

## Hybrid selves, intercultural futures: Afro-Italian writers reimagining belonging

### Identità ibride, futuri interculturali: le scrittrici afro-italiane reinventano il senso di appartenenza

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#### Abstract

Adopting an intercultural pedagogical perspective, this paper explores how Afro-Italian female writers open spaces for dialogue, recognition, and peaceful coexistence. Their (counter-)narratives act as both educational resources – fostering mutual understanding and deconstructing stereotypes – and as claims to cultural participation for hybrid and diasporic voices. The first section introduces the pedagogical framework of self-care and resistance used to trace the evolution of migration literature in Italy since the 1990s, highlighting its function as a dialogic arena for visibility, symbolic capital, and social engagement. After that, it examines the shift from the label *migration literature* to newer categories such as Afro-Italian, diasporic, or postcolonial writing, which better express the intersectional and gendered positions of female authors. The following sections analyse writings of Nassera Chohra, Igiaba Scego, and Esperanza Hakuzwimana Ripanti to trace the development of representations of ethnicity, gender, religion, and belonging. The conclusion shows how these authors construct intersectional, intergenerational, and intercultural relationalities, where self-narration becomes both resistance and a practice for reimagining belonging in plural, postcolonial societies.

**Keywords:** Afro-Italian female writing, counter-narratives, intercultural pedagogy, hybrid selves, belonging.

#### Sommario

Adottando una prospettiva pedagogica interculturale, questo contributo esplora come le scrittrici afro-italiane aprano spazi di dialogo, riconoscimento e pacifica convivenza. Le loro (contro)narrazioni agiscono sia come risorse educative per la comprensione reciproca e la decostruzione degli stereotipi, sia come rivendicazioni per la partecipazione culturale di voci ibride e diasporiche. La prima sezione ripercorre l'evoluzione della letteratura della migrazione in Italia dagli anni Novanta, evidenziando la sua funzione di arena dialogica per la costruzione di visibilità, capitale simbolico e impegno sociale. Rileggendone le radici socio-pedagogiche come strategia di cura di sé e resistenza, esamina il passaggio dalla definizione di *letteratura della migrazione* a quelle più recenti di scrittura afro-italiana, diasporica o postcoloniale, che meglio esprimono le posizioni intersezionali e di genere delle autrici. Le sezioni a seguire analizzano le opere di Nassera Chohra, Igiaba Scego ed Esperanza Hakuzwimana Ripanti, per rintracciarne lo sviluppo delle rappresentazioni di etnia, genere, religione e appartenenza. La conclusione mostra come queste autrici costruiscano relazionalità intersezionali, intergenerazionali e interculturali, in cui nell'autonarrazione coesistono forme di resistenza e pratiche per reimmaginare l'appartenenza in società plurali e postcoloniali.

**Parole chiave:** scritture femminili afro-italiane, contro-narrazioni, pedagogia interculturale, identità ibride, appartenenza.

#### Introduction

The trajectory of Afro-Italian women's writing emerges at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, religion, and colonial memory, forming a literary corpus that challenges the

persistent stigmatisation of Blackness, Muslim identity, and female subjectivity within the Italian cultural landscape and society that does not acknowledge its deep social changes of the past forty years. This writing is best understood within the genealogy of migrant literature in Italy, which – since the early 1990s – has functioned as a powerful site of resistance, healing, and political re-signification of belonging. From its earliest forms, it has offered counter-narratives capable of unsettling national self-representations and foregrounding the voices that Italy's *postcolonial amnesia* has historically silenced. Afro-Italian female writers call for a postcolonial perspective, highlighting how colonial legacies, diasporic memory, and racialized genealogies continue to shape everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Burgio, 2022). This lens proves particularly important later on, when themes of belonging, identity, and cultural heritage are considered within the context of Italy's unresolved colonial legacy and current postcolonial condition.

By situating Afro-Italian female writing within an intercultural pedagogical framework, this paper reflects on how their narratives open spaces for intercultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence, thematizing the racial question and the issue of the authors' chromatic difference from the white national norm (Romeo, 2022). Their (counter-)narratives serve not only as resources for educational and training processes – fostering dialogue, mutual recognition, and the deconstruction of stereotypes – but also as a means of reclaiming cultural participation for hybrid, plural, and diasporic voices. Within an intercultural pedagogical framework, counter-narratives perform a dual function. At the theoretical level, they contest dominant epistemologies by exposing the mechanisms through which difference is constructed and certain voices are structurally silenced. At the practical level, they provide educators and learners with concrete resources for developing intercultural competence through perspective-taking and critical dialogue across difference. In this sense, they foster what hooks (1994) describes as education as the practice of freedom – an approach that goes beyond the transmission of cultural knowledge to critically interrogate the power relations embedded in cultural representations. The comparatist Gnisci, a pioneer of migration-literature studies since their emergence, highlights the pedagogical and social value of these contributions as they prompt a critical re-evaluation of our own history (Gnisci, 2010). Literature becomes the medium through which intersecting, dialogic voices emerge, articulating from within the profound transformations of Italian society and encouraging a renewed pedagogy of human relations. By refusing to remain silent, these authors assert control over their lives and stories, using narrative as a tool to dismantle obsolete categories and resist the mechanisms of marginalisation and racism that persist in today's multicultural context.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section reconstructs how, since the 1990s, migration literature in Italy has operated as a dialogic arena while outlining its dual pedagogical function. It distinguishes between autobiography as a method of self-reconstruction (Demetrio, 1996) and writing as a practice of care and resistance (Contini, 2009), through which individuals assert their difference and existential agency (Bertin and Contini, 1983). Here, belonging emerges as a negotiated personal and political process that autobiographical writing helps to navigate (Cuconato, 2017). The section further situates the emergence of migration literature within the broader socio-political climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s, marked by rising multicultural visibility and racial tensions epitomised by the murder of Jerry Masslo in 1989. Works like Pap Khouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti* (1990) and Salah Methnani's *Immigrato* (1990) stand as urgent testimonies to structural violence, asserting the authors' right to write in the national language and participate in Italy's cultural life. The section closes by considering how, by the mid-1990s, the retreat of mainstream publishers from migration narratives

intersected with migrant writers' resistance to being confined within a distinct literary *niche* (Gnisci, 2002). This refusal, exemplified by authors such as Igiaba Scego, anticipated later critical shifts and the adoption of more nuanced terms such as *Afro-Italian*, *diasporic*, and *postcolonial*, capable of capturing the complex intersectional, racialised, religious, and gendered positions of female authors in the Italian context.

The second section examines the thematic developments in Afro-Italian women's writing, beginning with the trailblazer Nasserah Chohra, whose narrative anticipates themes that go well beyond the solely migratory experience: the body, the need to reclaim it and assert female agency, identity and cultural issues, racism, and the bitterness stemming from a sense of inadequacy. The challenges of navigating multiple identities within a *white space* surface here, foreshadowing themes later explored by female Afro-Italian writers. Among them, we focus on Igiaba Scego, whose work on transnational memory, multiple identities, migrant heritage, and the questioning of Italian national identity has become a crucial point of reference for Afro-Italian female authors. Her literary and intellectual trajectory demonstrates how questions of Blackness, Muslim identity, and female agency intersect in the daily negotiation of belonging within a society that still struggles to acknowledge its multicultural and postcolonial dimensions. Finally, it concludes with a reflection on the younger Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti, whose writing and activism illuminate the experiences of Afro-Italian girlhood and the processes through which young Black women claim voice, visibility, and epistemic legitimacy. Her work reconnects with the line of resistance initiated by Chohra, foregrounding the need to dismantle the white gaze and affirm new forms of agency and collective self-representation.

In the concluding section, the article discusses how these three authors articulate alternative strategies of intersectional, intergenerational, and intercultural relationality, where narrating the self becomes both a mode of resistance and a transformative practice for reimagining belonging in increasingly diverse and postcolonial societies.

### **1. Migration literature as dialogic arena, self-care, and resistance**

From a pedagogical standpoint, migration literature reveals two complementary approaches that depend on authors' cultural background, social contexts, and the specific conditions shaping the migratory experience. The first perspective, rooted in Duccio Demetrio's work, understands *autobiography* as a method of *self-reconstruction*: a way of speaking about oneself to recall the past, reproduce images, and reorganise relationships and affections to make sense of the present. Writing becomes a space where memories are gathered, reinterpreted, and reframed within the meanings available for overcoming existing contradictions (Demetrio, 1996). Through this narrative process, writers trace the explanatory logic of their biography and then negotiate the most appropriate course of action when confronted with the uncertainty that migration entails. The second approach is situated within the tradition of a *pedagogy of resistance* (Mantegazza, 2003) and resonates with the principles of pedagogical problematicism, which Mariagrazia Contini (2009) explicitly conceptualises in terms of resistance. Within this framework, narrative becomes a reflective and educational praxis through which personal history is reinterpreted, allowing individuals to re-appropriate life events from an evolutionary and developmental standpoint. Resistance, in this context, entails the construction of an identity that is sufficiently coherent to avoid fragmentation yet sufficiently dynamic to remain receptive to forms of becoming that are co-constructed with others. It also requires a critical interrogation of the power structures that perpetuate domination, as well as a deliberate disengagement from Western rationality and its

presumed universalism; a paradigm whose influence has been extensively amplified through processes of globalization.

Within this ethical horizon, the ideal of pedagogical problematicism emerges, encouraging individuals to affirm their humanity by cultivating pathways of action and forms of existential planning that, in an evolutionary sense, foster *their own* and *others'* difference (Bertin and Contini, 1983). This focus on the *other* is especially relevant today as a way of countering polarized political and cultural debates that continue to divide *us* and *them*. Italian migration literature, particularly by female writers, thus becomes essential for promoting forms of mutual education and recognition grounded in interest, attentive listening, and intercultural encounter. In this context, the concept of belonging becomes central to understanding the socio-pedagogical role of migration literature. As Antonsich (2010) argues, belonging comprises both an intimate feeling of being *at home* in a place – what he terms *place-belongingness* – and the social and political processes that determine who is considered part of a community – what Yuval-Davis (2006) names the *politics of belonging*. These two dimensions do not always align: the personal striving to cultivate a sense of home is often confronted with institutional and symbolic boundaries that regulate access to social membership: «Every politics of belonging involves two opposite sides: the side which claims belonging and the side which has the power of *granting* belonging» (Antonsich, 2010, p. 13). Yuval-Davis (2006) had similarly highlighted that belonging involves emotional attachment but is continually shaped by power relations, norms, and practices that define inclusion and exclusion. This implies that there is a constant process of negotiation, sometimes accompanied by refusals, violations and transgressive practices, which manifests itself at individual and/or collective level (Croucher, 2004). Seen from this angle, autobiographical writing becomes a crucial tool for navigating and negotiating the tension between personal and political belonging (Cuconato, 2017).

Migrant writing therefore operates simultaneously as *self-care* and *resistance*. It is a practice of care because it allows individuals to reconstruct forms of continuity, identity, and emotional grounding that attach a person to a given place; what bell hooks (2009) describes as the *longing for a homeplace*, a space of familiarity, safety, and affirmation that is crucial for healing and survival. Yet writing is also resistance: a means of asserting one's presence against marginalising discourses, challenging narratives that deny belonging, and performing, through language, an active claim to social recognition. Early migrant writing embodied these two dimensions, enabling individuals to process trauma and exclusion while confronting the racist imaginaries embedded in everyday interactions and institutions. This dual function laid the groundwork for later developments in Afro-Italian female writing, which would further deepen and complicate the exploration of belonging, recognition, and intercultural coexistence. These dimensions of migration literature become particularly clear when analysed through the lens of counter-narrative theory. As Lueg, Bager and Lundholt (2021) argue, counter-narratives are stories that challenge dominant master-narratives, functioning as relational interventions whose critical force derives from their embeddedness in the power structures they contest. From an intercultural pedagogical perspective, this relational dimension is crucial: counter-narratives do not merely offer alternative stories, but expose the mechanisms through which certain voices, identities, and forms of belonging are normalised while others are marginalised or silenced. As Miller, Liu and Ball (2020) demonstrate, when integrated into educational contexts they operate at two interconnected levels: cognitively, they provide learners with alternative interpretative frameworks, unsettling representations of ethnicity, gender, and belonging that tend to naturalise inequality. Affectively, they foster what Contini (2009) describes as a dialogical praxis of resistance, that is a productive

distancing from familiar categories that enables genuine encounter with the perspective of the other. Together, these dimensions make counter-narratives powerful tools for cultivating critical intercultural competence that extends beyond the recognition of cultural differences to include the capacity and the disposition to interrogate the power relations through which such differences are produced, valued, or suppressed. As the following sections shows, this pedagogical approach goes hand in hand with the political claim to voice and recognition animating Afro-Italian women's writing.

## 2. From migration literature to Afro-Italian, diasporic, and postcolonial writing

The migratory wave that reached Italy in the 1990s generated a new strand of cultural and literary production soon labelled as migration literature. It quickly drew the interest of major publishers, partly due to rising racist violence, such as the 1989 murder of South African worker Jerry Masslo, which brought migration forcefully into Italy's national consciousness. In *Letteratura italiana della migrazione* (1998), Gnisci identifies two main phases in the development of this writing. The first, which he calls *exotic* (1990–1992), saw large publishers approach migrant authors for commercial reasons, seeking to satisfy a *niche* readership. Early texts operated as *acts of resistance*: first-person testimonies exposing Italian audiences to the injustices, humiliations, and ruptures of the migratory experience. Migration appears as a decisive break, an *end* and a *beginning*, and writing in Italian becomes both a tool of self-affirmation and a declaration of presence (Comberati, 2010). These inaugural texts display a constellation of features that would become emblematic of migration writing in early-1990s Italy: the predominance of autobiographical testimony as a legitimating narrative mode; a pronounced political orientation toward denunciation, often articulated through testimonial rhetoric; and a linguistically mediated authorship, in which an emergent and frequently unstable command of Italian prompted recourse to collaboration with a native co-writer. Exemplary in this regard are Pap Khouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti* (1990), produced with Oreste Pivetta, and Salah Methnani's *Immigrato* (1990), written with Mario Fortunato. What emerges is a poetics of *affective solicitation* – strategically mobilising pathos to elicit indignation and empathy – while simultaneously foregrounding the complex dynamics of voice, authorship, and cultural translation that underwrite their production (Cuconato, 2017).

When this brief phase ended, and commercial attention waned, a second moment emerged: Gnisci's *subterranean* phase. Mainstream publishers withdrew, yet migrant writing continued to develop within volunteer associations, nonprofit cultural networks, and semi-anonymous spaces (Gnisci, 2002). Paradoxically, this marginalisation allowed the field to evolve: «left to itself, it did not dry up; rather, like a river, it found an underground passage»<sup>2</sup> (*ivi*, p. 90). Writers increasingly moved beyond personal testimony, creating characters and narratives capable of entering the broader Italian literary imaginary. Authors began to claim their place within Italian literature and to explore themes beyond their migratory origins. As Igiaba Scego observes, «we author of non-Italian origin are trapped by our origins» (Mauceri, 2004, p. 1). In this second phase, migration becomes a backdrop – an experience, memory, or inherited condition – while thematic attention shifts toward identity, interiority, and belonging. These works show how migration unsettles monolithic conceptions of identity, giving rise to *hybrid forms of belonging* that resist national-oriented cultural discourses. For second-generation writers, discrimination and the struggle to have their Italian-ness recognised – regardless of skin colour, physical traits, or cultural and religious practices – become central themes.

The tensions between parental traditions and the society in which they were raised create friction but also foster processes of *cultural creolisation* (cfr. Glissant, 1998).

Studying these texts reveals the need to move from singular to hybrid conceptions of culture. By introducing new perspectives and challenging dominant Western narratives, migrant writing serves as a laboratory for intercultural negotiation and linguistic renewal. It invites pedagogy to reflect on emerging identities that break free from ethnic and geographical constraints: tracing hybrid trajectories in a world where migration, and the creolisation it enables, is increasingly the norm.

### **3. From rejection to resistance: negotiating ethnicity, gender, and culture in in Afro-Italian women's writing**

The work of Afro-Italian women writers offers a crucial reinterpretation of gendered and cultural difference, framing it not merely as a marker of marginality but as a productive site of social, cultural, and emotional emancipation. Through narratives shaped by estrangements, internal divisions, and negotiated belonging, these authors articulate complex, plural identities that enrich contemporary Italian culture. Their prominence within migrant writing reflects the historical presence of women in early migratory flows from former colonies, which fostered communities in which female voices became central and themes such as Blackness, Muslim identity, and the negotiation of cultural heritage could emerge. Confronting both patriarchal expectations and a society that proclaims women's emancipation but often fails to put it into practice, these writers craft forms of resistance grounded in the construction of *hybrid identities*. Writing thus becomes a tool for transforming *difference* into a *resource* and for translating lived tensions into shared literary expressions. In this section, we aim to trace the development of literature by Afro-Italian women writers along a trajectory that begins with the trailblazer Nassera Chohra. Although Chohra's work is formally associated with the first phase of migrant literature in Italy (autobiographical testimony, political denunciation, and co-authorship), it anticipates themes that extend well beyond the migratory experience: the body and the need to reclaim it; the assertion of female agency; cultural and identity negotiations; racism and the bitterness that springs from a sense of inadequacy. The difficulties involved in navigating multiple identities and in articulating such multiplicity within a *white space* are equally central to the work of the second-generation Afro-Italian female authors who follow her with varying inflections.

Among the many, we focus on Igiaba Scego (b. 1974), the Roman-born daughter of Somali political exiles, and Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti (b. 1991), born in Rwanda and adopted by an Italian family. Although both authors are commonly categorised as second-generation female writers, their divergent biographical backgrounds, literary trajectories, and sociocultural experiences render them representative of the heterogeneous forms through which Afro-Italian female authorship has emerged in Italy. Placing Chohra alongside Scego and Hakuzwimana Ripanti allows us to highlight both continuity and transformation within Afro-Italian women's literary production. Together, these authors' distinct generational positions, personal histories, and cultural affiliations illuminate the multiplicity of pathways through which Black female subjectivities are articulated in Italy. Through this intergenerational thread – from Chohra's pioneering self-narration to Scego's decolonial critique and Hakuzwimana Ripanti's activist rearticulation – Afro-Italian women's writing consolidates a shared lineage of resistance, care, and self-definition.

*Negotiating otherness: body, identity, and resistance in Chohra's narrative*

Nassera Chohra, born in Marseille in 1963 to Algerian parents of Sahrawi origin, arrived in Italy in 1990 after growing up in the Marseille banlieues, a «real Tower of Babel, a mixture of races, cultures and religions» (Chohra, 1993, p. 9). Although her work *Volevo diventare bianca* (1993) focuses on her migratory experience in Italy, her most significant contribution lies in anticipating the key concerns that will shape Afro-Italian women's writing: policing of the body, negotiation of cultural identity, and the tensions of occupying spaces coded as white. In this kind of *Bildungsroman*, the text retraces her path from rejecting to valuing her body and skin colour (Ponzanesi, 1999). Naci, Chohra's alter ego, first recognises her otherness when a playmate refuses to give her a doll because she is Black (Chohra, 1993). This discovery exposes the body as an overwhelming presence that shapes her emotions, social relations, and sense of belonging: «Even when I moved to middle school, I was the only coloured girl in the class. And this feeling of being different from the others made me touchy and aggressive» (*ivi*, p. 71).

Her attempt to lighten her skin with bleach represents a naive and tragic episode of her childhood: «Bleach made my brothers' trousers white, so imagine if it would not lighten me too!» (*ivi*, p. 14). It reveals the internalisation of stigma and the extent to which the *desire of belonging* may become a form of *self-erasure*. This sense of inferiority does not diminish even when she becomes an adult: «I quickly and reluctantly understood that being an adult, an immigrant, and even with black skin was certainly not an advantage in a country of whites» (*ivi*, p. 80). This struggle with the body relates to the *politics of belonging* (Yuval-Davis, 2006): Chohra is not only racialised but positioned at the margins of the national imaginary. Her body becomes a site where the boundaries of the nation, womanhood, and acceptable citizenship are policed. At the same time, the young Naci's attempts to transform herself reflect a deep individual's *longing for belonging* to social, national, or cultural communities that reject her (Yuval-Davis, 2006): she tries to *care* for herself by *erasing* herself, revealing how systems of exclusion can make her internalise self-harm rather than self-nurturing (Tronto, 1993). Her body is also a site of violence and gendered discrimination: her mother, who is herself oppressed (as migrant, racialised, gendered), inflicts punishments that often involve the genital area, as if indirectly punishing her for being a girl (cfr. Parati, 1997), reproducing punitive forms that mirror the violence she endures in patriarchal structures.

Another central theme, common to many works by female writers, is *food* as a *cultural metaphor*. In one of the most ironic food-related episodes, the protagonist, Naci, attends a friend's First Communion party: the child desperately wants to become Catholic, not because of religious conviction but to integrate better with others and receive many gifts. To *convert*, she decides to eat pork: by ingesting forbidden foods, Naci attempts to appropriate the religious culture of her schoolmates, distancing herself from her parents' culture. She informs her teacher, who is baffled, of her imminent First Communion: «You know, teacher, I am different from my parents. I eat salami and drink wine, so I am Catholic» (Chohra, 1993, p. 69). Naci believes that symbolic acts of consumption will grant her admission into the community. Eating becomes a ritual of inclusion but also reveals the arbitrariness of the *politics of belonging* boundaries that define *us* and *them*.

After these experiences of rejection, Naci embraces a *mestiza* position, following Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) conceptualisation: the initial rejection of her skin and origin gives way to a positive appreciation of the richness of cultural *mestizaje*. «I had grown up half Arab and half French, [...] a mix of Algerian traditions and European dreams» (Chohra, 1993 p. 133). Her attitude is ambivalent, between modernity and tradition – a symbol of cultural *métissage* and of the complex identity of those who live between two

or more cultures. In this work, monocultural and rigid identity gives way to a fluid, multifaceted, and multilayered identity that rises above traditional unidirectional modes of thought, according to which the politics of belonging are regulated. Naci's embrace of a hybrid, *mestiza* identity exemplifies what hooks (1989) describes as a *politics of resistance*, in which marginalised subjects refuse the identities imposed on them by dominant structures: speaking one's own identity *subverts silence* and therefore functions as resistance to domination. As hooks argues in *Talking Back* (1989) and *Yearning* (1990), self-definition becomes a radical act: naming oneself rather than being named transforms marginality into a space of agency and resistance. In choosing to inhabit an *in-between identity* rather than assimilate into singular categories, Naci enacts this form of resistant subjectivity.

*Igiaba Scego: transnational memory and intercultural dialogue*

Twelve years later, Igiaba Scego's short story *Salsicce* (2005) once again turns the dilemma of identity into a question of food. Set in the domestic sphere, it shows how an ordinary cooking scene becomes the site where racialising dynamics emerge, exposing prejudices tied to skin colour, Islamophobia, and a lingering colonial gaze that casts otherness as foreignness. On the eve of Ferragosto, the protagonist – an Italian woman of Somali origins and a Sunni Muslim – decides to buy and consume five kilos of sausages to assert her Italian-ness and resolve her identity conflict. Suspended between her Italian and Somali affiliations, she imagines the sausages might erase this ambiguity. «If I swallow these sausages one by one, will people understand that I am as Italian as they are?» (Scego, 2005, p. 25). The story highlights her *dual* cultural belonging, neither side able to absorb the other. Unlike in Chohra's narrative, where the protagonist is a child, refusing to eat *haram* food becomes a political act: a rejection of any imposed, singular belonging, whether from her community of origin or from Italian society. «Would I be more Italian with a sausage in my stomach? [...] No, I would be the same, the same mix» (*ivi*, p. 35). By embracing hybridity, she rejects frameworks that demand a choice between the two worlds she straddles. This is not a simplification, but a commitment to continuous cultural negotiation and a refusal of identity norms dictated by place, class, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity – metaphorically crystallised in the sausages. In doing so, she generates counter-narratives that expose the myth of a homogeneous, non-racialised Italy and restore complexity to the lived experiences of Black, Muslim, and diasporic communities today.

Scego's wider writings, in continuity with the path opened by Chohra, deepens the analysis of how the Black female body is racialised in everyday life. It expands this inquiry by critically revisiting Italy's colonial past and examining how diasporic memory shapes belonging. Her protagonists inhabit multiple identities – Somali, Roman, European, Muslim, Afro-descendant – and their movements across geographies and genealogies reveal the tension between *place-belongingness* (Antonsich, 2010) and the *politics of belonging* (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Scego underscores the ethical dimension of her work. «The system turns us into numbers. These numbers need to be transformed into stories, faces, relationships [...] and this transformation is only possible through literature» (Ali, 2020, p. 159). Her words capture the dual value of Afro-Italian women's writing: it restores humanity to those reduced to abstractions and counters the dehumanising logic of the *politics of belonging* by asserting individual stories that claim *place-belongingness*.

This perspective finds a more mature expression in *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* (2023), a work steeped in memory and care. Scego weaves together family stories and national

histories to illuminate the ways Italian colonialism, the Somali civil war, and diaspora continue to reverberate across generations. Rome and Mogadishu become emotional and mnemonic terrains that echo and unsettle one another. Drawing on voices, photographs, silences, and narrative gaps, she creates a decolonial archive that gathers dispersed fragments into a form that can be told. Belonging, in this text, emerges as a process – shifting, relational, and vulnerable – shaped by encounters with colonial violence, the reworking of inherited trauma and the recovery of maternal lines. Taken together, *Salsicce* and *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* show how Scego advances a decolonial and pedagogical project: exposing structural racism, challenging erased colonial genealogies, and validating marginalised stories as *knowledge*. At the same time, they emphasise that belonging for diasporic subjects is not fixed but continually renegotiated. As Ponzanesi and Castillo (2025) note, Scego’s focus on migration and unbelonging resists nationalist exclusions; storytelling and memory work both renew gendered knowledge and foster cultures of equity.

Scego’s writing turns on a double movement: breaking down identity boundaries forged by colonial and national logics and opening symbolic spaces where Afro-Italian subjectivities can recognise themselves and speak back (hooks, 1989). Navigating the tension between memory and futurity, wounds and possibilities, her narratives take on a pedagogical dimension, inviting readers to imagine Italy anew as an intercultural and postcolonial space. In this way, they participate in the creation of counter-publics – alternative spheres where sexualised, racialised, and marginalised subjects voice demands, seek recognition, and assert political agency (Ponzanesi and Castillo, 2025). This capacity to sustain counter-public spaces is further evident in Scego’s editorial practice. The anthology *Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi* (Scego, 2019) brings together a plurality of contemporary Afro-Italian writers who narrate the future of Italy from positions historically excluded from national self-representation. As an act of collective authorship and political imagination, *Future* foregrounds the intersectional and intergenerational richness of Afro-Italian literary production. By amplifying diasporic voices beyond the individual author, the anthology enacts its central claim: that belonging in Italy must be reimaged through the perspective of those at its margins (Romeo, 2022).

*Afro-italian girlhood and the claim to voice: Hakuzwimana Ripanti*

Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti’s *E poi basta: Manifesto di una donna italiana nera* (2019) marks a new stage in Afro-Italian women’s writing. Born in Rwanda in 1991, she was adopted at the age of three by an Italian family, yet growing up as the Black child of white parents proved far from easy. She acknowledges that being raised «among white people, in a shade that did not belong to me because it was the opposite of mine yet also the only one» (Hakuzwimana Ripanti, 2019, p. 92) profoundly shaped her early self-perception and sense of identity. Until the age of eight, she assumed she too was white. The moment she became conscious of being Black marked a decisive turning point in her identity formation, prompting her to question everything she had previously considered a point of reference. She suddenly realises that the Black body in Italy is narrated through frames that fuel racial stereotypes and estrange Black children born or raised in the Country, «because in the eyes of others you represent only an ethnic group, alien, distant, exotic. And in the mirror, you are always alone, and your eyes, your mouth, your lines, and your hair are represented by no one» (*ivi*, p. 115).

This awareness of being *different* from both her peers and her family causes her a sort of inner laceration, leading her to search on TV and in the media for subjects who resemble her. What she discovers is the absence of representation and role models for

Afro-descendants (and others) in Italy, an absence that emerges in the book as a central concern. She highlights how Black female bodies are perceived as out of place in Italian institutions, from schools to the media. She affirms that not being represented or recognised often makes second-generation children experience existential unease and a sense of otherness not only toward Italy but also toward themselves. Caught between two worlds, these children feel doubly foreign, inhabiting an *in-between space* that can be unsettling but that, with appropriate support, may also become a site of meaningful belonging. For them, she writes, even though «I didn't want to be an activist» (*ivi*, p. 17):

I can talk about how I feel, what I would like to change, and how I do not intend to be treated. I feel the responsibility to do so for those who have no voice, for those who think they have nothing to say, and for those who do not yet know how to do it. (*ivi*, p. 22)

In refusing «[...] the borders that those who met me tried in vain to make me draw» (*ivi*, p. 181), she helps illuminate the experience of growing up in Italy as a Black Italian woman and offers a powerful role model for Black Italian girls and young women. A new generation of Italians is growing who challenge the blood-based notion of citizenship associated with *ius sanguinis*, and it is not easy for them to claim a space of identification. The need for belonging and for reconnecting with one's roots already forms a key part of personal development. For second generations, however, this process is further complicated and often marked by psychological vulnerability (Brown, 2017): the *Manifesto* narrative transforms this discomfort into a site of healing, agency, and collective empowerment.

### **Conclusion: intergenerational, intersectional, and intercultural relationality**

The analysis of both first- and second-generation Afro-Italian female writers uncovers the parallels and recurring patterns that migration – whether directly experienced or inherited – produces in migrants and in host societies. From an intercultural pedagogical perspective, reading, studying, and valuing the works of these authors enables a deeper understanding of the historical processes and socio-cultural transformations taking place in contemporary Italy (Cuconato, 2017). At the same time, their narratives invite reflection on the connections between *individual* and *collective histories*, foregrounding the perspectives and lived experiences of women who have found in writing a privileged medium for reworking the challenges, affective states, and intersecting differences that have often relegated them to the margins. As bell hooks (2015) affirms, *marginality* can become a site of *radical possibility*, a standpoint from which to critique dominant structures and envision alternative forms of community. In this direction, the authors' work serves as a repository of resources and testimonies that validate embodied, subjective knowledge while challenging the limits of institutional memory and asserting forms of narration traditionally excluded from dominant accounts.

The Afro-Italian female writers discussed here create reflective tools that critically interrogate the legacy of colonialism, question existing power structures, and resist cultural homologation while demanding recognition of their *hybrid identities*. Their reflections also echo Croucher's insights (2004) into how identities are reconfigured under conditions of globalization, migration, and transnational mobility. Acting as a *third space* (Bhabha, 2001), their writing destabilises normative constructions of identity and national belonging. Through narrative modes that interweave autobiography and autofiction, colonial history, multiple belongings, and intercultural dialogue, these

authors produce counter-archives that make visible migrant and diasporic experiences typically obscured in public discourse. Functioning simultaneously as personal and political archives, their texts counteract institutional narratives still shaped by colonial legacies (Smith and Watson, 2024), showing how *longings for belonging* are shaped by power, history, and social positioning (Antonsich, 2010).

The works of Chohra, Scego, and Hakuzwimana Ripanti demonstrate how Afro-Italian female writers elaborate constellations of intergenerational, intersectional, and intercultural relational practices that reposition migrant writing as both *resistance* and a *claim to belonging*. Their counternarratives reveal how everyday racism – interwoven with colonial legacies, institutional structures, and gendered hierarchies – continues to shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion in terms of *politics of belonging* (Yuval-Davis, 2006). By foregrounding the voices and agency of Black, Muslim, and diasporic women, these writers dismantle the epistemic silencing historically imposed on them and reconfigure the narrative ground through which Italy perceives itself. From a critical pedagogical standpoint, this body of writing encourages readers and educators to interrogate the cultural mechanisms that naturalise inequality. In doing so, they enact what hooks (1994) describes as an *education as the practice of freedom*, expanding the pedagogical horizon through which marginalised experiences are recognised and valued.

Such a perspective has significant implications for intercultural pedagogy. Engaging with the narratives of first- and second-generation Afro-Italian female writers means encountering migration not as an abstract socio-political phenomenon but as a lived, affective, and intergenerational process. Helping to rethink the spatial and affective dimensions of belonging (Antonsich, 2010), their works become pedagogical tools that facilitate recognition, foster dialogue across differences, and illuminate the socio-historical conditions that produce both conflict and possibilities for coexistence grounded in plurality, justice, and inclusion. By offering alternative and aspirational imaginaries of Italy – less bounded, less homogeneous, more attentive to its colonial past and postcolonial present – their cultural production opens spaces for rethinking the future through an intercultural lens. It calls citizens, educators, scholars, and institutions to move beyond tokenistic approaches to diversity and toward deeper practices of intercultural engagement. Afro-Italian female writing thus emerges not only as a significant literary field but also as an indispensable resource for envisioning pedagogies capable of sustaining equitable, hybrid, and interconnected societies. Through their intersectional, intergenerational, and intercultural strategies of self-narration, these authors illuminate the transformative power of storytelling in reimagining *belonging* in an increasingly diverse world.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of joint work by both authors. For attribution purposes only, paragraph 1 may be attributed to Morena Cuconato and paragraphs 2 and 3 to Maila Leoni. The introduction and conclusion are attributable to both authors equally.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations in the text whose original is in Italian have been translated by the authors.

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### Short Bio

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