

Contaminated Cosmopolis: The Destabilized Nation-State in Igiaba Scego's *Beyond Babylon*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines one configuration of the cosmopolitan ideal as expressed in Somali-Italian author Igiaba Scego's novel *Beyond Babylon* (*Oltre Babilonia*). The novel reacts to the myth of the inflexible, unitary nation-state, and suggests that colonial impulses of expansion disturb the national identity of the conquering state in the very attempt to uphold its meaning. Colonial encounters contaminate the colonizers and the colonized with the manifold identities of the other. The confusion of borders is essential for the creation of an alternative mode of belonging that does not rely on the nation-state. The liminal status of first-generation African migrants to Italy and their descendants creates a transterritorial subject who is free to cross linguistic and spatial boundaries. Scego's contaminated subjects are often women whose sense of self is fragmented by a state apparatus that seeks to maintain the façade of impermeable nationhood. This subject is forced to carry her identity with her, thus enabling a condition of "multiple belonging." For the anti-colonial author, language is useful as a tool that is not bound to a national identity per se. As Scego and other authors of migratory literature continue to resist traditional mores of national (literary) inclusion, they suggest that nations and literary canons alike are only as well-defined as their rapidly-shifting boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

Before the failure of the December 4, 2016 constitutional referendum in Italy, the country had long been fractured along regional, political, and linguistic lines. The Northern League, a far-right political party that called for immediate national elections following the

resignation of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, embodied key characteristics of what some sociologists have termed "new localism": discontent with a centralized ruling party (the Roman bourgeoisie, the Christian Democratic Party), disillusionment with the European Union, a call for decentralized economic production, and apprehension about incoming migrant populations.¹ Growing waves of immigration to Italy throughout the '80s and '90s, particularly from Italy's former colonies and Eastern Europe, worried those who feared that the traditional Catholic subculture of the northeast was disappearing.

Perhaps Italy's enduring liminality—considering both its geographic subalternity as the "boot" of Europe and its anxious scramble for global relevance during and after the colonial era—can explain the border hysteria that has afflicted some of its citizens. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, the cultural critic and Italian studies scholar, argues that Fascism offered a coherent model of modernity that appealed to many Italians as a regenerative national order.² Much of Africa had already been partitioned by Great Britain and France when Italy finally acted on its colonial ambitions in the late nineteenth century. By invoking a uniquely Roman imperial past, fascists instilled their march into the Horn of Africa with much-needed energy.

The conquest of nations like Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia would enable fascists to export a rich Mediterranean culture to a continent that was apparently in great need of it. If there was no consensus on the exact contours of an Italian national culture, everyone could at least agree that this culture would be redeemed by bridging the gaps between Europe and Africa. Imperialism's transnational nature was never a

1 Daniele Albertazzi, "'Back to our roots' or self-confessed manipulation? The uses of the past in the Lega Nord's positing of Padania," *National Identities* 8, no. 1 (2006)

2 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Modernity Is Just Over There," *Interventions* 8, no. 3 (2006): 382, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13698010600955883>.

concern. Only by moving *oltremare* could Italians control “the cultural and genetic fallout that would come from the erosion of national and racial boundaries.”³ Mussolini imagined Sicily usurping Rome as the core of imperial power and becoming the functional heart of a “Eurafrican” pan-region. The loss of Italian East Africa to Great Britain in 1941 signaled the end of that ambition, however, and the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 officially foreclosed it. Italy was forced to renounce its territorial claims in the Horn with the notable exception of Somalia, which remained a trusteeship territory for another decade.

Few writers have so successfully detailed the performance of Italian nationhood as Igiaba Scego, who described *italianità*, or Italianness, as “a dress that requires continuous adjustments and alterations.”⁴ Scego, who has made her name as a novelist, memoirist, and journalist, entered the literary scene in 2003 after winning the Eks&tra prize for her short story “Sausages” (“Salsicce”). She won the prize again the following year for her first novel *Rhoda*. Scego, born in Rome to Somali parents who fled Siad Barre’s 1969 *coup d’état*, is often identified, along with writers such as Jadelin Gangbo, Cristina Ali Farah, and Amara Lakhous, with the so-called second-generation of contemporary Italian migratory authors.⁵ Many of these authors were born and raised in Italy. However, because of the ruling principle of *jus sanguinis* in Italy, state citizenship is determined by the parents’ place of origin. Consequently, many children with African roots who self-identity as Italian cannot legally be recognized as such until they are at least eighteen years old, when they can apply for naturalization. Even then, less than half of applicants obtain citizenship as adults.⁶

Like the author herself, Scego’s second novel *Beyond Babylon (Oltre Babilonia)* does not respect boundaries. In a book filled with myriad characters, locations, and languages, there is no single story but rather a chorus, which is often dissonant. The novel consists of eight sections of five chapters each (bookended by a prologue

3 Ibid.

4 Gruppi di Lettura, “Il racconto della scrittrice Italo-Somala Igiaba Scego,” GdL L’Ora del T, September 12, 2015, accessed December 28, 2016, <http://www.biblioteca-spinea.it/blog/2015/09/12/racconto-della-scrittrice-igiaba-scego/>.

5 Marie Orton, “Writing the Nation: Migration Literature and National Identity,” *Italian Culture* 30, no. 1 (2012)

6 Norma Bouchard, “Reading the Discourse of Multicultural Italy: Promises and Challenges of Transnational Italy in an Era of Global Migration,” *Italian Culture* 28, no. 2 (2010): 105

and epilogue). Each chapter is narrated by a different character, always in the same order: Mar, a young Roman who decides to study Arabic at the Bourguiba School in Tunisia following the suicide of her lover; Zuhra, a record-store clerk with a traumatic past who also ends up at Bourguiba; Miranda, an Argentinian poet and Mar’s mother; Maryam, Zuhra’s mother and a Somali who self-exiles to Rome following the rise of Siad Barre; and Elias, a Somali clothes designer and father to Mar and Zuhra. *Beyond Babylon* describes the “dirty war” (*guerra sucia*) and the *desaparecidos* of Argentina, the tense years of Siad Barre’s political rule, and life in modern Rome and Tunis. The book’s cyclical structure is the only anchor Scego permits the reader as she navigates complex histories of colonialism and abuses of state power, while themes of black feminism and cosmopolitanism feature prominently.

Many individuals have offered their own definitions of cosmopolitanism: Kant’s anti-statist cosmopolitanism, Marx’s proletariat cosmopolitanism, Appiah’s moral cosmopolitanism, and so forth.⁷ *Beyond Babylon* articulates one of many possible configurations of the cosmopolitan ideal in light of Italy’s troubling colonial endeavors. In particular, the book reveals a paradox of the colonial effort that destabilizes the notion of a clearly delineated and cohesive nation-state: colonial impulses of institutional expansion disturb the national identity of the conquering state in the very attempt to uphold its meaning. A colonizing state cannot have a fixed, untainted identity while thrusting itself into the political and cultural affairs of another nation. The result is always contamination, an obfuscation of discrete borders that degrades old forms of belonging or affiliation. Borderlines that once seemed impassable become confused. This confusion is essential for the creation of an alternative mode of belonging that does not rely on the nation-state. *Beyond Babylon* uses multiple languages—tools that are fluid in form and meaning—to demonstrate the inevitability of contaminated subjects whose existence denies purist dreams of a nation bound neatly by lines and laws.

THE ANTI-COLONIAL NOVELIST

Despite favorable critical opinions, second-generation migratory authors exist in a state of marginality with respect

7 Pheng Cheah, “Cosmopolitanism,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 497–99

to Italian literary canons.⁸ Their collective exclusion is consonant with individual expressions of marginalization. Although Scego is not a migrant in the literal sense, she recalls being perceived “like an alien, more so than the migrants themselves.”⁹ If she was never exactly a migrant, nor was she fully Italian. As she describes, “Despite being born in Italy, I did not have the typical Italian aesthetic, so for them . . . seeing me was always a shock and I constantly had to explain who I was.”¹⁰ Scego’s liminality, her status as an outlier, deprived her of definition. Although she knew who she was, her efforts to explain to others were futile. Similarly, in an early passage of *Beyond Babylon*, Zuhra articulates her confusion as to why she is traveling to Africa:

I don’t know Africa. And to say that black blood courses through my veins. And that I was born there. But it’s not like knowing it, fundamentally. It really isn’t the same thing. One is born for the strangest reasons. [...] I was born in Africa and that’s all.¹¹

External appearances and internal convictions need not align. Zuhra does not feel African, and yet she encounters people who believe that is what she is. This “in-betweenness” can be painful and confusing, but it is the same uncertainty from which Scego’s cosmopolitanism grows.

Scego’s cosmopolitanism is fundamentally anti-colonialist. It is also anti-nationalist insofar as colonial state ideology is reinforced by the myth of the inflexible nation-state, one that does not allow the transgression of geographical, racial, and ideological boundaries. The nation-state establishes stringent nodes of belonging that rely on the subject’s full integration into the various social and political institutions that give a state its form and influence. It is sensible that Scego, once rejected by a nation of which she always believed herself to be a part, would oppose the belief systems that produced her estrangement. Scego’s cosmopolitanism aims to foster solidarity among the distinct communities that occupy

a shared global civil society, where these communities consist largely of African migrants and their descendants.¹² Cultural critic Norma Bouchard notes that because “the arrival of immigrants has yet to be translated into a serious reassessment of the civic and legal foundations governing citizenship and nationality, their growing presence in the Italian literary landscape represents a significant development for the contemporary imaginary.”¹³ Scego’s cosmopolitanism is a violent contamination of national and personal boundaries. It violates and debilitates those borders meant to limit the possibilities of human interaction. Scego’s mission is in line with Laura Harris’s evaluation of an African-Italian literary discourse as one that shows how “an African presence has always alternately sedimented and threatened European-ness.”¹⁴ The Somali-Italian author prepares to do the work of Berthold Schoene’s cosmopolitan novelist who exposes the world not as it wants to be, filled with pure nations, but as it is: vulnerable, impotent, and finite.¹⁵

The cosmopolitan novelist concerns herself with literature’s relation to the idea of the nation. Scego is interested in the rapport between European nations and the African continent. Disrupting the sanctity of a static European literary canon compels the rejection of a fortified Europe divided into tidy national units. How is this process realized through literature? Paulo De Medeiros, a scholar of world literature, suggests that shifting our gaze to the postcolonial enterprise and its resultant literature is a critical step. De Medeiros writes that postcolonial texts published in Europe “would open up the possibility of understanding Europe in a different and more cosmopolitan light.”¹⁶ Postcolonial literature, rather than being viewed as an addendum to European literature, ought to be included as integral to the development of any kind of European canon, if such a thing can exist. Early models of world literature that depended on the “bounded territoriality” of individuals and nation-states are rendered obsolete by colonial

12 Chris Durante, “Toward a Cosmopolitan Ethos,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 10, no. 3 (2014): 314

13 Bouchard, “Reading the Discourses of Multicultural Italy,” 105

14 Laura Harris, “Hybrid Italians, Diasporic Italians,” *Callaloo* 31, no. 2 (2008): 602

15 Berthold Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 27

16 Paulo De Medeiros, “Notes towards a (more) Cosmopolitan History of European Literature,” *European Review* 21, no. 2 (2013): 288

8 Orton, “Writing the Nation,” 25

9 Igiaba Scego, “Immigrazione: Abbiamo Dei Mezzi D’informazione Che Cavalcano Gli Stereotipi. Intervista a Igiaba Scego,” interviewed by Roberto Bertoni, December 21, 2014

10 Ibid.

11 Igiaba Scego, *Oltre Babilonia* (Roma: Donzelli, 2008), 35

endeavors, which seek to reorganize territories through attainment, enlargement, reduction, etc. What can be said about contemporary movements of populations across state boundaries also applies to the movements of colonizing forces across these same borders: It “threatens to sever the alignment of territory, political institutions and society that states try so hard to create.”¹⁷

The formation of Italian (literary) identities is deeply rooted in the development of its language. When asking how the myth of the Italian nation-state might be undermined, one may turn to the literature produced by migrants and their descendants. An author like Scego, already familiar with the nuances of the Italian language, is particularly equipped to challenge the ways in which Italian is represented on the page. In her analysis of works by Italo-Somali author Cristina Ali Farah (*Little Mother*) and Italo-Ethiopian author Gabriella Ghermandi (*Queen of Flowers and Pearls*), Scego describes how diasporic variants of Italian are both undoing and resurrecting the language:

The rhythm [of Italian] follows the unfolding of the stories, the tangled thread of the diaspora. And it’s this continual movement that unites the harmonic articulation of the little mothers with Dante’s language. The text is enriched with metaphors, proverbs, Somali phrases, Amharic and Tigrinya. Italian dissolves and renews itself. The lasting effect is a domestic estrangement that, to many people, already seems like the language of the future, the interwoven language.¹⁸

The Italian nation is the struggle over its language writ large. Inclusions of foreign words, turns of phrase, and legends expand the syntactic possibilities of Italian. One can imagine an object dropped into a stream. The water is disturbed and must rise to accommodate its own displacement. The stream contains the object, and yet it is perceptibly different. The basic theory of displacement applied to the nation-state is what Scego has called “domestic estrangement,” the simultaneous marriage and

disunion of the object and the stream, the “foreign” and the “native.”

Migration scholar Marie Orton expresses migratory literature’s transformative potential when she writes, “Just as the physical presence and social position of migrants in Italy’s national space has prompted re-evaluations of how national identity is formulated, migration literature calls into question the criteria according to which a text qualifies as national literature and interrogates many of the discourses and meta-narratives of national literatures and national identity.”¹⁹ These meta-narratives include the fabrication of a culture endowed with a common language and literature, as well as the eminence of Dante in the creation of a fatherland, a *patria*. Orton is perhaps more correct than she knows when she says that migratory literature confronts “the paranoid assumption that the inclusion of migrants into Italian society threatens or diminishes Italy’s cultural identity.”²⁰ The assumption may not be paranoid at all; the inclusion of migrants in Italian literary and physical spaces accentuates just how indeterminate these spaces actually are.

The rejection of a single Italian linguistic identity is implicit in the novel’s title. Scego, speaking on a RAI Radio program in 2008, said:

I wanted to reconstruct a contemporary Babel. We do know after all that Italy has an understanding problem concerning the so-called illegal aliens. The word is already misleading. Why should we be extra, that is, outside of the community? And then people often ask what we are: migrants or Italians in every sense of the word? They’re unable to categorize us. Is categorizing people that important? In my opinion, no. Labels aren’t important, but rather the path that one makes for themselves. And anyways, the Italian doesn’t exist, in the same way the European or the African race doesn’t exist.²¹

Babylon, too, appears explicitly near the end of the novel in an invocation of Bob Marley’s critique of the

17 Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald, “Transnationalism in Question,” *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 5 (2004): 1183

18 Igiaba Scego, “La Madre e l’Altra Madre: La Questione della Lingua in Gabriella Ghermandi e Uba Cristina Ali Farah,” *Moderna* 1 (2010): 97–98

19 Orton, “Writing the Nation,” 22

20 *Ibid.*, 24

21 Igiaba Scego, “Fahrenheit,” in *Fahrenheit*, transcript, Rai Radio 3, 2008.

“Babylon system.” As biblical scholar Steed Davidson points out, Babylon emerges as a trope of Black Zionism in Rastafari cosmology thanks to Marcus Garvey’s peculiarly Afrocentric and fundamentalist reading of the Bible.²² Garvey’s interpretation of Ethiopia as the Zion prophesied in Psalms, a symbolic or actual homeland for Africans outside of Africa, was galvanized by the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930. Garvey insisted that blacks would not be a race without a country. The return to Zion demanded the destruction of its antipode, Babylon, the mythic oppressor of God’s chosen people. While Babylon’s eventual fall was foreseen, the path to Zion was less clearly marked. The problem that Scego and many other writers of the African diaspora seek to resolve is how to escape that amorphous terrain between Zion and Babylon, the promised land and the land of exile.

The in-betweenness that Scego describes is typical of the transterritorial subject who is literally or figuratively beyond the jurisdiction of any single territory. The transterritorial subject may be in a state of transition (as a migrant waiting to be naturalized) or they might be purposefully or unwillingly stateless (as an expatriate or a refugee). Each of these examples presumes the presence of an official state entity which is capable of (de)legitimizing the transterritorial subject’s status. This entity is present even in Kwame Appiah’s formulation of “rooted cosmopolitanism.” The cosmopolitan patriot, Appiah writes, “can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of one’s own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people.”²³ The cosmopolitan patriot is anathema to the cosmopolitan novelist for several reasons. Firstly, Appiah speaks of an *ideal* here, not the world as it is, to which the cosmopolitan novelist must be responsible. Also, “a home of one’s own” is difficult, sometimes legally impossible, for a migrant to attain. There are other forms of liminality that disregard the nation-state entirely. It is possible, then, for the transterritorial subject to establish her roots beyond a bureaucratic apparatus. The cosmopolitan author would think it infinitely preferable to do exactly that. The nation

is an ideal in conflict with the mobile migrant who pierces its borders. Once the nation has been nullified, how do we identify an alternative space of belonging?²⁴

A NEW LANGUAGE OF TRANSNATIONAL BELONGING

If the nation-state is believed to be inflexible, hegemonic, and spatial, we might ask how a fluid, autonomous, non-spatial form of belonging might manifest. Theories of transnationalism carry the germ of this idea. Schoene, quoting Christopher Watkin, writes that “[a]s long as identity is imagined as something we own, and therefore something that can be taken away from us by others, we remain worlds removed from ‘the coexistence of singular pluralities [...] equidistant from juxtaposition and integration.’”²⁵ To alleviate this fear, it is best to abnegate the idea of any stable identity—personal, national, or otherwise. Instead of worrying about how our identities can be taken away from us, it is more productive to cast ourselves as mobile subjects who carry our identities with us, gaining and losing different ones along the way. Social theorist Chris Durante figures that as the myths of nation-states wane, “people from across the globe can remain deeply connected despite their lack of shared geographical space, making the concept of “foreign” less dependent upon spatial distance and more indicative of differences amongst worldviews, practices, ideals and ways of life.”²⁶ Transnationalism permits a mode of inclusion that is not contingent upon a physical location and celebrates what Sabrina Brancato calls “an ethics/poetics of multiple belonging.”²⁷

In *Beyond Babylon*, multiple belonging manifests as multiple citizenship—there are characters with dual nationalities in Italy/Argentina, Italy/Somalia, Portugal/Argentina, etc.—and also through various contact zones which are continuously changing. These contact zones necessitate the cross-pollination of nationalities and create new identities that are not containable within a homogeneous national culture inside boundaries policed

22 Steed Davidson, “Leave Babylon: The Trope of Babylon in Rastafarian Discourse,” *BlackTheology: An International Journal* 6, no. 1 (2008): 48, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/blth2008v6i1.46>.

23 Kwame Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (1997): 618

24 Lorenzo Mari and Polina Shvanyukova, “Re-negotiating National Belonging in Contemporary Italian Migrant Literature,” *Ethnicities* 15, no. 4 (2015): 530

25 Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, 182

26 Durante, “Toward a Cosmopolitan Ethos,” 315

27 Sabrina Brancato, “From Roots to Routes: Afrosporic Voices in Italy,” *Callaloo* 30, no. 2 (2007): 659

by the nation-state.²⁸ Scego's description of Rome as a *set cinematografico* is highly appropriate in this context. Rome is imagined as a site that more or less contains the world. The city, of course, is not infinite in size. Here is the city seen through the eyes of Maryam:

All roads lead to Rome. For her, and for all Somalis, all roads led to Termini Station ... at least that's how it used to be. All its roads, all its alleys, all its itineraries, its passages, routes, paths, all of its crossroads, even its stops were oriented towards Termini. Somewhat like prayer towards Mecca.²⁹

The Somalis that Maryam knows experience Rome through a sort of tunnel vision that seems to exclude all other groups. The city's inclusiveness is only suggested by the reference to the cosmopolitan city of Mecca, in which peoples from many countries intermingle in a constant, replenishing cycle. The Somali city of Brava, the birthplace of Elias' mother Famey, is another important contact zone where "everyone passed through. Egyptians, some ancient Romans ... Arabs, Portuguese, Malaysians and even Benito Mussolini's Italians [...] One spoke in Somali and prayed in Arabic, but the language of the heart was an explosive mix of Swahili, Portuguese, Arabic."³⁰ In Brava, multiple belonging is achieved linguistically. The widespread use of various languages negates the fantasy of a nation defined by any single language. Assorted modes of expression make it that much more difficult to bind a subject to one nation-state. Scego accentuates this point again when she describes Mar's Arabic classroom as consisting of "entire continents." In one condensed space, "there was Asia, America, Europe, Oceania and, yes, Africa."³¹ This vision of cosmopolitanism "promotes an open and flexible practice of community that can accommodate the whole world, which is quite different from assimilating or containing it."³² What unites Roma Termini, Brava, and the Arabic classroom is that they remain what Schoene calls "a momentary composition enduringly particular and productively conflictual with

regard to all its constituents."³³ Unlike the myth of the nation-state, each of these encounters is necessarily temporary and forever transforming. They are loci of movement that thrive on recurrent reassemblage, much like the literary canon that Scego herself challenges.

The novel's treatment of Italian colonialism and its consequences in Somalia highlights an interesting facet of multiple belonging: the crisis of non-belonging. The Italian colonial enterprise, fueled by the fantasy that national and social borders will remain intact despite their necessary rearrangement, ignores the fact that such expansionist activities actually help create a kind of transnational reality as that described above, i.e. one that is mobile (albeit not autonomous). As Bouchard writes, "[N]ational and transnational colonialism...are undoubtedly part and parcel of modern definition of Italian-ness. They constitute the global Italian nation, a transnational Greater Italy."³⁴ Bouchard is justified in including Italian colonies within a definition of *italianità*. The acquisition of territory is not like acquiring some ancillary, prosthetic limb. The relationship that forms is of the flesh, and the ligaments of culture intertwine in new ways to enhance an old body. Scego, writing of the Somali capital of Mogadishu as Elias' father and stepmother experience it, tells us that "The Somalis were overwhelmed by the masters. Others arrived in their place, new languages, new divisions, new practices."³⁵ Scego describes an exchange that invalidates the notion that Italy is monoracial and monocultural.³⁶ If we are to believe the argument that the Italian language forms the foundation of a national identity, then surely Italian-speaking Somalis must be included in any construction of *italianità*.

These obfuscated cultural and linguistic boundaries have important consequences for the nation and the individual. The border between Europe and Africa is, Harris notes, "the imperative precondition upon which the subject Europe and the abjection of the African immigrant rests."³⁷ While Harris is commenting on the movement of Africans into Europe, her statement is also true for those once subject to the influx of Europeans into Africa. The direction and circumstances of movement matter less than the fact that, in both cases, the border is

28 "Transnationalism," *China Review*

29 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 50

30 Ibid., 65

31 Ibid., 125

32 Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, 21

33 Ibid.

34 Bouchard, "Reading the Discourses of Multicultural Italy," 108

35 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 257

36 Harris, "Hybrid Italians, Diasporic Italians," 602

37 Ibid., 603

revealed to be a hallucination. A passage in which Elias, addressing his daughter Zuhra, questions how to tell a story is insightful:

Yet how does one begin to tell a story? From the beginning, I think, with the protagonist ... And then, what is the beginning of an individual? It isn't very clear to me ... [L]ife is a circle, a continuous beginning and end. No movement is precise, we cannot quantify, define, specify. The beginning is the sum of all our beginnings, the subtraction of past beginnings. The beginning is utter chaos, in short.³⁸

The logic and difficulty of narration are at the heart of this passage. It attests to the arduous task of delineating individuals—and, by extension, nations—in the throes of the colonial era. Elias first declares that a story begins with the protagonist. He equates the beginning with the individual herself, only to cast both into doubt when he asks, “What is the beginning of an individual?” The confines of the individual and nation are dubious. Neither are so linear, and the most that can be said is that the act of representing them has infinite beginnings and as many ends. No single mode of representation, even if it is precise, can be quantified. The beginnings of individuals and nations are never rooted in one moment. One beginning (or individual, or nation) is always contaminated by another that brushes against it.

THE CONTAMINATED SUBJECT

Contamination is the needle that threads Scego's cosmopolitanism. Individuals and nations are filled with languages and heritages that interact in a way which complicates Brancato's optimistic view that Afro-Italian texts offer a comparative perspective.³⁹ That is, in the absence of the stable nation-state, distinguishing a “host” culture vis-à-vis a “foreign” culture becomes more complicated. Frames of reference like religion, food, and clothing can no longer be expected to inform the reader about a single community of people. Brancato is more astute when she notes how the “syncretic process is

enacted...so that it becomes difficult to determine to which particular culture a particular aspect or behavior should be ascribed; facile cultural stereotypes are dismantled, and a transcultural perspective emerges as a major subject of migrant writing.”⁴⁰ The transcultural perspective that Brancato describes is epitomized in Scego's commentary on Tunis, which is especially interesting considering the city's proximity to Europe. Scego writes:

Tunis, on the other hand, was a carousel on the rim of the abyss. There the beards, if not hidden in collars, were strictly cut. There were no flashy mullahs, no prayers spoken aloud ... “We have supermarkets like the French,” they told everyone, proud to imitate that cruel and distant country. After all, someone had learned in their history books that they descended from the Gauls. Straight from Asterix and Obelix. They were French. Or, at least, they mimicked the ancient masters. They ate aged cheese and stuck baguettes under their arms. They even had the Monoprix.⁴¹

Poised as it is on the edges of Europe and Africa, Tunis exists in that same state of in-betweenness that Scego experienced as a child. Its French colonizers made a Muslim country ashamed to pray, and the importation of French supermarkets, food, spectacles and history books transformed an African city into a European gem. But even this privilege of rootedness is fleeting as Scego tells us that Tunis “didn't seem like anything. It wasn't Africa, it wasn't Europe ... It was a bit of everything blended together. A scrawl with traces of light. The shadows were numerous, the question marks plentiful.”⁴² The level of contamination spurred by colonialism disintegrates boundaries between Europe and Africa to the point that Tunis seems to be nothing but a “scrawl with traces of light.” Scego's cosmopolitanism is an acerbic critique of colonialism. It disassembles the nation-state but purposefully leaves important questions for others to resolve: Who are the contaminated subjects, what is their plight, and what is to be done about them?

Scego's contaminated subjects are often women

40 Ibid.

41 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 326

42 Ibid., 328

38 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 63

39 Brancato, “From Roots to Routes,” 656

whose sense of self is fragmented by the politics of documentation and bodily surveillance, which are enacted by a state apparatus to maintain the façade of impermeable nationhood. These people are the antithesis of Durante's cosmopolitan who retains her sense of self "with all of its narrative history, embeddedness in circumstance and partiality."⁴³ Instead, as gender studies specialist Manuela Coppola observes, the bodies of migrant woman (and those perceived as migrants) are under continuous inspection and their subjectivities are "hid by the predominantly corporeal reality they have been assigned."⁴⁴ That is why, for instance, Zuhra is perplexed that she is expected to feel connected to Africa. There is a seminal moment in *Beyond Babylon* when Zuhra notices the tenuousness of her sense of belonging as she moves through a Spanish airport:

I, me myself, in person, meat and bone, tits, pussy and all. Me, Italian. Me, Italian? The usual doubt that assails me. Will the bordeaux passport be enough for me to prove it? And if I bring my license, too? And my film society card? Yes, I'll bring that too. And my grocery rewards card? And my Arci Solidarietà card? The Central Library card? Yes, all of them, I'll take them all. The gas card as well. It all adds up. On each one of these damn cards my name is written in print, isn't it? Even my address in the Eternal City. Unfortunately nowhere is it written that I am Italian, but at least they show that I live here. They reinforce the Italianness of my passport.⁴⁵

The passport, most notably, is only legitimized by the state. But what about a license, a library card, a gas card? Each bears Zuhra's name, and even though she is a legally naturalized citizen, none declare that she is truly Italian. In Zuhra's experience, to be Italian is not necessarily to be a citizen of Italy. *Italianità* is a more mobile, transcultural and transnational concept than the Italian nation-state. Unfortunately, this very mobility allows it to be enforced or denied arbitrarily by the Spanish airport officials who

tell Zuhra that she is an illegal alien: "*Eres clandestina. No eres italiana. Puta. Marica. Falsificadora de papeles.*"⁴⁶

Scego regards freedom from the arbitrary control of a nation-state as positive, but this transnational mobility is not always a source of comfort. Mar experiences this dilemma acutely. Her father, Elias, and his parents were Somali. Her mother, Miranda, is Argentinian, and Miranda's parents were Italian and Portuguese. Mar resists the temptation to celebrate this mixed heritage:

Me, Mar Ribero Martino, do I make sense? I am fruit of the Third World. A black father, my mother the daughter of *terroni*. Pigmented with stains of slavery and spoliation. I am conquered land. Earth to be walked on. Colorless hybrid fruit. Without category. A half-blood that belongs to nothing. My blood is contaminated. Confused. There is too much of others in me. Nothing is wedded [...] I don't understand myself. I feel like an illegible scrawl ... Half-blood. Semi-negress. I'm ashamed.⁴⁷

Mar considers herself a descendant of slavery and dispossession. Her ancestry is evidence of conquest and violence, which produced an heir that lacks any identity whatsoever. There is such a thing as *too much* belonging, as being *too* contaminated, and what results is a subject who identifies with no group at all. Mar's numerous affiliations, Scego writes, "were sullied by the nuances of the other."⁴⁸

LINGUISTIC CITIZENSHIP

Are there affiliations that do not spoil one another and that grant mobility beyond the obligations of the nation-state? Scego's answer returns to and modifies an earlier point about language as the basis of nationhood. Language can unite people, but it does not need to be tied to an intransigent, disciplinary nation. Language is, as philosopher Étienne Balibar (qtd. in Claramonte) suggests, "a way for contemporary migrants not only to bear the mark of changing lines but also to transform themselves into borders, thus turning the border into a

43 Durante, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Ethos," 317

44 Manuela Coppola, "'Rented Spaces': Italian Postcolonial Literature," *Social Identities* 17, no. 1 (2011): 123

45 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 39

46 *Ibid.*, 40

47 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 389

48 *Ibid.*, 329

form of autotopography, an outer and inner landscape.”⁴⁹ Miranda epitomizes a kind of transnational, linguistic optimism. She is an internationally-acclaimed poet who writes in many languages: “Her native Spanish is mixed with all her other belongings. You find echoes of Catalan, Italian, Portuguese, English, French. But there are also Arabic words and, strangely, Somali words as well.”⁵⁰ Miranda’s linguistic adaptability occurs “without erasing the essential incongruousness or singularity of these individual segments...even though they remain subject to continuous re-assortment.”⁵¹

Scego does not turn to language arbitrarily. She is aware that both she and Miranda are concerned with the volatile occupation of Italian literary and linguistic spaces.⁵² Both women reject the sovereignty of colonial nation-states, and by inhabiting other languages like a “rented apartment,” to use Manuela Coppola’s illuminating analogy, they are able to “produce knowledge from the critical re-assembly of pre-existing elements, thus redefining boundaries and given notions of identity, literary canons, and linguistic normativeness.”⁵³ One example among dozens of instances when Scego writes using the vocabulary of other languages is her description of Zuhra’s first time using a tampon, where she writes, “The instruction sheet frightens me ... There’s writing in every language saying I need to stay calm. *Antes de empezar, relájate. Não fiques nervosa. Prenez votre temps et détendez-vous. Rilassati. Rilassati. Relax.*”⁵⁴ Zuhra feels at ease “inside” these languages, these rented apartments whose tenants are frequently changing and which may be arranged in any number of ways. The apartment analogy is a convenient contrast to the national ideal, where the latter implies permanent ownership (as of a language) and the former stresses the changeability of spaces.

Language—and, more precisely, the accumulation of languages within a finite space—is well-prepared to do the kind of radical anti-colonial work that is the cosmopolitan novelist’s calling. This labor calls for the destruction of hegemonic nation-states and the creation of alternative

relationships between the castaways of these former nations. Miranda voices this sentiment when, speaking about Arabic, she tells Mar, “Learning a new alphabet opens up other worlds to you.”⁵⁵ These other worlds are not regimented, confined, or “built at the white man’s table.” They come from the mouth of an Argentinian poet and the pen of a Somali-Italian author. Language as an alternative place of belonging is not a neutral space, writes translation theorist Paolo Bartoloni, but rather “a space-world...in which each text and each act of speech takes into consideration all the other languages, and in which the disappearance of even one language...is a loss to all languages and the beginning of their demise.”⁵⁶ Miranda’s contaminated languages are not pollutants. Each one is, in fact, the key to every other. The poet recalls the written language of a fellow Argentinian woman she once dearly loved:

Her Spanish flowed from the heights of the Andes, contaminated. Adulterated with the sweetness of Cervantes’ dialect ... Like you, Mar, Flaca was a puzzle of sounds. And maybe like me. We speak the language of the frontier, of continuous crossings. How many languages are within us? ... I can guess, but I don’t really know how many languages we’re made of. Certainly the ancestral Indian language is inside us ... Then there’s the language of history, Spanish exported with blood and deceit. But in our mouths it changed, I feel it, we refined and animated it ... It becomes air and stars, sun and moon. It becomes flesh. It lives. It becomes something else, a secret language spoken since childhood, a language to communicate with the angels.⁵⁷

Miranda calls Mar, who until now has struggled with her lack of identity, a “puzzle of sounds.” Mother and daughter alike speak the “language of the frontier,” which scorns the drafting of borders. They are made of an unquantifiable

49 M. C.A.F. Claramonte, “Translating Hybrid Literatures: From Hostipitality to Hospitality,” *European Journal of English Studies* 18, no. 3 (2014): 244

50 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 237

51 Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, 27

52 Coppola, “Rented Spaces,” 122

53 Ibid.

54 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 21

55 Ibid., 29

56 Paolo Bartoloni, “World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and Global Cosmopolitanism,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15, no. 5 (2013): 8

57 Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*, 415

number of languages, and through vocalization, language becomes surface as living flesh and subcutaneous as a “secret language spoken since childhood, a language to communicate with the angels.” The realm of terrestrial nation-states is abandoned in the movement towards language, a higher sphere that, despite its insubstantiality, can produce concrete, interconnected, and novel worlds.

Scego is concerned with language’s creative possibilities. For the anti-colonial author, language is useful as a tool that is not bound to a national identity *per se*. As Scego and other authors of migratory literature continue to resist traditional mores of national (literary) inclusion, they suggest that literary canons are only as well-defined as their rapidly-shifting boundaries. De Medeiros is not wrong when he says that Europe is “something unfinished, perhaps impossible to ever fully achieve, because it is in constant renewal.”⁵⁸ And this is true also for the marginalized individual. Migrants and children of migrants rebuff categorization as they move through physical and figurative spaces. Their identities are as portable as the hosts themselves, and the languages shared between them are the adhesives that give a transnational world its peculiar, ductile quality.

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⁵⁸ De Medeiros, “Notes towards a (more) cosmopolitan history,” 290