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Angelica Pesarini is Assistant Professor in Race and Cultural Studies/Race and Diaspora and Italian Studies at the University of Toronto. Her work explores the dynamics of race performativity with a focus on colonial and (post)colonial Italy, and she is also interested in the racialization of the Italian political discourse on immigration. She is the author of several publications on issues of race, gender, and identity in Italy, both in English and Italian. Active in anti-racist debates in Italy, she is among the co-founders of The Black Mediterranean Collective, which recently published *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders, and Citizenship* (2021).

Abstract: In this article, Paola Bonifazio and Angelica Pesarini discuss Pesarini’s short fiction included in *Future: Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi*, a collection published by Effequ in 2020 and edited by Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego. In their conversation, the author and the reader address questions of literary representation vis-à-vis identity politics, debate how an intersectional approach affects aesthetic choices, and investigate the intricate connections between scholarly work and creative writing.

Keywords: African-Italian women writers, Black body, positionality, oral history

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Raccontare e raccontarsi: A Conversation with Angelica Pesarini

PAOLA BONIFAZIO AND ANGELICA PESARINI

PAOLA BONIFAZIO: Assistant Professor of Race and Cultural Studies/Race and Diaspora at University of Toronto, Angelica Pesarini has recently contributed to *Future: Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi*, a collection of short fictions published by Effequ in 2019 and edited by Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego.¹ I really enjoyed your short story, Angelica, and thought that a conversation with you about your poetics, how it intersects with your work as a scholar, and the political implications of your fictional narrative would be a perfect fit for this themed issue on intersectionality. Let's start from the title of your story, "Non s'intravede speranza alcuna."² I would translate it as "We cannot see any hope," is that right? I wonder if you can speak of how this title relates to that of the whole anthology. If I understand correctly, the word "Future," feminine plural of the adjective "futuro," refers to the forward-looking perspectives of the Italian black women who contributed to Scego's project (as if "the narrated tomorrow" were to be embodied by these female authors). Do you see any contradictions here? What kind of future did you envision in your contribution if there is no hope? Or was it your intention to precisely highlight a contradiction?

ANGELICA PESARINI: I like to translate the title of the story as "No hope can be foreseen" because this is a very solemn and formal statement mentioned in the story. At first, such an assertion doesn't seem to leave any room for other possibilities. In reality by reading the story, one may perceive how this statement is not as clear-cut as it had hoped to be (talking about hope!). As you rightly point out, there is an evident contradiction between the title of my story and the title/aim of the book that focuses on the future, declined in its female plural form. To be honest, I did not create this contradiction on purpose. When we were invited by Igiaba to write a story, the only hint we had was to write a story focusing on the future in the way we felt it. Instinctively, my very first idea was to talk about the past because I don't think it is possible to think about the future without reckoning with the past. Having studied and worked on Italian colonialism and its legacies for a decade now, for me that past is intrinsically connected to our possibilities and developments of a future. Yet, even if that past floats around us and is around us, it is very difficult to grasp it given the difficult relationship that Italy holds with its colonial past (and it is not such a remote past). Thus, rather than talking about my own personal story, I decided to create a story that could encapsulate the many stories I collected when I went to the former Italian colonies in East Africa—stories of women like Maddalena, born in the *Impero of Africa Orientale Italiana* and left in the so called "collegi" or "brefotrofi," namely institutions for Black "mixed-race" children born to a white Italian father (very often missing or absent and already married in Italy) and a local woman. So, my idea was to talk about the future thinking *in* and *about* the past. Funnily enough, I found a source of inspiration in a grammatical rule of the English language. I've been studying and speaking English for many years now, and for a long time there was a grammatical tense that I struggled to understand and that created some confusion, namely the "future in the past." This tense is used to talk about the past, and in particular it refers to an action which was considered in the future at that time. The difficulty, for those who are not native speakers, lies in the fact that in English this sense of future is made using the present conditional, while in Italian we use the past conditional. Using the present conditional gives you a sense of possibility, even if you talk about the past, a possibility that, in my view, is precluded by the past conditional. It's this cognitive slippage that I find now so inspiring. The future

¹ Scego, *Future: Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi*.

² Pesarini, "Non s'intravede speranza alcuna."

in the past foresees a possibility; it gives you the opportunity to imagine a future, even if you are not sure that will occur or develop in the way you had imagined it.

This is how I decided to talk about the future, by locating it in the past and imagining what kind of possibilities and shapes it could have embodied for Maddalena.

Yet the title of this story, as you mentioned, seems to be in contrast with the aim of the book, “No hope can be foreseen.” In reality, by reading the story, especially the ending, one may perceive that it is quite the opposite. Maddalena is a young woman of mixed heritage born in 1916. Her father is a white Italian, and her mother is an African woman. For some reasons neither her mother nor father can look after her, thus she has been raised in one of these “collegi” for “mixed-race” children. When the story starts, we learn that Maddalena is desperate to leave this institution of violence to join her father, an ambivalent figure, apparently very affectionate, and somehow absent. The story shows us the struggles of this young woman and how she decides to take charge of her own destiny in a very powerful way. Thus, the initial contradiction becomes, eventually, a feminist act of empowerment and emancipation.

PB: Your story layers different points of view. In some ways, the whole story is made of multiple layers: there is yours, the writer’s, and then there is that of the protagonist in your story, which overlaps a little bit with yours, as you said, at the time when you did your research in Eritrea. This character is not only a traveler (from Italy to Eritrea), but she is also the one who unburies another story, that of an 18-year-old Italian-Eritrean girl. Would you like to talk about your stylistic choice to have these three perspectives co-existing and, perhaps, overlapping? Was this choice in any way affected by your own intersectional approach to scholarship? Is your relationship to historical research also a factor in your work as a fiction writer?

AP: You know, it’s fascinating for me to hear your analysis because when you mention my stylistic choices, or you point out the layers of my characters, it feels like you are talking about someone else—a proper writer! Although I write a lot, mainly academic/informative/political writing, this was my first time writing a fiction, and I felt a bit intimidated. Yet, I was very intrigued by this opportunity because deep down, I have always wanted to do it! Writing has accompanied me all my life. I started to write fictional stories at a very young age, and I have this very clear and fond memory of me as a child, taking a chair, climbing into the wardrobe in my parents’ bedroom, and stealthily grabbing my father’s very heavy Olivetti typewriter, protected by a beautiful red cherry cover. He really cherished that typewriter that his father had given him, and he didn’t want me to use it because it was very heavy, and I often messed up the ribbon while typing. I distinctly remember the sense of comfort and happiness I would feel while in the little studio I had made in my bedroom. I would think about all the stories I had in mind, and I typed them for hours. My first story, I think, was inspired by *Little Women* and was about a girl moving from London to Paris, so it was very symptomatic of my future actually! I’ve always wanted to write stories because I love reading them, and even more, listening to them. I don’t think it is a coincidence that in my academic work, I am so fascinated by oral histories. However, when I wrote this short story, I didn’t plan it as a professional writer probably would, I just put myself in it, in the way I was able to do it. It was very quick and immediate. Then it’s true, when you go back, and you look at it with an analytical lens, there are several characters and several identities intertwined to each other. Firstly, there’s me, the writer, a Black “mixed-race” Italian woman, historically and emotionally connected to Maddalena’s story because her story is also the story of my paternal grandmother. Unlike Maddalena, my nana never knew her father, and her mother died very young, thus she was also raised in one of these “collegi” in Somalia. I still recall hearing with horror the stories of ordinary violence she experienced at the hand of the catholic nuns running the place. Then, there is the researcher for whom the archives, the sources, the interpretation

of the data, and the rigor are fundamental. It was interesting playing with these two identities, as the documents I used in the story are real archival sources. I changed some names and some dates, and the ending is also fictional, yet the documents used in the story are almost verbatim transcriptions. Finally, there is Maddalena, whose story really struck me. Being still alive today, she would be 105 years old, a very old lady. However, in the story she's only eighteen, and I feel a lot of affection and a sense of protection for the young woman described in the story. It's interesting how these three identities talked to each other, but also struggled with each other. I rarely express my emotions in my academic or political writing, and I didn't in this story either, but I let the documents and the sources speak for themselves. I think the intersectional approach really helps here because it highlights dynamics of power and resistance, and it reveals the invisibility of women within patriarchal societies. There are many women involved in this story. It is a story of women. However, those who speak for them and decide for them are only men. I think about Maddalena's biological mother, for instance. She is never mentioned in the documents, like if she didn't even exist, and she was just a womb.

PB: You would agree with me then, that we can draw a connection between your own methodology as a researcher and the form of storytelling that you use in "Non si vede speranza alcuna." Historical documents are sources, it seems to me, not to reconstruct objective accounts of the past, but to talk about individual identities, to tell one's history. And people's histories do not always have clear explanations on how they developed in time, nor do they necessarily have conclusive outcomes. In your short story, I think, there is a constant push and pull around the idea that an "objective truth" about whatever happened to Maddalena can ever be uncovered, and maybe this is not even the point of telling her story. There is a kind of ambiguity in this sense that opens at the end (spoiler alert!), when the reader realizes that they will never know whether Maddalena's father abandoned her or was forced to abandon her.

AP: Yes, the methodological approach that I use in my academic work is really embedded in the story. When I started my doctoral research, I was struggling to find a methodological framework that could help me investigate certain aspects of Italian colonialism, a piece of history deeply connected to my own self. However, I didn't want to tell or investigate my own story just for the sake of it. Rather, I wanted to use it as a tool able to help me understand broader sociological phenomena. In my search, I came across feminist practices, in particular black feminist epistemologies, and these really opened a new world to me. I understood why the personal is political, how experience is knowledge, and the fact that marginalized groups produce a great deal of knowledge too, but this is often dismissed by mainstream processes of knowledge production. This is what I tried to do with this story, and in general, with the story I have the privilege to listen to. I try to respect *their own truth*, even if this can be quite far from what one may consider an "objective truth." This is *HerStory* rather than *HiStory*.

PB: I understand perfectly when you say that even as a scholar you feel the necessity to be a storyteller, but with a strong awareness of how you position yourself, so that your own perspective does not become a form of bias. So, I was wondering, because of this overlap between your own and your character's experiences looking for documents about Maddalena, then what can you say about the visibility of your characters vis-à-vis yours? It seems to me that you leave to the imagination of the reader the ability to picture your protagonists. And this is for me an important question when we approach your work "intersectionally," thinking about the role that gender and race play in the narrative. I myself had to pause and go back to re-read some passages and look for the gender in past participles to confirm, in my mind, that the traveler identifies as a woman (her blackness also

left untold and conveyed by the fact that she is Eritrean). Of course, it makes a difference whether the researcher identifies as a black woman or not, the same way in which it makes a difference if you do. What do you think? In this respect, your inclusion of a photograph as evidence in the story seems relevant. In this photo, Maddalena is visible. The color of her skin is visible. Her gender. We cannot say the same about the researcher; we do not even know her name (is that related?). This aspect reminded me of Carlo Lucarelli's book, *L'ottava vibrazione*, in which photos also play such an important role, but precisely because you can see the photos.³ You can imagine the people in the story by looking at these photos. Instead, in your case, readers are meant to imagine what characters may look like on the basis of their narratives.

AP: This is a really interesting point. I never thought about it! I guess it reflects what happens in the research process. As interviewers, we have the privilege of being invisible and not positioning ourselves if we avoid self-reflexive practices. However, in this case I did it because I wanted to take up as little space as possible. As mentioned earlier, I wanted to be a bridge between the reader and Maddalena. That's why there is very little information about the researcher in the story. It was about her and her life, and I wanted the reader to get to know her without my intervention. Writing this story made me realize, even more, how much untold is present in archival documents, how many things are perceivable in between the lines. Although Maddalena never speaks directly to us, we can almost see her and feel her through her reactions and decisions, simply stated in the documents. Through the cold formality of the correspondence between the interested parties who have to deal with her, we learn so much about her! I purposely avoided including her picture in my story, not only to respect her privacy, but also because it would have been a non-consensual act on my part and, therefore, an act of violence. I wanted the reader to imagine their own Maddalena, according to the feelings they experienced by reading the story, as it happened to me. When I first saw her picture without knowing who she was, I have to confess, I was already pretty struck by it. She appeared to me in the middle of all these papers, posing as I described it, staring at the camera with such a defiant look. Then, when I read the documents and went back to the picture, it really hit me. I was touched by her resilience and determination in the midst of all that trauma and violence. Another reason not to include her picture in the story, thinking about the lack of visual element you mentioned earlier, is that I didn't want her body to be objectified or consumed for the pleasure of the (white) reader. This is something really important for me in relation to the Black body. Historically, this specific body has been made supervisible, and at the same time, it has been also rendered invisible. Supervisibility triggers obsession for monitoring and control of this body, and invisibility treats it as if it doesn't exist and makes it, therefore, disposable. One of the main experiences that characterize the Black body is the one of dissection, as described by Franz Fanon, and the fetishization of the Black body perpetrated by the white gaze, so I wanted to avoid that.⁴

PB: For me, what is fascinating is this idea of visibility that is connected to (or disconnected from) sight. Your writing makes the story of this girl visible without us *seeing* her. I'd argue that this is a kind of feminist approach. It's not about framing her or showing her in a picture, as if the picture could tell her story.

AP: Exactly that.

³ Lucarelli, *L'ottava vibrazione*.

⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

PB: I have a couple of related questions, which I find appropriate to conclude our conversation. First of all, in the preface, Igiaba Scego writes that when she was given the task to find writers for the anthology, she had a very explicit political goal in mind. She uses the expression “J’accuse!” to indicate the female authors writing their stories perform an act of denunciation; they denounce the history of racism and colonialism; as well as the present of oppression and discrimination.⁵ Would you agree with her? Did you also aim at such a political goal?

AP: Well, I think that the simple fact of existing is a political act in a world dominated by white supremacist logics, and I say this thinking about my own experience. In a way, I’ve always been seen as a dissonant body, a body out of place, to borrow Nirmal Puwar’s words.⁶ It was impossible that my body would reflect the words I would pronounce. How can you be *Italian* and have that hair, that skin tone, those features? Why do you have an Italian name and surname and look that way? All those questions, from a very young age, had the power of dissecting me, quoting Fanon again, I was made to feel as a living contradiction. That is why I say that existing in such conditions is a political act, and the fact that I do the work I do, I think, is my response and my attempt to fill some of the many gaps that shape the existence of Black people and people of color in Italy. When I was at school, for instance, I never read or was taught stories that could speak to me too. The history I was studying was not the history of people like me or my family. We simply didn’t exist. Therefore, at some point I started to interrogate myself on a number of issues, and it was for that reason that I decided to study the history of Italian colonialism. That was the missing link in my identity formation. However, while studying it, I struggled to hear the voices of women like my grandmothers, so I decided to go to look for those. While listening to all those stories, I realized that these counterbalanced the mainstream, white Eurocentric, and heteropatriarchal idea of history and Italian colonialism I had been taught all my life.

PB: That kind of connects to my last question, which is about the issue of citizenship in Italy. Since this is a very broad topic, I would like to ask you to think about it specifically in terms of what kind of message your short fiction conveys. With respect to access to educational, economic, social, and political rights, citizenship in Italy is a tool of inclusion/exclusion, a privilege that is only allowed to those who are Italians by blood (*Jus Sanguinis*). In my view, your story addresses this question in a very unique way: Maddalena is Italian by blood (her father is Italian), and yet she’s not because her mother is Eritrean; because her mother is black. What is branded as the truth branded by the supporters of *Jus Sanguinis*—i.e.: blood is what makes you Italian—is openly (and tragically) negated by a century long practice of discrimination that has its root in Italian colonialism.

AP: Definitely, this is something that is really important in my academic work. I wrote specifically about it in relation to a saying we have in Italian “il sangue non è acqua,” that in English is “blood is thicker than water.” When some scholars speak about “race” in Italy, people are obviously horrified because many think about ideas of biological race and races, as the ones used by Mussolini or Hitler. Obviously, we talk about another kind of race, and mainly about a process—racialization—because race is a consequence of racism. Blood, along with ideas of race in connection to citizenship, have been fundamental elements for the construction of Italian identity, and this is reflected in the citizenship law that you mentioned, *Jus Sanguinis*. Although there are some specific reasons for the use of blood as an element capable of providing citizenship (let’s think about the dimension of the Italian diaspora), inevitably this association has very strong racial implications because blood has

⁵ Scego, *Future: Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi*, Nota della curatrice.

⁶ Puwar, *Space Invaders*.

been used to racialize and rank people. Let's think about the one drop rule in the US. One drop of black blood makes you Black, regardless. In the former Italian colonies, blood was used in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, blood conferred Italianness, if an Italian father would recognize his children. However, it was blood the element used to determine the degree of Italianness, in case of an absent father. In 1933, when the fascists revisited ideas of citizenship in the colonies in relation to "mixed-race" individuals, they substituted the word "blood" with "race." So, blood in connection with race equals being Italian. How can we imagine that such strong implications have not been transmitted today when we still use factors like blood to talk about citizenship and identity?

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