Development of a Literary Dispositif: Convening Diasporan, Blues, and Cosmopolitan Lines of Inquiry to Reveal the Cultural Dialogue Among Giuseppe Ungaretti, Langston Hughes, and Antonio D’Alfonso

Anna Ciamparella
aciamp1@lsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations

Part of the African American Studies Commons, American Literature Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Ethnic Studies Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons, Italian Language and Literature Commons, and the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4563

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
DEVELOPMENT OF A LITERARY DISPOSITIF: CONVENING DIASPORAN, BLUES,
AND COSMOPOLITAN LINES OF INQUIRY TO REVEAL THE CULTURAL DIALOGUE
AMONG GIUSEPPE UNGARETTI, LANGSTON HUGHES, AND ANTONIO D’ALFONSO

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in
The Interdisciplinary Program in Comparative Literature

by
Anna Ciamparella
M.A. Italian Studies, Florida State University, 2012
M.A. English, Florida Gulf Coast University, 2014
May 2018
To Oriana
patiently waiting my return...
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My career as a student has come to an end. Soon I will be opening another chapter of my life, hopefully as an academic. Mine has been a long journey that began as a childhood dream in which I saw myself teaching literature at a university level. In 2003, various circumstances took me to leave my native country and settle in America. Here I had to recreate a new me by translating who I was into English, a language that until then I did not know how to speak, let alone how to write. Like many of my Italian ancestors, I arrived in the United States with very little money, a suitcase that was too big, and oblivious of what was ahead of me. My cultural bricolage has been adventurous and challenging all at once, but in the meantime, I had the fortune to cross the path of wonderful mentors and friends who facilitated my metamorphosis. These people believed in what I had to offer and supported me every step of the way, making sure that when I stumbled, as indeed I tripped a few times, I could get up again, and stronger. It is difficult to find the right words to express the high regard I have for Professor William Q. Boelhower who went above and beyond to help me succeed. A simple acknowledgment here cannot be enough. Professor Boelhower has been and will always be my maestro, the finest mentor with whom I shared the most enriching exchanges, the longest emails, poetry in its embryonic state, and many paninis on the campus ground. My gratitude goes to Professor Greg Stone and Professor Adelaide Russo for having questioned the methodology I adopted in this study. By doing so, they gave me the opportunity to achieve theoretical clarity. I feel deeply indebted to Dr. Solimar Otero for having introduced me to Caribbean Literature and for being there every time I needed advice and guidance. My gratitude goes, again, to my mentors at Florida Gulf Coast University Professor Myra Mendible and Dr. Delphine Grass who encouraged me to become a comparativist, and to Professor Mark Pietralunga my mentor at Florida State University who is following me through my professional growth. I am grateful to
Lois Edmonds for helping me with bureaucratic procedures, but especially for the unforgettable affection she showed me in one of the most terrible moments of my life. Finally, I express my gratitude to Antonio D’Alfonso for sharing with me his published works and many of his creations still in progress, for agreeing to meet my students via Skype in Spring 2016, and for giving me the interview that appears in the Appendix A of this dissertation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................... iii

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................... vii

INTRODUCTION: THE LESSON OF ATLANTIC STUDIES ................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS A LITERARY DISPOSITIF? A CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO LITERATURE: TOWARD THE FORMATION OF A NEW READING MODEL .......................................................... 11

  Why the Literary Dispositif? ............................................................................................. 28

CHAPTER 2: COMBINING DIASPORAS: AFRICAN-ITALIAN-AMERICAN INTERSECTIONS ........................................................................................................ 47

  Forming Diasporan Relations: From the ‘Entrails’ of the Boat in Giuseppe Ungaretti’s “Monologhetto” to Langston Hughes’ Short Stories .................................................................................................................. 51
  Ancestral Homelands and Cultural Associations with the Hostland: Italy, Africa, and Canada ................................................................................................................................. 66
  An Italian-African-American Double Consciousness .................................................................. 82

CHAPTER 3: TUNES OF CULTURAL AND EMOTIONAL INTERSECTIONS: THE BLUES ACCORDING TO LANGSTON HUGHES, GIUSEPPE UNGARETTI, AND ANTONIO D’ALFONSO .............................................. 106

  Understanding the Blues of Langston Hughes: Black Masses and the Man of the Crowd .................................................................................................................................................... 113
  A strappo in fondo all’anima (a deep sprain inside the soul): The Blues of Giuseppe Ungaretti ............................................................................................................................... 130
  Speaking About the “Irrelevant Man”: The Blues of Antonio D’Alfonso .................................... 152

CHAPTER 4: COSMOPOLITAN COMMUNITIES ACCORDING TO LANGSTON HUGHES, GIUSEPPE UNGARETTI, AND ANTONIO D’ALFONSO ......................................................... 170

  Cultural Convergences of Giuseppe Ungaretti and His Connections to Transnational Blacks ........................................................................................................................................... 174
  Langston Hughes: From ‘Man of the World’ to Cosmopolitan Patriot ..................................... 185
  A Man of the World: Universal Emotional Experience and Italian Ethnicity as a Cosmopolitan Category in Avril ou l’anti-passion (Fabrizio’s Passion) ............................................................................... 201

CHAPTER 5: MEETING THE ITALIANS, THE AFRICAN AMERICANS, AND THE ITALIAN CANADIANS AT ETHNIC AND HISTORICAL INTERSECTIONS .......................................................................................... 224

  The Italian Risorgimento and the American Civil War ................................................................ 226
  Cultural Matrix: Ethnic Contiguity Between the Italian Canadian and the African American Experience .......................................................................................................................... 249

CONCLUSIONS ...................................................................................................................... 276
ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to create a literary dialogue among the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti, the African American author Langston Hughes, and the Quebecois writer Antonio D’Alfonso. Giuseppe Ungaretti and Langston Hughes were more or less contemporaries. Ungaretti was born in 1888 and Hughes in 1902, and both were active in modernist movements that shaped the literary history of their own countries. D’Alfonso was born in Canada about half a century after Ungaretti and Hughes. Besides significant generational differences, these three authors also underwent personal and intellectual experiences that shaped their writing in seemingly incomparable ways. While a traditional comparative approach to them would set out by acknowledging what they have in common and how they diverge, this dissertation project will identify where and how their lives and writings intersect by using a reading construct called literary dispositif. Briefly put, this research offers a reshaping of Foucault’s allusive dispositif and defines literary dispositif as the simultaneous assembling of lines of inquiry that yields to underlining the implicit communicability existing among various literary traditions, which can be compared beyond ordinary categories of similarity and difference.

By using notions such as diaspora, blues, and cosmopolitanism as the three main lines of inquiry, the literary dispositif developed here shows that the works of Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso represent a literary constellation. The objectives of this study are the following: outline a new theoretical perspective by creating a comparative paradigm to understand the cultural interconnectedness already imbedded in literary artifacts; demonstrate how these paradigms reflect the kind of interrelated worlds in which Giuseppe Ungaretti, Langston Hughes, and Antonio D’Alfonso lived; further the scholarship on these three authors by offering a novel critical assessment of their poetry, travelogues, and political and critical writing. Giuseppe
Ungaretti is seen as a blues poet, for, especially his earlier verse responds to the personal turmoil of the author in a manner that resonates with the literary blues, and the writing of Langston Hughes and Antonio D’Alfonso are interpreted beyond their respective ethnicities, categories that have been the conventional focus in understanding their works.
INTRODUCTION: THE LESSON OF ATLANTIC STUDIES

This dissertation project seeks to establish a dialogue between three writers who not only belong to different literary traditions and use different languages but who also lived in different periods and places. To attempt to connect authors whose works and biography are somewhat distant in time and who often have different thematic concerns represents a literary adventure that demands a new form of reading. The three authors studied in this project – the Italian Giuseppe Ungaretti, the African American Langston Hughes, and the Quebecois Antonio D’Alfonso – may, at first sight, seem to have little in common, yet for this very reason they offer the opportunity to think beyond traditional ways of comparison. By looking closely at their lives and literary careers, this dissertation will make manifest literary and biographical convergences that for now remain implicit; but, through the elaboration of a specific model of reading called literary dispositif, more than one bond linking the authors selected will come to light. This model of interpretation aspires to reconfigure Foucault’s allusive dispositif to bring together multiple lines of inquiry and illustrate how they entangle, juxtapose, and intersect the works of the three authors herein chosen.

The kind of analysis presented in these pages will fully embrace the tensions between the ‘local’ and the ‘global.’ So far, these concepts have determined new ways in which scholars have dealt with their subjects, often introducing innovative methodological approaches. Queries aimed at discovering the ontological influence of the ‘local’ on the ‘global,’ and vice versa, have demonstrated that human experiences are anything but isolated from one another. In the past, historians have produced new paradigms to study national histories in relation to world affairs. By focusing on how the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ work together in contingent ways, historians such as Sanjay Subrahmanyam have recently adopted a new form of ‘connected history.’ Today, a growing number of historians study human history as Global (or World) history, but to
interpret and understand this challenge requires a major interdisciplinary shift. As Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard put it, “global history aims to be global not only by virtue of its objects, but also by shunning historiographical fragmentation and disciplinary division, instead calling on all disciplines” (V). This implies a certain fluidity between the boundaries of academic fields and a similarly open approach to the subject matter.

Using the broad scale of the global to explore how literatures can represent human affairs, the researcher can gain new insights into cultural exchanges. As critical concepts, the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ help us identify new interpretive tools and develop novel kinds of connections linking together cultures and peoples, and in conversation with literary works, they help us to construct writers’ connected histories. Although the way in which the local intersects the global (and vice versa) will be explored later, here it will suffice to note that, in reference to the three authors selected, the local refers to their emotional and cultural attachment to their country (or countries) of origin and/or their ethnicities, whereas the global refers to their inclination to adopt a cosmopolitan and transnational outlook.

An initial glance at the work of Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso reveals the importance that their idealized places of origin assume in their poetics. To Ungaretti as a child, Italy appeared like a mirage, a promised land to which he wanted to return (Piccioni 59). For his part, Hughes has become one of the most acknowledged literary faces of the Harlem Renaissance as well as of the African American experience. The Afrotropic celebrations that run through some of the best of his early poems point to another mythic land regularly cited by black writers in the twenties. The mark that his writing has made in shaping black identity in the U.S. is now widely recognized. Both Anglo- and Francophone, the Canadian D’Alfonso helped to introduce and draw attention to the term Italian Canadian in Canadian literature, giving voice to Italian
minorities in North America. And yet, these local levels of engagement tell only part of the story. For their work calls for appreciation that also acknowledges their intense cosmopolitan, if not nomadic, poetics, as they reach well beyond their ethnic and geographical boundaries. Because of these local vs. global tensions in the lives and verse of Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso, strategic (re)positioning within the literary dispositif that embraces them could be said to continue ad infinitum. Taken together, their writings form a literary constellation in which African American, African Italian, and North American traditions meet in many ways despite evident cultural variables.

This literary constellation finds inspiration in the types of relationality and cultural networking that Atlantic Studies have been carefully detailing in the last twenty years or so, as they emphasize the levels of interaction among peoples and cultures located around the Atlantic basin. Atlantic History indicates that these places influenced each other, making national borders more fluid. Such exchanges helped to form ‘the Atlantic World,’ an expression forged in 1917 by an American journalist named Walter Lippman.¹ When the Atlantic World became not only a subject of study but a methodology to understand the various influences that peoples had (and have) on each other, it gave literary studies the opportunity to discuss multiple national literatures as they were phenomena able to synthesize the complex and multilayered influences that the Atlantic countries have on one another.

In his pioneering research The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800 David Armitage distinguishes three concepts of Atlantic History. He talks about a Circum-Atlantic history, which he defines as “the history of the Atlantic as a particular zone of exchange and interchange, circulation, and transmission” (16); a Trans-Atlantic history, which is “the history of the Atlantic

¹ See Atlantic History: Concept and Countors by Bernard Baylin (9).
world through comparisons” (18); and a Cis-Atlantic history, which is the “studies of particular places as unique locations within the Atlantic world [seeking] to define that uniqueness as the result of the interaction between local particularity and a wide web of connection (and comparisons)” (21). Among the three concepts, Trans-Atlantic history should be intended as a comparative field of study; altogether, however, the three filters of the Atlantic World offer scholars a three-dimensional way of approaching how cultural exchanges, connections, and circulations have taken place in the Atlantic. Armitage’s ideas embrace the circulation of goods, ideas, peoples, and cultures, implying that they are variously connected to one another in systemic, fluid, or contingent ways. Most importantly, the three Atlantic concepts help give coherence to those human activities, like literature, that are often blinkered by geographical, cultural, and social boundaries.

The Trans-Atlantic concept makes visible certain exchanges between countries (metropole and colony, for example) that helped shape various national histories. The primary objective of this field of study is to identify new cultural and social relations among countries located on the opposite sides of the Atlantic as well as to analyze how these relationships influenced their cultural development. These come to be linked by the experiences peoples shared insofar as they were tied together in many ways across the Atlantic basin. In Atlantic History, the story of a people is as important as that of single individuals. These people are those whose histories, to quote from Karen Ordahl Kupperman’s The Atlantic in World History, gave light to “a whole new cast of characters, people who may not appear in national stories, but who were the most important actors in creating a new historical reality” (2). That an Atlantic world exists suggests that people do indeed live between and across boundaries, constantly influencing each other’s outlooks through contact and contestation. As William Boelhower suggests, “[o]ur
very singularity as human beings depends on our ontological status of being-with-others, side-by-side-in-nature. Indeed, our singularity is what makes us one with common humanity, and it is this status that bestows on us our life, our common wealth” (48). Atlantic History helps us to recognize that peoples who may have never met before could learn how to understand and communicate among themselves. Proceeding from this idea, the literary dispositif intends to focus on the shifting level(s) of communicability across various literary traditions.

The Atlantic World reveals itself to be a vast intercultural and intercivilizational network. In the introduction to The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans, Indians and Their Shared History, 1400-1900, Thomas Benjamin asserts that “[t]hese attachments and engagements transformed Europeans, West African and Native American societies and also created new peoples, societies, cultures, economies and ideas throughout the Atlantic littoral” (xxiii). After WWII these new creations came to be politically imagined as interconnected communities. According to historian David Eltis:

[E]veryone living in [the Atlantic community] had values which if they were not shared around the Atlantic were certainly reshaped in some way by others living in different parts of the Atlantic basin, and... where events in one small geographical area were likely to stimulate a reaction – and not necessarily just economic – thousands of miles away. The result was, if not a single Atlantic society, a set of societies fundamentally different from what they would have been without participation in the new transatlantic network (quoted in Bailyn 59).

Again, historians Toyin Falola and Kevin D. Roberts, in their introduction to The Atlantic World 1450-2000, contend that the Atlantic World is an intellectual system (x). In his influential book The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness Paul Gilroy “take[s] the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis” (15). Scholars of Atlantic History suggest that the four continents bathed by the Atlantic Ocean depended on each other for trade, laborers, settlers, and the building of empires (Benjamin xxiv). Catherine Armstrong and Laura M. Chmielewski note
that without the help of Africans, who sent their delegates to Portugal to improve commercial
ties, the transatlantic slave trade would not have been possible (28). To understand the social,
political, historical organization of the countries located around the Atlantic one must consider
them in relation to broader and more porous cultural paradigms. It follows that critical analyses
of the literary traditions of these places require a similar treatment.

The literary dispositif developed here proposes to be a new methodological paradigm able
to project single literary traditions onto a vaster interscalar web of relationships. Its primary
objective is to bring to light a concomitant literary world that carries within itself the anchorages
of cultural exchanges and transmission. In the same vein in which the Atlantic World collects the
histories of the continents involved in Atlantic trades linking together an entire hemisphere, the
literary dispositif collects discrete histories (single authorial voices) connecting literary worlds
from the standpoint of several diverse cultural spaces.

In the context of the Atlantic World as outlined above, these intersections and junctures
may even seem a matter of fact. If only out of necessity, many of those who crossed the Atlantic
and mixed with other settler and migrants came to adopt a cosmopolitan outlook combining
aspects from other cultures and civilizations. In Dove finiscono le mappe (Where Maps End)
literary scholar Attilio Brilli relates the experience of explorers, colonizers, and immigrants who,
after having survived the initial shock of a new climate and after having realized that their
motherland abandoned them, soon enough embraced the culture of the native inhabitants. Brilli
recounts that in 1528 one of the Spanish expeditions led by Pánfilo de Narváez ended with the
survival of only four seamen who fell in with the native peoples of the area known today as
Florida, Louisiana, and Texas. Rather than trying to fight back or succumb, these four survivors
found a way to communicate with the natives:
È quindi all’interno del sistema di vita degli indigeni che i sopravvissuti trovano, dopo un periodo di dura schiavitù, una funzionale forma di integrazione […]. Nel contempo, il senso ingenuo e istintivo della comunità porta gli indigeni a condividere con i ‘quattro piovuti dal cielo’ il poco cibo e il duro lavoro. Una tribù dopo l’altra si confronta con gli spagnoli, li accoglie e partecipa alle loro sofferenze (64).

It was then inside the indigenous life system that the survivors found, after a period of terrible slavery, a functional way of integrating […]. At the same time, the simple and instinctive approach of the community influenced the natives to share with the just-arrived settlers their little food and harsh work. Every tribe compared itself with the Spanish colonizers, welcomed them, and partook of their suffering.²

Not only the Spaniards but also the natives ended up living harmoniously together, and eventually, the natives helped these four people survive in a new and hostile environment.

In the literary dispositif developed in this dissertation, intercultural fluidity exists a priori as the experience and the history of one people is influenced by others. The exchanges that took place between the Americas, Africa, and Europe led to intertwined circum-Atlantic histories. It is possible to speculate that these dialogic relations influenced, and still affect, the cultures of these countries, and consequently, their literary traditions. The objective of the literary dispositif is then that of uncovering these mutual influences at the cis-Atlantic, trans-Atlantic, and circum-Atlantic levels. Knowing from the outset that these countries interacted (and keep communicating) with one another in the three-dimensional ways outlined by David Armitage, it is but evident that their literary traditions too must show multiple points of connections by means of which different literary voices have come together. With the help of the literary dispositif, these points of junction will be foregrounded and discussed in all their complexity.

The reading scenario advocated here is meant to serve as a useful model for interpreting the oeuvre of all authors and their dialogical networks. Above all, this project seeks to disclose

² Otherwise indicated, in this dissertation, the translations from Italian and French into English are mine.
the potential that authors operating within discrete cultures have to communicate with each other, beyond ordinary comparative methodologies that are often dependent on oppositional categories, especially the binary logic of similarity/difference. Of course, these categories cannot be totally set aside, but as it will be discussed later, they tend to limit the scope of possible connections. For this reason, it is time to consider other possible modes of associating literature across national, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries. The study conducted here proposes to imagine a model more attuned to the kinds of relations that already characterize our ‘being-in-the-world’ as global citizens.

Recently, various attempts have been made in the fields of literature and cultural studies to create a more comprehensive method of assessing ideal contacts between peoples and their literary productions. For example, with his “distant reading” project, Franco Moretti has raised new issues about how to study and interpret literature, using computing technologies to compare literary traditions on a global scale. Whether or not the model he proposes is functional, it is important to recognize that both his books *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* and *Distant Reading* suggest that literary criticism is experiencing a crisis mainly induced not only by ever-changing technologies but also by the ineffectiveness of critical analyses executed within sterile methodologies having as their primary interpretative fulcrum the figure of the nation-state. Explaining, for instance, why he thinks specifically of graphs, maps, and trees, Moretti boldly states that even though his are abstract models, their consequences are crucial: they put in front of our eyes how little we know about literature (2). If this is true, and if it is also true that we can know peoples through the literature they produce, then not only do we know little about the literatures of the world, but our knowledge of cultures is equally lacking. The literary *dispositif* developed here seeks to respond to the intellectual challenges presented by
the complexity of interactions among cultures, hoping that it can also help to refine the way in which literature can be discussed in terms of networks, connectivity, and new forms of cultural mobility.

Dialogues between cultures are difficult to confine in traditional units of analysis. As the recent rise of Global and World history suggests, we can go beyond the old imperial, colonial, and postcolonial divisions to generate forms of dialogue more in tune with a new understanding of trade, migration, and exchange of ideas and cultural and literary forms. Keeping this broader connective paradigm in the foreground, this dissertation studies literary traditions to find points and lines where texts and authors from different cultures intersect and fully express their implicit communicative potential. Through the development of the literary dispositif, authors and their works can be brought together in innovative and complementary ways. According to the sociologist Giovanni Bechelloni, the act of communication is “potentially reflexive” (author’s emphasis 30) – that is, the act of communicating with one another is not necessarily spontaneous or natural. Interhuman communication, as he calls it, is not as systematic as one generally believes. Rather, it must be incited. The objective of the literary dispositif is to spark communication by locating cultural intersections and revealing the potential to form networks inscribed in literary texts. Following in the path of World History and Atlantic studies advances, and by submitting a new critical horizon for comparative studies, this dissertation proposes: 1) to develop and discuss a new forma mentis that can help define the more complex relational potential existing among literary traditions; 2) to appreciate these traditions as loci of encounters that are both productive and reproductive; 3) to embrace multiple kinds of connection while suggesting that the potential networks among peoples and cultures deeply inform the literatures
of the worlds. Our skills of reading must keep pace with the cross-disciplinary shift in the humanities outlined above.

Concerning two of the authors studied in this work, the literary dispositif will help us to understand that the intersections occurring between the literary spaces of the Italian and North American traditions are indeed many. Studies have already been made to understand these relations. For instance, in his book *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism Through the Italian Diaspora*, Pasquale Verdicchio proposes a postcolonial dialogue between Italy and North America, which should enjoin us from considering as disconnected the experience of the Italians living in Italy and the Americas. Verdicchio criticizes the fact that scholars of Italian literature have all too often failed to study authors of Italian origins who were born and live in other countries and write in languages other than Italian. The literary production of Italian authors abroad is regularly excluded from the Italian literary tradition. “Inherent to this particular view of emigrant literature,” Verdicchio says, “is the mistaken belief that those who write in Italian speak to their countrymen, while those who write in the languages of their adopted homes address only that particular population or wish to fully integrate into a North American environment” (97). Verdicchio points out that scholarship on Italian literature neglects altogether the Atlantic exchanges that have existed, and still exist, between Italy and North and South America. There is then a certain urgency to make amends. The following chapters intend to fill some of the critical gaps between Italian and Italian Canadian literature while exploring these connections beyond the blinkered scope of national studies. The final objective of this dissertation project is to establish a network between an Italian poet, an Italian Canadian poet and novelist, and an African American poet and prose writer and their respective cultures and ethnicities.
The French term *dispositif* has three different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Scholar Frank Kessler reminds us that in the *Petit Robert* dictionary the noun denotes the following: 1) a final judgment stated in a court setting, 2) the way in which the pieces of a mechanism function together, and 3) a set of maneuvers or measures compliant to a specific plan. According to Timothy J. Armstrong in his translation into English of Deleuze’s excursus on the Foucauldian *dispositif*, “[t]here is, in English, no straightforward way of translating dispositif” (159). Ordinary translations, however, tend to foreground the mechanical meaning of the term – by rendering it into English simply as ‘apparatus,’ discounting what the word ‘disposition’ or ‘arrangement’ implies. Translations often betray the many connotations of the original, so, an old Italian adage says, *traduttore, traditore* (*translator/traitor*). Attempting to give a more accurate interpretation of the term, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben suggests staying as close as possible to the French word by using ‘dispositor.’ However, he also clarifies that his too is a ‘monstrous translation.’³ To avoid any translation gridlock, throughout this dissertation the French term will be the only version used.

The word *dispositif* became an essential critical invention when Michel Foucault introduced it in one of his lectures at the Collège de France in January 1975. Although this term was already used in theoretical discourses, in Foucauldian thought, it became loaded with further significance. In Foucault’s work, the idea of *dispositif* evolved with time, but generally, in it, one can find three main dimensions of *dispositif*: power, normalization, and discipline. In his January


Une technique générale d’exercice du pouvoir, technique transférable à des institutions et à des appareils nombreux et divers […]. Cette technique générale du gouvernement des hommes comporte un dispositif type, qui est l’organisation disciplinaire dont je vous ai parlé l’an dernier. Ce dispositif type est finalisé par quoi? Par quelque chose qu’on peut appeler, je croix la “normalisation” (34).

A general technique of exercise of power that can be transferred to many different institutions and apparatuses […]. This general technique of the government of men comprises a typical apparatus (*dispositif*), which is the disciplinary organization I spoke to you about last year. To what end is this apparatus directed? It is, I think, something that we can call “normalization” (49).

The previous year Foucault taught a course on psychiatric power introducing what would eventually be known as disciplinary *dispositif* and *dispositif* of power. In 1974, the French philosopher was concerned with the way the punitive system operated and what strategies society invented to produce the right set of individual characters considered “normal.” In 1975, he focused on the social, medical, and juridical construction of the *abnormal* – one of his main interests at the time, which would also influence his thoughts on the ‘normalization of sexuality.’ Foucault would insist on these concepts in *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (*Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*), published the same year, and in the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité* (*History of Sexuality*), titled *La volonté de savoir* (*The Will to Know*), published in 1976.5

In *La volonté de savoir*, Foucault mentions the word *dispositif* many times to indicate a series of practices which connect several institutions, disciplines, and men, thereby constructing

---

5As he points out in his lecture, Foucault’s concept of normalization finds inspiration in the second edition of Georges Canguilhem’s *Sur le normal et le pathologique* (*On the Normal and the Pathological*). On the archeology of the *dispositif* see Matteo Pasquinelli’s article “What an apparatus is not: on the Archeology of the Norm in Foucault, Canguilhem, and Goldstein” (79-89).
‘the government of men’ which he spoke about in his January lecture. In *La volonté de savoir*, however, the *dispositif* is assigned the scope of policing individuals to make sure their behavior – specifically sexual – conformed to the social norms of the Victorian era. Albeit traditional narratives of the time suggested that, under Queen Victoria, sexuality was repressed, in *La volonté de savoir*, Foucault successfully argues the contrary, demonstrating that sexual behavior was constantly scrutinized, recorded, interpreted, and exposed. In effect, social performances were understood and studied according to how people conducted themselves in the privacy of their bedrooms. What Foucault terms the “repressive hypothesis” refers to Victorian society’s sexual prohibitions, but underneath the many layers of sexual intolerance and repression, people still managed to talk about and explore sex constantly, making sexual behavior a central subject of scientific interest. In the Victorian era, sex, first and foremost, became a scientific discourse in the attempt to control people’s reproductive behavior. Ideally, these regulations penetrated every aspect of social life, while sexual discourse created for itself the privilege of revealing a social truth. As the facilitators of such discourse, doctors and other experts in the field were appointed to decide what specifics of their case studies to disclose. In *La volonté de savoir*, the *dispositif* is a mechanism that generates discourse, and therefore power, through a series of measures invented to control people’s sexual life.

Neither in his lectures nor in his books has Foucault taken the time to explain more fully what a *dispositif* is; however, he would elaborate a description of it (or come near to one, as Agamben suggests) in a 1977 interview titled “Le jeu de Michel Foucault” (“The Game of Michel Foucault”) – now included in the third volume of *Dits et écrits* (*The Said and the Written*). Foucault defines the *dispositif* as follows:

[It est] un ensemble résolument hétérogène, comportant des discours, des institutions, des aménagements architecturaux, des décisions réglementaires, des
lois, des mesures administratives, des énonces scientifiques, des prépositions philosophiques, morales philanthropiques, bref: du dit, aussi bien que du non-dit, voilà les éléments du dispositif. Le dispositif lui-même, c’est le réseau qu’on peut établir entre ces éléments (299).

[It is] a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, institutions, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements (194).6

Above all, this rendition illustrates the elusiveness and heterogeneity of the dispositif. It is so sundry in the way in which it entangles its diverse elements – written laws, institutions, architecture, etc., which were once considered unrelated to one another – that at first it even escapes critical awareness. But according to Foucault, not only do these relations exist but also (and perhaps most importantly) their reciprocal entanglement guarantees their very existence. Foucault’s ultimate definition of dispositif suggests that everything people do, think, build, create, and talk about is somehow interconnected. He also indicates that everybody and everything constituting a dispositif is ensnared in its web of connectivity.

The Foucauldian dispositif can perhaps be best understood as a series of intersecting lines flowing in from multiple sources. In his essay “Qu’est-ce qu’un dispositif?” (“What is a dispositif?”), Gilles Deleuze stresses the multilinearity and the heterogeneity of the dispositif. He explains that it is an ensemble that does not express a uniform system; for the individual threads of the apparatus have different itineraries and different sorts of involvement whose relevance depends on how far one wishes to pursue their presence before and after becoming entangled in the dispositif under scrutiny (185). One cannot always have a direct sensory experience of these connections, that is, the itinerary of each element cannot always be taken into full account all at

---

6Translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper in Power/Knowledge with the title “The Confession of the Flesh” (Vintage, 1980).
once. But again, as Deleuze suggests, “[c]haque dispositif a son régime de lumière, manière dont celle-ci tombe, s’estompe et se répond, distribuant le visible et l’invisible, faisant naître ou disparaître l’objet qui n’existe pas sans elle” (186). Due to the fact that it has its own characterizing disposition of light, not only is it possible to study the formation of a dispositif, but the light that it gives off makes possible the existence of its very object, so that by studying how its elements connect with each other and from where they originate its nature becomes less elusive.

Among the many theorists who re-elaborated the idea of dispositif, Agamben broadens Foucault’s dispositif further. The Italian philosopher suggests that practically anything can be treated as a dispositif. In his pamphlet Che cos’è un dispositivo? (What is a dispositif?), he writes:

Generalizzando ulteriormente la già amplissima classe dei dispositivi foucauldiani, chiamerò dispositivo letteralmente qualunque cosa abbia in qualche modo la capacità di catturare, orientare, definire, interceptare, modellare, controllare e assicurare i gesti, le condotte, le opinioni e i discorsi degli esseri viventi. Non soltanto, quindi, le prigioni, i manicomi, il Panopticon, le scuole, la confessione, le fabbriche, le discipline, le misure giuridiche, ecc., la cui connessione con il potere è in un certo senso evidente, ma anche la penna, la scrittura, la letteratura, la filosofia, l’agricoltura, la sigaretta, la navigazione, i computers, i telefoni cellulari e – perché no – il linguaggio stesso, che è forse il più antico dei dispositivi […] (21-22).

Generalizing further the already vast class of the Foucauldian dispositifs, I will call dispositif literally anything somehow capable of seizing, directing, defining, intercepting, shaping, controlling, and determining habits, behaviors, opinions, and discourses. Not only then prisons, asylums, the Panopticon, schools, the confession, factories, disciplines, the juridical system, etc., whose connection with power is somewhat evident, but the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, mobile phones, and why not?, language in and of itself, which perhaps is the oldest among the dispositifs.

7“[e]ch dispositif has its system of light, a way in which it falls, fades, and responds, distributing the visible and the invisible, giving birth to the object at the moment of its disappearance, object which does not exist without it.”
This idea that anything can be a dispositif is reinforced by the word “cigarette,” an apparently meaningless object which, however, can be analyzed in terms of a dispositif. By stressing the universal applicability of the Foucauldian dispositif, Agamben does not mean to diminish its importance. On the contrary, he suggests that this notion can more generally provide access to information about “la relazione tra individui come esseri viventi e l’elemento storico […]” (“the relation between people as living beings and history”) (Agamben 11-12).

Agamben invites his readers to use the dispositif in a broad range of contexts, beyond Foucault’s original intentions. The Italian philosopher suggests that this is possible because, at a certain point in the reading experience, a text exhausts its possibility to produce meaning. When readers (and the text) find themselves in this situation, it becomes difficult to ascertain the difference between the author’s and the interpreter’s separate agencies. It is then up to the readers to proceed on their own (Agamben 21). Agamben’s observation ultimately turns Foucault’s definition of dispositif into a useful tool and suggests that interpreters can proceed on their own without remaining solely within the text’s formal limitations. At this point, it is possible to invent new uses of the Foucauldian dispositif, it now being up to us to form new dispositifs by identifying the heuristic lines that can be joined together in a complex entanglement.

Foucault claims that a dispositif forms in certain historical moments when there is a need for it, when there is a certain demand (“urgency,” he calls it) for it to exist (299). For example, the historical moment we are living in now – in the midst of an information technology revolution – leads one to think that new approaches to culture and literature are urgently needed. Today, we are already living in such an interconnected world that the facilitation of dialogues among cultures should be considered ordinary. The world in which we live today is one of
immediate relationships established simultaneously not exclusively with relatives and friends but also with people we never met before. Technological progress and the invention of the Internet are changing the way we communicate but also the way in which we relate to others. Places and cultures which before appeared remarkably distant from us have now become familiar and accessible. Often, we discover that we have much in common with people on the other side of the world. The development of a literary dispositif can compute these values while making them available to and shareable with other places and cultures. In short, the literary dispositif reconfigures the very concept of culture in the age of the Internet and connected histories.

The development of the literary dispositif can make visible that which is in-between in such a way as to show that, while the various points of the web are in a dialectical and tensive relationship, at the same time they maintain their singularity and distance. Hugues Peeters and Philippe Charlier note:

[L]e dispositif apparaît comme le concept par excellence de l’entre-deux. Or, l’entre-deux n’est pas fusion indifférenciée de deux pôles […]. Mais attestation d’un espace de médiation irréductible entre ces deux-ci. L’entre-deux ne dissout pas les pôles. Le dispositif désigne le lieu d’une dialectique à être traitée pour elle-même et qui doit encore être véritablement thématisée (22).

The dispositif appears as the ultimate concept of in-betweenness. In-betweenness does not indifferently merge the two poles […] but witnesses the irreducible mediation between the two. In-betweenness does not dissolve the two poles. The dispositif shows the place of a dialectic that still needs to be defined for itself and that still needs to be truly thematized.

Regarding computing technology, connecting two or more unrelated things or peoples – seen through the filter of the dispositif – it reveals the relational tensions between the networked points, which never collapse into or substitute each other. When, through a geobrowser like Google Earth (a dispositif in this case), we see people, say, touring the Colosseum in Rome, we bring together our own and others’ experience of it, because we can see what these people are
seeing in that specific moment of their stay in Rome. In other words, we see the Colosseum, but we simultaneously perceive what these tourists see. Although our experience cannot be reduced to theirs, and vice versa, the geobrowser reveals that our life intersects with that of the actual tourists in Rome.

Another example from the Internet shows that dispositifs like Google Earth play another important social role in connecting peoples. In her book *Google Earth: Outreach and Activism*, Catherine Summerhayes argues that Google Earth “is both a tool for militarized vision and a tool for embodied compassionate vision, […] for ‘love at a distance’” (4). To demonstrate her vision, she explores, among the others, the initiative “Crisis in Darfur,” a multi-layered document of the massacres that took place in Sudan in 1983, an initiative developed by Google Earth and the Unites States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). In 2007-2009, this project allowed users to see where the atrocities occurred and read testimonials and letters written by the victims. Summerhayes suggests that Google Earth advocates what she terms “compassionate correlation” between the users and the peoples and situations that they can see when using the Google’s software (118). Human geographer Nicholas Wise, in his essay titled “Placing Sense of Community,” argues that Google Earth represents an alternative approach to ethnographic fieldwork, “to understand spaces local people identify with” (924). When users look at Google Earth images, they tend to identify with a certain place in their community. The software can help us understand people’s sense of place. Without the intervention of a dispositif these bonds are destined to remain indiscernible, especially in a comparative context.

This is not to argue that the successful development of a literary dispositif needs computing technology, but rather to suggest that such technology can function as a paradigm of connectivity in which the literary dispositif can anchor itself. Furthermore, considering the
current importance of technology in literary studies, it would be incomprehensible for those interested in promoting comparative practices to back away from its many advantages. In her introduction to *Futures of Comparative Literature: ACLA State of the Discipline Report* (March 2017), Ursula K. Heise notes that one of the problems comparative literature currently faces is that “the challenge of scale presented by the study of literature as a global phenomenon […] gets conflated with the emergence of new quantitative tools and methods meant to address ‘big data’ in literary studies and other humanities disciplines” (4). Anticipating the content of her interview with Franco Moretti (also included in the volume), she writes that Moretti himself “highlights the difficulties of digital approaches to comparative literature” (4). Using technology to read literature and improve the outcome of comparative studies, however, does not necessarily mean that we must use *that* technology. Rather, some forms of technology, like the networking potentials of the Internet, can affect the way we approach the study of literature, and consequently, how we practice the work of comparison.

According to Foucault, “we are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (10). Computing technology helps to create this sense of simultaneity as it takes place. Since we constantly use these intersected or juxtaposed spaces, our lives, desires, needs, and ideas inevitably intersect with those of other people even when we do not know them. By using Internet technology, we immediately understand just how connected with one another we are. It inevitably plays a role in the claim that a global literature (or a global approach to literature) exists. However, it is equally possible that the use of technology per se may not be the best answer when trying to *compare* literatures on a global scale. But a literary *dispositif* that

---

8Quoted in Edward W. Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (Verso, 1989).
recognizes and works at the highest level of entanglement in human affairs can perhaps provide the answer.

What then is a literary dispositif? It is the simultaneous use of different lines of inquiry that, once exposed in their interconnectedness and singularity, form a grid of intelligibility, a network which is both comprehensible and comprehensive and that one can unravel to present the various levels of communicability existing among literary traditions. The formation of a literary dispositif is directly influenced by the scope of the research and concurs with the objects under investigation. Using a literary dispositif, researchers can underline relations not only among their primary sources but also between primary and secondary sources in such a way as to discover that individual intellectual properties are indeed shareable and that different literary traditions have more “in common” than just generational and thematic concerns. Because the investigation itself constructs the dispositif, the lines of inquiry are positioned (or repositioned) strategically according to the objectives of a specific critical enterprise. Thus, the literary dispositif is a reading model that helps us to study how apparently unrelated texts and documents may be seen to connect on a global scale, reducing or even measuring the distances among ‘remote’ traditions. The reading mode developed here provides an example of a convincingly far-reaching epistemological approach to comparative literary studies by which one can evaluate and discuss the multiple correlations implicit in human artifacts. Although the discussion in this chapter will take into consideration existing practices of comparative literature, the term ‘comparison’ is used in the broadest sense. Accordingly, it embraces cross-disciplinary relations extending beyond the conventional ambiance of comparative literary practices.

The literary dispositif is developed through an unconditional arrangement of cultural and literary interactions, intersections, interpositions, and juxtapositions that, once identified, can
illustrate the social and artistic relations of literary enterprises regardless of their national provenance. The development of a literary dispositif presupposes that the understanding of any given text must go beyond its geographical and cultural origin to embrace those interconnections among literary products that exist \textit{a priori}, even when they escape our awareness. From this starting point, the comparatist’s task is \textit{simply} that of making these interactions overt, by constructing the connective lines that are virtually inherent.

In their analysis of dispositif, Peeters and Charlier suggest that “le dispositif apparaît comme l’occasion d’une distribution de l’intelligence, celle de dispositif se partageant avec celle de l’individu” (“the dispositif comes into being as the occasion of a distribution of intelligence, that of the dispositif sharing that of the individual”) (17). Thus, the dispositif actively enables the construction of relationships between itself and the constellation of texts and connections under examination. In the literary dispositif, the distribution of intelligence can be imagined as the re-articulation of the literary artifacts studied according to the researcher’s investment in the dispositif’s real possibilities; these possibilities (virtually speaking, the new critical product as project) represent the limits of such distribution. Also, Peeters and Charlier argue that the role of the researcher is to make the connections. According to them, “[le dispositif] serait le produit d’un travail de l’analyste ou du praticien qui cherche à faire des mises en correspondances des articulations” (“[the dispositif] would be the product of the work of the analyst or the practitioner who seeks to find correspondences among the articulations”) (15).

When approaching specific literatures and cultures through the lens of the literary dispositif, researchers make themselves available to those cultures, and in a sense, inhabit them. To picture the extent to which one can invest in the dispositif, we might consider how any field of investigation can be both home and workplace at the same time. In other words, an area of
study is in and of itself an ideal place in which the academic lives and works at the same time. Interdisciplinary scholar James Clifford describes it “as a site of displaced dwelling and productive work […]. The fieldworker is ‘adopted,’ ‘learns,’ the culture and the language. The field is a home away from home, a place of dwelling. This dwelling includes work and growth, the development of both personal and ‘cultural’ competence” (99).

The literary dispositif is the resulting skein of the different kinds and levels of relationships among its elements: primary and secondary sources as well as the researcher’s own experience. The latter is as much a part of the literary dispositif as the other elements composing it. His/her contribution can at times even be autobiographical. Many critical publications now demonstrate that the scholar’s own voice and life can be made a fundamental dimension of one’s research. For example, in the recently published Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge, the author John Gennari deliberately inserts his own existential experiences into the fabric of the book. As he notes:

I seek a tone that is warm, openhearted, and true to the spirit of what Thomas Farraro simply but perfectly names feeling Italian. This entails more reference to my personal experience than perhaps anybody but my mother would want to read. I can only say that […] I tried hard to cut down on the book’s I-ness, but in doing so I found myself unable to deliver the particular argument, analysis, or – most of all – feeling I was going for (author’s emphasis 310).

Although this project does not wish to be as personal as Gennari’s, it still wants to promote this subjective dimension as a constitutive part of the literary dispositif.

The literary dispositif studied here allows us to see that in relation to Giuseppe Ungaretti, Langston Hughes, and Antonio D’Alfonso the subjective element corresponds to the autobiographical dimension of their poetics. Furthermore, since they are all poets, they can communicate easily with each other. Poetic language, with its multiple but deep roots of inspiration, seems to have a special ability to link cultures and literary traditions. A more recent
form of poetry called “flarf” demonstrates that poetry can originate from nowhere and from everywhere. Flarf poetry is an experimental movement which originated in New York in 2000 and was founded by the American poet Gary Sullivan. Every year, The Bowery Poetry Club in Manhattan used to host a three-day festival on Flarf poetry and art. Usually, flarf poets rely on Google search results to write their poems. In his article “Can Flarf Ever Be Taken Seriously” (2009), Shell Fischer notes that up to 2009 at least sixteen books of Flarf have been published. This kind of poetry is grounded literally everywhere, just as any Google search can produce a collection of information from a seemingly endless variety of sources. Also, works like Ignacio Infante’s After Translation: The Transfer and Circulation of Modern Poetics Across the Atlantic confirm that the circulation of poetry in translation helps to blur the national origins of poetry.

Besides the circulation of translations, there is also another reason why poetry helps to shorten cultural and geographical distances. According to Édouard Glissant in his Poétique de la relation (Poetics of Relation), “[L]a poésie prend source dans une idée, dans un vouloir, non pas dans la littéralité de la naissance” (“[P]oetry finds its source in an idea, a will, not in the literal sense of birth”) (49). Since the creation of poetry is not tied literally to the poet’s origins (“literal sense of birth”), it is free to roam over far-flung geographies and cultures. Glissant also suggests that poetic thought is “l’occasion d’une rencontre de type infinie de conjonction, où science et poésie sont équivalent […] L’axiome poétique, comme la mathématique, est éclairant, parce qu’il est fragile et incontournable, obscur et révélateur” (99). Poetic thought, the idea behind poetry, which in and of itself is the product of that thought, crosses boundaries (in Glissant’s case the boundaries between unrelated fields: science and literature) to form

---

9Translated by Betsy Wing in Poetics of Relation (37).
10“[C]reates the opportunity for an infinite sort of conjunction, in which science and poetry are equivalent […]. The poetic axiom, like the mathematical axiom, is illuminating because it is fragile and inescapable, obscure and revealing” (translated by Betsy Wing 85).
relationships. Glissant suggests that poetry is not only a literary genre but also an elementary form of making in which differences (again, science and literature) lose their importance, for poetic thought, by means of metaphor, creates heretofore unimaginable conjunctions (figures of thought) and equivalences; equivalences that remain “fragile et incontournable, obscur et révélateur” (99). Not having boundaries and originating in what Aristotle called *poiesis*, poetry solicits us to construct dialogues between poets of different traditions.

We can even go as far as saying that poets need one another to fulfill the meaning of their own verse. “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. […] what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it,” T.S. Eliot says in his famous essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (28). Here T.S. Eliot is concerned with how writers forge their work out of established traditions and how, by doing so, they in turn transform them. T.S. Eliot indicates, however, that artists/poets acquire “complete meaning” when they are put into relation with other works. Eliot helps us to understand why poetry is able to annihilate distances – why it is an ideal allusive site for a literary dispositif: poetry needs other poetry to attain a “complete meaning.”

In the literary dispositif, poetic thought establishes a sort of “common understanding.” By using this expression, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, intends not so much that when we compare our thoughts and ideas with other people, we need to agree with them. On the contrary, we should try to understand each other using communication and language, by opening a dialogue with others. Given the active role of the researcher in the construction of the literary dispositif, it is very much we who initiate a dialogue among poets. As we mediate among poetic voices, we see that even when speaking in different idioms, poets implicitly seek to communicate with each other. This is so because the
vocation of poetry, more than any other literary genre, is to break up crystalized linguistic practices – or, as T. S. Eliot once said, to dislocate language into meaning. In so doing, poems (through the radical process of *poiesis*) open themselves to “linguistic exchanges”; that is, to literary forces that push and pull poetic lines in different directions, covering by extension many geocultural areas whose literatures need only to be recognized, exposed, and shared.

By comparing, analyzing, and critiquing, literary scholars are always on the verge of engendering new literary approaches. In this dissertation, “comparing” means above all to bring poetic voices together so that they can speak to and among each other; so that they can facilitate the possibility of conceiving the world as a space of endless appreciation and interpretation across cultures. Once the investigator identifies and acknowledges these relationships, it then becomes possible to understand the dynamics behind certain cultural, legal, social, and material shifts. Again, the literary dispositif also visualizes mental maps as it makes the connections among a set of poets visible.

The literary dispositif pushes the researcher to examine the intersecting biographical and literary experiences of its authors in such a way as to form a multivalent constellation of comparisons and contingencies. In the process, it also complicates convergences based solely on common themes. When studied together, these multiple lines of inquiry (we might also call them elements or curves) constituting the literary dispositif generate new heuristic horizons. For we are now beyond the analytic of mere comparison. As Deleuze suggests, what counts is the regime of enunciation in and of itself; its eventfulness more than its originality (190). In the literary dispositif, this eventfulness consists in exposing lines of inquiry together, as we seek to connect the life, the work, and the traditions of authors who at first sight may appear unrelatable. Taken individually, the various threads of, say, a volume of poems give rise to specific regimes
of enunciation. The three main lines of inquiry selected here – diaspora, blues, and cosmopolitanism – help to identify Antonio D’Alfonso as an ethnic writer, to define Langston Hughes as a blues poet, and to consider Giuseppe Ungaretti as a true cosmopolite, but taken all together, they produce other kinds of cultural and literary formations which become more evident as the researcher sheds light on the web of relations connecting them. As a result, Ungaretti’s inclination to depict emotional pain, all his war poems, and those that most represent his desires and longing, resonate with tonalities of the blues. To label Ungaretti a blues poet may seem like a novelty, but the blues can be strategically used as a critical category to expose a significant line of communication between Hughes and Ungaretti. Traditional models of comparison would suggest that it is possible to read Ungaretti through Hughes. Hughes, the blues poet par excellence, would be the starting point here; but by shifting the focus on the line of inquiry itself (the blues), we can bring together the two poets in such a way that one does not necessarily mirror the other. Rather it is by exploring the blues spirit itself that one can reveal the cultural dialogue, the literary continuum, mutually established by these two modernist authors.

The dispositif’s constituents (and their effects) can constantly shift so that a new series of effects can take place. By carefully observing the interconnections and entanglements of the various elements of the dispositif, we are confronted with a whole new reading scenario, with a new set of interpretive challenges. The reading of the poetry of D’Alfonso will take place within the same dispositif that groups the poetry of Ungaretti and Hughes. The line of inquiry of the blues, traditionally associated with the work of Hughes can also help us understand an important dimension of the Quebecois poet’s verse. The multiple lines of the literary dispositif offer a rich scenario of reading possibilities, and their range and density necessarily become a part of the interpretive process. As Deleuze notes, “les dispositifs sont comme les machines des Raymond
Roussel, […], ce sont des machines à faire voir et à faire parler” (“dispositifs are like Raymond Roussel’s machines, […], they are machines that make you speak and see”) (186). What is more, the complicating and heterogeneous nature of the literary dispositif tends to keep the dialogue between cultures and authors constitutively open. As we set out to illuminate these connections, we will also have to abandon the analytical unit of national literature. For the more points of connection we can identify, the more national boundaries blur.

In his essay “Le jeu de Michel Foucault,” Foucault indicates that the dispositif is the site of a double process. On the one hand, it is the site of a “processus de surdétermination fonctionnelle” (“process of functional overdetermination”) in which the effects of its elements must constantly be readjusted as one of these effects can contradict or simply repeat another. On the other hand, it is the site of a process of “perpétuel remplissage stratégique” (“indefinite strategic substitution”) (299). Foucault’s explanation suggests that the threads of the dispositif are arranged to suit a specific social situation at a particular time. In the literary dispositif, this double process is equally crucial. Regarding the blues, for instance, this overdetermination is confirmed by the scholarship on Hughes, so that now we conventionally read his poetry according to a blues poetics. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing and intersecting the work of Hughes and Ungaretti, the literary dispositif will require a broader understanding of blues poetics and its applicability.

The critical dimension of the literary dispositif lies quintessentially in the entanglement itself. It is clear that the dispositifs imagined by Foucault, or revisited by Agamben and Deleuze, are in themselves a critical skein whose threads we ourselves can rearrange and adjust to offer a new critical apparatus for reading literary texts. The origin of the French term dispositif, as Agamben recalls in Che cos’e’ un dispositivo? originates from the Latin dispositio, which means
“to dispose,” “distribute,” “arrange.” The literary dispositif developed in this dissertation will try to open the three authors to the possibilities of inhabiting a common literary site. This site offers a weave of scales ranging from the local to the global and from a specific regional or national culture to a global or cosmopolitan one. In the literary dispositif, each line of inquiry has a life and itinerary of its own which demands equal attention. The literary dispositif creates an often geographically boundless, ongoing dialogue that connects that which is not always joined together, due to cultural differences that traditional scholarship has considered insurmountable.

**Why the Literary Dispositif?**

Several scholars have reflected on the scope and practice of comparative literature. While admiring “the immense merit” of comparative literature in “combat[ing] the false isolation of national literary history” (283), in 1963, the year in which he published *Concepts of Criticism* René Wellek stated that “the most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology” (282). Undoubtedly, many other practitioners of comparative literature have shared and still share the same preoccupation. For example, Peter Brooks even claims that “[a]lthough I hold a Ph.D. in comparative literature, I have never been sure I deserved it, since I’ve never been sure what the field, or the discipline, is and never sure that I could really claim to be teaching it or working in it” (97). Brooks’ statement may sound a little exaggerated, yet it suggests how critical of themselves and their practices comparatists can be. For many years now, they are trying to come up with a definition that would immediately give an idea of what the field is about and what it takes to start writing comparative scholarship. The debate is still open, and the quest at stake here generates endless anxiety. In 1993, in his assessment of the field, Charles Bernheimer proposed the term “anxiogenic” to describe that state of scholars in comparative literature. Explaining
what he means by that, Bernheimer takes as an example the expectations of an enthusiastic graduate student who as her studies progress “discovers that she has no firm ground underfoot” (1). Bernheimer suggests that the comparatist’s anxiety is not only a state of mind but describes the field of study itself, as it always demands more than what its practitioners produce.

Apparently, Comparative Literature anxiety derives from the fact that we regularly find ourselves in a position of answering the question, “what do we compare when we compare?” The general idea is that comparisons are meant to demonstrate “the literary world in its fundamental unity” (Bernheimer 2). To reveal this unity, comparatists often use multiple theories or methodologies, a practice that can make non-comparatives raise their eyebrows. The decennial reports produced by the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) have shown that, if our anxiety is not entirely treatable, we can at least keep it under control. Thus, in 2006, Haun Saussy opened his ACLA review very cheerfully by claiming that comparative literature has “won its battles,” since “not only [is it] legitimate [but] now, as often as not, ours is the first violin that sets the tone for the rest of the orchestra” (3). Saussy’s musical metaphor alluded to the fact that many universities and colleges were expressing increased interest in the field. It is almost impossible not to share Saussy’s enthusiasm. And yet, it seems that the anxiety proper to comparative literature is far from sedate, as Catherine Brown pointed out in a lecture given in 2015. Like Bernheimer, she too seems to believe that such anxiety is caused by the fact that comparative literature can neither be defined by its methodology nor by its matter.11

Perhaps the literary dispositif can offer a remedy to the anxiogenic nature of comparative literature, as they can help the comparatist to release some of the pressure the work of comparison entails. “Parler de dispositif,” Peeters and Charlier note, “permert […] de faire

---

11Lecture delivered at Oxford University on May 14, 2015 entitled “What is ‘Comparative Literature’?” Available online at the electronic address: www.writersinspire.org/content/literature-form-4-what-comparative-literature-0
coexister au sein de l’argumentation des entités traditionnellement considérées comme inconciliables” (16). And they continue: “[…], le concept est l’occasion d’un profond travail de décloisonnement qui offre l’opportunité de dépasser certain oppositions, de combattre des dichotomies binaires et excluantes.” A critical tool that overcomes binary logic is fodder for the comparatist, especially if one considers standard practices of comparison, where the duality similarity/difference is omnipresent in discussing cultural and literary relations. To see literatures through such dichotomies seems to be a given in the field. Nevertheless, as Brown claims in her lecture, in the past, very little attention has been dedicated to a theory of comparison.

In her article “Why Not Compare?” Susan Stanford Friedman too notices the same dearth. “These questions of the what, why, and how of comparison,” she says, “are seldom addressed by those who compare, even in disciplines like comparative literature and anthropology, founded on the principle of comparison and often engaged in self-reflexive assessments” (753). Traditionally, literary comparisons have relied on dichotomies based on the assessment of similarities and differences between two or more works at the level of form, content, themes, and period in which the texts were produced. As Brown further points out, comparing means to find a certain $x$ in $y$, almost as if one element of the comparison, or all of them, should contain the other’s literary and cultural features. In this way, comparative methodology proves too narrow in that the objects of comparison appear to be mere containers. Such a scope remains inadequate for the higher goal of literary unity proposed by comparative practice. Instead of producing boundless lines of communication, the similarity/difference approach depends on oppositional categories that can but restrict literary analyses. By focusing

12“We speak about dispositif allows the coexistence within the argument of the entities traditionally considered irreconcilable.”
13“[…], the concept is the occasion of a long work of breaking down barriers that offers the opportunity to go beyond certain oppositions, to fight against excluding dichotomies.”
on similarities and differences, one is presented with an insuperable problem of curtailment, in the sense that one has to avoid integrating ‘others’ into something to which they do not belong. However empathetic this reasoning might be, it ends up excluding the possibility that this “other” can belong (and exists) outside its “otherness.” This being the case, how can we justify the search for literary unity that comparative literature proposes?

Comparative practices based on similarity and difference also present a spatial problem, which per se hinders the dialogue between cultures. To cite the container metaphor, there exist limited techniques of pouring the content of one box into another. When we look at one text in light of another, we compare and constrain ourselves to a one-dimensional perspective. Indeed, we force our eyes to read from one text to another, following one imaginary line (vertical or horizontal). As a result, we can follow only one critical direction at a time. One might claim that the use of sets like similarity and difference is epistemologically démodé, but some comparatists still believe to the contrary. In her essay “The Place of Difference in Cross-Cultural Literacy,” Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, conceives of difference, by which she means minorities (74), as a starting point to engage in cross-cultural knowledge. According to Needham, difference “remains crucial to the interpretation [of cross-cultural texts]” (82). Vialshini Cooppan, in her article “Ethics of World Literature,” claims that “there is a limit to comparability” (38). Like many other comparativists, Cooppan is concerned with the issue of assimilation and the “conversion of otherness to sameness” (38). She believes that we should “imagine the other as the other” (39), which means that we should respect cultures for what they are. We should understand them without imposing on them our own (Western) perspective. In the same vein, Katleen L. Komar states in “The State of Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice,”
“comparatists must be very cautious about how they go about looking at two cultures in the context of each other” (289).

There exists some truth in these claims. But using the literary dispositif, cultures become accessible and understandable through a series of lines of inquiry working together to fulfill the perspectivism that the dispositif itself embraces. At its best, a literary dispositif seeks both to embrace and go beyond differences, for it pursues to assemble all the implications its elements offer. These implications can be of various kinds (intersecting, disjunctive, analogous, disruptive, contiguous) but in the literary dispositif, they are made to share a common site of inquiry. In their analyses, Cooppan and Komar suggest that readers must be careful mainly because it seems that they see literatures and cultures almost as mere containers. That being the case, the comparatist needs to be careful in measuring how much of the material contained in one of these basins is to be poured into the other, lest the original text be overwhelmed. Many of the problems faced by comparatists are caused by the rigidity with which comparisons are made, even there where they seem to propose high levels of interdisciplinarity.

As Coopman implies, by acknowledging differences, we avoid assimilating literary texts into a given tradition. The standard idea of the comparatists’ task is that, in assessing a text, one must respect the uniqueness of the culture in which it is produced. It would be crass or unethical to assimilate “the other” into another tradition for the sake of comparing. One cannot argue against the validity of this self-criticism, yet, similarity and difference limit our horizon of inquiry. It would be better at this point to forsake this practice of comparison altogether. When we focus on similarities, we can form a specific kind of relationship, but when we emphasize differences, we create schisms – even if we are moved by the noble intention to understand (from an outsider’s standpoint) a culture to which we do not belong. To find differences and
similarities between and among texts is based on a methodology that relies on the dichotomy of us/them, which, in the light of today’s globalized world and global media networks is simply insufficient. Furthermore, when we think solely in terms of difference and similarity, we also limit the possibility to establish a comparative dialogue among the most diverse cultures and their traditions.

In today’s globalized, postcolonial world a discourse focusing on differences and similarities fails to consider a higher, synoptic level of exchange and circulation. Therefore, it is now necessary to invent a new interpretive key that allows literary analyses to explore what is not possible to see due to the lack of a sense of multidirectionality in the difference/similarity model of comparison. We need a more refined approach to literature if we want to understand the complexity of cultural relations in a world already interconnected by way of qualitatively new cultural, political, and economic networks. In this ‘globalized’ world, the “other” is no longer simply “Other,” and the very terms “we” and “Other” are becoming something much more complex.

Traditionally, comparative literature has focused on studying the mutual influences of writers operating in different traditions. As César Dominguez, Haun Saussy, and Darío Villanueva remind us in their recently published *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications*, already in 1931 Paul Van Tieghem defined comparative literature “as ‘the study of literary works of different literatures through their mutual relationships,’ a definition,” the three authors continue, “in which the concept of influence was understood as *a rapport de fait* (authors’ emphasis)” (xii). In this regard, we may immediately call to mind the importance that the works of Dante Alighieri and Giovanni Boccaccio had in the making of Medieval English literature – on Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and*
Criseyde. Scholars of English Medieval Literature such as Jessica Harkins have shown that in The Clerk’s Tale, for instance, Chaucer makes use of Boccaccio’s language as it appears in Decameron X. Harkins argues that there is a relation of reciprocity between Chaucer’s and Boccaccio’s writings; furthermore, Chaucer’s selection of Boccaccio’s words shows “how Chaucer negotiates and redirects the textual history of the Griselda story” (248). Harkins concludes that Chaucer “translate[d] Boccaccio […] to create something richer and stronger by not allowing one author’s desire to cancel out another’s” (273).14

That many English writers were inspired by the Italian tradition is a claim put forward by the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in his “A Defence of Poetry, or Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’,” where he says that “the superstructure of English literature is based upon the materials of Italian invention” (710).15 Like many other English artists, Shelley too was an italomaniac. In his “Defense of Poetry,” he clearly states his love of Petrarch’s, Boccaccio’s and Dante’s works. “It is impossible to feel [Petrarch’s] verses without becoming a portion of that beauty which we contemplate,” Shelley says (708). He counts Boccaccio among the greatest poets of all time. In a letter Shelly wrote to Leigh Hunt and cited by Enrica Viviani Della Robbia in her “Shelley and Boccaccio,” Shelley stated that Boccaccio’s “more serious theories of love agree especially with mine…” (182).

These illustrations regarding the influence of one author on another exemplify the conventional work that has been produced through time in the field of comparative literature.

---

14Harkins is referring to Petrarch’s Latin translation of Boccaccio’s Griselda story. The scholar argues that Chaucer knew both the Latin, the French, and the original version of Boccaccio’s story, and that Chaucer, in his own translation of certain terms used by Boccaccio restored the meaning of the original text, thereby showing the importance of translation in and of itself. See also the book Chaucer and the Italian Trecento edited by Piero Boitani (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

15We know that Shelley lived in Italy, as a voluntary exile, from 1818 to 1822. He traveled throughout the peninsula, and his ashes were buried in the Protestant Cemetery known as Cimitero degli Inglesi, in Rome. In 1894, a statue of Shelley’s bust was erected in Viareggio to honor his memory. These facts suffice to understand Shelley’s deep connection with the Bel Paese.
The authors selected in this study are also relevant to the study of literary influences. Thus, in his recent book *Giuseppe Ungaretti: traduttore e scrittore* (*Giuseppe Ungaretti: Translator and Writer*), Francesco Laurenti focuses on literary figures such as William Blake, Shakespeare, Saint-John Perse, and Stéphane Mallarmé, whose work Ungaretti translated and was inspired by when developing his own poetics. Again, Langston Hughes found inspiration in the works of Haitian and Cuban poets such as Jacques Roumain and Nicolás Guillén who in turn, Arnold Rampersad claims, were highly influenced by Hughes’s poetic of the blues.

The study of influences is often quite fruitfully based on the principles of similarity and difference, but in today’s literary landscape, the talk about influences must adopt a more generous heuristic approach. If the focus of comparison shifts to uncovering lines of communication among authors, clearly there is no need to limit our analyses to those two standard parameters. Even Shelley, in his essay, implies the existence of a community of writers who ignored altogether national borders and the idea of time. Such instances engender a sort of entanglement that cannot be resolved through the two basic forms of comparison mentioned above. On the other hand, the development of a literary dispositif enables us to place these interactions together, however complicated that might be. To understand and study the many voices that merge together in one interpretive place rarely represents the final objective of a comparison, even though such a site often stands in for its starting point. Thus, by changing our premises and by evaluating literature from a very simple, but important notion that writers and poets are indeed already entangled, we can embrace more possibilities for practicing comparison. In this light, comparative criticism would focus not so much on how authors have influenced each other but on how to identify and unravel multiple lines of communication among writers.
Undoubtedly, in comparison to a mere twenty years ago, we now have much easier access to different cultures; and since communication enables us to understand each other, the “other” as a concept can be seen to disappear altogether when mutually entangled in the lines of inquiry embraced by the literary dispositif. Of course, we are now in the presence of a qualitatively different condition of world culture. As Peeters and Charlier write, “[…] le concept de dispositif est un concept situé. Il est lié à une certaine ‘vision du monde,’ il s’articule et participe à la conception d’un modèle, d’un idéal de société” (20). The agenda informing this project is as follows: “to compare” means first and foremost finding connection points – crocevie (intersections) and giunture (junctions) through which texts relate to each other and writers come together, interconnect, and complement, if not complete, one another. At the site of these critical intersections, literary texts acquire unforeseen meanings and become part of a network which potentially extends ad infinitum, revealing the multifaceted aspects of the history of being human. At one level, we should imagine this network as being free from national boundaries, able to traverse the entire planet, and able to link together everything that it encounters.

If we take pains to dismiss what we might think of as instances of total incommunicability, we will realize that we can find more than one point of contact between cultural traditions that are generally seen as being too distant from each other. Often, cultures overlap at certain intersections. Their ‘boundaries’ are porous. In The Bookseller of Kabul Norwegian writer and journalist, Åsne Seierstad describes the family of a bookseller who lives in Kabul. Seierstad met this man in November 2001 when she arrived in the city with the Northern Alliance, an organization created to fight the Taliban. In her book, Seierstad gives the man the fictional name of Sultan Khan, and she ended up living with the Khans for three months. She

16“[…] the concept of dispositif is a localized one. It is tied to a certain ‘vision of the world,’ it is formed and partakes in a prototype, an ideal society.”
listened to the stories of the family’s women and followed their everyday routine. The author seemed to be impressed if not shocked by the fact that Sultan’s younger sister did not have any possibility to advance herself (4). As the narrative of the Khans unfolds, Seierstad tells us about Shakila, one of Sultan’s sisters who marries a man named Wakil, father of twelve children. Wakil is not described as an abusive husband, but the morning after the wedding, the bride’s and the groom’s families required proof that Shakila was a virgin. Bibi Gul, Shakira’s mother, is relieved: (“[she] smiles while tears run down her cheek,” Seierstad says (105)) when Wakil’s aunt brings her an item of clothing stained with the bride’s blood.

In the not-too-distant past, newly-wed Sicilian women were the subjects of a similar checkup. More than showing a stained bit of cloth to the family of interest, they had to hang out of the window the bed sheet on which the newlyweds consummated their first act of sexual intercourse. A red-stained cloth was meant to satisfy and keep intact the honor of both families because it indicated that the bride was a virgin and the groom was able to perform his patriarchal role of dominance. An unstained sheet, on the contrary, indicated that the groom married an impure woman. Depending on the circumstances, the bride risked being sent back home, thereby causing shame to both families involved. Although in Sicily this cultural practice is now outdated, sometimes, to make sure that a man is marrying a virgin, he can request that his intended spouse be checked by a gynecologist. An article published in 1994 in the newspaper *La Repubblica* reports that in Brancaccio, Sicily, a nineteen-year-old woman was forced to see the doctor to give proof of her virginity. In the article, an Italian gynecologist working in that region claimed that young women can be brought to him by the future mother-in-law or even by her own mother and fiancé, and that the doctor receives six or seven of such patients per year.

---

17From “A Conversation with the Author of The Bookseller of Kabul,” which was first published in the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* on November 9, 2003 and then republished in *The Bookseller of Kabul* (Back Bay Books, 2004).
(“Quando la suocera e il fidanzato chiedono il test di ‘purezza’” (“When the mother-in-law and the Boyfriend Request the ‘Purity’ Test”).

The role of women in Italian and Arabic communities seems to overlap when it comes to the role of female spouses. The literary dispositif can facilitate the encounter of these and other cultures across time and geographical areas, especially if we consider that Sicily’s history has been shaped by Muslim traditions.\(^\text{18}\) Were we to construct a literary dispositif dealing with such connections, the two examples cited above would help us to reveal the ordeals that women are subjected to in the two communities mentioned. It should be clear by now that the objective in connecting cultures cannot be achieved merely by pointing out their similarities and differences.

Differences are often imagined and artificially constructed. In his published lecture \textit{L’écart et l’entre: leçon inaugurale de la Chaire sur l’altérité} (\textit{The Gap and the Within: Inaugural Lecture on the Professorship on Otherness}), the French theorist and sinologist François Jullien explains why this is so: “[…] l’établissement des différences suppose que je m’arroge une position de surplomb, ou moins d’extériorité, à partir de laquelle c’est moi qui ‘range’ entre le même et l’autre, l’identique et le différent, et qui compare” (28).\(^\text{19}\) In other words, to perceive differences, one needs to assume a position of exteriority. But this position is already significantly conditioned by the fact that we are already operating within a given culture, which is part of a system of cultural differences. If differences are dependent on one’s cultural standpoint, they can be deconstructed by varying one’s position of observation or participation.


\(^{19}\) “To bring forth differences implies that I assume a position of overhanging, or at least, of exteriority, for which, to start with, it is I who stands between the self and the other, between that which is identical and that which is different, and who compares.”
One of the functions of the literary *dispositif* developed in this dissertation is that of self-consciously critiquing the idea of differences.

Focusing on difference (or similarity) presumes that an intercultural level be common to all. Whatever distinguishes itself from this “common” dimension is different. So, for example, to identify A and B, we may say that A is A because it shows characteristics that B does not have and vice versa. In this way, difference is often used to identify things, and it is conclusive. By thinking in terms of difference, our ability to understand other cultures reaches a full and final limit. Comparisons imagined within a system of differences can only hinder our understanding of cultural diversity. This happens because of the limited number of forms of comparisons. As Foucault pointed out in *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*), there exist only two possible forms of comparison: the comparison of order and that of measurement (67). One can better understand the comparison of measurement as an evaluation drawn by establishing a larger, usually exterior (to the object measured) unit that is used to appraise smaller units. It implies that to compare two objects is necessary to have at one’s disposal something bigger than the object measured. The bigger or larger unit needs to exist *a priori*. If this condition is not fulfilled, comparative evaluation is impossible. The other form of comparison (that of order) compares two things, but it does not tell us anything about their surroundings. In explaining this latter form of comparison, Foucault suggests that one cannot come to know things that remain isolated units. We can only gain knowledge by perceiving their order, from the smallest to the biggest, and vice versa (67). Even though this form of comparison does not imply the use of a measuring unit established *a priori*, it still indicates that we can understand subjects only when, and if, they can be located within a certain structure where differences (small, big) are already included. However, in reference to literary works, this kind of constitution does not exist. As
Foucault points out in *L’Archéologie du savoir* (*The Archeology of Knowledge*), the margins of a text are never clearly defined, for its structure is inevitably influenced by other texts (34).

The complexity of comparative study requires the use of a methodology that allows our eyes to follow multiple directions at once. Literary scholars specialized in more than one field of study are trying to respond to the model ‘compare and contrast’ based on similarity/difference by stressing the existence of other forms of comparisons. Stanford Friedman, for instance, calls for a juxtapositional model where the things compared are seen “side by side, not overlapping them as in a Vann diagram, not setting up one as the standard of measure for the other, not using one as an instrument to serve the other” (758). However, juxtapositions alone may represent a spatial restriction insofar as this side-by-side model forces the comparatist to move unidirectionally (left right/right left). Furthermore, juxtaposing something to another does not imply that the objects being compared are necessarily contiguous. That one subject can *touch* the other remains a possibility, but it is not epistemologically fundamental – nor is it specific to the scope of this form of comparison. Undoubtedly, contiguity figures into the work of comparison, especially in consideration of the status of today’s interconnected world. But our focus on literary and cultural intersections, where texts and writers meet in more than one point in the signifying sphere of a *global continuum*, remains the very condition for developing a literary *dispositif*. For it is this condition that enables multidirectional ways of reading.

As mentioned earlier, in *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish*) Foucault did not quite define the notion of *dispositif*, but his analysis of the prison system demonstrates quite clearly that in this network of relations there is no outside. But it is not all, for the way the French philosopher imagines the *dispositif* in the prison network resonates with the idea of a global continuity of sort. Foucault posits:
Le réseau carcéral ne rejette pas l’inassimilable dans un enfer confus, il n’a pas de dehors. Il reprend d’un côté ce qu’il semble exclure de l’autre. Il économise tout, y comprises ce qu’il sanctionne […]. Dans cette société panoptique dont l’incarcération est l’armature omniprésente, le délinquant n’est pas hors la loi; il est, et même dès le départ, dans la loi, au cœur même de la loi, ou du moins en plein milieu de ces mécanismes qui font passer insensiblement de la discipline à la loi, de la déviation à l’infraction (308).

The prison network does not throw the unassimilable in a confused hell, there is no outside. It takes back that which it excludes. It keeps everything, even that which it punishes […]. In this panoptic society where incarceration is the omnipresent armature, the delinquent is not outside the law; he is, from the beginning, within the law, even at the heart of the law, or to say the least, within those mechanisms that transfer him gradually from discipline to law, from deviation to offence.

According to this excerpt, everything and everybody is embraced in the surveillance network, forming a continuum; they belong to it and exist in a certain way, according to the system itself. Consequently, an interdependent relationship is born between the network and its elements (the delinquent, in this case). The criminal is either already included in the law or lives within those mechanisms (the lines of the dispositif) that allow him to pass from one social standing to another (“discipline to law”), and from one behavior to another (“deviation to offence”).

Given the disposition of such arrangement, it is not possible to perceive one criminal as different from another. Foucault continues:

Grace au continuum carcéral, l’instance qui condamne se glisse parmi toutes celles qui contrôlent, transforment, corrigent, améliorent. À la limite, plus rienne l’en distinguerait vraiment, n’était le caractère singulièrement « dangereux » des délinquants, la gravité de leurs écarts, et la solennité nécessaire du rite (310).

Due to the prison continuum, the authority that condemns insinuates himself into those who control, transform, correct, ameliorate. Ultimately, in reality, nothing no longer distinguishes them except the singularly “dangerous” character of the delinquents, the gravity of their deviations, and the necessary solemnity of the ritual.
Foucault even suggests that it is almost impossible to distinguish the criminal from law enforcement authorities, for in the surveillance network these two figures are interconnected and depend on each other. Each element of this system works in conjunction with the others to obtain specific results. In the surveillance system, the scope of forming the prison network is to control the population. In this context, the idea of difference is eliminated because this category is simply not functional. It should be said, however, that the one who inspects distinguishes herself from the criminal for she occupies a different place in the network. Therefore, she also assumes a different role in society. But in wanting to draw up a map to locate the positions of these singular figures, one can see that they are ineluctably destined to meet at certain points (for instance, prison guards eating the same food available to prisoners or sharing their same space).

In this network, it is no longer possible to conceive the patrolling guards as being independent from, and unrelated to, the inmates. These figures and the authority that society attributes to them represent two variables in the skein of the Foucauldian prison system. As these variables are continuously changing, it does not make much sense to point out only their differences. To have a firm grasp of where they come from (genealogy) and where they are going, one must unravel the social and cultural mechanisms that make the connections between variables noticeable. Foucault urges his readers to make these kinds of relationships visible by following the lines of the dispositif. As Deleuze suggests, these relationships also help us to understand the process of (our) becoming (191). This idea of revealing the simultaneity of relations among peoples and social structures is relevant to literary analyses that set out to redefine lines of connectivity existing among cultural traditions.

In his essay “Foucault’s New Functionalism,” urban theorist Neil Brenner suggests that the dispositif is a “‘grid of intelligibility,’” and points directly to the question […] how do the
units of a [...] dispositif fit together?” (682). With reference to literature, one of the ways in which the elements of a literary dispositif can be intertwined is by means of what François Jullien calls cultural intelligibility. In his De l’universal, de l’uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures (On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue Between Cultures), Jullien seeks to create a dialogue between cultures. To do so, he imagines a new comparative methodology for examining possible relations among different traditions.

With this goal in mind, he discusses the notions of the universal, the common, and the uniform – all three being central tenets of the Western tradition which have been considered not only interchangeable but also foundational. Jullien reevaluates the origins of these notions by discussing them within the framework of non-Western traditions. In so doing, he constructs a new route to understanding relations between cultures, and in the process, challenges outdated dichotomies such as us/them and similarities/differences. One of the questions that Jullien tries to answer is whether in non-Western traditions there exist notions which are equivalent to those defining Western thought today. Regarding the universal, for instance, he claims that while European culture considers it an a priori, neither Chinese nor Japanese cultures have ever felt the need to cultivate a similar category. In China, cultural universality, Jullien says, is self-evident, as that country embraces a “culture of the globe.”20 Japanese culture, on the contrary, is based on the singular and the question of the universal has close to no meaning (120). This being the case, we would assume that the differences between Western and non-Western cultures are irreconcilable and that it is not possible to engage these two hopelessly different worlds in a dialogue.

20Here Julien refers to the idea permeating throughout the Chinese empire for which there existed only peripheries, and to the belief that the entire world can be house for the Son of Heaven, as Chinese call him (120).
The common, according to Jullien, is neither a category of inclusion nor of synthesis. Traditionally understood, it includes that which is sharable with others, and rejects, or ignores, that which cannot be shared in the strict sense. This way of referring to the common underscores a system of ethical values that are defined \textit{a priori}. Thus, it is not possible to understand cultures outside of a preformed logic. But Jullien suggests that we need to reconsider the notion of the common:

En réenvisageant, autrement dit, la communication d’où vient le commun non plus sous l’angle de contraintes normatives et comme telles prérequises, mais au titre de \textit{capacité} relevant d’un pouvoir des facultés : non pas à titre de règlementation impliquées, dont on risque toujours de constater qu’elles sont ignorées ailleurs ou qu’ on peut aisément s’en jouer, mais au titre d’un \textit{pouvoir être} indéfiniment partageable – celui-là même que j’ai commencé d’évoquer, d’après Kant, comme \textit{commuabilité universelle}. En repartant par conséquent non pas d’un dernier avatar d’innéité, plus sophistiqué, mais de ce qu’on posera comme résolument prospectif […] (Jullien’s emphasis 212).

[…] By re-envisioning the communication from which the common comes, no longer from the angle of normative and as such prerequisite constraints, but by way of \textit{capacity} arising from a power of the faculties. This will be done not by way of implied regulations, which always risk the observation that they are ignored elsewhere or that one can easily do without them, but by way of an indefinitely shareable possibility [\textit{pouvoir être}] – the very one I started to evoke, following Kant, as \textit{universal communicability}. Consequently, what is needed is to start not from a final metamorphosis of more refined innateness, but from what will be posed as resolutely prospective (135).21

“Communicability” here is a crucial concept. It inspires us to believe that we can grasp the meaning of cultures that are totally different from our own. Once we agree that cultures are intelligible, our understanding can be \textit{communicated} through language. At this point, other forms of intelligibility can be created.

“Communicability” can take place at many levels and is potentially limitless. Indeed, when something becomes intelligible, it is no longer foreign. The very act of understanding

---

21 Translated by Michael Richardson and Krysztof Fijalkowski in \textit{On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and the Dialogue Between Cultures} (Polity Press, 2014).
makes that which is graspable part of a common scenario; it becomes universally explicable. This dialogical effort creates coherence (bridges, Jullien calls them), which ideally can connect cultures. What Jullien is saying is that intelligence is our common resource (217). The common is constantly deployed in the very act of trying to understand. The common, it should be said, is not fixed, but forms and reforms itself in relation to what we understand at any given moment. Of course, in the process of forming knowledge-bridges, the intercultural quest for a common ground continues to engender connections between the cultures in play. To put it succinctly, if we say that A understands B and B understands A, it means that A and B both understand that which is intelligible between them. Consequently, if C understands B, C understands A, as what is understandable about B and A has already been passed on to C by B. Ideally, A, B, and C can be located anywhere in the cosmos, so that the bridges formed by this common understanding are not straight lines connecting A, B, and C. Rather, the three cultural elements can be connected simultaneously by multiple channels that spread in different directions through space and time. The literary dispositif makes cultural intelligibility perceptible by embracing these channels at once. 

Having Jullien’s category of the common in mind, the ‘said and the unsaid” of the dispositif can easily identify with the elements of communicability and intelligibility that Jullien proposes to discover in his comparative dialogue between cultures. Foucault’s dispositif shows the several connections that exist among social players, which in being deployed along with Jullien’s theory, can be thought of in terms of cultures. What has not been said or considered before, as Foucault implies, may have escaped us simply because we were looking in the wrong direction to discover the truth about ourselves and our surrounding. Jullien elaborates his comparative methodology by starting with a similar premise. Like Foucault, he suggests we
approach the Western philosophical tradition critically so that we can reach an understanding of ours and other cultures.

Both Foucault and Jullien argue against the grain of the Western tradition and the principles upon which this culture rests. While the scope of their respective analyses differs, both try to connect that which was once considered incomparable. In Jullien’s analysis, this sort of cultural isolation/independence matches up with the dichotomy similarity/difference, which rejects everything that cannot be framed between the two poles. In Foucault’s terms, social, legal, and religious institutions were considered independent from one another, but the French philosopher shows that these institutions are indeed connected and interconnected through a grid apparently invisible to untrained eyes. Though having different aims, Foucault and Jullien help us to appreciate the multiple ways in which the world can be interconnected. The following chapters will exemplify how this is possible by developing a literary dispositif to understand further the lives and works of the three authors herein selected.
CHAPTER 2: COMBINING DIASPORAS: AFRICAN-ITALIAN-AMERICAN DIASPORIC CONTIGUITIES

A diaspora is the dispersal of a group of people from its homeland. In the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, the term refers to the forced exodus of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel, but its current uses are much broader. Today, any populace that has been forced to leave its homeland en masse to escape social oppression and prosecution can be said to form a diaspora. The critical dimensions bearing on the concept of diaspora impels new queries about the network of relationships among individuals belonging to the same diaspora and about associations formed between different diasporas. In her essay, “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” historian Kim D. Butler suggests that there are four basic features of diaspora: 1) a minimum of two destinations, 2) a relationship to a real or imagined homeland, 3) a self-awareness of the cultural identity, and 4) the lingering sense of a diasporic existence lasting at least two generations (192). Ideally, these four features should help us distinguish forms of diaspora proper from other categories of dispersion (such as immigration itself), but it is not always easy to discriminate between them.

In her article, Butler is suggesting that the general approach is to “concentrat[e] on shared and essential aspects of diasporas rather than on the idiosyncrasies of specific groups […]” (194). She proposes then a comparative model of studying diasporas, which in and of itself indicates the possibility of rethinking how we study ethnicity. Albeit Butler’s theory still relies on difference and similarity, she stresses the importance of locating diasporic experiences in contact and in finding what they have in ‘common.’ Once found, this ‘common’ should prove a critical means to help us identify not only whether the mass migration(s) of a group can be considered diasporic but most importantly how different communities connect socially and culturally by means of their respective dispersals.
Whereas the scattering of people of African descent is undoubtedly conceived a diaspora, some scholars are rather skeptical about labeling the Italian mass migration in the same way. In particular, historian Stefano Luconi insists on rejecting an evaluation of the Italian migratory experience in terms of a diaspora. In the article “The Pitfall of the ‘Italian Diaspora’,” he suggests that most Italians were not forced into political exile – a type of dispersal Luconi considers as diasporic. If Italians ended up living abroad, he argues, it was because they voluntarily chose to do so (156). But looking at the literature produced by Italian immigrants, one can conclude that an Italian diaspora does indeed exist. This chapter will identify and discuss the diasporic experience of Ungaretti and D’Alfonso while computing moments where they meet Langston Hughes’s appreciation and understanding of the African diaspora.

In his book *Diaspora: a Very Short Introduction*, historian Kevin Kenny reminds us that “[d]iaspora is best approached not as a social entity that can be measured but as an idea that helps explain the world migration creates” (1). This world, which should also be considered a ‘cultural world,’ is the result of multiple networks and interactions that peoples scattered around the globe tend to form. If diaspora can serve as a “framework” (again, from Butler) for critical investigation, diasporan models help us better understand how diasporic groups cooperate with one another, especially in light of the fact that the members of a diaspora tend to form communities beyond the geopolitical borders of their hostlands. As Kenny illustrates, “[d]iaspora opens up new cultural spaces beyond the boundaries of homeland and hostland. The focus here is not on the process of migration but on the connections migrants form abroad and the kind of culture they produce” (12). Due to the global scale of the production of these spaces, we can imagine that it is more than possible for the members of one diaspora to be able to associate with those belonging to another diaspora.
As for the African and the Italian diasporas, scholars have already studied some aspects of the interactions between the two groups in the United States. For instance, in 1999, Dan Ashyk, Fred L. Gardaphé, and Anthony J. Tamburri edited a collection of essays *Shades of Black and White: Conflict and Collaboration Between Two Communities: Selected Essays from the 30th Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Society*, whose various contributors take in consideration various aspects of the relationship between African Americans and Italian Americans. In a more recent study, Nancy C. Carnevale explores how Italians and African Americans in New Jersey interacted over a period of fifty years (from 1900 to the postwar era). Without ever trying to challenge the literature on conflicts that from time to time erupted between these two communities, here Carnevale takes pains to demonstrate that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Italians and African Americans in Montclair (a suburb in New Jersey) ended up cooperating with one another because they shared the same neighborhoods, schools, and to some extent, social status (544). Furthermore, in her book *Corda e sapone: storie di linciaggi degli italiani negli Stati Uniti* (Rope and Soap: Narratives of the Lynching of the Italians in the United States), Patrizia Salvetti documents “quegli episodi in cui rimasero coinvolti cittadini italiani negli Stati Uniti tra Ottocento e Novecento e le reazioni del governo italiano attraverso la sua rappresentanza diplomatica a Washington” (IX).\(^{22}\) The text sheds light on the discrimination of the Italians by white supremacists, and allows the reader to draw a correlation with the history of oppression of the African Americans. The episodes showcased in the book resonate closely with the plight of the black community in the United States, for the Italians too were lynched in several occasions.\(^{23}\) Such episodes are still impressed in the

---

\(^{22}\) “Those episodes involving Italian citizen living in the United State in the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries and the reaction of the Italian government through its diplomatic delegation in Washington.”

\(^{23}\) See also the four-part PBS documentary *The Italian Americans* aired in 2015.
collective memory of the Italian Americans and are often represented in their literary tradition.

For example, in the poem “Dago Street,” in *Neither Seen nor Heard*, Rose Romano imagines the lynching of her countrymen in the following terms:

```
One [Sicilian] was
shot in the head, his right hand
blown away when he raised it
to defend himself, the top of his
head gone; he waited nine hours
to die. Two Italians were shot.
Only half dead, they were brought
outside, tossed overhead by the
crowd to the other end of the
street, and were hanged, and were shot,
and were left hanging to be viewed
Some of the women dipped their lace
handkerchiefs in the Italians’ blood
for a souvenir (54-55).
```

In this poem, Romano demonstrates that Italians shared more than just suburban spaces with African Americans, for clearly, both groups fell victim to a widespread racial hatred.

The relationship between Italian American and African American communities remains a source of academic investigation. Scholars keep on organizing conference panels to showcase current scholarship on the topic. At the 2018 Annual Modern Languages Association Convention, for instance, one panel was titled “Black and White: Opposites, Tensions, and Many Shades of Gray.” Despite the effort to understand this world in ‘black and white shades,’ as Tamburri, Gardaphé, and others envision, in our ‘republic of letters,’ these academic enterprises still appear as isolated episodes of literary criticism. Therefore, the call for investigating further the subject remains open. The following analysis intends to respond to this call while contributing to the current scholarship.
Forming Diasporan Relations: From the ‘Entrails’ of the Boat in Giuseppe Ungaretti’s “Monologhetto” to Langston Hughes’ Short Stories

Ungaretti is considered one of the most important Italian poets of the twentieth century. Together with Umberto Saba and Eugenio Montale, between the two world wars, he was able to change quite substantially the Italian poetic tradition. And yet, it is highly fruitful to read Ungaretti in the broader context of the Italian diaspora to gain a better understanding of his poetry and life. Among his many ‘removes,’ Egypt and Brazil remain the two crucial sites of Ungaretti’s diasporic experience. The importance of these countries has been discussed in Ungaretti scholarship, but primarily in terms of how they influenced his poetics. These critics do not address the cultural and material issue of diaspora. For example, in her book Affricana: altri studi per Ungaretti (Affricana: Other Studies on Ungaretti), Alexandra Zingone focuses mainly on Ungaretti’s early writing in Egypt without considering how the poet’s diasporic consciousness might have played a role in his creative work.

Zingone helps us understand why Ungaretti is a cosmopolitan writer by emphasizing the fact that the culturally eclectic city of Alexandria gave the poet the opportunity to become acquainted with many languages and peoples, but the text ignores exploring how his childhood in Egypt contributed to the making of a diasporan consciousness, or as it will be discussed later, a double consciousness. Zingone recognizes the presence of a “traccia araba” (“arabic trace”), as she calls it, in Ungaretti’s early verse (16), but again, eluding altogether the migrant and/or ethnic perspective of the poet. For the sake of understanding Ungaretti in the twenty-first century, however, we need to consider that the Egypt imagined in his verse is often described from a diasporic point of view. Thus, in the poem “Ricordo d’Affrica” (“Memory of Affrica”),

---

24At the beginning of his career, Ungaretti composed a new form of poetry that the Italian literary critic Francesco Flora in 1936 defined as ‘hermetic.’ Giusy C. Oddo (447-466).
he likens the sea of Alexandria to a “nappo d’un miele, non più gustato” (“a honey cup no longer savored”) (110), indicating that a strong sense of nostalgia (a sentimental longing which is typically shared by those living away from their homeland), seizes the poet when he thinks of his birthplace, where he was able to chase the goddess Diana. In this poem, the reference to the Roman goddess of the hunt, the moon, and nature, capable of talking with animals, increases the bucolic essence of the poem, thereby also augmenting the overall longing for a past and a place for which the poet pines.

Concerning Brazil, in his biography of Ungaretti, Piccioni gives the reader selected information about the place. For instance, he notes that there the poet “[l]avora molto, studia, insega: ma non un verso nuovo. In tutto il periodo passato in Brazile, non un verso di poesia nuova” (198). Brazil, we know, was also the place where Ungaretti understood the philosophical significance of the Baroque, while encountering an intense and overwhelming flora and reading Brazilian writers. This experience, Piccioni suggests, “porta a conseguenze anche più ricche, frenetiche, vitali: è in grado di abbracciare anche una maggiore molteplicità di aspetti, non già (mai), ma di contenerli, si, è capace” (194). Furthermore, in Brazil, the poet came to grips with the meaning of death, “mentre infuriava inesorabile sulla creatura umana che era più cara [e mentre ammiravo] le chiese a Bahia o a Minas, chiese che sono incarnazioni bellissime del Barocco” (456). Piccioni also mentions the important influence Ungaretti had on the literary culture of São Paulo (197), but again says nothing about the poet’s diasporic condition.

---

25 “[H]e worked intensively, taught, studied, but did not produce anything new. During the entire period spent in Brazil, not a line of new poetry.”

26 “[B]ears on consequences even more important, hectic, dynamic; he was able to embrace even more various aspects, (never) however, to solve them, but he was capable of containing them.”

27 “[W]hile it was ineluctably blowing on the human being most dear to me [and while I admired] the churches of Bahia or Minas, churches that are beautiful reincarnations of the baroque.” From Ungaretti’s essay “Brasile” (“Brazil”) in the “Appendice alle prose di viaggio (“Appendix to the Travelogue”) in Ungaretti: vita d’un uomo. Viaggi e lezioni (Ungaretti: Life of a Man. Travels and Lectures) edited by Paola Montefoschi (Mondadori, 2011).
while in Brazil. Only recently (2014), in the introduction to L’Allegria è il mio elemento: trecento lettere con Leone Piccioni (Joy is My Element: Three Hundred Letters to Leone Piccioni), has Piccioni described Ungaretti’s financial situation in terms suggesting that South America was indeed part of a diasporic existence for the poet. Piccioni writes: “[p]ioveva in casa; gli amici vedevano le catinelle posate qua e là nelle stanze per raccogliere l’acqua piovana. Nel ’25 era nata Ninon, nel ’30 a Marino il figlio Antonietto. Ungaretti faceva su e giù con Roma con il trenino dei Castelli: Jeanne lo aspettava ogni sera per la cena” (VIII).28

In 1937, Ungaretti accepted a position as the Chair of the Italian Department at the University of São Paulo. This trip must have seemed like a great opportunity, for in Italy he could not find a position that would give him financial stability. As Piccioni observed, before he left his ancestral land, the poet was already the father of two children and had to commute a considerable distance to his job. In a letter dated September (or October) 1930 to his friend Jean Paulhan, we read the emotional hardship he was enduring because of his precarious finances:


I continuously travel to Rome to find any kind of job that would allow me to leave this misery. My Calvary is lasting more than one and a half month now. They

28 “It was raining in the house; his friends saw buckets laying left and right in each room to collect rain water. In 1925, Ninon was born, in 1930, in Marino, his son Antonietto was born. Ungaretti used to go to and from Rome using the little train of Castelli; Jeanne used to wait for him for dinner.”

realize it is a shame that I am so abandoned, they promise me things and then I collect only humiliations. I really hope that I can find a way out of this situation. I cannot stand it anymore, Jeanne is extremely tired. As for me, at the moment, I cannot find interest in anything. I am not discouraged, but embittered, furious, crazy. My nerves. My nerves are in a cruel state.

This heartbreaking excerpt expresses the desperation of a fairly young man unable to provide for his family. During this period, he counted only on literary collaborations and on conference travel (Piccioni 189).

Whether Luconi considers the Italian emigration a diaspora or not, Ungaretti’s autobiography suggests that Italians were (and still are) often forced to leave their country due to what is known to be a chronic lack of job opportunities. Furthermore, even Piccioni calls the stay in Brazil a “specie d’esilio” (“a kind of exile”) (VIII), which, again, corroborates the idea of a forced passage to the other side of the Atlantic. Ungaretti conveys the difficulty of the trip in his poem “Monologhetto” (“Little Monologue”), a verse dealing, among the others, with the subject of diaspora.\(^{30}\) The poem reads as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
Giù arriva giù, un tale
Cielo, fino ad attorniare un mare buio
Che nelle viscere si soffoca
Il mugghiare continuo,
Ed incede il Neptunia (259).\(^{31}\)
\end{verbatim}

Down, it goes down, such
Sky, surrounding a dark sea
That in the entrails we suffocate
A continuous howl
And Neptunia strides.

\(^{30}\) According to Piccioni, Ungaretti wrote this poem for the Italian national television. In 1951, Rai produced a show with the intent to render the twelve months of the year in a poetic prospective. To Ungaretti Rai asked to write a poem on the month of February. The show aired on New Year’s Eve. The poem consists of 202 lines, “A record for Ungaretti!,” Piccioni comments (51).

\(^{31}\) All the poems of Ungaretti cited in this dissertation are from the 1996 Mondadori edition of Vita D’un uomo: tutte le poesie (Mondadori, 1970).
Neptunia is the name of the boat that transported Ungaretti to Brazil. The image of the “mare buio” (“dark sea”) refers to the actual crossing of the Atlantic. The poet undertook this trip many times in his life, yet as indicated in the verse, he sees it as difficult and uncomfortable. The term “viscere” here can refer to the stomach of the passengers who continuously “mugghiano” (“howl”), perhaps due to motion sickness; but it can also refer to the steerage of the ship, its bowels or “entrails.” The two meanings complement each other. In the translation above, I tried to convey this language ambiguity by maintaining the Italian syntax in English. By interpreting these “entrails” as the deepest part of the ship, we catch a glimpse of the poem’s diasporic significance.

To understand the diasporic dimension of the poem, we may want to remember the way in which Édouard Glissant in his Poétique de la relation (Poetics of Relation) talks about the “belly of the ship.” Glissant describes an imaginary ship transporting slaves to the New World during the Atlantic slave trade. In her article “The Birthplace of Relation: Édouard Glissant’s Poétique de la relation,” Stanka Radović notes that “Glissant […] transforms the ship itself in a womb, from which a ‘new’ people will emerge” (476). To Glissant these new people ended up populating the Caribbean, making it a distinct place for its own uniquely creolized culture (Radović 477). To bring forth Glissant’s idea of relation is not to probe into the complex and fascinating formation of the Caribbean culture according to Glissant, but rather to underline the congruity between Ungaretti’s and Glissant’s ship as a space where encounters of different cultures take place forming “a world community […] based on […] a lasting sense of connection between all cultures, which have at one time or another, survived the abyss and created a complex embracing culture out of its devastation” (Radović 478). Thus, the Middle Passage, as it is often called, has a formative character, historian Philip D. Morgan notes in his essay “African
and the Atlantic, c. 1450 to c. 1820.” To quote him: “[t]he development of a strong shipmate bond in many parts of the New World is a testament to the formative character of this most infamous voyage” (237). The otherness of these passengers mingled, thereby forming either a creolized culture (in Glissant’s eyes) or a graft (in Ungaretti’s eyes).

“Monologhetto” clearly renders this sense of otherness by the image of these people suffocating in the boat. The act of gasping for air anticipates their reaction to their new climate and intimates that they belong to another culture. Later, the poem suggests the formation of a new culture:

Si soffoca dal caldo:
L’equatore è a due passi.
Non penò poco l’Europeo ad assuefarsi
Alle stagioni alla rovescia,
E, più che mai, facendosi,
Il suo sangue meticcio:
Non è Febbraio il mese degli innesti?
E ancora più penò,
Il suo sangue, facendosi mulatto
Nel maledetto aggiogamento
D’anime e lavoro di schiavi […] (261).

The heat is suffocating:
The Equator is a step away.
The European struggled a lot to get used to
The backward seasons
And, more than anything, to creolize
Their blood:
Is not February the month of transplants?
And his blood suffered even more,
Becoming mulatto
Through the cursed exploitation
Of the souls and work of slaves.

Here, the image of the people suffocating recalls the miserable condition in which Glissant’s slaves were transported to the new world. Like Glissant’s ship, Ungaretti’s boat too is a womb of sorts, but in the imagination of the Italian poet, it discharges Europeans, and not black people,
into the world. Ungaretti’s ship can be said to represent a ‘belly’ because, like brand new babies, the passengers in “Monologhetto” have no prior knowledge of their destination; they struggled to adapt to backward seasons and to the new climate, to assimilate into native cultures (“creolize/Their blood”). As if this were not enough, the passage of these migrants happens under a stormy sky. Ungaretti renders this image by depicting the sky as being low (“down”) and joining the surface of the sea (“surrounding a dark sea”). The darkness encompassing the ocean makes the trip as uncertain as the future of these people.

The line “Is not February the month of transplants?” is a clear autobiographical reference, indicating that, like many other European immigrants, the poet suffered a process of creolization. Glissant imagines this process in the following terms: “Mais leur éprouve ne fut pas morte, elle s’est vivifiée dans cette continu-discontinu: la panique du pays nouveau, la hantise du pays d’avant, l’alliance enfin avec la terre impose, soufferte, rédimée” (19). The making of a hybrid culture is often a difficult and painful process, yet Ungaretti’s rhetorical question also suggests that this hybridization is in a sense natural. The poem, indeed, takes for granted that in the natural world February is a month for metamorphosis and grafting (for both plants and people). In Ungaretti’s eyes, February is the month of innesti (“graft transplants”) par excellence.

The difficulty of the journey to creolization is indicated, again, by the image of the boat reaching its destination:

A Pernambuco attracca
E,
Tra le barchette in dondolo,
E titubanti chiattole
Sul lustro elastico dell’acqua,
Nel breve porto impone, nero,
L’ingombro svelto del suo netto taglio (259).

32 “But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the hunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed lands, suffered and redeemed” (7) (translation by Betsy Wing).
It docks at Pernambuco
And,
Among little swinging vessels
And hesitant barges
On the shining agility of water,
In the short harbor, it imposes, dark,
The quick obstruction of its sharp cut.

Ungaretti and the others suffocating in the ship finally arrive at Pernambuco, a state in Northeastern Brazil. The harbor seems small, hosting only little vessels bobbing in the water (“little swinging vessels”). Again, the harbor is described as being “breve” (“short”), as if belonging to a state, or country, still in an early stage of development. Due to the meagerness of the port, the Neptunia appears as an “ingombro,” an “obstruction,” severing the harbor in the middle. The perfect cut done by the boat evokes a form of transplant surgery or grafting.

Penetrating the port, the boat (with its load of newcomers) inserts itself between both the little vessels (people already creolized) and the hesitant barges (a native culture wary of foreigners). As the poem indicates, the introduction (creolization) of the passengers happens with no little difficulty; in this light, the boat is also a place of trauma (“it imposes, dark”), caused by the surgery act of grafting. However, only by means of this trauma can the newcomers become acquainted with their new place.

“Monologhetto” is not the only composition where Ungaretti describes the migration shock. In the poem “Levante,” he illustrates the uncertainty immigrants face at sea and the difficulty they have in adapting to their hostland. He writes:

La linea
vaporosa muore
al lontano cerchio del cielo

Picchi di tacchi picchi di mani
e il clarino ghirigori striduli
e il mare è cenerino
trema dolce inquieto
come un piccione

A poppa emigranti soriani ballano

A prua un giovane è solo

Di sabato sera a quest’ora

Ebrei
laggiù
portano via
i loro morti
nell’imbuto di chiocciola
tentennanti
di vicoli
di lumi

Confusa acqua
come il chiasso di poppa che odo
dentro l’ombra
del
sonno (7)

The line
a wake of vapor dies
in the faraway circle of the sky

Hands clapping, heels beating
a strident woven clarinet
and the sea is ashen
it trembles softly restlessly
as a pigeon.

In the stern, Syrian emigrants dance

At the bow, a youngster is alone

On Saturday night at this time
Jews
there
carry away
their dead
in a snail-like funnel
hesitating
in alleys
of lamps

Confused water
like the racket of the stern I hear
inside the shadow
of
sleep

The poem opens with the description of a specific place: an Egyptian harbor, where people are flowing from different areas. The poet is asleep (“inside the shadow/ of /my sleep”), but music (“hands clapping/ heels beating”), which he perceives as a “rocket” heard first at a distance, awakes him. The sound becomes more definite as the vessel on which the Syrians are traveling approaches the port. The migratory status of the Syrians does not prevent them from being happy, so they dance astern. They might be happy because they have safely reached the shores of their hostland, and/or also because their travel was relatively easy – the image of the trembling pigeon evokes that the passengers might have easily overcome the struggles faced at sea. The sea is pallid (ashen) either because of the effects of the moonlight changes the oceanic blue into a duller color (indicating that the scene is nocturnal), or because, the weather, however menacing it might have been, did not prevent the Syrians from arriving in Egypt. Nevertheless, there is at least one unhappy, solitary person on the boat (“At the bow, a youngster is alone”).

The contrast between those dancing astern and the young man alone “at the bow” presents us with a scene of mixed feelings. While the idea of settling in a new country must have stirred their joy, their attachment to a distant homeland may have dampened their happiness. Again, the juxtaposition of these two images captures a specific predicament of these immigrants: they remain people in-between. It not only alludes to Ungaretti’s own struggle of being in between cultures and countries, but more generally, evokes the difficulty in blending with the hostland’s culture. To some, like Ungaretti’s Arab friend Moammed Sceab who
committed suicide while living in Paris, it is an impossible task. The poem “In memoria” (“In Memory”) describes how adverse the condition of living in between two, and sometimes even more, countries, cultures, and languages, can be. In this regard, the first part of the poem “Levante” portrays the diasporic dilemma of mediating between homeland and hostland cultures.

Despite the struggle inherent to the condition of being an immigrant, as Glissant suggests, the groups of passengers can create relations out of their shared experience of the journey. Considered in the context of the reading construct proposed here, the image of the “entrails” of the boat illustrates Ungaretti’s experience of migration and evokes the diasporic perspective that informs his work. On the other hand, the “entrails” in “Monologhetto,” which recall Glissant’s observations on the formation of relationships, form a joining moment that allows Ungaretti’s poem to connect to a specific instance in one of Langston Hughes’ short stories, “The Little Virgin,” which describes how aboard a ship, people spend their time in a relatively small place and are led to interact continuously with one another. This interaction often leads to a certain degree of entanglement among people who originally had little in common. In the short story, Hughes recounts the experience at sea in these terms:

[…] in a week at sea even a crew made up of Greeks, West Indian Negroes, Irish, Portuguese, and Americans can become well acquainted. When the weather is warm and sailors lounge on the afterdeck of evening telling stories, men learn to know one another. The sea breeds a strange comradeship, a strict fraternity, and many a time I have seen the most heterogeneous crew imaginable stick together like brothers in a sailors’ fight in a foreign port […]. The sea is like a wide-armed mother and the humble toilers of the sea, blood brothers (CST 17).

As Glissant, again posits, relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. The characters in “Little Virgin” share their stories (what they know) with one another and welcome comradeship or even mutual interdependence. Like brothers, they stand up for one another when circumstances require them to do so. If this shared knowledge ‘of the
whole,’ as Glissant puts it, engenders relationships among members of different cultures, and by extension, among members of different diasporas, we can readily assume that both Hughes and Ungaretti, having been in the belly of the ship, having experienced firsthand the abyss together with other peoples, partake in this Relation (in Glissant’s terms). As Glissant notes, “[n]ous pouvons dire maintenant que cette expérience du gouffre est la chose le mieux échangée” (“we can say that this experience of the abyss is the best good ever exchanged”) (20). In the metaphorical belly of the ship, cultures, idioms, and peoples mingle in such a way that a process of creolization – “innesto,” Ungaretti would call it – can easily take place. For Ungaretti and Hughes, the ship is then a heterotopic space in which the formation of new relations appears clear to them.

Another short story of Hughes, “Bodies in the Moonlight,” stages the formation of such relations among strangers. The story’s incipit lays out the physical condition of the ship’s crew and its cultural variety. Hughes writes: “[s]ix of our men had been sent ashore with tropic fever to the European hospital. The potatoes were running out and the captain no longer issued money to his mixed crew” (4). Like the speaker in Ungaretti’s “Monologhetto” and “Levante,” Hughes’s narrator tells us about hardship at sea. The phrase “mixed crew” immediately suggests that the crewmen, as in the “Little Virgin,” are from different countries. “Bodies in the Moonlight” is about a young man’s first love experience. He falls in love (or so he believes) with a prostitute from Lonbar, but he has to share the girl’s attention with his friend Porto Rico. Eventually, the two end up fighting for Nunuma, but the narrator sacrifices to his love for the girl after Porto Rico wounds him with a knife.

We do not know for sure where Porto Rico was born, but since he speaks Spanish and his nickname is that of a country, we can guess that he is from there. At one point the narrator
muses, “Porto Rico, hard, and rough, and strong […]. Porto Rico who did not know that Nunuma’s face was like a flower in the moonlight, who did not care that her body was soft and tender” (7). In this passage, he portrays his friend as a savage, a rival he cannot match, while on the contrary, the girl is as beautiful and pure as a flower: her “lips are red and her face like a flower, dusk-dark in the moonlight (8). Again, when he and Porto Rico offer Nunuma a half loaf of bread and a flat can of salmon, the narrator recognizes those were “grotesque gifts to offer an African-flower girl” (8), whereas Porto Rico is insensitive to the ludicrous nature of these items.

We may think that the narrator and Porto Rico are so different from one another that it is impossible for them to be friends. But the ending of the story suggests the contrary. As the narrative closes, indeed, Porto Rico says, “‘Jesus, kid, you know I didn't mean to do it. I was crazy, that’s all’” (9). Peculiar as it may sound, it represents Porto Rico’s own way of apologizing to the narrator who goes on telling us that “those things are almost forgotten now — but the scar, and the memory of Nunuma, make me write this story” (9). Here the adjective “almost,” rather than suggesting the narrator’s acrimony, indicates that he is still Porto Rico’s friend. If the scar did not remind him of their differences, he would have forgotten the unfortunate episode at once. “Bodies in the Moonlight” is another example of what happens in the ‘entrails of the ship.’

The ‘belly of the ship’ is a specific place that allows Ungaretti and Hughes to meet ideally in the Atlantic, but it also symbolizes a site where they connect and reconnect either with their ancestral lands or with those geographical places that have influenced in one way or another their poetics and careers. The worlds created by Hughes and Ungaretti having experienced the ‘belly of the ship,’ has rivers functioning as sites of memory of their diasporas. These rivers represent then their origin and their becoming. In his famous poem, “The Negro Speaks of
River,” Hughes recounts his black lineage and becomes a diasporic poet through the images of the following rivers:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset (CP 23)

Aside from the Euphrates and the Nile, the other two rivers all flow into the Atlantic or into water (like it is the case for the Mississippi river flowing into the Gulf of Mexico) which are connected to the Atlantic rim. In and of itself the poem is describing an Atlantic world according to Hughes. The waters of the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi offer Hughes an impressive global genealogy. That he “raised the pyramids above the Nile,” suggests indeed that Hughes is claiming membership to cultures distant from him. That he “bathed in the Euphrates” signifies the effort to belong, to give himself to a place in which he feels at ease. The poem closes with an image of watery depth, a metaphor for Hughes’ vast soul. We have the sense that the more we explore this soul, the more we discover an unusual understanding of human toil.

In his equally famous poem “I fiumi” (“The Rivers”), Ungaretti traces his genealogy imagining that these rivers have given him reason to exist. The poem also evokes the presence of an Atlantic community as many of these watercourses flow directly into the Atlantic or seas communicating with it (the Nile flows into the Mediterranean, the Serchio into the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Seine into the English Channel, the Isonzo into the Gulf of Trieste).

Questo è il mio Serchio
al quale hanno attinto
duemil’anni forse
di gente mia campagnola
e mio padre e mia madre.
These striking lines indicate the easiness with which Ungaretti talks about geography, as these places are part of who he is and has become. The Nile witnesses Ungaretti’s birth and youth, whereas in the Seine the poet recognizes himself as if to imply that the years he spent in France were crucial to him. In Hughes’s poem the Mississippi is that geographical place where he finds hope, as he sees “its muddy/ bosom turn all golden in the sunset” – indicating that the river and its history has much more to offer. The poet reaches past the muddy water that characterizes the Mississippi river to experience that which becomes gold, namely precious, at sunset. Ungaretti, reaches beyond the Siene’s muddiness as he finally realizes who he is.
Continuing this brief excursus on oceans and rivers, Ungaretti and Hughes cannot but meet Antonio D’Alfonso. Although this meeting will be explored more in depth in the next segment of the chapter, in this section, it is worth noticing how, in a poem like “Ghiaccio” (“Ice”) (in L’autre rivage translated into The Other Shore), D’Alfonso recognizes to what extent ocean and rivers fascinate him. He writes:


Why does the ocean fascinate me so much? I sit before the Saint-Laurent and the Biferno. Before the Tevere and the Arno. Before the German Main and the Po. I taste the Atlantic and the Pacific. I drink polluted water and am cleansed by it. Water, never still, always changing, cannot be imprisoned by matter or metaphor. Water for mother, freedom, nomadism, the unconscious. Where I begin. Where I will find myself in the end – if there is an end. How deep is the ocean? How deep is the ocean I swim in? (D’Alfonso’s translation 26).

The author embraces the ocean not only to purify himself but also to find an identity (“l’océan dans lequel je baigne”). D’Alfonso’s rivers too are sites of memories where he (re)discovers himself as a diasporic individual destined to roam the world.

Ancestral Homelands and Cultural Associations with the Hostland: Italy, Africa, and Canada

Like many other children born in the diaspora, by listening to his mother telling stories of Lucca (his parents’s hometown in Tuscany), Ungaretti developed an intense nostalgia for his ancestral homeland. These stories so impressed the young Ungaretti that later on, in the prose poem “Lucca,” he remembered his childhood as if it were a period of bewilderment. The opening lines of the composition capture Ungaretti’s wonder, for he writes: “A casa mia, in Egitto, dopo
cena, recitato il rosario, mia madre ci parlava di quei posti. / La mia infanzia ne fu tutta meravigliata” (“At home, in Egypt, after dinner, after praying the Rosary, mother used to tell us about those places. / My childhood was a total bewilderment”) (95). These words, however, also imply his emotional attachment to Egypt; in fact, by specifying that the house in Alexandria was “home,” the poet is making a claim for his birthplace. Moving with ease between remembering his home town proper and imagining an idealized Italy, the poem reaches one of its dramatic peaks when Ungaretti “sent[e] scorrere caldo nelle mie vene, il sangue dei miei morti” (“feeh[s] running in my veins the warm blood of my dead”) (95). Ungaretti feels his ancestors’ culture flowing within him. His italicità runs in his veins, keeping him alive, as the adjective “caldo” (“warm”) suggests.

A second-generation immigrant, Ungaretti developed a strong interest in Italian culture and completely immersed himself in the study of its major writers whose work eventually influenced his production after WWI. After the experience of the war, which on the contrary, inspired his hermetic verse, Ungaretti shifted to a style more attuned with the Italian literary tradition. One might even speculate that his “Svaghi” (“Distractions”) are an attempt to imitate the structure of Dante’s Vita Nova. Compared to Vita Nova, the comments in “Svaghi” bring to mind both the form and the subject of Dante’s poetic style. It comprises three poetic moments introduced by a brief explanation of the reasons Ungaretti decided to write a poem on Spring (distractions number one and two) and on the practice of poetic meter and language (distraction number three).

33 “In my house, in Egypt, after dinner, after praying the Rosary, mother used to tell us about those places. / My childhood was a total bewilderment.”
For Ungaretti, Italy has always existed as an idealized place. In a letter to Giovanni Papini dated November 1918, the poet defines himself as “un italiano di nostalgia” (“Italian by nostalgia”) (224).34 His is the nostalgia for a place that appears so close (with the warm blood of his ancestors running in his veins) and yet equally distant (given Italy actual geographical distances and the clash between native and hosting cultures). The emotional longing for the ancestral land is one of the major themes of diasporic literatures. In the recently published memoir My Two Italies, literary scholar Joseph Luzzi describes how little successful he was in assimilating into the “high Italian culture” – that which Ungaretti seems to imitate after his hermetic period – because he did not quite fit in the culture of Florence, where he spent many years studying. Albeit, Ungaretti was culturally and emotionally tied to Italy, he was often excluded from his ancestral homeland. His sense of being out of place must have further been exacerbated by the harsh experiences of WWI, a war which in his eyes turned out to be a general failure of humanity.35 In a 1920 postcard to Aldo Palazzeschi, he laments his having been blindfolded: “[h]o vissuto questi anni tra i rimorsi e le ubbriacature; era necessario ubbriacarsi per dimenticare di ‘subire’; il male è che ho finito per credere che fosse una ‘fede’, e a farmi strumento di colpa. Poco a poco la benda mi è caduta dagli occhi, e vedo i ‘farisei’ […]” (Piccioni 130).36

34 See Lettere a Giovanni Papini, 1915-1948 edited by Maria Antonietta Terzoli (Mondadori, 1988).
35 Writing to Ardengo Soffici, Ungaretti tells his friend about the physical pain he was enduring on the battlefield. “Ci sono queste benedette piaghe ai piedi, in seguito al freddo umido di questi paesi, e c’è una debolezza generale dell’organismo […] una delle cose più terribili per uno di noi in questa guerra è l’isolamento” (“I have these terrible foot blisters from the cold weather of these towns, and my body is completely weak […] for us in this war one of most terrible things is our loneliness”) (10). Edited by Paola Montefoschi and Leone Piccioni, these letters are collected in the book Lettere a Soffici: 1917-1930 (Sansonì, 1981).
36 “I lived in between regrets and binges; it was necessary to get drunk to forget that we were enslaved; the worst thing though it is that I ended up believing in it as if in a ‘faith,’ thus becoming an instrument of guilt. The bandage that blindfolded me has fallen a little bit at a time and I can see the traitors […]”
In the years that followed, his financial distress was aggravated by a sense of dejection. To these negative factors in his life, we should add that the Italian cultural circles did not always appreciate his work. In a letter to Piccioni, he describes Italy as a country unable to take care of its artists, defining this lack of understanding a “vergogna” (a “shame”). Again, in a letter to Enrico Pea, he mentions that he was a “cittadino spiantato” (“an uprooted citizen”) (Piccioni 83). The word “spiantato” means either “penniless” or “uprooted.” Both adjectives fittingly define the Ungaretti of this period. In the context in which I am reading the poet, his condition of “spiantato” is the defining factor of his status as a diasporic writer. Again, according to Piccioni, in a letter to a friend dated 1918, the poet writes, “Sono uno sradicato, ed ho la nostalgia – il corrosivo rimorso – della mia terra non più ritrovata […]. Amo la Francia perché al mondo ho trovato una gente che ha una patria; e io non l’ho” (101). The sense of belonging to nowhere in particular – although at various times he called at least four different countries (Egypt, France, Italy, and Brazil) his patrie – makes him the diasporic poet par excellence. As we can gather from this brief discussion of Ungaretti’s view of Italy, we realize how difficult it must have been for him attempting to create a healthy relation with his country of origin.

As Ungaretti reveals time and again in poems like “Lucca,” his relationship to Italy as ancestral homeland was often problematic and awkward. For his part, Hughes was not stranger to this feeling. In 1923, having found a job on the ship S.S. Malone, he had the opportunity to see at least some of his ancestral country. And like other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, he too idealized Africa in his verse. The poem “Dance Africaine” is an example of the eagerness to embrace African culture in terms of a conventional, mythologizing primitivism:

The low beating of the tom-toms,

---

37 L’Allegria è il mio elemento: cento lettere con Leone Piccioni (9) (Mondadori, 2013).
38 “I am uprooted and I experience a nostalgia – corrosive remorse – for a patria I will never find […]. I love France because there I have found a people who has a homeland. I don’t have one.”
The slow beating of the tom-toms,
   Low . . . slow
   Slow . . . low —
   Stirs your blood.
   Dance!
A night-veiled girl
   Whirls softly into a
   Circle of light.
   Whirls softly . . . slowly,
Like a wisp of smoke around the fire —
   And the tom-toms beat,
   And the tom-toms beat,
And the low beating of the tom-toms
   Stirs your blood (CP 28).

Throughout the poem, the onomatopoeic expressions “tom-toms” evoke African drumming. The structure of the poem as a whole seeks to convey the movement of the girl’s body at the sound of an African rhythm. But the words “Stirs your blood” also describe something more than a form of pure African dance. The stirred blood symbolically suggests a form of cultural and racial survival. The image of whirling that dominates the poem reverberates with blood circulation, a crucial life function. In short, the poem is an instance of Hughes’s engagement with the racial debate of his time; it also expresses his tendency to project a mythological or oneiric image of Africa.

In his essay “The Poet Speaks of Places,” James de Jongh notes that “for most of the nineteenth century, Africa had been inscribed in the discourse of black Americans as a receding memory, and alien and inaccessible ancestral landscape obscured by time, distance, and deliberate distortion” (67). For Hughes’s generation, the African continent was destined to become less a “receding memory” than a reality that would stir a still-young writer to reflect on his diasporic condition. As de Jongh says of Hughes, he “linked the literary topoi of Africa and America to each other” (67). And while he attempted to make a literary connection with his ancestral place, he also managed to travel to Africa. In *The Big Sea*, the first part of Hughes’s
autobiography, we note a sense of relief once he is aboard the *S.S. Malone* and on his way to Africa. “I was a seaman,” he says, “going to sea for the first time – a seaman on a big merchant ship. And I felt that nothing would ever happen to me again that I didn’t want to happen. I felt grown, a man, inside an out” (3). If this opening suggests Hughes’s coming of age, we can also read it as if his high expectation of Africa was the guarantor of his manhood. However, the excitement over his discovery of Africa was spoiled by the awkward realization that he did not quite fit in there, as he imagined and hoped he would. An episode in *The Big Sea* recalls a moment in which Hughes’s blackness came into question:

‘Our problems in America are very much like yours,’ I told the Africans, ‘especially in the South. I am a Négro too.’
But they only laughed at me and shook their heads and said: ‘You white man! You white man!’
It was the only place in the world where I’ve been called a white man. They looked at my copper-brown skin and straight black hair […] and they said: ‘You – white man.’ (BS 102-103).

That Africans considered him “white” must have been disappointing, if not a bit shocking. But above all, as literary scholar Jeff Westover notes, this incident suggests that Hughes “experienced his first direct contact with Africa within the context of a diasporan consciousness” (1211).

Soon enough Hughes realized that the African diaspora did not present a united front in a common cause. According to Rampersad, the fact that Hughes perceived discrepancies in the African diaspora “‘stirred [Hughes] to assert the unity of blacks everywhere’” (quoted in Westover 1212). This idea, however, must have crept into his mind even before his actual trip to Africa because, as we know from *The Big Sea*, he was familiar with the thought of Marcus Garvey, a Pan-Africanism enthusiast who advocated a return to Africa. In Africa, Hughes understood that “[the Africans] hoped what they heard about [Garvey] was true – that he really
would unify the black world, and free and exalt Africa” (102). It is possible that Hughes interpreted the popularity of Garvey in Africa as an impulse to network with other members and places of the black diaspora. At this point, we can understand why he advocated for “unity of blacks everywhere.” We should add further that Hughes developed a diasporic consciousness by mingling personally with other intellectuals and artists who promoted the concept of a black diaspora.

Despite being considered white by some Africans, Hughes supported the unity of the black community throughout his entire career. Having been in the belly of the ship – having partaken of the embryonic phase of the formation of Relation – he came to understand that even if the black diaspora was culturally fragmented and diverse, black people outside the U.S. experienced similar forms of racial and social discrimination. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes tells us about Edward, a boy born from a black woman and an Englishman who abandoned mother and son in Africa to return to England (104-105). The boy and his mother found themselves in the awkward situation in which “[t]he whites […] naturally would have nothing to do with them, nor would they give him a job, and the Negroes did not like his mother, because she had lived for years with a white man, so Edward had no friends in the village and almost nobody to talk to” (105). Hughes shows sympathy for the kid’s plight: “poor kid,” he says, “he looked very lonely. As he stood on the dock our ship hauled anchor” (105). The nostalgic image of the ship leaving the African place suggests Hughes’s deep sensibility to problems related to the cultural fragmentation of the African diaspora. The clear-cut contrast between his own reception in Africa and his sensitive treatment of the boy’s predicament – which Hughes demonstrated by commenting on the boy’s loneliness and the indifference of the people in the village – shows that there existed some fundamental intraracial differences within the black diaspora.
Hughes’s diasporic consciousness, however, did not prevent him from picturing the presence of a cohesive community of black people. The cultural climate representing Hughes’s creative and militant background consisted of the ideas elaborated by contemporaries like W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, who as Nathaniel Millet suggests, were crucial figures in the formation of the study of the black diaspora (24). While Hughes experienced firsthand the cultural and social fragmentations intrinsic to the African diaspora, his idea of a unified black people must have appeared feasible to him. Due to his love of traveling, geographical and cultural distances do not seem to have been an issue for Hughes. So, when we read Arnold Rampersad describing Hughes as a well-traveled individual who never lost “his passion for foreign lands, or for poetry” (xii), we can speculate that his love of traveling also inspired his support for a global black community.

Besides meeting other black people in his travels to Africa, Cuba, and Haiti, he also wanted to visit Brazil because “it has a population (I mean a Negro population) as large as America’s, and nobody seems to know much about them,” Hughes wrote to Noël Sullivan on January 31, 1933 (SL 139).³⁹ To Hughes, to travel then was a means to become acquainted with the African diaspora. His desire to encounter blacks outside the U.S. translated into literary projects such as the editing of anthologies of black writers from different countries. In the planning of one of these anthologies (provisionally titled African Treasures), he wrote to the Nigerian author Wole Soyinka on January 31, 1960, “I think this will make not only a rich and stimulating reading experience but also an important expression of what African writers are thinking and saying” (SL 362). He himself translated into English the works of writers like

³⁹ Quoted from the Selected Letters of Langston Hughes edited by Arnold Rampersad, David Roessel, and Christa Fratantoro.
Jacques Roumain (Haiti) and Nicolás Guillén (Cuba), figures of major importance in the Afro-Caribbean literature. As Lorenzo Thomas writes in his essay “Langston Hughes and the African Diaspora’s Everyman,” by assessing the works of black writers in French, Portuguese, and English, Hughes noted that these compositions did not really embody propaganda for African nationalism but rather advocated for *negritude*, a word used to indicate these writers’s pride and love of their African ancestry (Thomas’s emphasis 193).

The pride of being of African descent must have spoken even louder to Hughes when he received letters from enthusiastic readers outside the U.S. These people expressed their gratitude to Hughes for representing their lives in his creative work. In his article “Feeling Diaspora in Africa and Havana” scholar Frank Guridy relates that “on April 22, 1930, Lalita Zamona, an Afro-Cuban woman in Havana wrote a letter to Langston Hughes to [express] her admiration for the way [his] writing style effectively conveyed “the sensation and feelings of the desires, hopes, loves, and ambitions of our race”” (115). The episode is relevant in the sense that the appreciation of Hughes outside the U.S.A. was a process of black diasporization based on a perceived commonality (Guridy 116). On the other hand, this idea of a “perceived commonality” is fully expressed in Afro-Cuban literature, as for instance in the poems of Nicolás Guillén. The friendship with Nicolás Guillén is emblematic of Hughes’s intent to create a global cohort of writers whose political, social, and artistic agenda intersected. When he met Guillén in Cuba in February 1930, Hughes was struck by the brilliance of his lines; “he went to bed thinking about them (as he confided in a brief diary of the visit) and how they might be improved” (Rampersad

---

40 I am thinking here, for instance, of the poem “La muralla” (“The Wall”) where the Afro-Cuban poet imagines the possibility for blacks and whites to cooperate. The first stanza of the poem immediately renders Guillén’s hope for a mutual interaction: “Para hacer esta muralla,/ tráiganme todas las manos:/ los negros, sus manos negras,/ los blancos, sus blancas manos” (“To build this wall,/ bring me all the hands:/ blacks on black hands,/ whites on white hands” [quoted from the collection *La paloma de vuelo popular (The Dove of the Common Flight)*](21) (Losada, 2005).
Eventually, Hughes suggested to Guillén that he might emphasize the rhythm of the Afro-Cuban son in his poetry as he did with blues and jazz. (Rampersad 179).

Literary scholar Edward Mullen notes that, when Guillén first met Hughes, the Afro-Cuban poet was still in a formative stage, but one month after Hughes left Cuba, Guillén published eight dialect poems, Motivos de son, which made a substantial use of neo-African musical forms (Mullen 27). As literary scholar Vera M. Kutzinski observes in The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and Translation in the Americas, on April 21, 1930, Guillén wrote to Hughes the following message: “‘que los poemas de son han gustado extraordinariamente, y han formado un verdadero escándalo, por tratarse de un género completamente nuevo en nuestra literatura’ (‘that the son-poems have been extraordinarily well received, and that they have caused a veritable scandal for having been written in a genre entirely new to our literature’)” (Kutzinski’s emphasis 144). Other scholars like John Patrick Leary, however, are more critical of Hughes’s influence on Guillén’s decision to use the rhythm of the son in his poems. “Guillén asserted that the Motivos were not inspired simply by Hughes’s blues poetry; rather, they were part of a world-wide turn toward lo popular” (Leary’s emphasis 152). Leary is also suspicious of Hughes’s interest in establishing a bridge between Harlem and Havana. According to him, Hughes to some extent imposed his view of American racial issues on the black diaspora in Cuba.

Although scholars are divided over the dynamic of his genuine friendship with Guillén, the gratefulness of Lalita Zamona indicates that, even if Hughes and this woman expressed their African identity in different ways, they could nevertheless understand each other. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah in his Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers, “common understanding” is expressed through what the theorist terms “evaluative language,” which is
“primarily a tool we use to talk with one another” (28). When we speak, Appiah suggests, we load our speech with “vocabulary of value” that elicits a certain response from our interlocutor. Appiah stresses that our response to a movie, painting, story, etc., is shaped by the value terms (language) we use. Evaluative language, Appiah continues, is “one of the central ways we coordinate our lives with one another” (27). So, when we share our ideas with someone, the vocabulary of value fortifies “our common understanding and the value we share” (28). We can readily speculate that the Afro-Cuban reader used a vocabulary of value – which she shared with Hughes – to praise his ability to convey what it meant to be a woman of African descent.

“Engagement with strangers is always going to be engagement with particular strangers; and the warmth that comes from shared identity will often be available,” Appiah writes (98).

In this light, one can claim membership in a diaspora if she shares the same feelings towards specific social issues or even towards a certain type of writing congruent with her culture. In the literary dispositif, Hughes’s global black community certainly intersects with D’Alfonso’s intention of embracing the Italian diaspora both in and outside of Canada. In effect, D’Alfonso shares with Hughes a vocabulary of value. In his heartfelt essay on the publishing world, “Discovering and Publishing Italian/Canadian Writers,” D’Alfonso writes:

I need to talk with my Italian friends in the U.S.A., Germany, France, and Italy […]. I need to see what is happening to my colleagues abroad, say in Australia, Argentina, or Brazil; or it is by going beyond the borders of our little worlds that we shall receive a better reflection of what we really are. I feel something is wrong with the Italian within me, with the North American without me. I need a third person to help me understand (65).

This third person is one of those ‘particular strangers’ of Appiah with whom D’Alfonso shares both his Italian origins and his dedication to his job as an editor. As a line of inquiry, the concept of diaspora helps explain how Hughes and D’Alfonso become intertwined in the literary dispositif. More specifically it is useful to consider that the way in which Hughes imagined
Africa informed and shaped his conception of the U.S. (Westover 1208). This intersection of the global and local, which can be understood in terms of sharing a vocabulary of values, is suitable to comprehend D’Alfonso’s direct involvement with various representations of Italian identity on a global scale—an association which helped the poet to understand his home country a little better. Hughes and D’Alfonso can be said to meet where their investment in a diasporan consciousness allows them to clarify their cultural role in their own country. In the essay, “Pluriculturalism is Becoming a Global Affair,” D’Alfonso even mentions that he “discovered” Canada only when he started to speak Italian (142). Only then was he able to see Canada as made of different idioms and different cultures.

He recognizes the heterogeneity of his own diaspora, especially considering the various writing styles adopted by Canadian authors of Italian descent. Yet, he suggests that even though “[t]he Italic voices do not follow an identical melody, [these] melodies do not antagonize each other […] The view of the world we depict is personal, as disparate as our diversified works” (31). The diversities D’Alfonso sees do not prevent him from positing a global community of Italians. In the introduction to *In Italics*, he writes, “[t]o be an Italian outside Italy, or an Italic, as I like calling it, is an expression of my wish for unity and not for ghettoization and division” (author’s emphasis 20).

To D’Alfonso, Italics are both those living in Italy and those born abroad. Especially in his theoretical work, he advocates for creating unity within the fragmented cultural identities of the global Italian community. In doing so, he tries to reduce the gap between different forms of global culture and local expression. In reference to ethnic minorities, as Simon Harel notes in his *Le voleur de parcours*, in Quebecois literature, this struggle characterizes the arrival of the

---

41 The essay is part of D’Alfonso’s *In Italics: in Defense of Ethnicity.*
42 Quoted from “The Road Between” also in the book *In Italics.*
“stranger” in Montreal. These figures are often simultaneously included and excluded from the city’s life. As a result, the ethnic subject tends to remain in between worlds (and cultures). Yet, ideally this stranger becomes global, “[p]uisque l’étranger vient d’ailleurs, il peut tout aussi bien provenir de partout, ce qui permet de le situer en un hors-lieu commode” (“Since the stranger comes from elsewhere, he can just as well come from everywhere; this places him in a practical outside”) (Harel 67). By creating the diasporic category of Italic, D’Alfonso resolves the tension between being an outsider and an insider. He forges an ideal category of Italian people scattered around the world. That they do not have a homeland also implies that they do not have an official language through which communicate. The Italics must often write in another language to express themselves effectively. This is one of the reasons why D’Alfonso continues to write in both French and English. According to Alessandra Ferraro in Écriture migrante et translinguisme au Québec (Migrant Writings and Translinguism in Quebec):

[L]a recherche d’Antonio Alfonso se nourrit du désir d’atteindre une langue utopique qui ne correspond ni au français ni à l’anglais, ni à l’italien, ni non plus à son dialecte maternel; il s’agit d’un idiome qui le comprend tous, en les harmonisant dans une mélodie que tous prouvent entendre et qu’on peut identifier à la langue de la poésie (18).

Antonio D’Alfonso’s research focuses on creating a utopic language which is neither French nor English, nor Italian, nor the dialect of origin; it is rather an idiom comprehending all of these languages, harmonizing all of them in a melody understandable by everybody and that we can identify in poetic language.

To understand what Ferraro means by interpreting D’Alfonso’s usage of multiple languages as an attempt to create a utopic language, we should consider the historical debate on the official languages of Canada.

In 1969 the Canadian government passed Bill 63, also known as Loi pour promouvoir la langue française au Québec (or Law to promote the French language in Quebec), which made English and French equally official languages of Quebec. Parents and guardians of children
living in Quebec could choose whether to send their kids to a French or an English school. Apparently, in Canada language issues are strictly connected to politics. This is particularly true in the province of Quebec where nationalist movements continue to seek a separation from the rest of the country. In Quebec, then the question of the language is as much a political issue as it is a cultural and a literary one. Given this state of affairs, D’Alfonso refuses to choose one language over another, opting for a more nomadic stance. He argues that even in areas where only one idiom prevails and functions as the official language of a country, it cannot fully represent all the cultural and linguistic nuances of a people. Actually, he urges us to speak and write beyond geopolitical linguistic boundaries. In his essay “Poetica del plurilinguismo” (“Poetics of Plurilingualism”), he even proposes to “raccomandare ai giovani di essere ostinati non insegnando loro ad immergersi in un universo che è già il loro. È invece preferibile invitarli a camminare verso un mondo che non è il loro, che non assomiglia in nulla al modo in cui sono cresciuti, il contrario di quanto fanno la famiglia e la scuola” (26). In order to appreciate D’Alfonso’s work, we should remember that that language is not his only artistic medium, for he has also relied on photography to convey those worlds he sets out to explore.

In the 1980s, when there was a strong revival of nationalist sentiment in Quebec, the phenomenon of migrant literature also gained critical attention. As Ferraro reminds us, the literature of the time comprises the works of writers whose cultural origin was not strictly Quebecois, a phenomenon which challenged the notion of the country’s official culture and national identity. We learn with Ferraro that in this period the concept of “transculture” was

43 “[R]ecommend youth to be assertive by not teaching them to plunge into a world they already know. It should rather be more attractive to them to walk towards a world not their own, representing nothing they already know, quite the contrary of what family and school do.” This essay is published in the book of the same title, **Poetica del Plurilinguismo** (Samuele Editore, 2015) also includes the essay “Lode al pluriculturalismo” (“Praise for Pluriculturalism”).
coined (Ferraro 13). The term seeks to identify a process of cultural osmosis of sorts, through which one’s heritage influences the hostland culture and vice versa. The migrant subjects, previously confined to the cultural margins, now took center stage, becoming crucial to both the literary production and the political debate of the time.

In those years, together with other transcultural writers, D’Alfonso started publishing a multilingual literary journal titled *Vice Versa*. In that same period, he was also in the forefront in fighting to develop a specific Italian Canadian literary tradition, then a novelty in the Canadian literary tradition. To quote from Ferraro again:

[L]e choix de publier une revue en trois langues, français, anglais et italien, tout en ayant le mérite de déplacer et dédramatiser la tension anglais-français qui a toujours parcouru la société québécoise, vise à introduire la communauté italienne en tant que partenaire actif dans la culture du Québec (30-31).

The decision to publish a journal in three languages, French, English, and Italian, while having the merit of displacing and downplaying the tension French-English, which has always been present in the Quebecois society, aimed to introduce the Italian community as an active participant in Quebecois culture.

Not only did D’Alfonso try recognizing diasporic subjects by showing their literary value, but on a more militant level, he also sought to publish the works of Quebecois writers and intellectuals of Italian origins to show how important they were for the Canadian culture. D’Alfonso tried to accomplish all of this by calling for “a forum of thinkers, translators, writers, and critics who will concentrate their efforts in the promotion of brave new and historical ideas […]. We have to come up with a definition of ourselves and of the work we are doing so that we can give the key to understanding our communities to other North American cultures” (64). In other words, he urged intellectuals of Italian descent not be afraid to show who they were. In effect, he also tried to demonstrate their worth as writers and poets, by freeing them from being irreversibly trapped

---

44 From “Discovering and Publishing Italian/Canadian Writers,” included in *In Italics*. 80

In his manifesto, Hughes strongly criticizes the fact that many African American artists sought credibility and success by imitating Euro-American works of art. Hughes was very critical of the idea of passing for white and sought to free black art from white influences. Black artists, he believed, did not need to be afraid of showing what they were. To promote a uniquely black art, he pointed to black vernacular forms as best suited to depicting the plight of the average African American. As he put it, “[s]o I am ashamed for the black poet who says, ‘I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,’ as though his own racial world were not interesting as any other world” (43). Predating D’Alfonso’s idea by about half a century, Hughes, pretty much like D’Alfonso, suggests that “[a]n artist must be free to choose what he does […], but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose” (43). In refusing to be themselves, African American artists risked losing not only their cultural identity but also their freedom to become what they wanted to be. Throughout his life, Hughes never changed opinion on this matter. Indeed, at one point he refused to accommodate a white patron who sought to transform him into someone he did not want to be.

The purpose of the above discussion on the diaspora as a thread of discourse and theme is meant to shed further light on the migrant experiences of Ungaretti and Hughes insofar as they form part of a common site or juncture in the construction of the literary dispositif. The disappointments that Italy and Africa, respectively, caused them (which in and of itself constitutes a juncture of biographical and literary itineraries) encourages us to see how these reactions form a point of convergence. By following the diasporic line of inquiry, we can see how Hughes’s understanding of Africa intersects D’Alfonso’s sense of a global Italian
community. This concept is crucial in D’Alfonso’s intellectual activity and helps us to identify an important moment of literary entanglement. By now we have at least two points of interconnection: one joining Ungaretti to Hughes and another joining Hughes to D’Alfonso. Summing things up, these junctures outline the existence of an African Italian American commonality. Of course, the threads in this skein of interconnectivity are not the only ones. The next section of the chapter will identify other moments in which the authors converge.

**An Italian-African-American Double Consciousness**

In the essay “Of Our Spiritual Striving,” from *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois talks about a “second-sight” that allows black people to see the American world from two different perspectives. He likens this mental attribute to a “peculiar sensation,” which he calls double consciousness and defines in the following terms:

> [It is a] sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (5).

Although the idea of double consciousness gained momentum in African American scholarship of Hughes’s day, this notion can be appropriately applied to the experience of those who exist in-between cultures. The concept of double consciousness helps us understand how people with a hybrid cultural identity relate to their hostlands. As the term itself implies, this second sight is a form of *consciousness* – consciousness of using and thinking in more than one language, of living in and out of more than one culture; in short, of being one without ever being only one.

According to Samir Dayal’s in his article “Diaspora and Double Consciousness,” “we can learn something from studying diaspora as a figure of double consciousness. The diasporic, always in the waiting rooms of the nation-space, is preserved at least from the illusion of a fixed
identity and a prefabricated cultural role” (51). People belonging to a particular diaspora are traditionally understood as sharing the same religion, culture, and language. Today, however, we are fully aware that these categories do not exhaust the ways in which we can talk about diasporic experiences. Since the cultural identity of a diaspora is always multifaceted, we can even speculate that in effect one dispersal is made up of the sum of countless individual experiences. To quote D’Alfonso, “parlare della purezza della cultura è un paradosso; una cultura pura non esiste, la cultura è contaminata […]. La cultura è sempre costituita da più culture” (43).\(^{45}\)

In a diasporic context, double consciousness is a tool people use to mediate between their ancestral and hostland culture. Westover suggests that, by employing his double consciousness, Hughes was able to “criticiz[e] the failures of the American democracy and challeng[e] the United States to live up to its founding dream of freedom” (1208). Those equipped with a double consciousness can understand their homelands through hostland’s standards and vice versa. To the writers of the Harlem Renaissance (Hughes included), Africa, according to literary scholar Trudier Harries, was “the imaginative arena in which a speaker in a poem or a character in a text can shed the clothing of civilization and live a simpler, more natural, more uninhibited life.”\(^{46}\) Because it incarnated the ideal of a desirable life, black artists of the time rarely tested their vision of Africa, whereas life in the U.S. was constantly under their scrutiny. Ungaretti’s vision of Africa influenced his whole career. As many other diasporic writers who often tend to idealize

\(^{45}\) “To speak of the purity of culture is a paradox. There is not such a thing as a pure culture […]. Culture is more than culture. Culture is always a combination of many cultures. Culture is essentially pluralist” (13). Quoted from the essay “Lode al plurilinguismo” (“Praise for Plurilinguism”). The English version of this essay has been kindly sent to me by the author. The translation is D’Alfonso’s. The essay has been presented by the author at a conference in October 2014.

\(^{46}\) Quoted from the article “The Image of Africa in the Literature of the Harlem Renaissance” available online at www.nationalhumanitiescenter.org.
their birthplace, images and memories of Africa found their own peculiar space in Ungaretti’s works.

Talking about Africa the poet says in an interview: “l’Africa musulmana, resterà costantemente presente nella mia poesia con la sua profonda malinconia, con l’aridità del deserto, con un sentimento bruciante. […] ci sono tutte queste cose che sono rimaste vive. Il sole, il sole… tutte queste cose non potevano non rimanere vive nella mia poesia.”\(^{47}\) In his writing, Ungaretti attempts to synthesize images of his African origins with Italian images and places. This is particularly true in his travel writing *Il deserto e dopo (The Desert and After)*, which among the others, includes “Tre Memorie Egiziane” (“Three Egyptian Memories”) where in “Roma Africana” (“African Rome”), the poet compares “remoti giardini” (“distant gardens”) with piazza Santa Croce (7).\(^{48}\) His travelogue can be perceived, according to Paola Montefoschi, as an “avventura del linguaggio, incessante risemantizzazione, ricerca di parole ingenue, attraversamento degli idiomì” (“linguistic adventure, restless semantic research, a quest for words and idiomatic crossings”) (XX). Linguistic research was very important also for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. In most of the literature they produced, the image of Africa became either an endearing memory or an idealized place that the authors sought to discover their roots. Misplaced like these African American authors, Ungaretti too remembers Africa as if it were a dream, and therefore a place impossible to find elsewhere. This sense of nostalgia is clear in his prose poem “L’Affricano a Parigi,” where the poet writes: “Chi dall’esultanza di mari inabissati in cieli scenda a questa città trova una terra opaca e una fuligine feroce. Lo spazio è

\(^{47}\)“Muslim African characterized by a profound melancholy, the desert aridity, and a burning sentiment, will always be a constant presence in my poetry. […] All these elements are still alive in it. The sun… the sun, all these things could but influence my poetry.” The interview is available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=weZWrK2zG3Y&t=4s.

\(^{48}\) Ungaretti’s travel writing is collected in *Vita d’un uomo: viaggi e lezioni (Life of a man: Travels and Lectures)* edited by Paola Montefoschi (Mondadori, 2001).
finito. Concesso mai non mi sarà più un allarme spregiudicato né in quel sole che scatenava e
accomunava felici cose, incantevoli soste?” (92), indicating that that the sun, associated with his
childhood, is already becoming a vital memory, which will accompany Ungaretti’s spiritual and
literary travels forever. 49

Ungaretti used his own form of double consciousness both to praise and criticize not only
Italy but also Egypt. His travelogue Il Deserto e dopo (The Desert and After) clearly illustrates
the double consciousness he possessed, which is especially revealing in the articles regarding
Egypt and Italy. 50 Although fairly short, these reports demonstrate Ungaretti’s through
understanding of both countries. As critics have pointed out, these journalistic pieces were often
written in the same refined language the poet uses in his verse. Thus, Biagia Marniti (a.k.a.
Biagia Masulli), former student of Ungaretti, in her short piece “Ungaretti prosatore” (“Ungaretti
Prose Writer”) values these texts as poetry “per la forza sintetica delle immagini” (“because of
the synthetic power of its images”) (273). Again, we have an example here of how Italian critics
have tended to approach the work of Ungaretti, invariably stressing a philological point of view.
But the cultural dimension imbedded in Il deserto e dopo should be equally valued. In effect, this
dimension gives Ungaretti the authority to criticize his birthplace and his ancestral land and to
express his emotional attachment to both simultaneously.

By the time he wrote the travelogue, Ungaretti had already left Egypt for a while, had
lived in France for some time, and had settled semi-permanently in Italy. At this point in his
career, his double consciousness was fully developed. In the item “Per mare interno” (“By

49 “Anybody descending from the elation of buried seas in high skies onto this city finds an opaque land and a
ferocious smut. The space is finite. Will I ever be allowed an unscrupulous complaint not even in front of that
ravaging sun that was making things happy and breaks fascinating?”
50 In this book (published in 1961), the poet explores several places: Egypt, South and Central Italy, The
Netherlands, and Corsica, was published in 1961. It represents a collection of articles Ungaretti wrote for the
newspaper Gazzetta del Popolo between 1931 and 1935.
Internal Sea”), he describes Alexandria in these terms: “Com’è disordinata questa città! Tutte queste lingue che s’incrociano; queste insegne, italiane, francesi, arabe, greche, armene, delle botteghe; l’architettura, il gusto! […] Non solo quale rancore m’invade, d’amarla, questa mia città natale!” (33). His childhood in Egypt was enough for Ungaretti to create an Arabic African consciousness, but now, after almost twenty years away from Alexandria, having been directly in contact with European standards, he saw his birthplace as “messy.” Furthermore, these words suggest that Ungaretti almost felt ashamed for his emotional attachment to Alexandria; for he writes that he still loved his hometown, but not without perceiving his affection as a “grudge.”

The disappointment that his love for Alexandria caused him is reiterated in the poem “1914-1915” written after “Per mare interno,” in 1932:

Sono d’un altro sangue e non ti persi,  
Ma in quella solitudine di nave  
Più dell’usato tornò malinconica  
La delusione che tu sia, straniera,  
La mia città natale (161).

I am made of another blood and I did not lose you,  
But in the loneliness of that ship  
Melancholy returned all worn out  
The disappointment that you are, stranger,  
My birthplace.

The ship Ungaretti is probably referring to is the one he took the previous year to Egypt and from which he wrote his travelogue. The stanza indicates that, even though Ungaretti did not have Egyptian blood in him, he could still claim his membership in the culture (“I don’t lose you”).

51 “What a messy city! All these languages overlapping; these signs of Italian, French, Arabic, Greek, Armenian, stores; the architecture, the style! […] I don’t know what kind of grudge gets hold of me while I still love my native city.”
52 The notes to the Mondadori edition of Il Deserto e dopo indicate the intertextuality existing between Ungaretti’s prose and the poems written after his sojourn in Alexandria (e.g. note 2 at page 1158). The poem belongs to the collection Sentimento del tempo (Sense of Time).
Indeed, the poet is overcome by melancholy – probably on his way back to Europe: the first stanza captures Alexandria in the moment in which it is becoming only a memory in the poet’s mind, an image which per se evokes the quick *incedere* (proceeding) of the boat from the port of Alexandria. It is then he realizes that his birthplace is becoming alien to him. In *Il Deserto e dopo*, we no longer find the young poet of *Il porto sepolto* who used to consider Egypt a place where “Il sole rapisce la città” (“The sun steals the city”). Now the sun of Egypt no longer blurs geographical contours, thereby revealing unknown spaces to explore. Now Alexandria and the memory of the desert are represented through the filter of double consciousness, which allows Ungaretti to rethink his responding to the place.

In the opening of the article “Una grande avventura” (“A Big Adventure”), written in Alexandria on July 11, 1931, Ungaretti says: “Ora ho un sogno perché ho risentito il profumo delle alghe di questo mare. Un profumo unico al mondo. La sua freschezza pungente qui è enorme, come la nausea che gli è legata” (34). The ocean bathing Alexandria’s shores informs Ungaretti’s dreams, but his sentiment towards that city remains ambivalent; for the algae’s odor is unpleasant (“pungent freshness”) to his nostrils. In the second section of the article “Difesa dello spirito greco” (“In Defense of the Greek Spirit”), which stresses the influence of the Greek culture on Alexandria, on the contrary, Ungaretti praises his birthplace as an excellent example of ancient civilization: “Qui si osa perfino sfidare il sentimento religioso, si dà principio alla pratica dell’anatomia e perfino della vivisezione. Si fa trovare alle scienze il loro primo sviluppo positivo. Alexandria vide nascere il proprio spirito critico” (36). Here Alexandria almost

---

53 Opening line of the poem “Ricordo d’Africa” (“Memory of Africa”) (11).
54 “Now I have a dream because I smell again the fragrance of the algae in this sea. It is a unique fragrance. Its own pungent freshness is enormous, as the nausea attached to it.”
55 “Here they even dared religious belief, starting anatomical procedures and even vivisection. Sciences found their positive development. Alexandria saw that its critical skills were born.”
incarnates the attitude of a pre-Enlightenment Egypt. Ungaretti praises the fact that the people of the time increasingly acquired a critical approach to life while surrendering their religious superstitions (“here they even dared religious belief”). Ungaretti’s ambivalence about his birthplace suggests his full possession of a double consciousness through which he assesses the world around him. By criticizing a detail like Alexandria’s odorous algae, he does not mean to demean the city; he rather shows to what extent he understands his birthplace, especially now that its image was filtered through his European experience.

As a result of his stay in France and Italy, Ungaretti was able to stress specific features of Alexandria that make it attractive (its ancient history and civilization) and others calling its beauty into question (the topography of the place). With regard to his ancestral land, in the poem “1914-1915,” Italy appears as a “patria fruttuosa, rinascevi prode, / Degna che uno per te muoia d’amore” (“fecund homeland, you were reborn proud, / Deserving of our dying of love for you”) (162). Yet, this profound affection for his homeland did not prevent the poet from speaking critically about Italy. In the article, “Vesuvio” (written on June 2, 1932), he unflinchingly describes the coarseness and the misery of the town of Pugliano (near Salerno, South Italy):

Una strada grigia, secca, disordinata, che è – col suo pozzo, con le tre campane a portata di mano (nel vuoto di tre assi di muro sopra un tetto, pronte a suonare a martello) – piuttosto il cortile di un casamento popolare. Due o tre venditori di ricotta – non ne hanno un gran quantità […] stanno li aspettando il Messia, avvolti in quelle mantelline da soldato – possibile siano ancora quelli della guerra? (165).

A gray, dry, messy street, which – with its well and its three bells very close (built within the space of three planks of a wall on a roof, ready to play hammer) – resembles rather the courtyard of a public housing. Two or three men selling ricotta – in very little quantity […] stand there, patiently waiting for the Messiah, wrapped in their little soldier-like capes – is it possible they are still those from the war?

The passage illustrates the typical urban setting and lifestyle of small towns in southern Italy. To Ungaretti accustomed to living in big cities like Alexandria, Paris, and Rome, Pugliano appears
as simple as a single street with a well and a church. The image indicates that the Pugliano residents are very religious. The church, indeed, is built so close to their homes that when the bells ring the walls of their houses may shackle (“ready to play hammer”). That these people are very religious is also indicated by the image of the “two or three men.” Selling their meager store of ricotta, these individuals can hardly make ends meet and have little hope to improve their living conditions. Yet, it is equally clear that they keep believing in something better and greater than themselves (“waiting patiently for the Messiah”). To reinforce the image of the town’s poverty, Ungaretti suggests that these persons do not have the means to buy new clothes, for they still wear the same capes they used during the war.

This scene is a bit surprising to Ungaretti who wonders what causes so much indigence. Rather than judging these men, he blames the Italian society for not giving them the possibility of ameliorating their living conditions. The poet’s resentment is subtly embedded in the description of the men and in the rhetorical question at the end of the passage. That Ungaretti is critical of the Italian politics and society becomes even clearer if we consider that, in one of the sections of Sentimento del tempo, “La morte meditata” (“Death Contemplated”), written that same year, he sees his ancestors almost befriending death. This causes in the poet a sense of disillusionment towards the greatness he used to attribute to his Italian lineage.

“La morte meditata” consists of six cantos. In the first canto, Ungaretti defines death as a “madre velenosa degli evi” (“malicious mother of the past”) (181); in the secondo canto, death (the implied subject) is again defined as “la buia veglia dei padri” (“the dark vigil of our ancestors”) (182). In the third canto, it becomes “la beffa infinita dei padri” (“the infinite joke of our fathers”) (183); and in the sixth canto, Ungaretti concludes: “Con voi, fantasmi, non ho mai ritegno,/ E dei vostri rimorsi ho pieno il cuore/ Quando fa giorno” (“With you phantoms, I
always have little control of myself./ You live your own regrets in my heart/ At the break of dawn”) (186). Ungaretti can barely contain his resentment at his ancestors, so he criticizes them throughout the poems and eventually bursts out saying that now he has to carry inside his heart the burden they have left to their progeny (which includes the inhabitants of Pugliano). Ungaretti can no longer contain his feelings. Piccioni defines the Ungaretti of this period as “un poeta dominato dalla furia dell’ispirazione: il suo lavoro è irruente, non mai metodico: lunghi silenzi, lunghi periodi di ispirazione incessante” (“a poet daunted by an inspirational fury: his work is impulsive, never methodical: long periods of silence, long periods of continual inspiration”) (146).

Looking simultaneously at Il porto sepolto and at Il sentimento del tempo, we see that Ungaretti’s opinion of Italy as a promised land changed significantly with time. Indeed, in an earlier poem like “Italia” (“Italy”), we are presented with a young soldier who not only is fighting in the trenches but who feels so affectionate towards Italy that he compares his uniform to an ancestral crib where he can rest peacefully: “E in questa uniforme/ di tuo soldato/ mi riposo/ come fosse la culla/ di mio padre” (“and in this uniform/ of soldier of yours/ I rest/ as if it were the crib/ of my father”) (57). “Italia” evokes Ungaretti’s pride in wearing the uniform of an Italian soldier, and he reposes in his uniform like a baby in his “crib.” In my article “Atlantic Reflections on Giuseppe Ungaretti: the Poet, the Journeys, the Man,” I suggest that the structure of the poem actually raises questions about Ungaretti’s patriotism (7). Here, however, I would like to consider a more traditional interpretation of the poem, one now fully embraced by Ungaretti scholars.56 But following the poet’s diasporic journey and the informing effects of

56 One of the most recent articles on the subject is Rosario Gennaro’s “La grande guerra e l’italianità: il discorso nazionale di Giuseppe Ungaretti” (“The Big War and Italianity: the National Discourse of Giuseppe Ungaretti”) (69-86).
double consciousness, we begin to see how his juvenile idea of Italy evolves into almost a total rejection of his heritage, as in “La morte meditata” shows so well.

Ungaretti’s double consciousness reappears in the article “Il lavoro degli italiani” (“The Work of the Italians”). This time, his point of view is that of an Italian immigrant who finds it necessary to emphasize how important the manual labor of the Italians was to the urban development of Egypt. Ungaretti tells us that his family belonged to this category of Italians: “[M]io padre,” he says, “venne in Egitto insieme ad un fratello per i lavori del Canale del Suez” (“[M]y father came to Egypt with his brother to work at the construction of the Suez Canal”) (65). He goes on describing the great things Italians did there and suggests that more should be said about the relationship between Italy and Egypt. Ungaretti writes:

 [...] l’Egitto è un Paese al quale gl’italiani hanno dato, senza ricavarci grandi guadagni, molto lavoro, col sacrificio qualche volta della loro vita [...]. [V]oglio dire che il popolo italiano che veniva qui dalla Sicilia, dalla Calabria o dalla Toscana, recava amore al lavoro esemplare. Non so se chi emigra appartenga ad una specie di uomini più attivi degli altri. Il fatto sta che per opera degli umili, c’è in Egitto verso l’Italiano da parte del ceto popolare un moto affettuoso che ci dà in questo paese un vero vantaggio (65).

[...] Egypt is a country to which Italians gave a lot without receiving too much in return if only a lot of work for which, sometimes, they lost their lives. I mean to say that people from Sicily, Calabria, or Tuscany carried with them a passion for excellent workmanship. I am not sure if emigrants belong to a kind of individuals more active than others. The thing is that because of the activity of these humble people, in Egypt ordinary people like the Italians very much, and this gives us a significant advantage in this country.

Here Ungaretti shows profound respect for the hard work of his compatriots. Like his father, many of these immigrants were literally consumed by their work. It implies that Italian immigrants were used to enduring tribulations even when their only prospect was that of receiving little in return. Ungaretti describes these immigrants as almost resigned to their destiny. In his memoir, Joseph Luzzi calls this attitude la miseria (the misery), which, according to the
author is “a pervasive belief born of poverty that things will go worse than you expect them to and that fate is not your friend” (9). In Italian culture, misery is like a sense of one feeling cursed by fate. Noting that many of these workers died on the job, Ungaretti discloses one of the harshest truths about immigration, to wit, that many like his father died too prematurely to see their hard labor bear fruit.

In narratives that do not belong directly to the literature of the Italian diaspora, the theme of the misery of the Italians abroad is often implied or implicit. For instance, in Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*, Italians are not always assisted by *la fortuna* (*the fate*). Aside from the owner of Bartocci & Company (the shop in which Eilis Lacey, the young Irish immigrant and the main protagonist of the novel finds a job), who has been relatively successful, the Italians are generally depicted as manual workers and washerwomen. To make ends meet, the latter iron the clothes of other immigrants. So, Italian women iron Eilis’s clothes “very beautifully and put starch into her dresses and blouses, which she loved” (59). For Tony, the man Eilis falls in love with, Tóibín reserves a humble destiny as well: second generation of Italians from Brooklyn, he works as a plumber. After many years in America and after bearing four children, his parents were still living in a small apartment. When Eilis meets her boyfriend’s family for the first time, she thinks that the kitchen is one of the rooms of the house, but “slowly she understood that one door led to a bedroom where the boys slept and another door led to the bathroom” (153). The kitchen is indeed the main room in Tony’s apartment. To clarify further the family’s living arrangement, one of Tony’s brothers “explained to [Eilis] that each night their parents slept in the corner of the kitchen in a bed that he showed her was on its side against the wall, discreetly covered” (154).
Ungaretti’s childhood home appeared to be in an even worse condition than Tony’s apartment in Brooklyn. In the article “Chiaro di luna,” the poet claims that he lived in a “baracca con la corte e le galline e tre piante di fichi fatte venire dalla campagna di Lucca […]” (“a shack with a courtyard and chickens and three fig trees, arrived directly from Lucca’s countryside”) (70). It implies that his parents’ hard work did not guarantee them the comforts associated with a lifestyle above levels of poverty. But Ungaretti suggests another important trait of the Italian diaspora: by introducing in her garden the three fig trees, Maria Lunardini sought to reproduce familiar features from her hometown. The desire to create a backyard like those in Italy is typical of diasporic lives. The image of recreating a little piece of one’s homeland in another country is a subject often explored in the literature of the diasporas. In Luzzi’s My Two Italies the author mentions that his father, who always worried about feeding his family, used to keep an “orto” (“vegetable garden”) in the backyard. “While my friends with grandparents from Sicily talked about Italian food, my parents produced it […]. One year, the local paper took a photo of my father and his prizewinner, five-foot-long gourds,” Luzzi writes (123). Luzzi’s narrative suggests a sense of nostalgia that Ungaretti also evokes with the image of the fig trees.

While the reproduction of a little piece of one’s homeland in the hostland may indicate an emotional and cultural attachment to one’s ancestral country, it also suggests how difficult it often is for immigrants and migrants to adapt to new landscapes. On the other hand, the process of cultural assimilation is rarely easy and without pain. Actually, in D’Alfonso’s poem “Italia Mea Amore,” assimilation constitutes a social end in itself, one obtained by violent means and even torture. In this heartfelt composition, D’Alfonso describes the way in which

---

57 In his memoir The Prince of los Cocuyos: a Miami Childhood (HarperCollins, 2014) the American Cuban poet Richard Blanco remembers that, when he was a little kid, his family transformed his courtyard into a little farm trying to replicate the one they owned in Cuba. This reference should give a further idea of the literary network that the literary dispositif is able to reveal among various traditions.
Italians were integrated in Canada. The double consciousness – the heightened lucidity –
D’Alfonso’s persona possesses in this verse reveals to which extent the poet reacts against
cultural assimilation. Fully aware of being both Quebecois and Italian, the poet signs his name
with the word “Amore,” expressing D’Alfonso’s ability to see through the veil, as Du Bois
would put it. D’Alfonso writes:

Ils ont changé mon nom,
ils ont coupé les boucles de mes cheveux.
Ils ont ri de moi
parce que je ne m’habillais pas comme eux,
parce que je ne parlais pas comme eux,
parce que je n’étais ni noir ni blanc (69).

They changed my name,
they cut the curls from my hair.
They laughed in my face
because I didn’t dress like them,
because I didn’t speak like them,
because I was neither black nor white (84).58

In these lines, the Quebecois poet realizes what “Ils” have truly done to him, portrayed here
almost as a social martyr. D’Alfonso begins immediately accusing “ils” for having changed his
identity (his name) and his physical appearance (“they cut the curls from my hair”).

The first two lines evoke the experience of many Italian immigrants in North America.
While the first verse may refer to D’Alfonso’s juvenile look (when he was young, as one picture
on his personal website shows, he used to wear long and curly hair), making the poem part of an
autobiographical chronicle, it can also refer to those Italian immigrants from southern Italy, who
generally had thicker, wiry hair and saw their name changed because Anglo American
immigration officers did not know how to transcribe Italian names. To render these names more
accessible to an English-speaking interlocutor was the first major step in an often harsh process

58 Translate into English by D’Alfonso himself in The Other Shore.
of assimilation. Also, by claiming “I was neither black nor white,” D’Alfonso is referring to the skin tones of immigrants coming from southern Italy. Generally, these immigrants were darker than the average Scots or English Canadian and were therefore considered neither white nor black. On the other hand, they were not considered mulatto either, because they were not born from mixed marriages. Nancy Carnevale, whom I cited at the beginning of this chapter, reminds us that Italian Americans and African Americans often share common physical characteristics. She suggests that at the turn of the twentieth century, a black woman tried to pass as Italian American in the urban North (543). But D’Alfonso’s reference to skin color also suggests that for the Canadian government it was often difficult to categorize Italian immigrants, implying that people like D’Alfonso inevitably end up eluding racial and ethnic standards. Indeed, despite all of the measures that in the poem Canadian society adopted to restrain him, he can eventually become what he wants to be.

The way in which “ils” have tried to assimilate Italians in Canada is fully rendered in the following lines:

Ils m’ont mis le pain dans la bouche
Pour me dire ensuite que je l’avais volé
...
Ils m’ont donné’ un diplôme pour avoir desappris
ma langue maternelle et mon histoire.
Ils m’ont appris a parler, blasphemer, etudier,
voler, travailler, penser
avec leur langue, avec leur historie (69-70).

They put bread in my mouth
and told me I stole it
...
They gave me a diploma
for losing my mother tongue and history.
They taught me how to speak, swear,
study, steal, work and think
in their language and history (84).
Here the poem focuses on how systematic some methods of assimilation can be. At first, by giving bread to these poor immigrants, “ils” appear to be at least supportive of their food culture (it is well known that Italians prefer bread and pasta above everything else), but then, as if they had a change of heart, “ils” suddenly accused them of stealing the very same bread that was initially received. To understand the extent to which this betrayal affected the Italian community in Canada, we should remember that, in June 1940, the Canadian government decided to intern Italian Canadians. In his essay “A Tangled Knot: Prelude to 10 June 1940,” Angelo Principe observes that this drastic measure was the result of such factors as the activities inspired by fascist propaganda and an ambiguous Canadian policy towards fascist supporters in Canada (27). By trying to contain politically subversive activities in Canada, the government perceived many as ‘enemy alien,’ but most of these people were not in the least involved in political activities. As Principe notes, the government measures were so broad that almost any Italian was treated as an enemy. Consequently, thousands of Italians were unjustly interned in concentration camps (42).

The idea of interning, arresting, cleansing Italian ethnicity is one of the major themes of D’Alfonso’s Bruco, a movie about a writer named Tony Amoroso, interpreting a caterpillar (bruco, in Italian) that will eventually transform himself into a butterfly. Before he achieves his final goal, however, the police will arrest, interrogate, and brainwash him, so that for some time Tony will be speaking an official language (French) renouncing his multicultural identity. The movie means to illustrate the story we have been told in “Italia Mea Amore.”

In the poem, “ils” demand that immigrants learn the official language, resulting in the likely loss of their ancestral history. D’Alfonso even goes as far as to say that “ils” lied about Italy, as “Ils t’ont appelée putain, voleuse, ivrogne,/ drogue, hypocrite, terroriste, fanatique” (“They told me you were a whore/ a crook, a drunkard, an addict/ a hypocrite, a terrorist, a
religious fanatic” (85)) (70). But the fact that D’Alfonso possesses a double consciousness helps him embrace a richer identity, true to himself. The poem ends with the author writing “amore” (“love”) next to his name indicating that he is now ready to claim his identity by signing cultural documents with his real name.

Due to his double consciousness, D’Alfonso does not have any problem declaring his affection for his hometown, as it occurs in the poem “Montréal,” in the collection Comment ça se passe (Getting on with Politics). The poem forcefully expresses D’Alfonso’s hybrid identity. However, his Italian and Canadian identities do no longer compete with each other but work quite harmoniously together, side by side. Thus in the opening of the poem he compares, Montreal to an Italian grandmother, “Montréal c’est une grand-mère italienne penchée/ qui cueille une tomate dans un jardin d’été” (“Montreal is a stooped Italian grandmother/ who picks a tomato in a summer garden”) (11). In doing so, D’Alfonso appears to be claiming his ethnic origins. The bucolic image of the woman picking a tomato in a summer garden suggests a sense of tranquility deriving perhaps from a poetic double consciousness. Contrary to the bread that the poet was forced to eat in “Italia Mea Amore,” the tomato now becomes a source of cultural nutrition for the poet. The image of Italian grandmothers indulging their grandchildren with wholesome meals is a well-known cultural stereotype. Whatever the woman plans to make with the tomato, it will help to nourish D’Alfonso because it has come to represent a kind of love that only a grandmother is able to give. Contrary to the bread “ils/” put in his mouth in the previous poem, the tomato actually energizes D’Alfonso’s spirit to such a degree that, in the sixth stanza

59 By characterizing Italy as a woman, D’Alfonso appeals to the Italian literary tradition, perhaps intending to criticize it. When he says, “They called you whore,” he is recalling Dante’s apostrophe to Italy in Canto VI of Purgatorio, in which, among the others, the Florentine compares the country to a prostitute. Based on D’Alfonso’s formulation of “Italic,” the allusion to Dante reinforces the idea that linguistic canons alone do not guarantee the survival of the Italian culture.

60 Although Getting with Politics (Exile Editions, 2002) contains most of the poems in Comment ça se passe (Éditions du Noroît, 2001), it does not include an English version of “Montréal.”
of the poem, he likens Montreal to “un fleur de lys qu’on arrache/ de la bouche des jeunes mariés” (“a lily that we snatch/ from the mouth of newlyweds”) (11).

Although this image resonates with the line “[i]ls m’ont mis le pain dans la bouche” and with the act of torture implied throughout “Italia Mea Amore,” the lily in “Montréal” indicates that now, about fifteen years later, the poet has finally found a way to wear his hybrid identity with ease. The act of snatching the flower from the newlyweds’s mouth becomes a fit metaphor for his tough relation to his Quebecois homeland. If not altogether a rebirth, the act can certainly be considered the beginning of a life as promising as that of the poem’s newlywed couple.

Attuned to his double consciousness, the poem’s persona ends with these words: “Montréal c’est là où je suis né l’apatride/ Montréal c’est là où l’on va m’enterrer” (“Montreal, it is there were I was born without homeland/ Montreal, it is there where you have to bury me”) (12). D’Alfonso wants to be buried in that city, meaning that ultimately he belongs to its soil. The English word “bury,” in the translation of the last two lines of the poem, hardly renders the earthly connotation embedded in the French verb “interrer” which, like the Italian “interrare,” emphasizes the dissolution of the body into the earth, returning fully to land. (One could perhaps use the English verb “inter,” but at the expense of the poem’s stylistic simplicity).

To be sure, the idea of being interred in Montreal complicates the double consciousness D’Alfonso has demonstrated to possess. As in “Italia Mia Amore,” the poetic closure of “Montréal” resonates again with the Italian poetic tradition. This time, however, the source of inspiration seems to be the pre-romantic Ugo Foscolo in his long poem Dei Sepolcri (Of the Sepulchers), written in 1806 in response to the Napoleonic edict of Saint-Cloud which ordered that burial services be performed outside of the city walls. Foscolo saw this new law as a
violation of people’s right to be interred within their hometown. But above all, he considered it a
violation of the dead’s right to be mourned by those left behind. So Foscolo writes:

Non vive ei forse anche sotterra, quando
gli sarà muta l’armonia del giorno,
se può destarla con soavi cure
nella mente de’ suoi? Celeste è questa
corrispondenza d’amorosi sensi,
celeste dote è negli umani; e spesso
per lei si vive con l’amico estinto
e l’estinto con noi, se pia la terra
che lo raccolse infante e lo nutriva,
nel suo grembo materno ultimo asilo
porgendo, sacre le reliquie renda
dall’insultar de’ nembi e dal profano
pede del vulgo, e serbi un sasso il nome,
e di fiori odorata arbore amica
le ceneri di molli ombre consoli? (71).61

When the day’s harmony will be silent
does he live not, even interred,
if he can arouse it again
in the mind of his loved ones? Divine is this
correspondence of affectionate senses,
divine talent rests in Man; often,
through her we live with a dead friend,
and the dead lives with us if the pious earth,
which welcomed and nourished him as a child
offering him asylum in her maternal womb,
will protect his holy vestiges
from dark skies and the profane
gait of the mass, a stone preserving the name,
and comforting the ashes of tender shadows
by fresh flowers of arboreal tree?

This specific moment of Foscolo’s masterpiece suggests that, since there exists a
correspondence (“of affectionate senses”) between the living and the dead, visiting a grave is as
important to the dead as it is to the living. By indicating he wants to be interred in Montreal,

61 Quoted from the anthology, Letteratura italiana: testi e critica con lineamenti di storia letteraria (Italian Literature: Texts and Criticism with Key Elements of Literary History) edited by Mario Pazzaglia (Zanichelli,1979).
D’Alfonso may be alluding to the culture of his motherland where, as Foscolo indicates, regular visits to the grave of a deceased friend or relative are paramount. It is also routine for friends and family to keep the gravestone clean and decorate with fresh flowers. The perceived reference to Foscolo in the poem also implies that the Italian literary tradition is an important aspect of D’Alfonso’s expressivity.

In the poem “Montreal,” however, the city “c’est un Robin des Bois à l’envers/ il vole des pauvres et donne au riches” (“is an inverted Robin Hood/ he steals from the poor to give to the rich”) (11), describes a less appealing aspect of his birthplace. Furthermore, unusual things happen in Montreal: “le bambin […] demande à sa mère/ de faire la putain pour qu’il puisse voyager” (the child […] asks her mother/ to prostitute herself so that she can travel”) (12). Here D’Alfonso depicts a Blakean cityscape (see “London”) populated by characters willing to do anything in order to succeed. But the city is built on idle foundations, for the child imagines sex as a way to a life of luxury. In the poem, there is no indication that the child is needy or hungry, as a possible justification of her request. In “Montreal” D’Alfonso remains critical of the city despite the affection he also shows for it. He loves Montreal but also dislikes it because, being able to strip the veil over his eyes, its contradictions appear clear to him.

Beyond D’Alfonso’s poetry of double consciousness, there is still more to be said about the two poems discussed above, which can readily join the themes and the sentiment expressed by writers of black literature. D’Alfonso’s attitude in these two verses compares to that of the Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire’s in his masterpiece Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (Notebook of a Return to the Native Place). In the first part of this long poem composed in 1939, Césaire recounts – in the same vein as D’Alfonso in “Italia Mea Amore” – his scorn for his homeland Martinique upon his return to it, following a long sojourn in France. Raised in a French colony
where the indigenous culture was obliterated, Césaire finds his home town “étalée, trébuchée de
son bon sens, inerte, essoufflée sous son fardeau géométrique de croix éternellement
recommençant, indocile a son sort, muette […]” (3). Obviously, this situation is the result of a
colonial culture, but Césaire’s sentiment of rejection calls to mind D’Alfonso’s own rejection of
Canada. In the second part of Césaire’s poem, however, the poet is able to embrace his
negritude: “J’accepte… J’accepte… entièrement, sans réserves…” (“I accept… I accept…
etirely without reservations) (44). In his poem “Montreal,” D’Alfonso, like Césaire, ends up
embracing what he means to be Quebecois even while maintaining an ‘Italian consciousness.’
Through the filter of the literary dispositif, the work of Césaire makes the entanglement between
the Italian and the African diasporas even more ‘natural.’

As for Langston Hughes’s deployment of double consciousness, it is also possible to
interweave his attitude towards Harlem with the stances expressed by Ungaretti and D’Alfonso
towards their hometowns. Even if Hughes was not born in Harlem, Rampersad reminds us that
he always came back to Harlem even when it became too “congested.” “‘It is congested’ he
agreed. ‘Congested with people. All kinds. And I’m lucky enough to call a great many of them
my friends” (Rampersad xi). The passage suggests Hughes’s profound emotional attachment to
New York’s black Mecca. For this reason, it often inspired Hughes’s creative activity at least as
much as Alexandria and Montreal inspired Ungaretti and D’Alfonso respectively. To Hughes,
Harlem was a promised land of sorts (like Italy was for Ungaretti). While his father wanted him
to study mathematics, he opted to pursue a degree at Columbia University, which attracted him
not so much for its academic programs but for its proximity to Harlem. In The Big Sea, Hughes
writes, “I had an overwhelming desire to see Harlem. More than Paris, or the Shakespeare

---

62“[S]pread out, stumbling over its common sense, inert, breathless under its geometric burden of cross,
continuously replicating itself, undisciplined to his destiny, mute.”
country, or Berlin, or the Alps, I wanted to see Harlem, the greatest Negro city of the world” (*BS* 62). Later in his first biography, he writes: “Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere” (*BS* 240). All this suffices to understand that if Harlem was not Hughes’s hometown, it certainly was his cultural birthplace. Despite his love of Harlem, however, Hughes learned how to look at it with unbiased eyes. Using his double consciousness, he realized that Harlem was not after all the perfect place he dreamed of in Mexico.

Like Africa, the image of Harlem often appears in Hughes’s poems, but not always positively. Like many other parts of New York City, it too was affected by Jim Crow laws, which transformed it into a big ghetto where blacks could hardly find a job. In the poem “Harlem [1]” Hughes writes:

Here on the edge of hell
Stands Harlem –
Remembering the old lies,
The old kicks in the back,
The old “Be patient”
They told us before.

….
We remember the job we never had,
Never could get,
And can’t have now
Because we’re colored (*CP* 363-364).

Here Harlem is a racist city that almost traps blacks within its boundaries. Like Canada in “Italia Mea Amore,” Harlem lied to black people, betraying them (“Remembering the old lies,/ The old kicks in the back”), discriminating against in the place they hoped to call home. This was as true for black workers as for black artists who, in order to succeed, often compromised their identity by creating works more attractive to a white audience.
Keeping this in mind may help us interpret the poem “Harlem [2]” as a critique of the politics in Hughes’s Harlem. The verse reads as follows:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
Like a syrup sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (Hughes’s emphasis 426).

Even though Harlem is not overtly mentioned in the poem, the title and the expression “dream deferred” evoke the lack of success that many black artists experienced there, for it was a place in which one could not fulfill her dreams. Although the first line “What happens to a dream deferred?” and the following questions in the poem presume an answer, and therefore a future allowing us to provide a response, the last line “Or does it explode?” suggests rather a sense of impending revolution. Since we do not know for sure if the dream is going to explode and destroy itself, “dream deferred” may also indicate an extreme condition of possible rebellion.

This hope is fully expressed in his first collection of short stories, The Ways of White Folks. In the story “The Blues I’m Playing,” the main character Oceola firmly rejects her benefactor’s attempts to convert her into a concert pianist. Instead, Oceola chooses to sing and play the blues for her people. Despite his optimism, Hughes’s double consciousness also allowed him to critique the fact that, due a light skin tone, some blacks chose to pass for white to escape racial inequality. In the story “Passing” (also included in The Ways of White Folks), Hughes makes sure that the narrator criticizes those who surrendered their membership in black culture.
The short story is narrated from the perspective of Jack, a young black man who writes a letter to his mother after he pretended not to know her when he passed her by on the street.

Expressing consternation for what he has done, Jack writes:

“DEAR MA,
I felt like a dog, passing you downtown and not speaking to you. You were great, though. Didn’t give a sign that you even knew me, let alone I was your son. If I hadn’t the girl with me, Ma, we might have talked [...] Since I’ve begun to pass for white, nobody has ever doubted that I am a white man. Where I work, the boss is Southerner and is always cussing out Negroes in my presence, not dreaming I’m one. It is to laugh! (51).

Immediately, the opening of the letter tells us three important things. First, Jack is sorry for having avoided his mother on the street. His excuse is that he did it because he was with a white girl – someone, we learn later, he means to marry and then perhaps move to either New York or San Francisco in order to avoid the same embarrassment of “last night” (54). Second, his decision “to pass” is final. And third, now that he has found his way in white culture, he disregards issues of race (he laughs when listening to his boss cussing out the Negro). Further on in the story, he admits that he no longer has to think about race now that he is living comfortably in a white world (53).

The story’s structural irony conveys Hughes’s own criticism of the phenomenon of passing by which some blacks completely changed cultural identity in order “to take a little apartment on the North Side, in a good neighborhood, out on one of those nice quiet side streets where there are trees” (55). Through Jack’s story, Hughes depicts the social stratification within his own race, and his disapproval of those who, having the possibility to do it, preferred to pass for white rather than embrace their heritage. That Hughes reproached this circumstance is indicated here by the fact that Jack is writing to his mother who, besides, has been already silenced by his passing. We do not know what she would reply to Jack. We only know that she
might have “urge[d] me to go ahead and make use of my light skin and good hair” (52). If that is true or merely wishful thinking, then his mother is willing to sacrifice herself so that Jack can make it in the world of the whites. “Passing” sheds light on diverse aspects of the African American culture of Hughes’s time – a culture which thrived and survived on the principle of double consciousness, and which the author felt compelled to both praise and condemn.

In this chapter, by tracing the merging of diaspora as a significant semantic intersection of the literary dispositif, the dynamics of double consciousness has informed the relation that the three authors had with their ancestral land and their birthplace. While revealing these relations, the writing of Édouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire helped to link the literatures of the African and the Italian diasporas, and consequently find other moments of connection between Ungaretti and Hughes and between Hughes and D’Alfonso.
As a musical genre, the blues originated in the work songs crooned by slaves on plantations. In his autobiographies, Frederick Douglass gives us a glimpse at what these tunes meant for both the plantation economy and the slaves. More specifically, in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), he describes the way in which the workers managed to produce the songs, and how they were perceived by listeners. So, Douglass writes:

They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out--if not in the word, in the sound; --and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone [...] They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them (13-14).

This heartfelt passage describes two crucial characteristics of the works songs: their impromptu nature and their appealing to human emotions. Elaborating a little further on their expressive function, in his second autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass also suggests that those songs spoke “to the heart and the soul of the thoughtful” (75).

Work songs had a specific function in the everyday maintenance of the plantation: they were a means to support a steady rhythm, thereby ensuring that the work progressed expeditiously and in unison. But they also had another critical purpose, which Paul Oliver in *The Story of the Blues* points out to us: they helped reduce the number of injuries in the field. By creating a steady rhythm, slaves could coordinate their movements when using axes or hoes, ideally avoiding accidents (10). Furthermore, for slaves, the work songs were a way to
communicate their emotional and physical sorrow with one another. In *The Devil’s Music: a History of the Blues*, Giles Oakley notes that these tunes were also meant to entertain the plantation owners and their visitors. According to Oakley, listening to the musical skill of the slaves “was an amusing diversion” (15), even when they communicated the “deep melancholy” their servile condition caused them.

In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, LeRoi Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka) argues that blues is “a native American music, the product of the black man in [the United States]: or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives” (17). Once in America, slaves were subjected not only to bondage but as foreigners (immigrants) they needed to adapt to a new environment in order to survive. “When black people got to this country, they were Africans, a foreign people. Their costumes, attitudes, desires, were shaped to a different place, a radically different life,” Jones observes (1). In other words, they altered their culture according to the conditions of their new lives and the needs of the plantation. Among their many adaptations, slaves changed the contents of their African chants, avoiding, for instance, any reference to native rituals, and retuned them according to the demand of plantation labor. The work songs then can be said to represent one of slaves’ adjustments to their new ecological and social environment. So, when Jones defines blues as a ‘product,’ he means above all that Africans shaped it through the ‘cultural shock’ and their interaction with whites. In America, African chants started to take on a new profile, for “[t]hey became the realized circumstances of a man’s life after he had been exposed sufficiently to their source and catalyst – his enslavement” (Jones 20).
Work songs were impromptus that often followed a leader-and-chorus dynamic, which Oliver sees it as “a direct link with a widespread African tradition” (7). Call-and-response tunes are characterized by one line, representing the call sung by a leader, followed by another verse, representing the response of the others in the work gang (AAB). In the African American tradition, gospels and blues tend to follow this musical structure. However, we can find this model also in musical traditions outside the United States. The Cuban son, for example, has two sections: a verse section called “largo,” “canto, or “motivo,” introducing the topic (the narrative) of the song, and a segment called “montuno,” where the primary singer and the chorus follow the call-and-response pattern. According to Elijah Wald’s *The Blues: a Very Short Introduction*, in blues as we know them today, the call-and-response model has been replaced by a conversation between either two singers or between a singer and an instrument (piano, guitar, harmonica) (14). The instrument is made to respond directly to the singer while the two parties become inseparable in a context that we can almost compare to a confessional setting. With that being the case, singers confess their blues to the instrument-friend, which helps the performer deliver an often-excruciating representation of human experiences.

Blues music started becoming popular in the United States in the early 1910s (Wald 1). Oliver reminds us that there were blues singers who remained all their life in their place of origins and others who were rather nomads, moving from one place to another. “The mobility of the latter groups,” the scholar continues, “affects both, for it is the ‘visiting singer’ who may bring a new idea, a new concept to a district and be avidly imitated, as he picks up the fragments that appeal to him during his temporary stay” (34). Oliver’s remark indicates that blues are a

---

63 See the article by musicologist Noriko Manabe “Reinterpretations of the Son: Versions of Guillén’s *Motivos de son* by Grenet, García Caturía, and Roldán” (115-158).
highly nomadic genre and in constant evolution. Today, blues is largely studied and discussed in musical contexts, but as Wald indicates this was not always the case. As he puts it:

Much early writing about the form treated it as folk poetry. This was in part due to a long academic tradition of studying British ballads as poetry of the common folk, and also to a growing desire among African American poets in the early years of the twentieth century to connect their work to a heritage other than the European literary tradition (111).

As a form of human expression, blues goes well beyond its musical prominence, and blues singers have tended to define it in their own terms. In the 1969 documentary *The Blues According to Lightin’ Hopkins*, the famous blues performer from Texas suggests that it is hard to define what the blues is, for it comes in different ways difficult to explain. When one feels down, “you got nothing but the blues,” Lightin’ Hopkins says in the documentary. Although most of the blues might appear to be heartbreaking, blues is not only about ‘feeling blue,’ but it always intends to communicate “a wide range of sounds, feels, emotions, and passions […],” Jon Chappell, says (9). Blues lyrics often tell a story, but because emotions, feels, and passions are highly subjective, it is difficult to find a comprehensive definition able to describe everything that the genre implies.

Influenced by Paul Garon’s suggestion “to examine, for [our]selves, the poetic evidence of the blues” (9), his chapter will consider the blues mainly as a poetic form. Garon prompts us to experience blues lyrics from a poetic standpoint. In this broader context, even poets like Ungaretti, who do not follow the typical blues form, can be studied and appreciated in the same way we enjoy Hughes’s vernacular poetry. As Oliver further suggests, “the blues is both a state of mind and a music which gives voice to it” (3). If this is so, then the blues mode can also be identified and appreciated outside the African American tradition proper. As a ‘state of mind,’ the blues can be said to belong to everybody. In his essay “The Roots of Jazz,” Hughes points
out that jazz culture was already popular in the twenties (372). Contemporary writers were quick to incorporate their appreciation of blues and jazz in their work. In suggesting that jazz quickly became a prevalent idiom across the arts, Hughes seems to contest arguments in favor of the ethnocentricity of blues.

Before proceeding any further, it should be said that, although blues and jazz are not synonyms, in *The History of Jazz*, Ted Gioia reminds us that “[t]he history of jazz is closely intertwined with many […] hybrid genres and tracing the various genealogies can prove dauntingly complex” (8). Hughes himself notes that early forms of jazz were performed by slaves dancing in Congo Square in New Orleans in the eighteenth century (370). We also know that these spectacles were part of the same tradition from which blues originated. In effect, blues and jazz are strictly related to one another. But blues and jazz have also in common other structural elements. In *Jazz: a Music People*, Sidney Finkelstein notes indeed that “[t]he fundamental melody of jazz is the blues” (67). This melody, Finkelstein continues, “is basically without sense of key [or] ‘major’ and ‘minor’ mode […]” (68). Again, in defining what characterizes jazz, in *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America & The Meaning of Jazz*, Kathy J. Ogren mentions, among the others, the “blue tonalities” (7). To this, in the following pages, she adds that Jazz originated in the same African and slave musical traditions that gave rise to black music (11). The relationship between blues and jazz is also reflected in the continuities and differences between country and urban blues, where singers often play other instruments than the guitar, in particular, the piano and the trumpet, and are regularly accompanied by another player or two. So, in this chapter, the sentiment beyond blues and jazz poetics will be considered almost interchangeably.
To linger on the ethnocentricity of blues, in the recently published (2015) *Blues, How Do You Do? Paul Oliver and the Transatlantic Story of the Blues*, like other scholars (Oliver included), Christian O’Connell “move[s] away from nationally or ethnocentrically based discourses of blues historiography by acknowledging the transatlantic character of blues appreciation and writing in the postwar era” (2). Similarly, Nicholas Gebhardt advocates for a reconsideration of jazz historiography “within a transnational and global perspective” (185), complicating further the history, or as he insinuates, the ‘foreignness’ of jazz. This approach proposes to think of jazz as a mixture of different cultural and musical influences from abroad. Bruce Boyd Raeburn even writes that jazz is “a communal music that serve[s] the needs of a diverse population” (127), and embraces “a broad variety of ethnic and social types, Sicilian American, African American, Native American, Hispanic, Creole, and so on” (Raeburn135). By no means do these revisionist studies want to deny the fact that blues is rooted in the African American tradition, but they do argue that the ethnic boundaries of blues remain fluid, especially since its ‘story’ spans both sides of the Atlantic. To quote from Garon, “the blues can be regarded today as a world-historical phenomenon, the influence of which – though already considerable – will doubtless increasingly make itself felt on the poetic sensibility of this entire epoch” (2). The task of recent scholarship has been to identify the global dimension of the blues. About twenty years after Garon, Joseph Roach, in his pace-setting study *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, delved into various types of performances in New Orleans and England. He argued that these performances were actually circumatlantic – “hybridized routinely by the hemispheric circulation of collectively created forms” (xii).

According to Roach, the idea that people across the Atlantic “could not perform themselves […] unless they also performed what and who they thought they were not” (5) meant
that these people ended up performing their non-self as well. Roach’s argument helps us consider that blues (and jazz) is a product of several cultural encounters and exchanges. An exemplary circumatlantic phenomenon, the blues derived from the circulation of African culture in the United States. Since the blues became entwined with other cultural representations and ways of playing, an ethnocentric approach to this music can only prove reductive. Roach’s example helps us to appreciate the blues as a genre of encounters and exchanges. Recent scholarship on jazz historiography indicates, for instance, that at the turn of the century, Italian Americans in New Orleans played a crucial role in the formation of American jazz.

According to journalist and writer Garry Boulard, in 1910 Louisiana there were more than two hundred thousand Italian Americans (53). Jazz was the only form of entertainment that poor blacks and Italians could afford since they did not have the money to pay for leisure activities and were for the most part illiterate (Boulard 58). Adding to this Ronald Morris writes that “Sicilians were much like black people in seeing music as a highly personalized affair, an affair as an individual’s feelings, although born of a collective experience” (quoted in Boulard 55). To put it briefly, Italians were quick to pick up on jazz and could readily appreciate African American music. So, Louis Prima, the famous Italian trumpeter from New Orleans, could hardly perform without interpreting Louis Armstrong. “[F]or the first time I heard Armstrong,” he once said, “I felt such a close understanding of his phrasing, his handling a tune that it was impossible for me to do some tunes without being like him” (Boulard 60). Blacks and Italians often cultivated a similar approach to jazz, and this cemented their shared culture. Boulard continues: “[b]oth groups looked at jazz as an expression of their daily emotions, a reflection of their cultural agencies, and an extension of family traditions” (63). In effect, blues poetics can be seen to shed light on other possible intersections among the three authors herein selected. This chapter
will try to show that to some extent, and in certain special moments, all three authors speak the language of the blues. They can be said to share the same blues spirit. As a line of inquiry of the literary dispositif, the blues helps us to trace a zone of commonality (in Jullien’s term) among the works of the three authors. The ultimate objective here is to identify other literary and cultural intersections that will allow the researcher to deepen the investigation of the Italian-African-American-experience.

Understanding the Blues of Langston Hughes: Black Masses and the Man of the Crowd

Hughes is widely considered the founder of today’s blues poetry. David Chinitz claims that Hughes invented this new poetic style and that he was the first to grapple with the difficulty of “producing poems that manage to capture the quality of genuine blues in performance while remaining effective as poems” (177). Hughes was so passionate about blues that in 1923 he wrote his first blues verse titled “The Weary Blues.” Arnold Rampersad points out that the new style informing this signature poem took even Hughes by surprise. At first, indeed, he was not sure what to make of the possibility of blending standard English with African American vernacular tradition and the black speech of the South. “By his own admission,” Rampersad writes, “Hughes had a hard time to ending the poem” (147). It took Hughes two years to publish the composition. This must have been a long time for him, since he usually rushed to sell his work as soon as he finished it, trying to make ends meet through his writing. During the period in which he was developing a blues style, he traveled to Paris where he heard firsthand the jazz played in the city’s cabarets (Rampersad 147). Here, he had the opportunity to develop further his talent. It seems quite plausible to think that Hughes’s appreciation of jazz improved during

---

64 The strong interest that French people had in jazz confirms the idea that jazz was a combination of many cultural and musical influences. In Le jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity (University of Illinois Press, 2010), Matthew
his time in Paris where, apparently, he stayed in close contact with other people of African
descent living there. As Michel Fabre contents in his From Harlem to Paris, in Paris, Hughes
spent most of the time in Montmartre, a city’s district that was like a center for African
Americans (64). More specifically, he frequented the Place Pigalle and Rue la Bruyère, where,
in the “Parisian world of color” – as he used to call it, he sought the company of the working
class (Fabre 65). In 1924, working as a dishwasher in a Parisian cabaret, he started to think about
the development of a jazz poetics “to fit the rhythms of jazz into the rhythm of words” (Fabre
66).

When the following year, Hughes joined the black poor of Washington, D.C., he kept on
working on his new poetic style, this time, however, being influenced by the folk music that
black Americans performed in the street. According to Rampersad, Hughes once said: “I tried to
write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street – gay songs, because you had to be gay
or die; sad songs, because you couldn’t help being sad sometimes. But gay or sad, you kept on
living and you kept on going” (148). According to Hughes scholars, the poem “The Weary
Blues” changed the course of African American literature. In his essay “The Poetry of Hughes,”
Robert Niemi contends that the verse gained the attention of the Harlem Renaissance patron Carl
Van Vechten who eventually, in 1926, helped Hughes publish his first collection of poetry, also
called The Weary Blues. Excited as it might have sounded for Hughes, the work received
lukewarm reviews; actually, many criticized him for trying to raise African American vernacular
to literary standards. The majority of these critics advocated for a black culture modeled on

F. Jordan reminds us of the cultural influence that jazz had in France between 1922 and 1926. According to the
scholar, it became an increasingly popular musical genre by virtue of media technology which helped spread the
music also in rural areas (73).

65 See also the essay “Black Community, Black Spectacle: Performance and Race in Translation Perspective” by
Tyler Stovall in Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture edited by Harry
Justin Elam Jr. and Kennell Jackson (University of Michigan Press, 2005) (221-241). For an account of the life of
African Americans in France, see also Claude McKay’s novel Banjo (Mariner Books, 1970).
European aesthetics; Hughes, on the contrary, promoted a form of art capable of capturing the 
popular culture of common blacks. This opposing literary tastes reflected the social climate of 
the ‘20s, where upper-class African Americans, usually in favor of a highbrow culture, 
discriminated against lower-class blacks. In his book *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, Claude McKay 
defines the black mecca of New York as “hectic and fluid,” but also “lacking in group solidarity 
and the high seriousness of other Aframerican communities” (15), a commentary which 
reinforces the idea of social and cultural divisions within the black community. It is easily 
imaginable that these interracial tensions also influenced the objectives of African American 
authors who had to choose between producing works according to old or novel literary standards.

Depending on the zone where they lived in the United States, rich and poor blacks either 
shared the same neighborhoods or occupied separate areas of a city. In *This Was Harlem: a 
Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950*, Jervis Anderson suggests that the first scenario was more common 
in Manhattan, where, despite their more privileged social status, African American upper and 
lower classes lived close together. Whereas “[i]n a city like Washington, D.C., Negroes of means 
and cultural distinction lived apart from the masses, in attractive residential enclaves of their 
own” (Anderson 7). In this climate of interracial discrimination, blacks were often divided in 
assessing the artistic value of a literary form designed to render a realistic depiction of ordinary 
black people: “[m]iddle-class and upper-class black families were, at best, ambivalent about 
celebrating the cultural contributions of ragtime, jazz, and blues musicians – and often explicitly 
hostile to these elements in their community” (Gioia 91).

Hughes’s blues too attracted the criticism of his contemporaries. One of these was James 
Baldwin who in a book review claimed that Hughes failed his intent to make art out of the blues. 
As he put it, Hughes “has not forced [his blues] into of the realm of art where their meaning
would become clear and overwhelming. ‘Hey, pop!/Re-bop!/Mop!’ conveys much more on Lenox Avenue than it does in this book, which is not the way it ought to be” (“Sermon and Blues”)\(^\text{66}\). Just to give another example of the kind of attention Hughes attracted on his writing, in an article published in the August 1928 issue of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Allison Davis even accused Van Vechten of misdirecting Hughes. The following month, however, Hughes responded to Davis claiming that he wrote those poems even before meeting Van Vechten (553).\(^\text{67}\) Despite the criticism he received, Hughes never wavered in his commitment to blues poetry. In the article “Songs Called the Blues,” he defines the blues as “folk songs born out of heartache” (213). In his *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* Paul Allen Anderson says that Hughes “emphasized […] the poetic and musical power of the blues, a genre he regarded as both an urban folk music and a proletarian art form rich in political implications” (9). As folk and proletarian art, the blues and the literature inspired by it are able to capture the ways in which blacks lived in the United States as no other art form could. In order to understand “The Weary Blues” from the perspective of Hughes’s blues poetics, at this point, it is important to acknowledge that the blues offered the musician and poet “a means for self-expression […]. Through the blues a man could sing about himself as he did in the field; he could be his own hero” (Oliver 33).

Hughes saw blues (and also jazz), as a form of communication, a language that writers and musicians employed to articulate the experience of the black community. Attempting to give

---


\(^{67}\) See Hughes’s “Letter to the Editor Concerning Fine Clothes to the Jew and Carl Van Vechten” available in the collection *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs* edited by Christopher C. De Santis (University of Missouri Press, 2002).
African Americans a sense of cultural unity, in his essay “Jazz as Communication,” he observes that blues is a language which can unite the blacks of the South to those of the North. He states that “[w]omen behave the same on Park Avenue as they do on a levee,” and that “[l]ife is as hard in Broadway as it is in Blues-originating-land” (368). While “The Weary Blues” relates the life of a blues performer whom Hughes happened to notice in Harlem, the image of the piano player also symbolizes the generations of black southerners facing hardship in the North. According to Jones, thousands of blacks migrated from the South in big cities like Chicago and New York (95). In his writing, Hughes used to disseminate images of the flux of black migrants to the north. Thus, for instance, Luther, the main character in the short story “Slave on the Block,” another short story in The Ways of White Folks, “[...] had come from the south to his relatives in Jersey, and had only one job since he got there, shining shows for a Greek in Elizabeth (22). Generally, migrants like Luther were farmers – in the story, we know that the Carraways hired Luther to look after the garden (22), and to settle in a metropolis was not easy for them; they even needed to adjust to a new landscape. “Now the Negroes,” Jones says, “had not even the land to walk across. Everywhere was cement, buildings and streets filled up with automobiles” (105). Albeit they chose to migrate North, they hardly integrated in the big city, and “home” for them remained the South because it was what they knew best.

Southern blacks brought with them not only dreams of freedom but also their blues, to which, for the blacks born in the North must have been something new (Jones 108). The regional origin of the blues is still a source of debate among historians of folk music. Even though he

68 In one of his autobiographies, Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans (1954), Louis Armstrong hints at the hardship black southerners endured in places like Chicago or New York. “I had seen too many of my little pals leave home and come back in bad shape. Often their parents had to send them the money to come back with,” Armstrong writes (17) from Reading Jazz: a Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now edited by Robert Gottlieb (Vintage, 2014).
recognizes that the Mississippi Delta saw the birth of many blues performers, Oliver suggests that the blues is not a music of state and country line or rivers boundaries, but of people” (39). The performer in Hughes’s poem is certainly one of them. More specifically, because he is overtly distressed, as he plays “a drowsy syncopated tune,” we can readily think of him as one of those southerners struggling to find their cultural identity in some down-low Harlem dive, a locale referred to in the poem as “down on Lenox Avenue.” Hughes describes the man’s performance as follows:

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
“I got the Weary Blues
And I can’t be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can’t be satisfied—
I ain’t happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died.”
And far into the night he crooned that tune (CP 50).

The bluesman is melancholic and distressed (“‘I got the Weary Blues/ And I can’t be satisfied’”). The man’s body sways at the sound of the blues, as if the music itself were a kind of rocking chair, an image evoking the porch furniture of a house in the rural South. The sad tune of the song leads the singer to meditate in his plight, facing the reality of being black (“his ebony hands on each ivory key”), and reduced to playing in a run-down dive (“that poor piano moan with melody”). The man’s race and social class isolate him from American mainstream culture. He does not have the means to partake in the roaring life of the twenties. Perhaps if he could pass for white or for a northerner, the city would have treated him differently.

Down and out not only in New York but also in Harlem, the singer seems to be an outcast, an outsider. As Jones posits, “still after a time, the newly arrived Negro from the South were the brunt of the Northern Negro’s jibes” (108). Even though Harlem was the country’s
black mecca, class discrimination affected especially the poor and the southerner migrants, whose cultural history, according to Ralph Ellison in his essay “Harlem Is Nowhere,” “reads like the legend of some tragic people out of mythology […]. Not that a Negro is worse off in the North than in the South, but that in the North he surrenders and does not replace certain important supports to his personality” (323). Elaborating further on this social milieu, Anderson reports in his book that, in 1906, a black clergyman from the North, openly criticized southern blacks for their being uncivilized. The minister would have said that “[t]hey bring straight to the evils and temptations of New York the ignorance of the backwoods of the South” (10). Poor artists like Hughes, unwilling to be assimilated into a culture molded after European standards, found it at times difficult to live in Harlem. As Gioia suggests, even though Harlem created a cultural context for jazz, it was still part of the low-Harlem (90). Paradoxically, as the master of the stride style relates, “among those who disliked this form of entertainment the most were the Negroes who had recently come up from the South to seek a better life” (Gioia 91). This must have caused a palpable sense of social rejection among the newly-arrived southerners, a plight that Hughes’s persona describes in the lines: “I ain’t got nobody in all this world,/ Ain’t got nobody but ma self./ I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’/ And put ma troubles on the shelf” (CP 50). On the other hand, the troubles that he mentions might also be the result of his migrant condition and the years of slavery that his ancestors endured. However, this interpretation runs up against the fact that Hughes, according to Anderson, “parted from curatorial and folkloric approaches toward the ‘sorrow songs’ as vessels of black folk memory” (9). With this being the case, the isolation the man feels seems to reflect his geographical origins.

69 A commentary by the jazz pianist Willie “The Lion” Smith, quoted in Ted Gioia’s The History of Jazz.
The last two lines of the first part of the poem describe the great sense of loneliness that his being black and from the South causes the piano player. So, Hughes writes the following:

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
And put ma troubles on the shelf” (50).

The man realizes that he needs “[to] gwine to quit ma frownin’,” that is, he needs to stop complaining about his situation, “[a]nd put ma troubles on the shelf.” If putting aside his troubles is not a solution, it will at least give him the possibility to rest his “black man’s soul.” In the second part of the poem, Hughes reiterates the sense of dissatisfaction the man continues to feel, even though he posits a solution: by leaving everything behind, he can find a paradoxical sense of peace (“he slept like a rock or a man that’s dead”). Here Hughes evokes the man’s emotional strength. The fact that his blues singer is able to sleep as if he were a dead man suggests that he is ultimately a survivor. That he is able to fall asleep indicates that he can still make it in Harlem, as “the stars went out and so did the moon.” This line is also an indirect comment on the state of mind of the poem’s participant observer, who goes to bed when the singer does – when dawn is about to break. It is this onlooker who draws attention to the blues as an art form. We are left with the thought that what Harlem has to offer a man is the music of the blues, a new art form brought up from the South. These blues are not only better than nothing, they capture a creative energy that plucks a kind of victory out of social defeat. At the end of the day, both the poem’s persona and the singer put their troubles aside, by putting them on the shelf for tomorrow. If one is down and out, the best way to go on is a day at a time. In the end, it is the poem’s persona, a participant observer, who takes consolation in the weary blues. Listening to them, he finds an objective correlative for his own condition.
The emphasis Hughes put on the experience of middling African Americans suggests that he meant his poetry to evoke the feeling of the black masses, which was hardly considered a proper subject matter in the traditional American literature of the time. Hughes’s interest in narrating black folks was an aesthetic choice but represented also a desire to describe the people with whom he identified. As Rampersad notes:

At thirteen, Hughes probably already viewed the black world both as an insider and, far more importantly, an outsider […]. Once outside, every intimate force in Hughes would drive him back toward seeking the love and approval of the race, which would become the grand obsession of his life. Already he had begun to identify not his family but the poorest and most despised blacks as the object of his ultimate desire to please (22).

We may understand why Hughes recognized himself among the poor black folks: like them, throughout his life, he used to face financial hardship. However, he was also an outsider, because as he suggests in “Jazz as Communication,” he was “not a Southerner. I never worked on a levee. I hardly ever saw a cotton field, except from the highway” (368). According to Chinitz in “A Real, Solid, Sane, Racial Something’: Langston Hughes's Blues Poetry,” this condition of liminality posed for Hughes a problem of authenticity, because in effect he was only an external member of the community he wanted to represent in his work. This is perhaps why he started using fictional characters to replace his first-person point of view (Chinitz 68). Hughes’s sense of liminality though also allowed him to look objectively at his people. Although he chose to identify with the working class, “Hughes was scrupulous, qua artist, in representing his outsider status as a poet-observer” (Chinitz 67). Hughes sought the ‘love’ and approval of his people precisely because he occupied a position of liminality in the culture of the black community he wanted to represent. Blues, however, gave Hughes a source of inspiration which allowed him to express an authentic form of black culture, in the process creating an unprecedented way of producing poetry destined to influence other writers in his country and abroad.
Hughes’s overall affection and interest in his people indicate that he was a ‘man of the crowd,’ an expression used by the French poet Charles Baudelaire who in turn took it from a short story by Edgar Allan Poe’s titled “The Man of the Crowd.” In Poe’s story, a convalescent watching the crowd in the street from the windows of a coffee shop. Among all those who pass by in the street, an elderly man captures the convalescent’s eye, absorbing “my whole attention” (Poe 403). The convalescent is so intrigued by the man that for a moment he forgets about his physical state. Fascinated by this story (which he translated into French), Baudelaire, in the essay Le peintre de la vie moderne (The Painter of Modern Life), conceives of his artist genius as one who, like the convalescent in Poe’s story, needs to live among the crowd in order to discover his or her authenticity – an inclination to which Hughes was not stranger. Describing the artist for modern times, Baudelaire claims that in his sketches of the city life Constantin Guys (whom he simply calls Monsieur G.), is an exemplar. Baudelaire imagines Guys as being as interested in people as the convalescent in Poe’s story is, as “contemplant la foule avec jouissance [...].” Finalement, il se précipite à travers cette foule a la recherché d’un inconnu dont la physionomie entrevue l’a, en un clin d’œil, fasciné” (690). In his essay, Baudelaire describes how important it is for M.G.’s creative sensibility to roam around Paris to know his own community. The French poet says, “il contemple les paysages de la grande ville, paysages de pierre caressés par la brume ou frappés par les soufflets du soleil” (“he contemplates the surroundings of the big city, landscapes of stones caressed by mist or bit by the strikes of the sun”) (692). Hughes’s own

---

70 Constantin Guys was a watercolorist and draftsman. A Crimean War correspondent, his drawings were published in English and French newspapers.
71 “He observed the crowd with pleasure [...]. Finally, he decides to pass through the crowd to find someone unknown to him whose complexion, barely detectable, attracted him.”
72 Literary scholar Edward J. Ahearn, in his essay “The Search for Community: the City in Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Baudelaire,” writes that Baudelaire “describes the type of artist as much like himself as Guys, who observes everything in Paris, finding and later expressing in his work the beauty and strange harmony of her universal life”
interest in the vibrant life of the city corresponds to Baudelaire’s and Guys’s fascination with life in the French capital. In January 1926, Hughes published in *The Crisis* the essay “The Fascination of Cities” where he “painted” an impression of the cities in which he had lived.

About Kansas City, the first one cited in his recollection, he says:

> The bellowing voice of the brakesman, a jar and a curve, houses high on a bluff, a tiny street car running way up there. The old station in the bottoms. Hustle, hurry. ‘Cab, mom, cab?’ -- *This way to the street cars* --. ‘Bus to your hotel! Take your baggage!’ Mother holds me tightly by the hand. I am five years old. I am in the city for the first time” (Hughes’s emphasis CWAR 27).

Then, Chicago appears to him as a “vast, ugly, brutal, monotonous city, checker-boarded, hard” (CWAR 27). The harshness of this city environment is captured again in the poem “Chicago Blues,” where the city is as insanely fast, rolling as on wheels in a week period:

> Chicago is a town  
> That sure do run on wheels.  
> Runs so fast you don’t know  
> How good the ground feels (592).

But at the end of the week, everything, the struggle and the pace of the city pick up again:

> Sunday I was living  
> In a ten room flat  
> Monday I was back  
> Where I started at (593).

Even though in the second stanza, the city can appear as a playground for adults, by Tuesday people are “rolling drunk,” having the best time of their life. As the Sunday stanza shows, the persona ends up enjoying very little about the city. Hughes’s conclusions suggest Chicago is more a snare than a fun-park-like metropolis. Almost trapped by a centripetal force, life appears as an ominous carousel by virtue of which the persona can only return to where she started but

---

(86). Ahearn also believes that Baudelaire’s emphasis on observing and describing the city can be read as an attempt to communicate with his surrounding, and at the same time, to communicate information about the city (85).
never move forward. The wheels on which Chicago runs can readily symbolize the carousel, imagine evoked to the end where the city “runs so fast you don’t know/ How good the ground feel” (593).

Hughes’s appreciation of the city he visited shifts from the asphyxiating tone characterizing the description of Chicago to a more vital Manhattan. Although still in a gothic style of sort, Hughes captures the liveliness of New York, and writes:

Manhattan takes me, is glad, holds me tightly. Like a vampire sucking my blood from my body, sucking my very breath from my lungs, she holds me. Broadway and its million lights. Harlem and its love-nights, its cabarets and casinos, its dark, warm bodies. The thundering subways, the arch of the bridges, the mighty rivers hold me. I am amazed at the tremendousness of the city, at its diverseness, its many, many things, its spiritual and physical playthings, its work things, its joy thing (CWAR 30-31).

For Hughes, the city is like a creature that has a life of its own. It has a soul for a unique form or artistic attention; it needs to be discovered and described. In reference to the blues and the city, he writes: “[t]he blues are city songs rising from the crowded street of big towns, or beating against the lovely walls of hall bed-rooms where you can’t sleep at night” (213). And again, “they are songs of the black South particularly the city South” (212).

In order to describe the Harlem’s blues, Hughes observed everything that it had to offer. While doing so, like Baudelaire’s ideal artist, he ended up feeling “toutes les joies et toutes les misères que la circonstance lui présente” (“every joy and all of the misery circumstances offered him”) to the extent that “[l]a foule est son domaine, comme l’air est celui de l’oiseau, comme l’eau celui du poisson. Sa passion et sa profession, c’est d’épouser la foule” (Baudelaire’s emphasis 691). Baudelaire pictures his ideal artist “entre[r] dans la foule comme dans un immense réservoir d’électricité” (“enter the crowd as if it were an immense reserve of energy”)

73 “[t]he crowd is his territory as the air is that of bird, or the water is that of fish. His passion and his profession is that to marry the crowd.”
Hughes shares a similar view of the crowd: “Oh, the ecstasy of crowds; the joy of lights; the fascination of cities!,” he says in reference to Mexico City (CWAR 30); and again, in regard to New York City, he claims, “[t]he fascination of this city is upon me, burning like a fire in the blood” (CWAR 31).

Hughes closely monitored the unfolding of events happening in his community and had a profound awareness of his surroundings. In his introduction to *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, Webster Smalley notes that Hughes “creates his characters from life. He does not create character to fit a preconception […] (xiii). In the process, he often unleashed harsh social commentary in the papers for which he was writing. For instance, he became quite outspoken about the development of the Scottsboro case of 1931. Melvin B. Tolson, a black poet from Texas who was studying at Columbia University, described Hughes’s reaction at being late for a meeting about Scottsboro as follows: “There is a tenseness, an agony in the Poet’s face. It seems that his life depends on getting to that meeting in time… The poet talks passionately about the Scottsboro boys. They are innocent. They must go free” (Rampersad 217). The agony in the poet’s face indicates that Hughes, again, like the artist described by Baudelaire, embraces as his own the joys and the sorrows thrown up by the history of his community. Outraged by how the American justice system was handling the case, on December 1, 1931, in the journal *Contempo*, he urges the white South to give blacks the means necessary to succeed and encourages his own people to rise against injustice. He continues:

---

74 On March 25, 1931 a fight busted between white and black teenagers. The police arrived on the scene and arrested nine black kids with the charge of raping two white women who were passing by the area where the fight took place. Even though one of the alleged victims changed her version, the trial lasted several years. Fortunately, none of the teenagers was put to death, and the case ended in a mistrial (see the introduction to *Fight for Freedom and Other Writings on Civil Rights* by Christopher C. De Santis (4).

75 *Contempo* was a student journal at the University of North Carolina. It published Hughes’s poem “Christ in Alabama,” which created an uproar because Hughes dared to represent Christ as a “nigger and black.” See Hughes’s collected essays on art and politics (273).
If these 12 million Negro Americans don’t raise such a howl that the doors of Kilby Prison shake until the 9 nine youngsters come out (and I don’t mean a police howl either), then let Dixie justice (blind and syphilitic as it might be) take its course, and let Alabama’s Southern gentlemen amuse themselves burning 9 young black boys till they’re dead in the State’s electric chair (CWFF 209).

Hughes’s work offers many examples of the strong relationship he had with the crowd. He was especially keen on representing the living conditions of the lower classes and describing their plight not only to give them a voice but also to draw a fair image of them. He wanted to show what their life looked, sounded, and felt like on a daily basis to give his audience an idea of the enormous amount of energy and forcefulness characterizing his community. Precisely because he chose to be a man of the crowd, Hughes culled a profound knowledge of the struggles that blacks faced in the big city. As he did in “The Weary Blues,” he described many of these people as survivors, even when they made their living on the sly, within an informal black economy of gambling, playing the numbers, and betting. For instance, in the play “Little Ham,” now collected in the book *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, not only does the main character, despite his involvement in illegal activities, manage to stay out of jail but he is also lucky enough to find the woman of his dreams. Little Ham is destined to succeed because he knows how to handle the city and understands the ways of its populace.

Above all, Hughes’s deep enjoyment and understanding of the crowd gave him the authority to speak about the most intimate aspects of poor blacks. In the poem “Wide River,” for example, he tells the story of a man in love with a woman who lives on the other side of the river:

Ma baby lives across de river
An’ I ain’t got no boat.
She lives across de river.
I ain’t got no boat.
I ain’t a good swimmer
An’ I don't know how to float.
Wide, wide river
“Twixt ma love an’ me.
Wide, wide river
“Twixt ma love an’ me.
I never knowed how
Wide a river can be.

Got to cross that river
An’ git to ma baby somehow.
Cross that river,
Git to ma baby somehow—
Cause if I don’t see ma baby
I’ll lay down an’ die right now (CP 71).

Not having a boat, and not being a good swimmer, the man cannot cross the river, and therefore, cannot see his beloved. Only at this point does he realize how wide and difficult (“‘Twixt ma love an’ me [...]”) the river is. Nevertheless, in the last stanza, the frustrated lover is determined to cross the river (“Got to cross the river/ An’ git to ma baby somehow”). It’s a matter of life or death, as it could only be for a love-sick urban swain. Evidently, Hughes’s dialect-speaking persona does not even consider giving his love up. The poem registers the challenge facing him.

In and of itself this delightfully comic blues poem conveys a sense of exaggerated challenge as the river is not only wide but “wide, wide.” Along with the story of a romance, which may be cut short due to the daunting physical barrier of the river, the poem suggests that the woman must be won, either by a feat of swimming or floating or even stealing somebody’s boat and rowing it across. The repetition of the adjective “wide” implies that the code of chivalry requires the lover to overcome a considerable distance if he hopes to be reunited with his “baby” again. As the blues builds up its repetitions spelling out the lover’s plight, we are also presented with the persona’s obsession, which could even lead to the loss of life due to desperation and depression (“I’ll lay down an’ die right now”). The dark, but ultimately comic, mood of the verse recalls Hughes’s haiku-like “Suicide”: 

127
The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss (CP 55).

“Wide River” is a fine example of a blues lyric plucked from the Harlem gallery of characters Hughes mined as his poetic territory. In and of itself this poem offers a simple glimpse into the life of a poor black Harlem swain faced with the epic challenge of having to cross a river. As a man of the crowd, Hughes was able to appreciate the struggles of the black community because he knew them firsthand. In the poem “Always the Same” (165), the line “it is the same everywhere for me” indicates that the poet also takes to heart (“for me”) the plight of people everywhere – people who, in his eyes, reflect the troubles of his own.

Like the ideal artist envisioned by Baudelaire, Hughes was invested with the capacity to synthesize what he saw, but he also felt charged with the duty of giving a voice to those who, for one reason or another, could not adequately express their feelings. Time and again, Hughes stressed the social importance of his poems. In an essay, he writes:

Some of my earliest poems were social poems in that they were about people's problems -- whole groups of people’s problems -- rather than my own personal difficulties. Sometimes, though, certain aspects of my personal problems happened to be also common to many other people. And certainly, racially speaking, my own problems of adjustment to American life were the same as those of millions of other segregated Negroes. The moon belongs to everybody, but not this American earth of ours. That is perhaps why poems about the moon perturb no one, but poems about color and poverty do perturb many citizens. Social forces pull backwards or forwards, right or left, and social poems get caught in the pulling and hauling. Sometimes the poet himself gets pulled and hauled -- even hauled off to jail (CWAR 270).

Another essay showing Hughes’s interest in giving a realistic portrayal of black people’s reality is “People Without Shoes,” which he wrote in 1931 upon his return from Haiti. In it, he pointed

---

76 The article appeared in the Marxist magazine New Masses published in the United States from 1926 to 1948.
out the enormous gaps that he saw between the rich and the poor in Haiti and was roundly
criticized for his views. Responding to this criticism, Haitian writer, medical doctor, and
politician René Piquion wrote on *L’action nationale* (*The National Action*):

> I know that in [the] world, there are aware men, fired by good will,
knowledgeable about social and racial issues, who ardently desire but one thing:
the advancement of peoples of color, and who strive by the spoken and written
word to develop the greatest solidarity among all children of the Race (quoted in
Fowler 85).

As a “child of the Race,” Hughes tried to make *these children’s* issues visible on a wider scale.
On the other hand, providing insights into peoples’ problems in other countries, he hoped to
educate African Americans at home and make them more sensitive to what they could share with
blacks around the world.

The objective to consider Hughes quintessentially as “a man of the crowd” is not so much
to comment further on the connection between Baudelaire and Hughes – a dialogue, which
besides has already been established – but to focus on the type of artistic genius that may help to
appreciate Hughes’s blues in relation to his profound poetic investment in various black
communities. In the context of the literary *dispositif*, and not unlike Glissant’s ship alluded to
in the previous chapter, Baudelaire’s conception of the modern artist provides us with the
opportunity to reveal a blues sensibility in conjunction with other intersecting literatures and
ideas outside of the African American tradition proper.

---

77 In her *Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), Anita
Patterson endeavors to show that Hughes was influenced by the writing of Charles Baudelaire. For instance, she sees
Hughes’s poem “Dream Variations” as a brilliant adaptation of “Baudelaire’s primitivist longing and imagery for his
own special purpose, a celebration of blackness” (107). Here by primitivism, she refers to a taste for things that did
not fit European parameters for art (Baudelaire’s reviews of the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris are an example
of the emergency of this developed interested in primitivism. See the article “Becoming Cosmopolitan: Viewing and
Reviewing the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris” by Margueritte Murphy published in *Nineteenth-Century
Contexts*). According to Patterson, “Baudelaire’s poetics offered Hughes new-found expressive freedom” (107).
A strappo in fondo all’anima (a deep sprain inside the soul): The Blues of Giuseppe Ungaretti

Blues tradition assumes that performers will alter lyrics and improvise upon a basic music pattern, a three-cord progression built on the first, fourth, and fifth note; however, blues lyrics may (and regularly do) stray from this structure. Literary scholar Hans Ostrom writes in A Langston Hughes Encyclopedia that “[b]lues is about the spirit, the appeal, and the deceptively complex emotional content of the blues” (51); in other words, blues is blues inasmuch as it contains certain subjects and themes, but especially when it contains the spirit of the blues. It implies that to be a blues, a lyric does not have to be accompanied directly by music in a strict sense or does not have to follow the typical twelve bars (or measures) format of the genre. The blues can (and should) be also appreciated as poetry. In his introduction to The Blues Line: a Collection of Blues Lyrics, Eric Sackheim explains why it is possible, and sometimes even necessary, to present blues lyrics as poems. As he observes, in collecting blues lyrics as poetic works, “it felt necessary to be important to abandon the configuring yet more or less ubiquitous notion that the blues constitute essentially a single form […]. If a song has value its value is certainly in the words as they are not as filtered through a careless ear or hasty hand that is satisfied to write ‘repeat’” (no page number). Stressing the importance of words in a blues lyric means to associate the blues not only with literature but more specifically with poetry.

By understanding blues as a literary genre (and style), Hughes’s spirit of the blues converges with the composition of Ungaretti even though this latter did not follow the typical structure of a blues lyric. If the literary value of a blues lyric can be said to lie in its words and ultimately in its spirit, Ungaretti’s quest to find an appropriate language capable of expressing the bare condition of being human represents a successful attempt to convey his blues. As he began to craft his poetics, Ungaretti aimed to describe something very simple: the life of a man,
Especially at the beginning of his career, Ungaretti tried to go against mainstream culture by engaging in a quest for finding parole pure (pure language). His research was in and of itself a new way of conceiving poetry, which now favored nouns over adjectives, short loose verses over the longer and traditional Italian endecasillabo (hendecasyllable). In an interview with Confirmado, an Argentinian magazine, on November 23, 1967, he declared:


I think that the mission of a poet is to break everything. To me, in 1919, it was about to break with the roaring hendecasyllable forged by D’Annunzio. Today we need to break with other things. D’Annunzio was a great poet. Maybe among the best in Italy. I never met him, otherwise, I would have praised him directly. However, one thing is a personal homage, from one person to another, another thing is the artistic mission. My entire poetic production, almost my entire volume, Joy, proposed to demolish D’Annunzio’s style. We have to break, break with everything in order for our spirit to thrive.

From the front, Ungaretti gave life to a new poetic style in the same vein in which Hughes with his blues created a new language in Harlem. According to Richard K. Barksdale, “Langston Hughes found the blues attractive because it was the kind of music that demonstrated the black man’s emotional resiliency and his knack for singing his way through personal catastrophe” (20). The word “resiliency” is also a key to understanding Ungaretti’s blues: he survived a series of major tragedies and shipwrecks, both personal and universal. He survived two world wars, defying death and horror; he survived the death of his second child and his

---

78 Quoted by Bruna Bianco, a woman of Italian origin living in Brazil and with whom the poet fell in love the last years of his life, in an interview with Francesca Cricelli appeared on the quarterly magazine of the Italian P.E.N. Club in 2013 (2-3).
brother; he survived poverty and disappointment without ever losing the urge to live fully “the life of a man.” His poems read like an intimate journal; however, they record more than biographical events. They provide us with poetic moments in which his readers could also “find themselves;” what affected Ungaretti, affected, and still affects, many others. Ungaretti’s quest for breaking with the Italian poetic tradition and survival translated into the new poetic mission where the poet’s emotional toil in his highly autobiographical verse also plumbed the depths of universal human experiences.

Ungaretti’s search for the *parola pura* was aimed at expressing a collective experience filtered through the memory and the description of individual events. It is above all in this sense that most of Ungaretti’s production reads like so many blues. The linguistic tactics Ungaretti used to write his compositions do not differ much from the blues. As Garon explains, “[t]he blues is […] a self-centered music, highly personalized, wherein the effects of everyday life are recounted in terms of the singers’ reactions” (9-10). At the same time, Garon sees the blues as having the “capacity to present to us with the most uncluttered descriptions of human life” (10). In literary and philosophical terms, Garon’s insight implies that the blues is a ‘realistic’ genre. It is possible to assign the category of realism to Ungaretti’s poetry as well, given his interest in making *common people, those who could have gone astray, but who never lost emotional strength* his heroes.

The *life* element, namely, the ordinary events which make up most people’s life on a daily basis, remains the primary source of inspiration for blues performers. This ordinary dimension understood as a poetics of literary representations was, in fact, part of the Italian literary tradition in Ungaretti’s day. Ungaretti’s entire oeuvre reflects the idea that *life* in and of itself is the most appropriate subject matter of literature. In a 1938 essay, now considered the
manifesto of Hermeticism, “Letteratura come vita” (“Literature as Life”), Carlo Bo exhorted his contemporaries to consider literature as a conduit through which human beings can become conscious of themselves “presenti alla loro fragilita’” (“aware of their fragility”) to use Ungaretti’s words. According to Bo, literature and life are “strumenti di ricerca e quindi di verità: mezzi per raggiungere l’assoluta necessità di sapere qualcosa di noi […]” (5-6). In an international context, Bo’s manifesto helps to delineate a connection between the philosophical meaning of the blues and the purpose of certain literature centered on communicating ordinary events. His words also suggest that there is a profound connection between literature and other forms of art that seek to represent life in all its infraordinary nuances. As we shall see below, Ungaretti was keenly interested in creating a poetics capable of expressing the ordinary life of everyman, and it is this poetic quest that encourages us to read his poetry in the spirit of the blues. Ungaretti can be appreciated as a blues poet not only because of the autobiographical elements of his verse but also because for him life in and of itself was his major source of inspiration.

According to Garon, “the blues deal with the entire spectrum of emotional life” (51). Indeed, the blues seem to be an ideal genre for investigating ordinary life as such. By ‘investigating life,’ one intends that the blues tend to focus on anything having to do with the idea of being human. For example, the blues are often about male struggles, love, crime, sex, animals, travel, hope and despair, and being down and out; in short, themes that can also be taken as a critique of contemporary society. In this light, it is inevitable that some blues themes provide a description and an assessment of the singers’ or poets’ surroundings and their survival

---

79 “[R]esearch tools and thus tools for discovering the truth: means for reaching the absolute necessity of knowing something about ourselves […]”
as well as their critical skills. In other words, blues performers express their personal feelings to
cure their melancholy but also to convey concern with social issues.

Ungaretti’s work resonates with both the idea of the survival of the fittest and with that of
using poetry as a social commentary. On the one hand, he was a rebellious soul, uno che si
ribellava (one who used to rebel), and this undoubtedly helped him to survive under tough
circumstances; on the other hand, he was convinced that a writer should be an activist.
According to his essay “Difficoltà della poesia” (“Poetry’s Difficulties”), he wrote, “[U]no
scrittore, un poeta, è sempre, secondo me, impegnato; indagando i propri tempi per conoscerli e,
in rapporto ad essi, indagando sé per conoscersi […]” (“a writer, a poet is always, I believe,
socially active; investigating his own times to know them and, in relation to them, investigating
himself to arrive at self-knowledge [...]”) (792). Echoing Bo’s conception of the role of
literature, Ungaretti associates with Hughes when he argues that writers and poets cannot but be
socially engaged, and that, in order to express on the page their personal investment, they have to
“feel,” that is, sort through (investigating, indeed) those emotions (and horrors) they experience.
The enquiry is immediate and spontaneous, as Ungaretti describes later in his essay: “il
paesaggio in quelle prime poesie [...] era colto in un attimo, in un attimo che poi si protraeva in
me in un modo infinito” (“I collected instantaneously the landscape described in my first poems
[…]; this moment continued to exist in me ad infinitum”) (819).

This instantaneous capturing of a landscape also implies the improvisational character of
the poetic act, since it is impossible to predict when these moments will present themselves to
the poet. In most of his war poems, for instance, Ungaretti informally and spontaneously seized
in words those blues moments, acme to him in the trenches. Indeed, his first verses were written
on the firing line, while on active duty: “Parte dell’Allegria l’ho scritta in trincea. L’ho scritta su
In this hellish environment, he had time only for rapid-fire jottings, without being able to mediate and revise in tranquility. What came to him there he captured in a few words, or as he put it, in “parole che avessero avuto un’intensità straordinaria di significato” (“words that would have had an extraordinary intense meaning”) (820). In his essay, Ungaretti refers to both the impromptu character of his earlier verse, which often betrays characteristics of the blues spirit, and his literary quest for a parola pura. As the urge to narrate his and other soldiers’ circumstances pressed upon him, Ungaretti started to sing a version of his blues, between one scene of combat and another.

According to scholar Kimberly N. Ruffin in her essay “‘I Got the Blues’ Epistemology: Jayne Cortez’s Poetry for Eco-Crisis,” the importance of orality, aurality, and music cannot be overlooked in American literature (63); nor we can ignore the sound relation existing between language and music. As this proves to be true in African American literature, it is also true in Italian literature. Thus, in her interdisciplinary research on Ungaretti titled Giuseppe Ungaretti: poesia, musica, pittura (Giuseppe Ungaretti: Poetry, Music, and Painting), Teresa Spignoli indicates that there exists a close relationship between Ungaretti’s poetry and aurality. In his essay “Per Mallarmé” (“For Mallarmé”), the poet writes:

[m]i sembra sino ad oggi che la parola avesse qualche relazione con l’udito; mi sembrava che il ritmo fisico, danza, passo, corsa, battiti del cuore, chiaroscuro delle sensazioni, e ritmo dell’anima, passioni fugaci, senso della gioventù (eternità fuggitiva), senso dell’eterno (ferma verità), cercassero, per i poeti, nelle parole, cioè in oggetti sonori, il loro ordine (207).

80 “I wrote part of Joy in the trenches. I wrote it on pieces of paper that it happened to me to have, on the box of bullets, on cardboard, on postcards, like this, while I was in danger, between shots.” The interview is available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=weZWrK2zG3Y.
It seems that until today language had some relationship with our hearing; it seemed to me that bodily rhythm, dancing, stepping, running, heart beating, contrast of sensations and rhythm of the soul, fleeting passion, sense of youth (fleeting eternity), sense of eternity (sound truth), were trying to find for the poets their orders in auditory objects.

Spignoli maintains that in this essay Ungaretti claims that words are “aural objects” and that “[l]a musica, attraverso il ritmo, è ciò che dà forma e corpo alla ‘materia’ della poesia, individuate nella sua dimensione fenomenica […], esistenziale […] e noumenica […]” (28).81

Perhaps it is precisely because Ungaretti’s verse appeals so strongly to our sense of hearing that composers of classical music and jazz have been enthused by it. In 1937, Italian composer Ildebrando Pizzetti was inspired by the verse “La pieta’” (“The Piety”) and “Trasfigurazione” (“Transfiguration”); in 1954, Luigi Nono set to music the Cori descrittivi di stati d’animo di Didone (Evocative Choruses of Dido’s Emotional States); in 1994, Nono’s protégé Stefano Gervasoni adapted to music two French poems by Ungaretti, and in 1995, Ungaretti’s verse inspired jazz composer Michael Mantler to produce the album Cerco un paese innocente (I Seek an Innocent Country).82 Again, in 2006, the company Jump Rhythm Jazz Project from Chicago drew inspiration from Ungaretti’s war poems to create a revised version of “The News from Poems,” which focused on the loss of innocence during the war.83 These prestigious references indicate that Ungaretti’s verse has attracted composers interested in translating verse into music. In a sense, we could say that Ungaretti’s verse is not only poetic but also musical, just as the blues can be said to be both a musical and a literary genre.

---

81 “[M]usic, through rhythm, is that which gives form and substance to the ‘matter’ of poetry, perceived in his phenomenal […], existential […], and intelligible dimension.”


83 See “Jump Rhythm Jazz Presents Revised Works” by Judy Moore: www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2006/06/jump.html
One of the hallmarks of blues lyrics is the use of a direct, vernacular language, the kind of idiom we can also find in Ungaretti’s early poetry. In the short essay titled (“Zona di guerra: (Vivendo con il popolo)” (“War Zone: (Living with the People)”), indeed, the poet captures all the tough realism characterizing his personal experience of life. He writes:

Da quel vigoroso concime che si spallottola dal culo delle vacche, coda fremente alzata, a cadenze regolari come un ritornello di litania e giù si spiaccica improvviso facendoci voltare negligenti la faccia, all’arcobaleno che risolve ogni mistero dell’anima magica del poeta, anche qui si specchia la ragione della vita (5).

The meaning of life is also reflected in the fertilizer unrolled from the asses of cows, anxious tail lifted, regularly dropped as a refrain in a litany then to splash abruptly on the ground, making us turn our indifferent heads to the rainbow that solves every mystery of the poet’s magic soul.

Grotesque as it sounds, this passage is an example of Ungaretti’s ability to transform an ordinary process (“fertilizer unrolled from the asses of cows”), lacking any literary decorum, into a philosophical statement about life. While it stirs the reader to look away from the act of defecation, because it is unsightly, it helps us understand that this same scatological stuff actually stands for life and birth. In effect, as a natural fertilizer this “concime” is an important link in the food chain, which also nourishes the human body and helps the life cycle to continue. By presenting us with this small consideration, the poet succeeds in unraveling “ogni mistero” (“every mystery”) of his poetic calling.

It should also be said that Ungaretti proudly stated that he was born from “gente mia contadina” (“my peasant people”). In the poem “Transfigurazione” (“Transfiguration”), he writes: “ben nato mi sento/ di gente di terra” (“I feel well born/ from my peasant people”) (69).

Due to his humble origins, it is not surprising that when he referred to things close to his people’s experience, his style often takes on a blues tone. In the essay “Zona di guerra,” Ungaretti defines his environment by choosing words like “culo” (“ass”), “vacche” (“cows”),
“spallottare” (“unroll”). In the poem “Viareggio,” which recalls the atmosphere conveyed in his essay, he writes: “Vieni/ Sarà bella la pineta/ ma come ci si fa a dormire/ con tanti moscerini e tante cacate” (“Come/ the pine forest must be beautiful/ but how to sleep/ with all these midges and shit”) (373). Here Ungaretti seems to improvise while capturing the less attractive features of the pine forest. In “Zona di Guerra,” the image of the cow raising its tail to defecate is enough to make us turn away, but eventually we manage to accept the image as a conduit to the poet’s rainbow. Crossing the boundary of the grotesque, he abruptly takes us to a more inspiring place. He describes his surrounding as to agree with a farmer’s down-to-earth view of life, which in and of itself indicates the poet’s familiarity with the environment. Because of it, he also knows how to guide us towards the rainbow. In order to reverse death – namely, to survive – the poet has to embrace and absorb the strong contrast between his desire to “scrivere lettere piene d’amore” (“write letters full of love”) and the actual landscape that unfolds before his eyes. This embrace is feasible inasmuch as the language is made to correspond with the features of the landscape, its rhythmic beat of biological and environmental functions.

As the attention that Hughes gave to the city’s landscape and life shows, the ability to feel the neighboring environment is a characteristic of the blues poetics. According to Ruffin, “the blues contain people’s responses to the world around them and social circumstances […] elements of the blues sound and ethos are directly related to the changing relationships between African Americans and their ecological experience […]. Specific agricultural tasks informed the sound and the content […] of work songs” (64). Although Ungaretti’s war experience is not directly focused on the rural landscape, once in the trenches, he started writing poems relating the topography of places or what remained of them.
Among the other landscapes reported in Ungaretti’s blues, San Martino del Carso, in Gorizia county (Friuli-Venezia Giulia), had special significance for the poet. In the Carso – an unforgiving stone environment – Ungaretti used to have the blues. In the poem “SAN MARTINO DEL CARSO” (with a subtitle indicating the poem’s place and time: “Valloncello dell’Albero Isolato il 27 agosto 1916”), for instance, he uses the war-torn topography of the site as an objective correlative for his feelings. The houses in ruins and the shattered town surrounding the poet reflect his existential condition of the time. As he puts it in the third stanza of the poem, his heart becomes a city of the dead, a cemetery, where no cross is missing: “Ma nel cuore/ nessuna croce manca” (“But in my heart/ not one cross is missing”) (51). The poet remembers his fellow soldiers, now dead, and he himself becomes a part of devastation around him—“È il mio cuore/ il paese più straziato” (“It’s my heart/ the most wrenched country”) (51).

This use of local place to confess a form of identification will become a regular practice in Ungaretti’s poetry. In the lyric “PERCHÉ?” (with the further subtitle “Carsia Giulia 1916”), the poet’s black heart “Negli incastri fangosi dei sassi/ come un’erba di questa contrada/ vuole tremare piano alla luce” (“In the muddy grooves of the stones/ like a blade of grass of this neighborhood/ wants to tremble slowly into the light”) (55). In the poem “SONO UNA CREATURA,” (subtitled “Valloncello di Cima Quattro il 5 agosto 1916”), the poet compares his lament with the “pietra/ del S. Michele” (“the stone/ of S. Michael”) (41) and in “C’ERA UNA VOLTA” (subtitled “Quota Centoquarantuno l’1 agosto 1916”) he describes Bosco Cappuccio, a battlefield during the war, as “un declivio/ di velluto verde/ come una dolce/ poltrona” (“a slope/ of green velvet/ like a sweet/ chair”) on which the poet would like to pause and rest himself (40). The isolated position of the word “poltrona,” composing a single line of verse, emphasizes its importance, which in the second stanza becomes a “caffè remoto” (“remote cafe”).
where the poet dreams of “appisolarsi” (“dozing off”). In this poem, Ungaretti ironically evokes his war-torn environment only to transmute a gentle green slope into a chair, which he then uses to express a desire to sit down and rest in peace. Such is Ungaretti’s skill in bringing together in one poem the evocation of a botched landscape and a subjective response to it.

In 1966, the mayor of Gorizia invited Ungaretti to attend a ceremony in which his name was to be inscribed on the city’s seal. Welcoming the poet, now advanced in years, the major stated that “la nostra terra ha dato al dramma di Ungaretti il suo linguaggio; e Ungaretti ha dato alla nostra terra la sua anima” (“our land has given a language to Ungaretti’s drama, and Ungaretti has given its soul to our land.”) (10). In accepting this act of homage, the poet stressed how the Carso’s topography affected his writing:

Ho ripercorso ieri qualche luogo del Carso. Quella petraia – a quei tempi resa, dalle spalmature appiccicose di fanga colore d’una ruggine del sangue, infida a chi, tra l’incrocio fitto del miagolio delle pallottole, l’attraversava smarrito nella notte – oggi il rigoglio dei fogliami la riveste. È incredibile, oggi il Carso appare quasi ridente.

Yesterday, I walked through some places in the Carso. Its stony ground – back then considered treacherous, due to the sticky spread of mud like the rust color of blood, by those lost who crossed it at night under the solid intersection of thousand bullets – today is covered with an intense vegetation. It is incredible, today the Carso appears almost smiling.

To Ungaretti the Carso appeared totally different now, but the horrors he saw unfolding on that stony ground proved to have a formative influence of his blues poetics. Together with the landscape, the blues documentable in these poems were also induced by the fact that soon enough Ungaretti started losing his juvenile enthusiasm for the war. In his letters to Ardengo Soffici, he sounds nothing like a hero. Rather, he repeatedly asks his friend to intercede on his behalf for a military leave. “Perché non mi hai ottenuto la licenza? Che male ho fatto, e verso di

84 Quoted from Il Carso non è più un inferno (All’insegna del pesce d’oro, 1966).
chi?” (“Why didn’t help me to get a time of furlough? What did I do wrong and to whom?”) (13), he writes an April 2, 1918. Eventually, after a few attempts, the furlough was granted. Ungaretti could not tolerate war any longer, and his broken body begged for rest.

Continuing on the importance that the landscape assumes in Ungaretti’s blues, we can cite another poem “IL PAESAGGIO D’ALESSANDRIA D’EGITTO” ("THE LANDSCAPE OF ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT") sets out to describe what initially appears to be a rather traditional Egyptian landscape, which the poem’s persona then boldly turns into a post romantic sexscape of desire:

La verdura estenuata dal sole.

Il bove bendato prosegue il suo giro
Accompagna il congegno tondo stridente.
Si ferma alle pause regolari.

L’acqua meschiuta si distende barcollante.
Si risotterra durante il viaggio.

Le gocciole attimo di gioia trattenuto
brillano sulla verdura rasserenata.

Il fellà è accoccolato nell’antro
del sicomoro ritto sulle proboscidi
che escono di terra come vermi mostruosi
col moto uguale di anelli su e giù
stese verso terra come le braccia di Gesù.
Il fellà canta

gorgoglio di passione di piccione innamorato
nenia noiosa di delizia
- Anatra vieni.
- E chi se ne fregà.
- Al letto di seta colore di sfumatura di poesia.
- E chi se ne fregà.
- T’insegnerò la frescura di tramonto delle astuzie.
- E chi se ne fregà.
- Lo possiedo duro grande e grosso.
- E chi se ne fregà.

Il mio silenzio di vagabondo indolente (369).
The English translation:

The garden worn out by the sun.

The blindfolded ox keeps on turning
accompanies the round, strident device.
Stops at regular intervals.

Poured water stretches itself staggering.
Buries itself during the trip.

Droplets moments of repressed joy
shine on the reassured green.

The fellà is resting in the cave
of the sycamore upright on the proboscises
that resurface like monstrous maggots
by monotonous motions as of rings up and down
tending to the soil like Jesus’s arms.
The fellà sings
gurgling passion of a pigeon in love
delight of a monotonous tune
- Duck comes
- Who cares.
- To the bed of silk the color of nuances of poetry
- Who cares.
- I will teach the coolness as guile ends
- Who cares.
- I have it big and hard
- Who cares.

My silence, that of an indolent vagrant.

The poem opens with a rural image: the ox ploughing the dry soil (“The garden worn out by the sun”), indicating once again Ungaretti’s interest in exploiting scenes of agricultural life. In the first part of the poem its unobtrusive persona is intent on describing a rather ordinary scene, but the poem’s scope changes radically in the second part. Now sexual desire, at first hidden in the ox’s motions, is substantially developed through the image of the fellà. The fellà allures the “anatra” (“duck”), which here most probably stands for a female body, to teach her “la frescura
di tramonto delle astuzie” (“I will teach the coolness as guile ends”). And then, somewhat
desperately and as a final ploy, he boasts of the ‘seductive’ features of his sexual organ: “I have
it big and hard” – the unromantic reply being “Who cares.” Animals are often seminal figures in
blues songs. So, Son House in his “The Pony Blues” says: “Oh, my pony – / saddle up/ my black
mare/ You know I/ I’m gonna follow my baby/ way out in/ the world, somewhere” (210), and
Barefoot Bill in “From now on” sings: “From now on, mama, I ain’t gonna have no rule/ From
now on, mama, I ain’t gonna have no rule/ I’m gonna get hard-headed, and act juts like a
doggone mule” (297) (both lyrics are included in The Blues Line). According to Paul Garon,
“animal images may be used for poetical redefinition of human relationships,” and for
challenging traditional ideology. Indeed, Garon continues, “blues singers’ celebration of truly
human behavior (especially sexual love) in animal terms is an especially striking example of the
distance separating the blues from the dominant ideology” (Garon’s emphasis, 113).

If in the first part of Ungaretti’s poem we may only guess that the lyric is attempting to
describe sexual intercourse, the penultimate verse (“I have it big and hard”) reveals the persona’s
true intent. Furthermore, the first part is made up of separate stanzas marked by blank spaces,
appearing as landscape snapshots that we can access to create a bucolic picture, whereas in the
second part of the poem, we have lines that are now packed together in an attempt to represent
the scene of sexual seduction, in which the two sexes rehearse in rapid fire fashion “la frescura di
tramonto.” The last, detached line of the poem shifts from third to first person, bringing us into
the present, where the speaker appears in silence, indicating that the scene of sexual seduction is
merely a matter of wishful thinking. Inasmuch as the animals in the poem remain connected by
the narrative, they are allegorical elements standing implicitly for an incessant sexual longing
(“[b]uries itself during the trip”).

143
The spirit of the blues is particularly evident in Ungaretti’s war poetry, but a close reading of the compositions written after WWI, reveals that, whether he refers to love, death, or war, he rarely abandoned his blues poetics. So, the late work, from Taccuino del Vecchio (Notebook of the Elder) on, reveals the same blues perspective, only now personal images are often revisited through the eyes of an elderly poet. Yet, if Ungaretti’s first lyrics expose a human heart overflowing with sorrow, the late Ungaretti resuscitates loves and passions, which temporarily free the poet from his condition of exile. Piccioni talks about this period as one in which the poet experienced a renewed slancio vitale (vital drive). His love for Jane Graziani, whom Ungaretti met at Cervia on December 21, 1958, and later, his romance with the twenty-something Bruna Bianco, whom he met in Brazil on August 26, 1966, during one of his last trips to that country, certainly contributed to this second breath. During this period, his blues often acquired a jazz-like bounce. He began to write poems like “Canto a due Voci” (subtitle “Roma, Domenica-Giovedì 10-14 Maggio 1959” in Taccuino); while the collection Dialogue contains another canto a due voci – Ungaretti’s nine poems to Bruna and her five responses. “‘Dialogue’ is a song for two voices in which her [Bianca’s] vibrant freshness acts as a counterpoint to the weary tone of his [Ungaretti’s] voice, for whom happiness can now be only contemplated beyond mortal boundaries,” Giusy C. Oddo writes (465). It is the first time that Ungaretti wrote an ensemble which formally sounds like a jazz performance.

“There are so many arguments going on about jazz,” Toni Morrison says in an interview with Sheldon Hackney, and she continues:

There is however agreement about some things true all along […]. One person does not dominate the whole performance – or if he or she does, he or she will have to take close, close notice of what another voice or instrument is doing or saying, and listening to the other voice may, and frequently does, affect or alter what the other voices might do or say (126).
Luciano Rebay, in his essay “Ungaretti: lettere a Jane, ‘Prima poesia per Jane,’ ‘Canto a Due voci per Jane’,” which the scholar received directly from Jane, suggests that in many ways she is a counter voice, a direct response to Ungaretti’s singing. Clearly, Ungaretti “take close, close notice of what another voice or instrument is doing.” On May 23, 1954, the poet writes to Jane, “Continuo a ritoccare i famosi tuoi canti. Sono gli ultimi tre versi che mi danno tormento, e non so ancora se fonderli – ma occorrerà fonderli meglio – ai versi precedenti, o farne un canto a parte” (Rebay 55). Jane too, in turn, pays close attention to Ungaretti’s voice. The last version of the poem came to sound like a dialogue between two mature persons (although Jane was much younger than Ungaretti) in which the “altra voce” (“other voice”) synthesizes the “prima voce” (“first voice”). The first part of the lines sung, or recited, by the “prima voce” sets the stage for the other voice. This dynamic set up is rendered here by the white spaces between the actual lines, which put the prima voce in waiting mode, as if ready to embrace what the other voice has to say. According to Ungaretti:

Il cuore mi è crudele:
Ama né altrove troveresti fuoco
Nel rinnovargli strazi tanto vigile:
Lontano dal tuo amore
Soffocato da tenebra si avventa
E quando, per guardare nel suo baratro […] (284).

English translation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My heart is cruel:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

---

85 “I keep on revising your famous cantos. Above all the last three verses are torturing me, and I do not know yet whether to combine them – and if it will happen to combine them more soundly – with the previous lines, or make up a new different canto.”
You must love because you will not be able to find any fire

I renew him very fragile tortures:

Away from your love

Suffocated by darkness attack

And when, to look at the abyss […]

At this point, the second voice replies “Più nulla gli si può nel cuore smuovere” (“nothing else can we shake in the heart”) (285). The “altra voce” summarizes the sentiment of the first, which needs more space and words to convey its emotional trouble, its sense of decline that perhaps the poet was feeling at the time due to his age.

As is often the case in jazz literature, the dialogue between Ungaretti and Jane represents two versions of the same moment. Their exchange unfolds in the same fashion until the end where, again, the “altra voce” synthesizes the first with the rhetorical question “In una carne logora?” (“In consumed flesh?”). Paying close attention to the meaning of that question, the “prima voce” remains silent, either because it cannot find words or energy to reply, or because the “other voice” has captured an undeniable truth. “Suo incendio può guizzare” (“its fire can spring”) seems too long for a reply. The verb “guizzare” (“to spring”) evokes youthful vitality, but this is abruptly quieted by Jane’s voice, which takes the stage and brings the first voice’s canto to an end. It is she who closes the poem, hers the last voice heard. There is a kind of egalitarianism or meritocracy in jazz, Morrison says (126). This is also true of “Canto a Due Voci” (“Canto for Two Voices”). It is not that the “other voice” feels the urge to hush the first; rather, it finds its deserved space on the page-stage because it listened to the first voice for a good part of the poem. On the other hand, the “prima voce” creates this space because it is right and just to do so. In the process, an egalitarian poetic economy is created, with the first voice
opening the poem and the second closing it. Also, since the first voice talks a little more than the other one, it is only fair that the latter, with its fewer words, utter cogent and succinct phrases, which make a strong impression on the reader.

There is also a kind of poetical meritocracy in the poems included in Dialogo (Dialogue), where Ungaretti e Bruna converse about their love. Here the two voices seem even more in synchrony than those in “Canto a Due Voci,” perhaps because Bruna returned Ungaretti’s affection a little more than Jane. Poetical egalitarianism in these lyrics manifests itself not only concerning space and time, but also in language and concepts. Bruna often uses terms, or restates in her own style, words and ideas that Ungaretti has already uttered. Like little accessories, these words link together the solo moments. In the lyric, “12 settembre 1966” (“12 September 1966”) Ungaretti writes:

Sei comparsa al portone
In un vestito rosso
Per dirmi che sei fuoco
Che consuma e riaccende (299).

You appeared at my door
In a red dress
To tell me you are fire
That consumes yet burns again.

And Bruna replies in “Variazioni sul Tema della Rosa” (“Variations on the Rose Theme”):

Mi aspettavi paziente
Predestinato amore,
T’inseguivo sperduta
Dal primo dolore (313).

You were waiting patiently
Predestined love,
Lost, I chased after you
From the first sorrow.
This conversation matches quite perfectly the theme, style, and ambiance of the entire *Dialogo*. Both stanzas comprise four lines and have the same poetical weight, the same conceptual prominence. While Ungaretti closes his third stanza with “l’età per vincere non conta” (“to win, age does not matter”), Bruna opens with the word “gioventù” (“youth”), as if to respond to the idea of age introduced by her interlocutor. She remains the subject of the entire first movement of the poem. Ungaretti argues that age is not a problem and that old men can still win. Bruna, in turn, says that one’s youth should not prevent one from leaving “al cuore la scelta del destino” (“the heart choose its destiny”), especially because to sustain itself this youth disposes of “quel suo vecchio bastone/ Sul quale si appoggiava,/ Donato con le rose” (“that old cane of his/ Given with roses/ On which he leaned”). Examples of Ungaretti’s investment in poetical meritocracy could be extended further, since signs of the correspondence between him and Bruna are disseminated throughout the entire collection.

Jazz undoubtedly influenced Ungaretti’s later poetry. The poet must have known and appreciated this music. In his *Antologia dei negri d’America (Anthology of Black American Literature)*, Piccioni mentions that “un poeta italiano che si trovò una sera ad ascoltare del vero jazz per la prima volta, disse […] che quella musica gli faceva l’effetto che in poesia gli rimase legato ai primi incontri con Rimbaud” (109). Although Piccioni does not say who this poet is, due to his close friendship with Ungaretti, it is almost certain that the person in question was Ungaretti. In her article “‘S’incomincia per Cantare/ e Si Canta per Finire’: la Parola è Musica per Ungaretti,” Maria Luisi mentions that Ungaretti was introduced to contemporary music through Piccione’s brother Piero, a jazz player and composer (249). Especially in the early

---

86“An Italian poet whom, one night, was listening to some real jazz for the first time, said […] that that music impressed him in the same way in which Rimbaud’s poetry used to speak to him.” The first edition of this anthology was published in 1949 by La Stella Alpina in Novara, the 1964 edition was published by Mondadori.
decades of the twentieth century, there was a lively interchange between jazz and blues musicians and authors, writers, and poets. In Ungaretti’s poetry, we often find a strong rhythmic and aural correlation between words and music. We know that the blues and jazz also inspired many writers, especially African Americans. Familiarity with Ungaretti’s oeuvre reveals that he has a great deal in common with these writers. When asked “what is poetry?” Langston Hughes once replied, “[I]t is the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop, into atomic words” (5). Ungaretti is a good example of one who squeezed his personal experience (his soul) into “atomic words” – singing his own sorrow, the horror he endured in war, his blues, but also his joy and the desire to love and be able to laugh despite everything. We can truly say, he had the blues spirit.

But there is more to be said about Ungaretti’s relationship with black culture. Giuseppe Ungaretti shares with black Americans even more than a complex literary experience or sentiment of the blues. In 1964, year in which Columbia University invited Giuseppe Ungaretti to deliver a series of lectures, the poet wrote the introduction to the latest edition of Antologia dei Negri d’America. As it often happens, Ungaretti’s critical comments are always subjective, and in this particular essay, besides praising Piccioni for the significant job of presenting African American literature to an Italian audience, the poet informs the reader about his personal experience with black culture:

sulle colline, con i loro travestimenti, i loro tamburi, le loro sambe, le loro coreografie, le loro pazzia preparata per i cordaões durante l’intero anno: un anno intero di privazioni e di dedizione sognante per pochi giorni di carnevale. Li ho visti anche nei candombleu e nelle macumbe, di notte, nella foresta, ballare sino al delirio, sino a cadere in deliquio. Li ho frequentati a Harlem di New York […] Li ho visti professori di greco e latino a Parigi. Ho incontrato spesso in cordiali colloqui, rappresentanti delle loro liberate nazioni dell’Africa. E sempre li ho amati (712-713).

I knew black people since I was a child. In Egypt, they were loyal in every home. Born there, do I not remember black women as generous nurturers? In wealthy households, like those of the Arabic and Turkish lords, back then – I am almost eighty years old – there were also slaves. Seated, eunuchs guarded the gates of gardens. They were hairless. They were old, slim, tall, and dressed in black. They used to wear a suit called the Stambulina, a sort of tuxedo. They were like mummies, worse petrified, their eyes yellow. They kept their hands open on their knees. The looked eternal, and their voice, when you could hear it, as they were mumbling, was more childish than ours, as we are children […]. I met many black people. I saw crowds of them at the Carnival in Rio; I saw them leave their favelas and their humble houses on the hills; I saw them in disguise, carrying their drums, dancing their sambas, their choreographies; their crazy passion for the cordaões that thrilled them all year long: one entire year of sacrifice and dreamed dedication just to experience a few days of carnival. I saw them in candomblue and macumbas, at night, in the forest, dance to madness and to exhaustion. I frequented them in New York’s Harlem […]. I saw them professors of Greek and Latin in Paris. I often conversed with them in amicable terms, as they represented their freed African nations. I always loved them.

Here the poet seems almost to create a footprint of the black diaspora as he cites blacks kept in Arab captivity, Brazilian, African, and American blacks. All this should shed light on Ungaretti’s natural cosmopolitanism and his own definition of being a fibra dell’universo. Furthermore, Ungaretti’s version of black people also shows that, while making visible a dialogue between the poet and black cultures can help us further our understanding of Ungaretti, it also paves the way to reduce the distance between black and Italian experiences.

Albeit Ungaretti is not Italian American, his cosmopolitanism, the fact that he had more than one patria to which belonged, makes him Italian-African-American inasmuch as we compare him with other national writers. As Ungaretti himself suggested, indeed, the work of a
poet cannot be envisioned without taking in consideration the poetics of other authors. This Ungaretti implies when, in 1966, he was invited to deliver a speech at a reading of Allen Ginsberg’s poems in Naples.\textsuperscript{87} In this address, besides highlighting characteristics of Ginsberg that resemble his own, like that of girovago (wanderer), who traveled to Africa and Asia (716), Ungaretti infers the existence of an international community of poets whose work influences each other writing. Soon enough he stresses the impact that other national writers had on Ginsberg’s poems, in which Ungaretti recognizes the voice of Walt Whitman, Victor Hugo, Guillaume Apollinaire, William Blake, and James Joyce. Clearly, in this speech, Ungaretti created literary crocevie, point of connections between poets whose work originated then not only in one national tradition but in many traditions (214). Certainly, the speech shows the poet’s extensive literary knowledge, but most importantly that, when discussed together, authorial works diminish cultural distances precisely because of their mutual dependence on finding successful forms and styles by which expressing themselves.

The presence, the voice, the echoes of different cultural perspectives put Ungaretti’s works in an organic and fluid conversation with authors whose work originated in other national contexts. With regard to African American literature, to include Ungaretti in the roster of blues writers certainly helps enhance lines of communication to facilitate the dialogue with Hughes. Once this literary viaduct bridging Hughes’s and Ungaretti’s poetics through the spirit of the blues is created, Ungaretti’s oeuvre can readily intersect other folk traditions, as their cultural significance might have had the same effects that that blues has had for African Americans in the United States. Due to his close relationship with Hughes, one name in particular comes to my mind: the Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén. Although this is not the place to explore this literary

\textsuperscript{87} The speech is from the collection \textit{Vita d’un uomo: saggi ed interventi} (Mondadori, 1974).
juncture, the suggestion made here is that, in the literary dispositif, Ungaretti’s blues spirit assumes unexpected transatlantic dimensions, trespassing even the poet’s own experience of certain places across the Atlantic (Brazil and the United States), although crucial they have been for him.

**Speaking About the “Irrelevant Man”: the Blues of Antonio D’Alfonso**

Literary scholars and critics have been interpreting D’Alfonso’s writing almost exclusively in terms of his attempt to express, demonstrate, and construct his italic identity. This has led many (see Ferraro, for instance) to categorize his works as migrant literature in Canada. Again, Italian scholar Immacolata Amodeo suggests that the peculiar nature of D’Alfonso’s creation – she talks specifically about the poem “Babel” and the novel Avril au l’anti-passion – helps address the history of immigration both as a theme and as a literary form.\(^8\) Undeniably, D’Alfonso gives us more than one reason to classify his work as migrant literature; nevertheless, his production can be appreciated beyond ethnic groupings. This is possible especially if we take in consideration that besides being a writer, a poet, a filmmaker, a teacher, an essayist, and a columnist, D’Alfonso is also a musician. The author talks about his love of music at the beginning of his unpublished autobiography, Dépaysé (Disoriented) (note how close to Ungaretti’s poetics of spiantato (uprooted, penniless) this title is): “[l]e goût par la musique m’a été inculqué par mon père qui tenait mordicus à ce que j’apprenne à jouer d’un instrument. Entre l’accordéon et le piano, j’ai opté pour la guitare,” he writes in there (30).\(^9\) With other musicians, 

---


89 “My father helped me find my passion for music as he pushed me to play an instrument. Between the accordion and the piano, I chose the guitar”
he formed a band named *Togetherness*. D’Alfonso suggests that if they did not give up their dreams to make it in the entertainment business, they would have had a good chance to be famous (28).

D’Alfonso performed from 1963 to 1975, and at least in two occasions gave a reading of his poems in Montreal accompanied by the music of Italian composer Angelo Finaldi – an artist notorious for having created in the ‘60s the tune of the lyrics “Québécois, Nous sommes des Québécois,” while playing in the band *La Révolution Française* (with the other members being François Guy, Georges Marchand, and Louis Parizeau). In 2014, D’Alfonso also collaborated with Italian Canadian performer of contemporary jazz Dominic Mancuso to the release of the album *Sub Urban Gypsy* in which five poems of D’Alfonso appear: “Her simple truth,” “Saudade,” “My flesh” (from *Getting on with Politics*), “Dances in My Mind,” and “Night Drive” (from *The Irrelevant Man*).

To focus on D’Alfonso’s interest in music offers new ways of interpreting his works. It helps create even more easily another line of communication with Ungaretti and Hughes. Compared to the other two authors, D’Alfonso goes as far as considering music not only a source of inspiration but also a complete form of art, as he puts it in his autobiography. According to him, without using words, music represents all the languages together while at the same time separating them (30). His notion of music seems to be more attuned with the idea that Hughes had of jazz. Like the adopted Harlemite, D’Alfonso conceives of it as a means of communication and a way to assert individual and collective cultures. During a conversation I had with D’Alfonso in December 2016, he made it clear to me that he believed that, especially to the Italians in Canada, music represented a way to deal with the language barrier. This idea is kin to the experiences of the jazz performers of Italian origins living and producing music in New York.
Orleans. Again, since, the lives of the musicians in New Orleans intermingled with the musical experience of the African Americans, it follows that, continuing the exploration of the blues as a line of inquiry, Italian Canadian performers (D’Alfonso included) also intersect the black culture of the United States. This may result particularly interesting if we consider that, as Mark Miller suggests in *Such Melodious Racket: the Lost History of Jazz in Canada, 1914-1949* the black population in Canada has always been much smaller than it is in the United States (18), meaning that the presence of a black culture in the country is limited. Among the African Americans living in Canada at the turn of the century, there was Ollie Wagner, born in Kansas in 1907 from a former slave. Wagner moved to the Athabaska district around 1910. He was a trumpeter, and according to Miller, eventually, he was able to make a living through performing his music (160). Wagner is also notorious for having created the band *The Knights of Harlem*, succeeding in Canada during the Depression.

This example suggests the cultural import of African Americans in Canada. With reference to D’Alfonso, most of his work shows a peculiar sensibility to both blues and jazz. For example, *Un ami, un nuage* (*The Irrelevant Man* in English) in a way summarizes D’Alfonso’s entire poetic career not only because it deals with the subjects with which he is more concerned (a critique of Canadian politics, immigration, cultural heritage and ethnic belonging), but also because here more than in any other book he wrote so far, he ‘got the blues.’ A poem in this collection comes easily to mind, “Pier 21: l’accueil” (“Pier 21: Welcome”). It describes the emotional and physical restlessness of a nomad (also the speaker of the verse) who sustains that to be without a homeland is not always a bad circumstance—actually it is necessary to his predicament that always urges him to move from place to place—nomadism is a state the speaker has learnt as he did not have alternatives. So, D’Alfonso writes:
Il y eu celui qui reste, celui qui part.
La terre, inutile de me le rappeler,
La terre la terre n’appartient à personne.
Jamais partout le nomade ne prend
Deux fois le même trajet. Entre départ et arrivée (33).

Every man that leaves, another returns.
Land, no use reminding me, I know
Land land land never belongs to anyone.
Never anywhere do nomads take
The same trajectory twice from start to end (D’Alfonso 37).

The repetition of the word “terre” indicates that the speaker suffers the condition of being ‘homeless.’ The image of an ideal place in which to dwell permanently is impressed into the mind of the nomad who, by claiming the uselessness of it, reminds himself that the land in reality belongs to nobody, and clarifies for us that to master how to be a nomad was paramount for him. This idea is better rendered in the French version of the poem, where the past mood of the verb to be (“Il y eu”) prompts us to imagine the speaker’s toil through time.

We have a clear sense of the consequence of his training from the very begin, where the nomad describes his everyday life:

J’arrive à la douane tous les jours.
J’y suis venu le premier mi 1913,
Ensuite le vingt et un janvier 1930.
Une troisième fois le 10 décembre 2000.
J’aime voyager, c’est-à-dire le voyage m’aime (33)

Every day I make my way through customs.
I first came here on May 1st, 1913.
Again on January 21st, 1930.
A third time on December 10th, 2000 (37).

Here the speaker grew older by traveling extensively from place to place and by returning to the same sites once he visited them all. The life routine implied in this stanza also suggests that the poetic persona has very little opportunity to succeed, as for one reason or another, he keeps on returning to pass through the same customs; people fail to recognize him, and each time he has to
find his way through them. From the outset, D’Alfonso here sings the blues by introducing us to a poetic persona who must erase everything (in the English version “steps” reflect a more lenient image than in the French version) and commence all over again each time he starts on waiting. All this in order to survive. Later, D’Alfonso’s blues are especially clear in the following lines:

Je suis homme faible qui efface tout
Et débute vie nouvelle contre toute attente,
Je me convertis, apprends la patois du pays (34).

I am a weak man who erases my steps
And begins life against all odds.
I am a convert who learns the native parlance (38).

Although the poet expresses a sense of regeneration and restarting, the nomad keeps on roaming the world simply because this is the only lifestyle he knows. To do that, however, he pays a heavy price: he has to forgo his origin and learn new idioms each time he visits a country. “Steps” here also stands for those things that the nomad was able to build to create his community which will never be his (a reason for singing the blues). As D’Alfonso puts it in the middle of the second stanza and in the third moment of the poem:

Bien sure, je participe a la vie de la tribu
Qui s’installe dans au lieu fertile
Et bâtit maison jardin et famille

Je marche aussi avec la bande
Qui traverse les champs verts
Et noircit le zénith avec dans les bras
Nos outils nos fruits nos femmes […] (33)

Sure, I help with the tribe’s existence
In building its homes on fertile land
Where we erect our statues and gardens.

I also demonstrate with gangs that cut
Across the rich green fields of wheat
And blacken the summits with our arms,
Our tools, our fruits, and our women […] (37).
The speaker has done what he could to survive, for he helped his “tribe” build its community, maybe even form its identity (represented here by the byproduct of figurative arts and landscapes), and also his gangs. However, all of these things remain strange to him because he is destined to leave everything behind (another reason for feeling blue and sing it). So, towards the end of the poem, we have been told once and for all that D’Alfonso is chanting his poetic persona’s blues, but we have also provided with other details, intended to demonstrate that we can successfully deal with something as difficult as feeling uprooted even though sometimes one has to make unfortunate choice as that of selling identities and appearing detached:

Prêt à vendre l’identité, sans attachement au dialecte,
Sans désir de nostalgie, sans crainte de rompre
Avec ce sol, avec la mère, le père,
Avec cette région où je chante mon indifférence
Et ma différence, ma richesse, ma pauvreté (34).

I sell identities, have no fondness
For language, no nostalgia, have no fear
Of abandoning home, mother, father, region.
Where I am I sing my difference,
My indifference, my wealth, my poverty (38).

The nomad sells identities in the sense that he can give them away (can help others find their identities), but his destiny is that of having perhaps multiple identities; this is why he can sing his wealth (the privilege of having more than one identities expresses potential for life opportunities) and at the same time his poverty (multiple identities meaning instability).

Although D’Alfonso plays for the most part rock music, if we imagine him accompanying his guitar with this particular poem, we could hear a blues motif coming from the strings of his guitar. “Pier 21: l’accueil” is a poem of sadness caused by the fact the nomad does not have any other choice but to live the way he claims he does in the verse. At the same time, the speaker is not resigned either because he has the strength to keep on living or surviving, at
least, a typical attitude often showcased in blues performances. D’Alfonso belongs to the
category of blues writer not only because as he told me, blues and jazz, of course, he says, are
part of his background as a musician but also because, in many respects, his work shows a
consciousness defining those who are well in touch with their sentiments. It is by this clear
perception of life that he can describe (as Ungaretti and Hughes do) his relation to the condition
of being human. To put it briefly, when writers like D’Alfonso have the blues, they sing them. In
“Pier 21: Welcome,” the life of the nomad is perfectly clear to us, but it is especially clear to
himself, for he can tell us his story with perfect lucidity. The clarity of the story is one of the
crucial elements we find in blues lyrics. Here perhaps it suffices to mention only one blues song
by Bessie Smith, “Send Me to the ‘Lectric Chair,” which narrates the story of a woman who
killed her man and asked the judge to send her to the electric chair.

Coming out of the rasping voice of the performer, the woman in the song is anything but
a mad person. Rather, she appears to be conscious of having done a terrible thing. Because of
this awareness, she asks for the possibility to find peace in hell, thinking that by going to hell she
can purge her crime. The lyric goes as follows:

    Judge, judge, good mister judge,
    Let me go away from here
    I want to take a journey
    To the devil down below
    I done killed my man
    I want to reap just what I sow
    Oh judge, judge, lordy lordy judge
    Send me to the ‘lectric chair
    Judge, judge, hear me judge
    Send me to the ‘lectric chair
    I love him so dear
    I cut him with my barlow
    I kicked him in the side
    I stood here laughing o’er him
    While he wallowed around and died
    Oh judge, judge, lordy judge
Send me to the ‘lectric chair
Judge, judge, sweet mister judge
Send me to the ‘lectric chair
Judge, judge, good kind judge
Burn me ‘cause I don't care
I don’t want no one good mayor
To go my bail
I don't want to spend no
Ninety-nine years in jail
So judge, judge, good kind judge
Send me to the ‘lectric chair.90

The nomad in “21 Pier: Welcome!” did not kill anybody, but the interpretation he renders of his own life indicates a quite similar responsiveness. So rather than suggesting that, like Hughes, D’Alfonso is a ‘man of the crowd,’ his work indicates a profound knowledge of the human condition in general. For this reason, his verse equally relates to Ungaretti and Hughes, as both were well aware of human predicaments.

In the poem “26.07.02,” D’Alfonso tells us about a time in which he saw New York City from the windows of a convertible car while listening to the jazz of Torcuato Mariano playing the musical piece “A Very Special Place.” If the song can give the listener a sense of peace, maybe even the desire to go down to the beach to spend a relaxing afternoon, the description of New York in the poem reflects nothing of the allure evoked by the imaginary musical landscape in Mariano’s instrumental piece. Actually, the poem is concerned with portraying the terrible things history has recorded, gruesome episodes that D’Alfonso outlines in the second stanza:

L’assassinat de Lennon derrière nous,
L’assassinat de milliers devant nous.
Les bâtisses ne sont plus (41).

The murder of Lennon behind us.
The murder of thousands behind us.
The towers not on firm ground (D’Alfonso 45).

90 In the second CD of Bessie Smith’s Greatest Hits (Acrobat Music Limited, 2005).
This last verse, in particular, refers to the tragedy of September 11, as if the towers, a metaphor for our lives, may no longer feel safe, especially in big cities like New York, which keeps on showing to D’Alfonso its true face. The last two stanzas of the poem read:

Une étoile s’écrase en plein Times Square
On vend les miettes au nom de la liberté.
Un jeune garçon hume les vapeurs d’un aérosol.

Personne ne pleure, personne ne rit.
Les rues convergent dans un trou noir.
L’Orient et l’Occident attendent au feu rouge (41).

A star drops in the middle of Times Square.
They are selling its fragments for freedom.
A young man inhales the fumes from a hairspray can.

No one is weeping, no one is laughing.
All streets converge into a gutter.
The East and the West wait for the red light to change (D’Alfonso 45).

The lines evoke the Old Times Square, which, according to Keri Blakinger’s article on the New York Daily News website, in the ‘70s and ‘80s was “a hotbed for getting high and heavy with everything from live sex shows to porn theaters (the “gutter” D’Alfonso mentions in the poem) but all that changed thanks to an early 90s redevelopment and rezoning plan realized under former NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani.”91 The poem ends with the image of indifference from the people passing by Times Square, as they are simply waiting to drive through it to reach other destinations. Here we have the sense that D’Alfonso got the blues precisely because of the realistic way in which he describes the city. That same city, we may want to remember, that rejects the poor and the black blues performers as Hughes insinuates in his poem “The Weary Blues.” D’Alfonso’s reference to prostitution (“they are selling its fragments for freedom”) resonates with the despair of the new generation unable to make something good for itself. To

---

91 The article is available at the following address: www.nydailynews.com/new-york/manhattan/interactive-changing-face-times-square-article-1.2528294
avoid the emotional pain caused by a lack of opportunities, in the stanza before last, a young man uses cheap drugs to get high (“inhales the fumes from a hairspray can”) and escape reality. Like Hughes in his blues poem, D’Alfonso observes this man and others, coming to the conclusion that they are neither able to laugh nor to weep because any of these sentiments lose meaning in a city like New York. While Hughes’ southerner will eventually “sleep like a rock,” the personae populating D’Alfonso’s verse are just waiting “for the red light to change.” The sense of alienation and solitude, however, is equally evoked in both poems.

With the strokes of his pen, D’Alfonso reminds us in more than one occasion that besides feeling the blues he also and often plays literary jazz. What other scholars have interpreted as baroque and ethnic in his Fabrizio’s trilogy can also be associated with the jazz and blues traditions. While in the essay “Global Baroque: Antonio D’Alfonso’s Fabrizio’s Passion,” Lyanne Moyes suggests that the aesthetic of Fabrizio’s Passion (the English version of Avril, translated by D’Alfonso himself) is influenced by the author’s own hybrid identity, this segment of the chapter argues that the often non-linear, eclectic disposition of D’Alfonso’s novels can be read as inspired by jazz, which in and of itself is a call for scholars to draw further analyses. In his fictional prose work, the narrator often shifts point of view compelling the reader to consider the voices populating the story as parts of a jazz ensemble where each of them is able to find the time and the space necessary to express him/herself. In L’aimé (The Beloved) especially one can even find the conventional structure of the typical call-response patterns of the work songs because the women describing Fabrizio seem to communicate to one another their opinion about the man. These women, all from different cultures, lead the reader to construct an image of Fabrizio other than pleasing. The insights we gather is that Fabrizio is one fortunate enough to experience love in the guise of sexual attraction and passion but really unable to engage in a
serious relation with anyone. He constantly seeks love, but he flees it when he receives it. At the
end of the chapter “Trisa: 1991,” we understand that the woman is asking Fabrizio to marry her.
Here the reader has to rely completely on Trisa’s version, as we do not have any reaction from
the beloved. Through her eyes, “Fabrizio dissimule mal sa surprise, tu veux m’épouser? Dit-il,
oui, dis-je, oui, oui, oui” (“Fabrizio pretends to be surprised, do you want to marry me? he says,
yes, I want to, yes, yes, yes”) (109). These final words close the chapter, suggesting that Fabrizio
understood the implications of Trisa’s proposal. His silence, however, clarifies that he does not
intend to marry anyone.

His disconcerting muteness also suggests that somehow his way of living is unsettling
even for him. We do not know why he chooses this specific lifestyle, but we have the sense that
all of the emotional damages he caused, take a toll on him. He avoids dealing with the
resentment of all these women. This behavior, apparently, encourages him to disappear, or
maybe commit suicide, for he has nothing left to collect. This is clear in the last chapter of the
novel – a very short one, consisting of only one paragraph – where Dervla recounts the last time
in which he saw Fabrizio trying to pick up the red glasses he lost in a storm. This is how the
woman describes the last time he saw Fabrizio:

 […] Fabrizio s’est arrêté en plein trafic pour ramasser ce qui ne pouvait plus être
ramasse, car les lunettes rouges, ainsi que le feu rouge au fond de la rue, se sont
évanouis dans l’air comme un rêve amoureux, images effacée du passe, et peu
important les nombreuses tentatives de rebrousser chemin, il n’y avait plus rien à
cueillir, car tout s’était bien volatilise dans le maelström brésiliens.

Fabrizio stopped the traffic to pick that which could no longer be picked, because
instead of the red fire at the end of the road, it was his glasses that disappeared in
the air like a happy dream, lost image of the past, useless attempting to retrace his
steps, he did not have anything else to collect, because everything evaporated with
the Brazilian maelstrom.
The image of the storm, the loss of fire – a metaphor for his lack of happiness and even disappearance of his youth, perhaps – suggests a lack of inner sight, of consciousness, leading us to consider this novel as a possible blues performance. D’Alfonso makes it difficult to be sympathetic with his male character but, on the other hand, what makes Fabrizio interesting is the blues he plays throughout. It is even possible that when he plays them, he confesses that he feels blue to his guitar, as he clearly owns one. One thing that Harriette notices in Fabrizio’s apartment is indeed a “guitare acoustique dans un coin, contre le mur” (“an acoustic guitar in a corner facing the wall”) (15).

Due to the mood of the entire novel and this detail we can speculate that L’aîné also belongs to the jazz and blues tradition, proving that D’Alfonso’s style reaches far beyond representations of Italian ethnicity, opening itself up to lines of communications with other traditions. Overall, the novel reminds us of the song by George “Buddy” Guy “Born to Play Guitar,” especially when he sings:

I got a reputation
And everybody knows my name
I was born to play the guitar
People, I got blues running through my veins

Women in Chicago
They love me to the bone
But my love for my guitar keep me far away from home. 

Like the man in the song, in D’Alfonso’s novel, the people talking about Fabrizio have personally known him (in the lyric, “everybody knows my name”). But the men’s popularity is not the only characteristic making “Buddy” Guy’s character comparable to Fabrizio. Both, indeed, are also loved “to the bone” by women, but they prefer to remain “nomads of love,” as Ungaretti would put it, instead of choosing only one of them. So, while Fabrizio goes on to his

92 From the album Born to Play Guitar (RCA Records, 2015).
lonely life, “Buddy” Guy’s persona chooses his guitar over a stable home, image which obviously reinforces the idea that it is impossible for him to engage in a serious romantic relationship. In other words, the man in the lyric chooses to follow his dream to become a famous singer/guitar player. We do not know for sure if Harriette, observing that Fabrizio is a mediocre actor (13), implies that Fabrizio aspires to be a filmmaker, as we know from his first appearance in Avril au l’anti-passion. But since D’Alfonso intends his novels to be a trilogy about Fabrizio Notte, combining the information we have already given in the other two novels, we can speculate that he too, like the man in the lyric, may choose to follow his dreams instead of settling in. However, while the lyric suggests that the man succeeded, Fabrizio most probably did not. Losing his glasses (therefore the possibility to see clearly again) at the end of his story indicates a failure on his part.

The possible final failure of Fabrizio is told through the eyes and the stories of the women speaking about him. The structure of the narrative resonates with the idea of meritocracy Toni Morrison mentions in her interview. Fabrizio’s character is constructed through the impressions of the women he had sexual relationships with. We better understand how the idea of meritocracy applies to the novel if we consider that these women can voice their relationship to the best of their knowledge. In so doing, they reach their own conclusion about Fabrizio while helping us comprehend the reason for which he behaves the way he does (insecure, egocentric, even stupid). At the same time, even those women who did not have the chance to be with Fabrizio have a part in the novel and find their voice. For instance, in the opening chapter “Harriette: 1974,” Désirée finds a way to express herself when Harriette narrates: “Plus tard, lorsque sa rage se fut un peu calmée, elle m’interrogea à plusieurs reprises sur le « pourquoi » Fabrice m’avait choisie, moi, une femme de cinquante ans, plutôt qu’elle: je me taisais, car je ne
savais que lui répondre” (17). In only one sentence, we are told about Désirée’s emotional distress and how she suffered the fact that Fabrizio did not correspond her affection for him. We are also informed that he became almost an obsession for her. So, she constantly interrogates her aunt on the reasons that possibly lead Fabrizio to choose one older woman instead of her. Again, in the economy of this jazz story, we also get an idea of how selfish Fabrizio might have been, for most probably he stopped talking to both women.

We have seen that the blues according to Hughes is a means through which the African American author can describe and partake to the black masses’ plight; for Ungaretti and D’Alfonso the blues is as much an aesthetic choice as it is a personal one. In the final instance of showing the high level of cultural communicability revealed by the blues as a line of inquiry, it can suffice to consider how the concept of laughter, crucial in Hughes’s blues poetry, makes, again, their works comprehensible to each other. To give an idea of Hughes’s laughter, it is worth to mention the last speech that the author gave on February 16, 1967 – about three months before his death – at the University of California, Los Angeles. Here Hughes demonstrates how this laughter was meant not only to entertain but also to illustrate the moral strength of his people. Greeted warmly by the student audience, a few minutes into his speech, Hughes recounted the following anecdote:

We’ve experienced it in New York before the Harlem riot, you know? In fact the word ‘bebop,’ I asked one of the bebop musicians one time, where they got the word bebop for their music; he said, well you know, that comes from the sound of the club of the cops on the head. Every time it hits the clubs: ba-bap-bi-bap-map-map. Well, the story was they used to work the Negro’s head so well that a rhythm was developed.94

93 “Later, when she calmed down, she asked me more than once the reason for which Fabrizio wanted me and not her, me, a fifty-year-old woman: I did not say anything because I did not know what to answer.”
94 This recorded reading is available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Px5hwNCs9ss. The audio document was digitized in 2013 from the archives of the University of California, Los Angeles, Communications Studies Department.
The conclusion of this painful sketch induces laughter in the audience even if in reality there is nothing amusing about it. Later on, Hughes narrated other anecdotes, and again, he laughed with the audience. Hughes’ stories are much more than jokes, yet one of his major strengths as a writer lies precisely in his ability to turn horrible circumstances into something good for the collectivity, as the “bebop” story above suggests. Hughes’s poetic of resilience conveyed through the laughter is almost the backbone not only of most of his writing but of the African American cultures as Hughes knew it. Literary scholar Mike Chasar suggests that “[b]lack laughter not only challenged the acoustic of white power and served as a weapon in the struggle for political and social justice, but it also aggressively and bodily sounded what Houston Baker calls the strength of ‘African American ancestral past’” (58). We can say that a poetics of laughter is rooted in Hughes’s verse.

With regard to the significance of laughter in Ungaretti, we may want to consider that, like Hughes, the Italian poet was one who would always be able to laughed, as he would say in a letter to his pupil Leone Piccioni. In other words, Ungaretti too shows a strong resilience in the face of life’s horrors. In his poetry, however, rather than deliver bitter jokes, the poet often chose to describe life in such a way to convey the sense of its extreme seriousness. As a consequence, we cannot smirk, let alone laugh, when we read his lines. Poems like “Soldati” (“Soldiers”) (“Si sta/ come d’autunno/ sugli alberi/ le foglie,” “We are/ as in autumn/ leaves/ on trees” (87)) are not meant to be ironic with regard to the frailty of humankind. Contrary to Hughes’s laughter, which conveys a sense that life can turn around and that tragic events can generate good things, Ungaretti’s poem above does not suggest any such possibility. Things cannot get better simply because we all share a common human condition. We can easily experience life like a soldier in WWI, without making any noise – like the leaves (the soldiers) on the tree in Ungaretti’s poem.
The idea of ephemerality conveyed in the verse suggests that we are attached to the tree of life like leaves in autumn: we could fall any moment, weightlessly and quietly. Such a fall is soundless; people too regularly die without anyone noticing. The impersonal form with which the poem begins indicates that our destiny is not unlike the soldiers Ungaretti imagines.

Ungaretti’s laughter is the laughter of a survivor, whereas in Hughes the laughter is a means to survive, even excel.

On his part, D’Alfonso’s poetics shows more than a hint of irony, but more often than not it borders on self-criticism. The bitterest jokes seem to be played on the author himself. This is clear in much of D’Alfonso’s production, which is intended as a critique of the way in which Canada invests (or does not invest) in its intellectual and cultural human resources. In the poem “Soudeur” (“Welder”), Joe Pass’ dream to be recognized as an artist by the society in which he lives will never come true.95 The poem reads as follows:

Joe Pass gratte les cordes de sa guitare
et bascule l’esprit endormi sur son tabouret :
buste sur un toit qui, soudain, a la bougeotte.
Plume à la main, j’ai l’air ridicule affalé dans mon fauteuil
en train de limer ces mots que je tasse dans un mètre
qui suit le battement d’aucun coeur.
Jour gris à la dérive heureuse. Des travailleurs,
de vrais sculpteurs aux doigts ensorcelés,
martèlent la charpente de notre remise
plus vite que moi qui colle difficilement ces images
qui réchaufferont, j’espère, le cœur de mon épouse.
Papa, je n’aurais jamais dû vous écouter.
L’école, c’est pour les crétins. On apprend
davantage à être comme vous, soudeur (10).

Joe Pass plucks guitar strings
that pull the spirit from its stool:
wanderlust bust on a rooftop.

---

95 The poem appears in both the French version Comment ça ce passe and in its 2002 translation into English Getting on with Politics. I mention this because in his own version of the English translation of the book, D’Alfonso chose not to include a few poems that appear in French.
Pen in hand, I look quite foolish
slouched here trying to file smooth words
and fit them in a meter that follows
no one’s heartbeat. The gray-drift day
is happy. Workers, sculptors
with wizard fingers, hammer the frame
of our shed faster than I can glue together
a few images meant to bring warmth to my love.
Dad, I should not have listened to you.
As they say, school’s for the birds.
There’s more meaning in being, like you, a welder (14).

That Joe Pass could not become who he wanted to be is evoked in the third line “wanderlust bust on the rooftop.” The man has limited choices with regard to his career path. So rather than being able to travel the world playing his music, he ends up wandering on the roof of his house. Facing hardship and limited opportunities, Joe imagines that he has failed to be a good writer and musician. He “look[s] quite foolish/ slouched here trying to file smooth words/ and fit them in a meter that follows/ no one’s heartbeat.” These lines suggest that he does not have an audience, and therefore that his career has been wasted. At the end of the poem, Joe addresses his father telling him that to be a welder is more fulfilling (“There’s more meaning in being, like you, a welder”) than achieving a degree. As Joe says, school is meant for “les crétins” (“the idiots”). In this poem, the irony – very bitter and bordering on sarcasm – consists in laughing off an education suggesting that the more one knows, the more her chances to succeed in life are reduced. This being the case, the laughter is directed at the poet himself, as if to critique the fact that he pursued a career as an artist in a country that ignored his creative efforts.

This poem seems to be partly autobiographical. Indeed, in an interview with Quebecois author Fulvio Caccia, D’Alfonso recalls that when he tried to get published in the ‘70s, the French magazines in Quebec turned him down because “I did not write the kind of stuff the
editors of these magazines wanted to promote” (50). Again, the irony of “Welder” lies in the fact that, by criticizing his own choice of creating music, Joe Pass reinforces the idea that individuals who do not fit in mainstream cultures are only good for manual jobs. This form of self-belittlement is also meant to criticize the assumption that minority groups are condemned to live at the margins. By admitting that school is for idiots, and that it were better for Joe Pass to learn how to weld than try to be an artist, the poem suggests that to marginalize certain minorities (in this case, artists like Joe Pass who cannot glue images together fast enough as other artists do) is not after all so dramatic because they do not have what it takes. Joe, indeed, sees himself as “foolish” with “pen in hand.” Contrary to that of Hughes and Ungaretti, D’Alfonso’s laughter turns inward. It neither liberates nor intimates survival or some sort of resilience. Instead, it states that people like Joe Pass, whose life did not quite turn out the way it might have, feel “foolish” with “pen in [their] hand.”

The blues as a line of inquiry and an interpretative category helps reveal that Ungaretti and D’Alfonso can speak a language very familiar to Hughes, while they also intersect the ideas and the feelings of some of the most important names of the blues: Bessie Smith and Buddy Guy, for instance. This, of course, proves the transnational potential of blues poetry, but also indicates that by virtue of the blues spirit the works of the three authors can converge in more than one occasion. Because of their blues spirit then, Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso can readily understand each other making possible to draw points of intersection between the most prominent representations of the African American, Italian, and Canadian traditions.

96 The title of this interview is “Babel of the Welder.” It is included in D’Alfonso Italics: in Defense of Ethnicity.
CHAPTER 4: COSMOPOLITAN COMMUNITIES ACCORDING TO LANGSTON HUGHES, GIUSEPPE UNGARETTI, AND ANTONIO D’ALFONSO

According to cosmopolitan thought there are many forms of cosmopolitanism. In his essay “Cosmopolitan Norms,” law scholar Jeremy Waldron recognizes the challenge associated with constructing a comprehensive definition of cosmopolitanism and suggests that the word ‘cosmopolitan’ has several connotations. As he puts it:

For some, it is about the love of mankind, or about duties owed to every person in the world, without national or ethnic differentiation. For others, the word “cosmopolitan” connotes the fluidity and the evanescence of culture; it celebrates the compromising or evaporation of the boundaries between cultures conceived as distinct entities. For still others [...] cosmopolitanism is about order and norms, not just culture and moral sentiment (83).

Briefly restated, the first form of cosmopolitanism mentioned by Waldron can be called moral cosmopolitanism; the second corresponds to cultural cosmopolitanism (in tune with the image ‘citizen of the world’), and the third reverberates with political cosmopolitanism. Standing up for political cosmopolitanism means to favor the existence of either a world state or a global federation, while those supporting moral cosmopolitanism are concerned with emphasizing relationships among peoples and with understanding how one’s ‘neighbor’ can be helped.

Rethinking literary works through the perspectivism offered by cosmopolitan thought can open them up to often startling new interpretations. According to Tanya Agathocleous it “inspire[s] diverse forms of criticism, and allow[s] for works that crosses discipline, historical periods, and national traditions” (465). Again, Shannan Spisak suggests that the flexibility instilled by a cosmopolitan perspective creates, the “power to transform the relationship between the self and the other and leads to the potential to affect change within the broader scope of society” (86).

Literary analyses focusing on cosmopolitan representations are often interested in applying the category ‘citizen of the world’ to the protagonist(s)/persona(e) of a story/poem.
Rarely though do these interpretations take pain to note that when we can deduce one form of cosmopolitanism or another in a text, we are already opening it to a dialogue with other traditions. A cosmopolitan sensibility puts the self (the text, the author, the critic) and the other in a relational dialectic in which the self realizes its agency in making and remaking culture. Thus, in the case of interpreting a literary artifact through the critical filter of cultural cosmopolitanism, one has “the ability to make one’s way into other cultures, and the appreciative openness toward divergent cultural experiences” (Hannerz 13). Even though cosmopolitans might find themselves surrendering to another culture, their surrender can be situational (as in the case of the four survivors narrated by Brilli). Indeed, their commitment may not be definitive, as cosmopolitans tend to belong to many cultures simultaneously. This does not imply that cosmopolitans are unable to bind to discrete cultures but rather that at any given moment they remain adaptable to cultural changes.

One can certainly claim that Giuseppe Ungaretti, Langston Hughes, and Antonio D’Alfonso were/are gifted with cultural adaptability skills. But Charles Baudelaire can help us understand a little better the figure of the cosmopolitan artist. In Le peintre de la vie moderne, he states that to be a ‘homme du monde’ (‘man of the world’) is one of the salient traits of the artistic genius in modern times. According to the French poet, a true artist must explore life beyond the boundaries of familiar places. Even though Baudelaire never uses the word ‘cosmopolitan’ in his essay, the phrase ‘man of the world’ indicates not only a person of experience but also an homme universel (a universal man), “c’est-à-dire homme du monde entier, homme qui comprend le monde et le raisons mystérieuses et légitimes de tous ses usages […]”. Il s’intéresse au monde entier; il veut savoir, comprendre, apprécier tout c’est qui se passe à
la surface de notre sphéroïde” (689). In order to be a true artist, this man must inevitably embrace cosmopolitanism in its various forms. The expression ‘man of the world’ implies then that this artist is a ‘citizen of the world’ (in the sense that he feels at home everywhere), if only because of his innate desire to discover the whole of it. His creative instinct orders the way in which he relates to those different from him and incites him to pursue actively the knowledge of other ways of living – which makes him a cultural cosmopolite. Baudelaire says of the ideal artist, “c’est un moi insatiable du non-moi” (“it is me desirous of not-me”) (Baudelaire’s emphasis 692). In order to satisfy this desire to know others, he has to find a way to understanding them. In conveying the idea that appreciation of and curiosity about the world are the artist’s natural food, Baudelaire’s ‘man of the world’ assumes the genetic description of artistic genius. As if the artist’s commitment to the world were a matter of kinship, this “amateur de la vie fait du monde sa famille […]” (“The lover of life considers the world his family”) (692).

This chapter will discuss the importance of the figure of the cosmopolite in the works and the lives of Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso and the several ways in which they make their individual world accessible to one another as agents of their own cultural remaking. It will reexamine Ungaretti’s interest in and appreciation of other cultures, which will also help us to understand more fully his highly fluid cultural affiliations. As for the cosmopolitan outlook of Hughes and D’Alfonso, it will challenge the conventional use of ethnic categories that critics have invariably deployed in reading their work. It goes without saying that both Hughes and D’Alfonso have produced ethnic literature, but they have also addressed concerns that reach

97 “That is, man of the entire world, man who understands the use of the world and the mysterious and legitimate ways of each of its use […]. This man is interested in the whole word; he wants to know, understand, appreciate everything that appears on the surface of our sphere.”
beyond the boundaries of their respective ‘home’ cultures. Hughes in particular stands forth as a ‘man of the world’ and a cosmopolitan patriot. Finally, D’Alfonso’s ethnicity can be seen as his way of expressing an inevitable cosmopolitanism. Indeed, by labeling Italics the members of the Italian diaspora, the author’s strategy is to give the substantive ‘Italianità’ a global characterization coextensive with the cosmopolitan order.

Equating ethnicity with cosmopolitanism might be unusual. In effect, at first sight, these two terms might even appear antagonistic. Cosmopolites express themselves culturally and socially by living beyond the narrow range of an ethnic sensibility. To be cosmopolitan means to embrace as many cultures as possible. The word ethnicity, on the other hand, identifies a state of belonging to a discrete community whose members generally share the same linguistic, cultural, and often religious traditions. In her essay “Minority Cosmopolitanism” Susan Koshy indicates that “[t]ill now, cosmopolitanism has been tangential to ethnic studies scholarship” (592). By the term minority cosmopolitanism, she intends to focus on a cultural stance that encourages centrifugal energies in touch with other affiliations (594). What this means is that ethnic literature implicitly can go beyond the boundaries institutionalized by ethnic studies projects. Processes of globalization should enjoin us to reevaluate the way in which we interpret ethnicity, while cosmopolitanism helps to cast a new light on these literary thematics. After all, ethnicity is not a static category, it changes and shifts boundaries over time. Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso are as much ethnic as they are cosmopolitan. Their identities are made up of many cultures. If we want to understand them, the notion of ethnicity alone is not enough. Furthermore, what is “ethnic” is often ethnic only in the beholder’s eye (the host country). It often happens that people become aware of their ethnicity only when they encounter or clash with another culture. To sum up, this chapter discusses the constant and voluntary shift of the
authors’ allegiance to any one tradition. As they come to understand other cultures, they are also destined to be read as understanding each other.

**Cultural Convergences of Giuseppe Ungaretti and His Connections to Trasnational Blacks**

The title that Ungaretti gave to his *opera omnia* ‘life of a man’ illustrates an important corollary of his work, namely, that his is the life of a ‘man of the world,’ both in the sense of being a man of knowledge and a cosmopolite. The opening line of the poem “Il capitano” (“The Captain”), “Fui pronto a tutte le partenze” (“I have been always ready to depart”) (156), nicely captures Ungaretti’s inclination to embrace a nomadic lifestyle. In time, this predisposition also became a state of mind that allowed him to feel comfortable with the fact that for him “home,” in the sense of a final destination, did not exist. In the poem “Girovago” (“Wanderer”), Ungaretti describes himself as someone who “In nessuna/ parte/ di terra/ mi posso/ accasare” (“Nowhere/on earth/ I can/ find home”) (85). Although this might seem distressing, in the second stanza of the poem the nomadic condition acquires a different purpose in the poet’s life, for it becomes a means to gain a deep knowledge of the world. By claiming that “A ogni/ nuovo/ clima/ che incontro/ mi trovo/ languente/ che/ una volta/ gia’ gli ero stato/ assuefatto” (“Every/new/climate/ that I encounter/ I languish/because once/ I was already/ used to it”) (85), the poet stresses his familiarity with the world. He has become used to its many climates, meaning both a given place’s prevailing weather and its culture. This nomadic condition represents a way of relating to the world that resonates with cultural cosmopolitanism. Indeed, in the second stanza of “Girovago” the poet is clearly someone who has a profound knowledge of other cultures and finds a way to relate to them. Of course, he also says, “E me ne stacco sempre/ straniero” (“And I always detach myself/ a stranger”) (85). In short, he stands apart from those climates, while remaining for a time a part of all of them. What this evidently suggests is that his feeling of
estrangement defines his wandering state. Fully in touch with his nomadic existence, he is also aware that he will encounter and share in many different cultures. In one of his untitled prose poems he writes: “Riprenderò la via del mondo. Andrò dove sono forestiero. Dove non è peccato, sacrilegio, essere curiosi di sé nelle cose che godi” (395).98

Ungaretti grew up as a cultural cosmopolitan, as he was born and raised in a city, such as Alexandria in Egypt, where he could find a place in the Arabic, French, and Italian traditions. As one of his most complex poems “Monologhetto” (“Little Monologue”) articulates, Ungaretti was born in February, the month of transplants (grafts). The rhetorical question: “Non è febbraio il mese degli innesti?” (“Isn’t February the month of transplants”) (260) suggests that February is indeed a time of rebirth and regeneration. More importantly though, the sense of naturalness embedded in this metaphor articulates the very process of cultural hybridity shaping the poet’s life. 99From the start, Ungaretti was aware of his affinities with other peoples. In his famous poem “I fiumi” (“The Rivers”), standing for the respective cultures with which the poet was familiar, the Nile, the Serchio, and the Siene converge in the final river Isonzo. This river represents as a synthesis. Thus, in the sixth stanza of the poem, he writes:


98 “I will retake my travel to the world. I will go where I am a foreigner. Where to be curious about the things I can enjoy the most is neither a sin nor a profanation."

99 “Monologhetto” belongs to the collection Un grido e paesaggi (One Cry and Landscapes) which comprises poems that Ungaretti wrote between 1939 and 1952. The night in which Ungaretti was born “[e]ra burrasca, pioveva a dirotto/ A Alessandria d’Egitto in quella notte” (“there was a storm, it was pelting/ In Alexandria, Egypt, that night”), the poet says (261).
of the universe.

This poetic move is particularly interesting because Ungaretti seems to come of age ("recognized myself") while being in a zone in-between – the river Isonzo, indeed, flows at the borders between Italy and Slovenia. Again, the word "fiber" suggests that the entire world, represented by the different rivers, has become his natural environment. Being like a fiber, the poet performs best when he intertwines with other threads. By no means does this imply that all by itself this fiber is insignificant, but rather it acquires more emotional value when counted together as one in his Isonzo. “Questi sono i miei fiumi/ contati nell’Isonzo” (“These are my rivers/ flowing in the Isonzo”) (45), Ungaretti writes in the penultimate stanza, meaning to create harmony within the diverse cultures in which he was raised. In another poem, “Notte” (“Night”), he defines himself as a boy counting in his veins the rivers of many civilizations: “Il ragazzo/ che nelle vene ha i fiumi/ di tante umanità diverse […]” (“The boy/ who possesses in his veins the rivers/ of many different civilizations […]” (398).

One more image of cultural cosmopolitanism appears in the poem “Italia” (“Italy”), another of his war compositions, for Ungaretti compares himself to a “graft.” The second stanza reads as follows:

Sono un frutto
d’innumerevoli contrasti d’innesti
maturato in una serra (57).

I am a hybrid
of numerous contrasting grafts
ripened in a nursery.

The poet – and not the physical world around him, as was the case in “I fiumi” – now becomes a space in-between, a fluid bordering zone (like ‘his Isonzo’) whose liminality allows the poet’s several cultures to grow and thrive together. In this verse, Ungaretti represents the world itself,
not in the sense that he is the center of this world, but more with the meaning that he is rather a “hybrid/ of numerous contrasting grafts” that forms it. In “Mio fiume anche tu” (“You Too My River”) – a verse written after the poet experienced the horrors of WWII, the death of his brother, and the loss of his little Antonietto – the “Tevere fatale” (“deadly Tiber”), as he calls it in the first line, becomes his. However, the river has seen “mali imprevedibili” (“unpredictable horrors”), so that by claiming it as his, the poem’s persona inevitably mingles with the lives of the river’s victims. It is inevitable that he partakes of the human predicament. At the end of the poem’s second stanza he writes:

Vedo ora nella notte triste, imparo,
So che l’inferno s’apre sulla terra
Su misura di quanto
L’uomo si sottrae, folle,
Alla purezza della Tua passione (229).

I see now in the dark night, I learn,
I know that Hell opens up to us on earth
Equaling everything
Man tends to subtract, foolishly,
From the purity of your passion.

“Your” refers to a divine presence – it is in this period that Ungaretti renewed his faith in God – but the word “earth” suggests that the situation at stake here transcends the local, showing, again, Ungaretti’s ability to imagine and understanding the world as a whole. About the poem “Mio fiume anche tu,” Piccioni notes that Ungaretti uses his personal distress to describe the sorrow of an entire generation: “[i]l pianto non è soltanto ‘suo’ è il pianto di tutti, è la partecipazione d’assieme al dolore pubblico, è il corollario di quel ‘e quanto un uomo può patire imparo’” (44).100

---

100 “[T]he cry is not only ‘his’; it is the sorrow of a collectivity; it is the emotional involvement with the public sorrow; it is the corollary of ‘and I can learn as much as a man can suffer.’ This latter line is from “Mio fiume anche tu.”
This attitude to describe human affairs as his own is captured again in the verse “La pietà” (“The Pietas”): “E mi sento esiliato in mezzo agli uomini./ Ma per essi sto in pena.” (“And I am an exile among men./ But I feel their suffering”) (168). Commenting on the sweep of Ungaretti’s lines, Glauco Cambon says that the “I” in his poems – especially in “I fiumi” – “takes stock of its whole history; it repossesses its vital ambience […] It is a historical self” (584). This historical self is strongly committed to the world and its voice is that of one who is “pious.” In classical literature the pious person had a moral obligation towards her country and her people. But since Ungaretti had more than one patria, as the narrator of the history of a people his duty was toward all of humankind. In this light, the historical self also embodies the poet’s moral cosmopolitanism and demonstrates that Ungaretti’s relation to the world involves several cosmopolitan categories.

Due in part to his good-nature, the poet made friends wherever he went. In Ungarettiana Piccioni recounts that on one occasion, having injured his wrist, Ungaretti was admitted to a hospital in Turin. Here, his former pupil writes, “teneva tutti allegri, parlava con tutti, si faceva raccontare, riceveva confessioni: quando ripartimmo erano tutti alla finestra a salutare” (214). It is likely that his interpersonal skills and openness incited a sense of unbounded comradeship among people and a peculiar inclination to understand other cultures.

As an indication of his cosmopolitan personality, during his career, Ungaretti showed a strong interest in studying and translating other literatures outside the French and the Italian traditions. In the introduction to the Mondadori edition of collection of Ungaretti’s corpus of poetic translations, Carlo Ossola notes that they “nascono in luoghi e momenti di civiltà che sono crogiolo e crocevia di lingue e tradizioni letterarie diverse” (“were produced in places and

101 “he was cheering everybody up, he talked with everybody; in turn, people talked and confessed to him: when we left, all were bidding farewell by the window.”
moments of civilization, crossroads of languages and different literary traditions”) (XIII), indicating that, from the outset, his poetic project was essentially multicultural. Ossola also suggests that to understand Ungaretti’s poetry, we should read his translations first (XI). Besides many French authors, Ungaretti translated into Italian works by Edgar Allan Poe, William Blake, William Shakespeare, Luis de Góngora, and Oswald and Mario Andrade, among the others.

In the already cited 1966 speech delivered at a reading of Allen Ginsberg’s poems in Naples, Ungaretti even suggests that poetry is a vehicle to form intellectual communities. As he puts it:

[…] I am allowed to seek simultaneously the company of Jacopone, Francesco Petrarca, Villon, Leopardi, Ginsberg, and Mallarmé. Each of them tells me his own truth and pretends that those who manifest different truths will do it without other aims in mind, and that the poet, if indeed he is a poet, sacrifices his life to them.

On the one hand, this implies the existence of an international community of poets who are mutually influenced by the act of explicating the several truths of their works; on the other hand, it suggests that, having the power to converse with authors across time and countries, a poet must have the agency to defy time and geographical divides.

On September 15, 1917, Ungaretti wrote a letter to his friend Gherardo Marone depicting poetry as a bridge that can connect different cultures. As he puts it: “[…] la poesia si sta rinnovando, rinfrescando, purificando a contatto di tutte le poesie […] mi pare che tu abbia voluto provare che un occidentale d’una certa raffinatezza, indubbiamente potrebbe scrivere oggi
come Akiko Yosano e agli altri, e viceversa […]” (145). By literary sophistication, Ungaretti intends both a specialized knowledge of literature and an interest in discovering diverse poetic truths as an insider of that culture. The poet-translator then has to learn to understand, and even share, the cultural material inspiration to a specific literary tradition or work. In reference to Ginsberg’s production, for instance, Ungaretti cites the influence that poets like Walt Whitman, Victor Hugo, Guillaume Apollinaire, William Blake, and James Joyce had on the leading figure of the Beat Generation (214). In another essay, “L’artista nella società moderna” (“The Artist in Modern Society”), he writes that poetry cements the union among artists: “Ciò che ci ha adunati e ci unisce è che nonostante la diversità che deve distinguerci l’uno dall’altro, sappiamo tutti che un unico medesimo segreto di poesia mosse, nuove e muoverà sempre l’arte” (855). Ungaretti suggests that the universality of the poetic mystery (language) is the origin of any form of art and the bridge that makes a dialogue among different traditions possible.

Throughout his life, Ungaretti constantly changed his cultural affiliations. Both in his critical and creative work, he tended to challenge the idea that for one to find an identity it is necessary to pledge allegiance to only one culture or nation. Ungaretti embraced and constantly renegotiated his Italian, French, and African identities, proving that language can call into question cultural selfhood. He (re)negotiated his cultural affinity by suggesting he be like an artisan shaping his self. Indeed, in the second stanza of the poem “Annientamento” (“Annihilation”) written from Versa on May 21, 1916, he writes:

Colle le mie mani plasmo il suolo

---

102 Quoted from Ungaretti da una lastra di deserto: lettere dal fronte a Gherardo Marone (Ungaretti from a Desertic Slab: Letters from the Front to Gherardo Maroni) edited by Francesca Bernardini Napoletano (i Meridiani, 2015). “Poetry is renovating, rejuvenating, purifying itself in contact with other poetry […] I think that you wanted to prove that a Westener of a certain literary sophistication, today could certainly write like, say, a Akiko Yosano and others, and vice versa.”

103 From an address delivered in 1952 in Venice for the “Conferenza Internazionale degli Artisti” (“International Conference of Artists”). “What has united and still unites us is that, regardless of the diversity that must differentiate us, we all know that only the mystery of poetry has inspired, and always will inspire, art.”
diffuso di grilli
mi modulo
di sommesso uguale
cuore (29)

I shape the soil with my own hands
diaspora of crickets
I adjust myself
by an equally meek
heart.

The word “soil” renders the image of the actual ground where the poet was made, but also means “country” and “nation,” which recalls Ungaretti’s patriotic fervor of the time. Skilled in shaping the soil, Ungaretti can also mold the nation’s culture (“I adjust myself”) and himself, accordingly. Later in the poem, this transformation becomes even more profound, as “mi trasmuto in volo di nubi” (“I transform into a flock of clouds”) (30), suggesting a sense of freedom to move from one culture to another. In addition, “flock of clouds” indicates a possible return of the poet to a state where his culture is yet to be defined, depicting a continuous reshaping of it as time goes by.

In his La comunità che viene (The Coming Community) Giorgio Agamben discusses that an unidentified cluster that sounds similar to this “flock of clouds.” He calls this group a being-quale, which can become a being-tale only when it is brought to light (10), that is, when language can define it. The categorical belonging of the being-tale is created by language, which has the power to transform the quale into tale by the process of uttering. According to Agamben:

L’essere esemplare è l’essere puramente linguistico. Esemplare è ciò che non è definite da alcuna proprietà, tranne l’essere detto […]. L’essere detto – la proprietà che fonda tutte le possibili appartenenze (l’esser-detto-italiano, cane, comunista) – è, infatti anche ciò che può revocarle tutte radicalmente in questione (14).

The being exemplar represents the being in language. Exemplary is that which is not defined by any property besides the being said […]. The being said – the property forming all of the possible memberships (the being-said-Italian, dog,
According to Agamben, anything, including one’s identity being-said can be constructed through language, also meaning that if the language changes the being-said assumes other forms. The way in which Ungaretti used to define his own identity (his being-said), by using words like “graft,” “fiber of the universe,” and by being the maker of his own poetic persona, defining who he is, destabilizes his cultural identity. Grafts, fibers, and “flock of clouds” are elusive being-quali that the poet can transform into being-tali by shaping them. As a being-tale, Ungaretti refuses to identity himself with only one culture. On the contrary, he indicated that his being-tale in effect tended always towards a being-quale, leaving open an individual cultural definition of the self.

In one of these cultural redefinitions, he constructed for himself a black heritage. Piccioni tells us that a black woman from Sudan, Bahita, used to breastfeed him. Ungaretti used to remember her “tanto prosperosa che la sua ciccia raggiungeva un volume che a chiamarlo immense si direbbe poco, ma si muoveva con spontaneità di danzatrice, anche se per trovare l’equilibrio le mosse dei suoi fianchi rammentavano barconi in preda ad un ventaccio” (Piccioni 25-26). But there is more to it, for Ungaretti believed that her wet nurse helped him to form his rebellious character. He once commented:

So che il latte non è sangue, credo però che contribuisca a mettere nel sangue stimolo per certe fantasie, certe magie, certe disperazioni, certe irruenze. È di più il latte negro regala forse a chi se ne nutra quasi uno stato d’innocenza nei rapporti con gli altri – il negro puro essendo una mescolanza di mitezza, di espansività senza freno, di ritorno a quell’infanzia del mondo che quasi solo riesce a conservare in sé, intatta. Poteva non essere debitrice di questa cara gente la mia poesia per qualche cosa che credo in essa fondamentale? (Piccioni 26).

104 [V]ery plummy, to the point that her fat was so voluminous that to call it immense does not really render the idea, but she was able to move graciously as if she were dancing, even though to find her balance her hips swung like scows stroke by the wind.”
I know that milk is different from blood, but I believe that it helps to pour into the blood certain fantasies, certain magic, certain desperations, and unrests. In addition, black milk gives almost a state or innocence towards the relationship with others to those who drink it – because pure blacks are a hybrid of clemency, extreme kindness, a return to a juvenile character that they alone can keep alive and intact. How could my poetry not be indebted to these dear people for what I believe is fundamental to it?

Here Ungaretti evokes a biological affinity with the black culture of his childhood and feels indebted to it for having inspired him to write in the way he does.

The third stanza of his poem “Ti Svelerà” (“It Will Be Revealed to You”) reiterates one more time an emotional attachment to and an appreciation of the black culture. After having invoked youth (his poetic muse) to talk to him, (“Gioventu’ parlami/ In quest’ora voraginosa”) (“Youth/ talk to me/ In this abyssal moment’) (127), the first memory resurfacing in the poet’s mind is that of an acquired black heritage. The stanza reads as follows:

Ora di luce nera nelle vene
E degli stridi muti degli specchi,
Dei precipizi falsi della sete… (127)

Now the black light in the veins
And the muted screech of the mirrors
The false cliff of thirst…

The oxymoron “black light” creates a dramatic moment. According to Teresa Spignoli, by this rhetorical stratagem Ungaretti wanted to create a correspondence between images of ‘light’ and its opposite (darkness) to “inaugurare una nuova linea di ricerca poetica, in cui ‘il drammatico ossimoro tra luce e tenebra’ viene ad assumere un ‘contorno sapienzale’ […]” (149). 105

Nevertheless, the oxymoron also captures the poet’s emotional attachment to African culture and hints at the role it played in his life. If it is possible that “nera” also means “dark,” then it can be made to stand for the black people who were dear to him as a child. After all, anything running

---

105 “[I]ntroduce a new line of poetic research in which the ‘dramatic oxymoron between light and darkness’ comes to assume a ‘wisdom-like contour’ […].”
in Ungaretti’s veins resonates with ancestral connections. Thus, the black light running in his veins may appropriately signify a deep affinity with the African culture he once knew so intimately.

This black culture runs in Ungaretti’s veins in a light form, helping the poet to realize that his thirst was only a “false cliff.” Thus, in the closing stanza he writes:

E della polvere più fonda e cieca  
L’età bella promette:

Con dolcezza di primi passi, quando  
Il sole avrà toccato  
La terra della notte  
E in freschezza sciolto ogni fumo,  
Tornando impallidito al cielo  
Un corpo ilare ti svelerà (Ungaretti’s emphasis 127).

And by the deep and blind dust  
Youth promises:

With the sweetness of the first steps, when  
The sun will touch  
The nightly soil  
And every soot will be resolved into candor,  
Returning pale to the sky  
It will reveal to you a joyful body.

The black light is a promising image: it gives the poet the force to revive his youth (“l’età bella”) from a “deep and blind dust,” which here evokes the African desert, a place so familiar to the poet because in Egypt he lived near it. Throughout his life, Ungaretti made reference to his knowledge and appreciation of African culture. With regard to African Americans in particular, he writes that he encountered them in the United States during his stay at Columbia University.

The sojourn in New York City must have been so intense that, as he wrote in a note to his friend Jean Paulhan, he almost fainted in a black church that reminded him of the Brazilian forest (Ossola CLXVIII). We know how seminal for Ungaretti’s poetics the Brazilian environment
was; indeed, he considered Brazil one of his homelands. The fact that Harlem reminded him of his third patria signifies already a strong bond with the America’s premier black city. Again, in a letter to Vittorio Sereni on April 27, 1964, talking about his stay in New York, he comments, “Questa città è veemente e, nel suo gigantismo e nella sua mescolanza di genti che soffrono a diventare medesima gente, è ricca, come fosse nessun’altra al mondo, di motivi poetici. È una città unica negli Stati Uniti. Per uno spaesato come me, e se essa fosse stata così com’è oggi anche 50 anni fa, avrebbe potuto essere una Patria ideale” (155). New York City, and Harlem in particular, impressed the *spaesato* Ungaretti who felt easily at home there. Clearly, the cosmopolite Ungaretti found his own way through the American culture, and almost as if to appropriate it, he claimed not be strange to the possibility to see it as his own. As Paola Montefoschi observes, Giuseppe Ungaretti’s nomadism was “a condizione permanente dell’anima e una categoria universale della poesia” (“a permanent condition of the soul and a universal category of poetry”) (XIV) and a factor that could only but strengthen a cosmopolitan outlook that was natural to him.

**Langston Hughes: From ‘Man of the World’ to Cosmopolitan Patriotism**

Langston Hughes was born into nomadism, but to some extent, he grew up almost unaware of the significance that his unrested traveling would acquire in shaping his cosmopolitan perception of the world. In hindsight, it is possible to say that he embraced the figure of the cosmopolite as a result of his wandering course. As he saw it at first, his nomadism was rather a burden, for he was forced to move throughout the United States and to travel

---

106 “This city is vehement and, in its gigantism and in its mixing of peoples who are taking pains to become one, flourishes with poetic themes. It is a unique city in the United States. For an uprooted like myself, if fifty years ago it were as I see it today, I would have considered a perfect homeland.” From the collection of letters between Vittorio Sereni and Giuseppe Ungaretti titled *Un filo d'acqua per dissetarsi: lettere 1949-1969 (A Thread of Water to Quench Our Thirst: Letters 1949-1969)* edited by Gabriella Palli Baron (RCS Libri, 2013).
abroad. Looking for jobs, his mother changed city more often than necessary; on the other hand, Hughes’s father decided to live in Mexico, adding again another itinerary on Hughes’s already-busy travel schedule. Hughes had mixed feelings about his wandering, so for example, while he once would write that “[his] life has been filled with great envy for those persons who have grown up in one place, whose folks stayed put, and who have always had a home to come back to” (Rampersad 24), in the 1941 essay “Just Traveling,” he ended up claiming that, he discovered his love of traveling when he was still a little child. As he recalls, “the urge [to travel] came upon me at the age of four. I left home in a play-wagon, my own” (CWAR 142). Whether he enjoyed his nomadic condition or not, it is through his wandering course that he became an apprentice cosmopolite. This training, however, did not always come easy; on the contrary, often represented a challenge as when his first summer in Mexico (1919), he felt the place was “the most miserable I have ever known,” he recounts in his first autobiography (39). To live in Toluca was not all that fun; in truth, it was depressing, and Hughes even pondered suicide. Coming to his senses, however, he realized that “if I do, I might miss something. I haven’t been to the ranch, nor to the top of the volcano, not to the bullfights in Mexico, nor graduated from high school, nor got married” (BS 47). We know that Hughes’s situational depression was also caused by having a difficult relationship with his father; nevertheless, the episode demonstrates that, although his first encounter with the Mexican culture was not a “sheer pleasure,” he soon found a way to cope with his feeling of alienation. In other words, as a cultural cosmopolite, he found his way through another tradition, which he learned how to appreciate, and according to Rampersad, as time went by, he even felt at home in Mexico (47).

Ultimately, “home” for Hughes was whatever place he would see fit living in. So, in 1933, while he was spending a year in Carmel, California (upon his return from the Soviet
Union), as a guest of Noël Sullivan, he received a letter from his mother announcing that once
again she moved to another city. Recalling this moment in his second autobiography, he writes,
“[s]o it was not strange that now home should be a town to which I’ve never been” (309).

Hughes was so used to changing address that he could also call home an unknown place.
Another episode that can help us understand Hughes’s journey to cosmopolitanism relates to his
voyage to Africa. At we can gather from the opening of The Big Sea (see Chapter II), Hughes’s
coming of age at sea is emblematic of his cosmopolitan apprenticeship. At sea, indeed,
national/ethnic boundaries may assume new meanings, or even disappear. Hughes’s poem,
“Death of an Old Seaman,” suggests that those who live long enough at sea show no particular
loyalty or emotional attachment to their actual homeland or place of origin. The poem reads as
follows:

We buried him high on a windy hill,
But his soul went out to sea.
I know, for I heard, when all was still,
His sea-soul say to me:

Put no tombstone at my head,
For here I do not make my bed.
Strew no flowers on my grave,
I’ve gone back to the wind and wave.
Do not, do not weep for me,
For I am happy with my sea (CP 99).

While the man’s body is buried “on a windy hill,” his soul is freed from identititarian strings: it
willingly gives himself up “to the wind and wave.” He becomes one with the sea (“sea-soul”), a
place where it feels most happy (“I am happy with my sea”). The soul asks that no tombstone be
put on its burial site, for it does not wish to be bound to terra ferma, to a specific place. Nomadic
seaman as he used to be, his soul is not apt to settle in (represented here by the tombstone). This
is why, it does not want to craft a bed out of its grave and why the “we” in the poem interred him
on a “windy hill,” as if the heavy breeze could help the sea-soul to stay a wanderer. The sense of freedom that the speaker of Hughes’s poem has, the conviction that it is best for him to keep on being nomadic evokes Ungaretti’s sense of wandering in the poem “Girovago.” It indicates that, although the Italian poet and Hughes might have traversed different path to become cosmopolitan, their outlooks on life prove to be convergent. The sea-soul’s desire to embrace the unbound ocean rather than the “windy hill” is symbolic of a militant nomadic stance.

Scholars tend to take Hughes’s cosmopolitanism for granted. For instance, Dianne Johnson observes that, besides essays, poetry, and short stories, Hughes also sent in to The Brownies’s Book (the first magazine published for African American children) a few Mexican games because “[c]learly he thought it was important to introduce young readers to children from other parts of the world. The reference to America’s neighbors demonstrates the extent to which Hughes was interested in relationship between individuals and between peoples, relationship of kin and communities” (Johnson 2).107 In Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing, Tania Friedel claims that “Hughes reached a point of literary maturity in the 1940s, signaled by a new balance between his interest in particular identities and universalized humanitarian concerns for democracy and racial cooperation” (114). In this view, Hughes matured as a writer when he was able to balance his ethnic identity in the United States with the issues that blacks were facing around the globe. Friedel proposes to recuperate “‘cosmopolitanism’ as a critical term in order to identify a particular intellectual stance regarding racial discourse in the United States” (1).

Arguably, during the Harlem Renaissance, cosmopolitanism too was in vogue. Artists of the time seemed to exercise the possibility to find a balance between their local and global

---

107 From The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Works for Children and Young Adults: Poetry, Fiction, and Other Writings edited by Dianne Johnson (University of Missouri Press, 2003).
identities by writing about what mattered to blacks at home and abroad. Luckily for Hughes, he was one of the few who, before turning thirty-two, had traveled around the world (Rampersad 401). In *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness, and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas*, Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo further points out that during the New Negro Movement in Harlem, “potentially forms of othering coexist[ed] with profound engagement and bonding” (5), meaning that most of these artists, pretty much like their African Italian counterpart Ungaretti, were constantly facing a sense of local and global unity. In the introduction to her research, Nwankwo also writes that “[…] Blackness and cosmopolitanism became two pivotal axes of identity in relation to which public people of African descent defined themselves” (10).

In the editorial note to the collection of Hughes’s major short stories, Akiba Sullivan Harper states that Hughes was able to “cover the world. His characters sometimes emphasize race, but more often they could be people in any place, at any time. The world traveler, Langston Hughes, crafted them” (ix). Hughes’s cosmopolitanism is more than an intellectual stance that was popular among his contemporaries. As is the case with Ungaretti, Hughes combined intellectual cosmopolitanism with a personal sense of being-in-the-world as a man among men, sharing an indivisible bond with other people. Like the “historical I” informing the highly existential poetry of Ungaretti, Hughes’s impression of the world was a reflection of the predicaments of others, who he ended up treating as his own. Sharing Ungaretti’s life outlook, Hughes was interested in the plight of the poor everywhere. The fact that he was able to describe these people’s lives indicates that he was deeply in touch with their suffering, an attitude that certainly characterizes a ‘man of the world’ as both a man of experience and a cosmopolite.
In his poem “To Captain Mulzac,” Hughes has the possibility to talk about humankind (a
generic race) as a whole.

According to the author, a captain is someone in charge of a vessel
which transports, leading them for a period of time, people hailing from different places. Hughes
depicts this crew as follows:

There is a crew of many races, too,
Many bloods – yet all of one blood still:
The blood of brotherhood […] (294)

The crew is comprised of many races, but all these bloods are made one through a cosmopolitan
sense of brotherhood. Furthermore, to write a poem in honor of a captain leading all of these
different “bloods,” presents Hughes with the opportunity to address what he believed to be a
universal human condition, thus creating another juncture with Ungaretti’s interest in expressing
the predicaments associated with the condition of being human. In the first stanza of the poem,
Hughes writes:

Dangerous
Are the western waters now,
And all the waters of the world.
Somehow,
Again mankind has lost its course,
Been driven off its way,
Down paths of death and darkness
Gone astray –
But there are those who will still hold out
A chart and compass
For a better way –
And there are those who fight
To guard the harbor entrance
To a brighter day (293).

Here, Hughes compares mankind to a boat that “has lost its course,” and that has “[g]one astray”

However, against all odds, leaders like Captain Mulzac have the means (“a chart and a compass/

---

108 Hughes wrote the poem sometime in January 1943 when he was invited at a dinner sponsored by The National
Maritime Union in honor of the first black U.S. merchant marine skipper, Captain Hugh Mulzac. Hughes was the
principle speaker of the event. See the second volume of Hughes’s biography by Arnold Rampersad (56).
for a better way”) necessary to guide humankind. Captain Mulzac avails himself of the help of other courageous individuals patrolling the “harbor entrance” to make sure that mankind has the chance to see a brighter future (“a brighter day”). Both of the images of the captain leading the boat and those guarding the “harbor entrance” stand for the responsibility that people have towards one another. These lines are an example of Hughes’s moral cosmopolitanism. As Jeremy Waldron notes in his essay, “Who Is My Neighbor?: Humanity and Proximity,” moral cosmopolites often asks themselves “to whom are we obliged? Whom are we morally required to help?” (333). Moral queries like these imply a consideration, or reconsideration, of the concept of proximity. Presumably, physical distance determines our responsibility towards others; so, being our neighbor, the person living next door should receive our attention. But things are not always so clear-cut and become even more complex when we know that we have much to share with those living far from us. The question we should address then is the following: how does physical distance influence our perception and definition of ‘neighbor’? In “To Captain Mulzac,” Hughes clearly does not deem physical distance to be a problem when trying to help others, for the peoples he visualizes are united by a common cause.

By continuing to describe mankind, in the second stanza of the poem, Hughes ties his discourse to race. As he puts it:

There are those, too, who for so long
Could not call their house, their house.
Nor their land, their land –
Formerly the beaten and the poor
Who did not own
The things they made, nor their own lives –
But stood, individual and alone,
Without power –
They have found their hour.
The clock is moving forward here –
But backward in the lands where Fascist fear
Has taken hold,
And tyranny again is bold (Hughes’s emphasis 293).

The reference here is to the ordeal of slavery, but in the cosmopolitan outlook of the poem, the slaves’ suffering also symbolizes injustices against those (“[f]ormerly the beaten and the poor”) subjected to similar discrimination. This idea is developed again in the third stanza, which describes that of “negro slaves” as a collective experience:

We Negroes have been slaves before.  
We will not be again.  
Alone, I know, no one is free.  
But we have joined hands —  
Black workers with white workers —  
I, with you! You, with me!  
Together we have launched a ship  
That sails these dangerous seas —  
But more than ship,  
Our symbol of new liberties.  
We’ve put a captain on that ship’s bridge there,  
A man, spare, swarthy, strong, foursquare —  
But more than these,  
He, too, a symbol of new liberties (293).

Here people hold power for social change when they come together to fighting for a common cause (“we have joined hands”). Then, they can even free themselves from slavery (“We will not be again). While the theme of race and cultural affiliation remains crucial, Hughes also calls for all humankind (“[b]lack workers with white workers –/ I, with you! You, with me!”) to “launch a ship” equipped to sail “these dangerous seas.” The poetic persona reiterates the sense of a universal brotherhood by suggesting that blacks and whites can be free if (and when) they come together for a common cause: “In union, you, White Man,/ And I, Black Man,/ Can be free” (294).

Again, in other compositions, Hughes seems to adopt the point of view of a geographer, for, almost like reading a world map, he shows specific historical events that combined together
form the history of mankind. An example of this is the poem “Merry Christmas,” which reads as follows:

Merry Christmas, China.
From the gun-boats in the river,
Ten-inch shells for Christmas gifts,
And peace on earth forever.

Merry Christmas, India,
To Gandhi in his cell,
From righteous Christmas England,
Ring out, bright Christmas bell!

Ring Merry Christmas, Africa,
From Cairo to the Cape!
Ring Halleluiah! Praise the Lord!
(For murder and for rape)

Ring merry Christmas, Haiti!
(And drown the voodoo drums –
We’ll rob you to the Christmas hymns
Until the next Christ comes.)

Ring Merry Christmas, Cuba!
(While Yankee domination
Keeps a nice fat president
In a little half-starved nation.) \(CP\ 132).\)

Overtly ironic and embittered, Hughes draws a world map according to an international struggle for justice and independence. The African continent and the nations cited in this composition are all victims of history. When Africa “Ring[s its] Halleluiah! [and] Praise[s] the Lord!/ (For murder and for rape),” we are reminded of the distress Africans experienced at the hands of Europeans. As Timothy P. Grady notes, European colonization “led to enormous changes all across the Atlantic World as native peoples sought to retain their lives and cultures in the face of overwhelming pressures applied in the name of king, country, and Christianity” (27). The word “halleluiah” overtly alludes to the pressure native peoples felt as European missionaries forced them to convert (the “Christian guns” mentioned later in the poem). This image of oppression
also appears in the following stanza, where the domineering “Yankee” has now taken the place of the Europeans in the quest for hegemony (neocolonialism). Hughes suggests that, although these countries are different, a shared history of violence and coercion connects them together.

The poetic category of “the people” becomes for Hughes a door to cosmopolitan worldview. This can be seen in the poem titled “Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret,” which reads as follows:

Play that thing,
Jazz band!
Play it for the lords and ladies,
For the dukes and counts,
For the whores and gigolos,
For the American millionaires,
And the school teachers
Out for a spree.

You know that tune
That laughs and cries at the same time.

May I?
Mais oui.
Mein Gott!
Parece una rumba.
Play it, jazz band!
You’ve got seven languages to speak in… (CP 60).

By bringing together in the same poetic space people who in real life are separated by class, social pedigree (indicated here by their titles “lord,” “dukes,” “counts,”), and professions (“whores,” “gigolos,” and “teachers”), Hughes eliminates the barriers dividing them. Of course, it is an international jazz gig that performs this cultural alchemy. By the same token, in the militant poem “Merry Christmas,” putting on the same level of experience several countries and one continent, Hughes not only brings them together, but also gives voice to those who do not have one. And most importantly, he connects the four hemispheres in such a way that they are made to share a common cartographic space. The quasi-regular structure of the poem (stanzas of
four verses of almost equal length) suggests that the peoples can make sense of their chaotic and eclectic world.

The proletarian poem “A New Song” is another example of hope for the unification of blacks and whites in a common cause:

The Black
And White World
Shall be one!
The Worker’s World!

The past is done!
A new dream flames
Against the
Sun! (CP 172-173).

Evidently, Hughes imagined a world in which people of different races and nationalities could be united because he grew up in a multi-ethnic environment. Indeed, at Central High School, in Cleveland, Ohio, he found a “diverse student body dominated by the children and grandchildren of European immigrants often fiercely interested in education” (Rampersad 25). The second and last stanza of the poem “The Kids in School with Me” illustrates this upbringing, which must have been fodder for Hughes’s cultural cosmopolitanism. It reads as follows:

The Italian kid
And the Polish kid,
And the girl with the Irish smile,
The colored kid
And Spanish kid
And the Russian kid my size,
The Jewish kid
And the Grecian kid
And the girl with the Chinese eyes –
We were a regular Noah’s ark,
Every race beneath the sun,
But our motto for graduation was:
One for All and All for One!
The kid in front
And the kid behind
And the kid across from me –
Hughes describes a heterogeneous community which soon enough reveals itself to be cosmopolitan crucible (“One for All and All for One”), an America made up of many ethnicities, a mosaic of different cultures.

In its simplicity (it belongs to the corpus of Hughes’s literature for children), it underlines a strong emotional connection with his native country. Despite the climate of racial discriminations characterizing the U.S.A. of the time, clearly, Hughes loved his homeland. In the 1944 essay “My America,” he comments: “This is my land, America. Naturally, I love it – it is home – and I am vitally concerned about its mores, its democracy […]. My ancestry goes back at least four generations on American soil and, through Indian blood, many centuries more” (CWEA 232). This enlightening passage suggests that he is doubly bounded to the U.S. by birthright and by *jure sanguinis* (right of blood), as a descendent native Americans.109 His genetic patrimony sheds light on the several ways in which Hughes was able to express cosmopolitanism. In this specific instance, he adapts a form of cosmopolitanism that Anthony Kwame Appiah calls cosmopolitan patriotism.

Patriotism and cosmopolitanism seem to be mutually exclusive, but this is not always the case. In the essay “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” Appiah observes that “cosmopolitanism and patriotism, unlike nationalism, are both sentiments more than ideologies” (92). Patriotism concerns the responsibilities and the privileges of citizenship, but it also derives from a cultural climate in which peoples share the same kind of expectations, desires, duties: “[i]t is the connection and the sentiment that matter, and there is no reason to suppose that everybody in this

---

109 According to James Presley’s “The American Dream of Langston Hughes,” “the three races of America – Indian, Negro, and Caucasian – contributed to [Hughes’s] bloodline (381).
complex, ever-mutating world will find their [sic] affinities and passions focused on a single place,” (Appiah 95). In other words, Hughes could be emotionally attached to a place, as he was to Harlem, but at the same time, having lived in other countries, he could also feel involved with other cultures beyond the United States. To put it in Appiah’s words:

We cosmopolitans can be patriots, loving our homelands (not only the states where we were born but the states where we grew up, the states where we live); our loyalty to humankind – so vast, so abstract, a unity – does not deprive us of the capacity to care for lives nearer by (Appiah’s emphasis 95).

Cosmopolitan patriots connect emotionally with the people they encounter and with whom they associate. Hughes, for instance, not only shared the physical place of the classroom with the children of immigrants, but also an education system reflecting certain government policies aimed at forming good citizens. In other words, the educational system is one of those “institutions that provide the overarching order of our common life” (Appiah 102). At the same time, he broadened his understanding of other ways of living as he learned to appreciate other cultures and peoples. It is difficult to separate Hughes’s interest in the ‘affairs of the world’ from his interest in events unfolding at home. His cultural and existential entanglements made him both a cosmopolite and a patriot.

In the poem “Let America Be America Again,” Hughes expresses his patriotism by invoking the American dream, which now seemed dead. The first stanza of the poem reads as follows:

Let America be American again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free (CP 189).
Apart from the racism that Hughes experienced firsthand, he argued that America used to be a country in which immigrants (“the pioneer on the plain”) were welcome. This idea is reiterated in the second part of the eighth stanza:

O, I’m the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be home –
For I’m the one who left dark Ireland’s shore,
And Poland’s plain, and England’s grassy lea,
And torn from Black’s Africa strand I came
To build a “homeland of the free” (CP 190-191).

As in the poem “The Kids in School with Me,” here Hughes recognizes that America built itself through the work of those immigrants (Polish, Irish, and Africans) who settled in or were forcefully brought to the New World.

Overall, “Let America Be America Again” denounces the gap between the rich and the poor in America. Nevertheless, it also expresses a strong sense of patriotism, as is evident in the second stanza:

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe (CP 190).

The image of “Liberty” evokes both the Statue of Liberty in the New York harbor – a sight that in and of itself symbolizes freedom, especially for the immigrants – and a political and social condition due to every citizen. “Liberty,” Hughes proposes, is adorned (“wreath”) with sentiment of true patriotism and not with “false patriotism.” Thus, the poet distinguishes between two different kinds of nationalism. However, for America to thrive, its people have to become conscious of the great opportunity available to them (“opportunity is real, and life is free/
Equality is in the air we breathe”). The poem as a whole sounds a call for freedom so that America can fulfill its true destiny: “O, let America be America again –/ The land that never has
been yet –/ and yet must be – the land where every man is free” (CP 191), the poem reads towards the end while Hughes, as a good patriot, “[…] swear[s] this oath –/ America will be!” (CP 191). The image of swearing “this oath” evokes Hughes’s allegiance to the place he yearns to call home. On the other hand, it also illustrates an action familiar to those naturalized citizens who have taken the oath of allegiance, thereby showing Hughes’s investment in a form of political cosmopolitanism. The poem reveals Hughes’s love for his country, but it does not ignore the presence of other ethnicities and cultures that make “America tick,” as stated in the poem “America.”

The poem “America” expresses Hughes’s strong commitment to a local/national community and the desire to be accepted as an American. With a more confident tone than “The Kids in School with Me,” the poetic persona coexists with people of different ethnic backgrounds, becoming “one with them.” Indeed, together with other naturalized Americans, he is America:

Being brothers
Being one
Being America.
You and I.

And he closes with these lines:

Who am I?
I am the ghetto child,
I am the dark baby,
I am you
And the blond tomorrow
And yet
I am one sole self,
America seeking the stars.
Hughes reiterates that he is a reflection of other peoples (“I am you”). But while becoming “you,” he is also “one sole self” seeking the stars, longing for a better future and for the best that America can provide.

Turning into “you,” “I” can be seen as a component of what Appiah terms *common culture*, which, according to him, is a set of beliefs, symbols, and signs that people in a group share not necessarily because they believe in the same things, but more precisely because they recognize and understand same beliefs and sentiments (99). However, in a place like the United States, Appiah says, there exists a variety of common cultures (Appiah 101). Whereas Hughes was very critical of white Americans, he was willing “to play the game” (Appiah’s terms) and identify himself with a common culture representing the United States. As Appiah puts it, “[t]o live together in a nation, what is required is that we all share a commitment to the organization of the state – the institutions that provide the overarching order of our common life” (Appiah 102).

The statement “I’m you” not only expresses his commitment to a common culture, it also suggests the ability to assume other identities. In effect, this cultural shift has already taken place in the poem, since the speaker has become “you.” As his African and American identities mingle, they form a ‘cultural graft’ which inevitably shapes the persona’s identity. Even though he does not overtly embrace Ungaretti’s “fiber of the word” or existential “graft,” Hughes’s enthusiasm for an America made up of different cultures invites comparison with Ungaretti’s cosmopolitan upbringing. Due to his inherent liminal condition, Hughes’s identity, like Ungaretti’s, remained volatile; and contrary to expectations, this apparently negative condition helped to shape both authors’ cosmopolitan embrace of the world.
Apart from a few instances in which D’Alfonso’s poetic persona seems to coincide with the author’s own voice, generally speaking, the work of this Quebecois writer and poet assumes a third-person point of view. This objective approach to his material is indicative of D’Alfonso’s stance as a ‘man of the world.’ D’Alfonso’s defiance (see “Italia Mea Amore”), his ‘frank speaking,’ as he puts it, convincingly reveals the attitude of a writer endowed with the authority to talk about the world because he has immersed himself in it. As with Giuseppe Ungaretti’s and Langston Hughes’s subjective historical “I,” in a clutch of poems D’Alfonso sets out to chronicle human affairs. As we have seen, the poetics of both Ungaretti and Hughes convey how personal histories often intertwine with humankind’s many afflictions and vice versa. Their voices are as autobiographical as they are collective. Ungaretti’s and Hughes’s poetic voice often stands in for the people from all walks of life: soldiers, washer-women, mothers, migrants, performers. Regardless of their provenance, these individuals share the material world of the two poets. On the contrary, those appearing in D’Alfonso’s verse contribute to the emotional capital of his world.

In the poem “Prison,” from the collection L’apostrophe qui me scinde (The Apostrophe that Divides Me), the author dramatizes the emotional turmoil of the personae. The verse reads as follows:

Une camisole sur une chaise.  
La chaise dans une pièce a peine éclairée.  
C’est une chambre, non, une cellule d’homme ou de femme. Le soleil – ou est-ce la lune? – tire son hast de lumière contre la peau que nous percevons avec difficulté.  
Jaillit un grognement. De souffrance (41).
A straitjacket on a chair.
The chair in a room barely illumined.
It’s a room, not the particle of a man
or a woman. The sun – where is the moon? –
casts its light on the skin
that we sense with uneasiness.
A grunt springs. It’s sufferance.

D’Alfonso draws attention to a single detail: a straitjacket lying on a chair in a room scarcely illuminated. The description of the ambience is odd, almost surreal. The poetic move is also unsettling, but the way the “skin” (the key to the entire stanza) of the individuals in the poem reacts, suggests that D’Alfonso describes two lovers. They may even be married. The uneasiness they feel when their skin touches reveals that something disconcerting happened to them that turned this relationship sour. To make sense, this sequence depends on the immediate association of the straitjacket as symbol of mental illness. The metaphors of the straightjacket and the chair evoke their history as much as the “bold determined glances, heavy, solemn moustaches” reflect the courage and the dignity of the regiment recorded by Baudelaire in his essay on Constantin Guys. The straightjacket also conveys the idea that the lovers lack the ability to communicate, making theirs – as the title of the poem clearly states – an imprisoning relationship that affects their ordinary quest for happiness. Clearly, they are no longer attracted to each other, so intimacy is more a torture than a source of emotional and physical pleasure (“skin/ that we sense with uneasiness”). Even when they try to talk through their body language (sexual intercourse, which may be the only way they know how to communicate with each other), they indifferently fail. The ordeal produces only a grunt. And if the image of the “grunt” represents sex as a need that the lovers satisfy without feeling, it overly suggests how hopeless their relation is.

D’Alfonso’ sense-oriented objectivity seems to fail in the “we” of the penultimate line. This linguistic slippage indicates D’Alfonso might possibly be one of these poetic personae or
that he can understand their emotional turmoil simply because he readily empathizes with them.

In both instances, “we” indicates that D’Alfonso’s imagination partakes in the humanity he describes. However, after this lapse, the third-person perspective is fully restored. Thus, in the fifth stanza we read:

Il se souvient de son père, il se souvient
de sa femme et de ses enfants. Il ne reconnaît
pas la chambre mal éclairée. Il hurle. Il refuse
de parler. Le mutisme, la meilleure forme
de mutinerie. Il refuse de dévoiler ses secrets,
car parler, c’est se raconter, et il ne veut
surtout pas raconter d’histoires (42).

He remembers his father, he remembers
his woman and his children. He no longer recognizes
the dark room. He screams. He refuses
to speak. Mutism, the best form
of mutiny. He refuses to disclose his secrets,
because to speak is to narrate, especially
he does not want to narrate histories.

The repetition of the unnamed third person also suggests that “Il” might stand for an indistinct everyman. In other words, like Ungaretti and Hughes, D’Alfonso is insinuating that he has experienced it so vividly that now he can render what it means to be human. Even though to do so infringes on the privacy of his personae and may seem to pervert the objective, yet voyeuristic, point of view. However, as he puts it in the poem “Le portrait d’un peintre comme ogive” (“The Portrait of a Painter as an Arch”), “Ne peut-il pas, le poète, tracer ses vers/conceptuels sans que les puristes crient ‘pervers’?” (“Can he, the poet, not draw his conceptual/verses without the purists shouting ‘pervert’?”) (69). In short, voyeurism belongs to the poetic act. Furthermore, even without being indiscreet, others will find a way to insult him; so D’Alfonso might as well keep invading his personae’s privacy for the sake of describing ‘life.’
D’Alfonso’s understanding of the nuances of being human, regardless of cultural and national affiliations, casts a new light on the portrayal of his ethnic identity. As Simon Harel claims in his essay “Lieux trahis, déplacements entraînés dans l’oeuvre d’Antonio D’Alfonso” (“Betrayed Places, Hindered Displacements in the Work of Antonio D’Alfonso”), “[c]hez d’Alfonso, la valorisation de l’ethnicité correspond en effet à la mise en relief de ce que l’auteur appelle la communità, c’est-à-dire la communauté ethnique à laquelle il appartient” (Harel’s emphasis 49). D’Alfonso’s ethnicity is a vehicle for him to be in society as a ‘man of the world.’ Italian ethnicity, in effect, does not identify only one culture but comprises a combination of several identities whose proliferation has well defined historical roots.

According to Donna Gabbaccia in Italy’s Many Diasporas, even after 1861, to wit, after the Italian unification, “Italy was still such an abstraction to Sicilian peasants that when they heard ‘il Mille’ […] crying ‘Viva Garibaldi, Viva Italia!’ they assumed Italia was Garibaldi’s wife” (1). This anecdote illustrates a typical attitude of the time caused by an ideological fragmentation regarding the concept of patria. As a result, it has been historically daunting to identify a homogenous Italian culture. On the contrary, it has always been more practical to distinguish Italian communities by their regions of origin. It is well known, for instance, that many Italians in North America prefer to consider themselves as natives of certain areas rather than be identified simply as “Italians.” “Patriotism,” Gabaccia says, “continues to give Italian loyalties [even] today a localism that distinguishes them from other modern forms of nationalism” (4). Such accentuated localism prevents the Italians from identifying themselves by a consistent national character. If this social reality of the peninsula may seem a deterrent to the success of nation-building, on the other hand, as seen through a Trans-Atlantic paradigm (see

---

110 “For D’Alfonso, the value of ethnicity is that it helps to underscore what the author calls communità, that is, the ethnic community to which he belongs.”
Armitage), this cultural pluralism has similarities to the history of other peoples connected to and by the Atlantic. The reference here is to the black Atlantic, which according to Philip D. Morgan, in the early modern period, was fluid and dynamic, and “people tended to identify with their local village, neighborhood, or larger kinship grouping, not necessarily an ethnic or protonational identity” (236). People, then, could choose “among a variety of self-identification, and they might even switch from one [ethnicity] to the other” (Morgan 237).

Similarly, when the Italians arrived in America, they were unaware of who they were in terms of national affiliation. As Luconi notes, “[i]t was only circa WWII that Italian Americans turned whiteness into their self-perception. But by doing so, they lost their national specificity and merged into the much larger group of white Europeans, disappearing within the Caucasian cohort of U.S. society” (160). According to Luconi, this would hinder the classifying of the Italian experience as a diaspora, because by ‘becoming white,’ the Italians assimilated into American mainstream culture, thereby severing their ties with the homeland. But this was not always the case. For instance, in the article “Building an Identity on Paper: the Negotiation of Italianità in the Early North American Ethnic Press,” Franco Pierno indicates that, as they found a voice in newspapers like the Gazzetta del Massachusetts (Massachusetts Gazette), the Italians built their sense of community based on the superiority of the Italian language (92). But Pierno also notes that it was highly likely that the Gazzetta del Massachusetts published articles and columns in a hybrid language composed by lexes from their native regional dialects and the English spoken in the United States (96). It demonstrates how permeable the Italian culture is; as a result, it is possible to consider Italian ethnicity as a category readily open to cosmopolitan affiliations.
As the title to one of the chapters in Ernesto Galli della Loggia’s book *L’identità italiana* (*The Italian Identity*) suggests, there exists not one but “mille Italie” (a thousand Italys) (59). Among the many determining factors of this cultural pluralism, Galli della Loggia mentions the unique geographic position of the peninsula. Conveniently located in the heart of southern Europe and surrounded by water on three sides, the peninsula has always been vulnerable to conquest and colonization, an historical pattern that was seminal in the fragmentation of Italian culture. Throughout the centuries, Italy has been depicted by canonical writers as a victim of its own history, unable to find a direction – in short, ill-starred. For example, in Canto V of Purgatory, Dante calls it a “serva” (“servant”), “ostello di dolore” (“house of pain”), “nave senza nochierè” (“ship without a captain”), “donna di bordello” (“harlot”), and “inferma” (“ill”) (76-78); whereas in his poem “Italia mia” (“My Italy”) Francesco Petrarca believed that good luck had forsook Italy (“cui fortuna ha posto in mano il freno”) (“to which fortune put a brake in its hand”) (375). Again, Baldassare Castiglione in *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) complains about the fact that the Italians ended up imitating other people’s customs simply because they managed to lose their own. Thus, if this cultural permeability has become synonymous with a certain adaptability of the ‘Italian character’ – also known as the *arte di arrangiarsi* (*problem solving*) – it also generated internal divisions for which Italians are ‘strangers among themselves,’ or so in 1765, Gian Rinaldo Carli asserts in his article “La patria degli italiani” (“The Homeland of the Italians”).

---

112 The article appeared in the second issue of *Il caffé* (*The Coffee Shop*), a literary magazine edited by Pietro Verri. Quoted from the second volume of *Scritti vari di Pietro Verri ordinati da Giulio Carcano per Vincenzo Salvagnoli* (*Miscellaneous Writing by Pietro Verri edited by Giulio Carcano for Vincenzo Salvagnoli*) (Felice Le Monnier, 1854).
In an attempt to criticize the racial prejudices embittering Italian society, Carli creates a fictitious character named Incognito (Unknown) hailing from a town outside Milan. One day, Incognito arrives at a Milanese café owned by Alcibiade, who as soon as he sees the foreigner immediately asks where he is from. Insulted, Incognito replies, “Sono Italiano […] e un Italiano in Italia non è mai forestiere come un Francese non è forestiere in Francia, un Inglese in Inghilterra, un Olandese in Olanda, e così discorrendo” (107). To Incognito’s resentment, Alcibiade responds that to call somebody a foreigner who was not born within the walls of a city was merely an Italian habit. The confrontation goes on, and Incognito ends up scolding his fellow Italians for being “inimici di loro medesimi” (“their own enemies”) (108). This episode illustrates the difficulty one encounters when trying to argue that Italian culture is homogeneous. The diffidence showed by Alcibiade also helps to explain why it took Italians almost fifty years to unify the country. In The Making of Italy 1796-1870, Denis Mack Smith suggests that it was because Italians were neither culturally nor politically ready to engage in the unification project. In order to find the strength to raise its voice, the nationalist movement had to adopt political models created outside Italy (7).

Even many years after the Risorgimento, internal divisions continued to challenge the formation of a uniform Italian identity. For instance, in the 1965 documentary Comizi d’amore (Love Meetings), Pier Paolo Pasolini is sharply critical of Italian culture. Interviewing people from different regions, he demonstrates the enormous cultural gap between Northern and Southern Italy, shedding light on the challenges the country has faced in terms of establishing a national identity. The poetry of D’Alfonso is no stranger to this challenge, neither is the cultural eclecticism of Italy unfamiliar to him. The rhetorical question in the title of the poem “Où

---

113 “I am Italian […] and an Italian is never a stranger in Italy as a French is not foreign in France, an English in England, a Dutch in Holland, and so on.”
commencer?,” in fact, suggests that even to him the permeability of his ancestral culture appears a little messy. To ask where one should start from is to admit the absence of an easily identifiable cultural base. As if to acknowledge the ‘mille Italie,’ he writes: “Par quoi doit-on commencer? Dans quelle langue écrire? Dans quel monde entrer? A qui veux-tu parler? Quel est ton public? […] La nourriture, le dialecte, le peuple? Ou commencer? Et quand entre-tu en jeu?” (48). Given D’Alfonso’s attention to express an ethnic identity, the poem with all of its unanswered questions suggests that to make sense of his ethnicity is not easy. If the complexity of ‘being Italian’ poses a problem in terms of defining a stable national/ethnic identity, it is precisely such a diversified cultural matrix that makes Italian ethnicity a ‘cosmopolitan resource,’ as the sociologist Giovanni Bechelloni terms it. Bechelloni prefers to talk about Italicity more than ethnicity when describing the Italian experience around the world. According to this scholar, “Italicity has something to do with the Italian character, [it] is not confused with it because it does not carry nationalistic connotations; it is not identified with the Italian state or the Italian nation” (105). He believes it to be a cumulative category, where different ways of being Italian in the world (nationals, diasporic, universal, corresponding respectively to Italians, Italics, and human beings), open the ‘Italian character’ to various possibilities and affiliations. Bechelloni proposes we consider Italicity “as an example of a modality of approach to present-day

---

114 “Where does one begin? In which language to write? Which world to slip in? Who are you trying to get on? Who is your public? […] The food, the dialect, the peoples? Where do I begin? Where do you come in?” (The poem is in L’autre rivage, and this is D’Alfonso’s own translation from The Other Shore 58).

115 Quoted from the article “Italicity as a Cosmopolitan Resource” in Matrices. Bechelloni borrows the term ‘Italicity’ from the Italian politician Piero Bassetti who regards it as the manifestation of global, that is, “the ensemble of Italian communities at a global level” – an idea certainly familiar to D’Alfonso – and “the numerous ramifications or subensembles of Italian Italics, Italian Swiss, those of Dalmatian origin, Italo Americans, Italo-Argentines, etc., to whom must be added all those who appreciate the Italic way of life […]” (quoted in Bechelloni 102)
Again, to Bechelloni Italicity “is a typical product of the interaction and communication that is built up through movements of population […], of goods and money, of ideas and works of the human mind. Seen from my perspective as a sociologist who studies communication, this is a product of the intelligence and communicative skills of Italians, Italics, and human beings” (107). In this light, the concept of Italian ethnicity is deeply entangled with that of cosmopolitanism. The work of D’Alfonso offers various examples in which italicity and cosmopolitanism overlap. In his first novel, *Avril au l’anti-passion* (*Fabrizio’s Passion*), he sets out to give ‘Italian’ ethnicity a broader meaning. Fabrizio’s journey represents an interesting form of cosmopolitanism that we could call ethnic. In his essays on ethnicities in Botswana, anthropologist Richard Werbner claims that ethnic cosmopolitanism helps us understand “interethnic cooperation and mutuality” (732).

Fabrizio shares his “italicity” with his immediate family, but outside of the domestic sphere he also mediates between his Francophone culture (native) and his acquired (in school) Anglophone ethnicity. Fabrizio’s Italian ethnicity is expressed through the description of his parents’s house in Montreal, which opens the novel’s fifth chapter. The detailed description of the house has a twofold significance: one, it implies that it is very important for the Nottes to own their own place; and second, the Nottes are emotionally attached to the house. Both represent main tropes in Italian American literature. As Maddalena Tirabassi notes, “the reasons for Italian immigrants’ strong attachment to place were rooted in traditional Italian culture; ownership was the defining social goal of their migration experience. The building of one’s own home was the greatest symbol of success and a tangible way to make sense of an otherwise

---

116 Current scholarship on Italian culture addresses how we can rethink the lack of a homogenous identity at a global level. Thus, in her *Politics of National Identity in Italy: Immigration and ‘Italianità* (Routledge, 2015), historian Eva Garau aims to “rethink […] Italianness according to more inclusive criteria reflecting the changes occurring within a society today deeply different and less homogenous and static from an ethno-cultural point of view” (182).
foreign environment" (69). Once they can buy a house, generally, Italian families feel they have arrived, and any representation of this outside Italy becomes an ethnic theme.

It is no coincidence that Fabrizio spends most of the fourth chapter painstakingly describing the house that “mon père acheté la maison sur la 1 avenue en avril 1959 […]. Une maison modeste, mais qui représente pour mes parents beaucoup plus qu’une simple maison. Cet achat leur permet de montrer à la communauté le fruit de nombreuses années de labeur, d’épargne” (45). Fabrizio also finds another way of representing the Italian culture by describing the Nottes’s family dynamic. After Nonno Nicola died, Lucia inherited his place as caregiver and companion of her grandmother, so she started sharing the same bedroom with her grandmother (47). In Italian families it is customary for female children to assume the roles of their grandmother’s little helper, while the social expectation of male children is to take care of their grandfathers. The social role of children in the dynamic of the family, sometimes, is fulfilled at the expense of the child’s serenity. When this happens, the whole experience turns into a traumatic ordeal. Fabrizio describes it as “a painful period in Lucia’s life for, in one day, what used to belong to both of us suddenly becomes mine alone, and whatever sense of intimacy she ever had is lost for good” (47).

Fabrizio’s domestic life clearly illustrate his ethnic affiliation as well as the relativism of his cultural identity. D’Alfonso is interested in expressing his Italicity as much as he is in showing that his culture is the sum of encounters with others. As Richard Werbner points out, “[b]eing a cosmopolitan does not mean turning one’s back on the countryside, abandoning rural allies or rejecting ethnic bonds. Although that may sound paradoxical, put abstractly, it keeps in

---

117 “[M]y father buys the house on 19th Avenue in April 1959 […]. A modest house, it means much to my parents. With this purchase they can display to the community the result of their years of hard work and energy” (42). All the translations into English are from D’Alfonso as they appear in Fabrizio’s Passion.
focus a dynamic of transcendence interacting with difference, and allows, too, for interethnic partnerships” (731-732). This comment helps us to understand why D’Alfonso insists on describing his cultural ties with Italy by opening his first novel with the diary entries (which Fabrizio translates from Italian into French) written by his mother Lina during WWII, and the letters that his father Guido sent to her while in the army. These entries describe their love for each other but also reflect (especially Guido’s correspondence) the desire to escape Guglionesi.

At the beginning of the novel, D’Alfonso narrates the background story of his parents’s immigration to Canada; yet, he does more than report another account of Italian immigration. In his letters, Guido, who is stationed in north Italy, notices how different the habits of the Italians living there are from his own. “Cette ville,” he writes to Lina, “me plait maintenant. Je m’y suis habitué. Je respecte leur façon particulière d’être Italiens (26). From the outset, D’Alfonso’s narrator notices the many nuances of Italian culture: the people living in Udine (the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia), in the northeastern part of Italy, express a culture quite different from Fabrizio’s people in the South. Although another example of Italy’s different regions, Guido learns to appreciate and understand life in this northern city. In the terms developed here, we might say that his “Italicity” is a cosmopolitan resource that helps him to build a cultural bridge between southern and northern Italy.

This ethnic cosmopolitanism is accentuated later on in the novel when Fabrizio struggles to learn another idiom, a problem his father solves by sending Fabrizio to an English-language school. Despite the fact that the Nottes live in Montreal, Guido is convinced that Fabrizio should learn the language spoken by the majority (55). Learning the language of “power and money,” as he puts it to his doctor, will help Fabrizio succeed in life (56). Fabrizio, however, is more

118 “Udine is, in spite of all I have said, a pleasant city. I’ve come to enjoy this place. Their own particular brand of Italianness is something I can truly appreciate” (22).
interested in speaking a language that will help him to win friends. He realizes that to achieve both friends and a good job, he has to be a polyglot – able to cross the boundaries of his Italian and Anglophone worlds in order to make it in the French-speaking one. While ‘hanging out’ with other kids in the neighborhood, he learns to speak street-French. Pondering how to join up with them, he says, “Je fais demi-tour, je m’aperçois qu’au loin le groupe d’enfants s’est élargi. Tous se connaissent, mais je rassemble en mi assez de courage pour leur demander carrement: Can I play with you?” (D’Alfonso’s emphasis 50). By commenting on the ease children show in communicating with one another, he expresses his willingness to cross cultural boundaries.

Thinking of his childhood, Fabrizio recalls:

Les enfants parlent une langue bien à eux. Ils n’ont pas fait cas de la langue que j’ai utilisée et qui n’est pas la leur. Cependant je change de registre car on me fait vite comprendre qu’on ne saisit pas tout ce qui je dis. C’est ainsi que je fais la connaissance de Mario Berger. Sortir de la maison familiale, c’est entrer dans la maison des amis. Chaque soir, après dîner, nous nous rencontrons pour faire tous ensemble un match de baseball, de football américain ou de soccer et plus tard, à l’adolescence, pour faire de la musique ou un court-métrage comique en Super-8 (50).

Children have a language all their own. They never make a fuss about the fact that the language spoken is not theirs; however, I have to adapt in this instance because the children make it clear to me that they do not fully understand what I am saying. This is when I meet Mario Berger. Walking out of the family home means you could be entering the house of friendship. Every evening, after supper, Mario and I get together for a game of baseball, American football or soccer and, much later, as young adults, to play music and produce fifteen-minute comedies in Super 8mm (48).

Fabrizio seeks the company of those children who share his same ambitions. In the passage above, he associates with them through baseball or movie making. The fact that Fabrizio is interested in all sorts of games (whether American baseball and football or European soccer)

119 “I turn around on 19th Avenue and notice that there are more children playing ball. They all seem to know one another. I muster up the necessary courage and walk up to ask them in English: ‘Can I play with you?’” (48).
demonstrates, again, that he is able to mix his ethnicity with Montreal’s other cultures. His identity is never defined only by national or ethnic affiliations. As a child, his cultural hybridity reflects a world that:

…transforme nos contradictions en complexités. Notre identité est un jeu, un divertissement, et pas encore une confrontation. On m’appelle Fabi, et Mario ne se gêne pas – même si je m’offusque et veux lui casser la figure – pour chanter son refrain:

Fabi la roche,
Fabi la caboche (50-51).

…will change our contradictions into complex entities. Our identity is a game, a pastime, but never a source of confrontation. They call me Fabi now and, even if I lose my temper and I swear I will punch his face in, Mario is not frightened to sing his chant:

Fabi la roche,
Fabi la caboche (48-49).

Mario is not frightened because he knows Fabrizio understands his friend’s joke. Fabrizio must learn French to survive in the street and make friends. However, he can communicate in French as well as in English and Italian. We know that Fabrizio speaks Italian at home, English in school, and French in the street. French, however, is the language that helps him connect with the world outside of his ethnic identity; whereas, English is his professional language and Italian is the language of his domestic affections. Rather than creating confusion in his mind, these three languages and cultures give him the possibility to coexist peacefully with others in Montreal.

D’Alfonso’s multiculturalism reflects the Canada’s multicultural policy. Fabrizio’s story was published in 1988, two years after his country passed the Multiculturalism Act, which intended to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians and recognized “the existence of communities whose members share a common origin and their historic contribution to Canadian society” (3).120 This law recognizes that Canada is a country of immigrants. Sarah

120 From the PDF version of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, available at laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/C-18.7.pdf.
V. Wayland explains that these immigrants arrived in Canada because, around the turn of the century, the country needed manual workers to build the railroads and work in the mines. “In all, 2.5 million immigrants entered Canada between 1896 and 1914 […] The arrival of so many persons of diverse languages, religions, and ethnic and racial identities had a profound impact on the young Canadian State” (38).

Although Fabrizio’s story seems to reflect positively on the Multiculturalism Act, the political tensions deriving from the frictions between ethnic, national, and cosmopolitan aspects of Canadian identity is patent in Avril ou l’anti-passion. Eating with Mario at a Chinese restaurant, his friend says:

Il n’y a pas de pays ‘pur,’ nous sommes tous d’ailleurs. Il est vrai cependant que d’un cote on retrouve les maitres et de l’autre les esclaves. Qui peut le nier ? il ne faut surtout plus rabâcher ces histoires d’immigrant et d’assimilation (D’Alfonso’s emphasis 88).

There’s not such a thing like a ‘pure’ country. We all come from elsewhere. However, you are correct in saying that, on one side, there are slaves, and on the other masters. Who could disagree with you? But please, don’t always harp about immigrations and assimilation (89).

For the cosmopolite Fabrizio, assimilation and injustice towards immigrants are sensitive topics regularly addressed in the novel where the main character often comments on Canadian measures of cultural assimilation directed to ethnic groups. In so doing, he reveals the contradiction of the Multicultural Act. Just to give an example, when Peter, his future brother-in-law, is invited to supper, Fabrizio says that, in many respects, the man reminds him of all those immigrants born in Canada who find it difficult to be what they want to be: “A bien de se regards, la description de Peter ressemble étrangement a celle qu’on pourrait faire d’un immigrant né au Québec (Cette difficulté d’être soi-même, ce qu’on nous enseigne très mal)”
Peter’s assimilation into the dominant cultural is indicative of the struggles that immigrants faced in Canada. Clearly, Fabrizio follows Canadian politics. But, as the poetic persona in the poem “Italia Mea Amore,” despite the fact that the government tries to assimilate him, D’Alfonso’s main character embraces his multicultural identities and uses three different languages (Italian, French, and English) to communicate his ideas. Ultimately, this ability to use the language to define his mutable being-said (see Agamben), that is identity, makes him one of the most cosmopolitan personae in D’Alfonso’s oeuvre. This is why, at the end of his story, talking to his deceased grandmother, he says that he wants to create “un monde qui respire l’air que je respire: voilà l’unique rêve que j’accomplis. Sans gêne, sans orgueil” (198).

By telling the story of Lucia and Peter, Fabrizio recasts his ethnic identity in order to accept the presence of a foreigner (this is the point of view of Fabrizio’s relatives) in his sister’s life. While Fabrizio’s father is suspicious of Peter because he does not really know his native language, and as to make things worse, he is also unfamiliar with the Italian culture, Fabrizio worries that, once married to Lucia, the man will exercise his patriarchal power over his wife, who wants to get married precisely to escape the male-centered organization of her family. Eventually, Guido will give Lucia the permission to marry Peter, and this latter will become less of a stranger to Fabrizio (133). This happens because Fabrizio shifts attitude towards him as he understands that the man can make Lucia happy. At his sister’s wedding, Fabrizio comments that “[n]e pas réduire l’identité personnelle à sa culture ni à son territoire et certainement pas à sa nourriture” (194), indicating that one’s identity is more than just the product of the culture in

---

121 “In many respects, Peter reminds me of all these immigrants’ children born in this country. The difficulté d’être, the difficulty of being oneself, accrued from an absence of awareness” (130).

122 “Yes, nonna, I need to invent a world whose air is the air I want to breathe: this is the ultimate goal I have set for myself” (212).

123 “We’re not going to limit personal identity to culture and especially not to the food we eat” (207).
which s/he was born. D’Alfonso then allows Fabrizio’s ethnicity to assume a new way of thinking, a new way of approaching life and that which is foreign. He reorganizes his world according to the many cultures surrounding him, adapting to them. Fabrizio is able to create cultural networking through which he combines his Italian ethnicity with a much broader sense of the world.

**Translating Cultural Values: Cosmopolitan Encounters Among Giuseppe Ungaretti, Langston Hughes, and Antonio D’Alfonso**

According to François Jullien, in creating lines of communication between cultures, one faces the issue of translating certain values from one language into another. If, however, these values become intelligible to the cultures studied, they establish a form of dialogue between them. In the context of developing a literary dispositif, specific cultural values informing the lives and works of Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso can be shared amongst them through translation. Issues of race, ethnicity, and justice have constituted Hughes’s major sources of inspiration, but in the literary dispositif in which the authors are entangled, Hughes is not the only one to address social problems. For his part, D’Alfonso’s writing is infused with representations of social issues as well as with the idea that literature can be a means to criticize contemporary society. D’Alfonso often uses his pen to denounce the way in which Canadian government treats minorities. In his poem “Il n’y aura pas de terre promise” (“There Will Never Be a Promised Land”), in *L’Autre rivage*, he says, “[a]ucun/ chef ne parle la même langue que toi/ Tu apprendras les codes, la syntaxe/ et le vocabulaire, mais ce n’est pas toi/ qui les

---

124 See *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, and in the volume *Fight for Freedom and Other Writings on Civil Rights* (University of Missouri, 2001). In the introduction to the first book, Christopher C. De Santis, notes that “Hughes used the essay form as a vehicle through which to comment on the contemporary issues he found most pressing at various stages of his career” (1). In the introduction to the second book, De Santis says that “the Scottsboro incident of 1931 set the tone for much of Hughes’s radical poetry and rose in the years following the Harlem Renaissance” (4).
utiliseras, ce sont eux qui t’utiliseront” (13). In these lines, D’Alfonso is concerned with unmasking the hypocrisy of certain government measures (represented here by the importance of learning the official language of the country), which are ultimately meant to control its citizens. By using the official language these people become instruments in the government’s hands, for they lack the power to use that same language to express what they really want. By the very act of writing a poem highly critical of Canadian society, D’Alfonso uses his art on behalf of social change. For his part, Hughes states quite clearly that blacks should revolt against racial oppression.

To give voice to ethnic minorities, in 1978, D’Alfonso established the publishing press Guernica Editions. The aim of this press was, and continues to be, to publish marginal authors who could not find other outlets in traditional publishing markets. Today, D’Alfonso no longer runs the company, but the political vision that initially drew him to establish it is still clearly stated on the Guernica Editions website:

On Monday, April 26th, 1937, the bells of Santa Maria tolled, warning of the inhumane aerial raid that would reduce the Spanish city of Guernica into ruins. Men, women, children and animals were destroyed under the weight of the fiery nationalist bombs. Picasso immortalized the victims of this terrible moment in history with his painting Guernica and the image has become a plea for peace. We named our press Guernica with the hope that the books we publish will make this world a better place.

D’Alfonso’s desire to make the world a better place also animated his other cultural enterprises. As Alessandra Ferraro points out in Écriture migrante et translinguisme au Québec (Migrant Writing and Translinguism in Canada), a few years after establishing Guernica, in 1983 D’Alfonso and other writers such as Fulvio Caccia, Alberto Ramirez, and Lamberto Tassinari

125 “There is no leader who speaks/ the same language as you./ You will learn the codes, the syntax/ and vocabulary, but you will have/ been used by them and not using them.” Translated by D’Alfonso himself in The Other Shore (19).
created the cultural sheet *Vice Versa* to challenge the notion of a national literature and a national language (16).

D’Alfonso is not black, neither has he ever experienced the type of political climate in which Hughes exercised his rhetorical expertise, yet, Hughes’s drive to make black culture recognized can be *translated into* D’Alfonso’s interest in publishing “minor voices” as a means to revolt against an oppressive society. To translate Hughes’s social values into D’Alfonso’s is even more urgent if we consider that often Hughes, like D’Alfonso, was not able to find an avenue to distribute his works. This is particularly true regarding his political plays, as scholar Susan Duffy calls them. In her introduction to *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes*, Duffy claims that Hughes’s desire to see “his plays produced was so great that when he was unable to find companies to produce his plays, he founded his own: the Harlem Suitcase Theater, the Los Angelos Negro Art Theater, and the Skyloft Players of Chicago” (2). As for D’Alfonso, when he could not find a publisher willing to sell his works, he founded *Guernica*. As we can see, the commitment to upturn social equalities in their own countries entangles together the works of both authors.

Again, in his essay, “The Negro Writers,” Hughes argues that black writers have the potential to change the status quo in the USA. He writes:

[…] by way of exposure, Negro writers can reveal in their novels, stories, poems, and articles: the lovely grinning face of Philanthropy – which gives a million dollars to a Jim Crow school, but not one job to a graduate of that school; which builds a Negro hospital with second-rate equipment, then commands black patients and student-doctors to go there whether they will or no; or which, out of the kindness of its heart, erects yet another separate, segregated, shut-off, Jim Crow Y. M. C. A […]. We want a new and better America, where there won't be any poor, where there won't be any more Jim Crow, where there won’t be any lynching, where there won't be any munition makers, where we won’t need philanthropy, nor charity, nor the New Deal, nor Home Relief. We want an

---

126 According to the *Vice Versa* website, the founding meetings of the magazine occurred in 1982.
America that will be ours, a world that will be ours – we Negro workers and white workers! Black writers and white! We'll make that world! (132-133).

Hughes recommends that black people be and stay strong in denouncing philanthropic hypocrisy a help to transform America into a country where blacks and whites can live in harmony.

According to Hughes, the potential for change lies in the hands of writers as they have the means to depict and denounce racial and social discrimination. Hughes then sees writers as advocates for social changes. In *Gambling with Failure*, D’Alfonso, writing about Giulio Einaudi, the founder of the Italian publishing press Einaudi, says: “For a culture to thrive, it needs more than money, it needs people who with willpower and guts, people who possess much more than arrogance of ego: what is needed are men and women with a desperate desire to change the world they live in” (163). In these reflections D’Alfonso defines “a book [as] a blossoming of hope” (164). Presumably, writers and people like Einaudi have the courage needed to go against the grain of official culture.

In other instances, too, D’Alfonso’s works intersect Hughes’s idea of creating a better world. D’Alfonso sees himself as being part of a multicultural and socially unrestrained world. Thus, the poem “Babel” closes with the line “I hope the earth be mine” (47). Again, in the English version of his first novel, Fabrizio Notte imagines talking with his deceased grandmother: “Yes, Nonna,” he says, “I need to invent a world whose air is the air I want to breathe: This is the ultimate goal that I have set for myself. No need to be shy or arrogant about this quest. This is what I am” (212).¹²⁷ Both these works indicate a strong desire to claim a

¹²⁷ D’Alfonso’s English version of *Avril ou l’anti-passion* reads a little different. Seemingly talking with his deceased grandmother, Fabrizio Notte says, “Créer un monde qui respire l’air que je respire: voilà l’unique rêve que j’accomplis. Sans gêne, sans orgueil” (“To create a world that can breathe the air I breathe. This is the only dream that I fulfill. Without difficulty, without pride”) (198), which reiterates D’Alfonso’s conviction that we are people without homeland, represented by the term “orgueil”. In *In Italics: in Defense of Ethnicity*, D’Alfonso says, “The nation is dead. And if it is not dead,” he continues, “then let’s pray for its quick disappearance, for if the nation
cosmopolitan membership. The world (Hughes) or earth (D’Alfonso) is the only place these authors can truly call home. It implies too that this cosmos is still under construction – pretty much like the world Hughes urges black writers to create – as D’Alfonso in “Babel” does not know where he is going to be tomorrow. Hughes and D’Alfonso can be seen to share many of the same values with Ungaretti, for even if the latter did not travel about the world as a major representative of his ethnic group (as Hughes did), or even if he did not establish a publishing house for minor authors (as D’Alfonso did), his poetry created a world that can be easily embraced by the other two authors.

As mentioned above, Ungaretti was deeply sensitive to humankind’s suffering. He used to refer to himself as a uomo di pena, a man able to feel others’ emotional pain by exploring his own. What Ungaretti experienced personally allowed him to understand the pain of others. For Ungaretti, these people are usually common individuals. As Leone Piccioni notes in his introduction to Vita d’un uomo: tutte le poesie, Ungaretti’s poetics has a dimension attached to it which is entirely human and humanely expressed:

Certo la scelta della parola poetica secondo il vocabolario letterario corrente in quegli anni fu capovolta, perché le sue eran tutte parole sentite a misura umana. Certo la metrica, distrutta nei versicoli […] pareva proporre un tipo di discorso poetico, quasi del tutto nuovo, a dimensione diretta, colloquiale, popolare: ed era, invece, in quella drammatica situazione umana, in quella guerra dei fanti, misura eroica. Certo gli eroi dei suoi versi, dopo averli perduti per tanto tempo, erano proprio gli uomini, i fanti, la gente del popolo, smarrita e forte (my emphases XXIII).

Surely, by choosing a different poetic lexicon, [Ungaretti] overturned the tradition; his were words felt as a man would feel them. Certainly, the meter, which was destroyed in his little verses […] seemed to propose a poetic discourse almost completely new. It was direct, colloquial, and popular. It was, however, heroic in its attempt at describing the human predicaments of those infantrymen who fought the war. His verse’s heroes, whom he lost for long time, were foot

persistence it will have nothing else to offer except cultural gas chambers and political internment camps in one form or another” (15).
soldiers, common people, those who could have gone astray, but who never lost emotional strength.

In both Hughes’s and D’Alfonso’s verse, we find many of these individuals. For example, in the poem “A Song to a Negro Wash-woman,” Hughes describes the everyday work routine of a black woman:

But I know, at seven one spring morning you were on Vermont Street with a bundle in your arms going to wash clothes.
And I know I’ve seen you in a New York subway train in the late afternoon coming home from washing clothes (CP 41).

In describing this persona, however, Hughes portrays the predicament of many a poor black woman who tries to make ends meet. Indeed, towards the end of the poem, we find:

And I have seen you in church a Sunday morning singing, praising your Jesus, because some day you’re going to sit on the right hand of the Son of God and forget you ever were a wash-woman. And the aching back and the bundles of clothes will be unremembered then. (CP 41-42).

The reference to the church, a place where people gather on Sundays, helps us imagine the woman as the symbolic figure of an entire class of workers. D’Alfonso’s “Nonna Lucia” (“Grandmother Lucia”), in L’Autre rivage, like Hughes’s washwoman, must have known what it means to subject her body to hard work. Though her present condition does not allow her to do much, in the poem she comments that “‘[u]ne fois, j’ai transporté sur mes épaules plus de raisins que le mulet” (59). When she was young, Nonna Lucia was stronger than a mule. While her physical strength is a source of pride, it also alludes to the hardship she endured in deploying it.

---

128 As in many other examples from the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, the figure of the washerwoman often appears in Hughes’s writing. In this regard, see also Angelo Herndon Jones: A One-Act Play of Negro Life (in The Political Plays of Langston Hughes) where one of the protagonists is indeed Ma Jenkins, an older washerwoman.
129 “Once I could carry more bushels of grapes than our mule” (D’Alfonso 71).
As “Nonna Lucia” shows, D’Alfonso talks about familiar affects, but his poetry also speaks of much broader experiences. In the poem “Vivre pres de Santa Maria Maggiore” (“Living Beside Santa Maria Maggiore”), its persona addresses his father; and in doing so he appeals to an entire generation of men who left Italy to seek their promised land and ended up fighting in WWII: “Vous cherchez une eau en vain. Vous embarquez alors sur le S.S. Nea Hellas, chargé des promesses d’une terre d’eau. Et une eau essentielle vous trouvez. Toutefois, l’eau ne peut refroidir ce qui coule dans votre corps. L’eau de vos yeux allume tout, ressoudant encore une fois histoire et pouvoir” (D’Alfonso’s emphasis 58). D’Alfonso describes this man in terms of a body seeking to refresh itself. To find the water he is looking for, he embarks on a journey only to discover that he cannot fulfill his desire. Instead, the water he finds will only partially refresh him. But this is not enough. The critical eye of the poet sees from the outset that the man’s journey is not a solution to his problem (“You look for water in vain”). In this poem, D’Alfonso may be writing about his own father, but the metaphor of the water, a natural element we all need and share, indicates a much broader scope. Besides recounting the story of one man, D’Alfonso also evokes the stories of those who left their homelands filled with hope and dreams they only managed to realize halfway (“You find some essential water”). In effect, the subject of the poem shifts from “babbo” (“father”) to a more generic “vous.”

D’Alfonso and Ungaretti’s poetry is often autobiographical, yet both often use their own experiences to represent the sentiments of an entire generation. In Ungaretti’s verse, we often

---

130 “You’re looking for water in vain. You embarked then on the S.S. Nea Hellas, enlivened by the promise of a land of water. You found some essential water. But this water cannot cool off that which runs in your body. The water of your eyes lights everything up, strengthening once again history and power.” My translation. Although D’Alfonso himself translated l’Autre ravage into English, this poem has been modified in such a way to change its meaning. For instance, D’Alfonso changed the first lines of the excerpt I mentioned above into “[u]ntil you embark on the Greek Vulcan with the promise of a land of water” (author’s emphasis 70). The Greek Vulcan here stands for the S.S. Nea Hellas, which was a ship operated by the Greek Line. “Volcano” indicates that the ship was active during the time D’Alfonso’s “babbo” (“father”) crossed the Atlantic.
find the word “uomo” ("man"), which should be read as a synonym for mankind (Man). His poem “Ombra” ("Shadow") describes the condition of humanity as follows:

Uomo che spera senza pace  
Stanca ombra della luce polverosa  
L’ultimo caldo se ne andrà a momenti  
E vagherai indistinto (140).

Man whose hope is restless  
Tired shadow in dusty light  
The last warmness will leave soon  
And you will be wandering aimlessly.

For Ungaretti, Man is anything but happy. Even though people have hopes, they will never find peace. Paradoxically then, Man appears rather desperate. And Ungaretti indicates why: we are constantly seeking something we can never have ("wandering aimlessly"). Dark as it may sound, the poem expresses the poet’s concern about our future as human beings. Ungaretti also evokes moments of wisdom that teach us a little more about ourselves. For this very reason, his poetry might be termed common, that is, communicable among other cultures, which are all included in Ungaretti’s depiction of Man.

This chapter has demonstrated that as ‘men of the world’ and cosmopolites the three authors are already engaged in an ideal conversation with one another, which also implies that their respective cultural affiliations (Italian, African American, and Italian Canadian) are not absolute categories defining their work and lives. All of them grew up in multicultural environments, and this affected their relation to the world as a whole. Whether their cosmopolitanism is cultural (Ungaretti), patriotic (Hughes), or ethnic (D’Alfonso), the use of it as a line of inquiry reveals a common attitude to human affairs that they readily share with each other. This attitude leads to a successful balance between their ethnic identity and their openness to and engagement with other cultural experiences.
CHAPTER 5: METTING THE ITALIANS, THE AFRICAN AMERICANS, AND THE ITALIAN CANADIANS AT ETHNIC AND HISTORICAL INTERSECTIONS

Using the three lines of inquiry to elaborate the literary dispositif, so far, this study has tried to demonstrate that Giuseppe Ungaretti, Langston Hughes, and Antonio D’Alfonso participate together in a harmonic literary conversation. Although it went totally unnoticed before, their dialogue was already taking place in an ideal literary constellation. As a critical device, the literary dispositif has enabled the researcher to make observable (computing) the many ways in which literary traditions are related or can be made to speak to each other – an expression amply used to describe the objectives of traditional comparative practices. Probing into the existence of the three authors, this research has brought to light their mutual relationship. One of the consequences of underscoring their literary reciprocity is that the historical journeys of the communities to which they belong now can be seen and studied as ideal sites offering us the possibility of locating interchanges among their discrete societies. This chapter intends to push further the limit of comparison by discussing the way in which these three peoples’ experience meet on specific historical and cultural grounds. More exactly, it will focus on exemplifying cases where the Italians, the African Americans, and the Italian Canadians can be said to share the same history. So, it will review 1) some of the concepts incarnating ideals of freedom and emancipation developed during the Italian unification that, while it played a crucial role in shaping the Italian national character, undoubtedly became philosophical and rhetorical fodder for the American Civil War; 2) how the development of an African American culture intersects the identity formation of the Italian Canadians. The aim here is to expand our understanding of these three communities on a more comprehensive historical and cultural scale.

The idea that one can study the world as an ensemble of several expressions of human cultures constitutes the basic idea of what today we call ‘global’ or ‘connected history.’ In the
words of Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard, ‘global history’ is “a means to break down the compartmentalization of the historical gaze by embracing a contextual approach that can be enlarged to a planetary scale” (II). Generated by an increased interest in understanding processes of globalization, “connected history” proposes to rewrite the past beyond borderlines in such a way that the contributions of discrete (groups, communities, nations, etc.) histories are equally important in the formation of the world, now seen as the hierarchical merging of single political and social practices. Consequently, connected history is no longer dominated by a Western point of view, but it is written according to many other perspectives. In this light, the account of a people is never exclusive to any given community but is interwoven with the cultures and histories of other groups and countries.

In his *Imagined Community: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson notes that the idea of such a thing as a ‘nation state’ became realistic thanks in large part to print technology. As Anderson puts it, the newspaper reader, “observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, [was] continually reassured that the imagined world [was] visibly rooted in everyday life” (35). In other words, print technology allowed different peoples a simultaneous and ubiquitous reading of daily events and thereby fixed in their mind the idea of belonging to a specific community. According to Anderson, the idea of a nation as a community distinct from the rest of the world is an artificial construct made possible by the creativity of a specific group. On the contrary, ‘global history’ illustrates that this creative act occurs at a planetary level and considers, for instance, what happens when the newspaper reader is an ‘outsider’ of that community or simply a ‘passerby.’ The world imagined by this person, according to her own sense of community, must overlap with the perception of the world as seen, say, by Anderson’s barbershop. That
being the case, one assumes that there exists not only one imagined world, but many; not only one geographical community but many: all these emerging from the reading of the same newspaper. In and of itself the idea of nation always remains only that, an idea, because even in the same geographical areas there are always more than one world. Reading the same newspaper, the ‘barbershop,’ the subway, and the coffee house interconnect, thereby creating their own network or community – which is as local as it is global, depending on the cultural fragmentation of the neighborhood itself. It implies that human beings can belong to a discrete culture (nation, history, etc.), but since they inevitably encounter and share ideas with other people, they end up participating in a wider world. In this light, village, city, and national borders are no longer limiting, but becomes sites of connection between diverse cultures. Thus, there are really no breaks or gaps between one country and another or between one people and another. Even the Atlantic is reduced to a bucket of water where it is possible to mingle the discrete histories of different neighbors, regardless of skin color or social class.

**The Italian Risorgimento and the American Civil War**

In the last few years, historians are rewriting the American Civil War (1861-1865) with the scope to illustrate that it did not occur only within the borders of the United States. On the local level, we know that the war unfolded in places like Bull Run, Virginia, where one of the first battles of the war took place on July 21, 1861 (the other battle in Bull Run occurred between August 28 and 30 in prince William County the following year); the town of Sharpsburg in Maryland, where the Battle of Antietam, on September 17, 1862, became notorious for having been one of the bloodiest of the conflict – in one day 22,717 people were either killed, wounded, or missing; or Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, equally well known because, between July first and third 1863, an extraordinary number of people were killed and also because it virtually brought
an end to the fighting. These places, however, do not represent the only sites where the war unfolded, for both the Union and the Confederacy adopted diplomatic strategies that traveled well beyond American borders. According to historian Don H. Doyle in *The Cause of All Nations*, the idea for which America’s Civil War was as ‘American as the apple pie,’ as some historians, he says, “preferred to consider it, changed in the ’60s where the Civil War came to be interpreted as the prelude to the civil rights movement” (11).

Doyle’s transnational analysis reveals the complexity of the conflict. But it also argues that the War Between the States is an example of connected or global history, for both the unionists and the secessionists used diplomacy to gain public favor overseas. The Union and the Confederacy hired special agents to give a “‘right direction to the public sentiment’ and correct ‘erroneous’ reports that favored the other side” (Doyle 4). One of the tasks of these agents was to assure that Europeans were receiving a proper account of the war aimed at gaining sympathy for their own side. Thus, the diplomat Henry Shelton Sanford from Connecticut was sent to Caprera, Sardinia, to meet Giuseppe Garibaldi, the leader of the Risorgimento who had retired in October 1862 after he and his volunteers were granted amnesty. By then, Garibaldi was an international celebrity known as the “hero of the two worlds” for having fought for liberty and justice in Italy and abroad – especially in Uruguay, South America, where he lived in exile between 1842 and 1848. According to Raimondo Luraghi, Garibaldi was very famous in the United States, and he inspired the ideology of both sides in the Civil War (287). When Sanford arrived in Caprera, he offered Garibaldi a position of command in the Union army, but Garibaldi declined. In effect, he had hoped to be appointed the commander in chief. However, he wondered about the North’s

---

131 According to another scholar Giuseppe Monsagrati, people in Boston, Chicago, Baltimore and New York, saw the heroes of the Risorgimento, thereby also Garibaldi, as courageous but evil fated protagonists (24). See Monsagrati (17-44).
true reasons for fighting. Especially, he wanted to know whether “this agitation is regarding the emancipation of the Negroes or not” (Doyle 20). Although rumors have it that Garibaldi did not really intend to go to the United States but only wanted to raise an uproar in Italy, “he was sincere in his commitment to emancipation” (Doyle 25). On December 3, 1861, Garibaldi told a Scottish friend: “You may be sure […] that had I accepted to draw my sword for the cause of the United States, it would have been for the abolition of Slavery, full, unconditional” (Doyle 25).

The political debate on slavery must have been one of his main concerns. His book I mille (The Thousand) suggests that he held a strong abolitionist sentiment. A close reading of the passages where the word ‘slave’ has an exceptionally strong import indicates that Garibaldi interpreted slavery not only as a form of human trafficking but also, and more generally, as the exploitation of particular minorities. In short, he advocated for the freedom of humankind and despised all those who obstructed it. Thus, in I mille, imagining that the fame of his men (the thousand) would last through time, Garibaldi writes:

Quando l’avanzo dei Mille, che la falce del tempo avrà risparmiato – seduti al focolare domestico, racconteranno ai nepoti la quasi favolosa impresa a cui ebbero l’onore di partecipare – oh! Essi ben ricorderanno di gioventù attonita i gloriosi nomi che formavano l’intrepiddissimo naviglio, e la santa soddisfazione provata d’esser corsi alla riscossa della schiavitù (14).

When the survivors among the Thousand, those who defeated time and death – enjoying their fireplace, will tell their grandchildren their almost-fantastic adventures to which they had the honor to partake – O! they will find themselves surprised at finding that their glorious names formed the most courageous army, and will feel a sacrosanct satisfaction for having hastened to fight against slavery.

---

132 The name ‘thousand’ refers to the actual number of volunteer soldiers who in 1860 helped Garibaldi conquer Sicily and Naples. In Italian history, this episode is known as lo sbarco dei mille (the landing of the thousand).

133 Garibaldi’s broad conjecture of slavery predates the definition of what constitutes slavery as it came to be expressed by the first Article of the Slavery Convention, signed in Geneva on September 25, 1926. According to it, slavery is 1) “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” See The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) webpage: www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SlaveryConvention.aspx. See also Lenzerini (273-280).
Garibaldi also expressed abolitionist sentiments in a speech to England printed in The New York Times of October 18, 1862. In it he urged the United Kingdom to recognize “the great American Republic.” And continues:

She is, after all, your daughter, risen from your bosom; and, however she may go to work, she is struggling to-day for the abolition of Slavery so generously proclaimed by you. Aid her to come out from the terrible struggle in which she is involved by the traffickers in human flesh. Help her, and then make her sit by your side, in the great assembly of nations, the final work of human reason.

Garibaldi’s remarks in *I mille* and the address to England indicate how sensitive he was to the cause of freedom in general and the plight of Africans and African Americans in particular. He had always held a favorable opinion of the United States, so much so that he considered this young republic his second homeland (Doyle 23). According to Valentino J. Belfiglio, in another article sent to *The New York Times*, Garibaldi claimed that the American project of abolishing slavery pleased him immensely. In his own words: “I have always considered from the beginning that the American question was one which concerned all humanity and the whole world,… the principle of the emancipation of slaves… applause to the North Americans, who showed themselves to be the instrument of Providence in carrying out that sublime idea” (172-173).

Garibaldi shared his aversion to slavery with many other Italians, some of whom, Belfiglio explains, besides supporting the Union, decided to enlist under General Ulysses S. Grant, who was often compared to Garibaldi himself (163).

Belfiglio notes that between 1860 and 1870 the number of Italians in America increased by 5,480 people (166). Although this figure alone does not give us a clear idea of the number of Italians fighting in the Union Army, literary representations set in that period show that members
of the Italian community helped the North. The 1866 short story “Domenico’s New Year” by Irish American journalist Thomas F. Galwey is inspired by the way in which the Italians behaved during the War Between the States. In the story, an Italian immigrant named Domenico had no intention of fighting in the Civil War, but when he arrived in New York, two men tricked him into it. Eventually, Domenico proved to be a valorous soldier. Because he is a kind and ‘good Christian,’ life paid him back for his suffering. Literary scholar Nick Ceramella, in his article “American Writers’ Imaginative Empathy for the Risorgimento and Emigration,” points out that the Civil-War setting of the story “gave [Domenico] the opportunity to recover the dignity that most of his countrymen were denied as poor and ignorant ‘wops’” (407). The short story also indicates that Italians and black Americans shared the same type of social discrimination because of the color of their skin. One episode in the story shows a sergeant speaking to a lieutenant about the arrival of new soldiers – among whom there is Domenico – and describes the young Italian in the following terms: “He’s an Italian, and is almost as black as your cook. He seemed a little excited when I was out there; his ears were pricked up at every sound, and his eyes were as wide open as saucers” (Galwey 537). That the sergeant notices Domenico’s dark complexion does not necessarily show that he is racist, but comparing his eyes to saucers and describing his ears ‘pricking’ – like those of a dog or a horse, if not discriminatory, illustrates that the sergeant demeans Domenico by resembling his body with that of an animal. This story allows us to intersect the experience of the Italians in North America with that of the African Americans and black slaves – this latter often being equated to various kinds of animals. Like Domenico’s

134 The term “wop” literally means “without paper” and it still perceived as demeaning and offensive by the Italian community in North America. One can even suggest that ‘wop’ is equivalent to the racist connotation intrenched in the word ‘nigger.’

135 Thomas F. Galwey’s “Domenico’s New Year” was published in the journal Catholic World.
African American contemporary counterparts, the Italian man must have appeared animalesque to white Americans.

In Italy, anti-slavery sentiment led to the first Italian anti-slavery committee. Scholar Lorenzo Ettorre reminds us that on December 17, 1888, the committee was formed in Palermo, Sicily, and that other chapters were eventually established in Naples, Rome, and Milan. Pope Leone XIII, who was one of the leading supporters of these committees, considered them a means to reestablish sentiments of equality and Christianity (Ettore 695). On the other hand, this philanthropic enterprise served to validate the presence of Italy in Africa: “la garanzia della presenza italiana in Africa veniva considerata come la condizione necessaria per svolgere qualsiasi attività in favore degli schiavi” (“the involvement of Italy in Africa was seen a condition necessary to guarantee any possible activity favoring the slaves”), Ettorre writes (705).

More in general, and again, in tune with the idea of connected history, this Italian committee responded to a widespread antislavery movement flourishing in Europe. In 1890, England called for an international summit to discuss possible ways of terminating the institution of slavery in the world (Ettorre 699).

Even though the Italian antislavery committee would eventually shift position and promote Italian colonialism in Africa, on July 2, 1890, the commission stated its dissatisfaction with the work done by the Conference of Brussels. As the commission put it:

Mancheremmo alla nostra coscienza se dovessimo mostrarci soddisfatti del risultato dell’areopago di Bruxelles: mentre siamo intimamente convinti che ben altro di meglio si sarebbe da esso raggiunto, se altri obiettivi non l’avessero preoccupato allo infuori di quel massimo, che avrebbe dovuto essere l’unico, l’abolizione, cioè, della schiavitù e della tratta dei negri (Quoted in Ettorre’s essay (699).

We would only deceive ourselves by trying to show satisfaction with the outcome of the Conference of Brussels. Indeed, we are profoundly convinced that we could have obtained much more from it if it did not preoccupy itself with other
objectives besides the most important one, which should have also been the only one, that is, the abolition of slavery and the slave trade.

Historian Enrico Dal Lago claims that those in favor of abolitionism among American and Italian democrats had many ideas in common. If the North was fond of Garibaldi, American abolitionists expressed interest in Giuseppe Mazzini’s ideas. Mazzini was an Italian intellectual whose agenda influenced the revolutionary movements not only in his country but throughout Europe. Dal Lago suggests that the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and Mazzini both appealed to civil rights in their fight against slavery and monarchical tyranny and they both had a “credo indiscusso nell’imprecindibilità del concetto di progresso dell’umanità” (“a strong belief in the inescapability of the concept of human progress”) (154).

Mazzini’s liberal ideals influenced the American movement called *Young America*, which flourished in the 1840s, and became in the 1850s an important organ of the Democratic Party. The movement also advocated for the independence of literary artists. The American novelist Herman Melville belonged to it. One of his novels, *White Jacket*, published in England in March 1850, shares one the main concerns of the *Young America* of the time: flogging. Melville’s resentment of this practice, which was reminiscent of “a barbarous feudal aristocracy,” captures the democratic and humanitarian outlook of the movement as well. As Melville writes:

[… ] flogging in the navy is opposed to the essential dignity of man, which no legislator has a right to violate; […] it is oppressive, and glaringly unequal in its operations; […] it is utterly repugnant to the spirit of our democratic institutions; indeed, […] it involves a lingering trait of the worst times of a barbarous feudal aristocracy; in a word, we denounce it as a religiously, morally, and immutably wrong. […] we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world (95).

---

136 In 1831, Mazzini found *Young Italy* with the intent to help the people of Italy to develop a sense of nationhood and to encourage the masses to fight reactionary governments.

137 Quoted from the 1971 article “Melville and the Young American Movement” by Leonard Engel in *Connecticut Review*. 

232
According to Maria Laura Lanzillo, at first Mazzini supported both the Union, because it advocated emancipation of the slaves and the Confederacy because of its appeal to democratic politics.\textsuperscript{138} During the last two years of the Civil War, however, he embraced exclusively the North’s cause (Lanzillo 200-201). Lanzillo states that “Mazzini leggeva la situazione politica Americana per lo più alla luce delle aspirazioni morali universali” (“Mazzini interpreted the American politics of the time especially in light of universal moral expectations”) (200).\textsuperscript{139} Living in exile in London for much of his career, Mazzini always insisted on connecting local and global politics. To give an example of his vision of ‘shared history,’ one can cite a letter he addressed at the end of 1866 to his friend William Linton. Here he writes that the only legitimate war was that fought for the human rights, justice, freedom, and truth or that aimed against the abuse of power, tyranny, and falsehood.\textsuperscript{140} And he continues, “Nel nome di questi principii, voi [gli americani] avete decretata la libertà degli schiavi negri; nel nome di questi principii, noi stiamo riunendo i nostri sforzi per l’abolizione della schiavitù politica, dovunque possa essere stabilita o tentata, fra i bianchi.”\textsuperscript{141}

Mazzini was convinced that both black and white workers represented comparable groups enslaved by their own society. In Mazzini’s view, both races were subjected to similar working conditions. He and other intellectuals belonging to Catholic circles compared the way in

\textsuperscript{138} Maria Laura Lanzillo’s “Unità della nazione, Libertà e Indipendenza” (“National Unity, Liberty, and Independence”) in \textit{La guerra civile americana vista dall’Europa (The American Civil War Seen from Europe)} edited by Tiziano Bonazzi et al. (Società Editrice il Mulino, 2004) (185-212).

\textsuperscript{139} Among these expectations there was also the emancipation of women. For an analysis of Mazzini’s position on the role of women in society, see the article by Federica Falchi’s “Beyond National Borders; ‘Italian’ Patriots United in the Name of Giuseppe Mazzini: Emilie Ashurst, Margaret Fuller and Jessie White Mario” in the journal \textit{Women’s History Review}.

\textsuperscript{140} My paraphrasis of the quotation in Lanzillo’s book chapter (203).

\textsuperscript{141} Quoted by Lanzillo (203); the interjection is Lanzillo’s. “In the name of these principles, voi [gli americani] have emancipated black slaves; in the name of these principles, we are uniting our strengths to abolish political slavery, anywhere it can be established or attempts to establish itself, among the whites.”
which the working class was treated in Europe with the way in which blacks under bondage lived in America. In the words of Lanzillo, “gli avvenimenti americani diventavano manifestazione della necessità di una nuova costituzione sociale dell’umanità fondata sull’emancipazione dal lavoro” (208). Lanzillo also notes that some people close to the Catholic church condemned both wage slavery and racial slavery. It is also true that several intellectuals writing in journals such as Civiltà cattolica (“Catholic Civilization”) described slaveowners as good father figures to their slaves (Lanzillo 209). The slave narratives corroborate such a view, as they often suggest that slave owners took good care of their human chattel.

Here is the way the former slave Mary Anderson, born on May 10, 1851, recalled her life on a plantation in Franklinton, Wake County, in North Carolina:

We had good food, plenty of warm homemade clothes and comfortable houses. The slave houses were called the quarters and the house where the master lived was called the great house. Our house had two rooms each and marster’s house had twelve rooms [...]. There were about one hundred and sixty-two slaves on the plantation and every Sunday morning all the children had to be bathed, dressed, and their hair combed and carried down to marster’s for breakfast. It was a rule that all the little colored children eat at the great house every Sunday morning in order that marster and missus could watch them eat so they could know which ones were sickly and have them doctored [...]. Marster [...] four white overseers but they were not allowed to whip a slave. If there was any whipping to be done he always said he would do it. He did not believe in whipping so when a slave got so bad he could not manage him he sold him (21-22).

Countering this benevolent vision of slavery, Mazzini and the American abolitionists argued that bondage (from the serfs in Russia and Germany to the slaves in the Americas) corresponded to a form of global human oppression and that its economic system needed to be destroyed.

---

142 “The events in America were becoming as a manifestation of the necessity of a novel social establishment based on the emancipation from work.”
143 As Peter Kolchin explains in his “Reexamining Southern Emancipation in Comparative Perspective” published in The Journal of Southern History, back then “there was a sentiment that Christians should not enslave other Christians and Muslims should not enslave other Muslims” (7).
144 In the volume XI (North Carolina Narratives) of Slave Narratives: a Folk History of Slaves in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves prepared in 1941 by the Federal Writers’ Project and sponsored by the Library of Congress.
immediately. This outlook permeates the abolitionist literature of the time; the conditions of other peoples and races were not simply taken into account but encompassed a broader rhetoric of universal human suffering. In a letter to Reverend Dr. Beard, Mazzini considered the white factory workers of England as much the victims of economic oppression as blacks. As Mazzini put it, millions of white slaves suffered and died in Italy, Poland, Hungary and the rest of Europe (De Leo 155).\(^\text{145}\)

On the other side of the Atlantic, the connected history of white and black slaves was also rendered in verse by the African American poet and abolitionist James Monroe Whitfield. In the poem “How Long,” he describes the suffering of humankind subjected to colonization and oppression. Among these individuals are the Hungarians and the Italians, repressed by a murderous Austrian regime. About the Hungarians (the Magyar, in the poem) he writes:

> And where the Magyar vainly strove,  
> With valiant arm, and faithful soul,  
> In battle for the land he loved –  
> A perjured tyrant’s legions tread  
> The ground where Freedom’s heroes bled,  
> And still the voice of those who feel  
> Their country’s wrongs, with Austrian still (57).

Later in the poem, changing his angle of observation (“I turn the land to view”), Whitfield speaks about the land as everybody’s generic place:

> But then I turn the land to view,  
> Which claims, par excellence, to be  
> The refuge of the brave and true,  
> The strongest bulwark of the free,  
> The grand asylum of the poor  
> And trodden-down of every land,  
> Where they may rest in peace secure,  
> Nor fear th’oppressor’s iron hand –  
> Worse scene of rapine, lust and shame,  
> Than e’er disgraced the Russian name,  
> Worse than the Austrian ever saw.

\(^\text{145}\) According to the Italian historian, the letter appeared on The Manchester Daily News on May 30, 1854.
Are sanctioned here as righteous law. Here might the Austrian Butcher make Progress in shameful cruelty, Where women-whippers proudly take The meed and praise of chivalry (58-59).

Here the land is a safe place (“The refuge of the brave and true,” “The grand asylum of the poor”). But despite this hopeful attribution, everywhere the poet turns, he sees that the majority suffers, for the land is controlled by the few. It is also corrupted to the extent that the most violent of crimes are seen as retribution (“meed”) and are praised as acts of “chivalry.” The poem also refers to Austria’s repression of large areas of northern Italy. The “Austrian Butcher” was Julius Jacob von Haynau, an Austrian general whose repressive measures were well known in Italy and Hungary. He was particularly famous for the public whipping of women supporting revolutionary ideals.

Undoubtedly, Italian patriots took the abolitionists’ fervor to heart because, in the collective imagination of the country, it too was a slave. The vision of Italy as a slave country is corroborated by many travelers who visited the country in the nineteenth century. As Paola Gemme suggests, Margaret Fuller, a foreign correspondent of the New-York Daily Tribune, observed that “Americans in Italy […] talk about the corrupt and degenerate state of Italy as they do about that of our slaves at home (77). Italians compared themselves to American slaves because, being subjected to despotism for a long time, they lost their will to be free. Due also to their physical appearance, they were considered racially inferior. Their skin color created a deficit for which they were believed to lack a specific inclination to freedom (Gemme 77).

On the contrary, the leaders of the Risorgimento stirred the people to liberate themselves from the colonizers, in the belief that their instinct for freedom would prevail. Those who took the liberty of the country to heart did not stop fighting until Italy became socially and politically
unified. It took them decades to transform the divided kingdoms of Italy into a ‘unified country’ in 1861, the year in which the American Civil War started. The Italian wars of independence, as they are also called, predated the Civil War by several years. The word Risorgimento, which literally means ‘resurgence,’ is an umbrella term indicating the extended period in which Italy fought for its independence, from 1815 to 1871. The wars of independence were fought to liberate Italy from the presence of foreign powers. The country’s various city-states were controlled by the Spanish, the French, and the Austrians, while the Vatican presided over most of Central Italy until 1870. The French conquered Italy from 1796 to 1815. During this period, many Italian states were consolidated, and the middle class had the possibility of participating in the government. After the defeat of Napoleon, former rulers restored their power in Italy, and Austria reinstated a robust conservative regime. An Italian secret society called Carboneria was formed to stir up a sense of patriotism among the people and create a republican government. Its main opponent was the Austrian power, which adopted such repressive measures that some of the carbonari were arrested even before they openly rebelled. Among these people there was Silvio Pellico who, in 1832, published his memoir Le mie prigioni (My Prisons), a book narrating his time as a prisoner, first in the Piombi (The Leads) in Venice, and later, in the fortress of Spielberg in Brno, now in the Czech Republic.146

That both Italians and black Americans were animated by a similar instinct for freedom is confirmed in their respective literatures of the time. The fight for independence during the Risorgimento immediately evokes Ugo Foscolo’s Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis (The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis). Even though this text was published thirteen years before the

---

146 Piombi was a state prison in the Dodge’s Palace in Venice. The prison was located under the roof of the palace and covered with pieces of lead. Built this way, the winter cold and summer heat passed through the roof, forcing the inmates into a miserable status.
Risorgimento commenced, Foscolo’s story about a young patriot helped foment those liberal ideas that eventually fed the fight for liberty during the Risorgimento. The text represents the first epistolary novel ever written in Italy, and its main character Jacopo Ortis hides in the Euganean Hills to escape persecution. This predicament is a source of great distress for the young revolutionary who will end up committing suicide. Early on in his notes to his beloved friend Lorenzo, Jacopo compares his and his country’s situation to slavery.

Lamenting the abject condition of Italy, he writes: “E questi altri? – hanno comperato la nostra schiavitù, racquistando con l’oro quello che stolidamente e vilmente hanno perso con le armi” (“And these others? – they have made us slaves, buying back with their golds that which they lost to their foolishness and their cowardice”) (8). The first few pages of the narrative, which set the tone for the entire book, describe the image of Italy’s bondage by harking back to texts like Dante’s Comedy. It causes Jacopo to become aware of his “perpetua schiavitù” (“perpetual servitude”) (183), thus stimulating his disposition to fight for personal and national emancipation. By ‘emancipation,” here, however, Jacopo suggests both spiritual and legal freedom to live the life he wishes to live. Speaking about his moral debts, he writes:

```
Ho io incontrato questi debiti spontaneamente? e la mia vita dovrà pagare, come uno schiavo, i mali che la Società mi procura, solo perché gli intitola beneficij? E sieno beneficij: ne godo e li ricompenso fino che vivo […]. O amico mio! Ciascun individuo è nemico della Società, perché la Società è necessariamente nemica degli individui […]. Io sono un mondo in me stesso: e intendo d’emanciparmi perché mi manca la felicità che mi avete promesso (154).
```

Have I been the cause of these debts? and my life will have to pay for it, like a slave, the horrors that Society gives me, and only because it finds it beneficial. And let it be beneficial: I enjoy and will pay them until I breathe […]. O dear friend! Every individual is an enemy of Society because Society is necessarily the enemy of the individuals […]. I constitute a world of my own, and intend to emancipate myself because I lack the happiness that you promised me.
Almost imagining himself as a runaway slave, he intends to attain his freedom. Jacopo attributes to (his) society the power to dominate the individuals, who in turn cannot but nurture sentiments of hatred towards it and become its enemy. Jacopo’s words speak to the experience of America’s slaves. Indeed, slavery’s ideologues tried to convince their enslaved workers that they were an inferior species of humanity. Because they were not considered possible fellow citizens by the white majority, they had to keep on paying their debts to society through bondage. As an example of the rhetoric employed by the proslavery forces, it might be useful here to cite one of the speeches that James Henry Hammond, the governor of South Carolina (from 1842 to 1844), delivered to the Senate on March 4, 1858. The legislator believed that slaves were the mudsill of America, the lowest social class, yet “eminently qualified in temper, vigor, obedience, and capacity to stand the climate, to answer all her purposes […] Our slaves are black, of another and inferior race. The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created them, by being made our slaves” (12).147 This discourse, intersecting Foscolo’s vision of society, illustrates that the debased condition of characters like Jacopo could speak for both the Italians and the African Americans alike. At mid-century, the spirit of freedom shined like a beacon light on both sides of the Atlantic.

As it has been indicated throughout this entire dissertation, more often than not, one discrete literary tradition can significantly influence the expectations and the imagination of other peoples who apparently have nothing to share with one another. A case in point is the American reception of Dante’s Comedy during the Civil War. In his article “The Divine Comedy as an American Civil War Epic,” Joshua Matthews describes a phenomenon of the nineteenth century America, which turned out to be even more peculiar during the War Between the States.

147 Quoted from Speech of D. C. Broderick of California, Against the Admission of Kansas, Under the Lecompton Constitution: Delivered in the Senate of the United, March 22, 1858.
In this period, American writers became more and more interested in Dante’s works. Matthews indicates that, between 1862 and 1863 the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow translated Dante’s entire work into English. It was the first such translation by an American author (315). American writers found Dante’s works attractive because they read the struggle between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines as an analogy of the struggle between the Confederacy and the Union. Some Unionists interpreted Dante’s allegoric journey as a “promotion of the moral necessity of national unity and western imperialism, and for its condemnation of political traitors and rebels” (Matthews 317). Furthermore, the figure of Dante was interesting because he was a political writer and an exile. According to Matthews, during the second half of the nineteenth century, Americans used the Florentine to forge a deep connection with Italy.

It is worth remembering that even in Italy, during the Risorgimento Dante’s work were highly revived. In her Dante and Music, for instance, Maria Ann Roglieri points out that “Dante was rediscovered in the nineteenth century and knowing his writings became a crucial part of being an educated intellectual Italian […]. The Commedia was viewed as a historical illustration of the communes and the struggle between the empire and the papacy which were of particular interest to the nineteenth-century Italian bourgeoisie” (6). Like their American counterpart, Italian intellectuals found Dante’s work particularly inspirational in those difficult times. This connection nicely illustrates one of the threads interweaving American and Italian culture in the nineteenth century. Roglieri also notes that Dante was a very important figure during the Italian unification because the patriots saw reflected in the Florentine’s biographical experience (Dante was driven outside of Florence for his political activism about which he talks openly in the Comedy) a paragon of his struggle. As such, his work spoke to the hearts of the Italian patriots. According to Maurizio Isabella, even “for Mazzini, Dante was also the first upholder of the
Risorgimento’s patriotic interpretation of the exile, and interpretation based on the contrast Dante drew in the Divina Commedia between the nobility of his city’s ancient institutions and the present decay of its political life” (498).

The cultural relation established by Dante’s work between Italy and the United States can also shed light on the disappointment felt by both Italians and African Americans after having fought their respective wars for freedom. The figure of the exile, which according to Mazzini and other intellectuals of the time found its highest expression in Dante’s work, helped create in the Italian culture the image of patriotic anxiety akin to the sense of disillusionment felt by black Americans after the Civil War. According to Andrea Ciccarelli, “the psycho-cultural aspect derived from Italy’s division obviously weighs on Italian intellectuals’ political views and can be ultimately held responsible for their dissatisfaction with their own cultural heritage which was insufficient to propose the changes needed to raise a unitarian consciousness within Italy” (24).

The changes that African Americans hoped to see during and after the Civil War rarely lasted. The disillusionment of black Americans certainly represents another moment of shared or global history, for their disappointment matches the sense of failure felt by Italian patriots. One can find examples of the disappointment of black Americans at the very beginning of the Civil War. During the first year, African Americans were not permitted to enlist in the Union Army. Outraged by military’s racial discrimination, in 1861 Frederick Douglas attacked the Lincoln administration demanding that his people be allowed to fight. A year later he was busy in the recruitment of black soldiers. During the conflict, 178,000 black soldiers served in the Union Army. Of this number, 140,313 were ex-slaves, and 37,000 died in the war. In The Negro’s Civil War, James M. McPherson has collected numerous testimonies of black Americans’ hope

for freedom. The words of black soldiers bear witness to the excitement of these men. One of these black soldiers, James F. Jones, wrote in June 1864:

[…] under God, this will yet be a pleasant land for the colored man to dwell in, the declarations of colonizationists to the contrary, notwithstanding. Step by step we are emerging from darkness into light. One by one the scales that have so blinded our race- ignorance and superstition – re falling off; prejudice, with all its concomitant evils, is fast giving away, men begin to reason and think of us in a rational and religious way. As people, we begin to think of our race as something more than vassals, and goods, and chattels, and with increased good opinion of ourselves, we will make all people respect us (315).

Despite the social restrictions regulating their lives, this statement illustrates the optimism still galvanizing black Americans during the Civil War. Another wave of excitement followed the Emancipation Proclamation on January first, 1863. Although the Proclamation was of great symbolic importance, ultimately, it did not emancipate all slaves but, as Kolchin puts it, “applied only to those areas that were in rebellion” (10). During the Reconstruction, the Congress introduced specific procedures to define the terms of emancipation. In 1865, it instituted the Freedmen’s Bureau to help black and poor Southerners integrate into their new society. That same year, the Thirteenth Amendment (the abolition of slavery) was ratified. In 1866, the Civil Rights Act was passed, granting citizenship to all people born in America. Between 1867 and 1870, blacks were granted the right to vote (Table 3 in Kolchin’s essay (16)). Regardless of these promising measures, racism and white supremacist power returned with a vengeance, so that blacks still found it difficult to practice their civil rights.

Both Italians and black Americans became disillusioned with the outcomes of the Risorgimento and the Civil War and the social ideals guiding their struggles. This sense of disappointment felt by the Italians is evident in the very first letter that Foscolo’s Jacopo sent to Lorenzo on October 11, 1797, years before the Risorgimento began. Jacopo writes:
Il sacrificio della patria è consumato: tutto è perduto; e la vita, seppure ne verrà concessa, non ci resterà che per piangere le nostre sciagure, e la nostra infamia. Il mio nome è nella lista di proscrizione, lo so: ma vuoi tu ch’io per salvarmi da chi m’opprime mi commetta a chi mi ha tradito? Consola mia madre: vinto dalle sue lagrime le ho obbedito, e ho lasciato Venezia per evitare le prime persecuzioni, e le più feroci. Or dovrò io abbandonare anche questa mia solitudine antica, dove, senza perdere dagli occhi il mio sciagurato paese, posso ancora sperare qualche giorno di pace? Tu mi fai raccapricciare, Lorenzo; quanti sono dunque gli sventurati? E noi, purtroppo, noi stessi italiani ci laviamo le mani nel sangue degl’italiani. Per me segua che può. Poiché ho disperato e della mia patria e di me, aspetto tranquillamente la prigione e la morte. Il mio cadavere almeno non cadrà fra le braccia straniere; il mio nome sarà sommessamente compianto da pochi uomini, compagni delle nostre miserie; e le mie ossa poseranno su la terra de’ miei padri (7).

Our sacrifices to our homeland are now exhausted; all is lost, and the time that is still available to us, if there is still something available to us, will bring only sorrow and shame. My name appears in the list of proscription, I know it; do you believe that to save my life I would be subjected to the oppressor? Comfort my mother; her sad tears raised a loud voice that commanded me to leave Venice to avoid persecution. Now I will need to leave also my usual solitude; where, without losing sight of my country, can I find a few hours of peace? You terrify me, Lorenzo. How many are we? We Italians fight against ourselves. Let it be. I have been despairing over the fate of my homeland, and over my own destiny, now I am waiting my incarceration and my death serenely. My corpse, at least, will not fall in foreign arms; very few people will remember me, those people, my companions, with whom I shared my misery; my bones will rest in my homeland.

Here Jacopo imagines what will happen to the revolutionaries, whose “sacrifice” failed to produce the political and social changes originally envisioned.

We can almost interpret Jacopo’s words as a prophecy because later, history would confirm his intuition. In fact, after the first Italian war of independence (1848-1849), in which it seemed that Italy could be indeed unified, Austrian and papal power were restored. It took Italy two more wars of independence (one in 1859 and another in 1866) to defeat its enemies. At the end of the Italian struggles, the country was still so fragmented, at least culturally and economically, that the bloodshed of the previous years appeared useless. The discouragement of Italian artists was great. Even Giuseppe Verdi, whose operatic works often allegorize patriotic
ideals (at least until his 1849 *La battaglia di Legnano*), decided to write music for other topics.\(^{149}\)

In his *Giuseppe Verdi: uomo, artista, patriota* (*Giuseppe Verdi: the Man, the Artist, and the Patriot*), Luigi Sorge writes that, due to “lo sconforto dei tempi” (“the discouragement of the times”), the composer felt dissatisfied with the Risorgimento (148). According to Sorge, as the enthusiasm for unification diminished, Verdi’s patriotic inspiration lessened to the point that he composed subjects unrelated to contemporary politics (151).

A novel illustrating Italian politics of the time is the famous *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*) by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. Set in 1860 Sicily, during the period in which Garibaldi with his thousand broke through the Kingdom of Sicily, the novel tells the story of the Salinas, a noble Sicilian family in favor of the restoration of the old system. In one of the early scenes of the narrative, Tancredi the nephew of Ferdinando Salina informs his uncle of his intention to join Garibaldi’s army. His uncle is shocked and worried about Tancredi’s life, but the young man reassures the prince, saying: “Se non ci siamo anche noi, quelli ti combinano la repubblica. Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi. Mi sono spiegato?” (“If we are not with them, those will establish a republic. If we want that everything remains the same, everything must change. Did I make myself clear?”) (41). These few words succinctly illustrate the ‘discouragement of the time’ during and after the Risorgimento and what caused it. Due to the presence of the old system in the new one, Italian society could barely change. Ordinary people then found it difficult to integrate into this seemingly unified country because they remained excluded, forcing them to immigrate en bloc to the Americas.

\(^{149}\) The debate on the importance that patriotism assumes in Verdi’s operatic works during the Risorgimento is still an open debate among musicologists. See Roger Parker, *Leonora’s Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton University Press, 1997); Peter Stamatov, “Interpretive Activism and the Political Uses of Verdi’s Operas in the 1840s” in the journal *American Sociological Review* 67 (345-366); Philip Gossett, “Edizioni distrutte’ and the Significance of Operatic Choruses during the Risorgimento,” in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdie*, edited by Victoria Johnson et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2007) (181-242).
The disappointment caused by the failure of making a unified Italy resonates even many years later in the poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti. His verse “Accadrà” (“It will happen”) can be seen as speaking about the ‘discouragement of the time.’ In the second and forth stanza of the poem, he writes:

Tragica Patria, l’insegnasti prodiga  
A ogni favella libera,  
E ne ebbero purezza dell’origine  
Le immagini remote,  
Le nuove, immemorabili radice.

…

Da venti secoli T’uccide l’uomo  
Che incessante vivichi rinata,  
Umile interprete del Dio di tutti.  
Patria stanca delle anime,  
Succederà, universale fonte,  
Che tu non più rifulga? (231-232)

Tragic motherland, you taught it selflessly,  
To every free tongue,  
And the remote images  
found their purity,  
the new, unmemorable roots.

…

It is twenty centuries that Man is killing you,  
Incessantly reviving as if you were born again,  
Humble interpreter of everybody’s God.  
Motherland, tired of your souls,  
Will it happen, universal source,  
That you will no longer glow?

Like in Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel, Ungaretti’s poem laments the tragic sorts of Italy (“Tragica,” the poet defines it) for which everything must change to remain the same (“Da venti secoli T’uccide l’uomo”). Nevertheless, the country has the strength to die and come back to life each time that it is killed (“Che incessante vivichi rinata”). More in tune with Foscolo, Ungaretti
says his motherland is tired (“stanca delle anime”). Especially in the rhetorical question closing the fourth stanza one can distinguish a sense of discomfort comparable to that animating the people and artists of the Risorgimento. Positing a question, the poet seems to doubt the fact that Italy could glow again. Thus, the answer to that question is only one: Italy will lose its splendor, precisely as Jacopo anticipates in his letter. Ungaretti’s concerns reflect a universal sentiment that in the Italian literary tradition runs from Dante to, say, the lyrics of Luciano Ligabue, who in one of his songs, “Buonanotte all’Italia” (“Goodnight Italy”), sings:

Buonanotte all’Italia deve un po’ riposare
tanto a fare la guardia c’è un bel pezzo di mare
c’è il muschio ingiallito dentro questo presepio
che non viene cambiato, che non viene smontato
e zanzare vampiri che la succhiano lì
se lo pompano in pancia un bel sangue così

Buonanotte all’Italia che si fa o si muore
o si passa la notte a volerla comprare
come se gli angeli fossero lì
a dire che si
è tutto possibile
come se i diavoli stessero un po’
a dire di no, che son tutte favole…

Goodnight Italy, it can rest a little
because a beautiful piece of the sea is guarding it
there is some musk turned yellow behind this nativity
nobody ever changes it, neither is it ever renovated
and mosquitoes and vampires suck her blood
pumping it their bellies

Goodnight Italy which makes itself or we die
or we spend the night trying to buy it
as if angels would be there
saying, yes,
everything is possible
as if devils would be there
saying, no, everything is a fairy tale…

150 From the album, Primo tempo (First Act or First Half), a collection of Ligabue’s greatest hits with two new songs “Buonanotte all’italia” (“Goodnight Italy”) and “Niente paura” (“No Fear”) (Warner Music Italy, 2007).
Both stanzas explicitly refer to the history of Italy as a colony (“zanzare e vampiri che la succhiano li,” “o si passa la notte a volerla comprare”). At the same time, the “muschio ingiallito” and the image of an unchanged nativity – untouched maybe because nobody takes pains to clean it or even rebuild it – resonates with the idea of gattopardismo: the illusion that things can change but they never do.

It is possible to draw an analogy between the discouragement stroking the Italians (felt even today, as Ligabue illustrates in his song) and the disillusion of black Americans following the War Between States. During the Reconstruction (1865-1877), the winning republicans helped blacks to ease their way to freedom, but in states like North Carolina, Louisiana, and Mississippi, Jim Crow laws put a damper on black civil rights. White supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camelia sprang up to enforce the new order. One can call this an American form of gattopardismo. In the U.S. things needed to change radically so that everything would remain the same. Works like The Birth of a Nation, a silent movie released in 1915 and directed and produced by D. W. Griffith, express this American gattopardismo by representing blacks as animalesque and always on the verge of taking advantage of young and innocent white women. In the film a black soldier returns from the war and encounters a white girl. Imagining that blacks and whites now have the same rights, he tries to tell the girl that he would like to marry her. Frightened by this encounter, the girl runs to the edge of a cliff, and while the man tries to save her, she commits suicide. Impersonated, by a white actor in blackface, the African American is depicted as lurking and menacing. But a careful viewer quickly realizes the man’s good intention and the exaggerated reaction of the white girl. The movie ends with the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, depicted as a useful, even necessary, social movement. American history comes full circle.
The works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, an African American author born in 1872, capture perfectly the discouragement of his time. In his collections of poems *Oak and Ivy* vernacular and standard language convey the distress of his generation and illustrates how this American *gattopardoismo* prevents his people from being happy. In the poem “To Miss Mary Britton,” Dunbar praises Miss Mary Britton, a teacher in Lexington, Kentucky for speaking publicly against the passage of a bill that would obligate black people to travel on separate coaches. The first stanza of the poem reads as follows:

God of the right, arise  
And let thy pow’r prevail;  
Too long thy children mourn  
In labor and travail.  
Oh, speed the happy day  
When waiting ones may see  
The glory-bringing birth  
Of our real liberty! (30)

Dunbar appeals to God to help his people achieve the happiness they cannot obtain for themselves. It seems that there is nowhere that blacks can be free on earth, but with God’s help they can find happiness. Describing his people as children always in “labor and travail,” the poet suggests that without the help of a spiritual power, his generation is doomed. In the last line closing the stanza, the word “real” reveals the poet’s disappointment with his times, thus showing continuity and contiguity between the sentiments animating the Italian writers of the Risorgimento and those felt by African American authors during the same period.

The bitterness shared by black Americans is reiterated again in the poem “Hymn” where, in a decadent tone, the speaker expresses his tortured soul. At this point, he appeals one more time to God, looking for emotional relief. As the first stanza goes:

When storm arise  
And darkening skies  
About me threat’ning lower,
To thee, O Lord, I lift mine eyes;
To thee my tortured spirit flies
For solace in that hour (20).

“Tortured spirit” here echoes the bondage, which is a form of torture, and indicates the extent to which the poet is in touch with his people’s sentiment. Another poem, “A Career,” Dunbar imagines an anonymous man speaking from his grave. The man says:

‘But give me pow’r to work my will,
And at my deeds the world shall thrill.
My words shall rouse the slumb’ring zest
That hardly stirs in manhood’s breasts […]’ (47).

As with many others of his generation, the man’s request reveals that he did not have the possibility of asserting himself, neither could his needs be heard or fulfilled. Furthermore, by claiming that Man (“manhood’s breasts”) has little “zest” in his heart, the speaker establishes a cultural connection with ideas shared by Italian authors of the Risorgimento. Like them, indeed, the dead man seems to have lost his faith in society.

**Cultural Matrix: Ethnic Contiguity Between the Italian Canadian and the African American Experience**

The idea brought forth in this segment of the chapter is that, despite their cultural distinctiveness, once included in the arrangement of the literary dispositif, the experience of the Italian Canadians and the African Americans reveals itself to be contiguous by way of cultural and historical intersections, including the formation of their ethnicity, even there where they are less likely to find a common anchorage. For reasons that will be analyzed below, it is not a stretch to speculate that the way in which Italian Canadians formed their ethnic consciousness represents an ideal juncture to the African American tradition. The aim of this study is not to reinforce ethnicity as a basic category defining the cultural identity of a community; on the contrary, the reflections herein exposed are intended to reach beyond one specific ethnicity to
demonstrate that the experience of particular groups of people is never isolated from the rest of the world. In this light, distinct ethnic boundaries can be seen as contiguous to other ethnic formations.

It is useful to think of this bordering of cultures in terms of ethnic contiguity and/or continuity; for in a holistic map of the formation of the world, one can see that even singular identities (or one’s unique identification with only one group, culture, etc.) are never such. In their particularity and originality singular identities can serve as an anchorage for other experiences. This chapter section, therefore, proposes to bring the cultural identity of Italian Canadians and African Americans into relation with one another. Amartya Sen can help us understand why it is possible to conceive of a sound relation among different groups. In *Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny*, he states:

> We do belong to many different groups, in one way or another, and each of these collectivities can give a person a potentially important identity [...]. Two different, though interrelated, exercises are involved here: (1) deciding on what our relevant identities are, and (2) weighing the relative importance of these different identities. Both tasks demand reasoning and choice (24).

Original private enterprise (one’s individual choice in Sen’s discourse) becomes a *common* (in François Jullien’s terms) through which we can understand the world as a whole. Identity is construed through reasoning and choosing. ‘Reasoning’ and ‘choosing’ here imply that one’s identity formation is a conscious process. While identity may be inherited, it is also the result of one’s social needs and experiences. Given that the formation of cultural identity is a deliberative activity, it is possible to claim that, due to their contiguity, Italian Canadians and African Americans form an African Italian American experience, precisely as this dissertation has proposed to reveal all along.
To think in terms of the ethnic contiguity of the two distinct communities implies that the credentials of these communities draw from a cultural matrix in which the Italian Canadians and the African Americans emerged as discrete cultures. Focusing *a priori* on this cultural matrix leads the researcher to find immediately how and where the experience of the two groups interconnects. Here, only a few of the elements of this cultural matrix will be analyzed: the fragmentation of the cultures of origin from which the Italian Canadian and the African American ethnicity were formed; a sense of kinship among the ethnic groups generated by the fact of being ‘in the same boat,’ both literally and metaphorically; and the appropriation of history by both groups as they assert their presence in North America.

However briefly, Chapter 4 outlined the historical fragmentation of the Italian culture down to the present. Not only are there significant cultural and political differences between Northern and Southern Italy, but within the same region people also speak many dialects and have different social customs. After the Italian wars of independence, Italians had a very peculiar sense of nationhood: they did not claim their cultural and political membership in Italy as a national entity, but rather in their region. Even more commonly, they identified with their hometown, where they grew up. In Italian culture, this phenomenon is termed *campanilismo* and indicates one’s unique emotional affiliation to his or her birthplace. After the Risorgimento, that is, after the unification of Italy, Italians for the most part still saw themselves as Calabrians or Sicilians, but rarely considered themselves simply *Italians*. In other words, their local identity did not reflect a sense of nationhood, a phenomenon which led to a profound fragmentation of the Italian culture. While such accentuated regionalism helped define the national identity, the idea that one belonged to a discrete part of Italy (village, town) contributes to define an Italian identity abroad. In an interview with Filippo Salvatore, included in *Ancient Memories, Modern...*
Identities: Italian Roots in Contemporary Canadian Authors, scholar John Zucchi reminds us that the “human chains,” as he calls it, that is, a great number of people coming from the same village or region, is a factor that one must weigh in the formation of Italian ethnicity in Canada (29).

One can imagine that the ethnic formation of one group of people coming from the same village, speaking the same dialect, eating and preparing food in the same fashion, would be a relatively smooth process. But it is a little more challenging to explain how these several communities from, say, Sicily, Campania, Calabria, Molise (the regions where most Italian immigrants in Canada come from) would connect on a linguistic and cultural level forming a cohesive community. Despite local differences and despite the fact that, as Zucchi suggests, Italians “had a superficial sense of being Italian” (30), at least three factors influenced the formation of their ethnic identity: 1) the ghettoization of the Italians – by which people hailing from different regions found themselves living very close to each other (the industrialization of Toronto caused the Ward, College and Grace Streets, also known as Little Italy, Dufferin and Davenport Streets to be transformed into ‘Italian colonies’; 2) since the Italians were generally Catholics, Zucchi says, the Irish Catholic hierarchy treated them as a specific group (30); 3) the prominenti (community leaders holding political and economic power) promoted the emergence of a “trans-village or trans-regional” ‘Italian,’ identity (31). The second factor indicates the way in which Italians were seen by others – namely, as a homogeneous group, while the third factor has more to do with the politics of identity formation. As for the first factor, of the three it is maybe the more useful for discussing cultural intersections, inasmuch as the ghettoization of these different groups of Italians instilled in them a sense of belonging, an awareness and a consciousness of being Italian that otherwise they would have lacked. Thus, the Italian
Canadians became an ethnic community when they understood the significance of what they shared with one another.

The sense of an African American identity has taken place more or less in the same fashion. In their book *The Birth of African American Culture: an Anthropological Perspective*, Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price argue that Africans transported to the Americas were “drawn from different cultures and societies and spoke different and often mutually unintelligible languages” (8) – the variety inherent to African society helps to identify cultural intersections with a correspondingly diverse Italian society. However, in *The Slave Ship: a Human History* Marcus Rediker posits that the “mutual intelligibility of West Africans to one another, at least within certain large cultural regions, and […] linguistic divisions aboard the slave ships were less extreme than once thought” (277).\(^{151}\) Both perspectives on the experience of the Middle Passage agree that whether these differences were accentuated or not, shipmates were able to form bonds among themselves, which not only helped them cope with the horrors of slavery but also created mutual understanding – thereby laying the foundations of an African American identity.

According to Alex Borucki:

> [T]he slave vessel was a “non community” in African terms, a group of strangers separated from their kin and references who shared certain affinities with some others on board but were nevertheless isolated as a group. At the same time, the slave ship was a new community emerging from the hardships of New World slavery, where Africans created shipmate bonds that persisted as social networks (62).

The scholarship on this form of networking is extensive and cannot be discussed here.

Nevertheless, the dynamics of the slave ship sheds light on the way in which an African American culture came into being and on how it relates to the creation of an Italian Canadian

---

\(^{151}\) This view is shared by other scholars. About this, see also Ntloedibe’s (401-412) who advocates for the commonality and intelligibility demonstrated by shipmates rather than for clear-cut differences among the Africans transported to America.
identity, especially if we think that the crucible of the Italian Canadian identity formation also
derives its origins in the belly of transatlantic ships. Recollection of the experience of the ship in
both cultures allows for a mutual focus on the ethnic identities of the two groups. They can be
said to touch each other, especially because they are entangled in the set of cultural relationships
constructed by the literary dispositif.

Entangled in the literary dispositif, Rediker’s text represents a link between the Italian
Canadians and the African America culture. More specifically, Rediker’s account of the story of
a slave on the ship Loyal George, which crossed the Atlantic to Barbados in 1727, suggests a
link between the two communities. Because the slave went on a hunger strike, the captain of the
ship, a certain Timothy Tuker, first flogged the dissenter, then shot him three times. Evidently,
the slave refused to die (Rediker 264). Because of this murder, the other captives rebelled, but
when the crew regained control of the ship, the slaves committed suicide by jumping overboard.
“The refusal to eat had led to a kind of martyrdom, to an insurrection, and, once that failed, to
mass suicide,” Rediker comments (264). Such events were not uncommon on slave ships, and
whether or not the slaves were able to communicate among themselves, their situation made
these men and women brothers and sisters in their will not to submit to the humiliations of
captivity.

The Atlantic crossing and the predicament of the Italians in Canada created a sense of
comradeship that Gianna Patriarca in the poem “College Street, Toronto” expresses as follows:

they cooked their pasta
by the light of a forty watt bulb
drank bad red wine
as they argued the politics of
the country they left behind
avoiding always the new politics (21).
Once they landed in Canada, remaining faithful to their food culture, Italian immigrants continued cooking pasta. The men Patriarca describes as arguing “the politics of the country they left behind” betray a sense of comradeship common to the Italian and the African cultures. The various African peoples first became aware of being Africans while on the slave ship where the image and the recollection of their continent represented a shared bond. Later on in the poem, when recalling her individual difficulty to adapt to mainstream Canada, Patriarca writes, “we learned the language quickly/to everyone’s surprise” (23). It is not clear whether they learned English in order to be able to communicate with other Italians or with Anglophone Canadians, but her account is not that far from the experiences of Africans on the slave ship. As Rediker notes:

> Africans also communicate with one another by learning English on board of the ship, most of them by speaking with sailors. This involved normal conversation as well as the technical language of seafaring work. The latter would have been essential for the boys who labored alongside the seamen. But learning English could be a matter of urgency for most anyone” (278).

The sense of surprise that Patriarca emphasizes in her verse, together with a description of how quickly the process of learning a new language took place, indicates that knowing English was absolutely necessary to the Italians (the use of the plural pronoun “we” is holistic and refers to both her immediate family and the Italian community at large). In the methodological context of ethnic contiguity and shared history, the acquisition of the English language represents a cultural value for both the Italian Canadians and the African Americans. Both communities used it for the same reason: survival.

Another example illustrating the ways in which the slave ship experience intersects the history of the Italian Canadians can be found in the book *Canadese: a Portrait of the Italian Canadians* by the Canadian journalist Kenneth Bagnell. Among the others, Bagnell recalls one
episode resembling quite closely Rediker’s exposé. It involves the Italian laborers of Fort Williams. The occurrence can be summarized as follows: in April 1912, laborers working at the coal docks of Port Artur, Ontario, demanded a better pay. On July 29, they decided to strike, leading a policeman to arrest an Italian worker, Tony Shumacke; but the other workers were able to stop the officer. When other policemen tried to arrest Shumacke again, another Italian man, Domenic Deprenzo sided with his compatriot and beat up one of the officers. Then Deprenzo was shot three times, but was still alive. Though Domenic was heavily wounded, his brother Nicholas saw “another officer rush to [Domenic] and hold him erect while [a colleague] took aim and fired” (Bagnell 36). All told, Domenic got shot six times, Nicholas three. Both brothers survived the attack. During the trial, the testimony of the union’s president Mike Pento shed light on the racial climate that Italians were forced to endure. Pento recalled saying to the officer who tried to arrest Shumacke that the striker did not do anything to justify his confinement. The officer responded that it did not make any difference (Bagnell 39). As one might guess, the story ends with the Deprenzos sentenced to ten years in prison. Both of them, Bagnell says, served the full sentence (41).

Here the multiple shooting endured by the Deprenzos connects quite closely to the incident on the slave ship recounted by Rediker. Furthermore, the answer that the officer gave to Pento indicates that, in those days, Italians were considered less than human – as disposable as African slaves. In the 1936 edition of the Encyclopedia of Canada, the entry “Italian Immigration” reads as follows:

Ignorance of English drives the Italians to segregation in the large cities, where they establish colonies which results in retention of the language, customs and traditions of Italy. Segregation produces deplorable overcrowding and retards the Canadianization of the family. The Northern Italian is taller and often of lighter complexion, more prosperous and more intelligent than the southerner; he can usually read and write and is often skilled in some trade. The southerner is short
of stature, very dark in complexion, can seldom read or write and usually lands almost destitute. Sixty per cent of the Italian immigrants are illiterate… So far they have taken little interest in political affairs, although many have become naturalized (cited by Salvatore 841).

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Italian laborers found work in Canada, but often had to depend upon a *prominente* (an Italian business man) to survive. When a job was finished, many of them found themselves on the street. Most of these immigrants “ended up getting 30 cents a day from the Italian Aid Society of Montreal, then as their numbers increased, 15 cents, and finally, as the society began running out of funds, a single loaf of bread” (Bagnell 11).

To the Italian laborers, Canada must have appeared as cruel as the United States seemed to black Americans. In fact, African Americans found it hard to earn a wage even in those states where they supposed to be free. Because of their ethnicity, Italian Canadians experienced discrimination in the job market and were forced to take the humblest jobs. In *Motion: the African-American Migration Experience*, Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf write that in 1833 Boston no black workers were given access to skilled jobs, and even though places like New York City declared that blacks could have their own licenses, they found almost impossible to open small businesses. Pressured by white workers, the city of New York tended to exclude black laborers from being hack drivers and pushcart operators, as these jobs required a special permit (83). On their part, Italian laborers in Canada were often underpaid: most of the men would work for $1.50 a day (Bagnell 10). They started working on the docks and harbors as early as 1895, Bruno Ramirez, writes (121). Furthermore, some of the jobs available to Italians were seasonal, lasting either a few weeks or an entire season. According to one source used by Ramirez, “You had to stay there and just wait; and if they didn’t take you, you had to come back the next day” (122). The lack of skilled jobs and the condition in which Italians and blacks were
forced to work in North America indicate that the two communities share between each other a
global history of social abjection.

Lingering a little longer on the idea of the shipmate bonding as well as the memory of
the Atlantic crossing, it is possible to see how these thematic threads resourcefully belong to the
cultural fabric of both ethnic groups. In “College Street, Toronto,” Patriarca imagines the
Atlantic passage of the Italians as follows:

then the exodus
of wives and children
trunks and wine glasses
hand stitched linen in hope chests
floating across the Atlantic
slowly
to Halifax
to Union station
to College Street (22).

Here the image of “exodus” hints at the masses of Italians who crossed the ocean and arrived in
North America between the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth
century. According to official data on the Italian diaspora, ten million Italians left their country.
It is therefore normal that these emigrants stored memories of the transatlantic passage. Their
mass migration flows alongside of the millions of slaves stolen from Africa and transported
spoonwise in the dark holds of slavers. But there is more to be said about the “exodus” as a
symbol of cultural intersection between the two communities: it also stands for the experience of
persecution informing the African American culture.

For the Italian Canadians, the significance of the ship is twofold: first, it represents the
means by which they crossed the Atlantic; second, it belongs to the collective memory of
Giovanni Caboto (also known in English as John Cabot), who, especially after the half of the
nineteenth century, became an emblematic figure of the long history of the Italian settlement in
Canada and a way for Italian immigrants in North America to anchor their cultural identity. An explorer and entrepreneur from Venice, on March 5, 1496, Caboto received permission to explore the New World from King Henry VII, who provided him with five ships. In June 1497, together with his three sons Lewis, Sebastian, and Sancio, he landed on the east coast of Canada. In honor of this day, commemorative plaques and monuments of Caboto can be found all over Eastern Canada. Canada celebrates Cabot’s voyages as the primal scene of English discovery in North America, but as Caterina Ricciardi notes, only towards the middle of the nineteenth century did Caboto assume his place, thereby offering a direct association with England “per riconfermare il ‘lealismo’ anglosassone di fine Settecento” (“to reconfirm the anglosaxon royalty emerged at the end of the eighteenth century”) (561).

For the Italians in Canada, the memory of Caboto offers the opportunity to claim membership in the larger Canadian community. Anne-Marie Fortier synthesizes this link when she writes that, by appropriating the image of Caboto, Italians were able to claim their indigenousness (104). Traditional Italian narratives of Caboto are mainly concerned with his Italian lineage more than with his affiliation to England. In 1997, in honor of the 500th anniversary of Caboto’s voyages, the Italian parish Madonna della Difesa in Montreal circulated a booklet in which the explorer was remembered as: “[...] the first true discover of Canada. For these reasons, we of Italian origin proudly celebrate the quincentenary of the arrival on Canadian land of the first great navigator Giovanni Caboto and we do not feel strangers in this big and beautiful country: Canada” (Fortier 105).

---

152 This landing has been for long time an historical conundrum. In his 1867 book The Voyages of the Cabots: Latest Phases of the Controversy, Samuel Edward Dawson writes that in 1831 Richard Biddle started raising questions about Caboto’s exact landing location (140). The two locations mentioned in the controversy are Newfoundland and Labrador and Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia.
After almost two centuries living in Canada, some Italians still claim their membership in the country through the image of a navigator. The history of the Italian presence in Canada started in the fifteenth century with Caboto, but as Filippo Salvatore suggests, others after him explored Canada. Giovanni Verazzano, for instance, arrived there in 1524. Later, in the seventeenth century, Italian soldiers at the service of France were the first among their compatriots to settle in Canada (13). According to David Collenette, the first Italians settling in Montreal in 1780 were mostly hoteliers and food traders. Even though Italians have been living in Canada for centuries, the brief commentary above indicates that their community still feels estranged. We have the sense that to claim their Canadian citizenship, they appeal to their ‘indigenousness’ by Caboto’s discovery of North America but using this image to do so has a false rhetorical ring to it. There is a cultural as well as a political reason for this. In his essay “The Altar of Assimilation,” Antonio D’Alfonso reminds us that half of the Canadian population does not have French or English descent. As he notes:

Facing such a sudden growth of ‘foreign’ presence, Western as well as Eastern provincial politicians found it urgent to qualify those people of French and British origin as ‘founding peoples.’ To put it quite differently, politicians soon realized that Canadian history is changing so rapidly they had to concede defeat in their various attempts at concentrating the economic powers of the entire country in one center alone. It took about one hundred years before they were able to come up with an acceptable solution to the problem (quoted from In Italics 215-216).

Nevertheless, the Italians wanted to be part of this center. The critic Salvatore suggests that this phenomenon of “a permanent and distinctive Italian entity did not begin to coalesce until the second half of the nineteenth century with the first in a series of massive migratory waves” (15).

This form of ethnic self-consciousness coincided with the need of Italian Canadians to establish a place for themselves in the Canadian mosaic, especially as they found themselves having to compete with other ethnic and immigrant groups. Eventually, Canada decided to
assume multiculturalism as one of its founding civic principles. In an article from 1941 the anthropologist David Rodnick writes, we acknowledge that “[w]here intense competition exists between groups, both on economic and on status level, attempts will be made by the groups concerned to prove to themselves that their desires for higher status are due to their own cultural superiorities” (160). Rodnick’s observation helps to explain why Italian Canadians began to rediscover and celebrate the cultural heritage of their motherland. In one Italian’s own word:

There’s no nationality that’s produced more great people than the Italians. Look at Michael Angelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Dante and the others. The Italians have contributed more to civilization than any other people. The greatest painters, sculptors, writers and composers have been Italians. It’s about time that the others respect the Italians for being more important than any other people. Yessir, the smartest people in the world have been Italians (Rodnick 159).

The short biography of Cabot in the booklet mentioned by Fortier demonstrates that the Italian community in Canada learned to make positive use of a collective historical image in order to assert themselves culturally. Robert Harney, the first Canadian historian who took pains to study the experience of the Italian Canadians in North America, calls this phenomenon scopritorismo, that is, “a hunt for the Italianità of warriors, priests and explorers of Italian descent serving New France” (41). Harney also sustains that North Italian Americans suffer from something he calls atimia, namely, an ethnic self-disesteem (42). Thus, they manipulate history in such a way as to magnify their cultural achievements in their hosting countries. It is a need to attain “psycho-effective equilibrium,” Harney explains (40). Competing with other peoples and occupying the bottom of the social hierarchy in Canada, most Italians were considered cafoni, that is, rough and ignorant, a vision very disturbing to the Italian intelligentsia, Harvey explains. Thus stigmatized, the Italian Canadians sought to raise themselves by pointing to their prominent past (44).
Both Italian Canadians and African Americans have used powerful images of belonging to assert their cultural importance in North America. Throughout his lifetime, Langston Hughes strove to create in his writing a cultural space where African Americans of his generation could feel proud. In several of his story books for children – *Famous American Negro* (1954), *Famous Negro Music Makers* (1955), and *Famous Negro Heroes of America* (1958) – Hughes recounts the lives of the principal figures of African American culture. In the introduction to *The Collected works of Langston Hughes: Works for Children and Young Adults: Biographies*, which now includes the three texts, Steven C. Tracy says that, especially in the *Famous American Negroes*, “Hughes’s tactics was to refocus the lenses of history and culture on significant African American contributors to American and World history” (2). In tune with the attempt of the Italians to be recognized in Canadian society, Hughes, “[b]y describing the achievements of personages known in the African American community, […] was asserting that they deserved to be recognized by a broader public” (Stacy 2).

In his introduction to *Famous American Negro*, Hughes approaches the history of black Americans in much the same way in which Italian Canadians spoke about earlier Italian settlements in Canada. Hughes writes:

The history of the American Negro, contrary to common belief, did not begin with slavery. There were many negroes in America who were never slaves. Some of them came to the Western World as explorers. One of the pilots with Christopher Columbus, Pedro Alonso Niño, was, so some historians believe, a colored man […]. And, four hundred years ago, there was an African, Estavanico, connected with the earliest written history of the American Southwest […]. Estavanico discovered and opened up to European settlers what is now the rich area of Arizona. His discovery occurred eight years before the first slave ship arrived at Jamestown and the custom of selling human beings was established on North America (19).

Hughes’s attempt to make African Americans’ lineage known to a large audience resonates quite clearly with the way in which Italians constructed their identity in North America. Italians and
African Americans appealed to renaissance men, creating ethnic myths out of them. Black Americans have also been exploiting the theme of persecution by identifying themselves with the biblical image of the Israelites driven away from Canaan.

In his *Go Down, Moses: Celebrating the African-American Spiritual*, Richard Newman writes:

The biblical narrative that resonated most strongly with the slave’s bitter experiences, while at the same time promising hope for deliverance, was the story of the Israelites’ bondage in Egypt. Moses is one of the most often mentioned persons in the spirituals. African Americans also identified with Noah, Daniel, Jonah, and others of God’s faithful people who were rescued by a just God from a sinful world of unfaithfulness and oppression (23).

Robert Philipson notes that the Exodus story became a central motif of African American aspirations (18). Black Americans used the metaphor of the promised land in song and story “to envision an America without racism and segregation” (Philipson 19) – an image, that also plays an important role in Giuseppe Ungaretti’s poetics. Such images point to the infinite connections among cultures that can be found through the elaboration of a literary dispositif.

The famous spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” usually attributed to Nat Turner – leader of one of the 250 North American slave revolts occurred in 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia (Newman 23) – clearly illustrates the way in which black Americans saw themselves in the nineteenth century. In this spiritual the oppressed Israelites stand in for the African American people. The song also expresses a strong sense of resilience, which is one of the primary characteristics of African American culture. Furthermore, it shows “that freedom for slaves was a reality in this world, and not merely an otherworldly aspiration” (Newman 23). At a certain point, the lyrics read as follows:

O let us all from bondage flee,
Let my people go;
And let us all in Christ be free,
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses…

We need not always weep and moan,
Let my people go;
And wear these slavery chains forlorn,
Let my people go.
Go down, Moses… (Newman 70)

Because of this strong sense of freedom, Newman says, slaveholders prohibited workers to sing this spiritual on their property (23). In the spiritual, the image of Moses incarnates the strength of the people whom God will help to liberate. Turner, or whoever wrote the verse, describes the chosen man as “bold,” “good,” “with a lighted candle in [his] breast.” Eventually, he will “walk into the golden street” (Newman 69-71).

This representation of Moses resonates with the description of Cabot in Filippo Salvatore’s “Three Poems for Giovanni Caboto.” While the African American spiritual addressing Moses directly, Salvatore speaks informally to the navigator. In the first stanza of the poem he writes:

Giovanni, I didn’t need courage,
like you, I didn’t set sail
towards the unknown on an unsafe boat,
I didn’t have to fight the might
of the waves, I didn’t suffer hunger,
I didn’t look into death’s eyes (13).153

Recognizing how different his experience is from that of Caboto, Salvatore commends the man for his courage, but at the same time, by drawing our attention to Giovanni’s difficult voyage, he pictures him as a heroic figure, like Moses in the spiritual. In the second stanza of the second poems, we have the sense that others followed his example:

How many Italians took the boat
with you? Today we are many, so many,
and most of us are young,

young and ambitious, like you,
young and forced to emigrate, like you,
to start a new life abroad, like you (14).

The rhetorical question indicates that these Italians considered Giovanni one of them: as they trusted him, they tried to track his journey, and consequently, shaped their lives according to the example he left behind. Insisting on repeating the phrase “like you,” Salvatore suggests that Giovanni is not just a special man to the Italians, but if these latter are “like him,” they too have a chance to be free – most probably from poverty and lack of self-respect. Again, this interpretation establishes a cultural tangent between the certainty of being free (“I do believe without doubt/ Let my people go” (Newman 71), in the last stanza of “Go Down, Moses” and the Italian Canadians’ liberation from their sense of oppression. A sense of oppression Salvatore renders in the following lines:

[…] but the Eldorado
I was searching I didn’t discover.
I discovered instead
scornful glances, a hostile
environment, an overwhelming
emptiness in my soul,
I discovered what it means
to be an emigrant (13).

This sense of coercion is also explored by Mary Melfi in the poem “Censor: ‘Hurry, Madame’,” included in the book Roman Candles, where she writes, “I was made in Italy/ by slaves and slave owners./ I am made up in Canada by choice,” associating her Italian birth with the practice of slavery (63).

Whereas a sentiment of oppression always afflicted the Italian community in Canada, the African Americans suffered under the yoke of racial and social subjugation. It is this condition that led to spirituals like “Go Down, Moses.” Even though Egypt remains an essential trope in African American imagery, Paul Gilroy, in The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double
Consciousness, argues that “Blacks today appear to identify far more readily with the glamorous pharaohs than with the abject plight of those held in bondage” (207). Gilroy here refers to the attitude that the African diaspora seems to assume today. Clare Corbould details how African Americans’ spirit and pride was uplifted in 1922 by an anonymous contribution to the Harlem weekly newspaper claiming that the English archeologist Howard Carter, who had discovered an Egyptian tomb, did not fully disclose the pharaoh’s race, which according to this source, was black. “Discoveries such as Carter’s,” Corbould notes, “were a boon to black Americans, who took at face value, as it were, depictions of ancient Egyptians as dark-skinned and haired and claimed them as ancestors” (57).

Corbould reflects upon the difference between the significance that motherland assumes in the Jewish and the African American experience. The return to Israel is crucial to the cultural representations of the Jewish diaspora, but for the African Americans, homeland/ promised land (see Philipson) remains mainly the United States. Even though, in the ‘20s, some black Americans might have been captivated by the rhetoric of the Jamaican Marcus Garvey, founder of the Back-to-Africa Movement, generally, black activists, opposed to the idea of recolonizing Africa. They felt that America was their home even though it was not their homeland. At the same time, like Garvey, some black Americans identified with the children of Africa (Corbould 46). In the literary dispositif, the appropriation of history by African Americans intersects with the way in which Italians used history to affirm themselves in North America. Their shared use of history consists in a continuous striving for legitimacy and visibility in their own country, but in today’s North America, both groups are also inclined to evaluate their ethnicity critically. The way in which African Americans and Italian Canadians perform their ethnicity is often under scrutiny by their respective communities.
As for the Italians in Canada, a case in point is offered by Corrado Paina’s collection of poems *Cinematic Taxi*. The author here often scornfully depicts the predicament of confinement and solitude in which the Italians live in contemporary Canada. Having ‘made it’ in Canada, most Italians have climbed the social ladder and moved on from manual labors. These people can even afford to escape the extreme cold Canadian winters by vacationing in Florida. The fourth stanza of “Italian Saturday” depicts the Italians in the act of undoing their suitcases. Paina writes:

it’s warm and the linen clothes are lying  
on the bed still fragrant  
double-breasted suits and flowered shirts from  
Florida (26).

By explaining that “it’s warm” (in Woodbridge, Ontario), the author informs us that for the personae in the poem winter is finally over. They have returned from Florida (thus, the expression “flowered shirts” – typical Floridian style and usually available in stores like Bealls), to find their bed “still fragrant.” “[S]till fragrant” also indicates that their houses are entirely new, which immediately depicts the solitude as well as the financial well-being of this community.

Elaborating further on the financial comfort of the Italians, Paina defines Woodbridge the “Petawawa of the rich” (26). Then, reminding the reader of the (original) food culture of his countrymen, he writes:

the mothers and the nonnas are preparing cannelloni  
the wine stirs in the cellars

---

154 The title of the verse echoes the famous poem by Giacomo Leopardi “Il sabato del villaggio” (“Village Saturday”). Written in 1829, the work suggests that handworkers look forward to rejoicing on Sundays, yet, this day ends quickly, almost abruptly, and people come back to their daily routine. Overall, the poem expresses a sense of an unavoidable impasse. See the 1981 Rizzoli edition of *Canti* by Giacomo Leopardi edited by Emilio Peruzzi. In Paina’s poem, the Italians too fell victim of a routine: after their vacation in Florida, they return to the solitude of Woodbridge.

155 As a reminder, during WWII, in Petawawa, Ontario, Italians were interned in concentration camps as “enemy aliens.”
waiting for relatives friends
how nice it is to walk along the empty streets of
Woodbridge (26).

These Italians are lonely in their houses. They have no friends and await the visit of their relatives, maybe just to be able to communicate with someone. The relatives represent both their family but also friends; the only ones they have. The poem closes with a disconcerting image of old men waiting for someone to put out benches so that they can rest (“one day they will put benches/ for old men/ confined in their maximum security bekiardas”) (26).156 The elders do not have benches either because Woodbridge is still in the process of being developed or just, and more disturbingly, because they are forgotten by the rest of the community. As the elders embody the social fabric of the Italian identity, forgetting them, signifies that the generation of assimilated Italians is amnesic, it does not remember its origin.

In today’s United States, some members of the African American community have also become very critical of the way in which the black community embraces its ethnicity. Highly panned for his view on the social performance of black Americans in the United States, after the Treyvon Martin murder case, CNN anchor Don Lemon has publicly blamed the behavior of a segment of the African American community. In a commentary aired on CNN on July 27, 2013, the journalist says that black people should change five forms of behavior to avoid discrimination and move up the social ladder: 1) just because a woman can have a baby, it does not mean that she should (a critique of a lack of planned parenthood); 2) African Americans should complete their schooling in order to break the cycle of poverty in the black community; 3) African Americans should avoid running down the area in which they live; 4) African Americans should not use the n-word, as it is always demeaning and portrays the slave mentality of the

156 “Bekiardas” here stands for “backyards.” It is a typical example of what we call *italianese*, a language spoken by Italians in North America, infused with an accented pronunciation of English terms.
master; 5) African Americans should not use sagging pants, as they compromise specifically the image of black youngsters.\textsuperscript{157}

Lemon’s disapproval of the social performances in the black community is in part a response to what he believes to be the tradition of survival among black Americans. In a short film documentary in which he talks about his origins and his experience of being African American, Lemon recalls, of course, his growing up in Port Allen (West Baton Rouge) where he lived on Court Street.\textsuperscript{158} Back then, Court Street whites lived on one side of the street and blacks on the other. In the film, Lemon retraces his African roots and ends up traveling with his mother to Ghana to visit a slave castle. Walking around the fortress, he realizes that he descends from a community of survivors. He trusts that he is a fighter too.\textsuperscript{159}

Lemon’s criticism might also derive from the fact that the black community in the United States suffers a sort of memory loss by which it no longer remembers being part of a group of survivors. Furthermore, Lemon’s first point above seems to echo Patricia Hill Collins’s analysis focusing, among the others, on the figure of what she calls ‘Bad Black Mother’ (150). Here, the scholar refers to babies born out of wedlock (a predicament that Lemon considers demeaning) but also to bad behavior. In the 1980s, when crack cocaine appeared on the market, it was primary sold in black neighborhoods, and women were the chief consumers (Collins 151). In the late 1980s, many newborn babies tested positive; “[a]ddicted pregnant women became demonized as ‘crack mothers’ whose selfishness and criminality punished their children in the

\textsuperscript{157} The commentary if available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4z8EA_4YNvw.
\textsuperscript{158} The film is available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7ihpc9rMps.
\textsuperscript{159} These types of fortresses were located along the West Coast of Africa to facilitate the Middle Passage. Slave coming from the inland part of Africa stayed in these castles for many days, even months, before being transported to the Americas and the Caribbean.
Furthermore, regarding the representations of black American women in popular culture, Collins says that it is difficult to establish with certainty whether, for example, they are portrayed as resisting the status quo (since hypersexualized portrayals of them may represent a reappropriation of their sexuality, and thus, their independence) or if these images simply reinforce black stereotypes.

In the last year or so, especially on the web, some African Americans are showing to be oblivious to their black pride. These people keep on seeking the handshake of Donald Trump, even though they already know the real estate tycoon is continuously refusing to have any contact with the black community. Such episodes occur daily under the current administration. One of the incidents happened during a religious function where Trump did not even attempt to reach out for the hand of a black clergy; another happened on October 7, 2017, when Trump refused the handshake of a black nurse. The racism of the current administration is well known, and the list of black people whose handshake Trump refused and still refuses is stretching. Although given Trump’s reputation his conduct is not surprising, what is most astonishing is rather how some black Americans persevere in trying to establish a relationship with him and support him. On March 20, 2016, in a Trump rally, one of these black followers attacked a couple of protesters wearing a KKK hood and performing a Nazi salute.

Even though Italian Canadians and African Americans face different dilemmas in their own country, the criticism raised in their respective communities tells us a lot about the history

---

160 The figure of non-conforming mothers is a recurring image in African American literature. It was especially exploited by the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Often, in these stories, the main female characters either decided to kill their infants or refused to have children. Agent of this latter solution is the 1920 play Rachel by Angelina Weld Grimké. In the end, Rachel, the main protagonist of the drama, even though having a strong motherly instinct, decides not to have children of her own to save them from racial discrimination.

161 See the YouTube video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=23bCV5AZMGY (the clergyman) and at www.youtube.com/watch?v=QF4igbDWvuk (the black nurse).

162 The video is available here: www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/03/20/black_trump_supporter_attacks_left-wing_protester_in__kkk_outfit.html.
that connects them. It is generally told through tales of assimilation and through the illusion of social and economic improvement. Authors like Paina have spoken against this vision, which was very popular in Langston Hughes’s day. Hughes has openly criticized the conduct of some colleagues (see his 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”). Furthermore, in his poems, he often provided an idealized image of the African American community. Thus, in “My People,” he praises the beauty of black individuals. He writes:

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people,

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people (36).

In all its simplicity, the verse describes blacks as beautiful and interesting as the most attractive spatial elements (the night, the stars, and the sun). However, in another of his poems, “Migration,” he points the reader to the cultural and social schisms existing in the black American community. The first stanza focuses on the cultural shock experienced by a black child from the South after immigrating to the North, where he will end up competing with other black and white kids. In the second stanza, Hughes writes that “at first [white children] are nice to him/ But finally they taunt him/ And call him ‘nigger’” (36). While we may not be surprised that white children discriminate against their black playmates, especially if they are immigrants, the third stanza reveals a negative dynamic of the African American community. As Hughes puts it: “The colored children/ Hate him too,/ After awhile (36). Maybe they “hate him” because he is different from other black kids born and raised in the North. Although Hughes does not really explain why other black children fail to accept African American migrants from the South, his poem describes an instance of intraracial rejection and a black community that is culturally and
socially divided. All this resonates with the cultural division experienced by the Italians in the

Bel Paese and abroad.

In *Canadese: a Portrait of The Italian Canadians*, Kenneth Bagnell notes that many
wealthy Italians who were well established in Canada began to encourage people from Italy to
immigrate to Canada, holding out the prospect of a life-changing job. One of these tycoons was a
certain Antonio Cardasso who used to place ads of his employment agency in Italian newspapers
like *La Patria Italiana (The Italian Homeland)*. In one of these notices, he stated the following:

If you want to work on railways, canals, waterworks and other kinds of work of
long duration and guaranteed – payment sure – at the price of $1.25 and $2.00.
If you want to be respected and protected either on the work or in the case of
accident or other annoyance, which may be easily met. Apply personally, or
address letters or telegrams to

Antonio Cardasso
441 St. James St.
Montreal

Sole Agent, who may find with every security and guaranteed employment for
labourers and foremen who know how to do their duty. He is fully trusted by all
the greatest companies and contractors, who continually request his services
(quoted in Bagnell 5).

To many Italians farmers in the South, this type of advertisement must have sounded like a
dream, and so many of them left for Canada. Bagnell describes their arrival in these terms:

They would arrive, in the cold of January and February and March, imprisoned in
their own language, with a pittance of money and no skills, only the flimsy piece
of newsprint carrying the name and address of Antonio Cardasco. They would go
in groups in his office on St. James Street, and hand over everything they had –
usually three or four dollars – in return for the work he promised he would find
for them: good work with good pay. Far too often, there was no work. And so the
men huddled six and seven to a room in cold flats or hostels from which they
would emerge in the morning cold to wander the streets, fearful, hurt, and with
rising anger. When they ate, they ate remnants of food provided by a charity set
up for Italian immigrants (5).

Absurd as it may sound, this incident happened too often in the life of those Italians who sought
a better life in Canada. Here not only were they discriminated by their affluent countrymen but

272
were also fooled by the image of a lifestyle beyond their reach both in Italy and North America. People like Cordasco had the barbaric courage to steal from his already-indigent compatriots.

In 1904 Judge Winchester from Toronto started investigating Cardasco’s conduct. One day the judge interrogated Giuseppi Agostino, one of Cardasco’s victims. In his statement, Agostino narrates when he and his fifteen-year-old son applied to Cordasco for work he had to pay him two dollars. He ended up working only two days and he spent all his money waiting. Also, he had to pay a fee to Cardasco for the time he worked (Bagnell 18). A year later, Judge Winchester recommended “that the federal government put a stop to the activities of brokers such as Cordasco by permitting only federal officials to speak in the name of the country in encouraging potential immigrants” (Bagnell 21). Following this recommendation, the government passed The Alien Labour Bill to regulate the activity of private entrepreneurs. The Bill was passed in the House of Commons and appeared in the statute books the following year. From then on, “[a]nyone making and circulating a false representation to induce immigration to Canada would be liable to a fine up to one thousand dollars for each occurrence” (Bagnell 21).

Horrible stories like these involving people as rootless as Cordasco remind us that, in order to succeed, some immigrants were willing to accept the vilest turns. On the other hand, Cordasco’s scheme is not unlike the situation in which some African Americans find themselves today. Instead of resisting the absurd politics of the White House, some even embrace them. The damage to their community must feel like a betrayal analogous to that of Cordasco’s.

Between the African Americans and the Italian Canadians there exists a constant cultural and ethnic tension that, instead of dividing them through difference, makes them intelligible to each other. In his works, François Jullien talks about the concept of écart, which may refer to difference or to space and interval. As he puts it in his Il n'y a pas d'identité culturelle (There is
The concept of the écart is an inspiring critical tool that can help us to understand the way in which the African Americans and the Italian Canadians communicate with each other regardless of their distinctive ethnic traits. But for this to occur, critical analysis must move beyond distinctions by embracing the distance between the two terms being compared. The ideal relational distance between cultures allows us to see how close the experience of different groups can be. Geographically speaking, this distance can be great. Longitudinal distance allows the two communities to face each other – as one from Canada must look (down) South to see American people, while this latter have to look North (up) to interact with Canadians. On the other hand, horizontal distance represents their Atlantic passage and connects them with their respective place of origin (Italy and Africa), but not only that. The Atlantic crossing of both Africans and Italians arguably represents one of the most fertile (to use one of Jullien’s terms) moments of the écart, one always keeping the two communities in tension, facing one another, because their respective Atlantic passages will be impressed in their collective memories forever.
The écart between the two communities more than separating them permits their continuous and fruitful confrontation. The écart described by Jullien helps find intersections and junctures between the two communities because distance allows us to stretch the history of the African Americans and the Italian Canadians on an ideal map where it is possible to join several lines of communication between the two groups. This chapter has sought to draw some of these lines with the hope that future scholars will identify others.
CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis formulated in this research was that Giuseppe Ungaretti, Langston Hughes, and Antonio D’Alfonso carried within their work the cultural anchorages (points of intersections) to form a dialogue among their production and traditions. The hypothesis was tested by elaborating the literary dispositif, a reading model explicitly designed to identity remote cultural and literary connections. On account of the literary dispositif, the research herein conducted has revealed that, when imagined together in one analytical site, the three authors form a hybrid pool of common experiences that one can call Italian-African-American.

This study comprises five segments. The first chapter offers a critique of traditional comparative methodological strategies and explains the import of the literary dispositif for the practitioner of comparative literature. The second, third, and fourth chapters construct the literary dispositif by discussing the relevance of concepts such as diaspora, blues, and cosmopolitanism in the work of the three authors studied. The final chapter takes on a broader perspective by studying the Italian, the African American, and the Italian Canadian culture in terms of their shared historical experiences. By submitting the works of Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso to three different lines of inquiry, the literary dispositif connects the Italian, the African American, and the Italian Canadian traditions by way of several defining literary junctures.

The dialogue established among the three authors demonstrates that writers work in a space of potentially infinite communication. The theory of the literary dispositif helps us to understand cultures and peoples in wide-ranging intercultural contexts, and as it is developed here, offers us a means to appreciate variances. The complex set of relations between Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso confirms that connecting diverse literary traditions is a task demanding more than a mere discussion of difference. Such relations challenge the practitioner of
comparative literature to construct new methodologies and elaborate new reading models to understand cultural negotiation in the twenty-first century. The literary dispositif elaborated here represents a new, more expansive hermeneutical model of reading, allowing startling comparative exercises. Because the literary dispositif positions and repositions itself in a such a way as to require a general, unbound, and continuous concurrency of its elements, the life and work of Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso are interpreted as if they were simultaneous. Given the difficulty of representing a multidimensional reading model like the literary dispositif on the one-dimensional surface of the written page, such a decision appeared opportune. That being said, this research’s construct should rather be imagined as taking place in a tridimensional space.

In the interconnected world in which we live today, we are haphazardly part of an extended community (or world) where nationality and ethnicity are insufficient for understanding cultural identities. Social experience is much more complex and richer. Thus, as we have seen, the echoes of different cultural perspectives in Ungaretti’s own poetry puts him in an organic and fluid conversation with other writers. But it is through the literary dispositif that his literary and cultural values are brought to light and intertwined with the values embraced by Hughes and D’Alfonso. Now that these writers are no longer strangers to one other, the culture values of one of them has become available and translatable into the other culture. While D’Alfonso is explicitly a son of the Italian diaspora, the diasporic condition of Ungaretti is less evident. But by putting his work in a tensile relation – face-to-face, François Jullien would say – with one or more diasporic writers, his own existential configuration becomes more pronounced. By the same token, while the blues are expected from a writer like Hughes, a blues spirit – the exercise of an emotional force generating resilience to unanticipate personal and collective
injustices, disappointment, and suffering – may seem less manifest in Italian and Quebecois literatures, unless a blues poet like Hughes can be brought into dialogue with these traditions. Again, while to Ungaretti the figure of the cosmopolite is as natural as ethnicity is to D’Alfonso and Hughes, cosmopolitanism as a world view becomes a shared ground when the three authors are introduced to each other through the literary dispositif.

Converting the hidden dialogue among Ungaretti, Hughes, and D’Alfonso into explicit lines of communication allows us to appreciate literary production of one as a surprising complement to the writing of the other two. By no means does this imply that they are indistinguishable from one another. On the other hand, this dissertation has sought to rechannel their cultural, stylistic, and individual characteristics to bring forth a discourse of connectivity and entanglement. The lines of inquiry chosen here have also led this study to draw a more radical reading of the work of the three authors. Thus, the analysis of Ungaretti’s production shows that to define it as exclusively “Italian” proves parochial. His poetry offers more than a simply patriotic sentimentality or an emotional attachment to the ancestral place. While remaining a constant in his life and poetics, the Italian tradition is only one of the instances contributing to his cosmopolitan point of view. But the task of providing such insight requires a critical dimension in tune with today’s interconnected world.

As for Hughes, although his major concern was to address racial problems in the U.S., he too sought to understand what was happening to peoples of the African diaspora outside his nation. Thanks to his travels abroad, Hughes not only understood other ways of living, but was also able to cultivate a world view of contemporary politics extending well beyond issues of race. To read Hughes past the theme of ethnicity is necessary in order to fathom the transnational potential embedded in his work. For his part, whether expressed through prose or poetry,
D’Alfonso’s literary agenda transcends the limits of Italian Canadian literary expectations: he asks how one might survive in other countries and continents other than his own. The literary endeavors of these three authors stay true to the representation of the world as an inhabitable community. Woven into the fabric of all cultures there exists a virtual network of connections that can be readily brought to light, if only we as readers and participants will help it to happen.
REFERENCES


Amari, Michele. *Storia dei musulmani in sicilia*. Felice le Monnier, 1854.


Belfiglio, Valentino J. “Italians and the American Civil War.” *Italian Americana,* vol. 4, no.2, pp. 163-175.


“Canadian Multiculturalism Act.” *Justice Laws Website*. PDF.


Cricelli, Francesca. “‘Conversando Ungaretti gesticolava nell’aria come se stesse lavorando l’argilla’: il poeta, 79 anni, in viaggio con la donna amata (che di anni ne aveva 27), conosciuta l’anno prima nella capitale.” *P.E.N. Club Italia Onlus*, vol. 7, no.24, pp. 2-3.


---------. Dépaysé.

---------. “Re: Research.” Received by Anna Ciamparella, 12 Dec. 2016.


Dawson, Samuel Edward. The Voyages of the Cabots. The Royal Society of Canada, 1897.


Il n’y a pas d’identité culturelle. Cave Canem, 2016.


Michael Richardson, and Krzysztof Fijałkowski. On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue Between Cultures. Polity Press, 2014.


Luisi, Maria. “‘S’incomincia per cantare/ e si canta per finire: la parola è musica per Ungaretti.” *Colloquio Internazionale: Lucca 4-6 Aprile 2002*. Fazzi Editore, 2005, pp. 247-257.


---------. *Distant Reading*, Verso, 2013.


Speech of D. C. Broderick of California, Against the Admission of Kansas, Under the Lecompton Constitution: Delivered in the Senate of the United, March 22, 1858. Lemuel Towers, 1858.


*Un americano a Roma*. Directed by Steno, performances by Alberto Sordi, Maria Pia Casilio, 1954.


--------, *Il Carso non è più un inferno*. All’Insegna del Pesce D’Oro, 1966.


--------, *Ungaretti. Da una lastra di deserto; lettere dal fronte a Gherardo Marone* edited by Francesca Bernardino Napoletano. i Meridiani, 2015.


APPENDIX A: WHAT A FAILURE ARE WE TALING ABOUT? AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIO D’ALFONSO

Anna Ciamparella: In 1986, two years before Canada passed the so-called Multiculturalism Act, which intends to protect and sustain cultural diversities in your country, you included in the collection The Other Shore the poem “Italia Mea More.” This verse is very critical of cultural integration and describes with high lucidity the emotional and physical toil people endure when they are forced to assimilate into an official culture. Throughout the poem, the Canadian culture is addressed as “ils” (“they”), possibly indicating that, despite integration moves, the heritage of a discrete community and the values of its hosting country remain irreconcilable. In other words, even once assimilated, minorities remain marginal. If this poem has found inspiration in real events occurred to a minority group (the poem seems to be autobiographical as you even include your name in it), how much of this reality has changed in Canada after 1988?

Antonio D’Alfonso: What to say about a poem written after my return from Italy? The emotion of profound solitude was skin deep. I wrote the poem in Italian. I remember scribbling the poem in a single sitting on the back porch of the Harvard Street apartment in Montreal. The poem provokes immediate reactions in readers. Not always positively. In my Collected Poems I have changed the title to “Amore.” The source was the idea of Italians being pushed aside in North America. I have decided to exchange the Italian-centered content for a more generalized one. Keeping the topic remote can only direct allusions to the opposition of hatred versus love. For, let us face it, the immigration-emigration issue is ultimately one of hatred and exclusion. A country casts the bad seeds from its soil, and another accepts the same seeds and throws them into the garbage bins of slavery. The American Dream is not possible in Canada where people who stand out are beheaded quite rapidly. There is a reason why Canada acts this way, and it has nothing to do with the country’s actual possibilities. The Multicultural Act was a noble gesture, but it was not enough. It did not address the motive power of second-generation emigrants. Conscience or unconscience, the Act emerged from a preconception that immigrants would eventually disappear. If they do not disappear, then the Act makes no sense at all. In a country with two official peoples (the French and the British), where do immigrants go? They are tossed aside. I have not noticed any change since the 1950s in regard to emigrants. The issues did not go away. Religious intolerance became a job problem that led to the linguistic problem which then carries us back to religious intolerance. Nothing has changed.

A.C.: Who are the Italian Canadians and where are they?

A.D: Italian Canadians or Canadian Italians? Italians in Canada? Or Canadians who are Italians? Italians in Canada can be Italians only if they have rights, serious rights as a minority group. In the U.S.A., Italians do not even belong to the concept of Multicultural minorities. In Canada, they complain a lot but for the wrong reasons. Wrong? Because what Italians want is money and fame. Everyone wants money and fame. They should be demanding for schools and recognition. The Italian language does not appear anywhere on this continent. It is as if Italians never came here.

Canadians who are Italian? The definition would necessitate an in-depth explanation. What is an Italian? For how many years Italians will be Italians in Canada? Without minority rights Italians can stay Italian for as long as the federal and provincial governments permit them to be so.
Italians have yet to find a common denominator that unites all those peoples who originate from the Italian peninsula. Not having elaborated any sort of foundation, how can they erect a building to live in? The soil is bound to sink like in quicksand. The likelihood of survival is quite minimal. This is true for all minority groups, including visible ones.

A.C.: In your movie Bruco, Tony Amoroso becomes a butterfly after undergoing a systematic ethnic cleansing. In your poems, you also indicate the difficulty one may face while trying to maintain a distinct cultural identity. Overall your production shows a tension between two categories: the global and the local. How would you define these two groupings in relation to your corpus?

A.D.: Scholars have in the past decades come up with the term glocal to speak of the relationship between the global and the local. I am not sure, however, what terminology to use to explain the tension between the global and local entities. Even political anarchy seems outdated to capture what the future holds for the world of such relationships. I have never developed a program for the relationship between minority and majority in one territory, nor for the relationship between cross-territorial minorities and states in general. This is the task of sociologists and anthropologists, not poets and journalists. My approach to these topics came about through personal doubts. Unable to accept nationalism, I wobbled through the corridors of ideas advanced by researchers and scholars who, in most cases, thinly disguised their inevitable nationalist stance. Not many writers see the world as being made up of networks; most thinkers hold onto the concept of religion, language, and territory in order to define their identity. My position is not an easy one because these concepts might define one as a collective being, they do not say much about one as an individual. Or do these define one as an individual and not as a collective being? One way or the other, what works for one does not work for the other.

A.C.: In one of our Skype conferences in Spring 2016, speaking with my students who had just read Fabrizio’s Passion, you indicated, very playfully, that you began writing poetry “to get the girl.” In other words, like many other Italian canonical writers, for you, love is a source of inspiration. Dante, an implicit influence in Italian literary production, even closes his Divine Comedy with the verse “l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle” (“love that moves the sun and the other stars”). To what extent Dante and his notion of love influenced your work as a writer and filmmaker?

A.D.: Dante. Sure. How can one not be influenced by Dante or by any other author of the past? Their works have filtered through our everyday lives. Watching TV, listening to rock, the past is there for us all to absorb. The past is what makes our present livable. However, I prefer the Baroque to any other era of our civilization. The mosaic replaces ancient single vanishing view points. I am one of those who believe the Baroque is not a fixed period in history; the Baroque is a total experience that is not spatially or temporally localized. We have stepped into a new kind of civilization. What in the past foresaw this imminent civilization is what will interest our children.

A.C.: At a certain point in his career, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s interests shifted to cinema maybe because traditional linguistic means started appearing too restrictive to him. You too, like Pasolini, have found several and different expressive outlets. We also know that you two have in
common something else: *le franc parler*, as you put it. Do you find that somehow you could be a Canadian version of Pasolini?

**A.D.:** You are too kind to compare me to perhaps the greatest writer in Italian culture. What Pasolini did will never again be repeated in history. He acted as the gods had planned. No one else was going to do so.

Both Pasolini and Cocteau moved from one medium to another. Godard did the same. This is not unique. Shakespeare, Shelley, Eliot moved from poetry to theatre.

Writing is a fine tool, but it is not the only tool to capture reality. In fact, Plato considered it the biggest form of failed imitation. *Napolitano* songs capture better than writing the essence of the *Napolitani*. Written Neapolitan or Abruzzese is illegible for me. Gianbattista Basile did much to codify the idiom, but I wonder how the calligraphy reflects the actual verbal utterance.

There is no one from the Samnites who has produced a work that speaks of them as Virgil did for the Romans.

Both Ovid and Horace could have done so, but they were obsessed by fame and recognition. What language could I personally use to imitate my family’s world? Let us forget fame and money.

From the start, language was an obstacle to what I was sent on earth to do. The first attempts in writing were macaronic writings. I moved from one language to another with no attempt at translating what was being said. All that remains is “Babel,” the poem.

Macaronic practices are fun when limited in time and space. I dislike the interjection of foreign terms in a text. Literature should be first and foremost accessible to everyone, for the illiterate especially. The 1980s and the 1990s produced the worst kind of literature. Esoteric, complicated, illegible. Aristotle, Plato, St Augustine, the Bible are easily understood. Of course, complexities occur but these call for the wisdom of priests and scholars to interpret them. Anyone can read their works and get something out of them.

I always believed that TV and film were the proper tools to express the superficial particularities of people.

Pasolini was correct. The Ur-code is reality, and reality is highly codified. Watch Quebec French-language TV to see how little space remains for otherness in that society.

The problem remains: film and TV might be the perfect tools for Ms. Everybody, nevertheless film and TV belong to Mr. Someone.

The wager is for me to capture my collectivity without having to resort to stereotypes that the audience expects from any collectivity. No easy feat.
This sort of thinking led me to question the role language has been given to artists anchored in a single, specific territory. Language is a prison the writer must escape from.

A.C.: What does Francophonie mean to you?

A.D.: The concept of the Francophonie was elaborated in the 1980s. I recall being in Rome with Gaston Miron. He had returned excited from Perugia where a conference had been held on the idea of -phonie, -phonia.

The term is meant to encompass the highest plane of collective consciousness, this one based exclusively on language.

The goal is to unite people not on nationality but on linguistic belonging. This was a not-so-subtle way of declaring war against the takeover of English in the world.

It was by uniting all Portuguese that the luxophones turned up 8th in the list most spoken language in the world. Italian has not followed the same path. Italian is the 68th language behind Vietnamese. The language is therefore doomed to disappear in the near future. For a language to survive it must be spoken on a daily basis by a minimum of 150,000 million speakers. The refusal of Italians to create a -phonia led me to the creation of the Italic as a common denominator for the higher plane connection for Italians in the world. Many have misunderstood the term, accusing me of being nationalist. Clearly these people have never read my texts on the issue.

The Francophonie gave me a tool to go beyond the gates of nations. Besides that, it has meant very little. I used to believe that the French language was more open than the English. I was wrong. The French translate more than any other country, but they rarely accept translations made outside of the borders of France.

Thus, what was a desire to decentralize ends up falling back into the gates of the center.

A.C.: Living firsthand the multifaceted culture of the francophone world, how do you relate to the literature of other French-speaking countries?

A.D.: Humankind spoke one language for thousands of years. The Bible, quoting older texts, points to the creation of the Tower of Babel as the turning point for human in relationship with linguistic phenomena. I grew up with over 8 languages spoken on a daily basis in our household. French was one of these languages.

I was fortunate to have lived with French-Canadians. My father’s family came to America at the beginning of last century. This meeting with one of the founding peoples of Canada enabled me to experience firsthand the relativeness of my importance, as well as the fragility of immigrant cultures. The Italians in the family came from every part of the country. Everyone spoke his or her dialect, and usually at the same time, and quite loudly. To be heard one had to practice humour. If not humour, at least wit. One had to be quick on his toes. With dozens of voices speaking at the same time, in all different languages, one had to learn to prick his ears and turn
them in the direction of incoming wavelengths. It was the pleasure of being together, regularly, eating different foods, sipping homemade wine... The competition was there, but it was benign competition.

Real competition arose with the coming of the nationalist spirit from the French-speaking relatives. The French mastered the dialects spoken at the table. But a change did come, and it split the family. Every degree of difference became a degree of separation.

My writing in French was a natural process. I am shocked so few Anglophone writers in Montreal do not write in French. Not because there is a future there for them, there isn’t, the centralized powers are still very much intolerant of linguistic difference. In fact, this intolerance manifests itself in the emigration laws of this province. This is unfortunate for Quebec, as it is missing out on great cultures simply because it insists on French language as a pointer to ITS culture. Quebec is totally wrong about this. I laugh when I hear Quebec politicians speak of France as being their cousins. Whenever I go to France I run into Italians from France. I turn to the politicians and say, “now, this woman is more my cousin, than she is yours. We come from the same region. We are from the same emigrant generation, and we actually speak a different language to express different realities in one sitting.”

Quebec has a problem, and no longer knows how to fix that problem. The problem being: the tribe is breaking up into something they have always rejected. The Other. Since 1968 Quebec has decided to exclude people on linguistic criteria. And foolishly believe that speaking the same language means that people will be sharing the same culture. Islamic Arabophones are proving Quebec (and France) that language is the least important of cultural traits. This means that French language will die pretty soon, and be replaced by Arab, since the Arabic language is the most spoken language by those emigrants who have now spread across the world.

Linguistic difference. More than once, the fact of writing or speaking French has proven to be insufficient. The ‘true blue’ can always tell who is who. Writing in French means nothing in Quebec, you will never be permitted to criticize the place we live in. This is the issue that annoys me most about Quebec. Writings are there to boast the culture, never to criticize it. Most writers in French Canada are bureaucrats for the government. Forget about finding Pasolini here. Despite all of this, it is important that our dissenting voices be heard directly in French as well.

A.C.: Even though you never defined yourself as a blues writer, your concern about describing ordinary occurrences affecting common people resonates with the preoccupations typical of those who ‘have the blues.’ How would you comment on your blues sensibility?

A.D.: The blues was the music that spoke to me as a young man. Must I remind the reader that Neapolitan songs are Italian blues. It has never occurred to me to compose a blues song in dialect, but I was a Pino Daniele fan from day one. He sang about what I wanted to hear.

My incapacity to sing has put a strain on my desire to compose the blues. But my music is in minor keys, and it is only recently that the major seventh has slipped into my composition.
The major problem with singing the blues is that you have to be able to wear the mask of one’s collectivity. Italian culture is so varied that to aim for a uniform collective mask is pretty impossible.

This might be one reason why I prefer composing instrumentals to songs. I write lyrics for other musicians, but not for myself. I used to compose lyrics for myself but have not done so in decades. I prefer the poem and the monologue. Hence, my love of film.

A.C.: The title of one of your books is Gambling with Failure. Which ‘failure’ can an artist like you – who, among many other accomplishments, also received an honorary doctorate from Athabasca University last year – refer to?

A.D: In the book I set out to demonstrate how success can only arise in certain specific conditions, without which it is simply vanity and illusion.

Without an agent, without this agent connecting you to a major distribution outfit (the publisher being just a pawn in the entire process), success is impossible. Unlike the French and other linguistic groups, there is in fact no space for the presentation of your works in the English-speaking world.

This means that there is no true freedom of speech. That is, there is freedom of speech, but there is no place where this speech can be heard. In such a context what sort of success is ever possible? There is no success for anyone who does not comply with the rules and regulations of the industry.

The price to pay is high. The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Prince, CCR, and so many others have had to give up their rights to be able to attain fame and fortune. Who does remember the others? Dave Clark Five and King Chromson had to use parallel roads to be able to find their listeners.

The same applies to writers. Guernica was my way of creating a parallel road. For doing so, I was criticized. But it was my way of telling people: Eh, we are alive. But for many, this was just failure. Well, if what I did is failure, then I say let us gamble for failure, and pray that our works will outlive our lifetime.

A.C.: Your work has been translated in many languages, and you are fluent in at least three different idioms: French, English, and Italian. While you have preferred translating some of your works from French into English and vice versa yourself, when it comes to translating your production into Italian, you choose to work with a translator. Can you explain why?

A.D.: I even wrote some verse in American Castillan. Italian is a strange language for me. It is a foreign language because it is not the language we spoke at home. We spoke CB (campobassano).

I had to study Italian, and though I read and write it, my voice is clearly American. Let me use a parallel image. U.S. English is distinctly different from UK English. Canadian French is totally different from French spoken in parts of France. This is not the case with Italian.
Italian has not experienced recognized displacement. In fact, Italy insists in not decentralizing the language at all. Consider the ISBN Italy uses on its books: 88. Well, a book written and published in Italian in New York is not permitted to use the 88 number, which would unquestionably indicate the language of the book. This would enable us to penetrate the Italian markets. Italians do not want this. They content themselves with the blatant lie that Italian is spoken only on the peninsula.

Italian outside Italy is not permitted to exist in an official manner.

We in America have to use 1 to identify a book that is not English. France and England have decentralized their language. Books published in French in Canada use the same number 2 as they would if published in France, or the number 1 if published in English in the UK or in the USA or in Canada.

Therefore, not being able to have my uniqueness accepted in Italy, I might as well get an Italian to interpret me. If I may be honest, I much prefer my work to be in CB than in Tuscan. But that is another debate.

If I write in Italian, I want the language to sound American. Its bloodline is a displaced one. There is nothing properly Italian about me, except the fact that I choose to be an Italic. My writing should reflect this aterritorial position.

A.C.: In many of our conversations you suggested the desire to be able to write, talk, and convey ideas in Molisano, your parents’s regional dialect. Having the possibility to translate one of your works into that idiom, which would you choose and why?

A.D.: A couple of my poems have been translated in CB. In 2016, in Udine, I had the luck of having Maura Felice to read her translations in public. No one there had ever heard the dialect spoken before. You can imagine how much work there still remains to be done in regard to Italian culture, or if you will, Italic culture.

Yes, I would have all my poetry in dialect. It is the voice I would speak in public. Of course, it is no longer a pure language, but which language is pure today. The dialect has the sounds from the Neapolitan, Roman, Tuscan, German, Catalan, Spanish, Serbian-Croatian, Albarech, French, English...

It would be wonderful to be able to reveal what distance has been accomplished since the departure of the first round of Abruzzese emigrants at the beginning of the last century.

Measuring that distance is what makes us see how there is stability in the evolution of peoples. The Campobassani lost their Abruzzese identity in 1964 when Molise was invented as a region. The language was banned during the unification of Italy and then under the 1923 Gentile Law. In America, the language was smothered by making it illegal to communicate in it in any official way.
Yes, I would have liked to have codified the dialect. I didn’t. I regret it. I must ask others to help me express myself in the language of some of my ancestors.

A.C.: Aesthetic standards dictate the rules of successful publications. How these standards are changing with time?

A.D.: There are no aesthetic standards.

If there are then surely this is the end of literature as expression of self and collectivity.

What we have is a business-run industry that deals with books. And these books are not necessarily words anymore. They are fixed idiomatic expressions. There is a way to tell a story and it is THE way that must be taught in creative writing classes.

A very fine example of the stupidity of this trend can be seen how Casanova who is one of the finest Italian writer in history is totally disregarded by Italians (because not in Italian) and the French (because badly written). Blaise Cendrars reminds us that literature has never been about proper writing, proper emotions, proper etiquette.

There is very little literature left. I read a lot and find less and less elements that distinguishes one writer from another. They sound more and more alike. Especially the novelists. Poets still have some leeway, but even there, so many follow the straight line to sameness.

The same way we can tell a photographer from another, the same should be true of writers. Each writer should be recognizable. His writings should be as unique as his fingerprints.

If this is not the case, then there is a problem.

A.C.: You are an accomplished writer who published in different countries, including Italy. How do Italian literary criteria compare with the North American tradition? Why, aside from a few exceptions perhaps, Italian publishers, scholars, educators, etc. show indifference towards the authors of the Italian diaspora?

A.D.: Writers of Italian origins are not considered at all in Italy. The few that are published not because of their work but because of the agents these writers have.

A writer like John Fante would never had been published in Italy (he was published only recently) if it was not for the Dutch and the French...

Why Italy is not interested in us? The answer is undoubtedly related to the fact that emigration in Italy’s history books is not even mentioned in the footnotes! Those who kicked out emigrants are still in power in Italy. They are not interested in being accused for the evil things they might have done.

There is a stamina attached to ethnic voicing. It is like speaking with an accent. Have you noticed how so many ethnics speak without accents? A few days ago, I heard perfect Joual
(Quebecois slang) being spoken. I had no idea who was speaking, because I was reading a book. Only when I raised my head did I notice it was three young South Asian women conversing. The content was different from French-speaking Canadians, but the lexis was the common one spoken in Montreal. It was only when they began code switching did I feel normalcy again.

Many will say that the joual was a normal sign of integration. But for me this is also a more holy than thou attitude attached to such utterance. I speak with an accent. No matter which language I use. I do not feign speaking with an accent, it is me. Oh, I try to speak properly, but I can’t. The voicing of my vocal chords is foreign.

This doubling of voices (one localized voice added to the de-localized voice) is more natural to my ears. Now, this double-voiced process occurs in writing. It often happens unwillingly on the part of the writer.

When I first began to write, I remember the creative writing professors (poets) of the 1960s would reproach me for not using the English idiom correctly. I had never heard of such a thing in my life, and so I quit literary classes forever. I studied with two famous poets and they both told me English was not my language. So, I began to take French language more seriously, but I got the same response from publishers and readers. French is not my language. I write in Italian and get the same reaction. Italian is not my language.

Now, we have a serious situation going on, right? Here is this man who wants to write but cannot find the proper language to write in. Now that is a very serious problem. Imagine a shoemaker who cannot master his trade. I needed to find another medium to express what I came on earth to express. What was I going to do?

Photography and film took over. These work very well.

The trouble is that I have written over ten thousand pages of texts in various languages and all of this stuff has been published worldwide. And, except for readers like you, not much has been written in English about my work. Most of my writing is in English, by the way.

I am not the only person who finds himself in such a situation.

This is what I consider ethnic writing. It is a writing that exists despite all of the hurdles it has to jump over.

My position as publisher was to make sure such writing existed en masse. I am proud of the work I accomplished in my 40 years as editor and publisher. Even if much of the work is silenced. One day, the veil of silence will be pulled away. And if there is truth in this work, it will speak to future generation. This is the wager.

Right now, the biggest obstacle is the survival of this work. I have been fortunate to have my works archived at McMaster University. And I encourage all ethnic writers to find places to archive their works. For there are fewer and fewer publishers who will gather these works in Collected Poems, Stories, Novels. I am very sad that not a single Canadian publisher today has
considered such a task. The Quebecois publishers have. But not one in English Canada has taken the task of creating a series dedicated to Collected Works, like we find in France (La Pleaides) or Italy (Mondadori).

Without this sort of publishing activity, ethnic writing with an accent will disappear. As John Fante and Casanova disappeared for many years.

A.C.: In real life, you show to have a contagious laugh. What role does laughter play in your work?

A.D.: Laughter is the real art, in all media. Laughter is the book that was written by Aristotle, but it is now impossible to find. Eco wrote *Il nome de la rosa* about laughter, and how laughter was censored by human history. Laughter is Totò laughing at Italian etiquette.

Joking pushed aside. I believe that laughter in art has been totally eclipsed by tragedy. I see no reason why this should be the case. Laughter is more universal than tragedy. Look at Chaplin. There is no doubt about where he is going. But as for tragedy, what might be sad for one is humorous for others. I love *Touched by an Angel*. I bet you, if I showed some episodes in a theatre with hundreds of people, most would laugh where I would be shedding tears.

On the other hand, laughter is by its essence subversive. People cannot image that in Antigone there is a fool of a messenger who is reporting the worst of events in a comic manner. I spent more hours on that scene than in the last scene where Creon breaks down, his son dead in his arms. And yet, no one laughs. No one dares to laugh about sad and profound moments in humankind.

To make people laugh is extremely difficult. To make someone laugh means you have opened the heart of the person who is crying. Such is the subversiveness of laughter. Laughing is more difficult than weeping. To pull out laughter is similar to pickpocketing. You must steal a smile when the audience is least expecting it.

I would love to make readers laugh, but they do not dare to laugh. Many of my poems have moments of comedy, but no one dares to break out in laughter. As if laughing would insult the writer.

My first play, *Les violettes africaines*, made people laugh where I least expected it. In 1975, I was upset, but it took me years to realize that I was being funny without my being aware of it. Great comedy is being conscious of being tragic. Oops comical.

A.C.: Among your many professional activities, you have been teaching in several universities across North America and Italy. Teaching bears the responsibility to create the cultural and professional capital of society. How do you see yourself as a pedagogue?

A.D.: Oh, my career as a professor was not a positive one, in the sense that few students took me seriously. Students never take me seriously. I must be too sweet a prof for students who inhale gas every morning to be able to survive.
But students who learnt from me have gone very far. One became a major literary agent, and another presented a film at Cannes, something I was unable to do myself.

I am a strict professor. My creative position is scientific, mathematical. Creativity is about being able to come up with answer to specific questions. Art is about working as in prison. I teach students the realities of artistic prison. In a world where kids believe everything is free, they find in me what they hate most. I teach that art is not about freedom but about being able to move in a prison.

A.C.: Which do you believe to be the best way to teach literature and more specifically poetry?
A.D.: I am the worst person to ask about the methods to teach literature.

What I learnt about literature I learnt by what professors said was not good. I like what most hate.

In what most despise I find beauty.

Bach was hated for centuries. I love Bach.

I have no idea how to teach literature. I can only indicate students what makes a story a good story.

For the rest, it is not important.

Riming is subjective.
So is form.

I happened to like the sonnet.
Why? Because it is like a filmic scene.

A professor can teach the history of the sonnet. Another can teach student the epic poem.

I believe that a student who wants to find something will find it.

The professor is there to give directions. The more directions he offers the easier it is for a student to find his way to his destination.

A.C.: What is the future of humankind?
A.D.: The future of humankind?
I have no idea.
One thing I am sure is that we will not kill ourselves
With an atomic bomb.

We are not alone in this universe.
Others are watching us, they have made
Their presence felt, they have
Made their ideas known to us.

The future is out of the hands of
Humankind.

We are like lovers who have been writing
To loved ones we have never met before.

We told them that we were bold, longhaired, blonde.
But the truth is that we are shy, bald, and dark haired.

We are like Gilgamesh having to take
A shem (a flying saucer) to get to heaven
Where God waits for us.

As a believer, I believe that the future
Is about souls and the meeting of souls.
The sooner we learn the meaning of soul,
The easier the future will be.

Unfortunately, many are not believers.
For them we are dust that will become dust.

There is no future for dust.
There is a future only for believers,
For people who know their soul
Will be flying beyond...

You ask me about the future. What if the past is subverted and the future is not a returning but a change of perspective. The point of view normally utilized to gaze at the world is shifted. Be it just a single degree. More or less what is done to produce 3D films. Whatever we are looking at is seen off axis. Imagine the original center of attraction being displaced. What you think was in focus is now slightly doubled. The layers are superimposed not perfectly one on top of the other, but pushed a decimal to the side, so what is viewed is viewed twice simultaneously, but off centered.

What would happen? The image would then be blurred. That is, the image would be doubled, off axis. To see the image correctly, you would need an apparatus to correct your vision. Much like one needs special glasses to correct the view of a 3D image.
Let me be more precise. Imagine Italy no longer the center of Italian culture. Imagine France no longer the center of the Francophonie. Imagine England no longer the center of the Anglophone world. This is the future. This is the future that awaits us all.

The future is going to be a totally different reality where what was certain is put in doubt.

I am quite sure that Italy will no longer be the center of Italic culture. It will become a simple island among the many islands of Italian culture. Such is the Italic culture that awaits the people who will choose to participate in Italian culture.

The same will happen to all ethnicities. Ethnicity will change the fabric of what constitutes the official culture. Right now, what we have is a feeling of condescension that the original center has toward its offspring. However, the offspring will one day alter the essence of what parenthood means.

The Father and Mother will no longer be a fixed location. There will no longer be a fatherland or a motherland. There will be children everywhere redefining the meaning of what the family is.

We are the children of divorce. We will have to readapt ourselves to this new world of the divorced.

A.C.: People in the past have been asking about how autobiographical your work is. I want to rearticulate the question adding a request to complete the following sentence: Antonio D’Alfonso has become…

A.D.: Autobiography is a difficult art. I am trying to write an autobiography and I find it very difficult to write. However, writing a commission is the easiest of all. Give me a question and I will write a dozen pages. If I have to write about my youth, I do not know how to do it.

I have been writing about my daughter Micha for the past five years. I am still unable to do so.

And yet I have written over 3000 pages about other things since. Go figure. My truth is not truth.

As for my own writing, I use my lifeline as bate. If I have to write on a certain topic, the theme is more important that my truth. The topic comes first. My life comes second.

The same is true about my films. I find it easier to speak about myself by having Lazar Rajic speak about himself. I ask the questions and he replies the way I want.

It is best to play with truth. If I told you that I was abducted by aliens, you would never believe me. You would say I was totally out of my mind. However, if I told you that I was kidnapped and raped by a family you would feel immediate pity for me.

So, what is truth?

---

163 Lazar Rajic, also known as Lazar Rockwood, interprets the role of Tony Amoroso in D’Alfonso’s movie Bruco.
Truth is what the audience is ready to accept.

I invent to make truth acceptable.

My truth is beyond belief.

I have lived an incredible life.

No one believes me.

What do I care?
Giuseppe Ungaretti was born in Alexandria, Egypt on February 10, 1888. His parents Antonio and Maria Lunardini, two Italian immigrants from Lucca, Tuscany, tried to make ends meet by opening a bakery in Alexandria. In those years, while Maria managed the store, Antonio was working at the excavation of the Suez Canal. As Leone Piccioni indicates, the job eventually consumed the man who died in 1890 leaving a sense of eternal mourning in Ungaretti’s house (23). In Egypt, Ungaretti studied the French literary tradition and was enrolled, until 1905, in one of the most prestigious schools in Alexandria l’École Suisse Jacot. In those years, he studied the poems of Stéphane Mallarmé, Charles Baudelaire, and Giacomo Leopardi, one of those Italian authors whom, together with Dante, Ungaretti will read for the rest of his life. In 1912, he left Egypt for France where in Paris took classes at the Collège de France and at the Sorbonne. During his stay in Paris, he had the opportunity to meet some of the most important figures of the avant-garde movement, Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire, among the others. In 1915, he was drafted by the Italian Army and sent to the Carso, in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, a place known for having been the site of the most gruesome battles during WWI. The account of the horrors Ungaretti experienced as a young soldier was published the following year in his first collection of poems Il porto sepolto (The Buried Harbor). At the end of WWI, Ungaretti settled again in Paris for some time, then he moved to Rome in 1925. Here his first child Ninon was born, while five years later, in Milan, Ungaretti became father of Antonietto who died in Brazil in 1937. For Ungaretti this was an unspeakable loss which highly influenced his future production. In 1933, he published his second book Sentimento del tempo (Sense of Time) which, as the title implies, is inspired by the sense of time passing by. In 1949 he published a collection of prose titled Il Povero nella città (Poor in the City). In 1950 appeared La terra promessa.
Promised Land); in 1960 he published Il Taccuino del vecchio (The Elder’s Notebook), and in 1961, a collection of his travel writing under the title Il Deserto e dopo (The Desert and After). By now, Ungaretti was internationally known. In 1964, he was invited by Columbia University to deliver a series of lectures on his own poems. In 1969, he was at Harvard. In this period, according to a letter that Ungaretti wrote to Piccioni on May 2, the poet lodged in a beautiful apartment with five rooms and colonial furniture, “Harvard style,” he defined it (343-344). Ungaretti died a few months later between the night of December 31st, 1969 and January first, 1970.

James Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1st, 1902. Determined to seek a better future for his family, his father James Nathaniel Hughes left him to travel to Cuba and then to Mexico, where he remained for the rest of his life. James left the household in such indigent conditions that Hughes’s mother Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes saw herself continuously roaming the country looking for a shelter and a job. Hughes started his career as a poet when he was still in school. In 1916, towards the end of his last year in junior high, he was proclaimed class poet. After graduating from Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1920, he lived for one year with his father in Mexico. Although James wanted his son to become a bookkeeper, Hughes kept on writing, trying to make a living with his production. Hughes started publishing his poems as early as 1921, year in which he was able to publish one of his most famous verse, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” The appeared in The Crisis, the official magazine of the NAAP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) founded in 1910 by W.E.B. Du Bois. In 1922, Hughes started his undergraduate career at Columbia University, but soon left that school. In June 1923, he was hired as a shipman on a boat heading

\[164\] In L’allegria è il mio elemento: trecento lettere con Leone Piccioni.
to Africa (Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, the Congo, and Angola). The following year, he embarked on an European tour of sort; during this period, he settled in Paris for some time and visited Italy. In Genoa he wrote another of his most famous verse, “I, Too.”

In 1926, Hughes published his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*; that same year, he enrolled at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, from where he graduated in June 1929. During this time, he met Charlotte Mason (whom Hughes used to call Godmother), a benefactor who helped Hughes to study and write full time. In 1930, Hughes traveled to Cuba; later that year, he realized that his view on African American art differed greatly from that of his sponsor. Hughes saw their divergences irreparable and decided to end their friendship. Discouraged, for he was very affectionate to the woman, in 1931, he spent a few weeks in Haiti, and upon returning home, he started a reading tour of the country that lasted twelve months. At the end of the tour, Hughes joined other twenty-two African Americans casted for a movie to be produced in Russia. That same year, in 1932, Hughes saw published his first book of poetry for children, *The Dream Keeper*, and a children book written with Arna Bontemps, *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti*. We know, however, that Hughes started to write children literature since 1921. In June 1933, while still in Russia, he visited China and Japan.\(^\text{165}\) In 1935, he started translating Mexican poets into English. In 1937, he traveled again to Europe; this time, he went to Spain to cover the Spanish Civil War for black newspapers.

In 1940, Hughes published his first autobiography *The Big Sea*, a narration of his life up to his return from Africa. It is around this period that the Federal Bureau of Investigation started

\(^{165}\text{According to Takao Kitamura in his semi-autobiographical essay “Langston Hughes and Japan,” before his death, Hughes must have had money deposited in a Japanese bank. When in December 1966, Kitamura visited Hughes in Harlem, he said to him: “Takao, I have some money in Japan in my name. But because of the restrictions on foreign exchange imposed by your government, my publisher’s in Tokyo cannot send the money to me. So I want to spend it in Japan. Would you like to be my guide, Takao, if I visit Japan in a few years?” (12). However, Hughes never went back to Japan as he died a few months later.}
to investigate into his alleged subversive activities. Because of his stay in Russia and his apparent sympathy for the communist ideology, and because on 1953 he wrote one of his most revolutionary poems, “Goodbye Christ,” Hughes had to appear in front of Senator Joseph McCharthy to respond to supposed revolutionary activities. Eventually he was exonerated. On February 13, 1943, he introduced on his column of Defender (a Chicago newspaper) the adventure of Jesse B. Semple, also known as “Simple.” In 1945, he translated into English *Gouverneurs de la rosée (The Masters of the Dew)*, a novel by the Haitian Jacques Roumain. Together with Arna Bontemps, in 1949, he wrote an anthology of black poets, *The Poetry of the Negro 1746-1949*. In 1961, another anthology, *An African Treasury: Articles, Essays, Poems, by Black Africans*, appeared; this time, the contributors were all African writers. “I think this will make not only a rich and stimulating reading experience but also an important expression of what African writers are thinking and saying,” Hughes wrote to Wole Soyinka on January 31, 1960.\(^\text{166}\) In 1967, it appears another anthology of short stories titled *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers: an Anthology from 1899 to the Present* where he included a short story by the yet very young Alice Walker, whom he mentions during his last speech at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Hughes died in New York on May 22, 1967. He is generally considered one of the most influential writers of the Harlem Renaissance mostly for having created blues poetry. Hughes was a prolific writer; besides poetry and literature for children, he wrote short stories, a novel (*Not Without Laughter* published in 1930) social essays, two librettos for operatic works: *Troubled Island* and *The Barriers*; he collaborated on the realization of musicals and wrote several plays: *Tambourines to Glory, Soul Gone Home* (one act play), *Little Ham, Mulatto*,

\(^{166}\) In *Selected Letters of Langston Hughes* (362).
Simply Heavenly. These plays are mainly set in Harlem and focus on crucial aspects of the African American culture of Hughes’s time.

Antonio D’Alfonso was born on August 6, 1953 in Montreal, Canada. Son of Italian immigrants from the Italian region of Molise, he attended English schools, maybe because, as Fabrizio Notte claims in D’Alfonso’s first novel Avril ou l’anti-passion (Fabrizio’s Passion), his father considered English as being the language spoke by the job market in North America. As Fabrizio’s father puts it in the novel, “l’Amérique est anglaise et je veux que mon fils parle correttamente la lingue de majorité” (author’s emphasis 55). Whether D’Alfonso’s autobiography inspired Fabrizio’s story directly, in his writing the author is often concerned with issues regarding the use of official languages. In Poetica del Plurilinguismo, he writes: “ogni conoscenza linguistica è un privilegio politico e per questo la sua applicazione resta ben circoscritta” (“Every linguistic knoweldge is a political privilege; this is why its application is always limited”) (12). It implies that to know only one language is never enough for one to fully express his or herself. It would explain why D’Alfonso keeps writing in French and English and why when he translates his French works into English (and vice versa), he is compelled to change drastically the content and style of many of his compositions, as to create literary variations of the texts. Furthermore, it would also illustrate his extensive activity as a translator, which has also brought him to teach courses on translation in several Canadian universities.

Besides being a translator, a novelist, and a poet, D’Alfonso is an essayist, a photographer, a cineaste, and for many years he has been a publisher. Indeed, in 1978, he founded Guernica Editions, interested in publishing writers of Italian origins. According to D’Alfonso’s website, he edited “over 450 books by 900 authors from around the world.”

---

167 “America is English-speaking. I want my son to be able to speak correttamente the language of that majority.” Translated by D’Alfonso; from Fabrizio’s Passion (author’s emphasis 54).
D’Alfonso has written several collections of poems, among which we may want to mention *Black Tongue*, published in 1983, *l’Apostrophe qui me scinde*, published in 1998, *l’Autre rivage* (*The Other Shore*) published in 1999, *Comment ça se passe* (*Getting on with Politics*) appeared in 2001. In 1995, D’Alfonso published *l’Avril ou l’anti-passion* (*Fabrizio’s Passion*) the first book of the trilogy dedicated to the plight of Fabrizio Notte. The second book *Un vendredi du mois d’août* was released in 2004, and *L’aimé*, the last narrative of the series, in 2007. D’Alfonso also wrote and directed several independent movies, among which we can cite *Antigone*, released in 2004, and *Bruco* (*Caterpillar*), released in 2005. His writing has been translated into French, Italian, English, Greek, and other languages. In 2012, D’Alfonso earned a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto with a dissertation on a semiotic analysis of five Italian movies. In June 2016, he earned an honorary Ph.D. from Athabasca University in recognition of his impressive literary career. D’Alfonso has sojourned abroad for short and extended periods of time; he lived in Mexico and in Italy and traveled to most of Europe and North and South America. After having spent several years in Toronto, he now lives in Montreal where, I am told by the author himself, he is working on his autobiography and on a collection of his entire poetic corpus.
VITA

Anna Ciamparella was born in South Italy in 1978 and immigrated to the United States in 2003. She holds several academic degrees: in 2009, she earned a Bachelor’s in English from Florida Gulf Coast University, in 2012, she received a Master’s in Italian Studies from Florida State University, and in 2014, she graduated with a Master’s in English from Florida Gulf Coast University. In 2014, she moved to Baton Rouge to complete her Ph.D. in the Comparative Literature Program at Louisiana State University. Her areas of interest are Contemporary Poetry, Atlantic Studies, the African and the Italian Diasporas, African American Literature and Culture, Queer Studies with a concentration in queer representations in television and cinema, and Creative Writing. Her research has been published in Forum Italicum and other international and domestic peer-reviewed journals. Some of her poetic translations from French and English into Italian have appeared in Italian literary magazine and in the Journal of Italian Translation. Her research is strongly influenced by her personal history. When a few years ago from Italy she landed in the United States, she spent quite a long time trying to assimilate into her hosting country, but eventually she started seeing herself more as one of the many pixels constituting the holistic picture of the world than as someone belonging to only one culture. Happily, she realized that she could share her experience with other minorities regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, and social class. Then she started seeing herself as an individual partaking to other cultures. She is a strong advocate of multiculturalism. On a professional level, this has translated into creating scholarship that establishes multiple connections among different literary traditions. She lives in Florida with her family and she has a teenage daughter Oriana who loves ‘youtubing,’ as they call it today, and computer technology.