

Cultural diversity in textbooks and children’s literature in Italy (1980-2000). Breakthrough or continuity?

La diversità culturale nei libri di testo e nella letteratura per l'infanzia in Italia (1980-2000). Svolta o continuità?

Maria Lucenti
Postdoctoral researcher
University of Hamburg

Abstract

The paper intends to study the construction of the childhood imagination on diversity starting from two different sources and narratives, aware of the fact that they have equally contributed to picturing and shaping ideas and images of one other on young minds. The contribution’s main aim is to highlight how cultural diversity has been represented in formal and informal education, through the analysis of textbooks and children’s literature. To this end, Italian textbooks and novels published from the 1980s to 2000 have been selected in order to retrace cultural changes at a historical level and how both school and children’s literature have responded to the challenges of an increasingly culturally heterogeneous society. The analysis showed that while the best children’s literature offers alternatives and *intercultural* models to the young readers who know how to recognize and choose a *good story* establishing a rupture with the representations conveyed in the texts and novels of previous decades. Textbooks, for their part, are placed in continuity, they are slow to recognise and value cultural diversity.

Keywords: cultural diversity, textbooks, children’s literature, imaginary, stereotypes.

Sommario

L’articolo intende analizzare la costruzione dell’immaginario infantile sulla diversità a partire da due distinte fonti e narrazioni, consapevoli del fatto che hanno contribuito in egual modo a rappresentare e plasmare idee e immagini sull’altro nei giovani. L’obiettivo principale del contributo è evidenziare come la diversità culturale sia stata rappresentata nell’educazione formale e informale, attraverso l’analisi dei libri di testo e della letteratura per l’infanzia. A tal fine sono stati selezionati manuali scolastici e romanzi italiani pubblicati dagli anni ‘80 al 2000 al fine di ripercorrere i cambiamenti culturali a livello storico e come sia la scuola che la letteratura per l’infanzia hanno risposto alle sfide di una società culturalmente sempre più eterogenea. L’analisi ha mostrato che la migliore letteratura per l’infanzia offre alternative e modelli *interculturali* ai giovani lettori che sanno riconoscere e scegliere una buona storia, stabilendo una rottura con le rappresentazioni veicolate nei testi e nei romanzi dei decenni precedenti. I libri di testo, dal canto loro, sono lenti nel riconoscere e valorizzare la diversità culturale.

Parole chiave: diversità culturale, libri di testo, letteratura per l’infanzia, immaginario, stereotipi.

1. Why study the representations of cultural diversity in narratives for children and adolescents. Approaches, perspectives and directions

The theme of cultural diversity in narratives aimed at children and young people in the field of formal education – for example, textbooks – and informal education, especially in children’s literature, has been widely explored by studies and research conducted in multiple countries and from different points of view. Beyond the analysis of the representations conveyed by educational media and children’s literature, other approaches appear of great interest, such as the cultural background of the authors (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019), or the habits of buyers (Welch, 2016). In this paper we will try to contextualize today’s debate, focusing on these multiple aspects and then focus on the representations conveyed both by school textbooks for primary school and by some narrative works dedicated to children published in the 80s and 90s.

This period, described as a turning point in Italian children's literature, also marks the profound transformation of our national context from a country affected by the migration emergency to a permanent and *normalization* of foreign families. These phenomena primarily concerned schools, where the presence of students of foreign origin increased exponentially. It certainly seems interesting to investigate how these changes have influenced the representations of cultural diversity both at school, through textbooks, and in leisure time reading.

In particular, the comparison between formal and informal education and the way in which these different dimensions have contributed to shaping a certain vision of cultural otherness proves to be extremely interesting. The paper intends to study the construction of the childhood imagination on diversity starting from two different sources and narratives, aware of the fact that they have equally contributed to representing and shaping such imagery of the other. The comparison between narratives destined to feed the childhood imagination in the field of formal and informal education can promote the understanding of changes that occurred in the imagination with regard to the theme of cultural diversity.

The stories for girls and boys, in this sense, not only lay bare aspects of the social and cultural reality in a given period, but they can also anticipate trends, changes, new models or, on the contrary, confirm trivializing and simplified visions. If the children's literature, in its best guise and experimentation, seems to embody more the first model, inclined to the prophetic gift of anticipating and reading the new imaginative paradigms, the textbook, far from being the spokesperson of a complex vision of reality, often proposes a superficial and stereotyped reading (Lucenti, 2018; Portera, 2000), in contradiction with the everyday life experienced by the children themselves.

Our starting hypothesis is therefore that the narratives enjoyed by children and young people in their free time, in the context of informal education, have encouraged the introduction of new paradigms and gradually contributed to representing all types of diversity – cultural, religious, gender, family, etc. – while textbooks, on the contrary, tend to represent a crystallized reality, anchored to traditional values, which does not give space to social changes, present in the same classes attended by children. The need to carry out a study that reconstructs the representations of diversity in stories intended for children arises from the awareness that children are recipients of stereotypes and prejudices present in the wider social context. Children not only absorb such prejudicial representations but manifest them openly without those filters that characterize the adult world. An example of this is shown by the research conducted by Paola Tabet and published in 1997 in the book *La pelle giusta* (The right skin).

Tabet shows us a disturbing picture of the childhood imagination in comparisons of melanin diversity. The author analyses the arguments of girls and boys between the age of 7 and 13 in elementary and middle schools throughout the Italian national territory regarding the following outline proposed to them: «If my parents were black» (Tabet, 1997). In the arguments developed by children and young people a sort of homogeneity emerges, guided by recurring elements in almost all themes, such as fear: «If my parents were black, I would send them out even if they were good. Because I am afraid of blacks because they kill children and do harm» (p. 30); disgust: «If my parents were black and I was white it would be disgusting to be close to them [...] When I return home I would chase them away, because they stink» (p. 38), «If my parents were black I do not make me eat with those black hands, me I'd make dinner and lunch»; shame: «If my parents were black, I think I would have locked myself up inside some house and would never go out again, me I would be ashamed to death because they are all rags and have nothing to eat» (p. 43); contempt: «If my parents were black maybe they would be poor and then

murderers, criminals, thieves» (p. 55); strategies discursive aimed at denial: «If my parents were black I wouldn't like them because they are ugly. I would return them to the way they are now. I could take them from a veterinarian. But my parents painted themselves because they are white» (p. 88); the refusal: «If my parents were black, I would throw them out of the house because they are too ugly. If I was black, I would kill myself» (p. 120). The representations were extremely prejudicial and steeped in racism of Italian children born between the beginning and the end of the eighties, far from being a *extraordinary fact* trace reality well rooted in the collective imagination, but not always easy to *look* with critical eyes.

Children who were born between 1991 and 1994 – the time frame in which Tabet conducted research – they write that for nothing in the world they would like to have black parents, coming to hypothesize their own death or that of their parents like *final solution* aimed at *normalizing* reality, are the same as on the benches of school they read, study, do exercises and learn also thanks to textbooks. They also read stories at home, watch television, movies, cartoons. Therefore, the analysis of a corpus of textbooks and novels appears to be of great interest, which, albeit not representative or exhaustive – since we are not considering the role of other media, narratives or parental education for instance – it shows us a cross-section of the representations on diversity in different sources. One of the main objectives of the paper is to overcome at a methodological level the classical division between formal and informal education, starting from the assumption that childhood and youth imagination is not fragmented, but equally nourished by all the life contexts of which the child and the teenager experiences in daily life. All the narratives, therefore, combine to structure the child's thought and representations. Hence the need to study narrative sources in an integrated way according to a criterion of continuity, rather than discontinuity.

2. Current studies on inclusive children's literature. Some examples at international level

More research highlights still today «the pervasive whiteness of children's literature» so much so that «whiteness is ubiquitous in children's literature, despite almost fifty years of work to promote racial equality in the field» (Welch, 2016, p. 368). The author, in addition to denouncing the lack of diversity in contemporary children's literature, underlines how the choices of consumers to buy titles where diversity is not sufficiently represented, negatively affects the reproduction of stereotypes, reinforcing the unique representations that see the stories populated by Western children and especially white and male children. This lack of diversity (Francis *et al.*, 2018) affects both white children, to the extent that «white children do not often see, think about, or become invested in characters of colour» (p. 373), and children of colour¹, as this «render valuable goods less accessible to children of colour than to white children» (p. 369). But what exactly does the author mean when he speaks of the pervasiveness of whiteness in children's literature? According to a study published by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), of the 3,200 books they received in 2013, 93 were about black characters, 34 were about American Indians, 69 were about Asians and 57 were about Latinos (p. 370). According to Reckermann (2020), the values underlying school education mirror and reflect wider society – such as tolerance, equality, open-mindedness, respect, helpfulness, cooperativeness, politeness, fairness, reliability – meaning diversity must be placed at the centre of the narratives: «teachers cannot ignore diversity issues in their daily teaching practice and should therefore cater to multiple situations that bare the potential to raise awareness of them» (p. 135). Amadu Maddi e MacCann (2008) underline how little has

changed since Schmidt's 1981 volume and the adjectives that the author had identified about the representation of Africa and African children – queer, frenzied, heathen, dirty, naked, passionate, blood-thirsty, simple, barbaric, quant, hideous, black, ugly, strange, mysterious, unbelievable, cruel, primitive, weird, grotesque, romantic, wild, frightful, hostile, instinctual, splendid, inhuman, dangerous, formidable, faithful, dark, stupid, surly, crafty, greedy, ecstatic, backward, melancholy, and terror-stricken – they are still in vogue almost 30 years later. In an interview with Professor and author Amadu Maddi by Donnarae MacCann and Olga Richard in 1995, the author immediately highlighted the lack of objectivity and complexity when it comes to representing Africa in children's literature, as well as in other media:

The West (Euro-Americans) must stop treating Africa as if it belongs to another planet. The continent of Africa, like any of the other five continents, has as great a physical and cultural variety. Africa is a continent of nations and not (just) warring tribes as portrayed by the Western media (p. 1).

The author also underlines that if some picture books continue to represent Africa in a hyper-simplified way on the basis of stereotypes of the Western matrix, while others are more interesting, they convey distorted information that comes from the lack of knowledge of African realities and often confuse geographical areas associating them with traditions and cultures that do not belong to the latter. Koss (2015) analyses 455 picture books published in 2015 in the United States and his conclusions are not very different from those highlighted so far:

Results of this study show that children who interact with current picture books predominantly see White faces and receive the message that to be White is to be better. Finding books depicting non-White characters, particularly books depicting culturally specific elements, is rare (p. 37).

Despite the growth of diversity in the US context, picture books that represent this diversity in a non-stereotypical way remain rare. And, as the author points out, even rarer are the books written and illustrated by authors with a plural or different cultural background from the majority white, Western, male. Ramdarshan Bold (2019) also dealt with the presence of authors of colour, analysing the obstacles that they encounter in the UK publishing industry and how the lack of diversity in children's and YA literature is also linked to a substantial absence of the authors of colour in the publishing industry.

These examples, if not exhaustive of the many studies conducted in recent decades both in English-speaking contexts and elsewhere, are useful to contextualize and understand some of the current research issues on diversity in children's literature. Starting from studies conducted above all in the United States and the United Kingdom, where research on diversity in narrative media and literature is consolidated, is certainly useful to understand the extent of these reflections in the Italian context.

3. Cultural diversity in textbooks: extraneousness or repression?

Italian textbooks in the eighties and nineties are characterized by the abundant offer – the result of a specific editorial strategy – and by a growing presence of images, diagrams, concept maps and graphics. These elements, far from giving the textbook higher quality standards, respond to market rules for which the tendency is to publish updated editions, while maintaining the constitutive mediocrity of the texts. The approach that is given to

them, in fact, does not amplify their teaching effectiveness, but precludes the learner from a complex analysis of the phenomena, replacing it in the development of the contents. The textbook appears similar to the model of electronic hypertext, and often simplifies the contents, but all this does not seem to have raised the level of the texts (Gallina, 2009). Indeed, the textbook seem less able to articulate autonomous reasoning, connections and reflections, while data and information increase, and the schemes to connect them are already pre-packaged (Boero and De Luca, 2009, p. 295). Furthermore, the school textbook becomes an object of interest – and more often of controversy – mainly on the economic question, or the *carolibri* (Boero and De Luca, 2009). Far from provoking a debate regarding the contents or the educational and didactic implications, as happened in the sixties and seventies, in the eighties we were witnessing a quantitative growth of texts and only apparent innovation, while it was quality that was sacrificed. Faced with this premise, in which the textbook appears to be the result of changes and proposals substantially unchanged from the point of view of the contents², it is not surprising that the most notable aspect about the representation of cultural diversity is the flagrant *absence* of the other in textbooks. But is this absence the result of an actual lack of representation of foreign students at school? Between the 1980s and 1990s there was an exponential growth in the presence of children who had just arrived in Italy or were born in Italy to foreign parents. This growth is mainly visible in elementary school where it went from 2458 pupils in 1983-84 to 23.991 in 1995-96, with an increase of 876%, followed by middle school and nursery school, both with an increase of approximately 650%, up respectively from 1258 students at the beginning of the period to 9471 at the end of the period and from 1388 to 10.450 (ISTAT, 1998). This large increase is linked to the preponderance of family units and family reunification, phenomena that mark the transition from a first *emergency* paradigm to a second *structural* immigration. Therefore, if we cannot attribute the absence of issues relating to cultural diversity in the manuals to the actual non-presence of foreign students in Italian schools, how can we justify the choice by publishers and authors to represent a homogeneous cultural reality, distant from the experience of girls and boys who go to school? If we look closely at the educational models proposed by the textbooks analysed³, we observe that a certain pedantry predominates under the banner of admonitions and edifying teachings.

Regarding the theme of cultural diversity, we can note the presence of some marginal elements, for example in the section concerning colours, girls and boys were asked to define all the possible colours of hair, eyes and complexion. The same text, however, on the following page invites to complete sentences by choosing words from a pre-established list. Compared to the phrase «A girl's cheeks are...» the *right* word is *rosy*. The paradigm of the *right skin*, far from only concerning the representations of children, is fully embraced by the authors of the textbooks, for which the difference does not find space in the daily or imaginative reality of children. The purpose of the authors seems to be rather that of warning girls and boys against the many dangers that unfortunately can happen: «often in the newspapers are published news that have children as protagonists [...] You have to get used to reflecting on the dangers that surround you. Danger is like an octopus that has many tentacles. Each tentacle can hurt a child so much! Think about it!» (Bernini, 1986, p. 117).

In short, in the urban jungle one must beware of dangers, there is no room for imaginative narratives, for fantastic experiences that can mark a break with the banality of everyday life that children experience. From this point of view, the schoolbook's task is to admonish, teach, and correct.

In the text *Parole 2* (Uberti Gotti, 1984) for the first cycle, in the section on common names and personal names there is a page entitled *Who am I?* (p. 8) in which some

children were drawn in red in a stylized way: all except Meo, whose outline is in black and, unlike the others, has very voluminous and curly hair, while instead of a smile, he has pronounced red lips; the nose is also different: a larger and more pronounced ball. Diversity – or presumed as such – is introduced through grotesque and caricatured elements, which tend to exaggerate and alter bodily features. In addition to this timid and ambivalent *appearance* in the text we no longer find any reference to melanin and/or cultural diversity.

In the textbook *Progetto Elle 2* (Bellomo, Manacorda and Modini, 1986) the presence of cultural diversity makes its way through *Cion cion blu* by Pinin Carpi (p. 44), or through exercises in which one is asked to colour and describe an Eskimo child or a redskin boy. Despite this *look* – albeit marginal – on the world, outside the claustrophobic domestic and family tunnel, the pedagogical and didactic pedantry is sanctioned not only through a clear *must be* which basically means corresponding to a precise model of *perfect child* but also through knowing how to stay in one's place, with clear and evident classist colours. Elements of rupture with respect to the framework shown up to now are introduced by the text Invitation to read. The selection of the author's texts refers to well-known signatures in the children's publishing landscape for the quality of the proposals. It is Rodari, in particular, who leads us between the meshes of complexity, beyond any banality and simplification, introducing themes such as peace (p. 13) and hunger in the world (p. 19). In the text *Elle per Leggere 2* there are several references to cultural diversity, as in the case of a sheet on Lionni's *Piccolo Blu e piccolo giallo* (Little Blue and Little Yellow) (p. 21), an *intercultural* story that speaks of mixing, of the fact that one comes out changed from the relationship with others, through the metaphor of colours. But it is Manzi and Rodari who introduce the themes relating to diversity (pp. 154-155) more explicitly. The first says, «Can you tell apart the white men from the blacks, and the red men from the yellow ones? Why have men divided the earth into pieces and wage war with each other instead of helping each other to live better?» (*Ibid.*). Rodari, on the other hand, introduces the theme through the *Girotondo di tutto il mondo* (Circle dance around the world) and for the first time in the text there are images of two black children and an Asian girl, who, together with many others, holds hands in the circle and goes around.

4. Educational models in children's literature. Images, suggestions, plural transformations

In the eighties and nineties, children's publishing was in full swing. A few figures are enough to see how much the sector is growing: if 90 publishers were active in 1987, ten years later we found 125 (Boero and De Luca, 2009, p. 297). With the advent of the eighties, we are witnessing the birth of important publishing houses for children, such as *Fatafrac*, *Carthusia*, which over the years have always known how to keep the quality of their proposals high. The latter, in particular, appears interesting for the theme of diversity and interculture, thanks to the *Storiesconfinate* series curated by Graziella Favaro, which publishes fairy tales and stories from different countries in a bilingual version (Boero & De Luca, 2009, p. 300). The real turning point, however, took place at the turn of the eighties and nineties:

In fact, there is no doubt that regarding a longer-term vision, the turning point that took place particularly in Italy around the passage of the 1980s/1990s seems to have opened a completely new season of extensive remodelling of a large publishing yard and, in the same time, an articulated writing workshop. Within a panorama moved by

vigorous dynamics of change, the production area for younger readers has shown itself to be sensitive to intercepting both new reading requests – tendentially differentiated by request for variety of formats and products – as well as to accept an even more basic need, devoted to capturing a need peremptorily affirmed by young audiences: to be able to have a range of readings and to be able to benefit from a repertoire of narrative texts that are sensibly able to present themselves as more in step with the times (Todaro, 2016, pp. 77-78).

And precisely in order to intercept the new imaginative needs of children and young people (Favaro *et al.*, 2018), new publishing houses or new series are born, such as Einaudi Ragazzi – with *Storie e rime* and *Narrativa*, but above all with *Ex Libris* (1989), *Frontiere* (1994) –, Emme Edizioni, the L Group, with *Lo scaffale d'oro* (1997), Salani, and in particular the series *Gl'Istrici* (1987) directed by Donatella Ziliotto, born to prick the imagination of the reader⁴, as well as *Junior* Mondadori (1988), *Il becco giallo* (1986) by Mursia, *Il battello a vapore* (1992) by Piemme, the series *GRU* (1994) by the publisher Giunti, the *Intercultura* series from the Sinnos publishing house. It would be simplistic to draw in these few lines a picture, if not complete, at least reliable, about the enormous changes and renewals that have occurred in children's publishing over the two decades covered by our analysis. We will limit ourselves to retracing a totally arbitrary and incomplete path on the basis of some significant suggestions regarding the theme of cultural diversity and the way in which it is addressed in texts, novels, illustrated books for children and young people. The important changes that have occurred with regard to social diversification in a multicultural direction are reflected in a more marked sensitivity towards this theme, which can also be read and analysed from the point of view of children's literature. If we look at some productions that precede the eighties and nineties, we can understand how these are no longer suitable for describing and representing new cultural and social reality. Emblematic in this sense is the heated debate between Lucia Tumiatì, author of *Caro Bruco Capellone* from 1972⁵ and Barbara Palombelli, published by *Repubblica* in 1997, in which Lucia Tumiatì responds to the accusations of conveying racist content in the book in question:

I am anti-fascist, anti-racist, ex partisan, have a Jewish mother, I am known – in children's literature – for being obsessively engaged in anti-racism, but not from now, like many radical- chic or do-gooders, but from the years in which to write what I wrote (and am still writing) was a way to be excluded from certain cat-ministerial circuits. Rodari, Argilli, Lodi and a few others, including myself, are among the most committed and innovative modern authors. And she calls me a racist? Beyond belief. Try to have the next time, if it happens to you, the humility to inquire and above all to understand a story written for a 5-year-old child. The story is self-evident, but I will try to explain it to you all the same. Small children (yesterday more than today) have never seen a similar one of another colour and, if they see it, the first reaction, as for any other novelty, is one of surprise. But the surprise is not racism. The child first of all wants to touch what he does not know: is it dirty? is it chocolate? is it brown poop you see? What does a child know about blacks, yellows or greens?

Palombelli's answer leaves no room for equivocal interpretations:

YOUR letter – in fact – deserves no comment. Anyone can read it and draw their own conclusions. You compare the dark colour of a child's skin to dirt and poop and teach this to our children from the tender age of five, thanks to your precious book.

Just to be sure they have no doubts, when they grow up: black equals dirt, equals poop. Very clear: instead of taking a step back, you reiterate the usefulness of such a teaching.

This misunderstanding is actually the mirror of an important change that has taken place over a few decades for which the words acquire a *historical* and *political* meaning and no longer have the same value. Those same words that in the seventies were conceived as apparently *neutral* are no longer suitable for describing reality, as they are marked, also thanks to reflections and awareness in the academic field, by a culturally and historically connoted semantics, in which black and white are not just two colours, but embody centuries of construction of otherness on the basis of a precise social hierarchy, based on cultural supremacy on the one hand and on inferiorization on the other. Just as the previous words are no longer suitable to describe reality, which requires, in addition to new words, a new sensitivity and new interpretations, the images in the same way thirst for renewal. The most fitting example of this is Grete Meuche's *La storia di Pik Badaluk*, whose first edition in German dates back to 1921, translated in Italian in 1930 and re-edited in 1974⁶. Pik is a child who embodies the stereotype of the *wild* little African: he lives in a hut, he has caricatured somatic traits and parents that confirm belonging to a world marked by *nature*, according to the nature/culture dualism, for which only the western white man seems to have implemented that overcoming of the state of nature, which led him to be a rational animal. But a couple of decades earlier Alberto Manzi with *Orzowei* (1956) took us to South Africa with the compelling story of Isa, nicknamed Orzowei, or *the found*. «It is what is used to define a *coming-of-age novel* with a teenager looking for his place in a world he does not yet know, but it is also a novel with a strong anthropological component» (Cassani, 2011). Isa is a white child abandoned in the forest and raised by a Bantu tribe who never completely accepted and who has no intention of allowing him to pass the *great test* that represents the entrance to adulthood. Isa is experiencing a great identity crisis as wherever he goes, he is considered a *foreigner*, but at the same time, he feels that he belongs to all the groups to which he is related. In this sense, Isa experiences a *triple absence*, as, in addition to belonging to Bantu, he becomes part of the Bushman and Boer group. Although he was educated by all three peoples, he does not belong to any of the three: «I don't know what I am. I'm Swazi, I'm Bushman, I'm white. And maybe I am none of all three or all three put together» (Manzi, 1956⁷). But his strength comes precisely from his diversity: Isa has all the skills of a Bantu warrior, the sensitivity of a bushman and the knowledge of the Boers and precisely these peculiar and *multicultural* characteristics allow him to go where others cannot and to overcome arduous and difficult tests. It is thanks to the king of the Bushmen, Pao, Isa's adoptive father, that he finds the key to harmoniously reconcile his identity initially perceived as disintegrated:

But what does the colour of the skin count if beneath it beats a generous heart to which courage gives life? [...] They (the Bushmen) do not pay attention to the colour of a man, but they watch the actions of man [...] Among your people you can do something in our favour. And it will be a great, noble battle, Isa. Make your people understand that we are all equal, so that there is no contempt or hatred. Because, despite changing the colour of the skin, and the shape of the eyes, and the height, we have a heart that is the same for everyone. We are not inferior or better than others, black or white. Like the others are not inferior or better than us (Manzi, 1956).

Thanks to the wisdom of Pao, Isa, initially rejected, excluded, is able to take on the *civilizing mission* hoped for by the author. A mission based on the message of the unity

of mankind, which a master like Manzi is able to express in a refined way, without ever falling into trivializing or moralistic rhetoric. *Orzowei*, therefore, despite being set in an elsewhere, has represented a counter-narrative of the exotic, with strong intercultural implications, for several decades. The text, in addition to having been translated into 32 languages, inspired a 13-episode television adaptation broadcast by RAI since 1977. In Manzi's productions, it is often the very last ones, the excluded ones who change the tables, favouring that *awakening* of the dormant mass. This is what happens in the novel *El loco* (1979) with a South American setting. In this case it is the madman of the country, el loco precisely to *awaken* to accompany the inhabitants of San Sebastian towards a true, profound awareness, an awareness that arose thanks to his divergent thinking. *El loco* in its madness is brilliant, so much so that Manzi leads the reader to overturn labels and categories that are hardly questioned. The theme of otherness, therefore, is central in the author's narratives: not only the culturally different, but the excluded, the least, the marginalized can become acute observers and readers of spiritual needs, protagonists of radical changes, precisely because of the ghettoizing social conditioning that takes place outside. The nurse who works in the asylum, at first insensitive to the treatment reserved for inmates, tells him: «If everyone were like you, there would always be sunshine, as you say. You changed me inside, man. Inside, everything» (Manzi, 1979). Another character, a little girl this time, who leads us to *other* territories is Ilaria, the protagonist of *La bambina strisce e punti* (1996) by Emanuela Nava. Ilaria is eleven and lives in Addis Ababa with her parents, two doctors who moved to Ethiopia to study traditional medicine. Often left alone by her parents due to expeditions in search of medicinal herbs, Ilaria goes on an initiatory journey in search of the ostrich egg, which will lead her to become a striped and dotted girl:

Then I understood. It's not enough to be white or blue, or green or brown. One colour alone is too little. Fandù was black and white. He had painted his dark body with light ash. Its streaked skin glowed like zebra and cheetah skin. It was black and white. For this he could fly. Because it frightened no one. Neither the dark earth, nor the clouds of the sky (Nava, 1996).

And after taking the ostrich egg, at the end of her initiatory journey Ilaria was no longer what she was before. She has changed, she has been able to welcome the new and embrace diversity, winning the favour of nature, its protector:

From your fear your courage was born. You have been able to transform yourself and with you things have transformed. The river has been transformed and so has the land. Nature has welcomed you and protected you. Because you, Ilaria, have been able to transform yourself like a chameleon, you have been able to listen to what others cannot hear. You have been able to change. Now you are a woman. Now you are an African with stripes and dots (Nava, 1996).

Ilaria wants and manages to go beyond unique belongings, to become a hybrid being who can thus fly: reconcile earth and sky and reach full freedom. And it is always a little girl who in Silvana Gandolfi's *Pasta di drago* (1993), together with the protagonist Andrew, goes on an initiatory journey in which their paths will be irremediably changed. In search of the dragon paste, little Kumari – the most revered deity of Nepal – accompanies Andrew in the Nepalese mountains. Her goal was to never grow up and his was to stop rejuvenating, taking the risk of disappearing by swallowing the dragon paste, not aware of the other effects and consequences. That dragon paste that was destined for

Kumari, and that her grandfather had collected for herself without strength and on the verge of death and kept until now, she had decided to give to Andrew, an English foreigner in Kathmandu. The journey undertaken by the two protagonists is a mystical journey, where they get lost in order to rediscover one's authenticity and discover new sides of one's identity. Under the banner of cultural misunderstandings, the journey unfolds between elements of strangeness and new acquisitions regarding diversity, in the awareness that only from deep knowledge comes the understanding of elements that were initially unintelligible, like when Andrew turned his back to the fire, desecrating the house of Nepalese guests. But what does an Englishman know about Nepalese rites and beliefs? Kumari who, thanks to love, discovers that she no longer needs to be a divinity to embody a model of transcendence and *otherworldly* perfection, and she can allow herself to show fragility, needs, attachments, human feelings through which the real growth can take place. And Andrew, a mature man, depressed and abused by his wife, who takes away his youth, decides that he wants to start again from there, from the age of 12: «It really seemed like another life, my past as a gray and tired man. How young I feel now! Young and optimistic» (Gandolfi, 1993).

Son of the nineties is a novel about inclusion and real acceptance of diversity. In *Storia di una gabbianella e del gatto che le insegnò a volare* (1996) Luis Sepulveda takes us into an intercultural narrative, in which a cat takes care of a seagull, usually the prey of cats. The cat Zorba unfolds a unique sensitivity: after having promised the dying seagull mother that she will take care of the egg and that she will teach the seagull to fly once grown, Zorba involves all the cats of the port of Hamburg to get help and advice on how to fulfil the promise made. In the book the theme of diversity emerges and the way in which it is addressed by Zorba: not under the banner of blind denial of differences, but through a true affection that manifests itself in its highest form as a real desire for realization and fulfilment of the self of the person – of the animal in this case – loved one. Zorba is happy to see the seagull become what it really is, not trying to make it what it is not and never will be, that is, a cat:

We did not contradict you when we heard you screeching that you were a cat, because it flatters us that you want to be like us, but you are different and we like that you are different [...] We have given you all our love without any intention of doing anything. you a cat. We want you gull [...] and it is good that you know that with you we have learned something that fills us with pride: we have learned to appreciate, respect and love a different being. It is very easy to accept and love who is the same as us, but with someone who is different it is very difficult, and you have helped us to do it (Sepulveda, 1996, pp. 58-59).

Conclusion

The eighties and nineties have been two decades full of implications for the contemporary culture of diversity and its representation. Through the analysis of some textbooks, it emerges that, despite a timid appearance of cultural diversity, in most cases the other remains substantially absent and invisible. But even when present, it is often represented in a caricatured and stereotyped way. Only through the citations of texts by authors dedicated to children such as Rodari and Manzi – two prominent authors found in the analysed textbooks – does the theme of diversity acquire depth and relevance, albeit from a universalistic point of view which aim to overcome differences. The suggestions offered by literature for children, on the contrary, not only anticipate certain themes and phenomena, but deal with them starting from a plurality of gazes, angles, points of view

and depth. These texts – and many others that would deserve to be mentioned – offer girls and boys the opportunity to escape from the oppressive and castrating imaginative dimension of textbooks and to find spaces of freedom in which to explore, know, experiment new models, which accompany children in the discovery of identities, otherness and the unknown. They cause that *cultural decentralization* praised by the regulations, or a profound knowledge of the other, without which there can be no real inclusion. Only what is known can be truly understood. From understanding comes the dialogue, the exchange, the interrelation, from which each of us comes out modified, changed: they are the many Isa, Andrew, Ilaria, Zorba, Kumari and Loco, who teach us that it is worth going further *univocal* and pre-established models, where the best children's literature tends to undermine, overturn and dismantle certainties, rather than re-propose and confirm them. If the selected texts are paradigmatic of the radical change that has taken place in children's literature, they do not however represent a univocal and generalizable reality. Alongside these praiseworthy experiments, productions full of prejudices coexist, in continuity with the international studies mentioned in the article. But, if children's literature offers alternatives to those who know how to recognize and choose a *good story* and establishes a rupture with the representations conveyed in the texts of previous decades, textbooks, for their part, are placed in continuity, delaying in recognizing and valuing cultural diversity. The latter is and remains virtually invisible in the analysed textbooks, in spite of the exponential growth of foreign students in Italian schools, especially in the elementary grade. It is only and exclusively thanks to the reproduction of textual extracts of the best children's literature in school textbooks that we find sporadic non-stereotypical presence of cultural diversity within them.

Note

¹ I use this expression in the sense attributed to it by the author.

² With some exceptions in primary school, where there are innovative experiments from the didactic-pedagogical point of view more than in the other school grades.

³ The complete list of textbooks is given in the bibliography.

⁴ The introductory page of the editorial series contains the following wording: «A legend says that porcupines (istrici) shoot their quills, like arrows, on anyone who teases them. Try it to tease our porcupines and they will sting you: they will strike your imagination and your heart, having fun, fascinating and frightening you. We looked for them all over the world and now they are here to sting you, sting you».

⁵ Published, after a reworking, in 1995 with the title of *Caro librino mio* in the series «GRU» of the Giunti publishing house.

⁶ The title of the first edition was *Mampambuch*.

⁷ The following books were consulted on the Kindle eReader, so it was not possible to trace the page number:

Gandolfi S. (1993), *Pasta di drago*, Milano, Salani;

Manzi A. (1956), *Orzowei*, Firenze, Vallecchi;

Manzi A. (1979), *El Loco*, Milano, Salani;

Nava E. (1996), *La bambina strisce e punti*, Milano, Salani.

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