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SOMALIA IN ITALIANS' EYES: QUESTIONS OF SPACE IN *TIMIRA*

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In this paper I would like to illustrate some difficulties in the representation of colonial and post-colonial space that Antar Mohamed and I encountered whilst drafting *Timira. A Mestizo Novel*, which was published in Italy by Einaudi in May last year. Written in a very hybrid novel form, *Timira* recounts the life story of Isabella Marincola, an Italian citizen born in Mogadishu in 1925, daughter of a Calabrian non-commissioned officer and a Somali woman. Isabella/Timira grows up in Rome in the thirties and forties, visits Somalia during the period of the Italian Trust Territory, eventually settling in Mogadishu at the beginning of the seventies until April 1991, when the civil war forces her to go back to Italy.

In all these comings and goings, our protagonist is always out of place, disorientated, whereless. Yet it would be wrong to see the fact that she does not fit in as a lack of identity. During her childhood, Isabella experienced a systematic derailing of her own origins. Her father led her to believe that she was the natural daughter of his Italian wife, born with white skin but becoming permanently 'tanned' due to the strong sun of Mogadishu. After discovering the lie by pure chance, Isabella repressed it, buried it in a corner, frozen in the promise made to her brother Giorgio to go with him 'one day' to Somalia to meet their 'real' mother. Passers-by in fascist Rome observe her like a strange animal, but not even their looks prevent Isabella from identifying herself completely in the culture and language that she has studied at school since she was a child.

In Italy, therefore, is it the look of others that remind her of her difference.

In Somalia, conversely, it is the space around her that exposes the inadequacy of her presumed belonging.

Space acts as a mirror for the repression of her mixed-race identity and shows it through lapses and obstacles to perception. On one hand, therefore, Isabella's gaze on the world is crooked, atypical, revelatory of her anomaly. On the other hand, thanks to such an atypical gaze, the landscape that her eyes hunt out from the territory represents a gap in the visual

strategies consolidated and repeated thousands of times, in the 'truer than true' stereotypes that with apparent naturalness contaminate our relationship with space.
Isabella's singularity thus becomes a cure for the optical infection of clichés.

Following the non-linear structure of the plot, the first Mogadishu encountered in the novel is that of the civil war, of the escape of Siad Barre, of the Italians brought to safety outside the country. A city that the daily newspapers of the time always compared with hell, worrying about the fate of our compatriots who were trapped in a messy, savage, ferocious battle. Reading the articles from then, it is possible to trace emphases and tones worthy of *Goodbye Africa*, the notorious *mondo movie* by Jacopetti and Prosperi that came out in Italy in 1966, completely geared towards representing Africa as a lost continent, populated by cannibals, incapable of self-management without the benevolent protection of the white man.
Our objective was to construct a viewpoint on the battle that deviated from this imaginary, but which it also contemplated in order to produce a criticism of it.
The hybrid presence of Isabella in this context, as I have said, provided us with the starting point to construct a more complex representation.
Indeed, Isabella is perhaps the only Italian citizen to have remained in the *hell of Mogadishu* until the end of April 1991. In the middle of January that year, the main Italian daily newspapers rejoiced because our ambassador had managed to get all our compatriots to safety. With perfect timing, two days after this announcement, Bush's ultimatum to Saddam Hussein expired and the Somali civil war ceased to be news. In this situation, Isabella does not hurry onto the C-130s of the Italian Air force, but decides to die in her city, rather than becoming a refugee without prospects.
This is why our protagonist lived for four months shut away in her house, with her husband's cousin, a Somali, bringing her food and news. She remained in a sort of no-man's land, a private and personal prison camp, more 'inside' the war than any other Italian eye, more 'outside' it than any Somali. Her diary from those days is a claustrophobic chronicle, where every daily gesture seems absurd but essential. The city is reduced to a window frame, the war is explosions that make the walls shake and gradually become familiar, recognisable. The terrible battle even manages to show itself to be boring, repetitive, ridiculous. At times Isabella's eyes stretch beyond the window's curtains and see stereotypes, but these shatter against the information brought from outside, as she experiences the city despite everything through relatives and her husband. We enriched this perspective using written diaries by Somalis in those months: very few of these people were able to stay shut away in their houses like Isabella. Yet that house was useful in constructing a deposit, a reservoir into which we could decant different perspectives, testimonies, historical reconstructions that allow us to explain the hell and therefore to transform it into a setting that has not only horror but also meaning.
When the moment comes for Isabella also to leave, to head for the airport, to escape first to Nairobi and then to Rome, her escape crosses a different space from the frenetic, violent, relentless one experienced by Italians escaping months earlier, i.e. at the 'right' time. There is time to say a last goodbye to a kind neighbour (and to discover his dead body in his garden). There is time to look one by one at the ruins of the city, to give them a name, a history, an origin. To trace under the rubble the symbols of Barre's regime and those of the fascist regime, of Italian colonialism, of the global market. There is even time to have a cappuccino before boarding.
Isabella's camera car across Mogadishu, that she herself with a hint of irony compares to Lucia Mondella's 'Farewell to the Mountains' in Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed*, is the result of extensive research that we carried out on the sites of collective geolocation. These are places where many Somali refugees try to re-map their city, in the four spatio-temporal dimensions,

forcing themselves to superimpose the various historical faces of Mogadishu onto the present twenty years' worth of ruins. It is not a nostalgic operation, but an attempt not to forget the memory of a thousand-year old city, born of cohabitation and the conflict of the Portuguese, Indians, Arabs, nomadic and settled Somalis. And then came the Italians with the fascist quarter and the works of international cooperation. The symbols of different regimes, the grid of streets, the various regulatory plans.
It is a gaze that traces the temporal fractures of space, to try to construct a critical distance, a point of view on our way of looking. It shows the superimposing and stratifications that make reality come alive, but are concealed behind a presumed immediacy, or behind suggestion through simulacrums, clichés, hasty times that dissolve the time of history.

The way the novel is put together proposes as a second Mogadishu that of the twenties. The departure of Isabella from a city in ruins takes us back to her first departure, at the age of two, when her father decided to raise her in Italy and to tear her away from her natural mother forever. At that time the cathedral, destroyed by mortars in 1991, was still being built: planned for many years and then completed under the impulse of the fascist governor Cesare Maria De Vecchi di Val Cismon. From Piedmont and one of the quadrumvirs who led the March on Rome, De Vecchi wrote a memoir about his Somali experience entitled *Horizons of Empire*. A book that from the title marries political power (the empire) and the power of eyes (the horizon, the furthest point that the view can reach).
In the first lines of the introduction are these words:

A colony, a controlled territory, is not only valuable for what it is, but also for what it can be. In the intuition of its function, in the vision of its development, is the reason for the force that it can demand from the dominant state, the sacrifices that it requires from the men who are chosen to serve it. Knowing how to see is, for the strong, a will, and, for those who have a sense of responsibility, a passionate will.

Knowing how to see is a will. The formula, cleaned of its Promethean inspiration, reveals the central role that landscape played in accomplishing the colonial project, from Cortés' time to today. *Landscape* is not meant as a material element – a synonym of environment or territory – but as a cultural product, a collective perception that extracts meanings from the soil and plants. A landscape is not shaped only by axes and concrete, but even before this by stories and ideas, planting conceptual stakes between what is wild and domestic, beautiful and ugly, sacred and profane. A landscape that, in return, influences practices and thoughts.
There is a reasonable tradition of studies on the relationship between *landscape* and national identity, on how this is constructed from the way the citizens look at the mountains and rivers of their homeland. These mountains and rivers in turn contribute to the transformation of those who look at them into citizens, suggesting the idea of a 'natural boundary', of a 'cradle of such-and-such a civilization', of a privileged link between a certain race of men and a specific environment.
The same mechanism must be more fully investigated in the formation of colonial identities: rulers, ruled, subjected, assimilated... According to Andrew Sluyter, the main subject of dispute between natives and non-natives was not so much land as the representation of it, as an instrument of power and surveillance of the territory. It was a battle for control of the landscape that took place within the landscape itself, and the results of this persist far beyond the colonial era.
In the novel, we wanted to show the effects and characteristics of this 'colonising' gaze and at the same time produce a visual criticism of it, written in the same perceptual language.
In this case, the outsider status of our protagonist – who we had to start from in order to produce this critical rejection – lay in her very young age: no-one can remember what they

saw as a two-years old. But in the novel, everything before 1991 is written in the form of a memoir, in the first person, as the memory of a direct experience.
On one hand, we attempted to fill this gap thanks to a brief documentary section, entitled *historical archive*: in the text there are a total of ten of these, dispersed at crucial points, not to *anchor* the event narrated in historical fact – the truth – but rather to give an account of some episodes without passing through the optical filter of the protagonist, of her point of view on the world.
In the Historical Archive, therefore, we reproduced some paragraphs of De Vecchi's text, *Horizons of Empire*, where the author used numbers and figures to demonstrate that he had transformed an 'unknown and neglected' colony into the 'Country of order'.
In this sequence, two brief passages are placed in opposition. One is taken from the diary of Galeazzo Ciano, the son-in-law of Mussolini, in which he accuses De Vecchi of having carried out useless massacres to subjugate a territory that was already 'ours'. For De Vecchi, a territory is 'ours' if it has visible signs: disarmed tribes, sultans giving up their swords, square kilometres on the map, magnificent monuments of our skill (the cathedral), unequivocal signs of our fascist civilisation (the Italian quarter in Mogadishu), a new, unrecognisable appearance, works carved in stone... For Ciano, evidently, a colony can also not show these signs: it can be 'ours', even without being so through our eyes.
The second piece of writing that serves as a counter-melody to that of governor De Vecchi is taken from a Somali poem, 'Aakhiru-Seben' ('The end of time') by Farax Nuur:

The English, the Ethiopians and the Italian are arguing
They are dividing up the country, the strongest will prevail
But for me this is a sign of the end of time

It is a world that they have sold among themselves without telling us
It is a world in which the man you trust is a snake to you
But for me this is a sign of the end of time

Here, it is not by chance that the only reference to seeing, to recognising meanings in space, is a reference of a negative, apocalyptic kind: the 'sign' of the end of time.
But going back to our protagonist, and to her gaze as a child which she cannot remember or reproduce, the technique that we used was that of making her remember, as in a dream, the voices heard on the voyage by steamer from Mogadishu to Naples, when she was entrusted, like a parcel, to some missionaries. Nuns who were returning to their homeland to display in the main cities mixed race orphans from their orphanage. It is therefore through the words of a nun that Isabella 'sees' Mogadishu – and her mother – as she leaves the coast behind. The adult's gaze imposes itself, in a certain way 'colonising' that of the little girl. A paternalistic tone and a paternalistic gaze are combined in a single pronouncement. The voice that offers a doll to the little girl in tears is the same that praises governor De Vecchi for having made Somali prisoners do forced labour:

Look over there, look at how beautiful Mogadishu looks from the sea, all white like a meringue. Here on the right is the Amaruini district, where your mum lives, that one is Scingani, and there in the middle is the new area, see how much scaffolding there is? The higher parts are to build the cathedral, which will become the biggest church in the whole of Africa. 'Course they'll take a while, but now the works are going ahead in a hurry, because our governor is at war with a sultan and all the enemies that he captures he brings here, to give the builders a hand. Just think about it! When we come back to find your mum, there will be a lovely cathedral all finished. Then Mogadishu will be even more important and shinier than before. Bye-bye! Goodbye Mogadishu.

I would like to conclude by analysing the last case, that of Mogadishu in 1956, where Isabella meets her natural mother for the first time. It is the period of the AFIS – the Administration of the Italian Trust Territory in Somalia – a sort of colonialism with a time-limit, from 1950 to 1960. Until that date Italy, which had just shaken off fascism, had to teach the Somalis democracy and create a local ruling class, after forty years of having prevented its colonial subjects from studying beyond third grade. Indeed the Somalis, well aware of this deception, reinterpreted the acronym AFIS with the words: Again Fascists from Italy in Somalia.
Isabella did not leave for that journey 'to rediscover her roots', as the stereotype would have it. The idea of visiting Somalia was not even hers, but her second husband's, a journalist interested in the processes of decolonisation in the African countries. He proposes to traces her natural mother, but at first, Isabella's response was: 'I've already had one mother and she was enough'. Only later does she accept the offer, and more than anything else she does so to keep faith with the old promise made to her brother Giorgio, who died eleven years earlier fighting as a partisan for the Liberation of Italy.
Once more, therefore, our protagonist finds herself in an uncomfortable position in relation to the territory that opens out in front of her: a mother land which she knows she does not have any significant connection with. Yet, she also knows that Mogadishu could be the first place on the planet where she will not feel observed. It could even be a space where she feels at home, thinks Isabella, except then she realises she has never experienced this feeling and therefore would not be able to recognise it.
Thus, a land suspended in a strange colonialism, ultimately reveals its nature precisely to an inadequate, partial, uncertain eye.
Isabella sees Mogadishu from the steamer and tries to recall her perceptions when she said goodbye to the city as a child. This is obviously an impossible mnemonic operation: that gaze is lost forever. Instead, Isabella realises that her scrutiny does not have to be so different from the one her father gave Somalia on his first encounter with that land. On the verge of meeting her mother, Isabella realises she has her father's eyes, his perceptions as a colonialist. She tries to cleanse her view and not focus her gaze on the palms and other exotic elements. She tries to imagine that white Xamar on the shores of the Indian Ocean is similar to Otranto, an Italian seaside town. She forces herself to identify familiar visions.
Once she has disembarked, convinced that she is – finally – going unnoticed, she is instead recognised immediately by a boy who says he is her cousin and has the task of bringing her to her mother. Isabella follows him and along the way observes the streets of Mogadishu, or rather: she becomes these very streets, immersing herself in their flow, letting herself be swept along, hoping to thus liberate herself from every filter. She tries to perceive what is around her in its immediacy, in its haecceity, in its pure presence, without distinguishing between background and detail, similar and dissimilar. Acting as a stumbling block in this liberating trip is the triumphal arch that De Vecchi built and dedicated to 'Umberto I. Roman-ly'. An inscription of pure fascist pomposity, that in Italy would not longer be tolerated, whilst in Somalia still makes a fine show of itself.

I asked myself if an inscription of that type, in Italy, would have resisted the fall of Mussolini and the house of Savoy, and how on earth the young Somalis had not taken a pickaxe to it. It is true that a clumsy adverb like *romanly* makes us laugh our heads off and tells us about the cretinous fascists better than so many discourses. But it is also true that the fascist period was not a joke and that in Somalia – *romanly* – they were subject to beatings, summary executions, expropriations of land and forced labour.

It is then that Isabella, a moment before meeting her mother, realises that no gaze can read the landscape of a territory in conflict like a colony, unless it also knows how to be a gaze looking at the past, the fourth dimension, the ability to attribute a meaning to the gaps, the slippages, the inadequacies of a *mestizo* point of view.

Isabella realises that at the point where her perception falters, at the point where it produces an overhang, History clambers up on that overhang, to allow for a leap backwards that frames space from the right distance.
The *mestizo* gaze dismantle the stereotype. But it is not enough.
The historical gaze allows us to contemplate its pieces and put them in a different order.