
Familiar Ghosts: Imagining Lives, Re-imagining the Nation, Inventing the Future

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Abstract: This article focuses on novels that, located on the boundary between biography, autobiography and fiction, between detailed archival historical research and imagination, between the documentary and the speculative, seek to reconstruct the life of an ancestor of the writer-narrator to reflect on the traumas, exploitation, hopes, and desires of generations who, in their diasporas, also helped create their modern nations, or whose story challenges the exclusions on which the concept of the nation has been built. The texts discussed are Melania Mazzucco's *Vita*, Vona Groarke's *Hereafter: The Telling Life of Ellen O'Hara*, Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed's *Timira: Romanzo Meticcio*, and Maryse Condé's *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots*. At their center is the negotiation between the individual truth and the relational story across generations on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the tracing of collective histories such as those of nation, of colonization, of diaspora, of internal and external displacement, of rights and emancipation (the downtrodden, the poor, women, the migrant, the refugees), of the origins of dispossession and the permanence of its effects. At the core of the narratives is also the ghostliness of the erased (from history, from memory, from citizenship), the departed (in the sense of being dead and of having traveled away), and the in-between (generic: between the historical and documentary on the one hand, and the novelistic, the fable, fantasy on the other; geographical: between countries, between places, nationalities, national affiliations; historical: across generations; racial: the mestizo, the mulatto). It is, specifically, the biofictional imagination that enables these diasporic, transnational, transracial accounts to open up the possibility of a different, liberating future, by offering the space to imagine such a future, but also by recognizing, through its explicit acknowledgement of its recourse to fictionality, that it does not aim to construct a new myth to replace historical fact, but that it invites all of us to imagine, and strive to bring into existence, a different reality.

Keywords: biofiction, diaspora, genealogical accounting, ghosts, life narratives, national history, transnationalism

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This article focuses on novels that—located on the boundary between biography, autobiography, and fiction, between detailed archival historical research and imagination, between the documentary and the speculative—seek to reconstruct the life of an ancestor of the writer-narrator to reflect on the traumas, exploitation, hopes, and desires of generations who, in their diasporas, also helped create their modern nations, or whose story challenges the exclusions on which the concept of the nation has been built.

The texts I will discuss, which share significant features despite their differences, are Melania Mazzucco's *Vita* (2003, translated into English by Virginia Jewiss, 2005), Vona Groarke's *Hereafter: The Telling Life of Ellen O'Hara* (2022), Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed's *Timira: Romanzo Meticcio* (2012, no English translation, but translatable as *Timira: A Mestizo Novel*), and Maryse Condé's *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006, translated by Richard Philcox as *Victoire: My Mother's Mother*, 2010).

The genre to which these texts belong is fluid. They can be identified, to a significant degree, as biofictions: novels that choose real people as their protagonists and thus use factual biographical information as a starting point but, insofar as they are novels, can depart from that factuality, imaginatively reconstructing unrecorded events and speculating about what cannot be recorded, such as thoughts and emotions. In the texts I will discuss, the biofictional scope intersects with the autobiographical or autofictional, in that the authors-narrators both describe their own quests through documents, archives, and family remembrances and are themselves part of the narrative since the life of the ancestor determines their own existence (the case of *Timira* is somewhat different, as will be discussed later). As the protagonists of the texts are subjects of migration or, in the case of *Timira* and *Victoire*, of violent colonial encounters, this article will also consider how such auto/bio/fictional generic fluidity is used to explore questions that the migrant experience and the issue of race pose to the concepts of nation and citizenship.

Much critical work has appeared in recent years on narratives about individuals whose lives span the boundaries of nations, languages, and cultures. While the relational nature of biographical and autobiographical writing has been central to the study of life writing for some time (see e.g. Eakin; Cavarero), Sandra Mayer and Clément Dessy highlight more specifically, with regard to transnationality, “the global interconnectedness of lives within dynamic networks of human and non-human actors, places and institutions” and the “shared history of nations and cultures” (2; quoting Hannes Schweiger). A central concept often invoked in discussions of transnationalism and transnational lives is that of “methodological nationalism,” which Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller explain as “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (302). They model the concept on that of “methodological individualism” (327, n. 1), also pointing out, however, that the relationship between nation building and individual achievement within the construction of modern nations and states has been understudied (304; 306). Biography, with its focus on the individual life, can arguably be associated with individualism, but the genre is also traditionally used to prop up concepts of the nation, whether we think of the cultural role akin to sainthood attributed to

certain representative figures (see e.g. Dović and Helgason) or of History being embodied in the biography of great men, à la Carlyle. Nevertheless, biographical genres, including biofiction, have emerged in recent decades as part of the critique of methodological nationalism (see e.g. Rensen and Wiley; Rensen). This critique does not necessarily reject the concept of the nation, but invites us to re-think it in more open, relational forms that do not entrench what Wimmer and Glick Schiller call the isomorphism of people (conceived as rooted in a particular place and as racially and culturally homogeneous), citizen (drawn from that homogeneous concept of the people), nation, and state (309–317). In their diasporic, transnational focus, the texts I discuss below engage with such a rethinking of the foundations of the modern nation and the manners in which individuals can belong to it, be excluded from it, or be marginalized within it. These works’ merging of fact and fiction mobilizes the “moral imagination” that, as Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani suggest, “helps produce a narrative of possibilities, hopes, and social roles of appropriate conduct as well as models for action that are made meaningful by allowing individuals to take on the active narrative positions of migrant, victim, hero, survivor, community builder, transnational actor, and so on” (18).

Quayson’s concept of “genealogical accounting”—stories that span multiple generations and which are especially crucial to diasporic narratives (“There is practically no text that presents itself as diasporic that does not have a form of genealogical accounting in it” [154])—is also relevant to the works discussed here. In expanding the boundary of the individual life, they seek one’s meaning in the meaning and development of the other’s life. In acknowledging the paths that those ancestors opened for them—as we shall see in *Vita* and *Victoire*, these are explicitly identified as paths of liberation—the narrators also respond to the “biofictional impulse at the heart of the sense of community and of the better world one wants to create” (Boldrini, “Biographical” 46–47).

The mysterious life, imprecisely documented, fading from memory, requiring the combination of imagination and archival hunting, places the subjects between a material existence in the past and an evanescent trace in the present, turning these parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents into insubstantial figures often explicitly defined as ghosts. This opens up another critical context, that of the literary study of ghosts or specters (see e.g. Sword; Shaw; and, in the biofictional context, Avery) and of hauntology. Introduced by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, “hauntology” (*hantologie*) is both a reflection on history’s unresolved pasts that continue to haunt the present and the future, and a critique of Western philosophy’s concept of ontology as the self-presence of being. While there is no space to expand on Derrida’s discussion of hauntology, I would like to recall what he describes as his concern with “a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (xviii). The reflection on presence and on the ghostly link across generations is central to the sense of the possibility of a different future that these reimaginings of one’s progenitors envisage. The ghosts break both spatial and temporal boundaries—not least, the natural boundaries of birth and death—and those of individual subjectivity and selfhood; they reveal the lack of substance inherent in the concept of citizenship

when the state excludes those identified as “other,” because it ends up excluding also those that see themselves as solidly contained within that concept. Ultimately, the ghostly, diasporic, transnational life both challenges and reinforces the grounds on which modern identity has been constructed.

A final point before I turn to the analysis of the texts. The word “familiar” in my title refers, evidently, to the fact that the characters whose lives are being reconstructed are part of the family—grandmother, great-grandmother, grandfather, and mother. It also carries the folkloric meaning of “familiar” as spirit, originally a close friend or companion, a supernatural being that serves and protects; in this sense, it carries the meaning of domesticity, or being part of one’s family, without the later meaning of witches’ demons with which the word “familiar” has come to be associated. The “ghosts” in the books discussed here are familiar, homely rather than threatening, sinister, or, in Freud’s sense, *unheimlich*, uncanny—in fact, more *heimlich* (in German originally including, as the Grimms’s Dictionary explains, the meanings of domestic, homely, familiar, private, intimate, trusting, secret: Condé describes her grandmother Victoire as “secretive, enigmatic” [195]), than *unheimlich* (unfamiliar, strange, hostile, disquieting, and, since the end of the 18th century, causing fear, horror, dread, anxiety, uneasiness). It is through their ghostliness that these ancestors invite a questioning, a critique, and an expansion of the notions of home, family, community, nation, and of belonging.

Vita

Melania Mazzucco’s *Vita* is the story of Vita and Diamante, who in 1903, aged 9 and 12, arrive in New York from a desperately poor town in the south of Italy, and of the world of violence, poverty, strife, and prejudice they encounter in America—the mythical country fabled to make emigrants rich: some will succeed, some will return as poor as when they left, including Diamante, who was the author’s real-life paternal grandfather. Vita and Diamante’s is a story of love and separation, of chance and loss. They should have married, but fate divided them. There is much deception and self-deception, everyday heroism and pusillanimity, and misfortune caused by cruel fate or that the subjects bring upon themselves. But it is also a story of hope and redemption, of perseverance and dignity—like the perseverance of Vita, who will “make it,” like the dignity of Diamante who chose to return to Italy in 1912, taking a humble but dignified job as a janitor rather than accept either exploitation or a life at the edge of legality when he realizes that the American dream, for him, is lost.

The novel starts with Dy, Vita’s son, a captain in the American army fighting in Italy in World War II, visiting the small village of Tufo di Minturno at the Tyrrhenian end of the Gustav line. It is May 1944, the Allies have beaten back the Germans, and the town is in ruins after four months of fierce fighting. Dy is looking for the house where his mother was born, hoping to find his grandmother Dionisia. An old woman points to the mound of rubble he is standing on. That

was the house; that is where Dionisia is, buried under the rubble of war. A burned-out olive tree symbolizes his sense of the loss of his roots.

If the novel starts under the sign of loss and destruction, for Mazzucco, the last in Diamante's family line ("Be it by chance or destiny, I was the last one. No one was born after me—and with me the chain breaks, the name will be lost" [413]), this book is a way of seeking both to discover her family's (and thus, her) roots and to ensure their survival. Almost anticipating Quayson's observation that "the genealogical accounting introduces a form of ethical imperative that is incorporated into the recognition of the past" (152), Mazzucco writes: "Thus the legend of one's origins becomes all the more urgent, the desire to remember almost an imperative" (413). For the Mazzuccos, "Our legend was called Federico" (413). Another soldier, another battle, another "liberation": Federico, Diamante's grandfather, is the mythical northerner who had come to Minturno in 1860 when Garibaldi and the Piedmontese army had defeated the Bourbons, bringing about "the birth of Italy" (413). Wounded in battle, Federico remained in the village, his near-magical skill of water detection a precious gift in the dry South.

Mazzucco searches through what was left by her father Roberto, Diamante's son—postcards, letters, photos—and embarks on detailed archival research in New York, at Ellis Island, in the parish of Minturno, in Rome, where Diamante went to live on his return from New York; in newspapers of the time; in police files; in statistics; and more. A number of photographs of people, places, tickets, and ledgers appear in the book. The research throws light not only on the lives of Diamante and Vita but also on those of the countless Italian emigrants to America, showing their interconnectedness. When Mazzucco goes to Minturno to search through the registers of births, deaths, and marriages and the baptismal records, she does find Dionisia, Vita's mother; Agnello, her father; but no Vita, no Federico. In the absence of a birth, Vita remains a ghost, yet there are tangible traces of her existence: "She was an American lady who in the 1960s regularly sent gift packages laden with food and clothing to my mother, my sister Silvia, and later also to me" (144); Mazzucco's aunt, Diamante's daughter Vita, "kept a signed photograph of her" (144); Vita's son Dy—short for Diamante—went to Minturno and Rome, and later embarked on a long correspondence with Roberto, quoted at some length in the book, as they attempted to set up a variety of transatlantic businesses, all failed. But legend and material evidence do not match: "that legendary name [Vita] corresponded to a flesh-and-blood person whose real image differed drastically from that of the stories" (144).

Several possible inferences can be drawn. One is that her birth is as mythical as the "birth of Italy" witnessed in the early 1860s. Perhaps she just appeared, magically, miraculously, as a child. Another is that Diamante invented her story, like he invented that of Federico: there was some substance—a child, then a young woman, then a middle-aged one—but she had not been born in Minturno; perhaps she had been born in New York. ("In my father's tales [...] Vita popped up out of nowhere at Diamante's side. She was already in America, as if she had always been there" [144]).

The ghostliness of Vita, the presence and lack of evidential substance, neither threatens nor

disappoints. In her search through the records in Minturno, Mazzucco finds the same names returning, over and over, oppressively: “Birth relentlessly follows birth, generations disappear, are swallowed up, [...] but the names remain, return. A mill or a chain that sucks them and me into a thrilling yet painful vertigo. There is something atrocious and inexplicable in the fixity of their destiny” (419). The chain of generations is the chain that ties them to their land, like serfs unable to escape their condition. But Diamante had broken that chain: “squeezing the hand of a little girl, [he] was the first to open a passageway in that net of baptisms and death certificates, that grating as thick as prison bars [...] His gesture exalts and damages him, baptizes and breaks him, transforms and destroys him, but it liberates him and liberates us” (419).

It liberates him, and it liberates Vita: “Her existence has not been entrapped in those merciless registries. She has escaped the registry of death, the aged pages, the ordered archives of time and memory [...] They dove headfirst into the only gap in the net, and together these two fugitives invented another story” (420). It liberates the next generations: Diamante’s “gesture” is an act of self-invention through which he also reinvents the past and the future of the family: on the one hand, “Federico Mazzucco the dowser is born with [Diamante’s] flight—to rearrange the order of the pages of a book already written. To confuse the tracks, ennoble the past, change and redeem it” (419); on the other hand, if Diamante had not left, the author herself would be one of the endless Mazzucos in the registry (“Their last name is the same as mine. Everyone in these worn pages has my last name. It is like a blurred dream, a city teeming with homonyms, doubles, interchangeable identities, faceless souls” [417]), or would have died, like so many, under the rubble of war.

In a genealogical parallel world, had Diamante and Vita stayed together, Dy could have been Melania’s father. The position of each of us in history is the result of chance: while this points to the interconnectedness of all stories—the story of the emigrant is part of the story of each of us—this is not the faceless interchangeability of identities of the baptismal records. Dy’s and Roberto’s stories, in some ways interchangeable (at one point, Mazzucco calls them “my two fathers” [231]), are, however, stories of people who have more agency over their destinies than the peasants of Minturno; their journeys across the ocean are not diasporic; they are part of their lives rather than the attempt to have a life. They both owe this to the redemptive power of Diamante’s “gesture.”

Slipping through the gap in the net means escaping a closed existence, but it is also a trope of fantasy literature, like going through the mirror or through a rent in the structure of the universe—as in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* or Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*—to move into a reality that has a different ontology. The ability to imagine another life for oneself and for others also re-invents and liberates the nation: it gives birth to another Italy. The book thus combines different styles and generic referents: along the narrative based on documentary and archival research, along the autobiographical, the autofictional, and the biofictional, there is fantasy, fairy tale, even some suggestions of magical realism: Vita possesses the gift of moving objects with her mind; the author’s father has the gift of feeling things others did not see, which also associates him

with ghosts: “My father had a gift [...] whose source was unknown [...] He felt things happen, objects move, life quiver, sensing the tiniest shifts in the interstices of time” (Mazzucco 86). He “organized a party: he called it the Mazzucco party. He reunited all the survivors” (85) on 1 November 1989, as if he had been prescient that he would die four days later, so that “that day has taken on the significance of a funeral, an open testament to the presence of ghosts” (85). He visited the “small ghost town” called Mazzucco in Piedmont, on the traces of the fabled ancestor Federico; “It was October 1989. He would die suddenly twenty days later” (87).

As fantasy and documentary interweave seamlessly, we often cannot decide what is imagined and what is based in fact; so we are left to wonder whether cousin Rocco ever met the famous Neapolitan opera singer Enrico Caruso in New York (Vita fantasizes as a child that Caruso was her real father); whether Diamante’s life was saved, and his hospital bills paid, by an as-yet unknown and struggling English actor, who looks so much like Diamante that the doctors think they are brothers, and whose name turns out to be Charlie Chaplin (385).

There is another way in which the writing of this story can be seen as redemptive and as re-inventing Italy. As critics have pointed out (Lucamante; Capussotti), when this novel was published in 2003, there was no tradition in Italian literature of writing about the country’s history of emigration. The attention to the historical diasporas started arising as Italy was becoming a destination for migrants, and often focused on the hypocrisy and widespread racism of a country that was culpably forgetting the nation’s past and, instead of drawing lessons from it, chose to dehumanize migrants to Italy. Stefania Lucamante argues that the neglect of the Italian economic diaspora in Italian literature and culture was because the focus had been on the construction of Italy in the Risorgimento and the desire to celebrate Italianness in a country still divided (296). Mazzucco’s hybrid novel brings together the history of the nation and that of emigration, placing the latter at the center of the former, the two histories as intertwined as those of the characters and the families, the stories of those who had gone abroad opening up a different future also for those who stayed behind, and making the modern nation possible.

Hereafter

These themes are also central to *Hereafter: The Telling Life of Ellen O’Hara*, in which Irish poet Vona Groarke embarks on a “trail of scattered research crumbs” (6) to find the “verifiable facts” (1) of her great-grandmother Ellen O’Hara’s emigration to New York in 1882 from her impoverished village in the West of Ireland in the aftermath of the great famine, and of her life in the United States.

Ellen finds work as a domestic servant, putting her life on hold in order to send remittances home to help the family (“I left it late: a husband would have stopped the money home” [70]). She does get married and has two children, but is then probably abandoned by her husband. Unable to work and look after her small children at the same time, she takes them to her family in Ireland,

planning to save to return for them after three years. She will not be able to go back for twelve years; the many letters they write to each other are their only contact. Eventually, she saves enough to open her own boardinghouse and to bring her children back to live with her in 1913. When her daughter Annie gets married and has children, she calls her girl Ellen, shortened into Ellie (who would become Vona Groarke's mother). When Annie, her husband, and their children return to Ireland, Ellen and Ellie are heartbroken by the separation. They write regularly to each other but never receive the other's letters because Annie intercepts and burns them all: shaped by her 12-year separation from her mother, she does not want her daughter to suffer the same. But they do suffer, all of them: Groarke's "poor mother [Ellie], abandoned all of the same [...] by whom she held most dear"; "poor Ellen, abandoned in New York"; and "poor Annie, in the middle of it, trying to smooth over what can't be smoothed over" (165). Before her death, Annie will confess the letter-burning to her daughter. The stories of Ellen and of New York heard from her mother, as a child, in their kitchen (168), are what will make Groarke embark on her own act of genealogical accounting of her great-grandmother's "'unheroic' life" (xi).

Like Mazzucco's, Groarke's narrative is also a hybrid one, comprising archival research (there are quotations from newspapers, letters, and books, reproductions of documents such as passenger manifests and census data) as well as imaginary conversations with her great-grandmother in the form of what she calls the "folk sonnet, less interested in meter than it is in the structure of the boxy fourteen-line rhyming form" (xi). If prose is her "guardrail" to contain the story's narrative, the sonnets provide the "language that cross-stitches and embroiders itself, the way poetry often does" (3). In the absence of "concrete evidence" (3), "[t]here will be fact and doubt and speculation; there will be imagining" (3). If facts "incline to the general," what she wants is "to select one body from the throng, yours, and observing carefully, to draw first an outline, then to infill color and shade" (31). The metaphors multiply: cross-stitching, roads and guardrails, drawing and coloring—and also machinery ("I can hear the machine of my own invention whirring" [31]), skeins and conversations: "a story that skeins between two chairs that face each other in this room, for you and I to occupy" (3), as she imagines her grandmother sitting in front of her in her office in the New York Public Library, where Groarke has won a fellowship. Or perhaps it is not imagination, and Ellen is indeed there, as a ghost: "As if you were some sort of ghost, to be seen clean through" (7); "Ellen: Shapeshifter; flitting ghostly through the record, leaving the lightest trace" (127), helping her great-granddaughter to write her story: "Ellen: my ghost [...] Ellen: my ghostwriter" (173).

Groarke enjoys the "liberties" she takes in the giving of "an intimating life" (31), but she has to wonder about her right to shape this life to her imagination: "Is it generous or dangerous, this wild imagining? [...] Is this dishonest? Is it presumptuous? Does it dishonor your life and all your lives, having no way to gauge the full span of its inaccuracy?" (31). The ethics of representing another person's life is crucial to biofiction and to what I have called heterobiography (Boldrini, *Autobiographies*; "Biofiction"). Groarke's quest may be sustained by her sense of merging with her great-grandmother through her own writing ("Sometimes I lose track of if I'm me or

you” [128]), but rather than appropriative, the imagination aims to be restorative (“somehow restoring you” [131]), prompted by their genealogical continuity through the female line and by the possibility of reciprocity: if Vona imagines Ellen, Ellen may have imagined her beloved granddaughter’s daughter too: “I think maybe you have imagined me. Of course you did. And every mother after you in my family line” (139).

For Mazzucco’s grandfather Diamante, emigration was a chance to break free of the narrative of poverty and subjection to the landowners, to re-invent himself by making up a new identity. The same happens for Groarke’s great-grandmother. It is almost as if emigration expects, even requires, such acts of self-invention: “(Did anyone ever hand over true facts to their recorders of information on these transatlantic trips? Or was it a kind of free-for-all, a chance to invent or reinvent yourself, howsoever you saw fit? [...])” (98).

As we saw for *Vita*, Groarke, in telling the story of her ancestor, also tells of the lives of countless other Irish migrant women and constructs an alternative history of the nation, parallel to the official one. The point is made very explicitly: the migrant women, excluded from the narrative of independence and of the economic success of the modern nation, are in fact those whose hard work and remittances (“Eight out of every ten who send money home are girls” [53]) had enabled the prosperity of modern Ireland. Groarke reports statistics that show that over the years, at the end of the 19th century and especially at the beginning of the 20th, Ireland’s tenant farmers increasingly bought the land they had been farming. By 1913, “67% of all land had been transferred to occupier ownership”; by the time of the Irish Free State Treaty in 1921, “Ireland had been converted into a country of peasant proprietors” (156). This is a far cry from the poverty and devastating famine of the mid-19th century, and it was made possible by women:

Dollar by dollar, pound by pound, these women helped build Modern Ireland. And because they stayed single longer and worked (predominantly) in jobs that allowed them to save what they earned, it seems these women were in a position to send more money home than their male counterparts did. And send they did. (153)

“We made a country by our swollen hands and aching feet” (154), Ellen says in one of her sonnets; as they put their money orders in those envelopes to send home, “in went the best part of us too; our girlhood. Lightheartedness. Our young days” (154). But many also made a success of their own lives. If emigration is what turned Ellen into a ghost, emigration is also what made Ellen “substantial: whatever losses it also involved, it distinguished her” (100). So, as part of “restoring” Ellen, Groarke also makes

A modest proposal of my own:

- ◆ that Ireland’s early twentieth-century independence movement was underwritten by the economic confidence of a people now secure in their land ownership;
- ◆ that this security was, in turn, underwritten by remittances sent back home by emigrant

sons and daughters (though mainly [...] by daughters);

◆ that the link, therefore, between the work of Irish women abroad and the foundation of the Irish state is clear and strong (if largely unacknowledged). (157)

National history is founded on, but does not acknowledge, the history of transnational female sacrifice and work that props up the state and its increasing prosperity.

Alongside the similarities between *Vita* and *Hereafter* and the account of the respective diasporas, there are also significant, stark differences between those communities' practices and cultures. *Vita*'s father prevents her going to school, getting an education, or going into domestic service in the name of a patriarchal notion of family honor that limits the family's as well as the individual's possibilities of a better life. By contrast, the Irish emigrants, who often already had the advantage of speaking English (even when at home they spoke Irish: "Father taught them to use English words in case they went abroad" [16]), are schooled and see service as a portal to advancement for the self and for the family: "Dada said we should be able to write our own letters. / I think that was why he let us stay so long at school, / book-learning, as he said, being little weight to haul" (17). This may be why the Italians are considered the lowest of the lowest in New York. ("The Italians were the most pitiful ethnic minority in the city. Worse off than the Jews, Poles, Romanians, even the blacks. 'The Italians were like blacks who couldn't even speak English'" [41]), while the Irish achieve better social status: "we could write and read and tally sums, and in two / languages [...] which is more than [their employers] could do" (57). In both cases, nevertheless, the narrative points to the many erasures and silences over the emigration and the emigrants' role in building the nation. The next novel I examine will focus on a different erasure by the state.

Timira

Timira: Romanzo meticcio was published in 2012 by Wu Ming 2, one of the members of the Italian collective Wu Ming ("anonymous," or "without name" in Chinese; they designate themselves by numbers, even if their names are not secret: we know, for example that Wu Ming 2 is Giovanni Cattabriga), with Antar Mohamed, son of the protagonist Isabella Marincola, also known as Timira Hassan.

Timira tells the story of Isabella, born in 1925 to an Italian soldier in the Italian colony of Somalia and a Somali woman, Ashkiro Hassan. Recognized by her father and given his name (unusually for mixed-race children in a such colonial context) and thus given Italian citizenship, Isabella is brought to Italy as a small child to be raised by her father's wife Flora, but does not realize that this woman, who hates and mistreats her, is not her mother. When Isabella comes home from school with questions after being told by a teacher that her real mother's name was "Aschirò Assan," Flora beats her and tries to cover up the truth by telling her that that is the translation

of Flora's own name into Somali, and that Isabella's skin is darker because the African sun had made her tanned. It is not until she is an adolescent that Isabella discovers the truth about her real mother. She leaves home, becomes an artists' model, much in demand; she works as an actress, alongside famous actors such as Vittorio Gassman and Silvana Mangano; she marries several times; and she experiences racism both in Italy for being black and in Somalia, where she returns in the 1950s, for being Italian and half-white. She is evacuated from Somalia again in 1991 at the height of the civil war to return, unwillingly, to Italy, where she faces a long struggle to have her full rights as an Italian citizen recognized.

A hybrid text, like *Vita* and *Hereafter*, it comprises Isabella's recorded memories of the different periods of living in Italy and in Somalia, the biographical reconstruction of her birth and infancy in Somalia, and her recent struggles with the Italian authorities. There are quotations from and reproductions of official documents from colonial and post-colonial times, as well as from personal documents belonging to or about Isabella, her father, and her brother Giorgio, Italy's only black member of the Resistance, who had been killed in 1945 and was awarded a posthumous gold medal for heroism. Alongside the facts, there is much imagination. The epigraph, divided over two pages, reads, "This is a true story [...]" (3) "[...] including the parts that aren't" (5; translations from *Timira* are mine). Describing his struggle to find the right form for this book, Wu Ming 2 says that he wanted to write "a novel with 'Isabella Marincola' as protagonist" (159) but realized that "the problem lay in the word 'novel'" (160), and that this text needed a less precisely defined form, as it is neither quite a novel nor an autobiography nor a biography: it is a *romanzo meticcio*, "a mestizo novel." Despite these similarities in the mixing of fact and fiction, *Timira* is different from *Vita* and *Hereafter*: while those deal with the story of real and potential (great-)grandparents whom the authors had never met, Isabella had recorded her memories in long interviews with Wu Ming 2, and they, together, had discussed the form that the memoir/auto/biography/historical document/novel should take. The woman whose life is being reconstructed is thus not really a ghost, unknown, insubstantial, existing only through traces to be tracked and re-imagined; she is a strong, material, and often irritating presence who wants her story told and insists on telling it. Yet, the fluid uncertainty over the narrated figure remains.

As she talks to her Somali mother through an interpreter, she has to admit that her image of her father as a gentleman who had, against expectations, recognized his children was mistaken: "I am the daughter of a violence, and I would have been even if my parents had loved each other [...] Love in the time of colonialism is steeped in ferocity. A sharp knife threatens and kills even if it is covered in honey. I am the daughter of a racist" (375). Fathered by a military agent, taken from her mother, abused by her surrogate mother, exploited by a series of men, treated as alien both in Somalia and in Italy, evacuated from Somalia because she was Italian, but then, in Italy, subjected to racism and treated as an immigrant despite her citizenship, Isabella/Timira is rendered a ghost by the bureaucracy of the state that does not recognize her rights, her subjecthood, or her agency in her own life. She is Italian, but "an Italian with dark skin" (395). She undermines what Wimmer and Glick Schiller call "the isomorphisms between citizenry, sovereign, solidarity group and

nation” (308–309).

Towards the end of the narrative, Isabella looks for the meaning of words in the dictionary: she looks up *profugo* and *rifugiato* (459–460), both translatable as “refugee” in English, both implying that someone left their country of origin and citizenship to move to another country, which in Isabella’s case is inaccurate as she is Italian. Then she looks up the word *sfollato* (460), “evacuee,” which implies having to leave the place of habitual residence; however, the word is normally used for internally or temporarily displaced people who do not necessarily leave their country, and Isabella had to leave Somalia, forever. Finally, she looks for the meaning of *cittadinanza* (461), “citizenship,” and finds that it implies the documented belonging to a state, conferring certain rights as well as duties. It can be seen, the dictionary explains, “as a juridical relationship between the state and a natural [in Italian, literally, a physical] person” (461). Isabella reflects that she—the person—is there, physically and legally, and has all the requirements to be an Italian citizen, including the documents that prove it. What is missing is not the citizen (the person) but the state, which does not fulfil its obligations; but if it is the state that is missing, then it is not only Isabella that is the refugee, left stateless: *everyone* is: “siamo tutti profughi” (463), she says, “we are all refugees.”

The modern, successful nation state that claims to have left behind its fascist past and its shameful colonial history is in fact still seeking to erase the products of the colonial experience, not by making amends towards those it has subjugated and exploited but by making them “ghosts”—there but not quite there, haunting the modern state as an unresolved past, populating the heads of the “small colonialists” that, once “Colonialism with capital C has left by the door of History,” re-enters by the window and “inhabits Western craniums on a permanent basis” (345). In the interest of maintaining its false narrative, the state also renders all its people, its citizens, ghosts.

It is in this context that the choice of the authors to present their work as the result of a collective effort of authorship, and their rejection of proper names in favor of impersonal numbers, is important. Wu Ming 2 is wary of turning into a biographer or apologist. Although, he writes, “I wanted to feel free to weave your memories into a plot, stitching them together with the thread of doubt, not nostalgia” (344), he soon realizes that the book has to be written by him and Isabella together to avoid falling into crude stereotypes: the old woman that spins a tale of the past; the woman that tells her testimony and the man, playing the expert, that interprets it; the marginalized black person whose story can only be told by a white-skinned ventriloquist (344). Isabella and Wu Ming 2 spend a year searching for a suitable form, and when Isabella dies, her son Antar continues the joint quest. The idea of the individual story, of singular autobiography, is actively rejected in favor of relational subjectivity, the boundaries of the self unmade. Every work is always collective because many different subjects participate in its telling and shaping. “*Memoir, biopic, autofiction* [the words are in English] are the most collegial narrations that exist” and it is a pity that they often take a “solipsistic,” “egocentric form”: “it is time to do justice to the collective nature of autobiography” (504). This is another sense in which this is a “romanzo meticcio” (503).

A series of endnotes, called “closing credits” as in a film, emphasizes the many intertextual and interpersonal contributions to this book. One of the notes points out that a memory attributed to Isabella was in fact originally Wu Ming 2’s mother’s: “Convivial writing also means exchanging memories (and in memories, even exchanging mothers)” (510). As Groarke says in *Hereafter*, “Story is company” (6).

A Chinese name denoting anonymity, an Italian woman who would have preferred living in Somalia and who is considered a refugee and ghosted by the Italian state, her son a Somali national whose Italian right to citizenship is hindered by his mother’s choice of the Somali name Timira Hassan ... the interpersonal transnational authorship of the text and the refusal to recognize both the boundaries of the state and that of a self-contained personal identity add another twist to the transnationalism and intergenerational constructions of the person in these auto/bio/fictional texts. The next and final text will give yet another twist to this exploration.

Victoire

Maryse Condé’s *Victoire: My Mother’s Mother* seeks to reconstruct the life of the author’s grandmother, whom Condé never knew but whose photograph she saw on the piano where, as a child, she practiced her scales. “For all of us, this strange-colored grandmother was half imaginary. A spirit. A ghost. Floating in the mist of time long, long ago. A most enigmatic photo placed on top of a piano” (157–158). When she is still a child, Condé asks about her, and finds that her mother, Jeanne, is reluctant to speak of her own mother; so—once she has traveled around the world, lived in different countries, written books that have won prestigious prizes and which deal with diasporas and journeys across Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, the US, the Americas—Condé embarks on a quest to reconstruct the life of the grandmother, her father unknown but most likely to have been white due to her surprisingly light-colored skin, the cause of her being ostracized both by white and black communities in Guadeloupe. In this sense, and in the genealogical chain of relations that stretches from her grandmother to Condé’s own granddaughters (the dedication of the book reads, “For my three daughters and two granddaughters”), *Victoire* is similar to the other texts I have discussed. It is also different in that *Victoire* moved from Marie Galante, a small island of the archipelago of Guadeloupe, to the main island, with a brief interlude to the other French overseas territory of Martinique, but did not emigrate to a different country.

Born in Marie Galante and brought up by her grandmother (her 14-year-old mother had died in childbirth), *Victoire* goes into domestic service at the age of 10, is made pregnant at the age of 16 by her mistress’s daughter’s fiancé, Dernier Argilius (who, endowed with “The requisite very black skin” [29], will become a politician fighting for the emancipation of black people), and moves to the main island of Guadeloupe in the service of Boniface and Anne-Marie Walberg, a rich white Creole family. She gives birth to a daughter, Jeanne, in 1890 and

quickly becomes famous all over the island for her extraordinarily inventive cooking, her menus so spectacular that they are published in the newspapers. Victoire merged flavors like the island merged cultures, races, and languages; the author keeps emphasizing the analogy between the grandmother's cooking and the novelist's creativity: "What I am claiming is the legacy of this woman, who apparently did not leave any. I want to establish the link between her creativity and mine, to switch from the savors, the colors, and the smells of meat and vegetables to those of words" (Condé 59).

Victoire becomes Boniface's long-term lover, regularly sleeping in his room; best friends with Anne-Marie; like a mother to the Walbergs' daughter Valérie-Anne, while Boniface treats Jeanne almost like a daughter—until Jeanne starts resenting this white family for what she sees as her mother's "subaltern" condition (63). To leave the Walbergs, Jeanne demands to be sent to boarding school, and she will be the "first of their race" (113), as the newspapers proclaim, to be appointed as an elementary school teacher on the island. Increasingly hostile to Victoire's relationship with the Walbergs, Jeanne demands that her mother move in with her, but refuses to eat her food—a refutation of her mother's role in the service of white people. As Jeanne and her husband become established "Grand Nègres," the educated black professionals that promote the advancement of black people (mostly by admiring everything French), Victoire—illiterate, only speaking patois—becomes increasingly isolated. Ill with leukemia and close to death, Victoire organizes what Condé calls "The Last Supper" (189), a grand dinner of which Jeanne copied the menu in her exercise book. This dinner was

her way of writing her last will and testament. One day, she hoped, color would no longer be an evil spell. One day, Guadeloupe would no longer be tortured by questions of class. The white Creoles would learn to be humble and tolerant. There would no longer be the need to set a club of Grands Nègres against them. Both would get along, freely intermingle, and who knows, love each other. (189)

Victoire dies in June 1915.

This enigmatic figure enables Condé to use her invention when evidence is missing and to allow contradictory statements to coexist. The programmatic reliance on the imagination is asserted from the epigraph: "What does it matter whether I remember or invent, Whether I borrow or imagine" (from Bernard Pingaud's *Les anneaux du manège: écriture et littérature*). When something is not known because a story "has been erased. Deleted from memory," imagination becomes a means to knowledge: "But I want to know [...] I can therefore only use my imagination" (34–35)—in this particular case, the erased story is that of Victoire's relationship with Argilius, of which at first Condé states, "It wasn't rape; that I'm certain of" (35). Yet only a few pages later, she writes, "Victoire was just sixteen. Statutory rape. Dernier was twice her age" (39).

If Jeanne resents her mother for being a "dull-witted vassal" (97) and for having carnal

relations with a white Creole—something “Intolerable” (139) for the “Grand Nègres”—after Victoire’s death, “In her grief and remorse,” she would construct a “myth” of her mother without foundations, that of “the fighting woman who courageously resists life’s trials” (195). To this mythmaking aimed, ultimately, at self-absolution, Condé prefers the admission that her narrative is founded on the intentionally creative (but no less true) reconstruction of Victoire’s “secretive, enigmatic” life (195). In the acknowledgement of not quite knowing rests the recognition of Victoire as “the improper architect of a liberation that we, her descendants, have known how to enjoy to the full” (195). The imperfection and the enigma enable a more profound liberation for the generations that would follow (of which the future envisaged in the “last supper” is the utopian prefiguration) than that dictated by the politicians of black emancipation in their misogyny, snobbery, and hypocrisy—like Argilius, “this *vayan nèg*, this valiant Negro, who had advocated free schooling for all” but never thought of teaching Victoire to read and write; or like the exclusive club of the “Grand Nègres” who had had a French education, lived in comfortable houses, had visited Paris, and spoke only French, disdaining the people’s patois (143).

Unlike the works by Mazzucco, Groarke, and Wu Ming 2, there is no diasporic journey involved in this example of genealogical accounting; no crossing of transnational borders for the protagonist whose life is being narrated. What emerges powerfully, nevertheless, is the presence, within a life constrained spatially, socially, and culturally, of plural intersections of different concepts of the nation, of individual, racial, political, and trans-generational identity, allowing the narrative to dig deeper into the muted, silenced national past (“nobody in my family told me anything about slavery or the slave trade, those initiatory voyages that founded our Caribbean destiny” [84]) through the account of an individual’s life (“since individual stories have replaced our collective history” [84]) in order to recover collective conscious forms of belonging that have been othered and erased in successive waves of colonial oppression and internalized racial exclusions.

Conclusion

At the center of these narratives is the negotiation between the individual truth and the relational story across generations on the one hand and, on the other, the tracing of collective histories such as those of nation, of colonization, of diaspora, of internal and external displacement, of rights and emancipation (the downtrodden, the poor, women, the migrant, the refugees), of the origins of dispossession and the permanence of its effects. At the core of the narratives is also the ghostliness of the erased (from history, from memory, from citizenship), the departed (in the sense of being dead and of having traveled away), the in-between (generic: between the historical and documentary on the one hand, and the novelistic, the fable, fantasy on the other; geographical: between countries, between places, nationalities, national affiliations; historical: across generations; racial: the mestizo, the mulatto). It is, specifically, the biofictional

imagination that enables these diasporic, transnational, transracial accounts to open up the possibility of a different, liberating future, by offering the space to imagine such future, but also by recognizing, through its explicit acknowledgement of its recourse to fictionality, that it does not aim to construct a new myth to replace historical fact, but that it invites all of us to imagine and strive to bring into existence a different reality. It is in this sense that the biofictional impulse of these narratives is a profoundly ethical one.

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