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## Review Article

Brunetti B. and Derobertis R., eds., (2014)

*Identità, migrazioni e postcolonialismo in Italia.*

*A partire da Edward Said.* Bari: Progedit

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## Abstract

This contribution reviews *Identità, migrazioni e postcolonialismo in Italia. A partire da Edward Said*, a collection of essays edited by Bruno Brunetti and Roberto Derobertis, showing its topicality for contemporary cultural studies in Italy. By framing it in the wider debate on postcolonial or migrant writing in Italian, the review intends to assess how this volume starts from the legacy of Edward Said's thought to offer some valuable insights on cultural criticism and the role of intellectuals in contemporary Italy.

## Contributor Note

Serena Guarracino received her PhD from the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' in 2005, and subsequently authored *La primadonna all'opera. Scrittura e performance nel mondo anglofono* (2010), and *Donne di passioni. Personagge della lirica tra differenza sessuale, classe e razza* (2011), which deals with contemporary rewritings of *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly* from a postcolonial perspective. She also edited with Marina Vitale a double issue for the journal *AION Anglistica* ([www.anglistica.unior.it](http://www.anglistica.unior.it)) titled *Voicings: Musica across Borders* (13.1-2, 2009). More recently, she has published a series of articles on the role of the postcolonial writer in the public arena, featuring as case studies Salman Rushdie, J.M. Coetzee, Caryl Phillips and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She is currently teaching 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century English Literature at the University of Naples "L'Orientale".

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**Brunetti B. and Derobertis R., eds., (2014)**  
***Identità, migrazioni e postcolonialismo in Italia. A partire da Edward Said***, Bari: Progedit.

In a footnote at the beginning of the essay by Roberto Derobertis included in *Identità, migrazioni e postcolonialismo in Italia. A partire da Edward Said* (2014), which he co-edited with Bruno Brunetti, the author thanks the people who made his research possible – among them ‘Angela and those who supported us in taking care of our daughter Mila’ (Derobertis 2014: 113; here and elsewhere, my translation). It may sound odd to start the review of this groundbreaking and thought-provoking volume from such a marginal place as a footnote – not even a reference footnote at that. Yet, as often happens in postcolonial studies, the margins are the very place where the hegemonic discourses of the present are redressed: ‘Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there’ (hooks 1990: 152).

As a scholar who also holds a precarious position in and out of the Italian academia, I recognize Derobertis’ thanks not only as the gesture of appreciation it undoubtedly is – for all the collateral aspects that make research possible everywhere and at any time. This footnote also highlights how *il personale è politico* (‘the personal is political’), as Italian feminists from the 60s and 70s used to chant; i.e., that the emotional labour of homes, families and friends shares time, places and energies with intellectual and academic research, and that when that private life is constantly challenged by the economic instability coming with the early and not-so-early stages of a career in academia, then research inescapably becomes a political

statement. Research becomes resistance.

So it comes as no surprise that *Identità, migrazioni e postcolonialismo in Italia* is both what is stated in its title – a dialogue with the late Edward Said on the pivotal questions of national identity and migration in Italy – and a much needed elaboration on the role of the intellectual in the Italian public arena. This book emerges from the intellectual ruins of a country barely out of the Berlusconi *ventennio* and witnesses an apparently inevitable shift in the role of scholars and intellectuals, as Paola Rotolo powerfully argues in the first pages of her contribution. Her essay is exemplary of how a case study – in her case, an overview of narrative reportages on migration in Italy – cannot be discussed without the scholar positioning herself; and this positioning emerges as significantly different from the organic intellectual elaborated by Gramsci and then by Stuart Hall as the one bearing ‘the responsibility of transmitting [ideas] to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class’ (Hall 1992: 281). Today’s Italian intellectuals do not refuse this responsibility; nonetheless, they surface in Rotolo’s powerful phrasing as ‘knowledge workers [...] destined to existential precariousness and threadbare lives, with no security about their future on the many jobs that compel them to a continuous mobility just to survive... forced to live at the *margins* of the apparatuses they belong to’ (Brunetti and Derobertis 2014: 85; my italics).

Edward Said emerges as a central reference in this new elaboration of the role of those who dedicate their efforts to analysing cultural narrations in the public arena. In this respect, it must be noted that almost all essays included

make constant reference to *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004) as the crucial contribution by the late Palestinian scholar to the role of culture in the current neoliberal landscape. In the second paragraph of his broad and resourceful introduction, aptly titled 'Cominciare dalla fine' (starting from the end), Derobertis foregrounds what appears to be this definite though unstated editorial choice. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* towers at the centre of the volume, leaving more widely known works such as *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) somewhat on the margins. This allows contributions to the volume to elaborate extensively on the role of intellectual work in contemporary Italy; at the same time, all the essays included here reinstate the centrality of humanism in the third millennium, and specifically of literature – its 'worldliness', as Said would call it in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), another often quoted work of which Derobertis laments the lack of an Italian translation.

The debate on the role in Italian literature of writing and writers from elsewhere (especially but not exclusively from former colonies) is not as recent as one would imagine; and indeed Chiara Mengozzi subtitles her 2013 monograph on the subject *Vent'anni di scritture italiane della migrazione* (Twenty Years of Italian migrant writing). These twenty years have seen public discourse in Italy shaped by narratives of emergency as regards immigration (especially, but not exclusively) from across the Mediterranean. Such narratives have supported violent political and military responses, among which the Italian role in the *Mare Nostrum* and *Triton* operations are only the most recent. Many non-aligned knowledge workers have responded to this heightened

cultural and political situation through a radical interrogation of Italy's still controversial colonial past (as Franca Sinopoli shows in her contribution). They have consistently endorsed narratives aiming at complicating the us/them binary so often deployed against subjects who do not conform to accepted notions of Italianness.

*Identità, migrazioni e postcolonialismo in Italia* follows into the footsteps of these endeavours, as the reference lists of the individual essays show – although a complete bibliography at the end of the book would have been an invaluable research tool for the scholar interested in further readings. The volume recognizes again the centrality of Said's thought for postcolonial Italian studies, an element that has emerged from its very early configurations (see Chambers 2006). It also reinstates the usefulness of postcolonial theory for understanding and interpreting the crucial role of Italy in the global dynamics of power and resistance. This theme already emerged from the 2009 conference 'Sguardi dai/sui sud: Meridione, Mediterraneo e Sud globale' (see Cazzato 2011), and has found a recent place of confrontation and exchange in the conference 'Archivi del futuro' (Padua 2015). Such events create spaces at the margins for scholars to meet, exchange opinions, elaborate and contest methodologies, and undertake collaborations.

Yet, while previous and current work privileges a multidisciplinary approach, all contributions to this volume stick to literature in Italian as a linguistic, national, and cultural construction – with a few, well-chosen exceptions, among which the Joseph Conrad discussed by both Derobertis and Brunetti is a case in point. The reader will still find a variety of case studies: The analysis of prominent



political figures such as Marcello Pera by Daniele Coimberati, or the reportages discussed by Paola Rotolo show that many contributions deal with a variety of textualities through a rigorous cultural studies approach. Yet it is literary textualities in Italian that take the floor as the *locus* where hegemonic categories of nationality and power – cultural as well as academic – must be eroded and dismantled.

This dismantling reaches a peak in the essay that closes the collection, where, to define the new generation of migrant writers in Italian, Fulvio Pezzarossa upholds the category *scritture migranti* (migrant writing) as ‘a valuable tool [...] to individuate the characteristics of a textuality [...] interweaved with elements that nourish postcolonial discourses’ (Brunetti and Derobertis 2014: 160). This definition is offered in substitution to the many that circulate today in the academic and cultural debate, such as *letteratura italoфона* (italophone literature), *letteratura afroitaliana* (afro-italian literature) and *letteratura ibrida* or *multiculturale* or *della migrazione* (hybrid, multicultural or migration literature) (see Mengozzi 2013: 40-87). Pezzarossa’s proposal puts under erasure Italy as a category of discourse,

as some of the other definitions do, denying it any ontological authority as an interpretative category. At the same time, this suggestion also seems to leave the cultural authority of Italianness intact by placing migrant writing firmly *elsewhere*. More interestingly, though, the terminology maintained by Pezzarossa on the basis of previous work by Derobertis and others substitutes *letteratura* with *scritture*, literature with writing – in the plural in Italian: a plurality instead of a singularity, a web of textualities instead of the monolithic ivory tower of the canon.

It is in scholarly and political statements such as this that the reader can find enacted the intention of the volume: as Derobertis quoting Said candidly states in his introduction, is ‘the ill-concealed ambition to “shake up a few literature professors”’ (Brunetti and Derobertis 2014: 9). The reference here is to those notorious *baroni* who continue to ignore the fact that writing in Italian by migrant subjects is here to stay. This writing is already changing the perception of Italian literature as people know it, with the support of more than a few not-so-young researchers who, their existential and material precariousness notwithstanding, are not going away either.

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