

Intercultural women’s writings as pedagogical counter-narratives: voices, activism, and pedagogical applications

Narrative femminili interculturali come contro-narrazioni in ambito pedagogico: voci, pratiche di attivismo e applicazioni educative

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Abstract

This article builds on a previous research (Chiappelli and Bernacchi, 2024) by deepening the analysis of literary and para-biographical productions – short stories, novels, and graphic narratives – authored by young women with migrant backgrounds in Italy. These texts function as spaces of self-representation and political agency, where feminist and antiracist practices converge in the decolonization of collective imaginaries. Drawing on postcolonial studies, postcolonial feminism, and intersectionality, the first part examines how intercultural women’s writings articulate new forms of relationality and belonging, challenging essentialist constructions of identity. Particular attention is given to Muslim and Afro-descendant women writers, whose works respond to pervasive discrimination by producing sophisticated counternarratives that interrogate citizenship, white privilege, and inclusion. The second part explores the educational reception of one selected text within a university course in Education. Through students’ written reflections, the article shows how these writings foster critical awareness, empathy, and reflexivity, and discusses their relevance for building decolonial and inclusive school curricula. By bridging literary analysis and educational practice, the article highlights the pedagogical potential of intercultural women’s narratives in shaping transformative learning environments.

Keywords: intercultural women’s writings, postcolonial feminism, decolonial education, Muslim women, Afro-descendant women.

Sommario

A partire da una precedente ricerca (Chiappelli and Bernacchi, 2024), questo articolo approfondisce l’analisi di produzioni letterarie e parabiografiche – racconti, romanzi e narrazioni grafiche – scritte da giovani donne con background migratorio in Italia. Questi testi si configurano come spazi di autorappresentazione e di azione politica, in cui le pratiche femministe e antirazziste contribuiscono alla decolonizzazione degli immaginari collettivi. Muovendo dagli studi postcoloniali, dal femminismo postcoloniale e dalla prospettiva intersezionale, la prima parte analizza come le narrative interculturali femminili in esame elaborino nuove forme di relazione e di appartenenza, mettendo in discussione visioni essenzialiste dell’identità. Un’attenzione particolare è dedicata alle autrici musulmane e afrodiscendenti, le cui opere rispondono a forme diffuse di discriminazione attraverso la costruzione di sofisticate contro-narrazioni che interrogano i concetti di cittadinanza, di privilegio bianco e di inclusione. La seconda parte analizza la ricezione pedagogica di un testo all’interno di un corso universitario di scienze dell’educazione. Attraverso le riflessioni degli studenti e delle studentesse, l’articolo mostra come queste narrazioni favoriscano la consapevolezza critica, l’empatia e la riflessività e ne discute la rilevanza per la costruzione di curricula scolastici decoloniali e realmente inclusivi. Mettendo in dialogo analisi letteraria e pratica educativa, l’articolo mette in luce il potenziale pedagogico delle narrazioni interculturali femminili nella costruzione di ambienti di apprendimento trasformativi.

Parole chiave: narrazioni femminili interculturali, femminismo postcoloniale, educazione decoloniale, donne musulmane, donne afrodiscendenti.

Introduction: intercultural female writings as pedagogical counter-narratives

Sociological and educational literature has widely explored the condition and role of new generations with a migrant background, often describing their experience as one of *in-betweenness*, suspended between two worlds and two identities that are not always easy to reconcile. (Ambrosini, 2009, 2017; Besozzi, Colombo and Santagati, 2009; Ricucci, 2010; Santerini, 2017) This positionality can generate tensions, negotiations, and creative re-definitions of the self. Yet, despite – or perhaps precisely because of – this complex condition, these young people are increasingly emerging as key protagonists of cultural production, giving rise to practices, languages, and narratives that challenge standard conceptions of interculturality, citizenship, and participation (Chiappelli and Bernacchi, 2024). Contemporary Italy is indeed increasingly shaped by intercultural realities, yet dominant cultural and educational narratives continue to reproduce Eurocentric, racialized, and exclusionary imaginaries. In this context, young women writers with migrant backgrounds have emerged as crucial cultural agents, producing literary and para-biographical narratives that challenge stereotypes, reframe concepts of identity and belonging, and articulate feminist and antiracist forms of critique.

This article explores intercultural women's narratives as forms of pedagogical counter-narration, in which self-representation becomes a site of agency and decolonial knowledge production. Building on previous research (Chiappelli and Bernacchi, 2024), the first part of the article analyzes texts by Muslim and Afro-descendant women writers in Italy. The second part addresses the educational area, examining the reception of Marilena Umuhoza Delli's *Lettera di una madre afrodiscendente alla scuola italiana* (2023) (*Letter from an Afro-descendant Mother to the Italian school*, authors' translation) within a university course in Education. By bringing literary analysis into dialogue with educational practice, the article argues for the central role of intercultural women's narratives in reimagining Italian identity and in decolonizing the school curriculum. These groups were selected because they are simultaneously the targets of particularly visible forms of discrimination and active producers of counternarratives that challenge and reframe those experiences. Starting from a theoretical framework grounded in postcolonial feminism and intersectionality, the methodology adopted is an interpretive hermeneutic approach (Matias, 2021) to the contents of the selected works – autobiographical novels and graphic novels. The selection of texts was guided by their explicit self-representational dimension, their public circulation within Italian cultural debate, and their relevance for educational and pedagogical reflection. The analysis is grounded in the epistemology of feminist situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), which understands knowledge as partial, embodied, and produced from specific social locations. The authors' narratives are therefore analysed as sites of knowledge production that challenge Eurocentric, racialized, and androcentric epistemologies. In this sense, the study aligns with Black and postcolonial feminist scholarship that recognizes lived experience as a critical source of counter-knowledge.

1. Narrating the hijab: muslim women's feminist counter-representations

We examine here a selection of texts, novels, and graphic novels by young Italian women of Muslim faith with a migrant background. In particular, we focus on the works of Takoua Ben Mohamed and Sumaya Abdel Qader, which testify to the resilience and creativity of Muslim women as they claim their rightful place within public discourse. These authors are united by their use of irony to construct counternarratives about Muslim women, particularly in relation to the wearing of the Islamic veil. Their emphasis on

bodily autonomy and cultural pride points to an alternative form of feminism that is both local and global, grounded in personal experience yet sharply attentive to systemic injustice.

Takoua Ben Mohamed: irony as a counter-narrative to islamophobia in graphic novels

Takoua Ben Mohamed, of Tunisian origin and raised in Italy, named Woman of the Year by the newspaper D-Repubblica in 2021, has consistently challenged dominant narratives surrounding Muslim women. In the graphic novel *Sotto il velo* (2016) (*Under the veil*, authors' translation), the author uses irony to deconstruct stereotypes about hijab-wearing women in Italy, which have long been shaped by orientalist representations of Muslim femininity (Yeğenoğlu, 1998). She employs a series of funny vignettes depicting the daily interactions of a young Muslim woman, highlighting the unusual questions and prejudices she encounters – from whether she sleeps in her veil to whether she can hear through it. By contrasting these absurd scenarios with the protagonist's sharp, humorous responses, Takoua reveals how Muslim women are simultaneously scrutinized by mainstream Italian society and by certain segments within their own communities. The protagonist fields odd questions, such as «do you wear the veil because you don't wash your hair?» or «can you hear me through the veil?» (Ben Mohamed, 2016, p. 15). These vignettes highlight the absurdity of stereotypes by confronting them with irony. Takoua's cartoons further expose the *double gaze* that Muslim women navigate – one emanating from mainstream Italian society and the other from Muslim communities of origin. One illustration shows a passerby exclaiming, «you look like you're from the Middle Ages!» (*ivi*, p. 13) while another, presumably within a Muslim context, complains, «why are your pants too tight, and why wear so much makeup?» (*ivi*, p. 14). The novel also addresses the area of the workplace. When the hijab-wearing protagonist attends a job interview, she faces inquiries about her marital status and whether «that thing on your head» (*ivi*, p. 60) would be worn during office hours. The interviewer dismisses her as lacking the right appearance, overlooking her qualifications, work experience, and degree. The text concludes with a direct affirmation of Muslim women's autonomy: «Yes, I am a woman, and no, I am not subject to anyone» (*ivi*, p. 82). This declaration champions a universal womanhood – one that is «a warrior of rights, freedom, and equality for women worldwide» (*ivi*, p. 80). Thus, her illustrations provide a counter-narrative to the assumption that wearing the hijab signals passivity or oppression. *Sotto il velo* underscores the wearer's agency and individuality, illustrating that the choice to veil can coexist with creativity, self-confidence, and assertiveness.

Similarly, another graphic novel by Takoua Ben Mohamed, *Non stuzzicate la musulmana* (2024) (*Do not provoke the muslim woman*, authors' translation), addresses the issue of islamophobia faced by young Muslim women in Italy through a sharply ironic lens. Drawing on autobiographical experiences, Ben Mohamed stages a series of short episodes in which the protagonist responds to verbal harassment, stereotypes, and discriminatory remarks directed at visibly Muslim women. The title itself operates ironically, reclaiming an aggressive trope often projected onto Muslim bodies and redirecting it as a form of empowered self-assertion. Through humor, exaggeration, and visual punchlines, the graphic novel exposes how Muslim women are frequently perceived as either submissive victims or latent threats, leaving little room for complexity or agency. Ben Mohamed subverts these binary representations by equipping her protagonist with wit, confidence, and verbal skills, transforming moments of hostility into opportunities for critique.

Sumaya Abdel Qader: narrating muslim women's lives between multiple worlds

Sumaya Abdel Qader is another author who has written autobiographical novels about the experience of a young Italian Muslim woman with a migrant background navigating the tensions of multiple identities. Born in Perugia to Jordanian-Palestinian parents, she served as the first Muslim city councillor of the Municipality of Milan and has been actively engaged in promoting women's rights and the inclusion of young people with a migrant background for over twenty years. Her first book, *Porto il velo, adoro i Queen. Nuove italiane crescono* (2008) (*I wear the veil, I love Queen: growing up as new Italian women*, authors' translation) already signals in its title the complex and multifaceted identity of a young Italian Muslim woman of migrant origin, negotiating the tensions between different cultural worlds. She highlights her navigation between two sets of cultural pressures:

On one side are Italians - supposedly your fellow citizens – asking whether you have hair under the veil, how you manage to have sex covered like that, and other trivialities. On the other side are relatives, or Arabs in general, criticizing you for being «too Western» (Abdel Qader, 2008, p. 13).

Abdel Qader also reflects on the Shakespeare-inspired choice «To veil or not to veil» (Abdel Qader, 2008, p. 40) pointing out that the hijab in Italy entails challenges ranging from heightened visibility to outright discrimination in professional contexts, within a broader public discourse that has often problematized the veil as a cultural and political symbol (Prezzo, 2008). The book challenges readers to dismantle the simplistic binary separating the modern West from traditional Muslim contexts. Abdel Qader also points to the practical difficulties of securing work while wearing the hijab in Italy, emphasizing how employer prejudice often eclipses her qualifications and hard-earned credentials. In so doing, she highlights the broader need for an intersectional approach to feminism, one that acknowledges how religion, ethnicity, and gender shape women's day-to-day realities.

In another text, *Quello che abbiamo in testa* (2019) (*What we have on our heads*, authors' translation), Sumaya Abdel Qader tells the story of Horra, a not-yet-forty-year-old Italian Muslim woman born to Jordanian parents and living in Milan. Wife, mother of two very different teenage daughters, legal secretary, university student, volunteer, and active member of her religious community, Horra leads a full and demanding life that, at the beginning of the novel, appears fundamentally serene. Her apparent balance is disrupted by an episode that triggers a profound inner questioning, prompting her to reflect on what it truly means to be *free*, a question charged with symbolic weight, given that her name, Horra, means precisely *free*. Rather than constructing identity as a fixed synthesis between two cultures, *What we have on our heads* presents it as an ongoing, situated process. Horra does not seek a final label but a way to inhabit her complexity without fragmenting herself. In this sense, Abdel Qader's novel foregrounds the emotional and ethical dimensions of belonging: the desire to be recognized without being simplified, to choose without having to betray parts of oneself, to feel free without severing ties. By anchoring broader questions of freedom, identity, and recognition in the rhythms of everyday experience, *What we have on our heads* offers a vivid portrait of a contemporary Italy that is plural, relational, and already transformed into an intercultural reality.

In conclusion, the cultural productions by Takoua Ben Mohamed and Sumaya Abdel Qader challenge the assumption emerging in mainstream discourse that veiled women are

passive, oppressed, or anti-feminist. This point has been one of the most important in postcolonial studies and postcolonial feminism (Mernissi, 1991; Mohanty, 1984; Lewis, 2004; Vergès, 2019). In these narratives, Muslim women reclaim control over their self-representation and propose alternative representations of their bodies through writing and art (Macinai and Biemmi, 2022). These writers show how Muslim women negotiate tensions between an Italian context often hostile to the hijab and Muslim communities that may impose rigid norms, revealing identity as a dynamic process that resists fixed binaries such as Western versus Muslim (Salih, 2008).

2. Revisiting Italian identities: the rise of black Italian feminism and the centrality of the concept of *race*²

A second group of young women with a migrant background who have written extensively about their experiences and identities is Afrodescendant women. Indeed, in recent years, Italy has witnessed the emergence of what can be termed a *Black Italian Feminism* (Chiappelli and Bernacchi, 2024), spearheaded by women of African descent who contest both sexism and racism while challenging the assumption that Western societies inherently lead the way in women's emancipation. Building on the critical legacy of postcolonial and Black feminist thought (hooks, 1981, 1984; Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2022), these activists and authors bring to light the enduring impact of Italy's colonial history, the exclusivist concept of Italian citizenship – rooted in *ius sanguinis* –, and the everyday discrimination faced by Black women and other racialized communities. A key driver of Black Italian Feminism is the desire to reframe notions of *Italian-ness*, so they are not predicated on whiteness. Across different platforms, activists ask uncomfortable questions about the *line of color* (Du Bois, 1903), a term highlighting the racial boundaries that structure social and political life. They also link local struggles in Italy to broader international movements, reflecting a cosmopolitan perspective that draws on antiracist, feminist, and decolonial traditions from around the world.

A Black Italian anthology: Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi

One of the most significant works by Afro-descendant writers is *Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi* (2019) (*Future. Tomorrow, narrated by today's voices*), edited by the Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego. This literary anthology brings together the voices and perspectives of eleven Afro-descendant women living in Italy. Often cited as a landmark for Black Italian Feminism, the volume is compared by Camilla Hawthorne to other formative Black feminist compilations, such as *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981), and *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull et al., 1982). *Future* functions as a collective *j'accuse*, underscoring how, despite promises of a revised citizenship law, Black women in Italy continue to face marginalization and are seldom recognized as fully-fledged citizens. Within its pages, contributors address diverse but interrelated themes: a sense of identity filtered through the gaze of others, ongoing racism, the complexities of belonging in a Country that has yet to reconcile its colonial history, and intergenerational tensions within families.

Marie Moise states: «normality is the condition of those who have the power to make you feel wrong, to declare you inferior, to mark you as a failure. The opposite of white normality is failure» (Moise, in Scego, 2019, p. 41). Alesa Herero likewise writes: «and then again that thought: how long will we have to prove the legitimacy of our existence? Were there real possibilities of breaking that continuous thread dragging itself wearily

from the past to the present?» (Herero, in Scego, 2019, p. 156). Wii observes: «Those who enact language are the natives. The native does not need to ask themselves questions that do not concern them; they do not feel the need to define themselves» (Wii, in Scego, 2019, p. 172). Leila El Houssi also recounts the symbolic violence she experienced for not fitting into normality, when her elementary school teacher told her to stop saying that she had five grandparents. Anger – arising from discrimination, patriarchal norms, and social invisibility – runs through many of these narratives, amplifying the anthology's urgent call for a more equitable future. In Marie Moise's story, which recounts her journey to Haiti in search of her severed roots, she writes: «I carry so much anger for the life I have been given: I am a woman, and I am poor. What eased my anger was discovering that I am not alone, discovering that my anger is shared by many others like me, even if it has different origins and reasons» (Moise, in Scego, 2019, p. 51). For Esperance H. Ripanti, whose family is originally from Rwanda, «anger is what I felt in the summer of 2018, faced with the impossibility of feeling safe in the place where I grew up» (Ripanti in Scego, 2019, p. 204). Ripanti in particular recounts episodes of racial violence reported in the news during the summer of 2017 through a dystopian narrative. Anger is also central to Leaticia Ouedraogo's contribution, in which she denounces the sexually charged verbal abuse she endured.

In conclusion, by presenting a range of experiences – daughters of immigrants, women of mixed heritage, Italian-born and newly arrived – the anthology defies simplistic labels like second generation and insists on the multiplicity of Afro-Italian realities. The text simultaneously denounces the whiteness that dominates Italian media and institutions while championing the potential of young women to catalyze social transformation.

Personal narratives as a means of addressing racism in the Italian school system

Another area of attention in Afro-descendant women writers is the desire to address racism in the Italian school system and to write about the need to recognise the unacknowledged contributions of black people to Italian history. In this section, we examine the text *Letter from an Afro-descendant mother to the Italian school* by Marilena Umohoza Delli, a writer, photographer, filmmaker, and radio presenter born in Italy to an Italian father and a Rwandan mother. The book can be fully situated within the field of intercultural female writings as practices of pedagogical counter-narration. Through a maternal, situated, and relational voice, the text challenges the presumed neutrality of the Italian school system, revealing its role in reproducing Eurocentric and racially normed forms of knowledge. In this sense, the text embodies what Black feminist theory has defined as situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), namely a form of knowing rooted in the lived experiences of Black women that resists dominant epistemologies by producing critical counter-knowledges. As Black feminist pedagogy has argued, embodied experience constitutes a fundamental epistemic resource for transforming educational contexts (hooks, 1994), thereby reconfiguring pedagogical practices through marginalized and situated forms of knowing.

The school thus emerges as a space in which racism manifests not only through overt acts, but also through ordinary practices, curricular silences, and apparently neutral policies, an aspect which has started to emerge also in pedagogical literature (Burgio, 2022; Fiorucci, Pinto Minerva and Portera, 2017; Macinai, 2020; Lorenzini and Bolognesi, 2017). Marilena Umohoza Delli also explicitly acknowledges the need to engage with the concept of *race*, which is often censored in Italian public debate. She states: «People are often afraid to talk to children about *race* and racism, yet it is important to do so from a very early age. It is the silence surrounding *race*, understood as a social

construct, that fuels racism itself» (Umuhoza Delli, 2024a). A central concern of the Letter is the erasure of Black presence from *curricula* and collective memory. She writes: «I never saw myself represented in a textbook, nor did I ever encounter any non-white teachers, not even at university, in the second half of the 2000s» (Umuhoza Delli, 2023, p. 47). And she continues:

including the contributions of racialized people in this Country within school curricula would not only improve the quality of education, but would also allow young people to engage more closely with the experiences of families with multicultural backgrounds, while at the same time enabling boys and girls of different ethnicities to feel represented (Umuhoza Delli, 2023, p. 62).

At the same time, the text challenges educators to confront their own positionality and privilege, revealing how institutional authority is embedded in asymmetrical power relations. The letter also resists tokenistic forms of inclusion that leave dominant structures intact. Instead, it advocates transforming educational practices through an explicitly intersectional perspective, attentive to how *race*, gender, and citizenship intersect to shape students' school experiences (Lopez, 2019). For example, the author warns her readers about a number of phenomena of which we are often unaware, from color-blindness to cultural appropriation, and to the problematic nature of the very term *integration*. The text contributes to an intercultural reconfiguration of education that goes beyond formal inclusion and critically interrogates the power relations that produce difference, opening the possibility for genuinely anti-racist and intersectional educational practices.

3. Intercultural female writing as pedagogical practice

Intercultural female writing has increasingly been recognized as a privileged site of what can be called epistemic resistance. Feminist, postcolonial, and Black epistemologies have long argued that knowledge production is inseparable from power relations and that marginalized voices play a crucial role in challenging dominant narratives (Borghi, 2020; hooks, 1994; Hill Collins, 2022; Mohanty, 2003), while also exposing forms of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Building on this, within educational contexts, such writings not only diversify the canon but also function as pedagogical tools that unsettle Eurocentric and universalist assumptions embedded in curricula, teaching practices, and institutional structures. This section examines how intercultural female writings were employed in a Sociology of Education course taught by one of the authors of this article, as part of a syllabus addressing students with migrant backgrounds and intercultural education. In order to engage with the construction of an intercultural society from an educational perspective, the course included an in-depth exploration of a range of cultural productions – such as female writings, graphic novels, and podcasts – addressing issues of interculturality, racism, and white privilege.

Students' reflections on Letter from an Afro-descendant mother to the Italian school

We focus here in particular on the reflections emerging from the assignments of those students who chose to engage with the text – already addressed in the previous section – *Letter from an Afro-descendant mother to the Italian school* by Marilena Umuhoza Delli, which was selected from a set of readings on intercultural approaches in education curated by the course instructor. The study was conducted within a Sociology of Education course

attended by approximately 400 students, among whom about one quarter chose to further explore this text. The assignment was carried out during the 2024/25 academic year with third-year students enrolled in the Primary Education degree programme – typically aged between 21 and 24, with a few mature working students³. The exercise was anonymized, as it was designed to produce reflective writings to be collectively analyzed in class; accordingly, excerpts from the assignments are not attributed to individual authors. The analysis was conducted through a thematic analysis of recurring topics (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which led to the identification of six main macro-categories in the students' work: voice, positionality, and feminist counter-knowledge; decolonizing the curriculum and challenging Eurocentrism; structural racism; language and microaggressions; intersectionality and interculturality in the classroom; and teacher reflexivity and ethical responsibility.

Voice, positionality, and feminist counter-knowledge

At the core of the *Letter from an Afro-descendant mother to the Italian school* lies a deeply situated voice: maternal, Afro-descendant, and explicitly political. This form of writing aligns with Black feminist epistemology, which conceptualizes lived experience as a legitimate and critical source of knowledge (Hill Collins, 2022). Rather than aspiring to neutrality, the text embraces positionality, thereby exposing the partial and exclusionary nature of dominant educational discourses. Students recognize this dimension clearly. As one student notes: «the author speaks in the first person, and the book itself is born from her lived experience and from that of her daughter within the Italian school system» (St. 1, F). This recognition is pedagogically significant, as it reflects a shift from abstract engagement to ethical implication. Within feminist pedagogy, the personal is not only understood as political but as a key site of pedagogical transformation (hooks, 1994) and, as such, capable of reconfiguring learning spaces as arenas of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

Structural racism: from individual prejudice to institutional systems

Another key pedagogical outcome concerns students' ability to conceptualize racism as a structural and institutional phenomenon. Intersectional theory emphasizes that racism operates through interlocking systems of law, policy, discourse, and everyday practices rather than solely through overt acts of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). Students' reflections clearly reflect this shift. One student notes: «the author focuses on institutional racism, which takes shape in citizenship laws and in migration policies that still produce exclusion today» (St. 2, F). Another student notes: «the book draws attention not only to explicit forms of racism, but especially to less visible and sometimes unintentional ones» (St. 3, F). These observations demonstrate how the text enables students to move from moralistic understandings of racism toward a structural analysis, acknowledging how racism is embedded in social, political, and symbolic orders that shape subject formation.

Decolonizing the *curriculum* and challenging eurocentrism

Another central theme emerging from students' reflections is the need to decolonize the school curriculum. Postcolonial feminist scholarship has long highlighted how Western education systems construct knowledge through processes of exclusion and silencing, particularly regarding colonial histories and racialized subjects (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003). Students' engagement with the text reflects this critical awareness. As

one student observes, «students have the right to know history in its entirety, including contributions that are not only white». This statement reframes decolonization as an epistemic and ethical obligation rather than an optional gesture of inclusion. Another student explicitly links curricular silences to colonial legacies. «The section dedicated to colonialism is central for understanding cultural racism in our society. School must therefore be rethought and decolonized, transmitting a multiethnic history of our Country». Such reflections resonate with postcolonial critiques of national narratives that erase racialized presences and construct Europeaness as homogeneous and ahistorical (Di Maio, 2014). Intercultural female writing thus enables students to recognize the curriculum as a site of power and struggle, where histories are selected, hierarchized, or excluded.

Language and microaggressions

Across the reflections, language emerges as a crucial pedagogical battlefield. Feminist and Black scholars have long emphasized that language is not merely descriptive but performative, capable of producing exclusion or recognition (hooks, 1994). Students repeatedly stress that everyday expressions and *harmless* jokes function as mechanisms of racialization. As one student explains, «microaggressions appear through phrases or jokes that seem harmless, but in reality have the same discriminatory effect as more explicit forms of racism». Another student highlights the ethical responsibility of educators. «It is essential to learn how to use inclusive and accurate language, avoiding unconscious forms of tokenism, because words carry weight and can become powerful tools of discrimination» (St. 4, F). These reflections align with intersectional critiques of color-blind and tokenistic approaches, which often reproduce inequality under the guise of neutrality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2022).

Intersectionality and interculturality in the classroom

Several students explicitly frame the text through an intersectional lens, recognizing how *race* intersects with gender, disability, migration status, and class. Intersectionality, originally developed within Black feminist thought, provides a crucial analytical tool for understanding how inequalities are produced and experienced simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1989). As one student states, «the educator should adopt an intersectional approach, highlighting each person's identity and cultural background» (St. 5, M). This perspective challenges mainstream models of *diversity management* and reframes intercultural education as a relational and transformative practice. Another student explicitly resists dominant deficit narratives: «multiculturality should be considered an advantage and not a disadvantage» (St. 6, F).

Teacher reflexivity and ethical responsibility

Finally, a recurring theme across the students' assignments is the importance of teacher reflexivity. Feminist pedagogy insists that educators must interrogate their own positionality and internalized assumptions in order to resist reproducing systems of domination (hooks, 1994). As one student explicitly states, «it is crucial for teachers to engage in self-reflection on their own positioning and on their internalized racism, in order to adopt a genuinely anti-racist approach» (St. 7, M). This passage underscores a fundamental pedagogical shift: racism is no longer externalized as a societal problem but recognized as something that educators themselves must actively unlearn. To conclude,

the analysis of student reflections demonstrates that *Letter from an Afro-descendant mother to the Italian school* operates as a powerful example of intercultural female writing as a pedagogical counter-narrative. Through engagement with the text, students develop critical awareness of Eurocentrism in curricula, recognize racism as a structural phenomenon, reflect on the ethical implications of language, and articulate the need for decolonial and intersectional educational practices. More broadly, this case study confirms the transformative potential of intercultural female writing within teacher education. (Lapov, 2025; Zannoni and Sirotti, 2019). By centering marginalized voices and situated knowledge, such texts challenge dominant epistemologies and contribute to the formation of reflective, responsible, and critically engaged educators, bringing together feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional theory with concrete pedagogical praxis.

Conclusions

This article has examined intercultural women's narratives as powerful forms of feminist and antiracist counter-narration situated at the intersection of literature, activism, and pedagogy. Through the analysis of Muslim and Afro-descendant women's writings, the first part has shown how these texts challenge dominant representations of Italian identity, disrupt colonial and Eurocentric imaginaries, and articulate situated forms of agency that foreground relationality, intersectionality, and self-definition. In doing so, these narratives redefine authorship itself as a political practice capable of transforming cultural discourse, while also making visible the epistemic conditions under which certain voices are marginalized or silenced.

The second part has demonstrated that this transformative potential extends into educational contexts. Students' engagement with *Letter from an Afro-descendant mother to the Italian school* reveals how intercultural women's narratives foster critical consciousness, emotional reflexivity, and an emerging awareness of racism as a structural and institutional phenomenon. The reflections analyzed show that such texts can function as decolonial pedagogical tools, enabling future educators not only to interrogate curricula and language, but also to critically engage with their own positionalities and responsibilities within educational systems. Taken together, these findings confirm that intercultural women's narratives are not merely objects of study but active pedagogical resources. By centering marginalized voices and lived experience, they open spaces to contest epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), challenge the presumed neutrality of educational institutions, and contribute to the construction of more inclusive, anti-racist, and transformative learning environments. At the same time, they call for a rethinking of teacher education itself, highlighting the need to integrate critical, situated, and relational forms of knowledge into training practices. Finally, this study suggests that further research could explore how such pedagogical approaches can be sustained over time and across different educational contexts, as well as how students' critical awareness translates into long-term professional practices. In this sense, intercultural women's narratives not only illuminate existing inequalities but also offer concrete epistemic and pedagogical resources for imagining and enacting more just educational futures.

Notes

¹ This article is the result of joint research and collaborative discussion between the authors. The Introduction and Conclusions were written jointly. Section 1 *Narrating the hijab: muslim women's feminist counter-representations*, sub-paragraph *Takoua Ben Mohamed: Irony as a Counter-Narrative to Islamophobia in Graphic Novels*, together with Section 3 *Intercultural female writing as pedagogical*

practice are to be attributed to Erika Bernacchi. Section 1, sub-paragraph *Sumaya Abdel Qader: Narrating Muslim Women's Lives Between Multiple Worlds*, together with Section 2 *Revisiting Italian identities: the rise of black Italian feminism and the centrality of the concept of race* are to be attributed to Tiziana Chiappelli.

² Within the Italian academic context, the term *razza* (race) is not used, both because it is scientifically invalid and because of its historical association with Fascism, the 1938 racial laws, and the broader legacy of World War II. As a result, its use remains highly sensitive within Italian scholarly debate. It is therefore important to clarify that the decision to employ the term *razza/race* in this article – despite its exclusion from Italian scientific discourse – reflects the terminology explicitly adopted by the authors discussed throughout the text, as well as by the broader international critical literature to which they refer. In this sense, *race* clearly does not refer to biological differences, but rather to socially and historically constructed processes of racialization, discrimination, and the unequal distribution of recognition, power, and vulnerability.

³ In citations from the students' texts, students are identified only by a number, together with their gender in order to preserve anonymity. As already specified age varies from 21 to 24 years.

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