

EXILES/NOMADS: JOURNEYS THROUGH LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN ITALIAN WOMEN'S PULP FICTION OF THE 1990S

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Sommario

Le definizioni di esilio e nomadismo elaborate da Rosi Braidotti quali metafore dell'identità postmoderna costituiscono il punto di partenza per la discussione di alcuni scrittori degli anni Novanta (Brizzi, Culicchia, Caliceti, Scarpa, Nove, Ballestra, Campo e Santacroce), la cui narrativa prende le distanze dal contesto sociale, culturale e linguistico in cui si è tradizionalmente sviluppata la narrativa italiana. I personaggi dei loro testi si sentono estranei alla propria realtà geografica e culturale, in cui sono tuttavia costretti a ricercare le radici del proprio disagio, soprattutto quando vogliono trasformarsi da esiliati in patria in soggetti nomadi, capaci cioè di identificarsi in modo positivo nella loro perenne condizione di transizione e molteplicità. I personaggi femminili, in particolare se scritti da autrici, sembrano maggiormente in grado di quelli maschili di gestire gli opposti desideri di fuga e ritorno, in virtù di una soggettività più duttile e flessibile. Al contrario, i personaggi maschili appaiono spesso inchiodati ad una concezione fissa ed immutabile della mascolinità italiana, alla quale tentano di sfuggire ma di cui continuano a subire la fatale attrazione.

Ma lo volete capire che oggi il mondo è pieno di giovani ribelli che a casa non ci stanno più neanche se li ammazzano?

La Gabri chiede. E dove vanno i giovani ribelli?

La Natascia risponde che i giovani ribelli non vanno in un posto preciso, ma partono all'avventura per conoscere il mondo.¹

¹ Rossana Campo, *Il pieno di super*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1993: 127.

Rosi Braidotti's definitions of 'exile' and 'nomadism' are complementary and reciprocally alternative metaphors for the condition of permanent mobility, which characterises postmodern identities.² Her notion of the contemporary subject, as one who occupies in turns, or at the same time, the positions of the exile and of the nomad, and who deals with the negative and positive connotations implied by each of these positions, can be used to read and interpret a number of fictional texts written in the 1990s by a group of writers collectively referred to by critics as the 'pulp generation'.³ Braidotti's model is particularly useful when trying to make sense of a shared theme, which consistently shapes the plots of much of the new fiction of the 1990s, that is to say the theme of the protagonists' journey away from and back to their place of origin.

2 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects; Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). The suggestion of employing Braidotti's perspective in order to investigate the relationship between gender and identity in contemporary Italian fiction derives from Adalgisa Giorgio's adoption of Braidotti's theoretical framework in her study of Fabrizia Ramondino's writing: 'Moving across Boundaries: Identity and Difference in the Work of Fabrizia Ramondino', in *The Italianist*, vol. 18, 1998: 170-86 (177-78).

3 This label, born out of the debates that have taken place at the annual *Ricerca* conferences on new writing, held in Reggio Emilia since 1993, has become a generally accepted term of reference, also by critics and authors who contest its appropriateness. Mario Sinibaldi's groundbreaking attempt at establishing a theoretical framework, as well as an early critical appraisal, of the new fiction has legitimised the use of the word 'pulp' in the critical debate on contemporary Italian narrative: Marino Sinibaldi, *Pulp. La letteratura nell'era della simultaneità* (Roma: Donzelli, 1997). The volume published by Nanni Balestrini and Renato Barilli (eds.), *La bestia 1. Narrative Invaders!* (Roma: Costa & Nolan, 1997), and later, the book by Renato Barilli, *È arrivata la terza ondata. La narrativa nuova nuova* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), have also been very influential in establishing the vocabulary through which the new fiction of the 1990s is discussed. A collection of essays edited by Stefania Lucamante seems to confirm a general acceptance and acceptability of the term 'pulp', which she uses sometimes to replace her favourite expression 'cannibale narrative': Stefania Lucamante (ed. and transl.), *Italian Pulp Fiction: The New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers* (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Press, 2001).

In a previous essay⁴, I employed Braidotti's categories to analyse the development of the journey theme and the idea of the subject as exile and/or nomad in Italian youth fiction of the 1980s and 1990s. There, I drew a geographical and chronological map of the exile *motif*, which had modelled itself on Pier Vittorio Tondelli's fiction and had been later re-written by many pulp writers of the 1990s, both men and women. In the present article, I intend to discuss an issue, which I was only able to mention at the end of my earlier essay, that is to say the question of the relationship between journey, language and gender in pulp narrative. Braidotti's figures of the exile and of the nomad are adopted again as critical coordinates, this time in order to reveal how the themes of the journey and of displaced identities are charged with gender specific connotations, which can be identified in particular at the level of characterisation, narrative structure and language adopted by many *cannibali* writers.

A discussion about language and innovation was developed in my previous essay, which positioned the new narrative of the 1990s in the wave of linguistic experimentation with oral expression, youth jargons and 'low' registers, which was developed so influentially in the 1980s by writers such as Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Enrico Palandri and Marco Lodoli. In my analysis, I followed Lino Pertile's suggestions that the 1980s had witnessed the definitive formation and generalized adoption of a standard literary Italian, one which tried to conciliate the tension and irreconcilability between the 'high' idiom of traditional literary production and the 'medium usage' Italian which had rapidly developed and spread in mass-educated, media-influenced and socially, economically, geographically more homogeneous post-war Italy.⁵ This

4 Claudia Bernardi, '“The Road to Berlin”': Displacement and Cultural Exile in the New Italian Fiction of the Nineties', in *New Readings*, vol. 4, 1998: 23-38.

5 Lino Pertile, 'The Italian Novel Today: Politics, Language, Literature', in Lino Pertile and Zygmunt Baranski (eds.), *The New Italian Novel*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993: 1-19 (13-15).

'modern' literary language, Pertile explains, 'is supple, precise, clear, and without local or social inflexions' (14). It is the language adopted by most Italian narrators of the 1980s, including Celati, De Carlo, Del Giudice, Duranti, Sanvitale, Tabucchi and Vassalli. Tondelli is among the few writers who had tried to create and use in their works a different kind of narrative Italian, one which 'attempts to reproduce faithfully the "low" language of his characters' (15). It is precisely the experimental language of Tondelli and of the other 'generational' authors of the early 1980s which has inspired and served as a model for the pulp writers of the 1990s. These writers have continued to employ jargons, foreign idioms and subculture registers in their narrative, following the examples of both the experimental project of the *Neoavanguardia* and the writers of the 1980s.⁶ Within this context of ongoing linguistic innovation, Braidotti's theories on plurilinguism, as well as her view of the polyglot as a linguistic nomad⁷, prove particularly useful for a discussion, such as the one proposed here, of the way pulp women writers adopt gender specific linguistic characterisation as a narrative strategy, which allows them to differentiate between exile and nomadic characters.

Although patterns of journey and return, maps of places and itineraries of the subjects' movements between different locations appear in the fiction of most pulp writers (Enrico Brizzi, Aldo Nove, Tiziano Scarpa, Niccolò Ammaniti, Giuseppe Culicchia), this *motif* is particularly apparent in the works of women writers such as Silvia Ballestra, Isabella Santacroce and Rossana Campo. Stefania Lucamante

6 Some critics have pointed out the fact that readers of the Italian fiction of the 1990s need in fact to be fluent in the specific and often exclusive jargon adopted by many pulp writers. The new fiction runs in fact the risk of creating languages that are self-referential, elitist and inaccessible to those readers who do not share the same cultural references. See Severino Cesari, 'Narratori dell'eccesso', in Balestrini and Barilli (eds.), *La bestia*: 24-36 (28-29); Sinibaldi, *Pulp*: 79.

7 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*: 10.

identifies the movement of Santacroce's female protagonists and of her plots away from the Italian social and literary context as a feminist narrative strategy, and goes on to say that only 'abroad can Santacroce's heroines claim absolute agency for themselves and exercise their power through sex, away from the otherwise suffocating reality of women in Italy'.⁸ This is a statement which needs to be further investigated and the validity of which should be tested in relation not only to Santacroce's work, but also to the fiction written by other women of the same generation, in order to verify whether and how Italian women's (and men's) pulp fiction is written through gender specific perspectives. Braidotti's theory of a nomadic subjectivity, originating in a feminist context, is particularly appropriate to outline and understand those elements, which are characteristic, although by no means exclusive, of women's fictional writing, especially in so far as their fiction relates to questions of mobile identities raised within the wider context of contemporary Italian narrative.

The sense of displacement, which lies behind the need experienced by Santacroce's heroines to travel beyond the Italian boundaries, is not limited to the characters' relationship with their geographical spaces. The protagonists' distance from their place of origin is in fact a representation of Santacroce's and other pulp authors' displaced point of view, a displacement that encompasses 'a refutation of Italy's most immediate historical and literary past'.⁹ Pulp fiction, by both men and women, is in fact the narrative of the generational and cultural alienation from the Italian socio-historical context after the political disillusionment of the 1980s, and from the literary models that were

8 Lucamente, 'Everyday Consumerism and Pornography "above the Pulp Line"', in Lucamente (ed. and transl.), *Italian Pulp Fiction*: 98-134 (131).

9 Stefania Lucamente, 'Introduction: "Pulp", Splatter, and More: The New Italian Narrative of the *Giovani Cannibali* Writers', in Lucamente (ed. and transl.), *Italian Pulp Fiction*: 13-37 (23).

available until the early 1990s for its representation. In other words, Italian pulp fiction represents the voice of a generation of writers in exile from their own country and from their own literary tradition, an exile that invests language, cultural models and structures of the new narrative, including their gender connotations.

Studies on 'exile narrative' proper (that is to say narrative written by authors who, by force of different circumstances, find themselves in the position of having to write at a distance from their homeland)¹⁰, show that the term 'exile' can be used to describe a great part of contemporary discourses and narratives. According to this position, exile can in fact be considered as a metaphor for the condition of the postmodern subject, in so far as the loss of one's own country, of a geographical point of origin, symbolises the loss/dispersion of identity, which characterises the postmodern condition. Exile narrative is therefore the postmodern narrative *par excellence*, and every narrative that focuses on the state of exile experienced by the contemporary subject can be said to be a narrative of (identity) exile. Exile narrative, whether written from the position of voluntary or forced exile, is also characterised by the persistent awareness of one's loss, accompanied by a more or less conscious mood of nostalgia for the native country and for the sense of identity that it has traditionally helped to consolidate.¹¹ The elaboration of the idea of exile as a metaphor for the relationship between the contemporary subject and her/his identity, carries also the concept that nostalgia for the place of origin is in fact a symbol of the subject's desire for a more deeply rooted sense of identity, for a placedness that postmodern subjectivity does not grant anymore.

10 See Martin Tucker (ed.), *Literary Exile in the Twentieth Century: An Analysis and Biographical Dictionary* (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1991).

11 Martin Tucker, 'Preface', in Tucker (ed.), *Literary Exile*: vii-xii (ix-x).

Rosi Braidotti introduces the alternative and complementary metaphor of 'nomadism' in order to point out those limits, which are intrinsic in the conceptualisation of 'exile' as a way to describe displaced identities and the feeling of nostalgia attached to this concept. Speaking from a feminist standpoint, Braidotti underlines how the term 'exile' is traditionally used to define the displacement of an apparently ungendered and undifferentiated subject, which is in fact the subject of male and white Eurocentric thought. Such a subject occupies a privileged position from which he can look back at, miss, feel nostalgic about a place of origin, a moment in time and space when the subject was firmly placed. This longing is in itself a privilege, which, necessarily, cannot be shared by other subjects, such as women, whose location on the identity map has always been more insecure and unstable, placed at the margins of male-centred discourses on subjectivity. Braidotti warns against the desire for a feminist appropriation of the exile metaphor, as it would invest with negative moral connotations, or, conversely, it would romanticise a condition, which is all too real for a multitude of human beings. Her alternative notion of a 'nomadic subject', on the other hand, 'does not represent a homeless being, nor the condition of forced displacement', but rather 'the subject who has abandoned all ideas, desire or nostalgia for stability'¹². The nomad does not refer to a fixed place upon which to look back, nor misses the stable identity provided by a definite position. On the contrary, s/he is always in transit, moving along the borders and through places, perfectly aware of and responsible for her/his transitions and for confronting the many others s/he encounters along the way. The idea of nomadism offers a theoretical framework, which helps to describe contemporary identities by placing the emphasis on the desire that drives the subjects' transitions, rather than on their more or less forced displacements, as in the case of the

12 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*: 21.

condition of exile. Moving away from the place of origin and from the permanent sense of identity it traditionally helps to secure, becomes not so much a necessity as an act of will, performed by the subject in perfect awareness of the impermanence of any chosen position and of the multiple coordinates (age, gender, nationality, language, sexuality, class, etc.), which contribute to locate identities in any given space and time.

Italian pulp narrative of the 1990s presents subjects who move between the positions of exile and nomadism, between a sense of displacement accompanied by a longing for a stable, idealised point of origin, and a desire to belong to many places and no place at once. Issues of language, cultural models and narrative structures are raised through the representation of these positions and constitute the determinants of the condition of displacement, which marks this generation of writers, both men and women. Their thematic and narrative patterns reveal the displacement of their narrative subjects (authors, narrators and characters) from the context of contemporary Italian society and from many of its cultural referents. The desire to belong somewhere else, to speak different languages, to identify with alternative geographical spaces, expressed through patterns of journey, does however coexist with an equally strong tension towards finding ways of dealing with the subject's place of origin. The tension towards a nomadism experienced through alternative geographical contexts, languages and literary models resonates with the persistence of the desire to go back home.

Patterns of journey and return shape novels and short stories of the 1990s and in the case of Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce they are the underlying structure of their entire output. The theme of the journey dominates the early fiction of these writers, but is gradually replaced in the late 1990s and early 2000s by the *motif* of the return, suggesting that the authors' own entry into adulthood establishes a new relationship between the characters and their fictional spaces. Silvia Ballestra's *oeuvre* opens with the narrative of Antò Lu Purk's exile

from native Montesilvano, detailing his and his friends' unsuccessful attempts at escaping the Abruzzi province in *Compleanno dell' iguana* (the short story 'La via per Berlino', in particular) and *La guerra degli Antò*¹³, by emigrating first to Bologna, the city of an idealised university experience, and later by travelling to the capitals of alternative youth culture in Northern Europe. These escapes from the restrictive cultural models offered by the Italian province end disastrously, due to the male characters' inability to transform themselves from exiles into nomads. Renzo Paris explains the pattern of failed flight in Ballestra's early fiction in the following terms:

Cosa c'è di più provinciale, sembra chiedersi la Ballestra, di una provincia sprovincializzata, di gente che mentalmente va all'estero, vive una vita parallela televisiva; e invece poi gli tocca mangiare la cucina casereccia e trattare con i coatti locali. Ballestra mette in evidenza una specie di alienazione, quella culturale, dai riflessi inediti.¹⁴

If Antò Lu Purk and his male friends exemplify the subjects exiled from their original location, but unable of letting go of the tenets that the place of birth implied for their identity, the female protagonists of Ballestra's later fiction, *Gli orsi*, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.* *Una storia d'amore* and *Nina* are followed through their growing awareness that multiplicity is the condition of all their transitions at any

13 Silvia Ballestra, *Compleanno dell'iguana* (Ancona: Transeuropa; Milano: Mondadori, 1991), *La guerra degli Antò* (Ancona: Transeuropa; Milano: Mondadori, 1992). The short story which opens *Compleanno dell'iguana* – 'La via per Berlino' – and the full text of *La guerra della Antò* have been published together as *Il disastro degli Antò* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1997), and have been included in Ballestra's collected works, *Romanzi e racconti* (Ancona-Milano: Theoria, 1999).

14 Renzo Paris, *Romanzi di culto. Sulla tribù dei nuovi narratori e sui loro biechi recensori*, Roma: Castelvichi, 1995: 15.

given place and time.¹⁵ *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.*, for example, Ballestra's fourth fictional text and second novel, is a narrative about a journey back to the province, as well as a novel about the end of youth. The protagonist is followed through her return to the Marche province that had been the starting point of her nomadic wanderings, where she confronts the reasons that had determined her exile. It is through her confrontation with her past and place of departure, the provincial Grottaville (Ballestra's tellingly ironic renaming of her native town Grottamare), that her exile is re-written as a nomadic itinerary, while her nostalgia for the lost place and lost identity is integrated into the mobile condition of N.N.'s nomadic identity. In the narrator's own words, the narrative of memory – *la canzoncina della memoria e del cuore* – ironically suggested by the title of one of the chapters, becomes in fact 'un fragoroso addio a tutte le puttane dell'estrema giovinezza, ma non un funerale, cavoli, bensì una festa di liberazione!' (130).

Rossana Campo's young heroines of her early books, *Il pieno di super* and *In principio erano le mutande*¹⁶, are aware from the very outset of their condition of exile as young women born into Southern Italian families who have emigrated to Milan. Their desire to move away from their place of origin is a necessary consequence of their multiple cultural background, which is seen as oppressive in its traditional limitations, especially for the constraints the family force upon the young women's sexuality. However, it is precisely their multiple background that facilitates the girls' nomadic movements through geographical spaces and cultures and transforms their flight into a celebration and an adventure, rather than an escape framed by

15 Silvia Ballestra, *Gli orsi* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1994); *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1998); *Nina* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2001).

16 Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1992); *Il pieno di super* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1993).

nostalgic regret. The closing pages of *Il pieno di super* narrate how the ‘amiche femmine in casa della Silvia Padella’ (9) finally succeed in their planned *grande fuga* by train from the Milanese hinterland and their working class families:

Ora giù c’è solo la Michi, dice: Io resto qui.
Ou, sei scema? Diciamo tutte. Il treno comincia a muoversi.
No, non vengo, poi se mi becca mia madre me lo apre.
Che stro-onzaaaaa!! Facciamo tutte.
La Gabri dice: Dài, non fare la merda.
La Silvia dice: Che merda che sei.
La Dani dice: Be’, ciao Michi, però sei una merda.
Ciao, mandatemi una cartolina dall’Inghilterra,
Sì, ciao,
Quando tornate?
Bo’, diciamo noi, forse mai più.
La Michi ci ha guardato ancora, ha fatto una faccia come di chi sta per cominciare a piangere, Ciao, neh, ha detto ancora.
Ciau, abbiamo detto noi.
Poi finalmente ha fatto un balzo e è salita anche lei.
(136-137)

The young women’s spirit of adventure, their nomadic desire and their sense of solidarity prevail over their fears. The adjustments required by the characters’ transitions into other countries and in relation to other differences never throw the subjects of Campo’s fictions completely out of their flexible balance. In *Mai sentita così bene*, *L’attore americano* and *Mentre la mia bella dorme*¹⁷, the female protagonists who are a development of Campo’s earlier and younger characters,

17 Rossana Campo, *Mai sentita così bene* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1995); *L’attore americano* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997); *Mentre la mia bella dorme* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999).

move with confidence in non-Italian context, mainly Paris, but also America and London, and dialogue with ease in a framework of cultural, racial, sexual, class and personal diversity. The characters' physical wanderings along the many routes allowed by the Parisian map in order to reach the house where the endless party of *Mai sentita così bene* is taking place, the intercontinental flights in search of true love which structure the narrative of *L'attore americano*, the movements across Europe that help the protagonist of *Mentre la mia bella dorme* to unravel the mystery of her new lover's death, all these travels are performed in a spirit of constant exchange with the other(s), with a marked preference for interlocutors who are perceived as nomads, border-crossers, travellers, rather than marginal or outcast subjects:

Io mi trovavo bene fra quelle persone che sono arrivate al capolinea dell'umanità, che ridono, urlano, scoppiano a piangere per i motivi più insensati ... mi sono sempre piaciuti i disadattati, gli sfigati, i ciccioni, i fuori dal mondo, quelli che non ce la fanno, quelli che parlano con la Madonna, quelli che passano il tempo a tingere i capelli a una bambola, che sono tagliati fuori dalle conversazioni educate, dalle belle macchine, dai conti in banca, dalle vetrine coi vestiti eleganti ... Può darsi che ci sia troppa ingenuità in tutto questo, ma per me quegli sbandati si battono in prima linea. Sono i guerrieri dell'umanità.¹⁸

It is of course Campo's narrator's own nomadic perspective that enables her to re-inscribe the marginal and the exile as a nomad. Let's compare, for example, one of Campo's texts, *In principio erano le mutande*, with one by Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*¹⁹. Both texts

18 Rossana Campo, *Sono pazza di te* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2001): 21.

19 Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla* (Milano: Garzanti, 1997).

present very similar situations, in which the first-person narrators describe their impact with new cities. In *Bla bla bla*, the main character wanders around the streets of a city that, although never named, resembles London very closely. The anonymity of the city underlines its alienating features and the impossibility experienced by the protagonist to transit through it, rather than being displaced in it during his exile:

Cammino, cammino, cammino: trascorro le mie giornate attraversando silenzioso quartieri sconosciuti, mercati, edifici, rifiuti, alberi e dentro i mercati e intorno agli edifici e sopra i rifiuti e sotto gli alberi vedo volti, mani, capelli, gambe, incredibilmente vicini ma del tutto irraggiungibili, segmenti di vite inesplorate, estranee, distanti, io ignoro tutto di voi, voi ignorate tutto di me ... ci si sente come una cacca di microbo su un grosso letamaio, rispetto a quell'adolescente bionda che vola via in bicicletta non sono che un pedone da evitare zigzagando [...]. (23)

The character's perception of his physical environment as silent and anonymous ('attraversando silenzioso quartieri sconosciuti') is the prelude to the human silence, the complete absence of communication which marks his stay in the alien city. The absence of any form of connection between the protagonist and the subjects that cross his path, transforms his route through the city into an aimless wandering, an almost imperceptible interference in other people's travelling ('rispetto a quell'adolescente bionda che vola via in bicicletta non sono che un pedone da evitare zigzagando'). On the contrary, in Campo's novel the arrival in a new city, in this case Barcelona, coincides with the excitement of exploration, discovery and desire:

Poi comincio a fare quello che faccio sempre in una città sconosciuta, cioè che prendo e mi metto a girare

come una forsennata con questa grande furia che devo vedere tutto subito, ambientarmi e sapere andare in giro per le strade come fosse casa mia.²⁰

It is especially her desire and ability to communicate that distinguishes Campo's character from Culicchia's protagonist. The first person narrator of *In principio erano le mutande* keeps walking through Barcelona, familiarising herself with the place, meeting new people and talking with them, in a constant dialogue with their differences. Conversely, Culicchia's exile, who wanders through the streets of the unknown metropolis, is doomed to complete loneliness, to an even more definitive silence: the languages spoken by other people, which he is unable to understand, become for him an annoying background noise, an annoying *bla bla bla*.

If the journey is a place of dialogue with the other(s), it is also true that moving away from a space identified as the place of origin allows the subject to reassess the reasons of her/his exile from it. Confronting her father and his 'mondo di troie e di bevute e la sua vita insensata'²¹, helps the protagonist of *Sono pazza di te* overcome a moment of stasis in her nomadic experience. Her father's tales remind the main character and narrator of the reasons that had determined her exile from the place of her birth that he had come to symbolise. Nevertheless, by isolating the 'troie e bevute' from his mad love for her mother and the restlessness of his personality, the protagonist recognises in him a desire to escape and to return home similar to her own. Only once she has identified the existence of these conflicting desires and of their origin, the young woman is able to resume her nomadic passion. The dangers hidden in a journey that does not take into account the possibility and necessity of a return are exemplified by

20 Camp, *In principio*: 91.

21 Campo, *Sono pazza di te*: 172.

Campo's radio-play, *Il matrimonio di Maria*²². The protagonist of this text, a re-writing of Ang Lee's film *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)²³, is a young Sicilian woman, Maria, happily settled in a lesbian relationship with her Milanese partner Patti. Maria's happy exile from her family is suddenly interrupted when her parents force her to come to terms with the weight of Southern Italian traditions. The impact of the parents' pressure to see their daughter finally married is particularly devastating for the couple, because Maria has never really confronted the place and past she had once escaped. Escape proves in this case to be insufficient to transform the exile into a nomad: only a return to the point of origin, however forced (symbolised here by Maria's parents and relatives moving to Milan), permits an awkward plot resolution and the continuation of Maria's journey through her chosen nomadic identity. Maria's marriage of convenience is performed in order to meet her parents' expectations and results in a real pregnancy, which causes the break up of the lesbian relationship. Reconciliation between Patti and Maria is only possible once the two girls have acknowledged that this pregnancy is in fact the realisation of their yet unfulfilled desire for maternity, a response to the family values which they have escaped, but which had internalised.

Isabella Santacroce's stories also progressively move away from the Romagna province (*Fluo*), to London (*Destroy*), to different cities in Northern Europe (*Luminal*), and finally return to the Italian province in

22 Rossana Camp, *Il matrimonio di Maria* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1998). The radio-play was first aired on Radio Tre in January 1998.

23 The re-writing of contemporary cult movies from a feminist perspective is one of Campo's privileged strategies for commenting on the way gender operates at the level of popular culture. *Mai sentita così bene* reproduces the structure of Pedro Almodovar's movie, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1989), which, like Campo's novel, sees a number of connected female characters converge towards the same house; the protagonist of *Mentre la mia bella dorme*, like the main character of the Coen brothers' *Fargo* (1996), undertakes a crime investigation while she is heavily pregnant.

Lovers.²⁴ In Santacroce's case, there is no doubt that her characters' journey away from Italy corresponds to an escape from cultural and sexual limitations. In Lucamante's words, 'Santacroce's girls prefer to move to London, Zurich, or Hamburg, as only geographical difference in locales can accommodate their form of protest'²⁵. The nomadic experience of the free and confident characters abroad is interrupted whenever the past pulls them back to their point of departure and to their condition of exile. The unresolved relationship with the family, with the mother in particular, triggers, for example, Starlet's desire to leave her hometown Riccione in *Fluo*, but is also the cause of the interruptions of Demon's journeys in *Luminal*. In *Lovers*, the heroines and their sexual desire are unleashed within the heart of the Italian family, the stage of the unresolved conflict between feelings of attraction toward and rejection of this symbolic place of origin, which is the point of departure for many Italian narrative escapes.

The opposing desires to fly away and to return, which inform many fictional texts of the 1990s, correspond to the characters' movement between the positions of exiles and nomads, that is to say between the perception of their context as strange and unsympathetic, a place to escape from, and an awareness of themselves as subjects willing to identify with a permanent state of transition.²⁶ This narrative pattern

24 Isabella Santacroce, *Fluo: storie di giovani a Riccione* (Roma: Castelvechi, 1995; Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999). My references are to the Feltrinelli edition. *Destroy* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1996); *Luminal* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1998); *Lovers* (Milano: Mondadori, 2001).

25 Lucamante, 'Everyday Consumerism': 10.

26 The beautiful fictional biography of the famous Swiss traveller and writer of the 1930s-1940s, Annemarie Schwarzenbach, written by Melania G. Mazzucco and entitled, *Lei così amata*, Milano: Rizzoli, 2000, is to all effects the narrative of a subject who travels through her exile, while struggling to become a nomad, moving back and forth between the joyous condition of 'wanderer' 'zugvogelucello migratore' (131) and the awareness that 'la sua antica irrisoria e fallimentare identità si frantumava, il suo io si disintegrava, assorbito, risucchiato e infine inghiottito in tutto ciò che esisteva' (329). Since Mazzucco's text does not meet the rather restrictive parameters of Italian pulp narrative and given the fact that *Lei così amata* presents itself as a biography, however fictional, a more detailed discussion of this book must be deferred to another occasion.

achieves its most interesting results at a linguistic level. As mentioned for the works of Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce, the possibility that the characters' transition into nomadic subjects is achieved successfully varies from text to text and from author to author. Female characters by women writers do, however, seem generally better equipped to deal with the conflicting desires to flee and to return, adapting more comfortably to the multiple cultural shifts their identities are required to undergo. For male characters, created by both men and women, narratives are, on the other hand, mostly focused on the discomfort and limitations that traditional expectations of Italian masculinity impose on them, also at the level of the language they employ. In Santacroce's *Destroy*, for example, the character Misty can deal with the darkness of a marginal and pornographic London, because she is fluent in the linguistic codes necessary to perform her travels through the city, first of all the English language, a skill which Culicchia's protagonist of *Bla bla bla* was so tragically lacking. Campo's young protagonists, while aware of their Italian origins, do not dwell into nostalgic feelings for 'home' and for the past, move with full linguistic competence between Italy, Paris, London and America feeling equally at home and strangers in all places. The movement between the conditions of exile and nomadism, with its gender implications, must therefore be considered a fundamental component of the relationship between pulp narrative and language.

Generally speaking, pulp writers strive to move away from the confines of the Italian language, especially the language of the mainstream narrative tradition, both in terms of vocabulary and syntax. Their language is heavily influenced by foreign idioms, mostly Anglo-American and North European, and by the use of dialects and regional sentence construction. Ballestra, for example, creates an idiom, which the narrator of *Compleanno dell'iguana* and of *La guerra degli Antò* ironically calls *anglo-pescarese*, and which is used to voice the international linguistic and cultural aspirations and regional limitations of her characters. Rossana Campo inserts colloquial Italian

and colloquial French into texts which are structured around free flowing conversations of Italian expatriates in Paris and in the world. English enters Isabella Santacroce's *Fluo*, *Destroy* and *Luminal* completely unmediated by translation and paraphrase, and the reader is assumed to be able to understand it on the same level as the Italian language, which remains the preferential narrative code:

Arriva la police sbruffona come al solito. Lo spaccia un po' si caga ma mantiene la calma cercando di arruffianarsi i men in uniforme attillata. Edie si diverte con le jap isteriche dalla pelle liscia come budino alla vaniglia, saltella con loro canticchiano *Praying Hands* dei Devo. La lady del pusher sempre scalza e tremolante mi si avvicina timidamente chiedendomi una sigaretta. Ha una voce strana, sottile, quasi infantile. Potrebbe doppiare Minnie o qualsiasi altro personaggio fumettoso.²⁷

The words 'police', 'men', 'lady', 'pusher' must be understood by the reader not only in the meaning conveyed through their literal Italian translation, but also as the vocabulary of a specific youth and drug jargon, belonging to a culture that readers must know in order to interpret correctly the words 'spaccia' (*spacciatore*, drug-dealer) and 'jap' (Japanese women), and if they want to be able to recognise the reference to the song *Praying Hands* and to the comics character Minnie.

As we can see in Santacroce's text, *forestierismi* are only one of the linguistic components of 'pulp fiction', which reveal the estrangement of the writers of the 1990s from the standard narrative. Other strategies of linguistic distancing from such a tradition include the adoption of idioms specific to youth subcultures, ironic use of dialects and of

²⁷ Santacroce, *Fluo*: 82.

vocabulary and sentence structures mutated by media and popular culture.²⁸ Both men and women *cannibali* employ linguistic strategies that are meant to introduce ‘into the “starved” literary Italian the aggressive jargon of contemporary life arising from subcultures that, until recently, did not have a voice in narrative’²⁹. Enrico Brizzi, to mention only one of the most spectacularly talented of such linguistic experimentalists, creates a fictional language which, particularly in *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* and *Bastogne*³⁰, entertains what Marino Sinibaldi calls ‘un confronto continuo, ironico e complice, con i miti, i ritmi, gli stereotipi della cultura di massa più o meno giovanile’³¹, that is to say, his narrative visibly distances itself from those linguistic forms of mainstream Italian narrative that Brizzi and other authors of his generation perceive as standardised.

It is, however, precisely in the use of *forestierismi* that the works of Campo, Santacroce and Ballestra show a distinctive focus, which differentiates them from their male colleagues and creates links between their otherwise very heterogeneous linguistic and narrative experiments. The issue of linguistic competence, or better, plurilinguistic competence, is addressed directly by these writers, who seem to subscribe to Braidotti’s belief that what distinguishes the condition of the exile from that of the nomad resides in the subject’s skills to identify her/himself as a polyglot. The polyglot is a linguistic nomad and, differently from the exile, s/he is able to communicate

28 For a survey of the use of foreign terminology and specific jargons in the ‘pulp fiction’, see Marco Berisso, ‘Linguistic Levels and Stylistic Solutions in the New Italian Narrative (1991-1998)’, in Lucamante (ed. and transl.), *Italian Pulp Fiction*: 76-97.

29 Filippo La Porta, ‘The Horror Picture Show and the Very Real Horror: About the Italian Pulp’, in Lucamante (ed. and transl.), *Italian Pulp Fiction*: 55-75 (72).

30 Enrico Brizzi, *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal grappolo* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1994); *Bastogne* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1996.)

31 Sinibaldi, *Pulp*: 33.

effectively in any given context, moving with ease across linguistic, as well as cultural, boundaries. The exile, on the other hand, longs for her/his linguistic origin, and therefore her/his cultural transitions are impeded by her/his lack of linguistic skills, her/his inability to move beyond the relative stability of the original language. As natural polyglots, the female characters of women's narratives seem better able to deal with the plurilinguism required by their movements away from their home country. The multilingual narrative contexts of Campo's, Ballestra's and Santacroce's stories represent the different degrees of linguistic competence that distinguish the geographical, cultural and literary journey of the exile and of the nomad.

Traditionally multilingual by virtue of their gender, which locates them in and out, and on the borders of patriarchal linguistic and literary codes, female characters in the fiction of Campo, Ballestra and Santacroce meet Braidotti's descriptions of the nomadic subject as a polyglot. Male characters, on the other hand, are often presented in a condition of exile, striving to escape the limits of their national identity, but stuck to the cultural and linguistic limitations of the traditional tenets of Italian masculinity.

Rossana Campo's novel *Sono pazza di te* is exemplary of this gender/language distinction. Like the majority of Campo's novels, *Sono pazza di te* is set abroad and features an Italian protagonist narrator who has chosen to live in Paris and who is perfectly fluent in French. Despite the French context, the narrative is carried out almost exclusively in colloquial Italian, since it is filtered through the consciousness of the Italian protagonist. Her free indirect discourse incorporates the voices and conversations of French characters. French vocabulary flows freely within the Italian, in which the text is conducted, usually in order to underline the informal colloquialism of a specific exchange, or through a slang that signifies a particularly intense emotional moment. Reminders that the narrative context (French) is in fact foreign to that of the main language in which the text is written (Italian) become however more frequent once the

character of Renato, the protagonist's long-lost father, appears in the plot. Renato perceives and identifies himself as a nomad, a free willing agent of his own transitional destiny, who tries to project his self-image to his daughter and her friends. The daughter and narrator, who has throughout her life experienced his flights for freedom and adventure as personal abandonment, exposes him to be an exile, someone who transits neither successfully nor comfortably through the places of his numerous journeys. On the contrary, Renato has remained attached to the myth of Southern virility and to the language that traditionally expresses it (the dialect words 'bufaiotti' and 'poppone' are among his favourite terms when describing women's physical attractiveness and when talking about women in general). When father and daughter go to lunch in a Chinese restaurant, Renato's displacement in a doubly foreign culture (a Chinese restaurant in Paris) becomes palpable: 'si guarda in giro, cerca di avere l'aria di qualcuno sicuro di sé, tipo boss della camorra' (84), explains the narrator. Although he boasts of having travelled around the world, it becomes soon apparent that he must rely on his daughter's linguistic and cultural competence in order to read the menu and choose his food. In an attempt to make up for the discomfort revealed by his linguistic incompetence, Renato resorts to a verbal display of his virile appreciation of the Chinese waitresses, interspersing his comments with dialect: 'Ma vedi che belle signorine che ci stanno in questo locale, dobbiamo venirci più spesso qua. Uè, e pure per la strada stamattina! ho visto un paio di sventole...mamma mia! Guarda a quella che bel culone che tiene' (85).

Renato is an anagraphically grown-up version of Ballestra's Antò Lu Purk, who is not only tragically unable to establish his identity in the Abruzzi province of his birth, but who also fails to reach a sufficient degree of linguistic and cultural competence, which would enable him to deal with the European punk culture he aspires to belong to. During his exile in Berlin and Amsterdam, Antò's English proves to be insufficient to allow him to join in the youth subcultures he desires,

constantly pulled back by the *pescarese* portion of his *anglo-pescarese* idiom³²:

Hai vagato per Kreuzberg giorno e notte, cercando di farti benevolere, ‘taccare bottone con gli squatters più irriducibili e sanguinari, ma quei giovani introversi ti hanno snobbato senza pietà. Del resto, buoni tre quarti delle cose che dicevi erano incomprensibili, per loro. Inutile negarlo, Antò, tu le lingue non le conosci, e quando cerchi di parlare inglese il telaio delle frasi è tutto compromesso e stravolto dalla costruzione pescarese. Facciamo un esempio: «Egli è un mio amico», «He’s a friend of mine». Tu invece pensi «Collù è mìcc’a me» e dici «Ittis e frind to mmì».

E chi vuoi capisca cosa, in Germania? Parli quasi creolo ti rendi conto?³³

On the contrary, Antò’s linguistic competence is never found lacking, when he is required to define femininity, which he does by resorting to his vernacular, original, although geographically rejected cultural roots (see for example the phrases ‘la prustituta Laura Mei’ or ‘pocciuta furia’, used to refer to women he desires)³⁴.

Both Renato and Antò display through their language the same limits identified by Lucamante when she talks of the experimental language created by numerous male pulp writers. Italian male *cannibali*, she considers, are themselves ‘entrenched in a sphere of the imaginary in which women are still two-dimensional, their existence continues to be narratively defined in a physically determined matter,

32 For a detailed analysis of Antò Lu Park’s cultural displacement narrated in Silvia Ballestra’s fiction, see Bernardi, ‘“The Road to Berlin”: Displacement and Cultural Exile’: 30-35.

33 Ballestra, *Il disastro degli Antò*: 100-101.

34 Ballestra, ‘La via per Berlino’, in *Compleanno dell’iguana*: 8-103.

in an unending reiteration of *tette, culo, cosce*, etc.’³⁵. While I suspect that this statement would not prove to be entirely accurate, once we started to differentiate between the authors’ moral position and the linguistic codes which they deem necessary to represent the ‘pulpy’ worlds narrated in their fiction, I agree with Lucamante’s perception in so far as it means that the works of numerous male *cannibali* are permeated by the use of a sexist and androcentric vocabulary, one which does not allow alternative voices to emerge.³⁶ While the woman-hating vocabulary of much pulp fiction written by men is in fact the most effective tool by which the commodification of Italian society and of its youth culture, women authors are more successful in revealing that gender is in fact one of the main components by which narrative expresses its own ‘pulpification’. Aldo Nove’s, Enrico Brizzi’s and Giuseppe Caliceti’s narratives, for example, articulate correctly and effectively the language of an Italy where the homologation produced by the pervasiveness of the market and the media, the ‘riduzione del mondo a pura quantità’³⁷, is expressed also through the linguistic equation of women to other forms of merchandise. In Aldo Nove’s short story ‘Jasmine’, the narrator explains how he has hired a prostitute as a surprise present inside a chocolate egg for his brother’s birthday. When the egg is opened and Jasmine is found to be dead, the man’s reaction is one of frustration

35 Lucamante, ‘Everyday Consumerism’: 104.

36 A notable exception to this consideration is Tiziano Scarpa, who, in the final pages of *Occhi sulla graticola: breve saggio sulla penultima storia d’amore vissuta dalla donna alla quale desidererei unirmi in duraturo vincolo affettivo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1996), gives a prominent position to the voice of the until then objectified female character Maria Grazia. Her final intervention in the novel is to all effects a re-writing of the first-person narrative by the male protagonist, in which she had been the silent object of his desire. Also the latest novel of Giuseppe Caliceti, *Battito animale* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2001), introduces the voice of Sylvia, who creates the only real moment of crisis within the hyper-vitalistic, sexist, racist, homophobic and consumerist framework of the protagonist’s first-person perspective.

37 Sinibaldi, *Pulp*: 81.

before wasted goods: 'Erano le cinque del pomeriggio, non potevo più prenderne un'altra', the narrator states. He then moves on to narrate how both he and his brother try to make the most out of the dead body, in order not to lose out on a good bargain: 'Jasmine è un maiale, non si butta via niente. Le aprii la bocca e le misi il cazzo dentro'³⁸. While Nove succeeds perfectly well in reproducing the sexism inscribed in the culture and language of consumerism, he fails to or chooses not to escape the confines of that language in order to introduce their voices (such as Jasmine's), which might speak in alternative to the one through which the story is narrated and focalised. In Nove's, Brizzi's, Caliceti's novels and short stories, female characters are for the most part deprived of voices and identities, becoming extensions of the male narrators' world of reference. They are defined as 'vagine' and 'uniculi' in the Emilia disco-epos imagined by Caliceti in *Fonderia Italgisa*³⁹, or reduced to absolute silence before being raped and murdered in the fictional Nice of Cousin Jerry and his friends narrated by Brizzi in *Bastogne*. While the authors of these texts represent with great talent the sexism inherent in the language of much popular and youth culture, they seem uninterested in narrating alternative models of identity, voices and subjects that, if only by virtue of their gender, are exiled from the aggressively masculine linguistic and cultural codes adopted in their pulp narratives. On the contrary, the fiction written by Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce employs narrative patterns of journey and return in order to expose and question the very relationship between language, gender and identity. By doing so they reveal the alternative ways by which pulp fiction conducts its linguistic experiments.

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38 Aldo Nove, 'Jasmine', in *Woobinda* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 1996): 115-117 (116).

39 Giuseppe Caliceti, *Fonderia Italgisa* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1996).