato in aria quella creatura sofferente e aveva detto con orgoglio: - Lo chiameremo Libero. Fedele al suo spirito profondamente rivoluzionario, aveva chiamato, poi, tutti gli altri: Partizan, Lenin, Martire, Mao, Proletar, Sekretar, Gramshi, Stalin, Patriot, Progres.

The father's devotion to the revolutionary cause is ridiculed through this long list of names, which instead of reinforcing his faith in communism ends up making it void. The irony of the passage is amplified by the reaction of Viron's wife, Arta, who for each name fears the loss of the religious roots of her family, while the reader knows that religion was historically forbidden by the communist power.

Despite the shift in content of Communist nationalism, the discursive quality of the nation discussed by Anderson remained unchanged, even though disguised under the mask of historical materialism. The knitting of the national discourse was the imposed duty of intellectuals, historians, and ethnographers and, as Hysa states, "Albanian scholars were to establish an Albanian science within a Marxist-Leninist theoretical and methodological framework" (108). Such a forced-upon ideological structure became an intellectual stricture for many scholars, and produced affecting and delimiting works in all fields of the humanities and social sciences. The ideological borders of Albanian intellectual life were clearly drawn and meant not to be crossed.

In analyzing intellectual participation in support of the Albanian communist agenda, Hysa refers to Slobodan Naumovic's concept of "double insider syndrome" (106). The definition indicates the double position of a researcher who identifies with the studied group while also having the duty "to provide arguments, true or false, for the protection of the nation." (106) According to Hysa this sort of complex socio-intellectual position has been at the heart of the deliberate choice of many Albanian intellectuals to ideologize their discourse. The result was many cases of compromised intellectuals who were spontaneously supportive of the regime, writing with seemingly genuine praise.

Beyond the “double insider syndrome,” which is certainly valuable to indicate a complexity of interior and exterior forces that Albanian intellectuals found themselves needing to navigate, what affected intellectual life with respect to communist ideology was the “characteristic intensity and harshness, as well as the strong political control that [Albanian] dictatorship [...] exercised over every social, cultural, political, and economic institution” (Hysa 105). As Fatos Lubonja narrates from his personal experience of imprisonment in *Diario di un intellettuale in un gulag Albanese* (1994), the intellectuals who would break free from the imposed (b)orders of communist ideology were jailed, tortured, and very often executed. The control of intellectuals and society at large became progressively more paranoid, and pervasive strategies of espionage led to the arbitrary identification of numerous so-called enemies of the people.

Albanian-Italian literature aims right at the heart of this surveillance system, as many novels portray the systematic production of enemies of the people and the arbitrary juridical system that sits beneath it. Vorpsi’s *Il paese dove non si muore mai*, where the father of the main character is briefly sketched as a political prisoner, opts for omitting the reasons of his internment. Vorpsi’s narrative choice creates gaps in the diegetic fabric and a narrative curiosity for the reader, who keeps wondering why the father is in jail. The silent answer to this question seems to be that reasons don’t really matter; any reason would be a political fabrication to fit the narrative of the state.

While in Vorpsi’s novel this relativity of guilt is just suggested, in Ron Kubati’s *Va e non torna* the fabrication of proofs is openly revealed in all its injustice. In the novel, Elton’s father and his friends spend many years in the Spaç prison, one of the cruelest camps for political prisoners.

Kristofor era stato arrestato insieme a Viktor, ad Ilir e ad altri amici. Erano stati accusati di aver mediato un colpo di stato mai avvenuto. Visto che erano stati presi, si erano beccati una decina d'anni di condanna con l'imputazione di agitazione e propaganda politica. (89)

“Ti rendi conto che da qui non è mai uscito nessuno? [...] Qualche giorno prima che la tua pena qui dentro scada, chiamano un giudice da un paese vicino, trovano un paio di prigionieri, a cui concedono un incontro prolungato con le mogli oppure niente proprio, ti portano nell'ufficio del comandante e, nel giro di pochi minuti, vedi la tua pena rinnovata per altri dieci anni.” (86)

Passages like these constitute a harsh accusation against the juridical system, insofar as the punishment of inmates shifts from being uncertain in its correctness to being openly forged and forced upon them.

The italics of these passages is the graphic solution reserved for the central part of Kubati's novel, a chapter of about twenty pages, by the title “*ALBANIA. SPAÇ. 1982.*” The narration moves from the first person to the third person, and as the title itself indicates, it shifts from a diegetic present in Italy to a past time in the camp of Spaç. The narrative insert depicts life in the camp, mapping the relationships between the inmates, the judicial abuses, the physical and psychological violence that the inmates undergo, their painful separation from their families, and their inability to return to a normal life outside the camp. The paragraph ends indeed with Dhimiter, one of the inmates, committing suicide the day before his release.

Dhimiter's death interrupts the digression on Spaç and the narrating voice says “[s]pengo il computer. La luce bianca mi ha fatto male agli occhi. Mi sento un po' stordito dall'atterraggio brusco nella mia stanza” (100). Thanks to these few lines the reader comes to know that the Spaç narrative is the beginning of a book that Elton is

writing to tie together his past and his present: his past love for Iris – Dhimiter’s daughter – and his present love for Elena, his past in Albania and his present in Italy. In the landscape of the novel, the chapter on Spaç acts as the border between past and present that needs to be narratively traversed in order for Elton to resolve two contrasting parts of the self.

As Kubati’s *Va e non torna* portrays Dhimiter’s breakdown and death, many narrative voices render the physical and psychological consequences of the social-intellectual cleansing that Albanians underwent, as well as the repercussion on the prisoners’ family members. This is the case in Elvira Dones’s *I mari ovunque*, when Natasha and Artan’s story is depicted in its impossibility to continue across psychological and social borders.

Dopo esserne uscito, per mesi Artan aveva fissato Natasha senza proferire suono: il suo sorriso era cristallizzato nelle foto ingiallite della gioventù. Non sapeva più ridere, e nemmeno fare l’amore. Dopo mezzo secolo di dittatura nel paese era ritornata la vita. Mentre la vita di Artan era rimasta indietro, fra le mura di una cella, nel fango del nord dell’Albania, dentro il ruvido cappotto da prigioniero. (84)

Artan’s emotional mutilation constitutes an insurmountable barrier between him and his wife, a separation that Natasha had previously strived to avoid, when twelve years before she had opposed and rejected her family’s request to leave Artan in order to protect her siblings and parents.

“Sono calma, papà, non lascio Artan, succeda quel che succeda.” [...] Da quel momento i suoi rapporti con la famiglia si erano spezzati. Da allora erano passati molti anni muti. Le due gemelle, di cinque anni più giovani di lei, non avevano ottenuto il diritto all’istruzione superiore perché la loro

sorella maggiore era moglie di un detenuto. Erano state costrette a lavorare una come tornitrice, l'altra come sarta, in due fabbriche della capitale.” (118)

The system of surveillance and condemnation is here portrayed as the engine of multiple levels of separation, which affects all familial and socio-economic relations. The silence that informs the passage, the ten silent years that Natasha undergoes, becomes the ultimate symbol of all forms of distance.

While many instances in Albanian-Italian literature elaborate the persecution of the “enemies,” focusing on their imprisonment and the personal and collective repercussions of it, other instances push their narrations to represent the tragic and systematic destruction of the body of the enemy. In Guaci’s *I grandi occhi del mare*, the character of Zyz, a “non-allineato” in love with Western music and literature, is made to disappear and found dead in a plastic bag. In Kubati’s *Il buio del mare* the father of the nameless main character is publicly hanged in the town main square and left exposed for days as an intimidating message to the collective. Both the first hidden execution and the second public one are two variations of the same language of systematic terror and fear that emerges in many instances of Albanian-Italian literature.

The paranoid discourse used to control Albanian society was similarly crafted vis-à-vis the danger of neighboring capitalist countries. Western evils, which were ideologically crucial in shaping a national communist sentiment, also entailed an exponential increase in border protection. While dictator Hoxha maintained Albania within the borders established in 1913 in order to avoid any dispute with Federal Yugoslavia and to secure Tito’s support to his party, he hermetically closed those same borders, separating communities that had a long history of coexistence and intermarriage,

and filled the nation with military bunkers. Three decades into the democratic transformation of Albania, the architectural performance of security that the bunker represents still inscribes the landscape, as a visually powerful memento of the long self-imposed isolation of Albania under the regime.

Bunkers, barbed wire and armed figures are recurrent elements in Albanian-Italian literature. These military devices transform national borders in armed frontiers, in a constant tension between the strength and the vulnerability of the nation vis-à-vis “external” dangers. Bunkers in particular are the narrative element that often informs the post-communist quality of this literature. This is the case for Ornella Vorpsi’s novel *Il paese dove non si muore mai*, which narrates the exhausting military education that Albanian women have to undergo, a discipline that the space of the bunker makes viable through its constricting quality.

Oggi c’è la sparatoria (esercitazione di tiro). Otto proiettili per persona. Il bersaglio è lontano centocinquanta metri. [...] Siamo tutte in trincea, dobbiamo entrare nei bunker. Ciascuna il suo bunker. “Imparare a difendere la patria, per di più la nostra, invidiata da tutto il mondo per la sua marcia così riuscita verso il comunismo,” dice il nostro compagno, il Timoniere Enver Hoxha. Gli imperialisti americani, gli sciovinisti russi, i grandi capitalisti francesi e italiani sono pronti a sbarcare per distruggere l’esempio della parità in terra, l’esempio di una società che non ha più lotte di classe, che non conosce antagonismi nel suo seno, la società più evoluta mai conosciuta dalla coscienza umana. La sparatoria non è ancora cominciata e io con le mie amiche, con Ori in particolare, mi trovo a sognare l’arrivo dell’imperialista americano e dell’anarchico francese [...] Tutt’e due sognavamo il gesto patetico e teatrale con cui avremmo gettato il fucile e avremmo detto al nostro soldato i rispettivi “Ti amo” e “Je t’aime.” (81)

In this passage Ina’s description of the communist nationalistic rhetoric of strength and

infallibility comes across as a laughable non-sense, both for the hyperbolic tone of the prose and for the distance the soldier-girls immediately take from that ideological discourse, imagining foreign soldiers as potential lovers. The bunker to which Ina is assigned has been used as a bathroom, so that the stench, along with the deafening noise of the shooting, makes her associate that space to the end of the world. “Dopo ho saputo che quel frastuono-apocalisse era un fatto normale quando si tirava da un bunker,” (82) Ina realizes. The apocalypse, in its common association to disastrous events and death, ironically happens in Ina’s perspective through the microscopic space of the bunker. The physical narrowness of that space, through the hyperbolic description that Ina renders, symbolically equals the constriction of the communist ideology, doomed to burst like Ina’s shots from those simulacra of national borders.

The dissemination of bunkers and military marks, on the national soil as well as in the pages of Albanian-Italian writers, contributes to a sense of multiplication of borders. As Etienne Balibar puts it in his text “World Borders, Political Borders,” borders are situated “wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled” (71). Balibar’s analysis applies to new political-economic entities, and especially to cosmopolitan cities, so his voice will more aptly resonate in the following section, which focuses on the representation of the Mediterranean Sea as a site of global crossing and control. However, communist and capitalistic worlds are made comparable in their control and militarization of the borders, their dispersion, their fragmentation, and their omnipresence, which make human life entirely dependent on the logic of division and exclusion.

The exclusion from the world that the closure of national borders imposed upon

the Albanian people is one of the elements nurturing their dream of leaving, as Vorpsi suggests in *Il paese dove non si muore mai* when she writes: “Al diavolo questo paese maledetto! [...] Al mattino il saluto con i nonni per Eva fu facile, li tranquillizzò dicendo che non sarebbe comunque riuscita a partire, glielo avrebbero impedito di sicuro, sarebbe stato troppo bello realizzare il loro sogno” (107). Like Eva in Vorpsi’s novel, who dreams of escaping the strictures of the regime, many Albanians in the 1990s crossed the national borders, echoing the social forces of change that a few years before had torn down the Berlin Wall. Similarly, many characters of Albanian-Italian literature leave their native country in search of a land and a lifestyle that they had imagined through television, music, and literature. Between them and their dreams of freedom stood another border, though: the flat line of the marine horizon that Aulona, in Guaci’s *I grandi occhi del mare*, observes relentlessly, thinking how “quello era il confine, la fine di tutto, il limite tra il giorno e la notte” (9). The Mediterranean Sea, with its international and capitalistic logic of control and exclusion, proves to be, for Albanian migrants as well as for their fictional representations, a similarly closed, military, and deadly border to cross.

Mediterranean Crossings: Borders of Death

Albanian-Italian literary and cinematic expressions make the Mediterranean crossing one of the most recurrent diegetic passages in the life of their characters, to the extent that this set of works comfortably inhabits and greatly enriches both the narrative spaces of border literature and Mediterranean literature. In representing the marine crossings, this literature highlights the social, cultural, and legal interrelationships between Italy and Albania, as well as the international and global forces, both economical and political, at

play in the Mediterranean Sea, forces that transform the marine border into a space of exclusion, of rights violation, and too often of death.

As the title of this section indicates, Albanian-Italian migration across the Otranto Channel – the fifty-mile stretch of water and only border between Albania and Italy – very much echoes Iain Chambers’ analysis of the region. As stated in his work *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of An Interrupted Modernity* (2008), the Mediterranean area, under the logic of movement control that characterizes all contemporary borders, is transformed into a space where a profound “unfreedom” materializes. Against this unfreedom “[t]he very right to travel, to journey, to migrate today increasingly runs up” (3). This is a view largely shared by international scholars on the Mediterranean, and a criminal status quo that journalist and activist Gabriele Del Grande firmly denounced with his works. His blog *Fortress Europe* in particular maps the shipwrecks and the number of migrants who died in their attempt to cross the southern border of Schengen Europe.

Similar works poignantly unveil the dramatic extent to which the erasure of the internal borders of the European Union implicated a reactive need for protection at its outer border. In this dynamic of internal free movement and external blockage, migration is an uncomfortable element of disturbance to the European status quo. Socio-political expressions such as the agency *Frontex* are the embodiment of a defensive European strategy vis-à-vis migration, which asks the Mediterranean Sea to be one of the walls of the fortress. This is a role that alienates the liquid nature of the marine body and that fails to recognize its place as *medius terra*, in between lands, where exchange of goods, people, and ideas are transportable. In name of this transit-amenable quality of the

Mediterranean, Chambers's text strives for a re-theorization of the area as a diverse and polycentric, ever-evolving and cross-cultural space, one through which people, goods, sounds, and thought circulate.

Many voices in Albanian-Italian literature speak of the unfreedom of movement that they experienced on the Mediterranean border during the 1990s. Albanian migrants have been the first visible boat people crossing the sea over to Italy, a practice that since then other migrants from different countries, for different reasons and along different routes, have been choosing. The already discussed unwelcome arrival of the Vlora qualifies as the beginning of a two-decades-long policy of surveillance, rejection, detention, and deportation across the marine southern border of Europe, against people exercising their "diritto di fuga," as Sandro Mezzadra defines that individual and active choice of migrants to seek a better life across the border.

In his work *Diritto di fuga*, Mezzadra argues that the act of fleeing, the migrant's defection from despotic realities, the act of subtracting herself from the conditions of material and symbolic deprivations, is what constitutes the subjective and subjectifying dimension of migration. Mezzadra's theorization of migration disrupts the idea of a migrant as a "soggetto debole," a weak subject (19). A migrant is rather a subject of agency. Her migration cannot just be read as determined by the binary dynamic of push and pull factors, deprivations and opportunities, but rather as the result of her individual agency that sets her in motion.

Arthur Spanjolli writes about the trope of fleeing as a form of agency with his novel *I nipoti di Scanderbeg*, a story entirely set during the moments of departure, arrival, and reception of the Vlora.

“Ma dove si andava? Perché? Con chi? Chi mi aspettava oltre la costa? E se la nave fosse affondata o avesse perso l’orientamento o si fosse guastata in mezzo al mare? [...] Nessuna domanda simile filtrava nei cervelli di quelli come me. Importante era fuggire dalla miseria, fuggire dal paese allo sfascio. Fuggire dalla terra dannata. Varcare la soglia della sofferenza. [...] Senza acqua, senza cibo, senza nulla, urlavano con uno spaventoso grido di liberazione, di libertà, di speranza. (21)

The desire for freedom and the insistence on the individual pain that this passage underlines echoes Mezzadra’s main argument of agency and individuality of migration. Spanjolli’s representation of the people on the Vlora drips with a similarly driven agency, one which fills them with emotions, and even though they have suspended the evaluation of the risks of the situation, they are certainly aware of their “right to flee” their poverty and subjugation.

Once the Vlora starts moving towards Italy, Spanjolli’s Mediterranean crossing transitions from being a journey towards the imagined and prohibited world beyond “quelle acque azzurre” (14) to a completely overwhelming physical experience that mixes together hunger, thirst, lack of living space, darkness and military control. The Mediterranean landscape and seascape have no role in the narration, replaced as they are by the jurisdictional and military aspect of the Mediterranean space. “[D]alle 6 di mattina fino alle 6 di sera, fummo pilotati da due motovedette della guardia di finanza italiana e da due elicotteri che ci tenevano sotto sorveglianza” (22), is how the narrative frames the long time of the crossing. The armed patrolling of the marine border marks the first encounter of the migrants with Italy. This is a military presence whose verbal and physical violence will accompany him all the way through the novel, from his arrival to

the port, through his internment in the Vittoria stadium, to his final repatriation to Albania.

The Mediterranean as armed border depicted by Spanjolli is taken to a new level of violence in Natasha Shehu's novel *L'ultima nave*, which narrates the 1997 shipwreck of the vessel Kater I Rades, rammed in the Otranto channel by the Italian military ship Sibilla, an "incident" that caused the death of eighty-one migrants. Shehu's perspective on the tragedy combines her imagination as a novelist and her insight as an attorney that represented the case. As the author states in the forward to her text, the reconstruction of dialogues is a literary fiction, but the intention of the text is that of a denunciation of "un affondamento che poteva e doveva essere evitato" (7). With *L'ultima nave* the author aims at "[f]ar riemergere dal naufragio della memoria [...] il carico, purtroppo eccedente, di attese, speranze, desideri" (7). Therefore Shuhu, like many other instances analyzed in Chapter One, frames narrative as a tool for collective memory. The collective "traumatica frattura nella coscienza di molti" (7) is however mapped through the experience of the individuals, through their personal and distinctive reasons for migration.

The characters' migration takes place during the 1997 collapse of the pyramidal economic system, which massively ruined Albanian investors and brought the nation to the verge of a civil war, and is consistently informed by their individual dreams, expectations, and fears. "Arrivo, arrivo. L'Italia, le macchine, le canzoni, l'allegria – rispose Zamira canticchiando mentre scendeva i gradini a due a due. – Qui invece devi essere per forza triste, vero Fatima che hanno tutti certe facce? Me li farai comprare i vestiti corti? E poi andiamo insieme dal parrucchiere?" (Shehu, 49). This is how the teenager Zamira frames her own migration, following her dreams shaped by Italian

television, while her older sister Fatima reminds her that they are going “per lavorare, mica per divertimento” (Shehu 49). Other migrants are leaving to go study, others to reach a relative who works in Italy, others because they are sick and hope to be cured, others because they want to escape the civil uprising, and others because they have lost all their possessions. It is this collection of individual migratory projects that forms the crowd on the Kater I Rades, the little sister of the Vlora vessel, heading to Italy six years later and carrying onboard “tutta l’Albania” (50).

This ‘whole Albania’ is in reality just over 120 people, crammed on a vessel twenty meters long and three meters wide and exceeding all safety parameters. The narrative follows them across the sea, and Fatima, the main character, notices “la lunga schiuma bianca” that the boat leaves behind, the shrinking visibility of the city of Vlora, the stretching coastline progressively more distant, and the mounting of the waves at night. This attention to marine physical elements, which were absent in Spanjolli’s representation, gives a bodily and psychological role to the sea, one that makes Fatima realize how “[p]er chi veniva dall’interno il mare era un perfetto sconosciuto. Ma anche per noi che vivevamo sul porto, una cosa è vederlo dal balcone di casa, altro è starci dentro nel momento dei suoi capricci” (98). The physicality of the sea in Shehu’s text proves to be a hostile and unwelcoming obstacle and conveys a sense of natural threat throughout the novel.

The capricious identity of the sea, with its unpredictably changing body, is a trope that puts Shehu’s work in relation to many marine narratives worldwide, from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* to Giovanni Verga’s *I malavoglia*. To the trope of marine natural savagery, which can be widely found in literature from all over the

world, Italian migrant narratives add a very specific Mediterranean, and unfortunately recurrent, trope: the militarized Mediterranean space, already anticipated by Spanjolli and here expanded upon by Shuhu. The hostility of international regulations at play in the Mediterranean area is crucial to Shehu's novel. Her characters are indeed approached by an Italian military vessel, "una specie di città grigia galleggiante [...] con i cannoni alle finestre puntati in tutte le direzioni del mondo" (85-86). The vessel, with its giant proportions, and through the open intimation to the migrants to go back to Albania, is an active and more dangerous threat to their lives than the raging sea.

Besides the representation of the enemy vessel, the novel investigates the world of military and political (in)decisions, which make the migrants criminalized victims of the border. The novel indeed alternates between two narrative lines: while one takes the perspective of Albanian migrants, the other narrates the political and military negotiation between the Italian and Albanian governments.

Non si preoccupi, provvedo a tutto io. Dirò che ci impegnamo a consentire che gli italiani respingano le nostre navi se piene di migranti, ma che si tratta di un accordo provvisorio [...] L'unica cosa che ci tocca fare ancora, Presidente, è stabilire l'elenco dei porti dove far rientrare le navi fermate e comunicarlo agli italiani. [...] Non possono e non devono assolutamente riportare la gente nello stesso punto da cui è partita. Sapendo poi che il tutto avviene con il nostro consenso, ci mangerebbero vivi. (58)

With these words the Albanian government secretly decides to accommodate the Italian closure of borders while at the same time disregarding their request to stop new boats from leaving Albania, a move that would very luckily generate a civil uprising. Shehu therefore places the shipwreck of the Kater I Rades at the intersection of these

unspoken internationally discordant agreements, highlighting a strategy of non-action as well as shared responsibility.

Along with the procrastination of the Albanian government, Shehu's narrative strongly points out the inhospitality of Italian political decisions, informed by a defensive European pressure vis-à-vis the management of its southern border. "L'Unione Europea li ha bacchettati a più riprese perché fanno poco filtro nei confronti degli immigrati" (27) reads the text, aiming to highlight a chain of political influences, a set of supranational interferences that rule the Mediterranean space.

Italy finds itself at the center of those international decisions as much as it is geographically located in the middle of the Mediterranean space. In terms of responsibility, though, *L'ultima nave* recognizes Italy's national agency and full responsibility for its political decisions.

"Ce l'hai presente la Sibilla? Dodicimila tonnellate. Quelli invece galleggiano su un affare di una ventina di metri. E speriamo che non si alzi troppo il mare. Abbiamo mandato un tir contro un monopattino." [...] "Quelli di Roma per me non sono mica normali. Hanno dato l'ordine di eseguire un'azione più decisa, fino a toccare il bersaglio se necessario." "Toccare il bersaglio? E che siamo in guerra?" (Shehu 91-97)

In this dialogue two Italian soldiers involved in the military operation show a powerless awareness of the disparity of means and the excess of force in use. The "incident" here stops being the result of adverse fate or the rage of the sea, and instead it becomes the direct and criminal result of a military strategy, both national and international, that controls the marine border. Under these forces, the Mediterranean Sea stops being a frontier and becomes a frontline, a shift that openly recalls Franco

Cassano's analysis of the Latin etymology of the term *frontiera*. In his work *Il pensiero meridiano* (1996) Cassano argues that the term *frontiera*, from the Latin *frons frontis*, contains a double meaning. While on one hand it underlines a "frontal" relation between people who can therefore observe and mutually understand each other, on the other hand it indicates the tension and conflict between them. This second meaning is channeled in the military word *fronte*, frontline. Shehu's Mediterranean space witnesses armed conflicts; it is an international frontline, a war zone.

This war, like any other, claims its victims, and the threatening presence of the Sibilla escalates into a concrete offence when it rams the Kater I Rades, a collision that cost eighty-one real lives, and that costs the fictional Fatima the lives of her sister Zamira, her fiancé Andrea, and a long list of other friends, acquaintances, and fellow travelers with whom she had shared dreams, fears, and expectations. They all are the victims of the "nave nemica" (110), dead in a war that, even now on a constant basis, defends privilege and economic interests against the needs and dreams of other humans.

The forces generating the tragedy that Shehu brings to the readers' attention and memory – a tragedy that echoes many others in the last two decades that made of the Mediterranean Sea an improvised graveyard for thousands of migrants – transform the liquid space of the sea into a solid space. The concept of solid sea is investigated by the Milan agency Multiplicity with the multimedia project titled *Solid Sea*. This is a series of works, installations, and publications, one of which references another shipwreck, that of *la nave fantasma*, the ghost ship, as it was called for its almost complete absence from the news. In 1996 the vessel F174 sank near Portopalo, Sicily, killing two hundred eighty-three Pakistani, Tamil, and Indian migrants. Italian authorities acknowledged the

shipwreck only five years later.¹⁰ Referenced by Iain Chambers in the “Off the Map” chapter of his *Mediterranean Crossings*, the *Solid Sea* project investigates the extent to which “the Mediterranean basin is rapidly being transformed and ‘solidified’ through the impositions of frontiers and controls and the increasing rigidity of identities tied to specific forms of passage: tourist, mercantile, military” (68). Migrants are unauthorized inhabitants of the frontier, and their Mediterranean passage is far from being the liquid journey across the marine border. Instead, it is a dangerous passage through legal obstacles that include arms, internment, deportation, and death. The military operation *Mare Nostrum*, that implies naval and air units deployment allegedly to improve maritime security, patrol sea lanes, combat illegal activities, and human trafficking, is an example of this militarization. The dispersed migrants who didn’t make it across the border lay at the bottom of the sea, cementing it with their lost remains. Natasha Shehu’s *L’ultima nave* articulates one tassel of this tragic mosaic of cement.

Borders in absentia

The trope of the sea as a deadly space recurs in other instances of the Albanian-Italian production, such as in Edmond Budina’s first film *Lettere al vento*, and in Ron Kubati’s novel *Va e non torna*. In contrast to the previously analyzed instances, which place the reader in the middle of the deadly events, these two works rely on an esthetic of absence, an erasure of elements from the screen and the page, respectively. Borders are narrated *in absentia*, out of the diegesis or in another space and time. The reader, along with the characters, is kept far away from the scene of death, which is never directly represented.

¹⁰ The work of journalist and novelist Giovanni Maria Bellu investigates the event in his book *I fantasmi di Portopalo*.

The absence of border representation is a narrative device that amplifies the sense of powerlessness and loss that the characters are experiencing.

In Budina's film, *Lettere al vento*, Niko, interpreted by Budina himself, crosses the sea towards Italy in search of his son, Keli, who has suddenly stopped sending his remittances to the family and is now considered a dangerous criminal. Niko's journey will reveal the terrible truth that his son Keli never made it to Italy; he died in the Otranto channel trying to save a woman who had fallen in the water; his friend Roberto had sent remittances to postpone the truth to the family; and Keli's passport was sold to a ruthless criminal who is now using his name. Neither Keli's nor Nico's crossings are shown on screen, and they are instead suggested by quick shots of the marine horizon and a running train.

In an interview with the filmmaker, it was made clear that the repeated absence of images of the marine crossing as a choice informed by a social and political intention was intentional. Budina explained how this omission, besides the low budget of the film that forced the erasure of certain parts of the screenplay, was a chosen aesthetic solution that intended to reframe the media representation of the migrants' arrivals. Since news were full of undocumented migrants on boats or dead in the water, Budina aimed to distance his work from that socially overloaded imagery, and underline that it is never a crowd that crosses the sea, rather a group of individuals that have families and stories left behind, letters to exchange, and dreams to make true. The choice to work through absences is his aesthetic mark and his particular style for addressing the tragedies that happen in the Mediterranean.

Budina's work uses absence as narrative solution in many different cases. For

instance, Keli's body will never be found, one of many lying at the bottom of the Mediterranean. Budina's narrative underlines this absence treating Keli as a ghostly figure throughout the film, making him appear only in the disquieting dreams of his father. The viewer doesn't know what moved him across the sea, what dreams and feelings he had about his journey. Absent also is his grave, located in an unknown somewhere. The only homage the father will be able to pay to his dead son will be to throw into the water all the letters they exchange, as a symbolic gesture to reconnect with him.

As Jacques Derrida claims in his work *Of Hospitality*, the absence of an exact physical space in which to pray, a precise location where to find a tombstone, makes mourning impossible, "a mourning deprived of weeping" (111). This absence of mourning is somewhat soothed in the last image of the film, when a shot of the sea is superimposed with a dedication in memory of all those who didn't make it to the other coast. This last image is intended as a funereal inscription of the Mediterranean Sea as a collective place of death. The uninscribable surface of the water that conceals Keli's body just as it does those of many others is now written as a collective tombstone.

Absence similarly characterizes Kubati's *Va e non torna*, a novel in which the young Elton, translator of interceptions for the Italian police, remotely comes to know of a probable sinking of two boats while he is intercepting the dialogue between two traffickers. Elton, and the reader with him, is spatially and temporally removed from the scene of the incident, a tragic event that is erased from the page and that remains instead in the audible recording of a brief dialogue on a tape.

Alfred: Ah Tani...Che cazzo succede?

Tani: Kastriot... Alfred, mi senti? Kastriot e Krenar non si vedono. Sono sessanta persone. Non li vedo. Pronto? Alfred. Mi senti?

Cadde la linea. Si temeva che gli altri due gommoni fossero andati a fondo. Guardai spaventato Paolo e Pino. "Fate qualcosa..." (56-57)

Elton is translating this conversation between smugglers for two police agents, and his worried request of intervention conveys his empathy with those boat people (one of which he has been, as we will learn at the end of the novel) as well as his powerlessness in this situation. The episode will not have a resolution or a conclusion, since the novel doesn't inform the reader about what happened to those two boats, and whether anybody died. The presence of those people in the text is conveyed by their very absence.

The absence of representation of the border that characterizes this first half of Kubati's novel turns into a partial presence at the end of the narrative, when Elton's physical Mediterranean crossing is finally revealed and represented.

Il mattino dopo, quando ci siamo tutti e siamo in migliaia, la nave si muove. Il mare la trascina verso non si sa dove. Non siamo noi a attraversare il mare. È il mare che si fa attraversare. L'alba è grigia, fredda e ventosa. Già in partenza, siamo digiuni da più di ventiquattro ore. Non capiamo più niente. Il nostro sguardo registra tutto ciò che succede per ritrasmetterlo solo ad avventura finita, in forma di memorie. Ognuno s'è aggrappato a qualcosa per poter affrontare meglio le onde e la pioggia che si confondono sopra di noi. La città alle nostre spalle diventa sempre più piccola, ma davanti a noi non si vede niente." (193)

In this last scene of the novel Elton is represented on a boat leaving Albania: a marine departure that places Kubati's work in a conspicuous set of Albanian-Italian works, from the novels *I nipoti di Skanderbeg* and *L'ultima nave* discussed in this chapter, but also the

two documentaries *La nave dolce* by Daniele Vicari and *Anja: la nave* by Roland Sejko, as well as Gianni Amelio's film *Lamerica*. Kubati's description of Elton's marine crossing places him (and his reader) in the middle of the sea, at the very time and in the very space in which Elton's migration occurs.

However, despite this sudden presence of the marine border on the page, the passage is phrased in a language that is still strongly marked by a variety of absences. Absence of direction, absence of food, absence of understanding, absence of awareness, and absence of visibility are all elements shaping Elton's migration, so that his Mediterranean Crossing can be framed as an *in absentia* event.

As we have seen, works in Albanian-Italian narrative articulates numerous stories of Albanian migrations to Italy that are informed by the Mediterranean crossing. These narratives shed light on the human-scale impact of military, political, and economic forces at play in the area, for which the sea is transformed into a space of exclusion and death, into a solid sea. The differing approaches to centrally or only tangentially articulating images of the marine border is a choice that depends upon the sensibility of each author, and can be considered a double aesthetic strategy for a sole purpose: to highlight the individuality of the migrant experience as a counterpoint to the popular imagery of indistinguishable migrant crowds perpetrated by the news. These texts serve as a reminder that geographical crossings are also emotional crossings, and that the obstructions that international forces place upon human mobility, while always emotionally difficult, can also, suddenly and easily, turn deadly. The physical, emotional, and psychological toll that the solidified Mediterranean crossing asks for can sometimes be narratively articulated, while some other times its expression is kept veiled under a

language of absence, erasure, and suspension.

Borders of life

Kubati's *Va e non torna* serves as a useful avenue to articulate another dimension of the reality of the border. Elton's story of migration suggests that while many migrants don't succeed in their migratory project across the Mediterranean, some others instead do make it across the border, slipping through the tight net of police patrolling and finding their way to the other coast. This different and fortuitous fate for some migrants reframes, without invalidating it, the theory of a solid Mediterranean Sea. In certain literary instances the border is instead a liquid space, one that Sandro Mezzadra in *Diritto di fuga* defines as porous, open to the possibility of being crossed.

According to Mezzadra borders are indeed intrinsically dialectic when it comes to migration, insofar as they can be crossed despite their closure. Migrants are the exemplar figures of this dialectic "nella misura in cui da una parte mostrano materialmente la possibilità di oltrepassarli, mentre dall'altra i loro corpi esibiscono le ferite e le lacerazioni inflitte dalla quotidiana riaffermazione, in guise molteplici, del dominio dei confini stessi" (24). While the next chapter will analyze in depth the relevance and centrality of the body in a migrant context – its social and political value as well as the physical wounds that Mezzadra draws attention to – it is relevant here to give proper attention to Mezzadra's theory of porous and dialectic borders because several Albanian-Italian narratives inhabit and articulate that view. Aptly, while some narrative instances frame borders as a space of death, some other instances instead represent borders as a space of life where physical and psychological survival and refuge are provided. In this

light, borders become the concrete passage towards life when escaping from dictatorships, wars, and genocides.

Rivoluzionari o immigrati, emigranti o ribelli perché giovani, oltre un regime, oltre il muro, oltre il mare, oltre il giorno, che rinchiudono, fissano, realizzano una realtà che vogliono cambiare o abbandonare, irresistibilmente attratti dal futuro dall'altra parte del muro, dall'altra parte del mare, di notte alla ricerca di un altrimenti che può essere altrove (Kubati 189).

This passage from *Va e non torna* fully expresses how at the basis of Elton's migration lies a burning desire for an imagined future of freedom, an "altrimenti" – something different from the dictatorship under which he and his friends have been living – that is located "oltre" and "altrove," beyond walls and seas, somewhere else. Guided by this attraction for the "altrimenti" and "altrove," the border becomes that space of transition, a gate towards ideals.

While Elton's border crossing is driven by desire, rebellion, and an inner sense of social and personal revolution, other instances in Albanian-Italian literature frame border crossing as driven by fear, threat, and persecution. This is the case for Spend Sollaku Noè's *Il confine della nebbia*, in which the journalist and founder of the opposition democratic party Ludovik Oresti is forced to leave Albania under death threats.

“Potevo partire da solo, Frida, ma per quanto tempo starei lontano? Cosa accadrebbe a voi durante la mia assenza? Su di voi si potrebbe versare tutta la loro vendetta. Potremmo anche partire tutti e tre. In questo caso saremmo tutti al riparo [...] Spetta a te decidere del tuo futuro: aspettarmi qui finché ritorno, rischiando però l'incolumità tua e di nostro figlio, o venire con me in Italia.” (204)

This speech of Ludovik to his wife Frida draws a sharp separation between the consequences of staying or leaving, which equals to the difference between being in danger and being safe. The whole family will therefore opt for safety and, thanks to the help of a friend at the Italian Embassy who provides them with visas, they will board a vessel to Trieste, Italy. “[S]iamo nelle acque internazionali e diminuiscono le possibilità che qualcuno possa farci scendere dal traghetto!” (225), thinks Frida once on the vessel, releasing the tension and fear the whole family has lived with for days, and realizing how “le forze dell’ordine albanesi oramai diventavano innocue” (225). Similarly to Kubati’s representation of the marine crossing – one that is at the same time the solid space of laws and the liquid host of dreams of freedom away from a life of oppression – Noè’s pages inhabit the complexity of the border, making it be both the undefined “confine della nebbia,” – uncertain and opaque space as the title reminds us – as well as the secure space of movement towards life.

A greater need for protection is brought to the page in Elvira Dones’s novel *Piccola guerra perfetta*, which narrates the 1999 NATO intervention in the Kosovo war. For the Albanians of Kosovo, caught between the ethnic fury of Serbian military aggression and NATO’s nominally intelligent bombs, borders – the terrestrial ones in this case – are the few viable, and still tragically difficult, options for survival.

[S]e escono di notte forse possono trovare una via di fuga mentre i paramilitari sono intenti a svaligiare case e portar via gente [...] Forse Art Berisha è in mezzo alla folla, forse sta tentando la fuga verso la Macedonia o il Montenegro [...] Antonio Russo, rimasto a Pristina e creduto morto, è sbucato vivo su un treno di profughi in fuga verso il confine macedone. (Dones 35-39-53)

As the passage suggests, Dones's pages render a picture of frenzied people leaving the city of Pristina at the opening of humanitarian corridors, "quasi un milione di kosovari [...] in viaggio" (113), people using all the means of transportation available, from cars to trains to trains to even traveling on foot. As the passage underlines through the continuous repetition of the word *fuga* – escape – borders and refuge camps represent the few chances to survive the ethnic massacre. Only a few of Dones's characters can make it to the border, while many others perish under the ethnic hate of Serbian militants and the mistakes of the NATO bombing campaign. Dones's pen insists on the brutality of the mass execution that Kosovars undergo in the cities as well as in their routes toward the borders of salvation.

The crudity of her descriptions, overloaded with blood and acts of violence, contribute, per opposition, to frame borders and refuge camps as the only possibility of some respite and some humanity. In the Albanian camp of Kukës the Swiss journalist Yves can help a young Kosovar boy to call his father in Germany and reassure him that he is now safe. In the Italian camp of Chiasso the Kosovar Arlind volunteers to help as a translator for his refugee people, while coping with the lack of information about his family back in Kosovo. In the Macedonian camp of Stankovec the Kosovar journalist Art can keep writing for his national newspaper *Koha Ditore*, in this way nurturing his desire to keep living and loving, and feeding his determination to record history, a part of history that "nessun kosovaro dimenticherà mai" (135). These brief moments of life and human support, in opposition to the brutality that inhabits the majority of the pages, frame the space of the camp as a shift from the risk of death to the possibility of life for

thousands of people on the run.

Durante il giorno Art e Lindita vanno a battere palmo a palmo i diversi campi profughi; spesso la notte li sorprende che ancora raccolgono materiale, troppo tardi per l'edizione del giorno dopo, ma mica puoi tagliare la parola in bocca a gente che ormai non possiede più nulla se non storie da raccontare. (135)

As this passage reveals, besides protection, the refugee camp can also become a space of narrative, of recollection of individual stories, as well as collective and historical trauma. Narrative, like humanitarian protection, is what keeps the refugees psychologically alive and that gives some measure of meaning to their existence after they have been stripped of everything. This interpreting lens recalls Dones's consideration of narrative as a personal and historical act of therapy, as we have discussed in in the first chapter.

Camps: New Borders of Europe

Elvira Dones's attention to the protective and humanitarian function of refugee camps stands in contrast to a more recurrent representation of camps as places of arbitrary detention and violation of human rights. CIE, CDA, and CARA¹¹ camps have been flourishing since 1998, in Italy as well as in other European and non-European countries, as a form of management of migration to Europe. While these camps differ in denomination and purpose they fundamentally constitute a similar administrative response to migration, one that uses concentration, isolation, and detention as necessary aspects of migration management.

These camps are part of the Italian as well as the European border system, given

¹¹ CIE (Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione), CDA (Centri Di Accoglienza), CARA (Centri Accoglienza Richiedenti Asilo).

the direct link between the patrolling of the borders – especially the marine one – and the transfer of undocumented migrants caught in crossing them to one of the centers. For the majority of migrants detention ultimately transforms into their deportation back to the country of origin, while a tiny percentage of them are recognized as refugees. Rutvica Andrijasevic in her essay “From Exception to Excess: Detention Across the Mediterranean Space,” underlines how the construction of camps in non-European countries is funded by European countries, Italy among them, and they are under the European jurisdiction. Therefore camps are crucial spaces for the general redefinition of the external European border. The latter is indeed displaced and delocalized beyond its geopolitical map.

Andrijasevic studies the case of Libya. In this former North African colony, Italy has been funding, with European support, the construction of detention camps tasked with stopping migrants from entering Europe and designed to externalize the process of identification and deportation. Since Libya is a country that has no asylum system, migrants detained in its camps are easily deported to their areas of origins, which are often war zones. These camps are therefore places of open violation of human rights, a violation for which Europe is directly responsible and that turns the utmost European borders into inhuman frontiers.

Detention camps in Italy are based on the same principle of preventive detention, and when it comes to CIE, they produce acts of deportation, which directly violate the 1951 Geneva Convention that established the principle of *non-refoulement*,¹² a principle

¹² *Non-refoulement* is a principle of international law that protects refugees from being returned or expelled to places where their lives or freedoms could be threatened.

that Italy ratified and is called to honor.¹³ Life in the camps has been difficult to document since journalists were not allowed to access them up to 2011. Sociologist Federica Sossi could interview a group of women from a room located at the very margin of the camp to which agents accompanied migrants one by one. Their stories were collected in Sossi's volume *Autobiografie negate: immigrati nei lager del presente* (2002). The intent of the work is to unveil the inhumane deprivations that her group of women was forced to live with for an unspecified number of months.

Sossi's intent of denunciation is corroborated, in cinematic form, by Gabriele del Grande e Alessandra D'Onofrio's *La vita che non CIE* (2009-2011). This trilogy of short films follows the life of a few undocumented migrants to record the extent to which the border system, and the detention camps that it authorizes, has disrupted their projects and their lives. Similarly to the women interviewed by Sossi, Del Grande and D'Onofrio's subjects talk about the injustice of being there, and of how the social, economic, and political struggles that brought them to migrate are considered criminal by European policy.

Furthermore, all the voices contained in the two works narrate of an alteration of time and space. Migrants are not allowed to leave the camps and they are usually detained for longer than the three months allowed by the law. Their total lack of control over any part of the situation produces a narrative of endless and wasted days, each one like the others, one after the other. The space of the camp is described as a collective jail – an image supported by the high fences surrounding the camps – where private space is consistently lacking due to the fact that the detainees always exceed the maximum

¹³ Italy counts 26 detention centers including CIE, CDA, and CARA, many of which are located in the South of the country.

capacity of the camp.

Because of the distorted perception of space and time that they produce, detention camps are reminiscent of the non-places that Marc Augè articulates in his work *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995). According to Augè, supermodernity (or postmodernity), so strictly interlaced with globalization, is characterized by an excess of time and space, respectively connected with the overabundance of events in contemporary world and the shrinking of the planet. These dilatations and contractions of time and space are the result of the increased mobility and circulation of information, images, goods, and people. “[H]igh speed roads and railways, interchanges, [and] airports” (34) are aptly among the many non-places that Augè maps.

Camps enter Augè’s analysis only in their acceptance of “transit camps where the planet’s refugees are parked” (34). The narrowness of his selection is forced by the timing of Augè’s publication, 1995, when detention camps of this sort were not a reality yet. It is however pertinent to extend his analysis to this new function of camps in the Mediterranean area, in order to underline the formation of more recent non-places which are paradoxically founded on the immobilization of that very global mobility that the French anthropologist studied. Camps are the point of articulation for a paradox of globalization, insofar as detention of migrants greatly affects the very mobility that powers the global economy.

Detention camps and Augèian non-spaces are otherwise similar in the founding question of identity. Non-places, as Augè states, are the opposite of anthropological spaces; they lack history and relations, therefore they cannot be concerned with identity formation. Identity is suspended, impossible, in a non-space. Not by chance, the titles of

Sossi's and Del Grande-D'Onofrio's texts, *Autobiografie negate* and *La vita che non CIE*, insist so openly on the negation of autobiography and life. Sossi and Del Grande-D'Onofrio's works, based as they are on the telling of certain lives caught in the mechanism of camp/border detention, are therefore an explicit attempt to reestablish the identity of the detainees through the recollection of their own stories. In both texts, as well as in the Dones's *Piccola guerra perfetta* with the interviews of the journalist Art, camps are transformed into narrative spaces where the anonymous crowd of migrants is revealed to be a collection of narrating selves in the act of voicing their stories as individuals. These texts portray migrants as humans in an inhuman place established by the de-humanizing European border system.

When it comes to Albanian migration and its elaboration in Albanian-Italian literature, we can observe the embryonic stage of the camp system, which in the 1991-1997 period – the temporal frame of the major Albanian migration to Italy – was not in place yet. The embryonic stage of the camp system is the improvised retentive use of the Vittoria Stadium in Bari in 1991, where the boat people who arrived on the Vlora vessel were detained for days and eventually repatriated. This rudimentary camp already contains all the parts of detention, isolation, and deportation that a few years later would inform the rise of the camp system as a way to secure national and European borders.

From the articulation of Albanian Communist camps, through the refuge camps, to the detention camps of fortress Europe, Albanian-Italian literature sheds light on a variety of experiences of confinement and displacement as a result of attempts at migration management across the borders. The experience of the border in this set of works appears in all its complexity and simultaneously entails social, economic, and

political forces, both national and international, at play in the Mediterranean area. The literary instances studied in this chapter trace the articulations of the borders in Albanian-Italian literature, a set of works that reveals the complexity and the stratification of forces investing the frontiers – both in the making of a nation and in the unfolding of international relationships – as well as the full range of feelings that inform choices and movements of individuals across them.

Footnote for a Southern Thought

Focusing as it does on the Mediterranean area and the representation of the border, it seems appropriate to ask if Albanian-Italian literature can be read as a viable contribution to Franco Cassano's theorization of a southern thought. In his work, *Il pensiero meridiano*, Cassano argues for giving the Mediterranean – and therefore the South – the role of subject rather than object of contemporary theorization. In this shift in perspective the South is not thought by a modern North in terms of a not-yet North, and it starts instead to think of itself as a different way of being modern.

A similar shift of theoretical gaze starts by placing the Mediterranean at the center of the theoretical and representational discourse, a placement that has nothing to do with the nostalgia for the ancient imperial powers, but that rather considers the Mediterranean in its crucial role “di confine, di interfaccia, di mediazione tra i popoli” (xxiii).

Sul Mediterraneo non si va a cercare la pienezza di un'origine, ma a sperimentare la propria contingenza. Esso illustra il limite dell'Europa e dell'Occidente. E` sul Mediterraneo che il mondo del nord-ovest incontra il sud-est [...] Da questo ospitare civiltà diverse discende una dimensione cruciale del Mediterraneo: esso movimentata e mette in contatto i popoli intrecciandone non solo le lingue e le fedi, ma anche le concezioni del

tempo e dei ritmi di vita. (xxvii)

In this image of the Mediterranean as a space of encounters and multiplicity, coexistence and reciprocal understanding, Albanian-Italian literature seems to play the crucial role of gathering some southeastern voices and bringing them across the marine border to the attention of the northwestern civilization. Acting as a vessel of a perspective that is migrant and diverse, marginal and therefore central to the functioning of contemporaneity, Albanian-Italian literature has the potential to knit new stories and themes that are foundational and complementary to the understanding of what the contemporary Mediterranean space is.

Chapter Three

Language(s)

Graziella Parati, in her work *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking back in a Destination Culture* (2005), one of the first substantial analyses of Italian migration literature, investigates the multiple ways in which migrant literature, through the use of the Italian language, operates on a linguistic, social, and political level both within and in response to the dominant culture. Parati defines the growing set of works written by migrants in Italian as Italoophone literature and investigates to what extent it can be considered a minor literature. As discussed in Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975), the first mark of minor literature is that of being written in a major language from a position of marginalization and "that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (16), that is to say use of the national language beyond and outside the limits of the nation-state borders. The other two aspects characterizing minor literature, meanwhile, concern the political and collective values of the narrating voices.

In resonance with Deleuze and Guattari's articulation of minor literature and Parati's approach to Italoophone literature, this chapter studies the use of Italian language in Albanian-Italian narratives – the major group among the migrant communities writing in Italian – and the implications of its use at a personal, social, and political level. Observation of the strictly linguistic transformations, innovations, loans, twists, and

hybridizations added to the Italian standard language reveals the extent to which this set of works produces a disruption of the Italian language out of its own codified structure, as well as a disorientation for native Italian readers with no knowledge of the other language(s) involved in the creative process. Jennifer Burns, in *Migrant Imaginaries*, defines this operation as a de-centering of the Italian language, one that mostly occurs through “[i]tems of lexis from the author’s or narrator’s first language” (189). According to Burns these interferences force the text and the reader into a process, and to a position, of “estrangement” (189) vis-à-vis the text, and raise questions about the ownership of the Italian language as well as the multiple linguistic ownership of migrant voices. The linguistic interferences in Albanian-Italian narratives join the rest of the Italoophone literature in encouraging a reflection on the porosity of linguistic structures, ownership, and readership in the increasing ethnic and linguistic complexity of Italian society, while making Italian the expressive site and the vehicle of a progressive internationalization of both the verbal code and its readers.

When the choice of the Italian language by Albanian writers is alternatively analyzed from a perspective that exits the specificity of the texts, i.e., through personal, artistic, social, and political lenses, it is shown how Italian language works in many directions, either as a tool for artistic and socio-political belonging or distancing. Italian, to many authors, is an artistic tool that responds well to their emotional and psychological worlds. In addition to this, and as aptly discussed by Graziella Parati, Italoophone literature is an act of talking back, a response to mainstream Italian society and its strategies of representation that have created partial and distorted images of the Albanian community in Italy. Complementing this valuable argument, the adoption of Italian by

Albanian migrants brings in another set of issues, which span from the problematic relationships of the authors with the sociopolitical forces in past and contemporary Albania, to post- and neo-colonial negotiations, both political and cultural, between Italy and Albania. The Italian language, therefore, is the expressive tool that implies, enables, and channels a multilayered picture of personal, social, and political interactions between migrant subjects and societies vis-à-vis both origin and destination countries.

The discussion of these topics, which is conducted across several examples in Albanian-Italian narratives, is complemented by the final analysis of Gëzim Hajdari's translingualism as articulated through his first translingual collection of poems, *Corpo presente/Trup i pranishëm* (1999). Hajdari's poetic process is a unique and complex case of continuous movement between Albanian and Italian, a simultaneous, double language creation and a repeated act of self-translation, and one which becomes the only possible way for his poetic voice to be uttered. The poet's translingualism serves as the only viable dwelling for his exilic poetry and becomes a form of homeland for the exiled poet himself.

Inside the text

Daniele Comberiati, in his book *Scrivere nella lingua dell'altro* (2010), states that the first period of migrant literature in Italian, at the beginning of the 1990s, showed a strong link to the spoken language and oral expression, insofar as it was marked by cooperation between migrants and Italian native speakers. In that initial phase the authors, who orally recounted their stories, guided the symbolic sense of the work, while the co-authors, transcribing the stories, took care of the narrative framework. Works such as Pap

Khouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti* (1990), Mohamed Bouchane's *Chiamatemi Ali* (1990), Saidou Moussa Ba's *La promessa di Hamadi* (1991), Nasser Chora's *Volevo diventare bianca* (1993), and Fernanda Faria di Albuquerque's *Princesa* (1994) retained much of their oral sources while linguistically depending on the fluency of their Italian transcribers. As similarly stated by Armando Gnisci in his first studies of these new works, *Il rovescio del gioco* (1992) and *La letteratura italiana della migrazione* (1998), this first migrant literature, while not renewing any linguistic structures of Italian, did however permeate the language with foreign nouns, syntactical alteration, and morphological distortions; all operations that made Gnisci speak of neo-realistic narrative with an exotic taste.

This initial discourse on Italian migration literature can be only partially applied to Albanian-Italian writers, since double authorship among them is limited to a single case of Ervin and Ron Kubati's text *Venti di libertà e gemiti di dolore*. This is a socio-historical account of Albania under communism and the social upheaval in 1991 that led to its fall. The account of that historical moment, to which the Kubatis were direct contributors as activists in the student movement that precipitated the revolt, was narrated soon after their arrival to Italy in 1991 by a native Italian. It was collected and published by editor Renato Brucoli through his publishing house, *Ed Insieme*, in the city of Bari.

The singleness of this collaboration between migrant narrators and native speaker writer can be contextualized through the fact that Albanian writers, like many other Albanian people, were exposed to the most standard form of Italian language long before their migration to Italy via the reception of Italian TV and radio transmissions across the narrow stretch of the Adriatic Sea that separates the two countries. These tools, despite

being forbidden by the censors of the communist regime, provided many Albanians with a familiarity with the Italian language that helps explain their rapidity in adopting it for their literary works after migration, as well as the absence of numerous cases of migrant-native paired authorship. Albanian-Italian authors could access the host language with a degree of confidence and expressiveness that allowed them to narrate their stories without the support of a native speaker.

Even though Albanian-Italian texts only tangentially fit in Comberiati's and Gnisci's first observations on Italophone migration literature, they do present numerous linguistic disturbances and interferences. These authors infuse Italian with a set of foreign words, concepts, and cultural instances. While most of the times these elements derive directly from the Albanian language and culture, both contemporary and ancient, at other times they consist of jargon from the Anglophone pop culture, as well as expressions from Italian dialects, European languages, and languages from the Balkans. These multi-lingual interferences, in mixing with the standard language, turn the Italian of Albanian-Italian texts into the narrative mirror of the internationalization of its speakers, both real ones as well as fictional, who live at the crossroad of countries, codes, and cultures.

– *Hello*, – parlo in inglese perché dovrò scegliere i byrek e quindi sapere qual è quello agli spinaci, quale alla carne e quale al formaggio. Sono capitata male, il giovanotto non parla inglese.

– Parli francese?

– *No french, no*, – risponde.

Ho un'ultima arma:

– Italiano?

– No, no, – fa un segno di negazione scuotendo le mani. Sto zitta un attimo. Poi, senza speranza, gliela butto lì in albanese: io Albanese, vicina di casa io, e mi indico col dito.

– Albanese sei?! – salta entusiasta parlando albanese con un accento kosovaro.

Così ci siamo capiti per il byrek. (79)

This passage from Ornella Vorpsi's novel *La mano che non morde* (2007) shows an interaction taking place in Sarajevo between the multilingual Albanian Mrs. Topnani, who used to live in Milan but now lives in Paris, and a monolingual Albanian man, who works in Sarajevo. The brief dialogue is indicative of the mixing of places and codes that Vorpsi uses as background to her text, and while this specific passage only offers a few foreign words in English, other languages such as French, Serbian, and Albanian infiltrate the Italian narrative of the novel. Hinting at the linguistic complexity in which Vorpsi's autobiographical character lives due to her migrations, the passage becomes representative of the linguistic and cultural intersection from which many migrant writers narrate. As a consequence of that, the expressive complexity they inhabit and by which they are inhabited shows through their use of the Italian language, which is hybridized with elements from other linguistic codes.

While, as in Vorpsi's writing, many linguistic traces in Albanian-Italian texts are ascribable to contemporary migration, some other instances reveal instead linguistic sediments deriving from a long history of dominations, displacements, and hybridizations. This is the case for Artur Spanjolli's *L'accusa silenziosa* (2007), which reveals the linguistic-cultural legacy of the centuries-long Ottoman presence in Albania. Besides names of local food such as "*Halva, Bakllava, Kadaif, Kabuni*" (71), the text incorporates words such as *muezzin, Bairam, Iftar, Syfyr, chador, kaba, Harram*, terminology that makes clear the Islamic imprint left in Albania from the long period of Ottoman domination. "Si infiltrò l'Islam della mezza luna. Le città del mezzogiorno si riempirono di moschee e di madrase [...] Quattrocento anni di occupazione turca, di notte

ottomana, non sono cosa da poco” (42), comments the narrating voice to underline the length of the Ottoman occupation and the depth of its penetration into the local customs. Spanjolli’s linguistic interferences, therefore, function as a transfer of sounds and cultural contents among a multiplicity of linguistic dimensions, from the Ottoman to the Albanian and eventually to the Italian language.

Among traces of historical hybridizations, multilingualism finds its place and characterizes Carmine Abate’s novels, a body of works that revolves around the intersections of many cultural experiences and their linguistic legacy in the south of Italy. Born in the Arbëreshe community of Carfizi in the southern region of Calabria, and subsequently having migrated to Germany and Trentino, Abate, in his life as well as in his narrative, mixes Arbëreshe, southern Italian dialect, German, and Germanese – the pidgin form of Calabrese, Italian, and German spoken by southern *gastarbeiters* to Germany.

La processione ogni tanto si frantuma, a gruppetti ci si ferma nelle rare lingue d’ombra e si parla fitto fitto nella gjuha e zëmëres, la nostra lingua del cuore. L’altra, gjuha e bukës, la lingua del pane – che per mio nonno è stata il mericano, per mio padre il germanese, per me soprattutto l’italiano – a volte rintocca come una campana lontana un po’ stonata. (121)

This passage from Abate’s novel *Vivere per addizione* (2010) highlights the complexity of an Italian linguistic and cultural reality, which combines both the indigenous multilingualism of Italian dialects and the linguistic legacy of emigration that impacted – and still impacts – multiple generations of Italians. Therefore, both the immigration of foreigners to and through Italy and the emigration of Italians abroad are

active forces responsible for a transformation of the linguistic competences of the speakers of Italian. This transformation emerges in the Italian of their narratives through words and cultural tropes that signify a process of internationalization of the Italian linguistic experience, as well as a deterritorialization of its use across the country's borders.

Language Between Mimicry, Obscurity, and Explanatory Translation

Observing the way in which non-Italian linguistic elements are used in Albanian-Italian narrative, it emerges that several instances aim to give a realistic effect to the page, reproducing real-life dialogues, which blend the languages. For example, in Ron Kubati's novel, *Va e non torna* (2004), the Italian character Fabio interacts with the Albanian friend Elton greeting him with the Albanian *Mirupafshim*. While Fabio wants proudly to show his linguistic knowledge, he actually shows his limited effort to master his friend's language since, as Elton points out, that phrase is "la sola parola che conosce in albanese" (65). Later in the novel, Elton is asked to translate a dialogue between Albanian criminals, since the police cannot understand the sentence *mut i mutit* (56). Elton will explain that that phrase is an insult, and it doesn't therefore add any crucial information to their investigation. Similar linguistic knots in Kubati's text want to mimetically reproduce dialogues between people in the struggle of a partial communication.

Similarly Artur Spanjolli's novel *I nipoti di Scanderbeg* (2012) portrays a situation of linguistic confusion between Albanian migrants and police that revolves around the similarity of sound of a command in Italian and a command in Albanian with directly contradictory meanings.

All'improvviso, un ragazzo albanese alto due metri si girò dalla folla inferocita che agiva contrariamente all'ordine "Giù" e gridò in Albanese: "Giù, in Albanese significa ulu. Ulu.Ulu!"
 [...] "Lui è da dieci minuti che grida 'çou'!"
 "Non çou cretino, ma ulu! Giù suona come çou, come 'alzati', in albanese ma vuol dire ulu. Ulu!"
 Appena i poliziotti seppero il corrispondente in albanese si misero a urlare: "Ulu, ulu, ulu". Finalmente la folla si mise a sedere e si stabilì la calma nelle prime file. (17)

The similarity in sound of the Italian word *giù* and the Albanian word *çou*, which mean "sit down" and "stand up," respectively, is here responsible for a tense and chaotic interaction between the police and the migrants, one that can only be solved through the intervention of a translator. Similarly to Kubati's scene previously discussed, it is the translating subjects, thanks to their linguistic in-betweenness, that have the crucial task of untying the knots of miscommunication, and consequently act as the active elements in the pacification of tense situations.

Another occasion in which Spanjolli addresses the centrality of the act of translating is to be found in his text *La sposa rapita* (2011), where a humorous failure of communication is due to the inability of the translator Ramadan to understand what the visiting French ethnologist Alain is saying.

Quando gli offrirono una sigaretta rollata, lo straniero la rifiutò:
 "Merci beaucoup! Mais c'est trop fort pour moi!"
 Tutti i presenti si girarono verso il medico che da anni si batteva il petto con il pugno dicendo che era capace di tradurre dalle tre lingue più grandi d'Europa. Ma Ramadan non aveva capito un fico secco, e per salvare l'apparenza fece una faccia da fare pietà, si raschiò la voce, tossì leggermente e disse:

“Ehm...dice cha ha mangiato troppo *meze* ieri sera”.
Selim si sentì umiliato dal rifiuto della sigaretta. (46)

The humorous scene has none of the gravity of the encounter between police and undocumented migrants described in *I nipoti di Scanderbeg*. It does, however, similarly express the central role of the translator as the primary arbiter of communication: Ramadan’s inability to pass the information onto his people fails to soften the humiliation that the host, Selim feels for the rejection of his sign of hospitality in the form of a cigarette. A well-known statement by translator Gregory Rabassa relates to this: in his memoir *If this be Treason: Translation and its Dyscontents* (2005) the author states how “every act of communication is an act of translation,” underlining the extent to which the two elements are coterminous.

Spanjolli’s text extends this lack of translation to an extra-diegetic level, choosing not to provide any clarification neither for his characters nor for his readers. The French ethnologist keeps asking and commenting in his un-comprehended French language, and similarly some old women sing an Albanian traditional bridal song, which is also not translated for the readers. The verses “*O nusja re moj nusja re o te shkojne lotet rreke rreke*” return here and there during the wedding celebration in all their deliberate linguistic obscurity.

The missing translation of these passages necessarily raises a question about the projected community of readers that this literature reaches out to, or simply implies. While on one hand the linguistic inaccessibility has the power to put the monolingual audience at the same level of the confused characters of the text, and leave them in the

same communicative gap, it also projects a potential communication with a multilingual audience that is more comfortable with these sudden linguistic shifts. Jennifer Burns in *Migrant Imaginaries* (2013) points out that the “Italian-native-speaking reader is placed in a position of temporary estrangement which underscores linguistically the thematic and figurative estrangement” (189) of which these texts are vehicles.

The reader’s estrangement has a provisional nature, though, as these cases of missing translation and explanation of the foreign passages is counterbalanced by numerous other cases of linguistic and cultural translation. The majority of Albanian-Italian works prove to be very aware of the linguistic and cultural differences they carry vis-à-vis the Italian audience. They therefore show a consistent effort to fill the gaps of understanding for their readers. Thanks to the consistent literary translation or explanatory periphrasis of new words, concepts, and cultural practices, these texts make sure that readers are guided through the cultural encounter and that they are given informed access to the cultural dimension of the narrated stories.

“ ‘Pep’ era il titolo di rispetto per tutti gli uomini di una certa età mentre gli altri venivano rispettati mettendo davanti al nome il titolo ‘agà’, bastava che fossero capi di famiglia [...] Il rispetto per le donne si poteva esprimere chiamando ‘giò’ le più anziane e ‘gìco’ le altre sposate e più giovani” (21), the narrating voice explains in Shpend Sollaku Noè’s *Il confine della nebbia* (2012), while also informing the reader that *byzylyk* is the Turkish-Arabic name for handcuffs (134), and that *salèp e bòzë* is “una bevanda a base di miglio” (166). Similarly Mrs. Toptani in Ornela Vorpsi’s novel *La mano che non morde* (2007) describes her interaction with a Serbian neighbor in these terms; “– Lepa Ženo! – esclamava appena mi affacciavo alla porta. «Lepa Ženo» vuol dire bella donna in serbo”

(24). These are just a few of the many cases in which the foreign term is explained with a translation or a periphrasis, which is knitted into the body of the narrative as part of the diegesis. This narrative solution aims to draw the readers beyond the graphic and auditory novelty of the words used, and give them access to the meaning hidden behind the foreign form.

Sometimes the explanation of a word or a concept is removed from the diegesis and is placed in a footnote or in a glossary. This is the case in Natasha Shehu's *L'ultima nave* (2001) where the word *malok*, among many others, is explained in a footnote as a "modo di indicare la gente del Nord da parte della popolazione del Sud. L'espressione ha un senso vagamente discriminante, quando non dispregiativo, poiché indica la gente incolta e rozza, a differenza di *malësor* che indica semplicemente l'uomo del Nord o anche il montanaro" (9). Shehu's note goes beyond the mere rendition of the meaning of the term she uses, and ventures into the explanation of its regional use and social connotations, guiding readers through the unfamiliar social dynamics of the Albanian people.

Explanations of this kind act on a multiplicity of levels. To a certain extent they adversely interfere with the flow of narrative, giving it an anthropological tone, and similarly they risk making the text redundant and overly self-explanatory. At the same time, though, they reveal a strong communicative intention, the desire to reach out to the readers and establish with them a transparent relationship as a way to mutual cultural sharing. This sort of operation therefore cannot be considered just a linguistic transformation from Albanian to Italian, but rather an act of cultural translation.

Cultural Translations

The debate on cultural translation, which is split between the fields of anthropology and cultural/post-colonial studies, offers relevant insights through which Albanian-Italian literature can be analyzed. On the anthropological side, Talal Asad in his essay “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology” has been pivotal in recognizing the convergence of roles between ethnographer and translator. Referring to the work of Godfrey Lienhardt, he underlines how the ethnographer’s task is that of “making the coherence [that] thought has in the language it really lives in, as clearer as possible in our own” (142). This definition moves the focus from the meaning of a foreign thought or a foreign practice to the nature of its functioning and coherence of its contextualization.

Vis-à-vis this scenario, which enduringly links language and culture, Albanian-Italian narratives present a critical inversion of that dynamic. While in Asad’s view it is the anthropologist – the representative of the dominant culture – who is importing the foreign concept into their own language, in Albanian-Italian narratives it is the native Albanian subject that uses the adoptive language to explain their culture of origin. Therefore, their operation cannot be considered a cultural appropriation but rather a voluntary offer of bits of culture extended to the host audience through the appropriation, or ownership as Burns defines it, of the foreign language. Despite this crucial distinction, what brings together Albanian-Italian texts and the anthropological definition of cultural translation is the common action of cultural clarification through the use of the language of the receiving community.

Diversely, cultural and post-colonial studies describe cultural translation as

multiple negotiations in which displaced people need to engage. In particular Homi Bhabha, in his text *The Location of Culture* (1994), links translation to the “massive historical displacement [of] postcolonial migration” (320), so that translation goes beyond the linguistic transaction between codes, and becomes the very process and condition of human migrancy. According to Bhabha, the “liminality of migrant experience” (321) is per se a translational phenomenon, one in which the migrant, who lives in the in-betweenness of different cultural spaces and talks from a position of minority, is the very actor of translation.

Albanian-Italian narrators are located at the intersection of these two lines of interpretation of cultural translation; even as they enrich the Italian language and culture with sounds and concepts that are imported and translated from other languages and cultures, they also are those migrant subjects operating in the linguistically and culturally mixed space of their displacement. While, as seen, Shehu translates the concepts of *molok* and *malësor*, similarly Shpend Sollaku Noè in *Il confine della nebbia* (2012) culturally translates concepts such as *Sigurim* and *Fuks*, “come si chiamavano in gergo i Servizi Segreti dello Stato [...] artefici delle innumerevoli condanne ai dissidenti e alla gente comune che osava esprimere il malcontento” (101). Sollaku Noè clarifies for his readers the social role of the figures he describes, in a text that is a translation of the author’s past into the hybrid and displaced present of exile in Italy.

While the description of these terms and central figures of the espionage system established by the communist regime is limited to a few sentences, the rendition of other cultural elements become more extended and complex throughout the novel. An example of that is of the “translation” of the geography of the city of Berat, which is narrated as

follows:

[Berat è] una città stravagante, formata da quartieri arrampicati su colline ripide. Le sue singolari case si appoggiano una sulle spalle dell'altra [...] Vista dalla valle del fiume Osùni, le case, specie quelle del quartiere Mangalèm, sembrano un'unica gigantesca abitazione, con dei piani separati con tetti in coppi. Per questa parvenza particolare dall'antichità, Berat è stata denominata dai suoi visitatori "la città dalle mille e una finestra". Vedendoli, invece, dall'alto della Tebe – baluardo principe del castello che sovrasta Managalèm – i suoi quartieri sembrano un enorme foulard che serpeggia sulle spalle delle alture. (13)

This excerpt, while using a subjective and sentimental language to depict an urban space that is home both to the author and to his characters, shows the intent to give clear and objective coordinates for where to place the image of the city. This reaches its peak in the explanation of what the Tebe is: the most important tower of the castle. The Berat passage continues beyond the quotation reported here, and its long unfolding aims to render an image of the city that circulates within the history and the culture of Albania. Berat is "translated," in its shape, location, historical and literary relevance, for an audience that is not familiar with the city and that needs therefore to be led through that new urban space.

On this path, similarly, Elvira Dones's novel *Vergine giurata* (2007) can be considered a novel-long operation of cultural translation. The social figure of the "sworn virgin" ties back to the *Kanûn* honor code that rules life for many in the north of the country, and as Dones unpacks the concept and makes it clear through the entirety of the text, it refers to women who take the socio-political role of men in exchange for the promise of life-long virginity. The physical, psychological, and social implications of a

similar transformation are “translated” for the non-Albanian audience in the unfolding of Dones’s novel.

While Dones makes one of her works revolve around the powerful cultural figure of the sworn virgin, Gëzim Hajdari makes cultural elements and figures of Albanian literature and popular tradition serve as the pillars of his entire production. Hajdari knits his poetry collections around recurrent elements, such as the *Kanûn* honor code and its *Besa* oath, the predatory spirits known as *Xhin*, the demi-goddesses known as *Zàna*, the enumeration of the merits of the dead called *Gjam*, the native region *Darsia* and his mother *Nûr*, and the mythical literary characters *Duruntina* and *Costantino*. Hajdari’s entire poetic production is founded on these returning images, and his poetry becomes the arena in which they are culturally translated for a non-Albanian public.

The relevance of these figures escalates in Hajdari’s last collection, *Nûr: Eresia e Besa* (2012), where they are all gathered in a two-act-long work of epic reconstruction. In the first act, Gëzim, son of Nûr and valuable warrior from Darsia, is captured in Rome by Roman soldiers because he took Jesus’s place on the cross. While Gëzim intends the gesture as a symbol of peace and recognition between the two cultures and religions, he is instead accused of heresy and he is condemned to the stake. Nûr asks for the *Xhin*’s help, who, moved to compassion by the woman’s supplications, try to save him. The *Xhin* are at last defeated and Gëzim eventually dies in Campo dei Fiori, burned on the stake as a modern Albanian Giordano Bruno. In the second act, Gëzim’s story merges with the traditional epic of Costantino, a knight who rises from the dead to bring his sister, Duruntina, back home to his lonely mother who has lost all her children to war.

This complex work, which is written in both languages as the rest of Hajdari’s

collection is, mixes cultural, literary, and historical elements of both Albanian and Italian traditions. While the author's bilingual poetic process – a translingual continuous passage from one language to the other and vice versa – will be analyzed in a special section at the end of the chapter, it is here relevant to underline that the presence of the Albanian language, alternating as it does with Italian, constitutes a prominent visual and auditory alterity for the Italian readers. The graphemes and phonemes, which by themselves don't convey any meaning to the monolingual Italian readers, are linguistically made clear through the Italian version of the text. Traditional and literary elements and characters are instead made clear in an introductory glossary, where the concepts of Kanûn, Besa, and Darsia are explained, and where the mythical characters and figures are introduced. These initial explanations are part of the process of cultural translation at play in Hajdari's text, insofar as they are intended to create in the audience a detailed understanding of those Albanian cultural elements that will be pivotal to the unfolding of the text.

However, Hajdari's cultural translation is not limited to a transposition of Albanian elements into Italian. It also operates within the very body of the Albanian literary tradition, insofar as those traditional characters are "translated" into a different context and a different story, one that hybridizes the author's experience of migration with literary and historical elements from the host culture. As Bhabha states in *The Location of Culture* in reference to Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the act of re-inscribing a tradition and its sacredness in a new form is the heretical power of the text. As "Rushdie performs the subversion of [the Koran's] authenticity through the act of cultural translation" (323), similarly, in *Nûr: Eresia e Besa*, Gëzim performs the appropriation of the cross as an act of co-existence and hybridization between cultures. As Andrea

Gazzoni points out in his afterword to the collection, “[i]l poeta deve, in altre parole, rivisitare *eretivamente* le sue radici e strapparle alla loro chiusura atavica, per farne un luogo di condivisione” (133). In Hajdari’s work, as well as in Rushdie’s, it is the heretical use of languages and cultures that allows a fruitful cultural encounter and exchange, a translated survival of both the migrant self and the hybrid space that it inhabits.

The mixing and blending of the Italian language as well as the hybridization of the culture that Albanian-Italian texts offer makes of them a privileged space of auditory and cultural encounter. In this operation of linguistic and cultural translation lies the relevance of this body of works, which infuses the Italian language with new sounds, themes, and figures, for a newly discovered richness of expression. These texts are the mixed, multilingual voices of their authors and their characters, speaking from the center of their migrant reality, and revealing a journey of linguistic and cultural appropriation that ties together different spaces and different times, and that ultimately reflects and reinforces the internationalization of the language and its speakers.

Language Outside the Text

When analytic attention shifts from inside the texts to the extra-diegetic reasons and implications that inform Albanian authors’ choice of the Italian language for artistic purposes, a combination of socio-political, artistic, and psycho-emotional factors emerge. Albanian-Italian narrators are complex subjects who speak from a point of intersection of many trajectories. They are artistic subjects who have experienced a shift between two historical national moments – communism and democracy in Albania – and that now experience a constant negotiation of their existences between two cultures which have

historically interacted through military occupation, media reception, and past and present migrations. The Italian language is, therefore, the artistic and expressive tool that enables a reflection on and an articulation of this sociopolitical, artistic, and psycho-emotional complexity.

For many first-generation Albanian writers Italian was a familiar language long before their migration, partially due to the study of the language in the Albanian schooling system, but mostly due to the reception of Italian TV and Radio transmissions across the Otranto Channel. Italian was therefore the sound of a Western representation of the world that fascinated many Albanian migrants. The fascination with the West that was shaped by “listening” to the Italian language is the major theme in Leonard Guaci’s *I grandi occhi del mare* (2005). Italian music, TV, and literature forge the image of the Western civilization, in which “[l]e luci, i suoni, i colori, gli abiti, i movimenti” becomes progressively irresistible for the main character Aulona. To her, that world is “più fresco e chiaro del mondo in cui lei viveva” (26). Italian is the soundtrack to Aulona’s imagination, and that “lingua [...] facile e melodica” (67) is what shapes her desire to leave Albania and migrate to Italy.

In “Il ruolo della televisione nella comunità narrativa italiana-albanese,” a study of Guaci’s text, Nora Moll highlights that, while Italian language can provide an escape from reality for Aulona and her brothers, *I grandi occhi del mare* also assigns a revolutionary role to Italian television and to the language that comes with it. The image of Italy that is projected by the Italian media indeed has the power to undo the national communist discourse, and to serve as an active force in the subversion of the Albanian sociopolitical status quo in the 1990s. Aulona and her brothers, all musicians, aptly

organize a rock concert as a form of protest, one that triggers the social upheaval and eventually leads to the fall of communism. “Inglese e italiano si alternavano nei testi, il ritmo veniva scandito con rabbia, le note dei vari strumenti si compensavano come onde che si susseguono” (264), reads one of the final passages of the novel, remarking how Italian is one of the languages that serve as the backbone for the Albanian sociopolitical shift.

The counter-narrative to communism that is described in *I grandi occhi del mare* leads to a reflection on the post-communist value of Albanian-Italian literature, and the extent to which the foreign language becomes the enabling tool of articulation of the brutality of that national period. It is through the new language and the culture that it conveys that the narrating voices, after their migration, can go back temporally and creatively explore a historical era that was simultaneously painful at personal, sociopolitical, economic, and creative levels. While the physical and social lives of many individuals were directly or indirectly affected by the severe policing of the communist system, their artistic lives were also impacted by state censorship, which could decimate texts as well as incriminate their authors.

As an example of that, Hajdari’s first collection *Antologia e shiut* was published in 1990 after five years of repeated rejections, and it could appear only in a mutilated form as a result of state censorship. Hajdari’s sensibility for censorship motivates him to give voice to many instances of writers and works that had a similar or worst destiny. This is the case for both his *Poema dell’esilio* (2007), a text of denunciation, of accusation, and resistance against the communist past and democratic present of Albania, and for his *Gjëmë: Genocidi i poezisë shqipe* (2010), a choral story denouncing the

massacre of poets from 1920 to 1989 in Albania and more broadly in the Soviet Union, China, Poland, Romania, Kosovo and Serbia. These and similar sociopolitical reflections on the recent history of Albania convey a clear post-communist value to this set of works, and are made possible in the space of the new language, which therefore becomes the linguistic form of an ideological rejection of communism. Italian serves as the expressive vehicle of a post-communist narrative energy that aims to process the impact of recent Albanian history on people's physical and intellectual lives.

While the choice of Italian can be considered a favorable tool of elaboration of Albania's national history and ideology, the same linguistic choice invites an evaluation of how italoophone authors position themselves relative to the host culture and the international sociopolitical forces at which they choose to aim. In line with what Graziella Parati argues in her text *Migration Italy* (2005), Albanian-Italian narratives enter the discourse about Italoophone "minor literature." Parati refers to the Deleuzian definition of minor literature and highlights how the latter "appropriates a major language [...] and turns it into a new system of signification that describes complex lives grounded in cultural displacement" (13). Italoophone literature, therefore, speaks from a marginal position back to the Italian dominant culture, and in so doing it becomes an agent of change in response to the strategies employed to marginalize migrants and their practices. In this picture, the Italian language is the tool used by migrants to enter a dialogue with the host community, a dialogue that puts the margins and the center of Italian society in relation. Demanding to be heard, migrant narratives make a political use of the language they employ; through the use of Italian they carve a space of right – the right to a voice and the right to be subjects of cultural representation and self-representation.

Alessandro Dal Lago, in his work *Non-Persone* (1999), exactly discusses the extent to which Albanian migrants have been repeatedly objectified as invaders, prostitutes, and criminals in the Italian media discourse. A variety of Albanian-Italian works, such as Artur Spanjolli's *I nipoti di Scanderbeg*, Natasha Shehu's *L'ultima nave*, Elvira Dones's *Sole bruciato* among others, have responded to those perpetrated images, deconstructing them and re-narrating them from the point of view of the migrant and marginalized subject. The choice of the Italian language is therefore central to these counter-narratives across the border, insofar as they address the same audience as the negative messages do and engage in a conversation to reshape that audience's perceptions.

Old and New Colonialisms?

While challenging the representation of Albanian migration as it is perpetrated in Italian discourses, the choice of Italian by Albanian migrants also raises questions about their position, both as a people and as narrators vis-à-vis Italian post-colonialism and neo-colonialism in Albania. The use of the Italian language in Albania historically points at the Italian Fascist occupation, when Italian becomes the official language of the military body invading Albania and overthrowing the lawful rule of King Zogu. The full extent to which Italian occupation impacted Albanian life in the 1939-1944 period is something that for the moment remains hidden away in still-archived documents, study of which could shed some important light on the multiple legacies of Italian colonialism in the Mediterranean. What international historiography dealing with Albania has to this point made clear is that Italian language and culture, in the language of Communist rhetoric,

were considered and presented as both colonial and capitalistic tools. Albanian-Italian literature, using the Italian language to narrate instances of that colonial occupation – as discussed in Chapter One – indicates a key interpretation of an Italian colonial legacy in Albania that permeated the discourse within Albanian institutions and still lingers in the memory of the Albanian people.

Along with the post-colonial implications that Italian underlines, the use of the Italian language also points at possible neo-colonial cultural forces. Where, as already highlighted, for many Albanians exposure to the Italian media had a role in shaping their fascination with the West, the further use of that linguistic tool suggests an embracing of that western cultural model. Nora Moll, in her analysis of Guaci's *I grandi occhi del mare*, asks the same questions, and discusses how the theory of cultural imperialism, debated from the 1960s to the present day, has validity in recognizing the links between mass communication systems and military, economic, and political power. Whether or not Albanian-Italian authors are aware of the neo-colonial implications of their linguistic choices, she contends, they are directly affected by the level of visibility that comes with the language they use vis-à-vis the interest of the international literary community. The choice of Italian makes migrant works merge with the tout-court Italian literary tradition, channeling them into similar marketing strategies and allowing them partake of the language's literary prestige worldwide. Excluding that a work can receive international attention just because of the language it is written in, language does bring in issues of cultural visibility and speaks to an articulation of cultural power.

Feeling the language

Besides the visibility that a work can receive thanks to its language, the choice of one linguistic toolset over another is primarily and deeply connected with the artistic sensibility of each author, who appropriates it and fully makes it the form of expression of their inner world. As stated by American scholar Steven Kellman in his seminal work *The Translingual Imagination* (2000), “[bilingual writers] cannot write about the people they love in a language that they understand, or at least that love is most free when expressed obliquely.” (25) According to this statement, the use of a second language is often a device put in place by bilingual writers in order to obtain a detachment from a heavily loaded emotional world. Canadian-French Nancy Huston and Polish-Canadian Eva Hofmann, among many others bilingual authors worldwide, prove Kellman’s point. In her work *Losing North* (2002), Huston points out how “[t]he French language in general (and not only its forbidden lexicon) was to [her] less emotion-fraught, and therefore less dangerous, than [her] mother tongue. It was cold, and [she] approached it coldly. It was a smooth, homogeneous, neutral substance, with no personal associations whatsoever.” (49) Equally Hofmann in her work *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989) remarks how English language is free of “sentimental effusion of rejected love, eruptions of familial anger, or consoling broodings about death. English is not the language of such emotions.” (120) These two linguistically biographical works establish the emotional neutrality of a second language.

Similarly, Ornela Vorpsi needs emotional lightness and removal from the past to express it. In her interview “Vivere tra le lingue: scrivere in italiano” (2009), the writer describes the crossroad of languages that she inhabits as a person, living in Paris with an Italian husband, working in Berlin using English, and keeping alive her native Albanian

for family interactions. This oral multilingualism, though, doesn't interfere with the spontaneous and specific choice of the Italian language when it comes to writing. At the basis of her choice Vorpsi places the pleasure of mastering the Italian language, the spontaneity with which it prevails over the other languages, and the flexibility of the language, which allows her to express her full range of emotions. Talking about the languages that she masters, she says:

Je les parle toutes, ça dépend de la situation. Pour écrire ma langue préférée est en fait l'Italien. Je sais que j'ai besoin d'une langue étrangère pour pouvoir écrire. Ma narration porte en soi l'enfance. Cela m'était très important et l'Italien me semblait beaucoup plus flexible et plus malléable pour communiquer mon enfance et ses émotions, en gardant en même temps une distance que je sens nécessaire. J'ai besoin des paroles qui ont moins de poids. Dans ma langue maternelle, les paroles ont toutes du poids; quand je me mets à écrire, j'en sens toute la lourdeur. (138)

This statement serves as a complex definition of the various functions that the Italian language fulfills for Vorpsi. The flexibility and plasticity of the language serve well the emotions that Vorpsi's narrative contains; emotions that are strictly linked to her childhood. At the same time it provides some distance from that very past and some levity of expression, both of which are necessary for Vorpsi's narrating voice to enter that inner space of childhood without struggle and pain. Italian, therefore, is the expressive tool that lets her recover and convey deep emotions, while freeing them from the vividness that would make them incommunicable.

In 2009, when the interview was conducted, Vorpsi was still in the midst of her fully Italian creative process, and, discussing it, the author stated the following: "La mia

scrittura, per il momento, non sente la necessità della lingua francese. L'italiano viene automaticamente e ho voglia di stare in italiano. Certo, mi sembra che stia diventando una scelta problematica non vivendo più nella lingua italiana, ma per il momento sono in questa situazione” (140). The already-mentioned spontaneity and pleasure of using a language, the idea of “stare” in the Italian language recalls Martin Heidegger’s reflections on the connection between artistic composition and dwelling. In his essay “...Poetically man dwells...” Heidegger claims that “poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building” (213). Even though Heidegger’s comments refer to poetry in particular, the passage suggests how language and the linguistic act of literary creation can constitute a physical space, a dwelling in itself.

While the idea of linguistic dwelling is unpacked further in the section *Homelan(d)gauges* of this chapter, it is here relevant to stress how the above passage registers a progressively greater difficulty for Vorpsi in using Italian, of dwelling in it; a difficulty which is due to her not “living in the language,” and suggests the author’s awareness of an imminent evolution of her linguistic narrative choice, an eventual passage to writing in French, which took place with her latest novel, *Tu convoiteras* (2014).

Language, Sooner or Later

The connection between present life and language that Vorpsi underlines in the above passage recalls what Eva Hoffman states in her book *Lost in Translation*: “If I am to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present” (120). Hoffman and Vorpsi draw a correlation between place and time of narration and the language that

innervates that particular place and time with life. Narrative, therefore, even when it articulates past experiences, as many Albanian-Italian works do, comes to life in the tight connection between the present life of the self and the host language that articulates that present. Vorpsi's latest shift to French seems to realign her with the language of her present, almost twenty years after establishing permanent residence in France.

Despite this late alignment of Vorpsi's narrative with the language of her present, her overall linguistic trajectory suggests more than this expected linearity of a linguistic passage that mirrors a geographical passage. After Vorpsi left Italy for France, her narrative remained tied to the Italian language for a long time. Elvira Dones shows a similar lag in the artistic acquisition of the host language. Dones moved from Albania to the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland in 1988 and for many years she kept writing in her native Albanian. It is only in 2007 that she wrote her first book in Italian, *Vergine giurata*, after having left Switzerland for the U.S. in 2004. Her Italian narrative voice emerged therefore with a long delay, only once she had plunged in the new Anglophone environment. Her narrative seems to resist the Anglophone context, and *Piccola guerra perfetta*, her next published work that was composed in 2011, was also written in Italian. Both Vorpsi's and Dones's instances disrupt the connection between a new place and the adoption of the language of that place and highlight instead the extent to which the narrating self can linguistically evolve at a different pace and for artistic and emotional reasons that go beyond the physical coordinates of their existence.

Homelan(d)guages

As the above examples suggest, language, while a space of narrative existence, can also

be a space of individual belonging to a chosen culture and country. Among Italoophone migrant writers there are many statements to be found that describe the Italian language as a new homeland. As an example, Amara Lakhous on different occasions has spoken of language as a “patria,” and Tahar Lamri similarly refers to writing in Italian as a way to feed a sort of illusion “di avervi messo radici.”¹⁴ Among Albanian-Italian writers Carmine Abate and Gëzim Hajdari are the two authors who most complexly reflect on the meaning of language as it relates to identity and belonging.

The minor character in Abate’s *Vivere per addizione* (2010), Walter, is able to condense into a single sentence the sense of nostalgia that runs throughout the novel: “noi siamo stranieri quasi dappertutto” (95). Abate’s narrative often revolves around this sense of recurrent uprooting, depicting as it does the “ritrovar[s]i sempre altrove” (142) that characterizes the multiple migrations of its characters. In *Vivere per addizione* the main autobiographical character mitigates his lopsided sense of belonging, always mixed with uprooting, when he decides to embrace his existence in “la terra di mezzo” (141). The latter is at the same time the geographical space of Trentino, located in between Germany and Calabria – the biographical coordinates of the narrating voice – but also the space of linguistic hybridity that the migrant subject inhabits, “una persona che [vive] in più culture e con più lingue, per nulla sradicato, anzi con più radici” (144). Multilingualism here becomes fertile ground for belonging, rich soil in which to replant his compound and complex identity.

Gëzim Hajdari similarly inhabits languages as a space of identity and belonging.

¹⁴ Lamri, Tahar. “Il pellegrinaggio della voce: esperienze e complessità della scrittura migrante.” On-line article, consulted on February 28th, 2015. http://masterintercultura.dissgea.unipd.it/trickster/archivio/1_soglia/rubriche/lingue/pellegrinaggio/lamripellegrinaggio.html

A verse in his collection *Stigmatte/Vragë* (2002) reads as follows: “ogni giorno creo una nuova patria / in cui muoio e rinasco quando voglio” (page). The verse aptly summarizes the flexibility of Hajdari’s concept of homeland, which does not depend on a physical place and remains free of a final form being created and reshaped by the daily poetic work of the author. Homeland is a deep and compound concept in Hajdari’s poetic, both implying the substance of the poet’s literal body as well as of his poetry and the translanguaging in which it was born. While the analysis of the significance of the poet’s body will find articulation in the following chapter, which will be entirely dedicated to the representation of the body in Albanian-Italian literature, the following section of this chapter analyzes in depth Hajdari’s translanguaging. “My poetry inhabits the space of a constant linguistic migration between Italian and Albanian,” states the author in his on-line interview “An Ode to Exile” (2013), synthetically describing his entire bilingual production. Hajdari’s is a double language that “becomes a homeland,”¹⁵ and that can therefore provide a space of belonging for the poet and his perpetual existential and physical exile.

Hajdari’s consistent passage from one language to the other in a continuous act of self-translation constitutes a unique case in the literary Albanian-Italian landscape, one that marks the necessary duplicity of cultures and codes for the self to be articulated. Through a close reading of his work *Corpo presente/Trup i pranishëm* (1999), the following section examines how the translanguaging passage makes possible the internal space for the migrant subject to be creative.

Gëzim Hajdari’s Translingual Poetic Subject

¹⁵ The complete interview is available at this link: <http://www.warscapes.com/conversations/ode-exile>

The poetry collection *Corpo presente/Trup i pranishëm* by self-exile Gëzim Hajdari was published in 1999 and was written both in the poet's native Albanian and adopted Italian languages. Bilingual collections are the norm in his extensive collection of works. In fact, Hajdari's production in Albanian is very limited, consisting of only two works. The first one is the collection *Antologjia e shiut*, which was published in 1990 while he still lived in his motherland. This first work was highly affected by Communist censorship and could appear only as a mutilated version after being rejected for five consecutive years. The collection was later translated, amplified and published in Italy in 2000 in a bilingual edition. The other Albanian collection was instead never allowed publication in the home country, and only in 2001 was it re-elaborated into a bilingual version and published in Italy under the title *Erbamara/Barihidhur*.

Hajdari's migration to Italy coincided with his election of Italian as his primary literary tool. His work *Ombra di cane/Hije qeni* – published in 1993, only one year after his arrival to Italy – was already composed in Italian. Since then, Italian and Albanian have been equally and contemporaneously used for his post-migration production, forming a large collection of bilingual works. Literary criticism dealing with Hajdari's poetry, in Italy as well as in the U.S., considers this poet one of the most interesting cases of bilingualism in the Italian literary panorama, and the majority of the critical discourse regarding his work considers Hajdari's bilingualism as the crucial and pivotal aspect of his poetry.¹⁶

This analysis builds on the broadly remarked particularity and centrality of Hajdari's bilingualism, through a study of recurrent tropes of silence and utterance in

¹⁶ *Poesia dell'esilio: saggi su Gëzim Hajdari*, edited by Italian scholar Andrea Gazzoni, is the first monographic collection of essays analyzing Hajdari's work. The volume gathers essays by both Italian and American scholars who contributed to the international analysis of the author's poetic production.

Corpo presente. It is here argued that the space in between the two languages, that intimate space of their translatability, is not just one way for Hajdari's poetry to find expression, but it is rather the only possible way; as *Corpo presente* seems to suggest through a symbolic shift from silence to voice, it is only in the space of the constant translingual passage between Albanian and Italian that the post-migration poetic subject can exist. Outside the translingual articulation there is only silence and absence of any poetic experience. Hajdari's poetic subjectivity can therefore only exist as a translingual voice.

Italian philosopher and literary critic Fausto Pellecchia extensively speaks of the poet's bilingualism in his essay "Hajdari e la lingua della poesia." For Pellecchia, the poet's bilingualism must be studied not merely as a form of expression but rather as a founding literary theme underpinning all his collections, and informing every theme of his poetry. All Hajdari's major literary tropes, such as exile, immigration, love and hate for the motherland, solitude, and harsh sarcasm for Albanian political life, are fully illuminated and understood only when studied through the bilingual lens. As an example, Hajdari's bilingualism – which is particularly interesting, and perhaps unique, because many times it begins in Italian, and progresses through a subsequent self-translation into his native language – gives particular meaning to the trope of exile. Being one of the most dense and autobiographical themes in Hajdari's poetry due to the poet's personal and political history at the origin of his geographical migration, the trope of exile is informed by the very use of the second language, Italian, exactly because this is the language of his exile. Hosted by Italian, the poet and poetry itself can be considered in

exile from the native Albanian language, which for Hadjari does not provide the ignition force of the creative process.

As discussed earlier, Steven Kellman remarks on the use of a second language as a device put in place by bilingual writers in order to obtain a detachment from a heavily loaded emotional world, and it has been already discussed how this is through for many bilingual writers, including Ornella Vorpsi when she states “volevo scrivere in una lingua straniera in quanto non carica dell’infanzia. [...] L’italiano è per me eccezionale, perché mi consente la perfetta distanza da quello che racconto” (139). It can be argued, therefore, that Italian language can function as emotional filter in Hajdari’s poetic experience as well, if we consider for instance his ideological and political critique against the legitimacy of post-communist politicians in Albania. That political denunciation is at the heart of his exile and entirely informs one of his most studied collections, *Poema dell’esilio/Poema e mërgimit*.

The poem is a long and bitter “pamphlet” which was published twice over the years in extended versions¹⁷ and sheds light on social, cultural, ethical and political aspects of Albanian society, its historical tragedies and political crimes. Even though it remains undeclared by Hajdari, it would be enriching to investigate the poet’s choice of Italian as having a component of emotional filter to narrate that life-threatening and life-changing political situation. Using this perspective we can unpack one of the most cited verses by Hajdari, and one of the most representative of his linguistic experience; “scrivo questi versi in italiano e mi tormento in albanese” (2002, 91). This verse resonates of Kellman’s parallel between second language and emotional detachment, insofar as the

¹⁷ The poet is currently working on a forthcoming third, amplified edition of *Poema dell’esilio/Poema e mërgimit*.

torment connected with the native language is tempered through the use of a more neutral writing in Italian.

However, Hajdari's linguistic experience proves to be more complex than a case of defensive emotional use of the host language. This is because in reality the native Albanian language doesn't disappear at all from the poetic act. Albanian is instead re-appropriated and restored to the poetic creation through the practice of self-translation from host language to mother tongue. Kellman defines self-translation as "a bold reconception rather than a humble approximation of the original [text]" (33). Hajdari himself corroborates Kellman's understanding of self-translation as reinvention. In an interview with Giulia Inverardi, published in 2007 by the title "Il poeta epico delle Montagne Maledette," the poet states: "Non si tratta di una traduzione meccanica dall'albanese in italiano, ma di una *ricreazione*. A volte scrivo in albanese e mi tormento in italiano, altre volte scrivo in italiano e mi tormento in albanese" (302). Amplifying the already-seen trope of torment in its connection to languages, what is relevant to emphasize in this statement is the constant tension between the disappropriation of Albanian and its reappropriation through the language of the exile. It is only in this space of "uso disappropriato delle lingue" (172), as Pellecchia defines it, that the poetic voice can take a form.

In that same interview with Inverardi, Hajdari expands the reflection on his creative process by adding something crucial for the understanding of his poetry; the contemporaneity of the use of both languages.

Scrivo parallelamente in tutte e due le lingue, quindi in albanese e in italiano e viceversa. Non si tratta di bilinguismo ma di una lingua doppia.

La mia migrazione non è una migrazione da un paese all'altro, ma da una lingua all'altra. [...] Quindi, la mia scrittura è una migrazione linguistica: uscire e entrare da una lingua all'altra, insegnando a tutti a essere migranti e stranieri. (302)

What Hajdari describes here is, in fact, a more articulated process, where the parallel writing in both languages, the constant migration and simultaneous recreation of one language into the other, transforms bilingualism into a double language, one that implicates a double originality of Hajdari's poetry. Both the Albanian and the Italian versions are therefore the original versions, disrupting the common binary of original text and translated text.

The contemporaneous recreation of one language into the other closely parallels what Pellecchia calls the "intima traducibilità delle lingue" (176), suggesting a space of non-conflicting translatability, a space in which each language smoothly migrates into the other. According to Pellecchia, Hajdari's poetic language, in the passage between Albanian and Italian, is "il loro *resto*, ciò che insiste e resiste nella loro reciproca traduzione" (174). In contrast to Eva Hofmann's idea of something being "lost in translation" – concept articulated in the homonymous novel – Hajdari's poetic translingual migration suggests instead the existence of a text which is "found in translation," something that is possible to transport in the constant back and forth across the border between languages. The inevitable loss of meaning and loss of complexity pointed out by Hofmann is replaced by the gain of sediments deposited along the translingual passage.

Literary scholar Martha J. Cutter articulates the concept of "found in translation" in her analysis *Lost and Found in Translation. Contemporary Ethnic American Writing*

and the Politics of Language Diversity (2005). Cutter focuses on both linguistic and cultural translation as a literary trope occurring in much of ethnic American literature. According to her, the representation of translation in those texts embodies “a remaking of not only language but also racial, generational, and cultural identities” (2). These new subjectivities are made possible by the constant transmigration of ethnicity into English, and are “found” in the interstitial space between languages and cultures. Borrowing Cutter’s argument to approach Hajdari’s translanguaging, it can be argued that the space between the two languages, Albanian and Italian, as well as the action of their mutual translatability, is the place where the post-migration poetic subject comes to life.

This interstitial translanguaging space inhabited by the poetic subjectivity is also thematically symbolized by the diegetic unfolding of the work under examination, *Corpo presente*. The collection depicts the translanguaging formation of the poetic subject by insisting on a progressive passage from images of silence to images of sonority. An initial complete lack of expression, which originates from the subject’s uprooting and exile, shifts progressively into a more and more confident access to “Parola” and “Voce” which Hajdari alternately makes stand for the ‘ability to speak’ and ‘poetry’ itself. As we will see, such a shift takes place only thanks to the space of overlap, interaction and mutual translation of the two languages.

Këndoj trupin tim të pranishëm
lindur hapsirës së ftohtë
që s’premtton asgjë (10)

Canto il mio corpo presente
nato da questo freddo spazio
che nulla promette¹⁸ (11)

¹⁸ “I sing my present body / born from this cold space / which nothing promises.” All translations of the passages from *Corpo Presente* are by Anita Pinzi.

These are the opening lines of the collection, which, recalling Walt Whitman's poem "I sing the body electric," establish a connection between poetry and the poet's body. While the relevance of the body in Hajdari as well as in other Albanian-Italian narratives will be discussed in Chapter Four, it is here relevant to remark how these incipient lines clearly and inseparably link the poetic body to a cold space – real and metaphorical at the same time – one that can be interpreted as the spatio-temporal location generated by the poet's condition of exile. The poetic voice exists in the two categories of the "now" and "here," insofar as it is a "present" body which comes into existence in "this" cold space.

As the opening of the collection highlights, the space of exile can only generate an absence, a "nulla," a nothingness, erasing therefore any possibility of promise. The initial sense of absence is soon restated when the narrating voice rhetorically asks:

Vallë do të ketë kuptim kthimi
në gjakun tend? (12)

Avrebbe senso ritornare
nel tuo sangue? ¹⁹ (13)

The narrating voice is here directly addressing the motherland, Albania, which had nurtured him with her metaphorical blood and from which the speaking subject has disconnected himself in a condition of irreversible exile. The poet's question is indeed immediately answered with a peremptory denial of such a possibility, making Albania

një territor

un territorio

¹⁹ "Would it make any sense to return / into your blood?"

zhdukur përgjithnjë (12)

svanito per sempre²⁰ (13)

The lost Albania of these verses is addressed many times in the unfolding of *Corpo presente*, multiply personified as a mother, as a lover, and as the mythological Gorgon which devours its children.

por ti, nënë dhe kuçedër,
mallkove trupin tim, gjuhën time
dhe sytë e mi gjer në verbëri (88)

Ma tu, madre e gorgone,
hai maledetto il mio corpo, la mia
lingua
e i miei occhi fino ad accecarmi²¹
(89)

As per this passage, the poet strongly links the conflicting relationship with the native land to a wasted relation to his own body and his mother tongue. Such a combined physical and linguistic curse becomes the mark of the condemned, leading to a loss of sensorial abilities, and therefore reducing the poet to silence and blindness.

Losing Albania is therefore the consequence of the irreversible and tragic uprooting of the exile, which causes a loss of language and a consequent silencing of the poetic voice. As the following examples demonstrate, in *Corpo presente* many are the verses insisting on the trope of silence, either impossibility to speak and hear, or suspension of sonority.

Jam kambanë deti
me heshtje dhe zëra
mbyllur Kohës.

Sono campana di mare
di silenzi e di voci
chiuso nel Tempo.

²⁰ “a land / vanished forever”

²¹ “But you, mother and gorgon / you cursed my body, my language / and my eyes until you made me blind”

Dhe asnjë Zot s'i ndjen tingujt
të mishit tim. (14)

E nessun Dio sente i suoni
della mia carne. (15)

Gjuha e këtij vendi
s'i shërben më askujt,
udhëheq drurë e zogj
drejt rrënimit. (16)

La lingua di questo paese
non serve più a niente
conduce alberi e uccelli
al disastro. (17)

Jemi këtu mes gurëve
me gurët,
rrethuar me lagëstirë livadhesh
dhe sytë e mëdhenj të zogjve,
në pritje të një Zëri (20)

Siamo qui tra i sassi
con i sassi,
circondati dal freddo del prato
e dagli occhi grandi degli uccelli,
in attesa di una Voce²² (21)

These verses in multiple ways insist on the disappearance of sonority. In the first stanza the poet's body is ground for articulation of silence and voice, but its poetic vibration fades anyway unheard, in a sort of cosmic disinterest, as suggested by the reference to God's deafness. In the second stanza, linguistic communication has been rendered empty and useless by the poet's encounter with the host Italian language, which at this early stage of his exile makes it impossible to convey any poetic meaning. In the third stanza the poet is surrounded by poetry – represented by symbols, which are commonly found in Hajdari's poetry, such as stones and birds – which cannot be verbally articulated because of a lack of voice. The only option left to the poet is to linger on this state of acoustic suspension, patiently waiting for the possibility of a future voice that will reactivate the poetic act.

²² "I'm a sea bell / of silences and voices / closed in Time. No God hears the sounds / of water and fire / in my flesh." "The language of this country / is of no use anymore / it leads trees and birds / to disaster." "We are here among the stones / with the stones, / surrounded by the cold of the field / and by the big eyes of birds, / waiting for a Voice"

As just mentioned, the images populating the above verses, such as the stones, the birds, and the voice – the latter capitalized many times as “la Voce” in Hajdari’s poems – are among the most commonly recurring themes in all of Hajdari’s collections, and are the marks of his highly symbolic poetry. Since the publication of his book *Sassi contro vento* in 1995, stones have become the symbol for his poetic compositions, and suggest the verbal dryness and the harsh, heavy content of Hajdari’s poetry. Similarly, as Italian scholar Silvia Vajna De Pava, convincingly shows in her essay “La peligòrga canta in italiano,” birds populate all Hajdari’s collections and “rappresentano il poeta stesso” (204). Birds are therefore constantly associated with the poetic voice, and the Albanian bird *peligorgë*, in particular, is linguistically transformed into the Italian *peligòrga*, becoming the poet’s alter ego in the homonymous collection of poems, which was published in 2007.

While these same symbols are recurrent in all Hajdari’s collections, what makes *Corpo presente* different from the rest of his works is its pivotal position between a first and a second period of the poet’s production. Vajna De Pava’s unpublished dissertation, *I miei occhi: sguardi incrociati. Gëzim Hajdari e la letteratura interculturale in lingua italiana* (2005), provides a study of the intercultural influences in Hajdari’s poetry. In this work Vajna De Pava explores how *Corpo presente* stands between a period of total erasure of Albanian literary and cultural references, and a period in which those references are progressively recovered. According to Vajna De Pava, in *Corpo presente* it is possible to detect the beginnings of a certain affinity for the epic cycles of the ancient Albanian literary tradition, an affinity which increasingly emerges in following collections such as *Stigmat/Vragë* (2002), *Spine nere/Gjëmbe të zinj* (2004), and

Maldiluna/Dhimbjehëne (2005), culminating in Hajdari's latest work *Nûr: Eresia e Besa* (2012).

Marking the movement towards recovery of Albanian literary written and oral tradition, *Corpo presente* makes use of a recurrent plurality of the narrating voice, as the most evident stylistic element giving an epic resonance to the collection. The narrating voice repeatedly speaks for and to a collective entity. These are examples of that multiplicity of voice.

Në këtë'anë të botë
jetoimë me fjalë guri
e lavdi fjalësh. [...]
Nuk do të jemi kurrë të lirë
si kodrat (16)

Da questa parte del mondo
viviamo di parole di pietra
e di gloria di parole. [...]
Non saremo mai liberi
come le colline (17)

Shtrengojmë emrat tanë
capëtuar si bari
e nuk dimë nga na vjen
kjo vetmi. (22)

Stringiamo i nostri nomi
strappati come l'erba
e non sappiamo da dove ci viene
questa solitudine.²³ (23)

As made evident by the recurrent plural subject "we," these verses link the singular and personal experience of the poetic subject to a collective dimension, to a plurality of people who underwent the same uprooting experience of the exile. This collectivity, like the poet, is deeply plunged into a vacuum of sounds suggested by the images of heavy words such as stones. Along with the loss of language, the violent uprooting of names suggests a loss of identity.

²³ "On this side of the world / we live of words of stone / and glory of words. [...] We will never be free / as the hills." "We hold on to our names / ripped out like grass / and we don't know from where comes to us / this solitude."

The absence of voice turns almost into a chorus of muteness, when the poet writes:

Gojëkyçur, duke fshehur fjalët,
shtyimë muret e erës
për të parë n'anën tjetër,
lumin me buzë të zeza (20)

Con le bocche chiuse, nascondendo
le parole,
spingiamo pareti di vento
per vedere dall'altra parte
il fiume di labbra nere (21)

S'mund të flasim
nën këta qiej të gozhduar. (24)

Ora non riusciamo a parlare
sotto questi cieli inchiodati.²⁴ (25)

These powerful images of shut mouths, hidden words, and inability to articulate language create a crescendo of muteness, culminating in the liquid and deadly image of darkness that the black lips suggest.

Throughout the collection, the muteness that images like the ones above convey stylistically emphasizes and magnifies tropes of pain and absence, such as the longing for a lost motherland, a lost childhood, the despair over the fragility of memory, and a constant sense of non-belonging, epitomized in the following verses;

Kujt vallë i përkas kësaj kohe
me shpatulla për tokë,
klithmat mbyten në mjegull. (42)

A chi sono appartenuto
tutto questo tempo?
I gridi si annegano della nebbia.²⁵
(43)

²⁴ "With our mouths shut, hiding words / we push walls of wind / to see on the other side / the river of black lips" "Now we are not able to speak / under these nailed skies"

²⁵ "Whom did I belong to / all this time? / My screams drown in the fog."

The crucial question of belonging, the very moment it wants to be shouted, remains tragically unanswered, sinking into a landscape of uncertainty, as the image of fog can suggest. These lines constitute the highest moment of impossibility for vocal articulation by the poet's existential sorrow, where the image of drowning screams is placed in such close proximity to silence and death.

However, this desperate impossibility of communication is not a permanent condition throughout the collection, and little by little, tropes of silence give ground to tropes of sonority, starting a process of restoration of the poetic voice. I select here some of the most meaningful examples.

Dëgjojmë zërat
e të varrosurvetok me të vdekurit
kodrës me rërë. (102)

Riascoltiamo le voci
che abbiamo sepolto con i morti
sulle colline di sabbia. (103)

Si mund të lihorem prej qiellit të mbyllur
Dhe errësirës së gurëve,
për t'u rikthyer tek gjaku yt?
Për të rigjetur fjalët e fshehura
nën lëkurën e borës
dhe lulet e shkelura? (104)

Come liberarmi dal cielo chiuso
e dal buio dei sassi,
per ritornare nel tuo sangue?
Per ritrovare le parole nascoste
sotto la pelle della neve
e i fiori calpestati? (105)

Nuk shoh,
Ndiej veç zërin që më ftin
të iki larg nga ky vend,
paraprirë prej këngës sime të ashpër. (120)

Non vedo,
sento la voce che mi invita
ad andare lontano da qui,
preceduto dal mio canto crudele.²⁶
(121)

²⁶ "We listen again to the voices / which we buried with the dead / on the hills of sand." "How to free myself from this closed sky [...] to find again the words hidden / under the skin of the snow" "I hear the voice that invites me / to go far from here / preceded by my cruel chant."

In these verses, verbs such as ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’ progress toward an emission of sound, reaching a point of distinct utterance, the climax of which is the poet’s cruel chant. As highlighted in these stanzas, narration is still embedded with a deep sense of sorrow, solitude, physical pain, and death, intensely conveyed by the image of the buried dead. However, the negation and absence of sonority so far encountered is now becoming more rare and opening up to the interplay of hearing and uttering. The two questions in the central stanza express the poet’s impulse towards freedom of expression. The return into the blood of poetry hopefully will bring back the hidden words, and will give life to new poems. In the third stanza, the personified voice is becoming an invitation to the poet to move towards a different space, probably far from this exilic condition, which was at the origin of the absence of sound. This new space will be possible only if the poet will follow his poetic sensibility, his own chant. This chant cannot be anything but a cruel one; it will indeed articulate his displacement, his loneliness and his exilic condition. The essential point here, though, is that a chant is now possible.

The passage from silence to heard and spoken sonority may appear to be a fragile one throughout the collection and the re-established sonority proves irregular and unstable in its enfolding, as references to a lack of voice sporadically reappear toward the end of the collection. As a matter of fact, though, the passage from muteness to utterance, from silence to voice, is well delineated and leaves a distinct mark in the composition of the poetic images, in many of which the poet is willing to “*procedere verso la voce*” (127).

It sounds compelling at this point to ask what generated this change. What was the catalytic element able to reactivate the lost poetic subjectivity? The answer is to be found in the following crucial few verses:

Lëviz një dorë e sapozgjuar
në muzg. Thyen heshtjen
e gërsheton gjuhët tona memece
sipas mënyrës së vet (72)

Së shpejti do ta njohim zërin tonë
e do t'ua dimë emrat e zogjve
që na këndojnë ndër gishta. (74)

Si muove una mano appena
risvegliata
al crepuscolo. Rompe il silenzio
e intreccia le nostre lingue mute
a modo suo (73)

Presto riconosceremo la nostra voce
e riconosceremo i nomi degli uccelli
che ci cantano delle dita.²⁷ (75)

Brief and densely symbolic, these verses record the birth of a new poetic subjectivity, one that lives at the intersection of two languages, Albanian and Italian. The movement of the hand on the page at dusk stands for the newly awakened act of writing – the new poetry – which finally has the power to break the silence which characterizes the poet's precedent of uprooted experience. The new poetry knits the two languages together, as different threads of the same poetic fabric. When kept apart they are mute languages. When they are instead intertwined by the movement of the poet's hand in the act of writing, they restore the poetic voice and make it sing. The space of intersection and translatability of the two languages – Hajdari's double language – is finally recognized as the space in

²⁷ "A newly awakened hand moves / at dusk. It breaks the silence / and braids our mute languages / in its own way. Soon we will recognize our voice / and will recognize the name of birds / that sing in our fingers."

which the poetic voice can be restored to its lost existence. Tying back to Vajna de Pava argument, the bird-poet will sing again. A translingual poetic subjectivity is finally born.

Placed halfway through the collection, these few verses mark a fundamental change in the poetic experience represented in *Corpo presente*, and their central position reinforces the pivotal quality of their content. Here, silence reaches an agreement and an articulation with the voice, and even if it will keep undermining the existence of the newly born translingual poetry, reemerging here and there throughout the collection, from this point forward it no longer has the power to extinguish the poetic voice.

Jam poeti më i trishtë i Ballkanit
në mish
e në gjak.

Sono il poeta più triste dei Balcani
nella carne
e nel sangue.

Ditën jam mes jush e natën migroj sërish
mbartura nga një hije
e fusit në hasmëri.

Di giorno sto con voi e di notte
emigro laggiù
portato da un'ombra
della mia stirpe in vendetta.

Dikush kërkon ta fshij Zërin tim,
por ai rishfaqet aty ku ka qenë
në asnjë vend
e në asnjë kohe,
pezull në muzg (112)

Qualcuno cerca di cancellare la mia
Voce
ma essa è lì, dove è stata
in nessun luogo
e in nessun tempo
appesa al crepuscolo²⁸ (113)

²⁸ “I’m the saddest poet of the Balkans / in my flesh / and in my blood. / During the day I’m with you and at night I emigrate over there / carried by a shadow / of my descent into revenge. / Somebody tries to erase my Voice, but there it is, where it has been / in no place / and at no time / hanging by the twilight”

The first lines of this passage constitute a strong assertion of artistic identity; the poet from the Balkans now exists, in his sadness and his body. His linguistically double-poetic voice is now shaped by a further duplicity, which concerns the spatial dimensions of both a “here” and a “there.” These verses explicitly blur clear geographical references, creating disorientation in the reader, who is not able to clearly decipher the trajectory of the poet’s physical and linguistic migration. Is “here” Italy or Albania? Is “there” Italian or Albanian? The only answer that *Corpo presente* seems to provide is that it doesn’t really matter. What matters instead is that the movement across the border of a geographical “here” and “there,” and the migratory passage from Italian and Albanian translating into each other, is the only ground on which the poetic subject can reside. As the last verses of the above passage suggest, the new double-linguistic space generated by the passage from Albanian to Italian and vice versa proves to be a safe space for the poet, a space that resists and defeats any attempts at erasure of poetry, any aphasia. Poetry cannot be erased anymore; it will resist and exist in an a-temporal and a-spatial abstract dimension, thereby regaining its immortal mission. Translingualism serves as a home to the poetic subject.

The linguistic angle makes evident that Hajdari’s translingual experience must be the basis for all these other possible approaches and investigations. The very moment we try to erase one of the twinned elements of his linguistic and cultural transpassage, if we ignore that his poetry lives in the liminal space of the border, we miss the very substance of Hajdari’s poetry, the intrinsic translingualism and inner migrancy which informs his poetry. The collection *Corpo presente*, with its insistence on tropes of silence and utterance, is fertile ground to observe the value of the creative space in between Albanian

and Italian. That intimate space of linguistic translatability, with its constant translingual passage between the two languages, is the only space where the post-migration poetic subject can exist. Hajdari's poetic subjectivity can therefore only exist as a translingual voice.

For a Conclusion

The analyses of the Italian language used by Albanian migrant authors, both in its linguistic specificities and in the personal, artistic, social, and political reasons that inform the choice, show the extent to which these migrant voices contribute to a dislocation of the language from its codified structure, while using it as a tool for creating and expressing multilayered and complex social interactions. The linguistic bending and hybridity of the language in this body of works inhabits standard Italian with a refreshing otherness. Italian becomes the site of encounters of different times, cultures, and expressive codes. The personal, social, and political implications of the use of a language shed light on the complexity of a shifting Italian society and are grounds for negotiation of past and contemporary international interactions. The multilingualism that traverses the fabric of these narratives point at the internationalization of the Italian language and, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, a “deterritorialization” of the Italian language and a disconnection from the territorial borders. Italian is the expressive tool elected as a space of hybridization and dwelling of migrant voices, proving how the language is an adaptive organism [and customizable space for those who choose to embrace it, growing and changing through the experiences of individuals and the narratives of their lives.

Chapter Four

Migrant bodies

Ed io sogno un letto asciutto
dove poggiare il mio corpo leggero,
questo corpo spaventato
di sangue e di acqua
che trascino per il mondo
ogni giorno, con fatica.

Gëzim Hajdari – Corpo presente

As Jennifer Burns aptly remarks in her work *Migrant Imaginaries* (2013), migration is inseparable from the “bodily presence and bodily experience [that] form the interface between the interior and the individual and the public, populated space” (13). As the statement underlines, the surface of the body is the visible support on which the migrants’ existence as “others” is negotiated and revealed. Features such as skin color, clothes, and decorations are among the ethnic, religious, and social marks informing a continuous tension between alienation and belonging. Beyond its surface, the body, through its intrinsic ability to feel, is the physical and emotional membrane, which informs all aspects of the migratory experience; it is the privileged space of negotiation between the inner and the outer world of the migrants.

This bodily negotiation of the migrant self at the intersection of many internal and external forces is reflected in the narratives both by and about migrant subjects. Focusing

on the works of Albanian-Italian writers, this chapter investigates the varied representations of the migrant body, to highlight the extent to which it becomes the crucial space of articulation of physical, gendered, social, political, and literary interactions. Hungry and tired bodies, sexualized bodies, socially and politically controlled bodies, dead bodies, and literary bodies all inhabit Albanian-Italian narratives, revealing the extent to which migration is primarily and diversely a bodily experience.

Of particular interest is the representation of the female body in Ornela Vorpsi's first novel, *Il paese dove non si muore mai* (2005), to which the section "Osmotic Bodies," which is discussed at the end of this chapter, gives special attention. Vorpsi's novel articulates a complex representation of the female body, one which, in its movement from the Communist Albania to the Capitalist Italy, becomes the expression of personal, social, political and international tensions. Vorpsi's female body is a text-body, a surface on which power dynamics are inscribed – and is continuously traversed by a set of conflicting forces, which make it a simultaneously active and passive element. Applying Elizabeth Grosz's feminist analysis of the body, one that recalls Burns's image of the "interface," it is shown how the body in Vorpsi's novel functions as an osmotic threshold between an interior and psychic level of the subject and its social exteriority, both in a national and international setting.

This Body that Feels

Many representations of migratory journeys depicted in Albanian-Italian literature reveal the centrality of the migrant body in the construction of the migrant subjectivity. The diverse range of personal and collective struggles that migrants face at home or in the

host countries, be they social, economic, cultural, linguistic, and political difficulties are experienced and decoded through their bodies. Albanian-Italian texts are inhabited by a variety of characters that represent migration through the sensorial ability of their bodies, so that cold and heat, hunger and thirst, fatigue and rest, pleasure and pain, are only a few of the physical sensations that accompany their migratory trajectory. The condition of migration seems to be mainly a bodily condition.

This is the case in Artur Spanjolli's *I nipoti di Scanderbeg*, where the main character narrates the crossing of the Adriatic sea aboard the Vlora vessel and his days of migration in Bari, Italy, before being repatriated to Albania. A wide range of bodily perceptions and reactions inform the character's experience of those days. "I piedi scalzi mi facevano male per il granito del suolo. Avevo il corpo a pezzi. La pancia vuota. Gli occhi mi bruciavano per aver dormito male" (22), states the narrating voice, while waiting in line for the Italian police to decide what to do with him and his thousands of fellow citizens who have just landed. The passage underlines how the discomfort of that moment is mainly registered through bodily stimulations and reactions.

That state of the body is technically caused by meteorological circumstances, as it is a hot August and the character has spent long hours crossing the sea in the crowded company of his fellow citizens. However, another layer is added to the body's response to the situation when we read the dialogue that the main character has with himself. "Buongiorno Occidente! Ahi, mi fa male il corpo! Buongiorno benessere! Ahi, come mi sanguinano i piedi! Buongiorno mondo emancipato e avanzato! Ahi come sento la pancia vuota! Buongiorno Benessere! Puzzo di merda e di miseria!" (22). The exclamations repeatedly swing from the greetings to the Western world that he has imagined and

idealized to the acknowledgement of the very real and present pain of his body. This oscillation between opposites marks an unbridgeable gap between the imagination and the reality of migration. This distance transforms the physical pain into the mark of the social and political exclusion that informs the unfolding of the events.

The socio-political exclusion at the basis of Italy's inhospitality vis-à-vis the Albanian newcomers on the Vlora transforms into a physical reclusion of those migrant bodies, as they are transferred and detained in the local stadium of La Vittoria, waiting to be expelled from Italy. The entrapment of the migrants in that forced space is described by the narrating voice through the interplay of psychological and bodily effects.

L'ultimo giorno spuntò sempre luminoso con un sole che picchiava forte e lo sporco sui nostri corpi che colava insieme al sudore. Veramente mi stavo esaurendo a poco a poco. Eravamo arrivati in parte bianchi e il sole lì in una settimana ci aveva fatto marroni. Anche quei pochi chili di carne in più si erano consumati insieme con l'alimentazione cattiva, lo stress, la fatica, la rabbia. Mi alzai e mi sentii in colpa per aver abbandonato lo zio.
(43)

The passage makes clear that both soul and body are equally challenged by the events. The experience of socio-political exclusion and physical reclusion traverses the migrant at multiple levels, from the surface of his skin left burning under the sun, through the hungry stomach that consumes his flesh, to the sense of guilt that afflicts his spirit.

The condition of deprivation of nourishment and freedom in Spanjolli's novel magnifies the physiological functions of the body, so that the migrant is consistently reminded of hunger, thirst, sweat, fever, and waste. His migrant identity is shaped by those needs, the reality of which entirely replaces the dreams that had originally set him in motion. It is not by chance that when he is taken to the airport to be repatriated he feels

a last urge for physical relief.

Proseguii diritto nell'erba secca, mi abbassai i pantaloni luridi, e feci in modo di non essere visto. Cagai con difficoltà e mentre mi sforzavo sentivo che non provavo rabbia per come ci avevano trattati. Mi veniva un po' da ridere per la mia strana situazione. Insomma, pensai, soffrire una settimana in terra straniera solamente per lasciare un piccolo ricordo indecente alla fine della permanenza. (45)

As the passage suggests, the physiological needs that have infused the brief but intense migrant experience of the character with different aches become an ironic and cathartic farewell to Italy. In a scene that recalls Julia Kristeva's articulation of abjection in relation to the corporal reality, "me that is not me," (5) as she puts in her text *Powers of Horror*, the dreams that brought Spanjolli's character to Italy are expelled in that indecent and animalistic memento produced by his body.

Once back in Albania, the character's body is transformed so much that his relatives barely recognize him. After the end of the migratory experience, reacceptance of the self is possible only through care of the body. "Dopo mi lavai, mi cambiai e la mamma mi consigliò di non mangiare subito tutto per paura di un'indigestione [...] poi dormii per un giorno" (49), states the narrating voice. These restorative and basic actions aim to eliminate the physical distress that migration had amplified beyond humanity. It is only after feeling human again that the subject can regain his intellectual self. The novel indeed ends with the character reading, translating, and reflecting on the news coverage of the experience that he and many other Albanians have just lived through.

Spanjolli's representation of the arrival of the Vlora and the treatment of Albanian migrants echoes a process of dehumanization and criminalization of migration that has

been widely studied by sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago in his work *Non-persone* (1999). While Spanjolli describes from within the socio-political brutalization that Albanian migrants underwent in 1991 in Bari, Dal Lago analyses instead how the same socio-political forces are at play in the construction of the migrant through media and public discourse. Dal Lago points out that the body of the migrant is at the center of the construction of “otherness” through bestializing metaphors. “Corpi omicidi, corpi ipersessuati e fallici, corpi bestiali e sozzi, oppure corpi alieni e informi, quindi corpi, a seconda delle metafore da recidere, evacuare, eliminare” (97), states Dal Lago, underlining how this contemporary iconography of the “other” is a fascist and colonial legacy. In line with Dal Lago’s statement, Spanjolli’s text several times make clear for us how migrants are treated like animals.

While Dal Lago’s analysis of the animalization process of the migrant in the media seems to equally concern both genders, a gender divide is registered when it comes to sexuality, according to which “la donna straniera è il corpo da offendere (e quindi la prostituta “sta per” la donna straniera, nella misura in cui questa è visibile, e quindi “oscena,”) l’uomo straniero è il corpo offensivo” (99). Therefore, the media discourse represents migrant subjects along this passive-active and victim-perpetrator dichotomy depending on their gender. Some relevant instances in Albanian-Italian literature look at the relations between genders in similarly oppositional terms. This is the case in Elvira Dones’s novel *Sole bruciato* (2001), a novel that maps the story of a group of young Albanian women who have been deceptively brought to Italy by their relatives or partners and then been forced into prostitution. While Dal Lago registers a tendency in the public perception to link the foreign female body to prostitution, Dones’s novel leaves behind

the media perspective, instead reworking the same topic, narrating it from the point of view of the victims and following their attempt to reestablish themselves as individuals in a reality of abuse and violence that defines them as mere objects.

Sole bruciato insists on an unambiguously explicit representation of the violated bodies of the girls. Dones's prose describes in detail the reactions of the body to violence, through a set of close-up descriptions of gestures and particulars that tears the girls to pieces on the page, just as the male characters do psychologically in the plot. While in Spanjolli's work feces was ultimately a sarcastic response to Italy and its inhospitality, in Dones's text, feces, blood, vomit, saliva, tears, and sperm are the bodily inks with which the tragedy of the trafficking of women, forced prostitution, and captivity is written.

In Dones's text, the use of physical and sexual violence is used by the pimps to produce in their victims a psychological state of fearful subjugation. The body as "interfaccia" between exteriority and interiority that Burns analyzes is in Dones's novel depicted as the external door to transfer – through the use of violence – alienating fear from the outside world to the inner part of the self. The same transfer from the outside to the inside of the self exceeds the limit of the individual body and functions also between different bodies. The pain that each female body feels is internalized by all the others. As an example, Leila, the first-person narrating voice, surrenders to her fate of prostitution when the criminals that abducted her kill her younger sister, Aurora, back in Albania. The text therefore establishes this sentiment of sisterhood and extends it to include the other female subjects, connecting their bodies and their selves, which resonate to violence as a whole organism.

In this scenario of violence, which aims to tame and completely objectify the

bodies and spirits of the girls so that they can accept and be functional in the prostitution business, the characters find strategies to cope with victimization and consequently to survive as autonomous individuals. Soraia's psychological and emotional self survives through a detachment of her heart from her body. Each time that she feels afraid "il cuore le fa un balzo, rimbalza sulla parete, si schiaccia sul soffitto e lì si ferma, sospeso a mezz'aria. Soraia lo guarda. Meglio così rimani lì dove sei [...] Fino a quando si è sistemato tutto" (15). This temporary and repeated abandonment of the body is Soraia's strategy to cope with the violence inflicted upon her.

Similarly, Leila, the main narrating voice that weaves together the stories of the other girls, reconstitutes herself as a complete human being only after a complete separation from her body, as Leila has been murdered by her fiancé for rebelling against the criminal organization for which he works. Her post-mortem voice recounts her story of prostitution, one that is similar to and interwoven with those of the other girls in the text, and the very act of telling reestablishes Leila's agency as a human being. Her body, a receptacle of violence and pain during her life, is far from the consciousness of the subject and Leila can narrate herself from the outside.

Riesco a vedere il mio corpo fatto a fette come un melone e contemporaneamente l'uomo che lo ha ridotto così [...] È una cosa alquanto strana vedere te stessa dentro una bara. Sapere che non potrai più toccare nessuno, nè bere una tazza di caffè o pettinarti. Fa un certo effetto anche vedere chi ha pugnalato il tuo corpo e non potere apparirgli davanti in veste di fantasma. (7)

Liberated from the deadweight of the body, Leila can finally speak, and can feel nostalgia for the simple physical pleasures of touch and taste, indicators of a healthy relationship

with her body that was violently denied by others.

Both Soraia's and Leila's strategies of endurance mark the need for a detachment from the body and the pain and violence it can feel, a strategy to make the body an opaque "interfaccia," to recall Burns's terminology, so that what happens outside doesn't seep into the inner part of the self.

Dead Bodies

The example of Leila in *Sole bruciato* introduces a space of representation that revolves around the mortality of the body. Several Albanian-Italian works articulate the various ways in which social, political, and ideological forces can turn deadly for the body, be this at home or in migration. It is once more Elvira Dones with her works *I mari ovunque* (2007) and *Piccola guerra perfetta* (2010) that writes about dead bodies. While Leila was the victim of organized crime, the dead bodies in these works are the victims of political forces: the murderous anti-communist dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina – the memory of which is so unbearable for Andrea that she eventually kills herself – and the ethnic hatred of the Serbs against the Muslims of Kosovo, respectively.

In *I mari ovunque*, Andrea is the daughter of two victims of the Argentinean dictatorship of Videla. While her mother Monica had been killed with a shot to the head and buried in the basement of a building, her father had been imprisoned and tortured for two years before being thrown into the Atlantic, as thousands of other *desaparecidos* were. Andrea's tragic loss as a child resulted in her developing into a fragile and psychologically unstable adult, consistently haunted by depression and suicidal impulse. Andrea keeps projecting the tortures that her father suffered into her daily life, and

internalizes them as her own. Her father's body, "invecchiato [...] con gli elettrodi" (51), burned, and thrown alive into the ocean, works for Andrea as an in-absentia "interfaccia," insofar as the pain of torture that he felt has become her internal world.

Andrea's own body is contrarily almost never on the page, and narrative gives more space to her psychological and emotional life. Even her dead body is removed from the narrative, as the novel terminates soon after the deadly injection that will stop her life. It is only a tremor of her hands that suggests Andrea's fear and the imminent end of her life, but the text doesn't describe her dead body. It is instead her husband Eric that articulates a bodily response to the suicidal plan of his wife, with which he has been asked to help. In one of the last scenes, Eric eats and drinks compulsively until when "lo stomaco si rivoltò e lui corse di nuovo in bagno. Vomitò l'anima. Si pulì piano e poi urinò. Il cattivo odore non gli si staccava di dosso" (123). The vomit and urine that Eric's body produces, along with their stench, are the physical marks of Eric's abjection, his rejection of the idea of taking part in Andrea's plan. "[N]on riesco ad accettarlo" (123), Eric utters, putting into words a decision that his body has already taken.

While in *I mari ovunque* the dead bodies of Andrea and her parents are ghostly presences populating Andrea's imagination, dead bodies are instead a constant and real presence in Dones's novel *Piccola guerra perfetta* (2010), a text in which abjection moves from a personal to a collective level through the representation of the systematic Serbian ethnic cleansing against Albanians of Kosovo. The novel narrates the struggle for survival of three women hiding in the city of Pristina during the war in Kosovo and the NATO bombing in 1999. While the women miraculously survive the war, closed in their apartment, their families find instead a tragic death as they attempt to pass the country's

borders and reach the refugee camps. In their desperate journey towards survival, they encounter instead the utmost forms of violence, and their bodies are the receptacles of crude brutality. Rape, mutilation, mass shooting and dismemberment are the forms of violence directed at the body, the strategies of a war of hatred aiming to annihilate the ethnic and religious diversity provided by the “other.” Piles of dead bodies are constantly displayed on the page, as many letters in a transcript of war.

While the death described in the last two texts is perpetrated as a systematic tool of destruction in national political contexts, Natasha Shehu’s text *L’ultima nave* (2001) extends responsibility of the production of dead bodies to international agreements. Focusing on the shipwreck of the Kather I Rades – the Albanian vessel rammed by the Italian military ship and sunk in 1997 in the Otranto channel, killing 108 people – Shehu points to the inhospitality of the European marine border vis-à-vis migration, while accusatorily speculating on the conjoint political responsibility of Italy and Albania in creating the conditions for that tragedy to happen.

While most of the novel maps the planning of the trip, giving voice to dreams and hopes informing people’s decision to leave Albania for the neighboring country, it is at the end of the novel that the bodies, killed in the tragedy, appear in their full admonitory and accusatory power. “Per tutta la giornata ho visto arrivare corpi deformi, mutilati dall’impatto, colpiti da oggetti impazziti” (107), narrates Fatima, who has lost her sister Zamira and her fiancé Andrea. The deformation and mutilation inscribed on those bodies recalls Sandro Mezzadra’s description of the bodies of migrants as the major example of the dialectic of borders. In his work, *Diritto di fuga* (2006), Mezzadra underlines the extent to which the political and military forces at play in the Mediterranean space are

made evident in their exclusive power when migrant bodies attempt to cross that space. “[I] migranti sono figure esemplari, nella misura in cui da una parte mostrano materialmente la possibilità di oltrepassarli, mentre dall’altra i loro corpi esibiscono le ferite e le lacerazioni inflitte dalla quotidiana riaffermazione, in guise molteplici, del dominio dei confini stessi” (24). Wounds on migrant bodies are therefore the mirror of the logic of exclusion and inhospitality that invest the Mediterranean space.

In Shehu’s text, it is Zamira’s body that works as ultimate memento of that political exclusion that stands in conflict with the needs and the dreams of the migrants.

Zamira era distesa sul tavolo, una coperta le copriva il corpo fino al mento, qualcuno aveva avuto la delicatezza di comporre i capelli dietro la testa [...] Sembrava dormisse profondamente, la mia bambina, come la domenica mattina quando non ne voleva sapere di svegliarsi. La dovevo scuotere molte volte prima di vederla muovere mani, braccia, gambe. Si girava dall’altra parte [...] Protestava il diritto di non essere strappata dal mondo dei sogni. 110)

The overlapping images of sleeping Zamira and dead Zamira on the mortuary table come across as a strong accusation against the logic of exclusion that has caused the sinking of the *Kater I Rades*. The Mediterranean has made her sleep eternal and dreamless.

A similar denunciation of the deadly forces that cross the Mediterranean space is made in Edmond Budina’s first film, *Lettere al vento* (2002). Budina’s narrative revolves around the death of Keli, who, in his undocumented journey on a vessel across the Otranto channel, has died at sea. Keli jumped into the sea to rescue a woman and has drowned because the criminal crew in charge of the boat refused to help him. Keli’s father, Niko, not aware of what has happened and worried by Keli’s lack of communication, decides to retrace Keli’s movements, from Albania to Italy, to find him.

The tragic truth will be revealed to Niko by one of Keli's friends, but his son's body will never be found.

In contrast to Shehu's display of Zamira's corpse on the page, Budina opts for erasing the dead body from the screen, an absence that is in line with his aesthetic of erasure discussed previously in Chapter Two. It is exactly Keli's absence from the text – the void that he leaves in his father's life, as well as on the screen – that gives power to Budina's denouncement of the criminal forces that cross the Mediterranean and that transform it into a site of death. Budina's film articulates a kind of criminality, which is modeled upon the phenomenon of the *scafisti*, groups of organized criminals that during the 1990s have been responsible of smuggling undocumented Albanians into Italy. That criminal business occurred at the intersection of the economic and political transformation of Albania and the progressive restrictions to mobility in the Mediterranean as the southern border of Europe.²⁹

Keli, therefore, is the fictional victim of that criminal system, and his absent dead body is the reminder of other real missing bodies, ones which have been lost in the same stretch of sea. Budina's work openly commemorates them with the following sentence, which inscribes the last frame of the film: "A quelli che non hanno potuto attraversare questo braccio di mare e a quelli che con lo sguardo verso il mare aspettano ancora." This is the message that, like the inscription on a tombstone, defines the sea as a collective cemetery of migrants, whose dead bodies are concealed in its depths.

²⁹ Since the 1990s the European control over the Mediterranean has been progressively strengthening. The establishment of Frontex, the European agency for border control, and the enforcement of its measures of marine control, from Mare Nostrum to Triton, have rendered the Mediterranean a place of death to thousands of migrants. The latest measure discussed, as a consequence of the April 18th 2015 shipwreck in which 700 migrants died, considers an additional strengthening of the border control and military actions against people traffickers.

Budina's second film, *Ballkan Bazar* (2011), similarly revolves around dead bodies, which once again are kept hidden from the screen. This second work, a multilingual comedy, is drawn from real cases of exhumation of corpses in Albanian cemeteries in the south of the country – close to the border with Greece; bodies that were fraudulently re-identified as the remains of Greek soldiers from World War II in order to be sold to the ostensibly related Greek families. Here the dead bodies take on a completely new meaning, ironically becoming the space in which Greek national identity and pride are defined.

The scam of selling Greek remains is exposed by a French woman and her Italian daughter as they travel to Albania to recover the body of a French relative (their father and grandfather, respectively), which has been mistakenly sent to Albania. Following the man's dead body across the country becomes the morbid engine of the comedy, while at the same time highlighting the ironies inherent to the process of identity formation. It reflects on the undoing of any identity, as the film creates overlap and blending of people from Italy, France, Albania, and Greece.

As a last declination of the representation of dead bodies in Albanian-Italian narrative, Irma Kurti's autobiographical text, *Tra le due rive* (2011), interprets the mortality of the body as part of the evolution of physical life, far from the social and the political intersections brought on by the previously analyzed texts. In the novel, Irma's mother dies of cancer, and her body is described in all its physical frailty as the disease advances.

Lei sapeva tutto del mostro che aveva in corpo, sapeva che la fine era vicina, ma ballava, ballava...Mi alzai, le andai vicino e l'avvolsi nelle mie

braccia. Quel corpo minuscolo, trasparente, che emanava quel sapore gradevole come di bambino...non l'avrei mai più toccata, stretta, non avrei mai più goduto del suo abbraccio (56).

The body is here described as shrinking under the weight of the disease, a change in size, texture, and smell that guides Irma's association of the mother with an infant, in need of basic care. The mother's body is the reference point of Irma's psychological, emotional, and artistic life throughout the novel, so that losing her equates to Irma losing her own sense of self. "[S]entivo che ero diventata un tutt'uno con il suo corpo fragile" (60) says Irma, describing her last hug with her dying mother. It is a statement that indicates continuity, both physical as well as spiritual, between mother and daughter.

The above exploration of the variety of representations of dead bodies in Albanian-Italian literature shows the extent to which this literature reflects on the many connections between migration and the mortality of the body. The variety of social, political, and economic forces – both at national and international level – that migrants and refugees must navigate and pass through in their journey between countries and across borders, manifests its destructive interplay by damaging and ultimately extinguishing the migrant body. The proliferation of dead bodies on these pages becomes therefore an admonishment of the darkest underbelly of migration found at the intersection of identity formation, national powers, and international inhospitality.

Mothers' Bodies

Kurti's narrative instance moves the analysis from the representation of the dead body to the recurrent presence in Albanian-Italian literature of the maternal body. The narrative of women writers in particular articulates the presence of the mothers as a founding

element in the daughters' lives. Their bodies inform a set of physical, emotional, and artistic connections that the daughters use as part of the building material of their selfhood, especially when migration redefines their life coordinates.

As seen through Kurti's depiction, the relationship between mother and daughter is a symbiotic one; the spirits and the bodies of the two women are inseparable, so that when the mother dies the daughter feels "[di] aver perso per sempre una parte di [lei]" (178). Irma's loss is not just emotional, rather it is an absence that inhabits her own body, one which becomes "un abisso nel quale ruzzolavano tutte le [sue] sofferenze" (158).

The symbiotic bond between the two women is often described in language that establishes a dependence of the daughter on the mother, and the language employed is often the one of care, need, and childhood. As an example of this, the text reads:

Mi è sempre mancata la mamma; sarebbe stato bello stare vicino a lei ogni istante, ogni minuto, non distaccarmi neanche per brevi periodi. Abbracciarla all'infinito, appoggiare la testa sul suo grembo, e lei mi avrebbe accarezzato i capelli cantandomi una ninna nanna, finché non mi fossi addormentata. Bacciarla senza fine, cosicché il suo profumo, il suo odore sarebbe rimasto per sempre sulla mia pelle. (161)

Passages like the above one retain all the qualities of a child's need for physical attachment to the mother, a bond that starts with recognizing the voice and the smell of the mother, as basic as the early physical interactions between newborn and mother.

If on one hand Irma's attachment to her mother points to a possible fear or resistance to adult life, on the other hand it is precisely the mother's absence and the pain that absence causes which together prompt Irma's migration to Italy – the land where the mother is buried – and give birth to Irma's text. "Ho cominciato a scrivere questo libro

dopo aver perso per sempre una parte di me e lo sto terminando all'anniversario di questa perdita [...] È diventato parte del mio passo verso un mondo migliore, più onesto, più pacifico, che mi unirà per sempre alla persona che ho perso" (178), Irma writes in the last paragraph of her book, clearly framing her novel as a compensatory creation. Her last comment, therefore, inscribes the text as the space where the link to the mother can be re-established and perpetuated, in a condition of displacement.

A similar narrative establishment of connections and legacies between mothers and daughters is articulated in Anilda Ibrahimi's first novel, *Rosso come una sposa* (2008), a text that follows the female genealogy of a family along the twentieth century. Meliha, Saba, Klementina, and Dora represent four generations of women in the same family. Their lives, as well as those of their sisters and cousins, are gathered and narrated by Dora in a text that is meant to be Dora's identity quest after her migration to Switzerland. Dora's migrant quest is based on the reconstruction of the female history of her family.

Nella mia stanza da letto c'è la sua cassapanca di vecchio legno tarlato. Quando la apro, sento forte e violento nelle narici l'odore delle mele cotogne [...] quest'odore è quello delle madri felici e di quelle abbandonate. È l'odore delle madri che addormentano i figli e di quelle che cantano le ninnenanne alle bambole di pezza. È anche l'odore asprigno del latte materno, quello delle mamme eclissate dal troppo amore delle nonne [...] Le stagioni delle donne della mia terra, le stagioni delle mele cotogne piombano così nella mia nuova vita, altrove." (261)

The smell of quince apples used to scent the dowry chest of Dora's grandmother, Saba, is here the metaphor for a universe of mothers that the novel maps in multiple declinations. Mothers that love, mothers that punish, mothers that cannot accept their daughters'

disabilities, shared mothers and half mothers are just a few examples of this “grande tribù di donne” (120) that the novel depicts. The centrality of bodies in establishing these complex filial relationships is summarized by the taste of maternal milk. While the milk guarantees the biological growth of the daughters, the passage describes it as “asprigno,” indicating sourness as a basic component to those filial relationships.

Physicality characterizes above all the interaction between Meliha and her daughter Saba, who as a child was married by the mother to an older man to take the place of her dead sister Sultana. Meliha is aware of having contributed to the violence that this early marriage represents for Saba, a choice guided by social traditions and framed by Meliha as the “destino” (33) of women. Meliha and Saba elaborate and accept the harshness of this female destiny in rural Albania at the beginning of the twentieth century, sharing the intimacy of a maternal embrace.

Saba si appoggia delicatamente sul grembo di Meliha. La madre passa il braccio intorno alle spalle della figlia e la rinchiude in un abbraccio. Guarda la faccia pallida, i piccoli seni, le mani da bambina su cui si vedono ancora i segni dell'henné rimasti dal giorno del matrimonio [...] Prima di morire penserà a sua madre con un altro sguardo. Lo sguardo di chi vede la propria vita intrecciata a mille altre vite insieme [...] Ma ci vorrà del tempo. Adesso lei può solo abbracciarla e abbracciarla ancora” (32)

In this scene of physical tenderness Meliha observes her daughter's body, still marked by the signs of childhood, and her hugs suggest a last moment of protection before Saba's prematurely forced entrance into adult life. The scene finds a reverse moment towards the end of the book, when it is Saba who has to take care of her mother, whose dead body is lying on the bed.

Quel mucchio di ossa sul letto è la madre che le ha dato la vita. Un destino nella forma di un corpo pieno di vene e rughe. Un sorriso lieve, le palpebre chiuse, e il seno bianco. Un seno secco, manifestato dolorosamente dal suo colore, il colore del latte. La lava passando un pezzo soffice di flanella bagnata in acqua di fiori di bosco. Le fa le trecce con i pochi capelli rimasti. (117)

In this passage it is Saba's turn to observe the mother's body, which is instead marked by the signs of old age. In both passages the prose focuses on the women's breasts, too young in the first image and too old in the second one. The bonding function of the milk previously raised is absent in both cases, perhaps to underline their lifelong conflict and the sourness of their mother-daughter relationship.

Similarly, Ornella Vorpsi depicts strongly passionate and conflicted relationships between mothers and daughters in many of her works. While a close reading of the representation of the female body in her first novel *Il paese dove non si muore mai* (2005) is given in the session "Osmotic Bodies" of this chapter, it is here relevant to highlight that Vorpsi's prose in general makes the body a pivotal element in the formation of female subjectivity. Homosexual and heterosexual erotic drives, suicidal tensions, fascination with aesthetic beauty, and patriarchal and socio-political awareness are just a few of the many body-related experiences in Vorpsi's narrative. In the physicality her narrative, the mother's body is one of the privileged spaces for the daughter to experience formative emotions, ranging from admiration to jealousy to love to fear. In other words, the bodily relations between mother and daughter are a space of formation and evolution of the emotional and psychological self of the daughter.

As an example of that, in the short novel *Vetri rosa* (2006) – a text that narrates

the early homosexual experiences between pre-teen girls and the premature death of the main character when she is seventeen – the body of the mother is framed as the refuge where one can be held and childhood fears can be quelled. “Mamma, urlavo, mentre la sua cara visione cominciava a scomparire. Mamma, un bacio! Mamma ti prego, per favore, ancora uno, uno solo poi vai” (21), asks the young protagonist of the novel on her first day of school. The mother’s kiss is the safe place and the source of strength to face the solitude and separation that the school represents for her, “un muro di cemento armato” (21).

In the novel *Fuorimondo* (2012) the figure of the mother is instead amplified to become the object of total admiration and profound love of Tamar, the novel’s female protagonist.

Cosa aveva fatto Esmé del mio smisurato amore? Di tante lacrime avevo sbiancato le sue foto di gioventù, pianti sconsolati per il giorno in cui i suoi capelli avrebbero perso il bagliore del biondo. Lei sola non doveva invecchiare. Cosa faceva Esmé quando correvo a perdifiato verso il suo giovane corpo offeso dal marito e dagli amanti, promettendo che l’avrei portata via? Via dove voleva lei, Dove vuoi che ti porti mamma? Cosa vuoi, dimmi, ti darò tutto, farò tutto. (110)

The passage reveals Tamar’s loving abnegation towards her mother, and her will and abiding need to protect her mother, as well as her mother’s body, from both the passing of life and the violence of lovers. The body of the mother is depicted as still young and beautiful, but Tamar’s fear of losing her makes her see her mother’s form as vulnerable, weak, and abused – something the prose consistently implies.

Despite the open admission of Tamar’s profound filial love, the passage suggests some distance between the two women, as Tamar addresses the mother using her first

name, Esmé, and rhetorically asks herself what Esmé has done with all Tamar's endless love. The text progressively sheds more light on this hinted fracture between them, revealing how Tamar's love is not reciprocated: Esmé instead loves Rafael, her younger child who has tragically drowned. Tamar reveals her partial responsibility in her brother's death, since she had encouraged Rafael to hold his breath under water to prove to his mom that he was immortal.

Additionally, Tamar and Rafael are children by two different men, one hated and the other loved by Esmé, and the same feelings are extended to the two children.

Mi guardava assente e poi con odio, mormorando che ero sua figlia, la figlia di lui, che la guardavo con i suoi occhi malvagi, e che almeno Rafi non gli somigliava [...] Dove correre per sotterrare lo sconforto? [...] Se Rafi non avesse visto la luce, Esmé mi avrebbe amata di più. Lui era la mia disgrazia, io ero la disgrazia di Esmé. (111)

This passage summarizes the painful dynamic of attraction and rejection between daughter and mother that runs through the whole text. This dynamic informs Tamar's sense of self, consistently described in terms of lack and emptiness, a life in a space which is not of this world, rather outside of it – the *fuorimondo* of the title.

The absence of the mother in the formation of Tamar's personality is also linked to the unavailability of Esmé's body. Tamar doesn't find any space on her mother's lap for rest or consolation, she has no possibility for embraces or closeness to the maternal and adored body, a physical interaction that Tamar recognizes is possible and foundational for other girls.

Le bambine corrono sempre verso la madre, tra le pieghe della sua gonna,

affondano il viso nel grembo e rimangono zitte in quell'eterno tiepido [...] La madre era il prolungamento delle loro piccole gambe e mani, era i capelli fini diventati densi e forti. Esmé non aveva grembo, e soprattutto non aveva nessuna intenzione di cogliere l'immenso cruccio che provavo per lei. (111)

The passage underlines a general continuity between the mothers' and daughters' bodies, and the extent to which daughters will physically grow into the image of their mothers. The absence of a similar connection is for Tamar the basis of her neurosis and her tension towards death.

Literary Bodies

While the mother is a bodily presence in the works discussed so far, the mother becomes a literary instance in Gëzim Hajdari's poetic production. While several of his collections, such as *Peligorga* and *Spine nere*, make references to the mother and the importance of her presence in the formation of Gëzim's poetic voice, it is above all his last work *Nûr: Eresia e Besa* (2012), that transform the mother into a literary character. The text weaves together the real mother of the poet, Nûr, with the literary figure of Duruntina and Costantino's epic mother. As per the Albanian literary tradition, in the text Nûr becomes the mythical figure that asks her son Gëzim to come back from the dead in order to fetch her only daughter, Doruntina – the last of her children who have died at war – and bring her back to the lonely mother. Nûr is thereby transcended from real figure to purely poetic element.

The literary treatment of the maternal figure in *Nûr: Eresia e Besa* corresponds to the treatment of the very body of the poet across different collections of Hajdari's production. It is especially *Corpo presente* (1999) that explicitly expresses the physicality

of Hajdari's poetry, poetry of a kind that is possible only through the existence and movement of the body. The body's vibrations and tremors generate the composing process. Andrea Gazzoni, in his introduction to the monographic collection of essays *Poesia dell'esilio*, samples passages from different works by Hajdari to show the high recurrence of the combination of body and poetry across his poetic production. According to Gazzoni "[l]a poesia del corpo in Hajdari è solo in minima parte una sensuale, gioiosa effusione: nel suo insieme essa è invece un'esperienza, in figure, del corpo come processo tragico che tenta la sua catarsi, la purificazione attraverso il tremore. [...] Il corpo diventa suono, voce, parola, esponendosi alla vibrazione dell'esilio" (36-37). Gazzoni convincingly highlights how the body of the poet is recurrently the privileged space for poetic vibrations. The reader witnesses a sort of incarnation of the poetic voice, which finds articulation through the tremor of the body.

Këndoj trupin tim të pranishëm
lindur hapsirës së ftohtë
që s'spremon asgjë (10)

Canto il mio corpo presente
nato da questo freddo spazio
che nulla promette (11)

These opening lines of *Corpo presente* establish an overlap between the singing – intended to represent the poetic voice – and the body, which is at the same time the source and the content of the poetry. The poetic body is linked to a real and metaphorical cold space, one that can be interpreted as the spatial-temporal location generated by the poet's condition of exile. The poetic voice exists in the two categories of the "now" and "here," insofar as it is a "present" body which comes into existence in "this" cold space.

Vazhdoj në gjelbërimin e konsumuar
e s'mbart asgjë veç trupit tim.

Procedo nel verde consumato
E non porto nulla oltre il mio corpo.

Trupi im i çjerrë
do të tingëllojë nën shira balkanese
Si të të bëj strehë në trupit tim
prej balte dhe hijeje?

Il mio corpo lacerato
suonerà sotto piogge balcaniche (99)
Come ospitarti nel mio corpo
di fango e di ombre? (107)

This selection of verses, together with the quotation that opens this chapter, reinforces the centrality of the body in the poet's migrant and exilic condition. The body is the only belonging that he carries in his displacement, a body that is torn and consumed, restless, and hunted by shadows. The reference to the mud-body suggests the image of a rudimental building, the space of a dwelling or a shelter. The body is ultimately – and simultaneously – the space inhabited by the poetic voice, and the instrument that will articulate that poetic voice.

The poetic body is one of the themes that run through all of Hajdari's works. A passage in the collection *Spine nere* (2004) suggests the interconnection between different collections when we read:

Përse këto plagosje gurësh në trupin tend
Përse vragat e tua kullojnë gjak
Dhe në lëkurë gjëmbe të zinj?

Perchè queste ferite di pietra nel tuo corpo
Perchè le tue stigmate perdono sangue
E nella pelle le spine nere? (101)

The wounded body of these verses is the space of Hajdari's entire poetic production, as each verse auto-referentially links back to the works *Sassi contro vento* (1995), *Stigmate* (2002), and *Spine nere*. Hajdari's poetry as a whole is an artistic manifestation based on the ability of the body to resonate to the experience of migration.

As seen in the above critical excursus, Albanian-Italian literature maps a constellation of bodies at the intersection of multiple forces, internal and external,

emotional and socio-political, national and international, so that migration appears above all as a physical experience. In this light, Ornella Vorpsi's first novel, *Il paese dove non si muore mai*, cuts across this variety of forces and maps the complex articulation of female bodies as spaces of social and political meaning, both when they are in communist Albania and when they migrate to capitalist Italy.

Osmotic Bodies: A close reading of Ornella Vorpsi's Il paese

Il paese dove non si muore mai (2005), Ornella Vorpsi's first novel, narrates the life of one girl, who, like many others, grows up under the dictatorial regime of Enver Hoxha and who ultimately migrates from communist Albania to capitalist Italy. The novel maps a reality in which the female body is a ground for the articulation of personal, social, political and international tensions. The female body emerges as the pivotal element of the narration, becoming the privileged space for a reflection on how the female subjectivity is shaped, first informed by gender dynamics in a patriarchal society, then marked by the norms of communist discipline, and lastly re-codified and re-read in the transit between different economic and cultural systems. Such forces and displacements inscribe the body as a "text," making it both an active and a passive element at the same time.

Vorpsi's text narrates about bodies that need to be covered, punished, operated, and disciplined in the name of the party to contain their vital eroticism, a force that subverts the patriarchal and political order of communist Albania. At the same time, the very same bodies are deliberately exposed, adorned to be beautiful and visible, so that they can express the femininity and sexuality that they are denied by Albanian patriarchal

society and communist law. In this tension between repression and exposition, the female body is the point of junction and articulation between an external objectifying pressure and an internal subjectifying response. The body is the osmotic tool between a social exteriority and an emotional-psychological interiority, the coexistence of which shapes the individual.

Elisabeth Grosz has theorized this duplicity in her works *Volatile Bodies* (1994) and *Space, Time, and Perversion* (1995), two texts advocating for a rewriting of feminism that is based on the specificity of the female body. Grosz considers the corporal and sexual difference as the founding element of the subject, “the very ‘stuff’ of subjectivity” (1994, ix). She elaborates on the concepts of “lived body” and “inscriptive body.” While the first concept “refers largely to the lived experience of the body, the body’s internal or psychic inscription,” the second approach “conceives the body as a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed” (1995, 33). According to Grosz there is neither separation nor synthesis between the two approaches, both of which are necessary to problematize the binary categories related to the body, such as inside/outside, subject/object, active/passive, and surface/depth. The female body theorized by Grosz, like the one narrated by Vorpsi, is therefore the hyphen between opposites, the osmotic element positioned between a psychological internal level of lived life and a socio-political exteriority.

Il paese dove non si muore mai opens with a body description.

È il paese dove non si muore mai. Fortificati da interminabili ore passate a tavola, annaffiati dal rachi, disinfettati dal peperoncino delle immancabili olive untuose, qui i corpi raggiungono una robustezza che sfida tutte le prove. La colonna vertebrale è di ferro. La puoi utilizzare come ti pare. Se

capita un guasto, ci si può sempre arrangiare. Il cuore, quanto a lui, può ingrassare, necrosarsi, può subire un infarto, una trombosi e non so cos'altro, ma tiene maestosamente. Siamo in Albania, qui non si scherza.
(5)

This narrative incipit describes the body in its mechanical functionality, torn to pieces to be described in its internal components, heart and vertebra, that challenge any disease. The body-machine is easily repairable, indestructible, and, as the title of the work underlines, it never dies. The enduring corporality of the passage is linked to the Albanian landscape. In a first transfusion between external and internal world, the nature of Albania, made of mud and dust, generates its children – the Albanian bodies. The underlying exterior deformity of those bodies, suggested by the image of the irregular cranium, is the sign of an interior deformity made of megalomania, lack of fear, intolerance, and unconsciousness. The body is therefore the osmotic surface that transforms the characteristics of the landscape into physical and moral qualities, which are intrinsic to the Albanian people.

While this first immortal body is not gendered, the narration moves quickly towards a gender distinction which is crucial for the entire work; “[l]a questione della puttania” (7) is soon introduced. This is the social obsession with the women’s virginity, a fixation that runs transversally across the Albanian society, equally preoccupying man and women of different age and class. It is part of the patriarchal logic, which divides the feminine universe in two precise categories: “una ragazza bella è troia, e una brutta – poverina! – non lo è” (7). According to this distinction, the esthetic declinations of the female body are the mirrors of a presupposed immorality and the mark of an inevitable destiny. In Vorpsi’s text, beauty and ugliness inscribe the body,

transforming it into a legible text, a body-text. The readers of that text master a denigrating and male chauvinist language that sees the female body as the expression of an interior immorality.

The image of the body-text aligns Vorpsi's novel with Grosz's analysis, according to which, in modern societies, "[t]he body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into [...] bodies are textualized, "read" by others as *expressive* of a subject's psychic interior" (35). The surface of the body is therefore written with numerous traces and meanings, such as clothing, tattoos, jewels, wounds, or gestures. For Grosz, these inscriptions are the external mirrors of a female subjectivity that resides in the interiority of the body. Surface and depth engage in a dialogue through the body, and, in so doing, they constitute the subject.

The female body-text is arbitrarily read by the patriarchal society. The narrating voice states: "Quando passi per la strada, i loro sguardi t'incrociano penetrandoti fino al midollo, così a fondo che il tuo essere diventa trasparente" (8). In this passage, the male gaze that inspects and reads the woman has a multiple meanings. It is primarily a violation of the flesh, an allegoric penetration that suggests a visual rape. At the same time, it erases the object of its very desire, making it into something transparent. In this sheerness of being, of self, Vorpsi pinpoints the most critical level of female objectification. The male gaze at the same time reads the body and cancels the subject. The body-text is the junction point between visibility and invisibility.

If beauty is the visible inscription of women's "puttaneria," the latter becomes even more visible in the case of unwanted pregnancies and their uncontrollable deformation of the body. "Un ventre riempito che non puoi nascondere da nessuna parte,

mica puoi saltar via da te stesso. Sei *timbrata*. Quella pancia riempita voleva dire: [...] nutrire vermi di vergogna, cibare un embrione che deformandoti il corpo esibiva la scopata concretizzata” (10). As the passage suggests, the pregnant body speaks again, revealing the secret and socially rejected act of sex outside marriage. The language is this time that of shame and filth, a language of social obscenity. The italic used for the word “timbrata” suggests the permanence of the condition of objects that women endure, reinforced by the uncontrollable growth of their wombs. They lose control of their body-texts, which during pregnancy inscribe themselves in disregard of any social taboo.

Some women in Vorpsi’s text try to free themselves from that shameful inscription, in an attempt to reconstitute themselves as non-marked individuals in the eyes of society. Abortion – psychologically and physically painful – is the tool they use to return to a “virgin” text, a non-written page. Abortion is however an illegal practice in the Albania of the novel, so that “il corpo viene lavorato a vivo, la vergogna [...] la tolgono mentre dal [...] corpo fuoriescono dei suoni disumani” (59). This attempt to regain a neutral and non-stigmatized subjectivity is therefore painful, an action that can only take place at the margins of society and outside of the law. Often the attempt fails and women are pushed out of life itself. This is the case for Kristina’s mother, for whom abortion becomes the tool of her death. “La morta era giovane, non più di ventisei anni. Aveva fatto l’amore, quella puttana, mentre il marito giaceva in prigione. La pancia le si era gonfiata. Togliere aveva voluto. Sangue, e poi sangue e ancora sangue le era colato tra le cosce finché si era svuotata tutta” (26).

While abortion is an act of cancellation of the body-text, or a subtraction of the body from the patriarchal code to re-establish female subjectivity, Dorina and Blerta

choose an extreme solution to end their pregnancies, and drown themselves in the lake of Tirana. Suicide is a voluntary destruction of the body that becomes the juncture between two opposite sides of a single dialectic. While on one hand suicide represents the open victory of patriarchy that oppresses women, on the other hand it is also an extreme rebellion against that code, an act of agency that negatively shapes the subject. Women, tragically subtracting themselves from men's control, are subjects *in absentia*.

Men's objectifying control is described in terms of ownership, given that "[i]n questo paese il marito ha un istinto molto sviluppato della proprietà privata" (7). In communist Albania, where any form of property is banned, the only socially acceptable property is that of the husband claiming ownership of the wife. Male control operates even from a distance, as the following passage highlights.

Quando il marito era via per affari o in prigione, si diceva alla donna che non avrebbe fatto male a ricucirsi un po' là sotto, in modo da convincerlo che aveva aspettato lui e soltanto lui, e che la sua dolorosa assenza le aveva ristretto lo spazio tra le cosce [...] Ah! Ingrid, Ingrid! Le tue cosce così bianche, così soavi, chi te le ha scucite ieri sera? Vieni bellezza, vieni che poi ti do i soldi per farti cucire un'altra volta. (7)

The image of the woman who stitches and unstitches her sex represents another declination of the dialectic of subjectivity and mythically recalls Penelope's weaving and unweaving her shroud to carve a space of autonomy. While on one hand women are trapped by the male social control and its logic of male property, on the other hand Vorpsi invites the reader to think about women as a body-fabric, on which they themselves can operate in order to shape their own subjectivity. The body-text here

becomes a body-fabric on which women can tailor themselves as subjects. In this conception women become at the same time cloth and seamstress, object and subject.

As the passage above infers, Vorpsi's narrative depicts a society based on control, one that recalls the Foucaultian analysis of the panopticon. As Michel Foucault states in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the idea of control creates in the confined individuals "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201) and assures self-discipline. It is the visibility concept that Vorpsi returns to most frequently in relation to the female body. In her novel, women are always too visible, everyone looks at them, everyone judges them, and the panoptical control becomes a tension between that seemingly inescapable visibility and the women's attempt to escape that control.

The panoptical social order is not only reproduced by men, as the novel is populated by women that contribute to it, internalizing the male gaze and supporting the male social laws. As an example, the aunt and cousin of the main character insult her and accuse her of "puttaneria" when she is still thirteen. Similarly a nurse insults a young woman who asks for her help for an abortion. In the novel, female control by other women is mostly fueled by envy of beauty. "La mostruosa invidia delle donne l'ho visto in concreto dietro di lei. [...] L'avrebbero spolpata o mangiata viva, l'avrebbero gettata in pasto ai cani" (15) states the main character in describing the reaction of women to the beauty of her mother. Envy finds articulation in a desire to destroy the beautiful body, to strip the individuals out of their subjectivity, reducing them to mere flesh. While the female subject loses its visibility, the female body threatens to tower over envious women.

It is the schoolteacher, Dhoksi, that Vorpsi's narrative describes as being the human tool that inscribes the female body with social and communist discipline.

[C]ompagna Dhoksi con le gambe storte dettava legge. A me faceva lavorare duramente perché ne avevo bisogno. Ero figlia di un condannato politico, quindi dovevo impregnarmi d'educazione comunista più degli altri perché ero a rischio, anche a causa della mia avvenenza, che mi stava conducendo senza dubbio verso la perdizione. (19)

While the passage once more draws a connection between beauty and moral dissolution, it also remarks on its destructive force vis-à-vis the political order in communist Albania. The teacher, Dhoksi, is indeed not contaminated by beauty in the eyes of the authorities, since the deformity of her legs erases any potential appeal in the eyes of communist Albanian society. Therefore she can be the perfect tool of communist education through systematic punishments that center upon a mortification of the students' body. Dhoksi whips the beauty of their bodies with a white-hot ruler.

Quel righello in mano a Dhoksi ha baciato il mio corpo chissà quante volte, nel nome del Partito e dell'educazione, di Avni Rustemi e di tutti i compagni eroi popolari [...] disegna[ndomi] miriadi di strisce di pelle bruciacchiata sulle cosce e sulla schiena. A volte in mezzo alla lunghezza della striscia si creavano delle bollicine piene d'acqua. [...] al rientro da scuola era già buio, così potevo nascondere gli occhi gonfi di pianto e con questi anche il mio terrore, mentre mi svestivo e scivolavo nel letto come una ladra, cercando di nascondere i segni rossi e violacei che avevo sul corpo. (20-22)

The long passage links the Albanian communist discipline and female corporality, as through severe and repeated beatings the individuals are forcefully re-inscribed in the image of the moral and socio-political order. The political management of the body

recalls other Foucaultian concepts, such as the spectacle of punishment. Studying the practice of torture, widespread before the birth of prison, Foucault argues that the public violence inflicted to the body of the guilty, “exposed alive or dead to public view” (198), is a way for the state to visibly punish the crime and infuse society with sentiments of shame and terror. Vorpsi moves the spectacle from the town square to the classroom, which emerges as the strongest of communist institutions. The marks left on the student’s body by Dhoksi’s ruler are a source of shame and guilt for the victim and an emotional memento for the spectators.

Dhoksi’s ruler is another of the tools that inscribe the female body. Marking the body-text of women with the violence of the regime, Dhoksi’s ruler recalls Grosz’s argument of the incarnation of laws. “Bodies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativized: simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become incarnated” (35), states Grosz, showing the extent to which bodies are inscribable surfaces crossed and infiltrated by several declinations of political or social power. According to Grosz the body is “pliable to power,” recalling the similar definition of “docile body” espoused by Foucault. In both definitions, power determines the body’s function in economic, social and political spheres, be that the factory, the school, or the army. The embodiment of power places the body in the middle ground between writing and reading. Communist power writes its purple marks on the character’s body, and through those marks remains visible to the world’s eyes.

Besides inscribing the body through corporal punishment, the communist discipline acts also through the military training to which girls are regularly called.

La mia uniforme militare mi sta stretta. Essendo alta, non sono nella norma che hanno stabilito per coprire i corpi delle adolescenti in Albania. In guerra non si sa mai cosa ti può capitare, mi hanno risposto, quindi un'uniforme stretta e le scarpe troppo larghe sono una sofferenza davvero minima in rapporto alla guerra. [...] non riesco a riempire d'aria il torace a causa dei bottoni che mi stringono il petto, trascino le scarpe che sono lunghe e larghe e hanno un chiodo testardo che entra ed esce infilandosi sempre nella stessa piaghetta, apparsa tre giorni fa. Ho messo un pezzo di cartone sotto il piede, per impedire al chiodo di sbirciare di nuovo il tunnel di carne fresca. (78)

The passage indicates how the proportions of each body are constrained in a standardized military uniform, and ironically teases the communist concept of equality while also establishing a new form of corporal punishment. The uniform indeed prevents basic vital functions like breathing and walking. The suffering of war for which the girls are training becomes a daily constant, and generates the disarticulation and breakdown in coordination of physical movements.

The constant physical pain that the girls experience, trapped as they are in the uniform and in the practices of training – such as shooting from the bunker where the noise becomes deafening – is intended by the regime as a way to make them internalize the discipline, but it instead transforms into mental illness. Ina, the narrating voice in this episode, makes her body scream in protest; “Io impazzisco, capite, sto impazzendo! – e qui, dal mio polmone esaurito di non-sonno, di tanti tè, di settantadue giovani ragazze, di maschere a gas che mi soffocano, di vestiti che mi stringono – proprio qui, con mio enorme stupore, il corpo indebolito ebbe la forza, di lanciare un urlo tale che il dottore, per quanto militare, si spaventò” (80). The communist attempt to inscribe the body with

discipline is psychologically internalized, showing once more how the body is the osmotic filter between outside and inside worlds.

Grosz explains this process of internalization of the external world through the Lacanian image of the Möbius strip, which by twisting and closing in on itself represents “the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the way in which [...] one side becomes another. This model also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporal exterior, by showing [...] the torsion of the one into the other” (xii). Grosz uses this figure to explain how mind and body are not two distinct substances or two attributes of the same substance, but rather are a single osmotic entity. According to this reading, through the body the external is internalized and the internal in turn emerges on the surface. Vorpsi’s subjects exist in this space of articulation; while the body surface is wounded, a constant movement toward madness and death manifests from the inside to the outside.

The communist regime, through the impersonality of the uniforms, deprives the individuals of the management of their own bodies, which instead become bodies of the state. “«Imparare a difendere la patria, per di più la nostra, invidiata da tutto il mondo per la sua marcia così riuscita verso il comunismo», dice il nostro compagno, il Timoniere Enver Hoxha” (81). This is what Ina repeats to herself each time she enters a bunker to learn how to defend the homeland. It is still Michel Foucault in “The Political Technology of Individuals” – one of the lessons he presented at the College de France, in which he analyses the relations between state and individuals – who argues that “the individual becomes pertinent for the state insofar as he can do something for the strength

of the state” (409). Foucault states that this acknowledgement is the beginning of the state investment in the control and wellbeing of its people. Foucault’s definition of “biopower” is better elaborated in *The History of Sexuality* and indicates the “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (140). In agreement with this view, Vorpsi’s narrative gives to school and military training the power to control female bodies, which are central to homeland protection, survival of the regime, and reproduction of its ideology. The painful treatment of the body and its wounds that she gives voice to harshly allegorizes the corrosive nature of the Albanian communist state.

The public wellbeing of the Foucaultian “biopower,” necessary in his estimation if citizens are to be responsive to and in agreement with the state, disappears from Vorpsi’s novel, replaced instead with physical aggressions, deportations, and incarcerations. The state regulates habits, practices, health and family, but does not guarantee the protection of the physical life. Many people in the novel are jailed, deported, or pushed into suicide. This is the case for Bukuria and her daughter Ganimete, who have chosen prostitution as a form of survival.

Le hanno prese una settimana fa e le hanno internate [...] le hanno punite per immoralità. [...] Lei e Bukuria adesso staranno lavorando nei campi, zappando la terra, raccogliendo il mais, rieducandosi. Con il divieto assoluto di allontanarsi da casa – l’internato è una mezza prigione – lavoreranno senza essere pagate, controllate a ogni passo, vivranno in una baracca di fango, odiate dalla gente del villaggio perché sono puttane.” (47)

The passage insists on the responsibility of the state in the suicide of the two women, suggesting that the Foucaultian concept of “biopower” is in Vorpsi’s novel rather

transformed into a “state of exception,” as articulated by Giorgio Agamben. The philosopher discusses the suspension of the juridical order that occurs as response to moments of political crisis. Analyzing Nazism, Agamben explains how the “state of exception” is essential to the creation of modern totalitarisms, since they “can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (2).

Seen through this lens, Bukuria and Ganimete are part of the category of citizens who do not participate to the moral reproduction of the state, and therefore they cannot be integrated into the social body. Conversely, through the free use of their bodies and their sexuality they attempt to escape the constrictive system. For this reason, they are jailed and trapped in a space of suspended rights, subjected to a regimen of heavy physical work and relentlessly invasive vigilance that ultimately lead them to suicide. “Ganimete e Bukuria erano morte. Si erano impiccate tutt’e due con lo stesso filo elettrico che scendeva in mezzo alla loro stanza nell’internato. [...] un filo elettrico piantato così forte da tenere appesi i corpi magri delle due puttane, intrecciati gola a gola” (49). The destruction of their bodies equals the further destruction of a state based on individual rights.

The punishment of Ganimete and Bukuria’s sensuality is the highest degree of negation of subjectivity. Their sensual bodies cannot take part in the destiny of the nation; they cannot be historical subjects and participate in the communist ideology’s version of “proper” popular revolution. The removal of sensuality from the idea of popular freedom and nation building is evident in the manipulation of Delacroix’s

painting, *La libertà guida il popolo*, a piece that the main character studies at school. She asks her grandfather: “Ma nonno, cos’è questo brutto scherzo? Nel mio libro di storia lei ha i seni coperti da una stoffa bianca, e nell’enciclopedia dell’Italia capitalista i suoi seni svolazzano in aria. Qual’è il quadro vero? Non è che gli italiani vogliono compromettere la figura della donna, e insieme a lei anche la rivoluzione?” (76). These are the questions Ina asks, as she tries to make sense of the differences between the two versions of the same image, the original one with naked breasts and the “corrected” one with breasts covered. Even the painted body of Liberty is framed as a threshold between two different economic systems, East and West, communism and capitalism. Albanian ideology erases sensuality from the representation of the nation and revolution.

Ina’s questions about the relation between sensuality and freedom do not find an answer in the text. They remain open issues, as they are meant to stress the meaninglessness of the stigmatization of the sensual body, which in her eyes is instead a freeing power vis-à-vis the female subjectivity. “*La sensualità che guida il popolo*, così doveva intitolarsi [il quadro] – forse la rivoluzione ha a che fare con la sensualità, o forse può riuscire grazie alla sensualità? Perché no? [...] *La libertà* possedeva dei seni così abbaglianti [...] aveva il potere di sedurre e incantare e non sembrava aver allattato” (68) says the main character, reflecting on the revolutionary force of the female body. Showing the body, therefore, can be a way to claim freedom from the patriarchal structure and from the female model of woman-mother-worker that the regime demands. As the passage suggests, the revolutionary freedom-woman is not necessarily a mother, given that she never breastfed.

The awareness of having beautiful bodies and the attention given to aesthetic care is a channel for the women in the novel to reconstitute themselves as subjects in the face of a society that seeks to objectify them. In Vorpsi's female universe, Ina's mother is the first woman to be re-codified according to her corporality. Emotional fragility and brittle physicality are the major characteristics of Diella. "Pure lei era carne e ossa. Questo mi doleva, mentre mi stringevo al suo corpo, al suo odore che conoscevo da sempre" (13) states little Ina, reflecting on the images of an anatomy book. Muscles, bones, blue veins, in the eyes of the child, provide a mix of "robe strane e colorate, al di fuori della nostra volontà" (13). That invisible mixture of parts, concealed inside the body, reveals the unreliability of the body, and the loss of control over our physical life. The mother's fragility resides in the precarious balance of those body parts that can so easily be swept away.

While the biological inner condition of the body constitutes a weakness of the subject, its inscribable exteriority is instead the ground on which the strength of women can emerge, in its resistance against the patriarchal and communist code. Diella's body is elegant, refined, adorned to be desired; it is inscribed with objects and gestures that determine a language of female existence.

Mia mamma è molto bella, impiegava ore a curarsi, gonfiava i capelli cotonandoli, metteva un nero leggero attorno alle labbra, indossava vestiti attillati in vita, si metteva a tracolla una borsetta colorata cucita da lei, e dopo essersi guardata più volte allo specchio usciva [...]. Gli uomini le sussurravano – Come sei bella Diella, vorrei mangiarti tutta intera! Le tue gambe Diella, oh santo Dio, sono perfette come una bottiglia di champagne. [...] Così lei incedeva lungo il vialone, si riempiva di complimenti ardenti passando con la testa altissima, la schiena dittrissima, facendo finta di disprezzare tutto ciò. (15-16)

Diella manipulates her own figure, she enhances it with jewels and gestures, and she shows it with pleasure in her walks through the village. The narcissistic care that Diella reserves for her own body recalls and challenges the Freudian understanding of narcissism. In “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” Freud claims that the narcissistic behavior of women is an attempt to compensate for the lack of the phallus, and to become the object of desire. Diella’s narcissism functions in a more complex way, opening the path to a renewed ownership of physical pleasure and the use of the body as a space for freedom and construction of the self.

Diella’s body is instead the page on which her *écriture féminine* is inscribed. It is exactly in the relationship between body and writing that Hélène Cixous bases her *écriture féminine* in her piece “The Laugh of The Medusa.” “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (875). With these words Cixous exhorts women to write about themselves. Female writing must reappropriate the female body, and speak through it to break free from the censorship that afflicts women and makes them mute. Cixous’s argument draws a parallel between text and body when she states “Text: my body” (882). Vorpsi’s Diella inhabits this space of overlap. Through the manipulation of her own body, Diella re-forms the subject, cutting a space of action through seduction.

Body-care practices such as combing the hair, putting on makeup and wearing flattering dresses constitute the language of Diella’s feminine writing, through which she traces visible marks on her own body and she crafts it into something legible and desirable. Body care is cultural potentiation of the physical body through which the subject can emerge and express its sexual power. According to Grosz, “libidinal

intensifications of bodily parts are surface effects, [which] are not simply superficial, for they generate an interior, an underlying depth, individuality, or consciousness” (34). In line with this, Diella’s aesthetic and erotic intensification of her own body results in the construction and expression of her subjectivity. The body is again the surface of osmosis between the psychic interiority and the social exteriority of the person.

Similarly to Diella, other women are aware of their beauty and indulge in a spectacle of their young sensuality.

Anila ha un sedere che i pantaloncini neri fanno risultare maestoso. Anila lo sa. Quando giochiamo a pallacanestro lei è impaziente di togliersi i vestiti. Noi, le ragazze della classe, tratteniamo il fiato per un attimo, cercando di capire per l’ennesima volta che cos’è che rende il suo sedere così magnifico. [Lei] va e viene correndo, mostrando spietatamente a tutte noi il suo sedere sublime, le sue cosce lisce la cui forma non viene alterata dal correre. Quello che lei possiede è una bellezza intatta. (53)

The passage shows the extent to which Anila uses her beauty as a response to the patriarchal language. Her shorts are made “belli grandi per nascondere tutto quel che potrebbe risultare sensuale o attraente alla vista” (52), however the simple gesture of getting undressed to reveal her legs indicates a feminine freedom that changes their meaning. Anila is aware of her body, a body that she exposes to be admired.

As the passage shows, the novel is infused with homoerotic tension between the schoolmates, and maps the full sensorial experience of the main character. From viewing and admiring the body, the narrative transitions to the touch and smell when Denata’s body is described.

[...] nell'affetto che mi stava dimostrando, d'un tratto la sua mano mi sfiorò il viso e io sentii l'odore delle sue mani, che sapevano di sesso. Piena di un nuovo interesse nei suoi confronti, in seguito ho fatto attenzione all'odore delle sue mani, per poi rendermi conto che sapevano sempre di sesso, dell'esalazione del suo sesso. (53-54)

The shift of the text from the eyes to the hands makes the body concrete on the page, and indicates the materialization for the character of the awareness of female physicality and sexuality. Homoeroticism remains at the stage of tension for Ina, and functions as the moment in which she becomes conscious of the attractiveness of the female body. Through the sensorial experience of the friends' bodies the subject marks a growth towards sexual maturity.

Moving from the anxious hugs of the mother, through the painful punishment of the teacher Dhoksi and the military training, to the sensorial experience of the friends' bodies, it can be argued that the character's growth is marked by distinctive physical moments. She learns how to construct her subjectivity through body and senses, tickled by beauty and pain. Not by chance, the sexual maturation of the main character, defined by the arrival of her first period, happens after a violent hepatitis that forces her into a hospital for a month.

Tre giorni dopo il vaccino, la febbre mi demolisce e il corpo mi prude dappertutto. Sono coperta di chiazze rosse che non smettono di chiedermi di grattarle, mentre annuncio a mia mamma a notte fonda: - Sto morendo, *ma*, sto morendo. – Il medico non mi tocca: - Ha la lebbra, - dice avviandosi frettoloso. [...] Sono uscita dall'ospedale [...] ho dei seni, dei piccoli seni che mi dolgono tanto e che cambiano la morfologia del mio corpo. Anche un certo tipo di sangue mi bagnò le cosce. (96)

The passage frames her puberty in terms of painful metamorphosis. In between life and death, Ina moves away from childhood through visible corporal signs, marks inscribed on the surface of her body. Childhood is consumed in small red stains, it burns with a violent fever, and leaves space for the small breasts of adult life to develop. Menstrual blood completes the inscription of the new body-text, as the ink of a new language. If according to Cixous and the previously mentioned *écriture féminine* a woman “writes in white ink,” (881) which is the mark of her inseparable connection to the maternal milk, Vorpsi ties feminine writing and the birth of the active subject to the menstrual blood.

The first period read as a birth is a reading also guided by the last change of name that the character undergoes, from Ornela to Ina and finally to Eva. Eva is the fulcrum between three narrative strands. While she recalls the origin and the first woman – for her name but also for her characterization as sinful and temptress – she is also the last woman, the one that is created after a long path of physical transformation. To this initial binary, a third meaning is added, insofar as Eva is the embodiment of a migrant passage. The narrative, shifting as it does from a first person voice to third person one, introduces the theme of the migratory movements of female subjects, Eva and her mother, who move from communist Albania to capitalist Italy.

The last chapter of the novel is entitled “Terra promessa,” as Italy, “la terra tanto sognata” (108), is sarcastically defined. In the novel Italy sporadically appears in the form of postcards, daydreams of the girls who fantasize about finding foreign husbands, or the memory of the elder who recalls the Fascist occupation. “A volte [il nonno] mi sta di fianco mentre continuo il mio lavoro, e dopo un po’ so che comincerà a parlarmi dell’Italia fascista. – Si stava proprio bene ai tempi dell’Italia, mica questa povertà come

oggi, eh quelle belle cose! Adesso non posso neanche esercitare il mio mestiere” (63). The passage, ironically celebrative of Italy, invites the reader to a post-colonial reflection on the historical connections between Albania and Italy, as analyzed in Chapter One. Ornela’s grandfather is portrayed in a conversation with a friend who lost his memory and still thinks they are in World War II. In doing so, the text points at the memory loss of the interconnections between the two countries and encourages a reading of the most recent Albanian emigration as a possible post-colonial legacy.

Eva and her mother’s migratory trajectory is placed in this context. In the last chapter of the novel, Italy, this desired “scenografia di ogni amore nascosto in fondo al cuore” (108), is destined to implode and be reconfigured as a place of solitude, anguish, disease, and death. Albanians in Italy “[h]anno capito che lì si muore, e loro morire non vogliono” (111) reads the last sentence of the novel. In line with the rest of the text, it is through the body that the migrant subjects become aware both of the fleeting nature of life and the untruthfulness of their idea of paradise.

Eva and her mother, for instance, discover an Italian femininity that is different from that represented in Albania. “[Le donne] non avevano niente a che vedere con Sophia Loren e Gina Lollobrigida! Dov’era la famosa bellezza delle donne italiane? In quali luoghi si nascondevano le straordinarie mogli di casa, che pur circondate da tre figli avevano corpi sontuosi?” (108), wonders Eva in her first encounter with Italian women. The idealized body of Italian women is revealed as a mere media construction. Migration is an awakening moment that re-inscribes the foreign corporality according to different parameters.

In a similar way the migratory experience transforms Eva and her mother, too, making them into two strangers and as such their bodies are read through a different lens. Exiting the patriarchal and communist structure experienced in Albania, their bodies are redefined in agreement with capitalist and consumerist logic. “A quanto scopi?” (110) is the first question that an Italian man asks Eva’s mother, soon after the two women have landed in Italy. The dream of freedom that pushed them towards Italy crashes exactly on her body, which is mistaken for a body for sale. In a migratory context, therefore, their bodies are read as foreign bodies, somehow inscribed by an arbitrary language of not belonging and prostitution.

The text at this point stops and the reader is not informed of the coping strategies that the two women will put into place to shape their new migrant subjectivity to counter the objectifying forces of the West. The only indication in this regard is to be found in the short sentence “[p]resero l’autobus per Roma” (110), which suggests more geographical displacement and a degree of agency in finding a place that will host them. What can be said is that in a situation of migrancy, their bodies continue to be a critical point of overlap for cultural, linguistic, and economic systems.

In *Il paese dove non si muore mai* Vorpsi’s narrative maps a set of personal, social, political, and international forces which find a privileged space of articulation within the female body. Recalling the Lacanian image of the Möbius strip that Elisabeth Grosz so effectively makes articulate the link between social exteriority and psychological internality of the subject, Vorpsi narrates the script-ability of the female body, transforming it into a body-text or body-canvas. On these surfaces external events, social pressure, and political laws are inscribed, leaving visible marks. The bodies of

Vorpsi's women are flexible signifiers with multiple meanings, all of which are located at the intersection of gender relations, socio-political spheres and migratory movements. While on one hand the external forces aim to objectify women, on the other Vorpsi's narrative treats their bodies as agents of resistance and subjectivity. These bodies, though stigmatized by the patriarchal gaze, marked with blood by the repressive violence of the communist education systems and re-read through the Western gaze as objects of pleasure, still retain the strength to resist and take back the freedom to dress up, wear makeup, and move in ways that reestablish their subjectivity and a space of agency and freedom.

The female body in *Il paese dove non si muore mai* is the space of coexistence and articulation of crucial binary oppositions which are fundamental to autonomy, such as internal-external, surface-depth, private-public, active-passive, and in Vorpsi's case also East-West. Vorpsi's body is an osmotic entity on which multiple forms of power find articulation.

Notes for a Conclusion

From the arrival of the *Vlora* on Italy's shores in 1991 through the present day, the panorama of Italian literature has been enriched by the formation of a large body of works elaborated in Italian by authors of Albanian origin. This body of works joins other migrant voices from disparate corners of the world that choose Italian as their primary literary tool, thereby contributing to the development of what is commonly called Italian Migration Literature. The works analyzed here, due to the geographical trajectories they entail, their linguistic and thematic choices, and the socio-political implications they expose, can be more specifically defined as Albanian-Italian literature.

Spanning a variety of media and genres, this significant number of narrative voices proves impossible to be exhaustively framed and critically analyzed in a single work, therefore this final part of this analysis is not meant to be considered a conclusion of sort, but rather the space of a summative recollection of the findings that each chapter elaborated. These findings constitute a set of notes that are meant to open a door onto the thematic and theoretical richness of this new literary material and indicate possible paths towards a deeper understanding of how migrant literature interacts with and modifies the panorama of contemporary Italian literature. The Albanian-Italian literary experience, by its linguistic choices, the articulation of its themes, and the socio-political implication it conveys, is a disruptive and innovative force which challenges, reframes, and enriches

the very idea of Italian language and Italian literature, thereby intertwining it with a broader discourse on world literature.

The thematic approach, while not allowing the inclusion of all the authors and even less of all the works, proved to be a viable strategy to conduct a cohesive and focused critical discourse, one that aimed both to map the material in its most recurrent elements and to indicate possible theoretical lenses through which to read the contributions it gives to Italian literature. Through analysis of the multilayered theme of memory, one which spans from personal to collective, national and international memory, this set of works offers a well-defined perspective on the links between text and survival and redefinition of the migrant self. Furthermore, the elaboration of national and international historical memories reveals a double tendency: it is possible to register the birth of a strong post-communist narrative that both the displacement of migrants and use of the Italian language make viable, while the focus on past and present relations between Albania and Italy serves to deepen the recently born field of critical exploration of Italian colonialism. In this regard, Albanian-Italian voices integrate the already established north-south trajectory of Italian imperialism with a narration of the repeated cross-Adriatic military occupations of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Divided by a narrow stretch of water, Albania and Italy share a history of repeated political, cultural, and migratory interactions that involve the marine border. The analysis of this multilayered theme shows how the border is at once a geographical, emotional, and narrative space that provides the amniotic fluid in which the tale of migration has been born. At the same time, it is the space in which geographical, cultural, economic, and jurisdictional boundaries are negotiated. Borders – marine as well as terrestrial – and

the act of crossing them form a complex map of migratory pressures and movements, one which necessarily engages in a dialogue with contemporary theorizations of borderlands, frontiers, limits, and margins. Albanian-Italian literature frames borders in general, and the Mediterranean border in particular, as the major paradigm of globalization, informed as they are by the full range of personal, cultural, economic, juridical, and political tensions.

Coming from this perspective, it felt appropriate to link this material to contemporary theorizations of the Mediterranean, and in particular to Franco Cassano's concept of southern thought, insofar as Albanian-Italian literature places the Mediterranean at the center of the many migratory experiences and offers a southern gaze on the North. The consequent critical step that will need to be made is that of reorienting these coordinates from a South-North to an East-West perspective, investigating whether the Mediterranean perspective can become a more detailed Adriatic one, and determining whether specific characteristics can be highlighted in the body of Albanian-Italian literature. The post-communist literary force that emerged from this analysis seems to be the first brick in the construction of a Balkan- and Adriatic-centered narrative.

Albanian-Italian literature finds articulation almost entirely in Italian, and in doing so it joins the rest of the Italoophone literature in encouraging a reflection on the porosity of linguistic structures, language ownership, and readership in the increasing ethnic and linguistic complexity of Italian society. Albanian-Italian authors create a dislocation of Italian out of the fixity of its linguistic structures through a stylistic blending with other languages, and out of its national borders insofar as some of them use the language despite having left Italy for other countries. Through their works, Italian

itself becomes a migrant entity, in transit between spaces and between communities.

As shown, the adoption of Italian by Albanian migrants brings in a complex set of issues, which range from artistic to socio-political motivations. The Italian language contemporaneously channels the artistic relation of the authors with their texts, their diversely hyphenated identities, their problematic relationships with the sociopolitical forces in past and contemporary Albania, and the contemporary post- and neo-colonial negotiations between Italy and Albania.

Language and artistic production ultimately reside in the migrant body, which proves to be the crucial space of articulation for physical, gendered, social, political, and literary interactions. Hungry and tired bodies, sexualized bodies, socially and politically controlled bodies, dead bodies and literary bodies all inhabit Albanian-Italian narratives, revealing the extent to which migration is primarily and diversely a bodily experience.

The female body in particular is traversed by a complex set of conflicting national and international forces, in its movement from communist Albania to the capitalist Italy. The woman's body, like a text, is inscribed by the dynamics of power – be they patriarchal, social, or political – which aim to objectify, shape and lay claim to it. Her body, though vulnerable to that interference, is also a woman's primary available tool for resisting those forces and reestablishing herself as an independent subject. Interpreted as an interface or an osmotic threshold between the interior and psychic level of the subject and its social exteriority, the body is the pivotal center, and lasting physical testimony, of any migratory experience.

The selection of these major four themes necessarily left out other possible worthy candidates, such as the representation of space – interconnected with themes of

home, displacement, urban and rural spaces, and socio-spatial margins – or use of the fantastic to create surreal and oneiric narratives. Likewise, the thematic map left out authors such as Alban Ikonimi, Idalo Hoxhvoqli, and Darien Levani, younger authors who were born in Albania and were raised in Italy, so that their linguistic fluency and cultural/literary education are no different from that of native Italians. Being so far authors of just one text, these new writers seem to point at experimental and non-mimetic approaches to the genre of the novel, the analysis of which can offer additional productive critical strategies.

This is to say that Albanian-Italian literature is a large, growing, and organically evolving set of works. A different phase in Albanian-Italian relations, as Albania is preparing to join the European Union and international mobility is already a reality for Albanians, will likely soon be reflected in new literary voices with fresh textual approaches. Imminent also the appearance of second generation voices, one which will offer different themes and critical paths more in tune with the evolution of their Albanian-Italian identities. This analysis therefore, is meant to offer a few critical snapshots of a dense literary body just as it turns twenty. It is a young but vibrant new arrival to the Italian literary community, one that has endured and grown from a multitude of challenging environments, transitions and inputs, and one which merits further attention over the coming years.

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