

Migrating Identities. The Italian Female Gaze: Around the World in Thirty-Four Stories

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Abstract

In the collection *Women Who Migrate Abroad. Italian Female Voices Around the World* (2015), migration becomes functional in the reflection on identity (trans)formation. This Italian female-authored work charts physical, emotional, and figurative journeys around the world through attention to migrant voices. The present paper aims, through an analysis of the common themes emerging from the narratives, at understanding how the thirty-four female migrant writers define and position themselves. Through a multi-perspective approach focusing on some composite snapshots, presented in a direct and informal style, identity may be dissected and investigated from several angles exploring collective and personal facets. The female gaze becomes an interpretative lens through which the authors reaffirm their understanding of the world, in the process of engaging with their split identities.

Keyword: female-authored migratory writing, identity (trans)formation, travel, expats, migrants.

Introduction

In this globalized, technological age, with its all-permeating use of information and communications technologies, thirty-four Italian women who migrated abroad relied on this global system of interconnection to report and share their stories. Later collected in a volume entitled *Donne che emigrano all'estero. Voci di Italiane nel Mondo (Women who migrate abroad. Italian female voices around the World, DCE in short)*, these narratives, which like a postmodern female Phileas Fogg take its readers all around the world, are a rich source of material to draw from to explore the phenomenon of migration, considered as a life- and identity-transforming practice. These women decided to enshrine on paper their experiences of movement and settlement. These migratory writings reinforce the link between movement

in space, and thus crossing borders, the craft of writing, and, ultimately, identity formation. Indeed, writing becomes a translation into words of a mobile identity in its search for balance between spaces and geographies, cultures and societies. The thirty-four chapters, in their wide geographical range, give rise to a repetition of images and themes which, as central factors, lead to an evaluation of the Italian female identity abroad. Juggling with multiple spaces, cultures and people, and describing complex bonds and influences, these stories give rise to “an anarchic flux of snapshots that create a mosaic of their lives in the most disparate places on earth” (“Libro”).

In a comparative framework, identity (trans)formation can be investigated from several angles; even finding an agreed-upon definition of the term “identity” poses a challenge. Within migration discourse, this perspective may stimulate the search for migrants’ identity or its contextual perception. In Foucauldian terms, identity is not monolithic; on the contrary, it is shaped by the communication process between one self and the other. In these exchanges, language brings the self into being. In anti-essentialist terms, the constitution of the subject is, thus, the result of the forces that shape – from the inside and the outside – the subject itself. In the first stage, migrants, in the broadest sense of the term, embark on a journey as travellers – not as tourists – and, in the second phase, try to familiarize themselves, acquiring and exploring their identity as “foreigners”.

The collection at hand is of particular interest as it presents migration-related written productions from multiple voices, albeit under one main umbrella; that is, the female gaze.¹ It is a multi-perspective approach to a main theme conveying the “‘we-ness’ of a group, stressing the similarities or shared attributes around which group members coalesce” (Cerulo 386). Through the study of this varied corpus, the present paper seeks to examine and outline the identities emerging from it. Therefore, the principal research questions are the following: (1) How do these thirty-four female migrant writers position or construct themselves? (2) How do they define themselves? (3) What are the emerging common themes in their narratives? In brief, by drawing on various scholarly and critical approaches, within a purposive, nonprobability, sampling framework,² the purpose of this qualitative, empirical study is to analyse the volume to discover how the migration process defined the sense of

¹ The *female gaze* is here understood as an approach that sees women as active subjects rather than passive objects, especially when focusing on male-dominated domains; their perspective is the main lens through which the migrating experience and all the elements it entails are analyzed.

² In purposive (or judgmental) sampling, the researcher relies on their expertise and knowledge to select the subjects of the population (Berg 32). This method is also considered a non-probability method of sampling as not all subjects have the chance of participating in the study. In the present study, the “population” is, then, composed of the data gathered from the publication whereas the ‘sample frame’ is constituted by words, phrases, and sentences about the investigated topic.

identity; letting its actors, the female migrants or expats, live a life “in-between”, physically and figuratively.

1. Research context

The primary belief this paper is based upon is that “‘non-academic’ literature, written often (but by no means exclusively) by migrants, can offer powerful insights into the nature of the migration process and the experience of being a migrant” (King et al. x). Such testimonies, rather than aiming for polished rhetorical finesse, concentrate on immediacy, spontaneity, and truthfulness; and serve as a therapeutic tool of self-reflection or as support system for the other migrants. Hence, the heterogeneous, often unstructured nature of the narrative reflects the very nature of the experience. At the beginning, the commonality is the feeling of being “out of place”, whether its cause is internal or external. This “out of place-ness” “creates opportunities for new subjectivities³ through the interaction of the ‘old’ and ‘new’” (Preece 2). The interplay of the dualistic dimensions – old/new, inner/outer, home/not-home – contributes to the redefinition of the relevant identity.

Identity is a fleeting (and definitely not univocal) concept; as a consequence, a definition to work with is a requirement. For this purpose, drawing from the field of language learning, in particular second language acquisition, the term is used “to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton 5). Furthermore, according to a poststructuralist approach, identity could be considered a “socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narrative that individuals perform, interpret and project in dress, bodily movements, actions and language” (Block 27). In this formulation a pivotal aspect is the exchange, as “identity works occur in the company of others – either face-to-face or in an electronically mediated mode” (Block 16). Moreover, identities are about “negotiating new subject positions at the crossroad of the past, present and future” (Block 16), as much as “the act of migration concerns people and places, but it also concerns time” (White 4). In very simple terms, both identity and migration are about movement, time, space, and ultimately change.

³As regards terminology, the process through which individuals construct and express their “self”, that is to say, the complex product of psychological and cultural processes, may be defined as “identity”, whereas the individuals’ position in relation to power, in the broadest sense of the term, hence, their being “subject”, is “subjectivity”.

The migrants' narrative is strictly connected to language as "a change of place brings with it a change in language" (Vlasta 59). In fact, it is possible to claim that a person's position as a subject is reflected in language use, which may be considered a medium of self-expression, and of social and cultural exchanges. Consequently, writing (i.e. language use), becomes a mirror of mobile identities in search of a sense of balance. The transnational, cross-cultural perspective redefines a subject. Migrant writings can evade typical categorization, as migrant literature can encompass various text forms and typologies. Just like any migratory phenomenon, every migratory production must be contextualized. As regards Ireland, for instance, a first classification divides migratory production into two broad categories: on one hand, "largely autobiographical work which contains direct, personal accounts of emigration" (Duffy 20); and, on the other, general fiction by writers at home and abroad which reflects either directly or indirectly on emigration" (Duffy 21). Transferred to other migratory cases and specifically to DCE, the present narratives belong to the first group, as all the texts are directly drawn from personal experiences. These accounts are factually descriptive.

Echoing their authors' personalities, writing as a practice acquires symbolic power. The flow of words on paper turns into a stream of consciousness; and the diary becomes a therapeutic tool for venting and for sharing personal narratives that are extended to (or intended for) social use. In doing so, in addition to the potential healing aspect, diary writing attains an educational function whose purpose is to broaden the reader's horizon. In this 2.0 age, blogs become a modernized version of the more old-fashioned recording practice. Detaching itself from a tradition that considered the diary a gendered feminine genre and lining up with a travel diary tradition, the personal blog may be considered "at once a descendent of earlier textual diary forms and a radically altered hybrid form of autobiography and self-construction not to mention community-creation" (Taylor 184). Overall, this hybrid nature embraces a more informative approach, like that of travel guides.

2. A collaborative venture: *Donne che emigrano all'estero*

Regarding Italian migration, historically the female presence was altogether more modest compared to its male counterpart; female migrant experiences occurred either for family reunification or because of employment (De Filippo & Pugliese 56). Nonetheless, changes in the migrating population and the forms of migration have occurred. Some figures will allow to better frame the phenomenon. Articles in newspapers, official or academic research have tried to trace the outlines of this flux. According to the Italian National Institute

of Statistics (ISTAT), in 2016, net migration grew by over 10,000 units, +8% compared to 2015. The number of Italian graduates who leave the country is on the rise, almost 25 thousand in 2016 (+9% compared to 2015), even if the majority of the overall emigrant population (56 thousand, +11%) has a medium to low educational level. Moreover, Italian citizenship holders who are born abroad amount to approximately 28,000 (+19% compared to 2015). In terms of demographics, the migrant population traditionally is very young and composed of slightly more men than women.

Due to the widespread use of the Internet, these expat communities have created pages, sites, blogs and other sharing strategies that are functional in developing support and in gathering and sharing information. Within this framework, *Donne che emigrano all'estero* – through its Facebook page and chat room, its website, and its Instagram account – gives an opportunity to its members to share their stories. The creator of this project, Katia Terreni (Seychelles),⁴ claims to have started this venture first on Facebook in 2013 to share her thoughts and stories and then, due to the high number of subscribers, in 2015 the website was designed (DCE 2).

The DCE Facebook page is described as “a container of stories and thoughts of women who emigrated abroad and who find themselves all around the world”.⁵ Interestingly, though, the information section includes a statement that sounds like a justification for the decision to include only women: “Because we are more afraid of men. Deep down, we are still bound to a culture that sees us close to the hearth and that is more inclined to see man as an ‘emigrant’. But it’s not like that anymore” (Donne Facebook). By representing the typical man-woman dichotomy and emphasizing a vision against which women (not just those who purposely developed a feminist approach) have fought, the presentation strays onto an aspect that is perhaps accessory rather than a primary feature within the whole picture. It continues: “Today there are more and more young and less young women who emigrate, who find the courage to do it and that perhaps succeed in realizing their dream and their fulfilment. Women are scared but also find the courage to do EVERYTHING” (Donne Facebook). This describes the perception of the migrating population whereby age is non-prejudicial and self-realization is a sought-after objective.

Moreover, the courage-fear dualism linked to the phenomenon of mobility is a traditional *topos*. Sharing the same experiential ground, ‘to fare’ and ‘to fear’ have,

⁴ A specific language code spontaneously developed: the members sign their post adding their geographical location at the end in parenthesis.

⁵ All the passages of the book are translated from Italian into English by the author of the present paper.

etymologically, the same root; while on the journey, especially on departure, the individual is deprived of the infrastructures and dynamics typical of the familiar environment (Leed 20). Thus, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the individual undergoes identity transformations. It is, claims Castelli in “Giusta Direzione” (The Right Direction), “like cutting the umbilical cord that has tied us, until that moment, to our roots” (DCE 2).

As modern and contemporary travel literature, the volume, without a fixed structure, allows its target readers to “have a look at the world [through the migrants’ eyes], to share their emotions, their thoughts, their joys, their difficulties” and “Without leaving home,” claims Libenzi, the supervisor and editor, “I travelled all over the planet and visited all the continents” (DCE 2). It is a composition of diverse styles, formal solutions, and registers which share the use of the first-person narrator: “posts on Facebook, fragments of interviews, pages of diaries, snapshots of a living, anarchic, and constantly moving reality” (DCE 2). The target audience comprises not only the members of the online community but also those who are not familiar with it, especially women who would like to leave but who have not yet found the courage to do so (DCE 3).

2.1 Participants

At the beginning of each story, a picture of the author with biographical information such as name and surname, age, and location is presented. The main intention was to rely on words rather than the visual aids to build verbal images, empowering the pen over photography (DCE 2). The age range of the female authors who contributed with their personal accounts stretches from 22 to 70, with the majority (38.2%) in the 31-35 range.⁶ The geographical journey starts from Europe where the largest number (41%) of narratives takes place and reaches Canada, Central America, Asia, New Zealand, Australia, the Middle East, and Africa.⁷ The period spent abroad varies from two months to seventeen years. The participants left alone (44%) or with a partner (52.9%). The two main reasons behind the decision to migrate were work (61.7%) and partner-related (20.5%).

⁶Age range: 20-30 n.3 (8.8%); 31-40 n.18 (52.9%); 41-50 n.6 (17.6%); 51-60 n.4 (11.7%); 61-70 n.1 (2.9%), unknown n.2 (5.8%).

⁷Locations: Europe n.14 (41%); South America n.1 (2.9%); Canada n.2 (5.8%); Central America n.2 (5.8%); Asia n.6 (17.6%); Australia & New Zealand n.3 (8.8%); Africa n.5 (14.7%); Middle East n.1 (2.9%).

2.2. Semantic ambiguity: *Expat* or *Migrant*

Postmodern mobility branches off in different, often hybrid or alternative, forms of movement and this phenomenon is naturally reflected in language use. When it comes to the usage of a word, the norm may sometimes differ from the speakers' intention. Far from being a Hamlet-like doubt, the distinction between "expat" and "migrant" may, nevertheless, be quite troublesome. Identities are indeed "manifested in language as, first, the categories and labels that people attach to themselves and others signal their belonging" (Joseph 19). On their website, one of the contributors claims that they are "*modern migrants* that nowadays are called *expats*". This may raise some questions, to say the least, as it is not just a temporal dimension that qualifies this shift in terms. This is certainly not the place to delve extensively into questions of terminology, as it goes beyond the objectives of the paper; however, this issue should be addressed. It may be an issue because debates are still thriving and because they are politically and culturally loaded; with current discussions on travel bans, migration restrictions, immigration emergencies, and integration, the public perception of the words "migrant" and "expat"⁸ may be considered an example of language drift with connotations of meaning which are often inconvenient.

A certain hierarchy in the migration lexicon is involved;⁹ some definitions are perceived as outdated, some as being used as a political tool or to reflect a bias, still others as symbolizing a race or a privilege of some kind. In the present paper, then, given that spatial mobility has to be distinguished from migration intended as the "movement of a person (a *migrant*) between two places for a certain period of time" (Boyle 34), migrant and expat are going to be used interchangeably. Undoubtedly, all the words inevitably involve a set of assumptions. Thus, it has to be acknowledged that nowadays, quite often, a certain superiority or even intellectuality is attached to the term expat whereas the label of non-skilled worker moving for economic reasons is associated with migrant. Nevertheless, expat or migrant are here intended in a broader sense, indicating someone who decides to live abroad for a certain amount of time, without any restrictions on race, status, residence, or any other limiting, categorizing criteria. In addition, the term "emigrant", as in someone who has migrated out of a country but from the perspective of the sending country, should be included.

⁸ The term "immigrant" involves a permanent residence or citizenship and it is, consequently, excluded for the purposes of this argument.

⁹ See Koutonin, Mawuna Remarque. "Why are white people expats when the rest of us are immigrants?". *The Guardian*, 13 Mar. 2015, www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/13/white-people-expats-immigrants-migration. Accessed 13.12.2017.

In DCE, the word *expat* is associated with its embryonic sense, i.e. *ex-patria*, namely outside one's homeland (3), whereby the native country recalls familiar scents, places, food, affections. These are genuine, sincere emotions that evoke a close or remote past that spurs melancholy and, when sustainable, even pleasant suffering. As a verb, "emigrate" could reflect "enthusiasm, desire, willingness to do more, to go beyond. But also sacrifice" (7). This sacrifice is connected to the fear of the unknown, on one hand, but also to a need to leave the familiar environment, on the other. The departure and the experience itself are unsettling events which shake the migrant's identity leading to unpredictable outcomes.

Offering another perspective on terminology, one of the authors claims: "I don't like the word *expat*: instinctively I associate it with terms such as 'formalism', 'bureaucracy', and 'difficulty'. Hence, I prefer to call myself a *traveller*, or better still, a *nomad*. For me being here means embarking on a new journey, a bit longer and more demanding than others, but certainly not the last. An interior journey, first of all. An incredible challenge" (78). This reference to a "nomadic life" is a recurrent theme in these autobiographical narratives. The dual dimension of a physical, but more importantly cognitive and psychological, journey is stressed by the participants. From a different angle, this real, not virtual, nomadism is firmly related to the two interconnected concepts of curiosity and knowledge: "we are not necessarily *zingare*:¹⁰ we are eager for knowledge because it is only through experience that we discover our potentialities and, above all, we exceed our limits" (22). Therefore, in this newly found environment, a dimension, which could be called "exploratory", emerges; it does not correspond simply to a temporal phase of the journey, but rather it represents something much more complex, as it is both a movement in space and in, and against, time: "Even a place, not just an individual, is 'clotted' time, multiple times. It is not only the present, but also that labyrinth of different times and epochs that intertwine in and create a landscape" (Magris XVI-XVII). In this exploratory dimension the folds of the being take shape and evolve.

To this composite framework, two more terms suggested by the authors need to be added: *backpacker* and *globetrotter*. Both terms align with a nomadic essence, in that they represent anti-tourist modalities; the former is perceived as an unostentatious mobility mode whereas the latter, quite clearly, deriving from "globe" and "trot", indicates a "world traveller", a term which in the present context can be attributed, to some extent, to the vast

¹⁰ The original Italian word is *zingare* – that is, literally, gypsies or nomads – which is used here figuratively to indicate a wandering person, inclined or subject to constant changes of location. However, in Italian, the term *zingari* has a strong cultural connotation and is often used as a term for comparison or identification in figurative expressions of a derogatory tone.

majority of the contributors. Tourist experiences are differentiated from those of the traveller even if semantically the border between the two may be less clear-cut than assumed (Francesconi 2). As stated in the targeted narratives, “Backpackers do not go to a hotel, but to a hostel. They do not look for comfort, but to save money. They do not stay away for a few weeks: they travel at least for a few months, mingling with the local population or accompanying other backpackers” (DCE 53). The frugality and associative spirit of this type of traveller seem to be the central characteristics. The human beings’ empowering skills to explore, adapt, and compromise mould the travellers’ minds, and hence, their interpretation of reality.

Quite often the migrants feel like *travellers*. The DCE narratives, in a dialogic relationship with the reader, provide information just like tourist guides embellished with personal anecdotes because the migrant’s life is like “a swing of emotions: one day you’re sad, the day after you’re on cloud nine, the next day you’d like to give up everything and go back home” (43). The migrants’ constant seesawing is given as a norm within the tiers of the experience. Much as in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the expats have to undergo a basic, four-stage model: “Did you know that there are various evolutionary stages in the sentimental relationship between the immigrant and the host country? We start with the honeymoon phase, we continue with the culture shock, then the integration, and finally the acceptance stage” (46). Through these levels, identities and subjectivities are altered and split, to such an extent that “from that moment onwards, the Italian *Simona* has started to coexist with the German *Zimone*” (35). A summary of the resulting unsteadiness is conveyed in these few lines: “My father warned me: ‘If you emigrate, you will never belong entirely to your new nation, and you will never belong to the one you were born in’. At the time I did not understand, but now I know that he was right: I became almost a stateless person” (50). The public and the private dimensions seem to undergo a similar process of disruption, to be only later rearranged and recomposed into a new outcome of which quite often the migrant-writers are aware. They simultaneously live in two worlds characterized by feelings of separation and remoteness.

2.3 “Pulverizing distances”: travel and migration

Travel, in Italian “viaggio”, and migration, “migrazione”, are perceived in DCE as quite similar movements. Both may be considered an experiential path of self-reflection. Given that they are not merely physical movements in space, the subject is forced into an inner analysis, exploring the person she has become and her objectives. While underpinned by

such an introspective approach, invisible and subjective barriers are created. On one hand, the novelties, which represent the unknown, become a source of fear and worry, the reason for the crumbling of a person's microcosm; on the other hand, though, they may represent a source of excitement and enthusiasm, a stimulus to growth.

Drawing on DCE, it is possible to infer that there are several migration modalities. As regards the temporal dimension, “[s]ome people go abroad for a period and then come back. Others explore the world constantly moving from one country to another. Others still relocate to a foreign country and know they’ll have to stay there” (39). In these short-, medium-, and long-term relocations the individual becomes an entity in-between, with multiple cohabiting aspects striving to find and allocate meaning: “Today I wonder: Where is my real life? [...] I feel divided between two worlds: both belong to me, and they are both real. [...] I will learn to live with this fracture” (98). The process of change is subtle, slow but inexorable. Similarly, as regards the spatial dimension, a quotation from Fosco Maraini¹¹ is cited to convey the complexities of the movement: “There are two ways to travel. In the first way, you travel great distances in a short time, you move, you learn to get to know the general features of the mountains, valleys, the most obvious aspects of people and their character. In the other way, you move, you go deeper, you put the roots down a little, you try to absorb from the earth the invisible spiritual nourishment the inhabitants feed on” (22). Space is here connected to a spatial and anthropological exploration: the former seems to be a more contemporary, technological and hectic approach to travel, whereas the latter seems to incite a more participatory experience in exchange with the Otherness and the Other. Essentially, the product is a sophisticated system of varying coexistences and exclusions whereby “distances are pulverized” (45).

To travel “is to live twice” (58) but it also means “discovering diversity, even when it is unsettling; dismantling prejudices and opening up to the variety of the world, which is a whole with its beauty” (87). Taking possession of a new space with all its elements is a twofold undertaking. On the one hand, even if hazardous, discovery has positive connotations; on the other, the related precariousness may have implications of a negative nature. Overall, though, it coincides with a first attempt at integration. Moreover, the departure “does not imply being ready for the change: if we do not know where we are going, and why we are doing it, everything can become difficult” (88), but “until you take that step, and you are still in your homeland, in your home-nest, you cannot envision the difficulties

¹¹ Maraini, Fosco (1912 – 2004): Italian academic, anthropologist, traveler, writer, and photographer.

you will encounter” (38). As noted, the migrant’s relationship with movement is always rather conflicted, entailing intricate closures and openings. The concept of the house as a “nest”, a comforting microcosm with predefined dynamics of self-realization and socialization, may be considered one of the tropes of female-authored migrant and travel literature. In such a framework, the migrant community is inclined to reproduce such a *milieu*, which can be reflected in habits, traditions, or rituals. The goal is to bring together its members by producing familiar networks of socialization which can be considered a source of support and assistance.

Basically, travelling or migrating could be perceived as: (1) a movement in the broadest sense between two places and identities; (2) as an opportunity for personal growth within a constant exchange with the Other. Spatial mobility is reflected in an inner motility: “My identity and my sense of belonging are in constant movement. I feel nostalgic for the world I left behind, but I cannot look back” (58).

In addition, the individual sphere may also be connected to the social and national ones: “as migrating women, I’d like to think, we belong to this category [of Italians who roll up their sleeves to create a better future]. We try every day, with our perseverance and work, to safeguard Italy’s reputation abroad” (86). The latter educes another significant element of identity formation: the migrant-homeland relationship and its links to national and collective identity.

2.4. Identity (trans-)formation

Identity is fluid, and migration appears functional in stimulating the process of reflection on the individual’s sense of identity, which must consequently always be considered as a composite topic subject to reformulations. Due to its fragmentation, three interrelated dimensions may be used for reference: “the subjective/psychological dimension, or ego identity *qua* a sense of temporal-spatial continuity and its concomitants; the personal dimension, or a behavioural and character repertoire that differentiates individuals; and the social dimension, or recognized roles within a community” (Erikson as cited in Côté and Levine 15). Within this framework, national, social, personal and gender approaches may be used to reflect upon this intricate concept. As previously noted, the migrant writers in DCE openly address the idea of identity transformation or identity splits, including references to the thorny subjects of Italian-ness and femininity.

2.4.1. “Italianità”

The structure-agency debate¹² may be pivotal in the process of defining national identity. If *nation* is intended as “group (of people) who perceives of itself as a nation: ‘identity does not draw its sustenance from facts but from perceptions; not from chronological/factual history but from sentiment/felt history’” (Polese 175), a common sense of *national identity* emerges from DCE. The relationship with the homeland is compared to the ‘mother-daughter’ relation: “we fight when we are together but as soon as we are apart we suffer” (38). In the same way, it must be noted that the conflictual filial relationship is reproduced in the interrelation with the native country. Contradictory feelings distinguish this bond: bitterness, disappointment and dissatisfaction blend with caring memories of love and nostalgia. The DCE narratives provide an assortment of characteristics representing the typical “Italianità” or Italian-ness. As regards character, spontaneity, improvisation, a happy disposition, and passion; as regards behaviour and typical traits, the members’ Latin accent, their love for food, for their morning coffee and for the “aperitivo”; the loud-speaking members of this community share a great sense of cohesion, anger against injustices, and suffer because of the distance from their families of origin.

Inquiries into the concept of “home” become common. The aforementioned home-nest simile further points to the migrants’ need to find a place or recreate a familiar environment. In DCE, a philosophical stance appears to provide a suggested resolution: “Life is like a suitcase, each person fills it with her/his belongings: however, the space inside is limited, so each of us has to make choices” (10), thus, ultimately, “if until yesterday the house was the home of the body, today it is the home of the heart” (46). This may relate to possible coping strategies due to the pervasive sense of displacement.

However, if on one hand, the authors seem to dwell upon the positive aspects of their native country made of familiar affections, customs, and habits, a clear and even harsh criticism of the *Bel Paese* is quite noticeable. Italy, defined as a “Sleeping Beauty” (47), is portrayed as stuck in a stagnant state, frozen in a past that prevents it from moving. Paradoxically, this stagnation is the propulsive force behind movement: “under no circumstances, would I go back to Italy. I say this with a heavy heart, because I love my country but I don’t want to be its victim anymore” (35) and “we don’t miss the old rubbish of a nation that is struggling to change, that doesn’t leave room for the youngsters, that doesn’t support families, that feels sorry for itself instead of rolling its sleeves up” (47). Likewise,

¹² Reference is made here to the debate in social sciences pondering the extent to which external and internal factors shape behaviours (see Côté and Levine 9).

“Ours is a country that lives on old glories. The people no longer have any rights: they only have to work and tighten their belts to maintain a political class of demanding dinosaurs. Young people no longer have hope and live ad libitum with their parents” (50). These passages become the expression of a frustrated collective identity.

The resulting image depicts a country where gerontocracy, the lack of meritocracy and of a sound social system impoverish society as a whole; the young generations, faced with this sense of impotence, injustice and loss of hope may turn to migration. The critical remarks, though, also touch these new generations of Italian migrants who often complain and frequently compare the host and the native country in their persistent search for symbols – such as Italian products, doctors and friends (27) – that reproduce their country abroad. Furthermore, within this composite picture, the children of previous generations of Italian migrants should be further explored, as their experience of this Italian-ness is commonly linked to a great sense of both pride and longing: “They are proud of being Italian: definitely, more than me. I, for my part, have not forgiven Italy yet” (46).

2.4.2. Femininity

Throughout the DCE collection, the *leitmotiv* is evidently the female gaze which is used to interpret and understand the world. Exploring all aspects of different life styles such as food, art, music, natural or urban landscapes, but also affections, work, customs and traditions of the new country; and accentuating the excitement of the change, the difficulties of integration and separation from one’s native country, the narratives touch upon civil rights, racial and gender discrimination, poverty, and inequality.

While the features of femininity are not universally alike, in DCE some emerging traits could be: eclecticism, open-mindedness, flexibility, empathy, resourcefulness in creating a profession, and a strong organizational attitude. Social modelling and its reinforcement have thus become malleable and questionable barriers. These women decided to leave their familiar environment to go beyond predefined schemes (73) and to tear down several walls (74). Frequently, the need to leave is associated with a dream of freedom (21), revival (53) or spreading one’s wings (19). The physical journey translates into a dreamlike state which brings to light the deep elaborations of the unconscious mind. Furthermore, migrating is perceived by the female authors as a unique experience (43) in order to get to know new cultures and new life styles (34), leaving the subject in a situation of unremitting stimulation. Essentially, exploiting the potential of newly acquired knowledge to shape a

“complementary” identity, the female subjects explore reality far beyond preconceived societal boundaries. Their main attitude may be synthesized as follows:

Expatriate women – those who find within themselves the grit and courage to leave their places of origin, accepting work assignments somewhere else or chasing a love to a foreign land, or simply driven by the desire to rebuild their lives – have a great strength that distinguishes them. [...] It is in this land that they take root, and they make the landing through each new person they meet, because they want first of all to understand and then merge with what is new around them, to absorb a new energy and make it flow inside. (DCE 22)

Understanding occurs through an essential tool: language. For the migrant, “mute” at the beginning (58), language may be a hurdle in the construction of new relationships (37); ultimately, “language defines our identity” (60). Each author reports terms belonging to the idiom of the host country, trying to explain or contextualize it. As in travel narratives, the use of foreign words, comparisons between the two realities, and the recording of traditions or cultural events enrich the accounts. Language use is another aspect of the process of integration which is, generally, both a common query and a major challenge: “Adapting means taking away many cultural filters from the eyes and struggling with oneself to welcome a reality that is never reassuring. The risk of getting discouraged is always around the corner. We could say that integration is possible, but it takes a lot of time” (80). Another noticeable aspect emphasized by the authors is an increased tranquillity, or lack of frenzy, which impinges not only upon social relationships but also upon all daily dynamics, and hence, on the anthropological and urban subjects alike.

Conclusion

To conclude, as claimed by Tiozzo (Sweden), “in the end, we become children of the world: ours is a double richness – two cultures, two languages, two nations” (DCE 11). As regards definitions, a lack of general agreement is to be acknowledged; a series of taxonomic labels were used by the thirty-four migrating authors: modern migrant, expatriate, traveller, nomad, backpacker, and globetrotter. Within the vast array of topics presented in the choral framework of this collection, the female gaze may be considered an interpretative lens through which the female authors reaffirm their understanding of the world by engaging with their split identities. The narratives as webs of personal reflection and reproduction converge

around common themes accounting for a physical and allegorical movement between worlds and identities; creating complementary dimensions where self-positioning, language and integration become essential aspects. These female-authored texts contribute to the analysis of national, collective, and personal identities which have to be considered as products of the migration process.

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