

## Beyond the Eternal City: Topographies of Trauma in Elsa Morante's *La Storia* and Igiaba Scego's *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*

Katrin Wehling-Giorgi

Rome has been referred to as the *urbs aeterna* at least since the elegies of the Roman poet Tibullus (circa 19 BC),<sup>1</sup> with the link between the capital and empire, and later also Christianity, emerging as highly influential in the collective imaginary of Italy's past, as well as of course being instrumentalised by the fascist regime. The city's construction as the repository of a historical archive of European and indeed world history<sup>2</sup> has captured the imagination of copious intellectuals well into the twentieth century, with Rome's rich cultural history often seen it marked in its «temporal fixity», constructed as a «static space of the past»,<sup>3</sup> and with Freud employing the city as a metaphor for the surviving memory-trace of Western civilisation.<sup>4</sup>

More recent narratives, instead, have posited the capital as a complex, pluralistic entity that provides the backdrop to some of the major events and mobilities of the past century.<sup>5</sup> One such account that in many ways redefines the *eternal city* in its palimpsestic spatial and temporal layering is Elsa Morante's novel *La Storia* (1974).<sup>6</sup> Only recently revalorised as a «foundational trauma narrative»<sup>7</sup>, as well as one of the great novels of (internal) migration,<sup>8</sup> this article re-assesses the novel's timely contribution to discourses around geopolitical conflict, trauma and cultural memory by placing it in dialogue with a contemporary scribe of

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<sup>1</sup> S. Malia Hom, *Consuming the View: Tourism, Rome, and the Topos of the Eternal City*, «Annali d'italianistica» 28, 2010, pp. 91-116 (p. 94). Malia Hom's article includes a detailed discussion of the origins of the topos of the eternal city.

<sup>2</sup> See also the recent introduction to a Special Issue entitled *Italy and the Eternal City: Rome in History, Memory, and Imagination*, ed. by B. Bouley and R. Wittman, «California Italian Studies» 13(1), 2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/C313164303> Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6ww730sn>

<sup>3</sup> S. Malia Hom, *Consuming the View*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> S. Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, transl. by David Mc Lintock, Penguin, London 2002, p. 8: «Now let us make the fantastic assumption that Rome is not a place where people live, but a psychical entity with a similarly long, rich past, in which nothing that ever took shape has passed away, and in which all previous phases of development exist beside the most recent».

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. *Rome: Postmodern Narratives of a Cityscape*, ed. by D. Holdaway and F. Trentin, Pickering and Chatto, London 2013.

<sup>6</sup> E. Morante, *La Storia. Romanzo*, Einaudi, Torino 1995. Henceforth abbreviated as «S».

<sup>7</sup> T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, *Trauma and Women Writers: A Transnational Perspective*, in *Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women's Writing*, ed. by T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, SUE, Rome 2022, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> See T. de Rogatis, *Homing/ritrovarsi. Traumi e translinguismi delle migrazioni*, Edizioni Università per Stranieri di Siena, Siena 2023, p. 9. See also S. Porcelli's contribution to this Special Issue, *The Nest of a Migratory bird: Embodiments of Fear in Elsa Morante's «La Storia»*.

Rome, Igiaba Scego, and her latest autofictional novel *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* (2023).<sup>9</sup> Morante's fictional Roman epos recounts the tragic story of mother-son duo Ida and Useppe during the Holocaust and in the immediate aftermath of WWII, narrated in continuous juxtaposition with the official chronicle (*cronistoria*) of events that precedes each chapter. Scego's memoir, on the other hand, set in the present-day Italian capital which is also the author-narrator's birthplace, takes the form of a letter addressed to her niece Soraya which interlaces an orally transmitted family history with the atrocities of colonialism and the transgenerational aftermath of the Somali diaspora. The two texts are centred on historical events that are diversely linked to the era of imperialist expansionism and fascism in Italy: while Morante's writings are concerned with the horrors of the Holocaust and the Jewish persecution, Scego's text focuses on the violence committed by Italian colonialists in the period leading up to WWII and beyond, including the Italian Trusteeship in Somalia (1950-1960) and its lasting effects into the post-colonial era. The two writers' works are centred on recuperating, and giving shape to, an unresolved «archive of evil»<sup>10</sup> that continues to both evade and haunt our collective memory of the past.

It has been widely discussed how the Holocaust, partly due to Italy's relatively small Jewish community, has long played a marginal role in Italian memorial culture, as well as in otherwise well-established transnational debates around cultural memory that are only now starting to gain traction.<sup>11</sup> With the notable exceptions of prominent writers like Primo Levi, Giorgio Bassani, and Natalia Ginzburg, the post-war period was characterised by a widespread latency<sup>12</sup> up to the period in which Morante was writing, and to the present day there remains a complex and often belated response vis-à-vis the atrocities of the Holocaust that continues to enable revisionist narratives of the past in the current political landscape.<sup>13</sup> Similar arguments can be made about Italy's colonialist legacy, which has long been dominated by the narrative

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<sup>9</sup> I. Scego, *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*, Bompiani, Milano 2023. Henceforth abbreviated as «CM». The article will also include occasional references to *La mia casa è dove sono* (I. Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono*, Loescher, Torino 2012; henceforth abbreviated as «CS»), when considered relevant.

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive discussion on the Derridean notion of the archive in relation to trauma, see T. de Rogatis, *Trauma, the Spectre and History* in T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, *Trauma and Women Writers*, cit., p. 17. See also J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Engl. trans. by E. Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; London 1995.

<sup>11</sup> R. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944-2010*, Stanford UP, Stanford, CA 2012, p. 8. As to the debate around cultural memory, see for instance G. Bartolini, *The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Seld-Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility*, Palgrave Macmillan, NY; Basingstoke 2021; M. Josi, *Rome 16 October 1943: History, Memory, Literature*, Legenda, Cambridge 2023.

<sup>12</sup> S. Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories: Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust*, Palgrave Macmillan, NY; Basingstoke 2014, p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. P. D. Tortola and M. Griffini, *Abuses of the Past by the Italian Far Right: A First Assessment of the Meloni Government*, «Journal of Contemporary European Studies», 1–14, 2024.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2390161>

of «italiani brava gente» and a lack of engagement with the violent history of fascism's imperialist enterprise.<sup>14</sup> Echoing Toni Morrison – a central point of reference for Scego's latest novel<sup>15</sup> – and her well-known accusation of a «national amnesia»<sup>16</sup> covering up the legacy of slavery in the United States, the Roman writer has often evoked Italy's silence around the brutalities of the regime committed in the Horn of Africa, described as «una cappa spessa e impenetrabile» (CM 226) that lasts to the present day:

L'Italia si era dimenticata del suo passato coloniale. Aveva dimenticato di aver fatto subire l'inferno a somali, eritrei, libici ed etiopi. In molti [...] paesi [...] dopo la Seconda Guerra mondiale c'è stata una discussione [...] ci si è interrogati sull'imperialismo e i suoi crimini. [...] In Italia invece silenzio. (CS 20)<sup>17</sup>

The reluctance to engage with its past is yet further exacerbated by a wider «reticence to accept the word and work of women» in the Italian literary landscape.<sup>18</sup> While undoubtedly scholarship in Italian gender and postcolonial studies has come a long way over the past two decades,<sup>19</sup> scholars have long delegitimised and constructed the works of Morante and Scego as marginal (see also the introduction to this Special Issue).

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<sup>14</sup> There is extensive critical literature on the history of Italian colonialism and its postcolonial afterlife. For instance, see the important works of Angelo Del Boca (e.g. *Gli italiani in Africa orientale: Nostalgia delle colonie*, Laterza, Rome; Bari 1984; see also key works in Postcolonial Studies that have emerged throughout the past two decades, including but by no means limited to: S. Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Post-colonial Culture. Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora*, State University of New York Press Albany, USA 2004; *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. by C. Lombardi-Diop and C. Romeo, Palgrave Macmillan, NY; Basingstoke 2012; J. Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries: Figures in Italian Migration Literature*, Peter Lang, Oxford 2013; F. Sinopoli, *Postcoloniale italiano. Tra letteratura e storia*, Novalogos, Milano 2013; *The Horn of Africa and Italy: Colonial, Postcolonial and Transnational Cultural Encounters*, ed. by Simone Brioni and Shimelis Gulema, Peter Lang, Oxford 2018); C. Romeo, *Interrupted Narratives and Intersectional Representations in Italian Postcolonial Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, NY; Basingstoke 2023. The latter book provides a very helpful overview of what Romeo divides into four phases of Italian Postcolonial Literature, as well as an extensive bibliography covering the field.

<sup>15</sup> As Scego has confirmed in a recent article (*Igiaba Scego. Una famiglia in mezzo alla storia tra la Somalia e l'Italia*, in «Altreconomia», 27 March 2023, <https://altreconomia.it/igiaba-scego-una-famiglia-in-mezzo-alla-storia-tra-la-somalia-e-litalia/>; last accessed 8 July 2024), it is not a coincidence that the novel opens with the word «Amatissima», which as the Italian translation of its title and key character is a clear homage to Toni Morrison's influential novel *Beloved* (1982).

<sup>16</sup> T. Morrison, *The Pain of Being Black*. «Time Magazine», 22 May 1989. Last accessed 11 November 2024. <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,957724-2,00.html>; I have previously addressed the important comparative links in the female-authored negotiation of transgenerational trauma in the works of Morante and Morrison: «Unspeakable Things Spoken»: *Legacies of Transgenerational Trauma in Toni Morrison, Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante's Works*, «Romance Studies», 41.4 (2023), pp. 248-266.

<sup>17</sup> See also CM (153; 225-26), as well as Scego's journalistic writings, which often centre around the need to address a violent, repressed past: [https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/igiaba-scego/2020/06/09/tracce-passato-colonialismo-razzismo-fascismo?fbclid=IwAR3yqiMSpwYMmmDUiriD3x2XnJUGCEjUz7JY5YOfpG13NhzxbtROzWTz\\_pQ](https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/igiaba-scego/2020/06/09/tracce-passato-colonialismo-razzismo-fascismo?fbclid=IwAR3yqiMSpwYMmmDUiriD3x2XnJUGCEjUz7JY5YOfpG13NhzxbtROzWTz_pQ) (last accessed on 13 November 2024).

<sup>18</sup> S. Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> See note 13 for some key works and bibliographical references on postcolonial studies in the Italian context.

Set against the backdrop of Rome, with its urban spaces bearing the traces of fascist atrocities and its colonial past, both Morante and Scego's texts establish an oblique relationship with the city. Their portrayal of the urban landscape, as I will show, questions longstanding associations between Rome and dominant narratives of the past, focusing on the spaces that lie beyond and beneath its urban splendours instead. Structured around the temporal and spatial dislocations and deferrals of traumatic recall,<sup>20</sup> Morante and Scego narrate their stories through Rome's heterotopic spaces, as well as through oneiric and postmemorial reconstructions of past and present trauma. At the same time, the bodies that populate the urban space are afflicted by physical marks, illness, and disease that evoke the structural disarticulations of trauma. Lastly, both writers use visual topographies, photographic images or paintings to channel an otherwise repressed imaginary of trauma. In *La Storia*, trauma is often processed and articulated through the visually focalised episodes of hallucinations, images, and dreams, set in the urban spaces of the capital;<sup>21</sup> Scego's work, on the other hand, features some compelling visual tableaux of trauma as it works with photography and paintings retrieved from the Roman archives to conjure up an undocumented past.<sup>22</sup>

By foregrounding the female characters' diverse enmeshment in overarching power structures, the article does not aim to establish competing versions of the kinds of atrocities narrated, but instead seeks to draw productive links between the two. Building on Rothberg's intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory,<sup>23</sup> as well as on Craps' notion of «cross-traumatic affiliation»,<sup>24</sup> I view both the Jewish and the Somali diaspora «as part of a multidirectional network of diverse histories of trauma and extreme violence».<sup>25</sup> While

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<sup>20</sup> On the dislocations associated with trauma, see e.g. C. Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore 1995, p. 8, and R. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, Routledge, London 2008, p. 218. For a detailed outline of the Freudian mechanism of deferral (*Nachträglichkeit*) and the complex temporalities of trauma, see T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, *Trauma and Women Writers*, cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion of Morante's employment and visual tropes, see also T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, *Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma*, «Allegoria» 83, 2021, pp. 178-183, and K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Come un fotogramma spezzato»: *Traumatic Images and Multistable Visions in Elsa Morante's History: A Novel*, in *Trauma Narratives*, ed. by T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, cit., 55-78.

<sup>22</sup> The visual arts of course also play a central role in Scego's novel *La linea del colore: Il Gran Tour di Lafanu Brown* (Bompiani, Firenze; Milano 2020); interestingly, *La linea del colore* and its fictional protagonist Brown is similarly constructed on an archival lacuna, bringing back fragments of the partially undocumented lives of two women artists in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy, Edmonia Lewis and Sarah Parker Remond, as E. Bond points out in *Black Lives in Italia: gli archivi fra memoria e ricostruzione artistica*, in *Storie condivise nell'Italia contemporanea. Narrazioni e performance transculturali*, ed. by D. Comberiati and C. Mengozzi, Carocci, Roma 2023, pp. 163-168.

<sup>23</sup> M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford UP, Stanford 2009, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> S. Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013, pp. 80-88. Other scholars who have established important links between Jewish and Postcolonial Studies include Marianne Hirsch, and her very influential notion of «postmemory».

<sup>25</sup> M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, cit., p. 132.

Morante's text of course precedes the era of the postcolonial turn in cultural studies, and her novel is chiefly focused on national migratory patterns, the contemporary author Scego instead has often shown an acute «relational understanding of trauma» in her writings,<sup>26</sup> building bridges between the victims of the Holocaust and colonialism.<sup>27</sup> The comparative perspective in this article highlights new synergies and affiliations between diverse dissymmetries of power and transnational histories, negotiated in the spatial, corporeal and visual topographies that are channelled through the city of Rome in the two authors' texts.

## 1. Elsa Morante's Phantasmagoric Rome

### 1.1. Spatial and Corporeal Topographies

From the opening pages of *La Storia*, the reader is invited to share an oblique gaze on Rome that undermines the dominant fascist narrative of the city's imperialist glories. Focalised through the eyes of the perpetrator-victim, the German soldier and rapist Gunther, this passage proleptically foreshadows the violence to come:

Di Roma sapeva soltanto quelle poche notizie che s'imparano alla scuola preparatoria. Per cui gli fu facile supporre che i casamenti vecchi e malridotti del quartiere San Lorenzo rappresentassero senz'altro le antiche architetture monumentali della Città Eterna! e all'intravedere, oltre la muraglia che chiude l'enorme cimitero del Verano, le brutte fabbriche tombali dell'interno, si figurò che fossero magari i sepolcri storici dei cesari e dei papi. Non per questo, tuttavia, si fermò a contemplarli. A quest'ora, per lui Campidogli e Colossei erano mucchi d'immondezza. La Storia era una maledizione. E anche la geografia. Per dire il vero, l'unica cosa che in quel momento lui andasse cercando, d'istinto, per le vie di Roma, era un bordello. (S 18)

The excerpt provides an early glimpse into what the city will come to signify in the course of the narrative as Gunther foregrounds Rome's working-class squalor («i casamenti vecchi e malridotti») over its classical architectural splendours. One of the novel's key words

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<sup>26</sup> S. Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, cit., 73.

<sup>27</sup> One example is her novel *Adua* (Firenze, Giunti 2017), which has a distinctly intersectional dimension that brings together the victims of fascism and colonialism, as M.-L. Cenedese has pointed out: (*Instrumental Narratives of Postcolonial Rememory: Intersectionality and Multidirectional Memory*, «Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies» 10.1–2, 2018, pp. 95–116. <https://doi.org/10.5250/storyworlds.10.1-2.0095>; see also Scego's short story *La Chat* (in *1938. Storia, racconto, memoria*, ed. by S. L. Sullam, Firenze, Giuntina 2018, pp. 99–111), which as Barbara D'Alessandro has pointed out brings together the Shoah and colonialism in an act of affiliative postmemory (*Raccontare il trauma della Shoah: tra memoria e postmemoria*, in *Trauma Narratives*, cit., pp. 153–55).



«mucchio»<sup>28</sup> proleptically references the mass killing of the Jews in a material metaphor that continues to haunt Ida's dreamscape, and there is an impending sense of doom that posits History as a curse: San Lorenzo will be reduced to rubble in the 1943 bombings, there is a specific focus on the city's sepulchral architecture (including references to the Cimitero del Verano, «fabbriche tombali» and «sepolchri storici dei cesari e dei papi»), and Gunther's sexual stirrings will soon result in the brutal rape of the innocent victim Ida.

In clear opposition to the *cronistoria* of events preceding each chapter, in Morante's narrative the unspeakable horrors of history find their way into the textual fabric under the guise of slippages, visions, and dreams. With its focus on the spaces that lie beneath the central sites of the *città eterna*, including the Roman ghetto, the San Lorenzo Quarter and the banks of the Tiber River, Morante weaves a rich web of liminal topographical references throughout the novel with the technique of «traumatic realism» in which claims to reference are upheld whilst also depicting a «traumatic extremity that disables realist representation».<sup>29</sup>

In fact, the destruction of the Roman cityscape penetrates both the realist surface of the narrative and its oneiric blind spots. In the first instance, the urban ruins are vividly described in Ida and Usepe's narrow escape of death in the San Lorenzo bombing in chapter 1943.<sup>30</sup> As they stumble through the debris in the immediate aftermath of the attack, their perception of time has been obliterated (S 169) and their surroundings have been pulverized, with the human literally «intertwined with the more-than-human world».<sup>31</sup> The immense dusty cloud of post-explosion, tar-stained dust penetrates the victims' lungs («faceva tossire col suo sapore di catrame», S 169), while a dead horse has turned into an inanimate object. The surrounding cityscape assumes anthropomorphic features and emerges as an equally vulnerable «receptive surface»,<sup>32</sup> with «gli alberi massacrati e anneriti» and «cipressi neri e contorti» as elements of nature are mutilated and stained by war akin to the massacred human bodies. The dry, pungent

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion of the links between the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the term «mucchio» in the novel, see K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Come un fotogramma spezzato», cit., pp. 60-61. See also Mara Josi's contribution to this special issue, *Holocaust-related Traumas in Elsa Morante's La Storia: Davide Segre and the Jews Who Evaded Deportation*.

<sup>29</sup> M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, cit., p. 106. See also T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, *Traumatic Realism*, cit., for a detailed discussion of Morante's use of this technique.

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, the Cimitero del Verano also repeatedly features as a prominent burial site that interweaves individual and collective trauma in Morante's last novel, *Aracoeli* (see E. Morante, *Aracoeli*, Einaudi, Turin 1982, p. 131). For a detailed discussion of the latter, see K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Una stampa lucida»: *Traumatic Images and Ruinous Landscapes in Elsa Morante's La Storia and Aracoeli*, «Annali d'italianistica», Vol. 42, forthcoming 2024.

<sup>31</sup> See S. Alaimo, *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature*, in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by S. Alaimo and S. Hekman, Indiana UP, Indianapolis 2008, pp. 237-264 (p. 238).

<sup>32</sup> See R. Walker, *Bringing up the Bodies: Material Encounters in Elsa Morante's La Storia*, «Italian Studies», 2020, pp. 82-95 (p. 85) for a discussion of the trans-corporeal in Morante's work.

smoke starkly contrasts with the surprisingly reassuring soft, warm liquid (S 169-170) of Useppe's urine as he wets himself amongst these scenes of utter destruction.

The porous trans-corporeal fusion of the characters' bodies with the war-scarred urban landscape is, however, most prominently explored in the novel's oneiric and delusional dimension. It is precisely when the characters lower their defence mechanisms, «come il crollo di una parete divisoria» (S 128), that central elements of the conflict resurface in the novel's rich dreamscape.<sup>33</sup> As I have previously shown,<sup>34</sup> the close encounter with death in the bombings resurfaces in a dream sequence following an epileptic fit in post-conflict 1947, all focalised by Useppe. The scene is set in an idyllic place on the bank of the Tiber (similar to the place referred to as «tenda d'alberi» in the novel, S 532), while the surrounding landscape is populated by a series of trees with anthropomorphic features that, rendered in their nude fragility, have been contorted and mutilated by an unknown force: «gli alberi si tendevano nudi e neri come corpi scarnificati, forse già morti» (S 552). This dream sequence in turn dialogues with yet a further iteration of the latter that metamorphoses into a multistable image that has previously been associated with the workings of traumatic memory and the spectral presence of the traumatic event: «lo spettacolo gli dava un doppio stupore: della presenza attuale, e della reminiscenza inconscia» (S 632).

In an earlier chimeric vision in chapter 1942, furthermore, Ida pictures herself amidst a crowd of naked people, all standing in a proximity that leaves them no space to breathe (S 128). In its emphasis on the defenceless human body and suffocation, the scene clearly alludes to the horrors of the lager, with trauma and breathlessness furthermore constituting a central anchor in Scego's portrayal of colonial trauma, as we shall explore below. This huddled mass of bodies forms an entanglement of organic matter that is mirrored by the inorganically enmeshed «mucchi di travi e di pietrisco» (S 128), reminiscent of Alaimo's notion of the trans-corporeal constitution of the body as «inseparable from “nature” or “environment” ».<sup>35</sup> These piles of rubble and the atrocities they conceal foreshadow the tragic destinies both in the collective – «sotto quei mucchi si sente un fragore come di migliaia di denti che masticano» (S 128) – and in the individual sphere («e sotto a questi il lamento di una creatura»; S 128), foreshadowing Useppe's tragic destiny. In the same oneiric scene, Ida furthermore channels the shame and fear of punishment associated with her ethnic origins into a further corporeal metaphor, a physical

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<sup>33</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of dreams in Elsa Morante's works, see also E. Porciani, *L'alibi del sogno nella scrittura giovanile di Elsa Morante*, Iride Edizioni, Soveria Mannelli 2006.

<sup>34</sup> See K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Come un fotogramma spezzato», cit., for a detailed discussion of Morante's dreamscape.

<sup>35</sup> S. Alaimo, *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature*, cit., p. 238.

imprint on her body: the matrilineal descent of Judaism into the seventh generation is referred to in terms of visible scars that are etched onto her legs: « [...] essa deve dimostrare le gambe, ma tenta di coprirsele, sapendo di avere certe cicatrici infami, che le deturpano la coscia e il polpaccio, e per le quali verrà punita fino alla settima generazione...» (S 128).

In several key episodes, Ida's body succumbs to a trans-corporeal fusion amidst the scarred urban landscape, and the experience of trauma in the novel is often accompanied by a distinct imagery of material and bodily entanglement. Epilepsy emerges as the most evident physiological correlative of (transgenerational) trauma that is transferred along a largely matrilineal line and accompanies the traumatic junctures of the novel, the «Grande Male» (S 463) or «scandalo» that frames the novel's opening and closing sections whilst sealing the characters' subalternity in their premodern, superstitious vision of the illness.<sup>36</sup> For instance, Ida suffers an epileptic convulsion during her rape that sees her dissociate from her surroundings and experience moment of psychic and material disintegration which sees familiar objects metamorphose into «creature vegetali o acquatiche, alghe coralli stelle marine» (S 71). Useppe, on the other hand, suffers his first seizure at the time of the death of his older brother Nino, with the illness overwhelmingly portrayed as a violent, unconquerable force («un punto violenza che lui subiva senza esserne testimone», S 551) that cannot be subsumed under the teachings of modern medicine («la scienza dei dottori non solo era inservibile per il male di Useppe, ma lo offendeva», S 504). Ultimately, Morante metaphorically expands the «great evil» of epilepsy from its clinical context to a historical perspective<sup>37</sup> in which it comes to stand for a collective, irremediable tragedy (S 30).

As I have previously shown,<sup>38</sup> moments of traumatic dissociation are accompanied by the fusion of the body with its material surroundings, affecting sight, breath, and other sensory organs. Ida's directionless wanderings on her way to the mortuary in the aftermath of Nino's death, for instance, are accompanied by a veritable fusion between Ida's porous body and the urban topography of the city. Dominated by the material interpenetration with the dust and limestone of her surroundings, and accompanied by altered perceptions, the detritus of war inscribes itself onto and indeed penetrates the violently inflected urban architecture and the body to articulate a destructive, all-encompassing traumatic moment in history. In its agential intra-actions, any ontological dichotomies between human and non-human are levelled as

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<sup>36</sup> See T. de Rogatis, *Homing/ritrovarsi*, cit., pp. 82-84 on a detailed discussion of the notion of epilepsy in Morante's work.

<sup>37</sup> See T. de Rogatis, *Homing*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> See K. Wehling-Giorgi, «Come un fotogramma spezzato», cit., for further examples of the characters' fusion with its material surroundings.



bodies are «literally swallowed up, fatally fused with the rubble».<sup>39</sup> In this context the porous female body not only becomes a privileged signifier of an all-pervasive state of trauma, but it is also the female voice that harnesses the expressive potentialities of trauma to tell an intense affective experience that has long been considered unspeakable.<sup>40</sup>

## 1.2. Visual Topographies

It is undeniable that images play a powerful role in archiving and preserving memories of the past. There is, furthermore, a close link between the visual dimension and trauma that scholars have explored since the 1990s: if trauma «in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge»,<sup>41</sup> or indeed apprehended in language, it can be registered in a form that is arguably held to be less mediated than linguistic expression, i.e. in an «imagistic way that stands outside normal memory creation».<sup>42</sup> *La Storia* has a distinctly visual dimension, not least inaugurated by its iconic first cover image depicting a collage of a lifeless casualty of the Spanish conflict on a pile of rubble.<sup>43</sup> In the narrative dimension, the characters' dissociative states frequently give rise to an affective imaginative investment into alternative realities that are set in the urban landscape, focalized and visualized through the main characters. When Ida finds out about the death of her first-born child Nino, for instance, she navigates the streets of Rome in a semi-conscious state of which she later preserves no memory. This dissociative state furthermore affects Ida's vision, distorting and deforming the urban landscape and topography around her «come da specchi convessi» (S 466): the light is perceived as a «uno zenith accecante», S 465) that bestows all objects an obscene appearance, with even the basilica appearing as distorted (S 466); on another occasion, Ida finds herself febrile and unable to map the city of Rome, whose topography becomes confused and tilted (S 344). In one of her dreams that directly channels her fears of persecution, furthermore, the streets of Rome take on the shape of her native Cosenza, Calabria, in yet another spatio-temporal confusion that is mapped onto the urban space (S 345).

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<sup>39</sup> R. Walker, *Bringing up the Bodies*, cit., 86.

<sup>40</sup> On the unspeakability of trauma, see for instance T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, *Introduction: A Historical-Literary Pathway in Trauma Narratives*, ed. by T. de Rogatis and K. Wehling-Giorgi, cit., p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> C. Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, cit., 153. Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore 1995, p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> R. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, cit., p. 148. For a detailed discussion of the links between trauma and the visual sphere, see the introduction to *Trauma Narratives*, cit., pp. 29-33.

<sup>43</sup> As recent scholarship has established (see M. Josi, *Rome 16 October 1943*, cit., p. 71), this image was not taken by Robert Capa as has long been assumed, but by the young war photographer Gerda Taro in 1937 shortly before her death. This detail raises further interesting questions about the systematic disavowal of female authorship in the construction of historical documents.

Further focusing on the visual dimension, the novel's numerous photographs provide fleeting glimpses into the horrors of war and the atrocities of the Holocaust,<sup>44</sup> often appealing to a collective archive of images that would be recognisable to an Italian readership and beyond. While newspaper photographs often depict blurry images showing the horrors of the lager, other snapshots synecdochally channel Ida's innermost fears that remain otherwise unspoken in the novel. In fact, one of the pictures contemplated by Useppe, referred to as «misteriosamente atroce» (S 370), captures Ida's own predicament of having unwillingly fathered a child with a German soldier, and hence fearing persecution for this act of "treason". The photo shows a woman with a shaved head, heckled by a crowd of bystanders whilst carrying a young baby with blonde curls («con una testina di ricci chiari», S 370). The fear («la donna [...] pareva spaventata», S 370) we can read in the woman's features clearly reflects Ida's own anxieties, translated into an image of collective resonance.

A further example of a spectral image that obliquely references the events of the Second World War is Mussolini's corpse. His death is not explicitly mentioned in the narrative, but it features in the *cronistoria* (S 364), the chronicle of historical information preceding each chapter. The latter key event is then translated into the storyline through the ekphrastic description of a widely circulated, and hence collectively identifiable photograph of the Duce's body exposed in Piazzale Loreto, Milan, in April 1945. The blurry image is focalised through Useppe, who views the newspaper print with a sense of «stupore titubante» (S 370),<sup>45</sup> with the female narrator describing the photo as depicting «un uomo vecchio, dalla testa grassa e calva, appiccato per i piedi con le braccia spalancate, sopra una folla fitta e imprecisa» (S 370). Visual glimpses in the novel indeed provide a powerful subtext that destabilises the storyline through the narrative techniques of traumatic realism, constituting a distinctly spectral urban and visual topography in Morante's work that points to the experience of trauma.

## 2. Igiaba Scego's Roman Archives

### 2.1. Heterotopic Spaces

As we have seen above, Morante's novel is set in the marginal spaces of Rome, including the working-class district San Lorenzo, the Jewish ghetto, and the banks of the Tiber, supplemented

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<sup>44</sup> See K. Wehling-Giorgi, "Come un fotogramma spezzato", cit., for a detailed discussion of the role of photographs and other visual documents in Morante's oeuvre.

<sup>45</sup> As S. Porcelli has shown, the term «stupore» in *La Storia* signals moments of affective intensity (*Narrating Intensity: History and Emotions in Elsa Morante, Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante*, unpublished PhD thesis, City University of New York 2020, p. 80. I have previously linked the term to moments of traumatic experience in the novel (see Wehling-Giorgi, *Traumatic Images and Multistable Visions*, cit., 62).

by the imaginary investment into a dreamscape and hallucinatory visions that are projected onto the urban canvas. Much of Scego's work, instead, focuses on landmarks, monuments and districts that bear the imprint of Italy's colonial history, as for instance in her first memoir *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010) and in *Roma negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (co-authored with Rino Bianco, 2014), a book that combines Bianchi's portraits with Scego's narrative of suppressed Roman spaces. In the former work, for instance, the protagonist Igiaba - together with her cousins who all form part of a transnational Somali diaspora - draws up a map of the lost city of pre-conflict Mogadishu. This act, in turn, results in the protagonist's remapping of her birthplace Rome in an attempt to uncover the hidden traces of Italy's colonial past in the capital's urban fabric (CS 16). Critics have previously pointed out how Scego's novel interlinks individual with collective history in a new spatial dimension or «affective geography», grounded in «the movement of emotions and bodies»,<sup>46</sup> and it has been associated with a «third space» that reveals «le stratificazioni verticali della Storia e la verità rimossa [...] dei tempi storici».<sup>47</sup>

In her latest book *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*, Scego further builds on the hidden geographies sketched out in her previous work to unveil some of the affective objects and material remnants of a lost, collective archive of past atrocities. As the scribe of an undocumented, orally transmitted past that threatens to be obliterated, she makes it her mission to give voice to a new, national archive that recuperates her family's lost memories (CM 192):

Possiamo ricercare la nostra memoria perduta dentro gli archivi dei colonizzatori. [...] Aggrappandoci ai racconti di famiglia. Ai racconti di *hooyo* per esempio. [...]

Anche questa lettera iniziata mille volte, mille volte stracciata, è memoria che si fa carne. Per te, Soraya. (CM 230)

While in *La mia casa è dove sono* Scego takes the reader on a journey through various sites and key monuments of Rome that are associated with its colonial past, her latest book is written in the form of a letter addressed to her niece Soraya, inspired by American writer James Baldwin's *A Letter to My Nephew* (1962), thereby foregrounding the relational, embodied, and

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<sup>46</sup> G. Parati, *Migrant Writers and Urban Space in Italy: Proximities and Affect in Literature and Film*, Palgrave, New York 2017, p. 158.

<sup>47</sup> T. de Rogatis, *Homing*, cit., p. 159.

narrative constitution of the subject.<sup>48</sup> The author grounds her story in a new matrilineal genealogy framed by her mother *hooyo* and her niece Soraya that, read alongside Cavarero's thought, posits the mother as the subject's first term of relation.<sup>49</sup> Originating in the void left by an obliterated, war-torn Somali archive, the narrator sets herself the task of (re)constructing a national record of the past by interweaving the orally transmitted stories and the «storied matter»<sup>50</sup> bequeathed by her extended family, thereby positioning herself as an archive<sup>51</sup> or empathic listener.<sup>52</sup>

La guerra ha distrutto tutto. [...]  
TUTTO.  
Inghiottito. Perso. Venduto.  
[...]  
Il nostro archivio è hooyo. E chiunque abbia visto la Somalia prima della distruzione.  
È così, nipote amatissima.  
[...]  
E anch'io in un certo senso sono un archivio. Perché ricordo.  
(CM 117-18)

Framed by the Roman cityscape, Scego salvages the voices of a silenced people in what becomes a personal and a collective «viaggio nel trauma» (CM 363), defined from within a multidirectional, matrilineal chorus of voices.

The narrative does not engage in a spatial journey as such; rather, it provides a non-linear exploration of a multi-layered, diasporic family past that in many ways dialogues with Morante's oblique portrayal of the capital. Interestingly, the thematic sequence of chapters

<sup>48</sup> A. Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1997. For further insights into second-person storytelling in contemporary Italian literature, see A. Bazzoni, *Second-Person Narrative and Relational Ethics in Donatella Di Pietrantonio's Mia madre è un fiume and Ada d'Adamo's Come d'aria*, forthcoming with «The Italianist».

<sup>49</sup> A. Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi*, cit., pp. 32-33: «La madre è anche l'altra alla quale, per prima, l'esistente appare. Il primato dell'apparenza costituisce sullo sguardo altrui il fondamentale aspetto corporeo dell'identità».

<sup>50</sup> S. Iovino and S. Opperman, *Stories Come to Matter*, in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. by S. Iovino and S. Opperman, Indiana UP, Bloomington; Indianapolis 2014, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> As Scego claims in an interview with Riccò centred on *La linea del colore*, she claims that her task as a writer is that of filling the voids and the unsaid left by history: «I tried to fill the gaps, the unsaid, the removed, and the unexplored with my imagination. It is obvious that a professional historian does not perform such an act of using imagination. But, thankfully, in literature, you can do it; you can fill the gap left unsaid by history textbooks». G. Riccò, *Igiaba Scego on Writing between History and Literature*, in *PublicBooks*, 12 August 2020; <https://www.publicbooks.org/igiaba-scego-on-writing-between-history-and-literature/> (last accessed on 13 November 2024).

<sup>52</sup> See also L. Pinton's work on second-hand storytelling and Aleida Assmann's notion of the empathetic listener in contemporary narrative: *Il narratore testimone nella narrativa contemporanea*, in *Con i buoni sentimenti si fanno brutti libri?*, ed. by G. Carrara and L. Neri, Ledizioni, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ledizioni.15173>; A. Assmann, *The Empathetic Listener and the Ethics of Storytelling*, in *Storytelling and Ethics. Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative*, ed. by H. Meretoja and C. Davis, Routledge, New York 2018, pp. 203-218.

themselves rotate around a heterotopic narrative and material space located at the heart of the text, and spatially reified in the capital's fascist architecture: an «intermezzo decoloniale», set in the Museo delle civiltà that houses the collection of the former Museo coloniale. The latter space occupies an interstitial position in the economy of the novel as it forms a structural hiatus or interlude in what is an otherwise thematic sequence of chapters. Furthermore, the section constitutes a spatial heterotopia in the Foucauldian sense in that the museum and its colonial collections provide a locus in which the «real sites» of reference, i.e. the spaces, people, and objects subjected to colonial power, are simultaneously «represented, contested, and inverted». With «heterochrony» (an «absolute break with their traditional time»)<sup>53</sup> forming one of the key principles of heterotopia, the latter concept closely resonates with the complex temporalities of the archival space that houses objects that bear testimony to a violent past and the haunting, reiterative function of the colonial objects, inviting some interesting associations with the deferral mechanism of trauma.

The Museo delle civiltà is located in the EUR district of Rome, originally constructed by Mussolini for the Universal Exhibition of 1942 that never materialised due to the outbreak of the war. As Scego describes, the museum is currently undergoing a concerted decolonisation effort to become a contemporary decolonial platform (CM 221).<sup>54</sup> Set on a hot summer day that firmly roots us in a present-day Rome scorched by rising global temperatures, the protagonist takes two of her nephews and her uncle on a visit to the colonial collection. The imposing building itself, together with its paradoxical beauty, sets up the immersive, spatial experience of the colonial past that vividly conjures up the violence of the imperialist enterprise:

Se ci avviciniamo alle pareti del Museo delle Civiltà, come in ogni superficie di questo quartiere teutonico e candido che è l'EUR, possiamo percepire nitidamente gli stivali degli eserciti europei calpestare la nostra pelle nera. (CM 220-21).

Scego here takes us to the heart of the archive of atrocities, where every catalogued object can be read along the lines of a «material narrativity» that provides colonial objects with a new

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<sup>53</sup> M. Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, Engl. transl. by Jay Miskowiec, in *Diacritics*, Vol. 16.1, 1986, pp. 22-27 (p. 24; 26).

<sup>54</sup> While Scego portrays the museum's decolonisation efforts as a positive development in her book, critics have questioned the lack of specialists in the field of colonial history, postcolonial and decolonial studies at the Museum's launch event in 2020, for instance, as well as its location within the EUR district, built to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of fascist dictatorship: see e.g. A. Ferrini, *White Tinted Glasses: On the 'Difficult' Heritage of Italian Colonialism*: <https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/en/2020/06/17/white-tinted-glasses-on-the-difficult-heritage-of-italian-colonialism-journal-of-visual-culture-hafi-31-2/> (last accessed on 11 November 2024).

narrative agency.<sup>55</sup> The visit turns into an all-immersive sensory experience in which the author senses the march of the oppressors in the surrounding walls, while the colonial artefacts assume a voice that quite literally screams trauma: «Ecco la potente missione di questo luogo: mostrare il dolore, il *Jirro*, di oggetti tanto pregni di cattiveria [...]. Il *Jirro* urla da ogni manufatto» (CM 223). There is, in fact, abundant reference to forms of affective experience that bestow agency onto the objects in the museum and therefore challenge deeply entrenched human/nonhuman hierarchies:<sup>56</sup> the *Jirro* (literally: Somali for «illness», which assumes a broader significance in the book akin to trauma; CM 17) screams, the casks/masks suffocate, like the victims of the Holocaust Ida projects into her dreams («senza spazio di respiro», S 128). In a powerful warning of the lasting effects of transgenerational trauma that simultaneously underscores the importance to break down racial hierarchies, the suffering of the material artefacts is then linked to the current Black Lives Matter movement, emerging from the last gasps of George Floyd's «I cannot breathe».

It is also breath, or rather the lack of it, that emerges as one of the foremost embodied (and frequently imagined) symptoms of transgenerational trauma in Scego's novel, often coinciding with a wider bodily paralysis. The grief her father experiences after his brother's death brings to the fore a whole repertoire of suffering that ultimately leads to a paralysed jaw and breathlessness (CM 57), while the writer imagines the horror seeping into her paternal grandfather's colonized body when translating the colonial violence of Graziani under the regime, as well as narrating his imaginary escape from the threat of a suffocating oppressor:

E mi sono immaginata il peso sullo stomaco. La testa che andava in frantumi. La lingua che si seccava. La raucedine che invadeva la trachea. I polmoni come risucchiati. E poi mi sono immaginata il nonno che correva via. Verso il mare. A cercare un po' d'aria. «Non riesco a respirare,» urla il nonno, come ha urlato George Floyd [...] Corre [il nonno] per cercare un po' d'aria e tornare umano. (CM 167)

Postcolonial trauma has in fact often been associated with forms of breathlessness as a somatic form of subordination,<sup>57</sup> as well as with forms of bodily mutilation that affect the colonised body: while the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has spoken of bodily dismemberment as a metaphor for memorial dislodgement of the colonial subject,<sup>58</sup> Fanon's work includes

<sup>55</sup> S. Iovino and S. Opperman, *Stories Come to Matter*, cit., p. 1; p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> For an interesting discussion around hierarchies in postcolonial materialism, see e.g. Colleen Taylor, *Postcolonial New Materialism and Nonhuman Narrativity*, in *Irish Materialisms: The Nonhuman and the Making of Colonial Ireland, 1690-1830*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2024, pp. 1-23.

<sup>57</sup> See for instance A. Rose, *Combat Breathing in Salman Rushdie's The Moor's Last Sigh*, in *Reading Breath in Literature*, ed. by A. Rose, S. Heine, N. Tsentourou, C. Saunders and P. Garratt, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2019, pp. 113-134.

<sup>58</sup> N. wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, Civitas Books, London 2009, p. 6.



references to the objectification of the colonised body in terms of «an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage».<sup>59</sup> Building on a longstanding genealogy of traumatised, suffocating, and dismembered bodies, Scego recounts and powerfully reimagines the transgenerational suffering of her family in a seemingly endless proliferation of physical ailments.

The most poignant corporeal topography of trauma, however, emerges in Scego's own body. She agonizingly relates her female ancestors' genital mutilation,<sup>60</sup> and despite her being spared this infamous tradition she claims to have inherited the experience of trauma from birth (CM 23). However, it is only when her mother gets trapped in the Somali civil war and fails to return to Rome for a period of two years that her adolescent body is gripped by the full force of the *Jirro*. Scego in fact associates the moment of separation from *hooyo*, which coincides with the first weeks of the civil war in Somalia, with the moment she lost her relatively carefree body («in quelle prime settimane ho perso il mio corpo», CM 96). As already recounted in *La mia casa è dove sono*, bulimia becomes a coping mechanism, originating in a desire to put order into a world that has taken an unexpected turn that lies outside the protagonist's control (CM 100).

As we have seen with Morante's translation of epilepsy into a collective, historical phenomenon, Scego's eating disorder similarly has lasting physiological effects, leading to irritable bowel syndrome in adulthood (CM 100); furthermore, it is similarly transposed into a collective sphere that sees her «spezzata [...] dalla Storia, quella con la "S" maiuscola» (CM 33). In fact, she links the sacred ritual (CM 99) of the body with an illness (CM 200) that subsequently metamorphoses into a war-ridden imagery of vomit (CM 92): «vomitavo lanciagranate, rivoltelle, mitragliatrici. E ancora fucili di precisione, fucili a pompa, carabine, fucili anticarro, fucili d'assalto [...]» (CM 99; see also CM 347). The narrator imagines the *Jirro* literally travelling through the body like a bullet (CM 273) that ruptures her tissue in the trans-corporeal interpenetrations of body and weaponry.

In the letter to Soraya, furthermore, the protagonist provides a striking number of examples in which the body keeps the score of directly or indirectly experienced trauma, conjured up in prosthetic memories<sup>61</sup> or direct testimonies from a diasporic familial network in

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<sup>59</sup> F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Engl. transl. by C. Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, London 2008, p. 85.

<sup>60</sup> See de Rogatis, *Homing/Ritrovarsi*, cit., pp. 163-166, for an incisive discussion of female genital mutilation in CS.

<sup>61</sup> The notion of «prosthetic memories» was first introduced by Alison Landsberg in *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Columbia UP, New York 2004, pp. 25-26: «prosthetic memories are those not strictly derived from a person's lived experience. Prosthetic memories [...] are experienced with a person's body [...] [and] become part of one's personal archive of experience, informing one's subjectivity».

which nobody is spared the effects of transgenerational trauma: «Il *Jirro* ha impresso in tutti noi, naturalmente con gradi diversi di intensità, delle conseguenze corporali» (CM 273). Igiaba herself ascribes not only her poor eyesight (CM 188), but also her migraines, her oblique and clumsy walking style (that seems to recall her mother's writing style), as well as a series of other symptoms that mirror the psychic upheavals at a somatosensory level:

La parola somala Jirro fatalmente ci descrive, Soraya. Descrive i nostri frequenti mal di testa, la nostra ansia che non va mai via, i perenni dolori cervicali, il cervello che si dissocia da sé stesso, i tumori che ci hanno quasi abbattuto, gli occhi che si velano di opaca oscurità, le orecchie che si rifiutano di ascoltare, il cuore che perde battiti, la gola che si fa deserto, i capelli che cadono come foglie in lavandini pieni di paure. Il *Jirro*. La maledetta guerra che ci abita dentro. E ci spezza. (CM 18)

## 2.2. Visual Topographies: Picturing Absence

While the photo collage that inaugurates Morante's *La Storia* in many ways foreshadows the intimate merger of fact and fiction that characterises her act of renarrating history, the cover image Scego has chosen to adorn the front cover of her book is of no less importance to the novel. As she explains in the autobiographical afterword, the archival picture was discovered on the internet while she was writing the novel: it purportedly portrays her mother at a Milanese trade fair in 1956, teaching a young Milanese lady how to sew a pair of slippers. This photograph, she explains, is central to her very understanding of the act of writing: in threading the various pieces of fabric into a harmonious, beautiful whole, it provides a powerful maternal metaphor of creation whilst underscoring the layering of various temporal levels in her story:

Attraverso questi fili si snodano tutte le epoche storiche che si incontrano in questa lettera caleidoscopio. Ci sono il colonialismo, il trauma della dittatura e la guerra civile. Ci sono le tante ferite provocate alla Somalia da tanti colonizzatori differenti. (CM 362)

In the chapter *Fotografia*, Scego comes to the realisation that Soraya herself is the most authentic photograph of her mother, thereby once again placing the focus onto a female lineage that frames the entire novel (CM 217).

The focus on a female genealogy of suffering through a visually focalised approach is further elaborated in the section *Intermezzo decoloniale*. During the visit to the archive, Scego focuses on two paintings, both portraying Somali women. While the first depicts a defiantly looking woman from the same tribe as her mother, it is the second portrait that most vividly catches her attention. It shows a naked, helpless and vulnerable woman in a defensive pose:

she wears no clothes or accessories and «gli occhi sembrano quelli di un'antilope spaventata, con un tenue residuo di bagliore che ne fa intuire una personalità forte annichilita dal tempo, dalle circostanze, dagli invasori» (CM 227). Scego is reminded of the so-called *kurkurei* women of the Shangani quarter in Mogadishu who, as related by her mother, used to prostitute themselves to the Italians under the Trusteeship to supplement their meagre family incomes. The portrait, which the protagonist sees mentally overlapping with several other images of humiliated women, comes to stand for the violence imparted on the female colonized subject:

Nella mia testa il corpo di quella donna si sovrappone al dolore e all'umiliazione di mille altre donne che ho intravisto negli archivi, nei libri e nelle foto antiche trovate durante le mie immersioni nei mercatini delle pulci. (CM 228)

The visual portrayal of trauma in the archive is closely linked to the author's focus on material, archival artefacts. It is only when her attention is caught by a small object, part of the original painting, that these reflections on female-focalised trauma are interrupted by a violent flashback:

La mia attenzione viene rapita da un piccolo oggetto, un pettine [...] in legno [...] lavorato fin nei minimi dettagli. [...] E dalla gola mi sale un urlo che reprimo. [...] Quel pettine che apre porte che non immaginavo esistere. (CM 228)

The discovery of the handcrafted comb which conjures up a «vast network of agencies and energies»,<sup>62</sup> brings back the memories of her stay in Somalia as a child. The image of her young mother brushing her hair with a similar comb becomes a metonymic metaphor of loss: «Il *Jirro* è questo, Soraya. Un pettine che non sappiamo più usare, costruire, inventare. Una parte di noi, della conoscenza degli antenati, che non abbiamo salvato dalla furia che ci ha travolti» (CM 229).

It is in the heterotopic space of the archive, and indeed of the text-as-archive, that the absence of an official record of the colonised can be carefully represented, contested, and ultimately inverted, to speak the silenced horror of the colonial subject. Conjured up from the void of a collective memory, Scego focuses on the material narrativity of the objects of colonialism to construe a new repository of a collective past. In becoming part of the story and hence of a new form of communication, just like her «caleidoscopic» letter (CM 362), the comb

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<sup>62</sup> S. Iovino and S. Opperman, *Material Ecocriticism*, cit., p. 1.

turns into a symbol of hope capable of bridging the temporal chasm caused by trauma, firmly rooted in a matrilineal genealogy of traumatic transmission and narration.

The Decolonial Intermezzo provides insights into how Scego often channels trauma into the spatial, visual, and indeed the material sphere, as well as highlighting the parallels between cataloguing the colonial archive and the process of writing:

Guardare quel pettine potrebbe spingere qualcuno a ripristinare la comunicazione tra passato e presente che la guerra ha interrotto. Lo potresti fare proprio tu, carissima nipote. [...] Potresti ricreare il nostro passato. [...] Può sembrare una contraddizione, ma possiamo ricercare la nostra memoria perduta negli archivi dei colonizzatori. [...] Anche questa lettera iniziata mille volte, mille volte stracciata, è memoria che si fa carne. (CM 230)

## Conclusion

The comparative critical lens has allowed us to gain new insights into how female-focalised traumatic experience is filtered through the text's spatial, corporeal, and visual tropes, all centred in and around the city of Rome as a locus that harbours stratifications of historical atrocities. What also emerges in the parallel reading is that both authors varyingly use storytelling to unlock an all-too-often silenced archive of trauma related to the Jewish and the Somali diaspora, both diversely linked to fascist atrocities. By employing the technique of traumatic realism that captures traumatic experience in the spatial, corporeal and visual disarticulations of the text, the authors lend powerful expression to a personal and collective experience that has long been threatened with amnesia and oblivion.

In that process, the female-focalised, polyphonic narrative itself comes to materialise and communicate the memory lost to colonial and fascist violence. For, as Cavarero argues, it is natural for those subjected to traumatic amnesia to look for the lost text in the memories of others, in a relational process that recalls the kaleidoscopic letter authored by Scego, or the stories recorded by the female, empathetic narrator of *La Storia*:

È naturale che lo smemorato cerchi nella memoria altrui il testo perduto. Facendosi raccontare la propria storia dagli altri, egli sta infatti cercando di ricucire il suo sé narrabile alla storia nella quale era costitutivamente intessuto.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> A. Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi*, cit., pp. 52-53.

Crucially, the writing process also becomes a form of cure against a *Jirro* that otherwise threatens to consume the writer/protagonist. The articulation of these blind spots of history in fact turns not only into a dynamic, multidirectional discourse, but also into a potent medicine:

Mi hanno spiegato che questo è un luogo in continua trasformazione, dinamico. [...] Anche questa lettera è in perenne divenire, una base da cui partire per riflettere su di noi. Come famiglia. Come diaspora. Per curarci. Dal *Jirro* che ci balla dentro. Io curo te e con te, scrivendoti, curo me stessa. [...] E il Museo delle Civiltà dell'EUR in fondo segue lo stesso principio. È una medicina. (CM 225)

Both *La Storia* and *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* show that narratives can not only reconstitute lost archives, but they can significantly enhance our understanding of trauma and illness in the context of the specific histories and cumulative experiences that affect the lives of the disenfranchised, as well as tracing their diverse enmeshment in sources of power. The two novels show how language and narrative can powerfully communicate and indeed frame the stories of illness and suffering, «so as to escape [their] dominion».<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The epigraph to Ada D'Adamo's recent book, *Come d'aria* (Elliot, Roma 2023), which is of course another prominent tale of illness, interestingly includes the following quote from Rita Charon's important book *Narrative Medicine*: «The telling of pain and suffering [is critical], enabling patients to give voice to what they endure and to frame the illness so as to escape dominion by it» (R. Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2006, pp. 65-66).



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