Superman in Italy: the power of refugee artists

Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski

This chapter examines an Italian collection of refugee stories from 2018, *Anche Superman era un rifugiato: Storie vere di coraggio per un mondo migliore* (Superman Was a Refugee Too: True Stories of Courage for a Better World) to analyze key elements that Italian literature brings to discourses about migration literature. With the increase of migration to Italy, and the harsh Bossi-Fini immigration laws of 2002, a growing number of scholars have examined migration in Italian literary and cultural studies, but English-language anthologies and criticism still often overlook Italian work. Restricting analyses of literature in Italian to just Italian studies contributes to an international power imbalance, which is reflected not only in migratory movements, but also literary studies as a field. Arguing for the importance of including untranslated works in debates about migration literature, I put *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* in conversation with two well-known collections, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (2018) and *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature: Departures, Arrivals, Generations, Returns* (2019), in order to trace how Italy is positioned in these three migration literature anthologies and to show how Italy decenters ideas of one-directional migratory movement.

The English-language collections share various qualities with *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* that underscore shared investments in challenging concepts of migration but also shed light on the Italian collection’s unique configuration. *The Displaced* is a collection of contemporary essays edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen, the award-winning author of *The Sympathizer* (2015) and *The Committed* (2021). *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* is a collection of stories co-edited by Igiaba Scego, the award-winning author of *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), *Adua* (2015), and *La linea del colore* (2020). Nguyen and Scego’s collections emphasize refugees as artists and authors, *The Displaced* in its choice of contributors and *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* with the subjects of its stories. Nguyen and Scego’s own novels also bear important thematic relationships to their edited volumes: both
authors’ fictional and non-fictional work have been central for motivating public conversations about racism and migration, primarily in the United States for Nguyen and in Italy for Scego. The Italian writer has also characterized her last three novels as a “trilogia della violenza coloniale” (Scego, 2020: 360) (trilogy about colonial violence). Scego aims to decolonize the space of Italian literature, not only with her own writing but also with her edited volumes (Ferracuti, 2020: 49): *Italiani per vocazione* (2005, with works by authors who moved to Italy), *Future: Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi* (2019, a collection by Afro-Italian women authors), and *Africana: Raccontare il Continente al di là degli stereotipi* (2021, works representing Africa’s contemporary diversity), as well as *Anche Superman era un rifugiato*, which she co-edited with the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

*Anche Superman era un rifugiato* and *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* emphasize the long history of migration in literature. *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* represents a selection of migration literature from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, while *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* portrays the journeys of refugees from antiquity to today. The two collections call attention to space as well as time, since their works purposefully map multiple movements of people from around the world. These volumes’ global structures underscore migration literature’s transnational nature. While constructing a vision of what migration literature means, these anthologies raise questions about what the literary can and cannot accomplish, especially in terms of understanding migrant experiences in order to change the treatment of people who cross borders.

Italy is often described as a country that changed from being one of emigrants, with Italians moving to America or northern Europe to find better economic prospects in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to one of immigrants, where an estimated 8% of the population today is foreign born.¹ From the 1870s onward, about twenty-six million people left Italy (Fiore, 2017: 4; Gabaccia, 2003: 1).² Providing the exact numbers for Italian migration is difficult, not only because of the challenges of precisely counting human movement but also because many emigrants returned to Italy or emigrated multiple times. Teresa Fiore’s *Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy’s Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies* examines the challenges of characterizing Italy and migration: she notes that in 2014 there were about the same number of Italians living abroad as the number of foreigners living in Italy (Fiore, 2017: 3), which undermines narratives that frame Italy as simply transitioning from a country of emigrants to one of immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s.

Before the citizenship laws of 1992 and the Bossi-Fini migration laws a decade later, Italy’s history of emigration provided a reason to expect that
Italy would be more welcoming than other European countries to immigrants. In the introduction to his 2001 collection, *ItaliAfrica: Bridging Continents and Cultures*, Sante Matteo directly links African immigrants in Italy to Italian immigrants in the United States, surmising that Africans in the peninsula, like Italian Americans, would lose their minority status over time: “The status of African immigrants in Italy is more akin to that of Italian immigrants in America at the turn of the last century than to that of previous Africans who left their homes as slaves or ex-colonials” (Matteo, 2001: 6).

Italy’s history, geography, and politics highlight the complexity of describing migratory movement, and the issues with assuming all countries follow similar models in terms of migration.

In part because of Italy’s proximity to Africa, the co-editor of *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* Scéo has argued that the country has a fear of being Black. Scéo’s statement can be approached from a variety of angles, including racism, politics, or geography. Jennifer Gugliemo and Salvatore Salerno’s *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* explores how Italians are situated in racial constructions and exposes the contradictions involved in establishing racial differences. Camilla Hawthorne examines the racism of Italy’s debated citizenship policies, which prioritize bloodlines (*ius sanguinis*) and the children of older Italians (even if they have never been to Italy), rather than those born in Italy (*ius soli*). Melissa Coburn has succinctly brought together many of the specificities of Italy and discrimination: “Italians have all, at some point, been the target of racializing discrimination. As an example of such discrimination, consider the prejudicial saying that ‘Africa begins at the Alps.’ The imagined border with Africa shifts from one interlocutor to the next: ‘Africa begins at Rome’ or ‘Africa begins at Naples’ are equally commonplace expressions that may still be heard today” (Coburn, 2013: 13).

Calling attention to Italy’s long history as a place of transition, Scéo argues that Italy must confront its racism in order to move forward: “In its heart, as a Mediterranean state, Italy knows itself to be a country with strong links to Africa. It could be the perfect pivot between continents, between Europe and Africa, yet it persists in denying its mixed-race identity as a country made of diversity. Everyone has passed through here: Arabs, Austrians, Africans, the French, the Spanish. This is Italy, a mixture of different blood and skins. When it finally accepts this identity, it will once again be the *Bel Paese* we all love” (Scéo, 2018c).

In the first section of this chapter, “The paratexts of migration anthologies: locating Italy,” I compare *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* with the more discussed English-language works to show the importance of considering migration from Italy’s position, instead of, for instance, that of the United...
States or United Kingdom. In the second section, “Migrant, refugee, and in exile: a long literary history,” I consider the uses of the terms “migrant,” “refugee,” and “in exile” in these anthologies, noting how the development of national identities and literary histories influence critical understandings of these terms. The importance of Italy’s pre-national medieval literature continues to shape both how more recent migrant writers engage Italy’s literary traditions and also how Italian literature is incorporated in anthologies. Focusing on the contrasts between Anche Superman era un rifugiato and the English-language anthologies, I will also analyze differing concepts of authorial identity. In the third section, “From Superman to 1938: literary collections as dialogues,” I discuss how Anche Superman era un rifugiato reveals the connections between colonialism, migration, racism, and antisemitism in Italian history and criticism. Like other chapters in this volume, the analysis of Anche Superman era un rifugiato focuses on the significance of including a broad historical view of migration, the possibilities of Romance-language spaces to offer alternative perspectives to those grounded in Anglophone ones, and the potentialities of art and literature in critical conceptions of migration.

The paratexts of migration anthologies: locating Italy

Literary anthologies make arguments through their organization and selections. They may make visible a previously ignored connection between authors’ works, propose a canon, or formulate a new field. In the early twentieth century, English poetry collections helped define modernist verse.7 In part as a response to the framing of migration as a series of crises and the dehumanization of refugees in the media, numerous recent anthologies offer different ideas of migration through literature.8 Even limiting the selection to just anthologies in Italian or English from 2018 and 2019 generates a lengthy list beyond Anche Superman era un rifugiato, The Displaced, and The Penguin Book of Migration Literature. These anthologies vary in terms of who is included in the categories “migrant,” “refugee,” or “in exile,” as well as what migration literature itself encompasses. Often framed as a point of transition rather than a destination, the descriptions of Italy in these works reveal connections between the places in a migrant’s journey and between the journeys of migrants from different periods, from Aeneas to Dante to today, raising the question of who is included in this category and why.

With its layered construction, Anche Superman era un rifugiato underscores connections between migrants over time. Each story combines the narrative of a recent refugee with that of an internationally known one from the past.
These famous refugees’ stories predate this century and include fictional figures, such as Aeneas, Hercule Poirot, and Superman, as well as non-fictional ones, such as Dante, Marc Chagall, and Hannah Arendt. The Italian authors of the stories spoke to the contemporary refugees, whose words are often directly cited in the works. The authors of *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* take a variety of approaches to combining the stories from the past with those of the present, as well as how they incorporate their conversations with the twenty-first-century refugees. The recent refugee’s phrases may be woven into the story or italicized to differentiate them from the author’s narration. The refugee from the past may be a figure of inspiration, may communicate in a dream, may appear as the author of a book, may transform into a bird, or the story may be told in parallel to the twenty-first century refugee’s story. The variety of ways that the past – fictional and non-fictional – is incorporated into the stories emphasizes how literature inspires, changes, or speaks to the present and future, in terms of an individual and collectively. With their pairs of refugee characters, the collection is purposefully constructed around literature’s ability to serve as a bridge between people from different time periods and places.

The recent refugees of *Anche Superman era un rifugiato*, like the more famous ones, are subjects, not only because of their difficult journeys, but also because of what they have created. The famous characters are, in order of appearance, Rudolf Nureyev, Dante Alighieri, Marlene Dietrich, Nadia Comăneci, Miriam Makeba, Joseph Conrad, Marc Chagall, Hannah Arendt, Freddie Mercury, Aeneas, Chico Buarque, Superman, and Hercule Poirot.

Most of the twenty-first-century refugees are also artists, dancers, singers, and poets. The more recent refugees are Ahmad Joudeh, Alaa Arsheed, Mohamed Keita, Rose Lokonyen, Emi Mahmoud, Mercy Akoot, Abdalla Al Omari, Abdullahi Ahmed, Amani Zreba, individuals in the group “Diamo rifugio ai talenti,” Dagmawi Yimer, Tareke Brhane, and Alidad Shiri. These refugees are also often internationally known and have become more so since the publication of *Anche Superman era un rifugiato*.

Each story is accompanied by a related illustration by various artists. For the most part, a single image depicts the two refugees together in a way that relates to how the story has brought them together. Laura Riccioli portrays a dancing Ahmad Joudeh looking up at the ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev and a swallow, a central party of the collection’s first story (Figure 5.1). Mariachiara di Giorgio portrays Abdullahi Ahmed and Hannah Arendt, in the company of other figures, both staring out at the viewers (Figure 5.2). The artists’ and authors’ works, within the collection and outside of it, underscore the varied ways art and literature are in conversation with each other. Some of the artists and authors had worked together on previous projects, while other artist-author pairs collaborated together for the first
time for the volume. The illustrations vary stylistically, but most of them highlight the connections between the two refugee figures of the story while also accentuating their individual abilities.

The volume’s illustrations of refugees dancing, painting, playing the violin, and helping others make the works more appealing for a younger audience, while also challenging common media representations of refugees. In the early twenty-first century, the largest number of migrants to Italy have come from (in order): Romania, Albania, Morocco, China, and Ukraine,
but the most common representations of immigration to Italy are ones of crowded boats of Black African refugees trying to reach Lampedusa, an Italian island closer to Tunisia than Sicily. This disjunction suggests the vital importance of portrayals in shaping how migration is understood. Photojournalist Darrin Zammit Lupi’s photographs for Reuters have, for instance, been used by multiple articles across media. Highlighting the danger required to reach Italy, many of Zammit Lupi’s photos feature crowds of Black people in boats (Figure 5.3) or in the water, almost drowning. These
powerful images of dehumanization can prompt a viewer to sympathize with or pity the migrants’ situation, but the photo also frames them in a fixed, dehumanized shot.

Federica Mazzara’s *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and Aesthetics of Subversion* argues that images can problematically fix the loss of life around Lampedusa as “border spectacle,” but that art can subvert views of migrants in and around Lampedusa. In chapter 6 below, Tenley Bick analyzes art located on Lampedusa itself, especially the Italian artist Mimmo Paladino’s 2008 work, *Porta di Lampedusa, porta d’Europa* (Gateway to Lampedusa, Gateway to Europe) in terms of its decolonial fluidity and in contrast with monuments as exertions of power. The illustrations of the stories in *Anche Superman era un rifugiato*, as the refugees themselves, also disrupt mainstream images of migration. For instance, Abdalla Al Omari, paired with Marc Chagall in Michela Monferrini’s story, is famous for painting world leaders as refugees (Figure 5.4). In order to shift the Eurocentric idea of what an African migrant or traveler includes and the concept of what a migrant is, artists and authors of *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* counteract a widespread view of Africans as exemplifying migrants. American media, for instance, often ignores migrations within Africa or to Turkey, in contrast to the focus on the smaller number of migrants to Lampedusa.

Figure 5.3 Darrin Zammit Lupi, “Rescue at Sea 2” from the series *On Board the Aquarius, December 2017*. Courtesy of the Rubenstein Library, Duke University.
Even when the Italian collection’s stories include Lampedusa, the refugees’ narratives always continue beyond this moment of peril to focus on their lives and later actions.

Whereas most of the short stories in *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* have an initial illustration followed by the text, the titular tale is a graphic story, written and illustrated by the same person, Giuseppe Palumbo. Each line of text in “Anche Superman era un rifugiato” is accompanied by two images: the one above the text depicts Superman’s journey from his home planet to earth and the one below shows the refugee Tareke Brhane’s journey from Eritrea to Italy. Both show the transitions the men undergo, first fleeing for their lives (Figure 5.5), then adjusting to life in a new place, and then working to help others (Figure 5.6), Superman as Superman and Taneke Brhane as the president of the Comitato 3 ottobre, which pushed for a day of remembrance for migrants who perished off the coast of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013, as well as for recognition of the plight of migrants more generally. Palumbo’s pictures draw on widespread images of Superman but also of refugees in the media. The work calls attention to how many refugees’ narratives follow the pattern of a well-known superhero, including a need to leave, facing incomprehension in a new place, and then helping others.
Figures 5.5 and 5.6 Giuseppe Palumbo, pages from “Anche Superman era un rifugiato.” © Giuseppe Palumbo. Courtesy of the artist.
Figures 5.5 and 5.6 (Continued)
Subverting dehumanizing portrayals of migrants as border spectacle, the parallels between the journeys of Brhane and of Superman show how numerous refugee tales could be rewritten following the format of Superman’s story and how this popular American superhero figures as a refugee.

Despite Italy’s important role in migration, both to and within Europe, the country is not as central as the United States, England, Germany, or France in discussions of migration or migration literature. Although the introduction to The Penguin Book of Migration Literature emphasizes its global nature, 28 out of its 32 pieces were written in English. The few languages from which the works are translated are French, German, and Arabic. This focus on English-speaking countries as the assumed physical destinations, and English as the linguistic one, indicates how English-language globality can degenerate into provincialism. Many of the authors who write in English in The Penguin Book of Migration Literature and also The Displaced, which is composed of untranslated works in English, were not born speaking the language. At times, the dominance of English emphasizes immigration (the destination) and occludes linguistic emigration. This perspective also centers migration to English-speaking countries as paradigmatic, often ignoring the cases of migration to and from French, Italian, or Spanish-speaking countries, among others.

In Immigrant Fictions: Contemporary Literature in an Age of Globalization, Rebecca L. Walkowitz argues that migration literature challenges views of English fiction as homogenous and monolingual. Caryl Phillips’s anthology Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging (1997) shows how English fiction can challenge what is considered British: “For many British people, to accept the idea that their country has a long and complex history of immigration would be to undermine their basic understanding of what British fiction means” (Phillips, 1997: xii). The Penguin Book of Migration Literature, meanwhile, points out that, “While one can find origin-specific anthologies (e.g. African, Caribbean, or South Asian diasporas) and destination specific ones (e.g. Canadian, British, or US immigrant literature), this is the first collection to offer a global, comparative scope” (Ahmad, 2019: xv).

Despite its claim, migration literature anthologies, such as The Penguin Book of Migration Literature, are often debated, and perhaps even constructed, as if their goals were akin to Phillip’s anthology: to shift the concept of English fiction. While this challenge is a critical one, it potentially overshadows more global (not Anglo-global) questions and issues. A focus on migration literature in English underscores the issues of English colonization and decolonization, minimizing the differing cases of French, Italian, or Spanish colonization, among others.

The frequent assumption that authors write in English potentially recreates the power dynamics these works may aim to contest, with the migrant as
viewed (or object) and the English speaker as viewer (or subject). In her important analysis of the development of refugee anthologies as a genre, Emma Bond suggests how anthologies potentially limit what one considers part of a genre or even of history:

Yet on the macro-level, the anthology is also subject to the ulterior practices of intentional selection on the part of the editors and publishers that might risk allowing one particular history to emerge instead of another. It thus also runs the risk of fixing history into that one image that it has decided to communicate, and in so doing, might unintentionally end up “fixing” cultural differences as well. (Bond, 2019: 161)

The migrant may write or be described, but the English-speaking non-migrant is assumed to be the audience, the one enacted upon and transformed by the work.

Migration literature anthologies present not only different potential world maps (what spaces are included) but also a sense of time (what periods of migration are included). Anglophone criticism of migration literature and anthologies often overlook Italian works in which connections across time, especially between the medieval period and today, tend to play a vital role. Focusing on English-language works prioritizes modern migration literature, again reflecting how the study of migration literature has developed in English. Phillips’ introduction to Extravagant Strangers persuasively argues: “To my way of thinking, English literature has, for at least 200 years, been shaped and influenced by outsiders” (Phillips, 1997: x). What “outsider” or “stranger” would mean in the Italian context is more fluid, since Italy was not a country two-hundred years ago. Many authors, such as Dante, have been in exile or made to migrate within the peninsula itself. The idea of exile or migration between different parts of Italy continued long after the nation’s unification in the nineteenth century. Mussolini forced many Italians he considered dangerous to Fascism into confino, “internal exile.” This policy was important in terms of development of the “Southern Question,” since primarily northern Italians were sent to southern Italy where they experienced the great differences between the North and South of their country. Discussions of migration and Italy in the 1950s and 1960s often focus on the move many southern Italians made to the more economically prosperous North of Italy. The prejudice southern Italians faced has shifted somewhat onto non-Italian migrants as the number of migrants in Italy has increased. This exile within a country, an important feature of Italian history, is less frequently covered in migration studies, which tends to emphasize big moves and assume that it entails crossing at least one national boundary.

Collections’ paratexts, the words and images around the stories that mediate a readers’ understanding of them – from book covers, to subheadings,
to chapter titles – often reveal the different directions that a reader could be pulled in terms of time, space, and genre when approaching anthologies of migration literature. Under each selection in *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* is a place with an arrow to somewhere else: for instance, Julie Otsuka, “Come, Japanese!” Japan → USA; Francisco Jiménez, “Under the Wire,” Mexico → USA; Eva Hoffman, from *Lost in Translation*, Poland → Canada. Although the potential complexities of assuming that a character (or author) finds a final destination are suggested in the two examples where the space after the arrow is left blank, the labelling itself sets up a teleological structure of spatial, one-directional movement, based primarily on nations. The boundaries of migration literature, as framed by *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*, reflect how globalism, literary markets, and issues of migration are intertwined. English-speaking destinations, linguistic and physical, dominate. In contrast to the United States’ eight or the UK’s ten, Italy appears only once in these directional lists.

Dinaw Mengestu’s “An Honest Exit,” Ethiopia → Sudan → Italy → UK → USA, is the only story to list five countries underneath it. Italy is significantly in a spot with multiple arrows, marking transitional places before the final destination of the United States. “An Honest Exit” reflects on the country’s in-between status at several points: “In Italy he was given asylum and set free. From there he works his way north and then west across Europe” (Mengestu, 2019: 88). As much as an entry point to one nation, Italy represents a door to Europe. While the story describes some migrants as always having planned to leave Italy, others readjusted once there: “Rome is not what I thought it would be. France will surely be better” (Mengestu, 2019: 88). Occupying a spot between Ethiopia and the United States, between Sudan and the United Kingdom, Italy presents a different focal point from which to consider migration, one which frequently reveals how interconnected places are and that migration almost always involves more than a point A of departure and a point B of arrival.

In the collection *The Displaced*, authors such as David Bezmozgis, Fatima Bhutto, Joseph Kertes, Maaza Mengiste, and Dina Nayeri reflect on what being a refugee means. Italy again appears as a transitional space, for Jews leaving Hungary in the 1950s or the Soviet Union in the 1980s and people leaving Eritrea and Ethiopia today. On the way from Riga in the Soviet Union to Toronto in Canada (after thinking they would end up in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Melbourne, and Israel), David Bezmozgis describes his family’s temporary period in Vienna and Rome (Bezmozgis, 2018: 36). When moving from Iran to the United States, Dina Nayeri’s “The Ungrateful Refugee” describes “spending two years in refugee hostels in Dubai and Rome” (Nayeri, 2018: 138). Considering migration from the perspective of Italy highlights the unexpected connections between
places, like Rome and Dubai or Vienna, with journeys over and over again reflecting the potential randomness of home and nationality. Examining Italy’s role in migration literature challenges any concept of destinations as destined. “Second Country” by Joseph Kertes elucidates the links between places and chance involved in finding a homeland: “The West must have felt guilty, so they opened their doors to us. At the grand bus station in Vienna, Hungarians got free tickets to anywhere they wanted to go in Europe. Each bus was labeled with a different capital – take your choice: Paris, Rome, Bonn, Madrid, Amsterdam, Brussels, Lisbon, and beyond – London, Stockholm, Copenhagen” (Kertes, 2018: 108). Rome repeatedly comes up as a city people consider making their home, but which ultimately ends up being just a stop on their travels. Focusing on Italy reveals the difficulties of knowing what spaces are transitory or destinations in an individual's journey.

In other essays in *The Displaced*, Italy’s museums and cafés (or rather caffès) make an appearance, contrasting the routes tourists and refugees follow to and through the country. In “Flesh and Sand,” Fatima Bhutto discusses going to the Fondazione Prada in Milan to see Alejandro G. Inarritu’s virtual reality installation of the experience of walking through to desert to enter Arizona. In Maaza Mengiste’s “This is What the Journey Does,” the author observes a refugee from a coffee shop: “I know there is nothing really special about him, not in Florence, Italy. He is just one of the many refugees or migrants who have made their way here from East Africa, a physical embodiment of those now-familiar reports and photographs of migration” (Mengiste, 2018: 129). The author suggests the significance, not only of her own observation, but also of that of the refugee’s: “If he looks at me, then our lives will unfold and in front of us will be the many roads we have taken to get to this intersection in Florence and we will reveal ourselves for what we are: immigrant, migrant, refugee, African, East African, Black, foreigner, stranger, a body rendered disobedient by the very nature of what we are” (Mengiste, 2018: 132). Mengiste suggests the power of recognition as she contemplates the potential connections between her past and that of someone who has ultimately ended up in a very different situation. Mengiste emphasizes the transformations the journey entails for a migrant and the difficulty of finding a place even when one has found a home. Italy’s role in these works also suggests the problem of considering Europe purely through representations from its members with the greatest political strength.

While Italy is primarily a transitional space in *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* and *The Displaced*, the language of Anche Superman era un rifugiato could suggest that Italy would play a central role in the work. One could expect the language of a volume, English or Italian, to
drive the configuration of the work itself, particularly in terms of which nations are included. While this is true of *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*, Italy does not dominate as a destination in *Anche Superman era un rifugiato*, though it plays a somewhat larger role than in the English-language anthologies. As the title itself suggests with “Superman,” an American hero referenced in English rather than as *superuomo*, Italian scholars and authors are more likely to put their country in a comparative perspective than those from countries who more obviously impact global discourses. Since there are multiple moves in each story, with numerous transitional spaces, a paratext with arrows identifying directional moves between nations as in *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* would be extremely complicated, if not impossible. The paratexts of *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* instead identify the author and the two primary characters of each story. The table of contents lists the titles of the stories and the authors, while each story’s page header provides the name of the author and then the subjects of the story: a famous refugee of the past, from Aeneas to Freddie Mercury, and a twenty-first century refugee, preceded by a title page with the name of the story, the name of the illustrator, and the image inspired by the work.

Although it does not declare itself as such, the volume is, in some ways, more global than *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*, but the concept of “global” often implies a larger (English-speaking) audience. The fact that the stories of *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* are written in a language that is not always considered global, again raises the question of how linguistic and geopolitical movement are framed from the vantage point of countries that consider themselves destinations and the defining forces of globality. These power structures can be reified by the limited number of translations into English from other languages and the publishing practices that consider discussions of works not in English to be niche. Apparent marginality (like Italy’s) becomes a place of experimentation, where ideas are brought into contact in a way that they are not necessarily in centralized discourses. This space of experimentation promotes considering migration across space, time, and languages. For *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* these concepts are forged through art, not only by the stories themselves, but also due to the artists described in the works.

In Paolo Di Paolo’s “Una nuvola di note” (“A cloud of notes”), Dante’s *Divine Comedy* provides a model for the unification of two friends (one of whom turns out not to exist), offers a reference point in terms of artistic collaboration, and is also discussed within the story itself. The story begins “Una delle cose più belle che possano capitarti nella vita è ritrovare un amico che avevi perso di vista” (Di Paolo, 2018: 26) (“One of the most beautiful things that can happen to you in life is to see again a friend that..."
you have not seen for a while”). Alaa Arsheed, a violinist, is in an Italian city and runs into his friend Moosa. They reminisce about the artistic circle they had in Afghanistan, which they have both fled because of the war. Alaa plays music to accompany Moosa’s description of Dante. It turns out Moosa never made it to Italy. Like Dante in purgatory when he sees Casella, who set his poetry to music, these friends are unable to embrace: “perché Casella era una specie di fantasma, o comunque un ricordo, un’immagine senza corpo. Come Moosa, di cui si sono perse completamente le tracce, e con lui di tanti altri, nella terra da cui Alaa è venuto via” (Di Paolo, 2018: 31) (“because Casella was a kind of ghost, or in any case a memory, an image without a body. Like Moosa, whom he had completely lost the traces of, and along with him many others, from the land that Alaa had left”).

Music and literature reunite these pairs of friends when they are no longer able to meet in reality. The Italy where Alaa and Moosa appear to meet is paralleled to purgatory, where Dante meets Casella in the Divine Comedy.

While Dante, like all subjects of the volume, is included partially because of his experience as a refugee, at the same time, much of the story dwells on Dante’s poetry, its models of friendship, its descriptions of loss, and the journey from hell to paradise.

Flora Farina’s story “Gli uomini rondine (“The swallow men”) opens the collection (Figure 5.1) and reflects on the ability of dance and narrative to bring together people with different backgrounds. The narrative starts with Rudolf Nureyev’s point of view as a dancer, who dreams of a swallow, a migratory bird. In the next section, the swallow speaks to Ahmad Joudeh (both men are referred to using their first names). Moving between the two perspectives, the story reveals how the two men are linked by more than their incredible dancing abilities. Rudolf was born on a trans-Siberian train, in motion. Born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, Ahmad is without a stable home because of the bombing. Their fathers condemned them for dancing. Rudolf decides to leave the Soviet Union and asks for political asylum in Paris. Ahmad leaves Syria for Amsterdam. The swallow inspires bravery in them both and connects their stories. The freedom of the bird’s movements points to the lack of freedom Nureyev has in the Soviet Union and Joudeh in Syria, but also symbolizes the freedom they find in dance, suggesting connections between the movements of migration and dance itself. The bird seems to go where it is needed and at the end appears ready to narrate Joudeh’s story to Nureyev: “Sei tu? Sei tornata rondinella! Racconta allora, su racconta” (Farina, 2018: 22) (“Is that you? You’ve returned, dear swallow! Tell us then, come on tell us”). The movement of the bird through time suggests connections between all people who need to leave their homelands, no matter what prompts their departures. In reality, Nureyev died not long after Joudeh was born.
Joudeh became known internationally because of his dancing. The subject of a Dutch documentary, he moved from Syria to the Netherlands in 2016. In Syria he danced in the Palmyra theater, used by ISIS for executions and then partially destroyed. When Joudeh was threatened for his dancing, his reaction was to have “Dance or Die” tattooed in Sanskrit on his neck, the place where the blade would touch were he beheaded. The same motto, in Italian, provides the title of his autobiography Danza o muori. In the acknowledgements to his autobiography, Joudeh credits the Italian dancer Roberto Bolle (who writes the preface to the book) with having made his dreams a reality. Joudeh’s story shows both the power of art to connect and its dangers, since death threats directly related to his pursuits as a dancer. In part because of the important role Bolle played in his development as a dancer and for his international status, Joudeh’s autobiography is originally in Italian, written for an Italian audience, although Joudeh does not live full-time in Italy. Joudeh’s memoir highlights how the international nature of art does not necessarily follow the movement of people.

The fact that the subjects of the works in Anche Superman era un rifugiato are often better known internationally than the authors disrupts the power dynamics of many migration tales that follow a similar format of authors narrating stories told to them by refugees. Especially because of the parallels established in the pairings, several of the stories potentially contradict expectations of who a refugee is. Nureyev’s departure from Soviet Union, for instance, is usually described as a “defection” and he is not often referred to as a “refugee.” The UNHCR spokesperson for southern Europe, Carlotta Sami, introduces Anche Superman era un rifugiato with an observation about the potentially distancing effects of the word “refugee”: “Mia nonna è stata una rifugiata. Ma io l’ho capito solo pochi anni fa” (Sami, 2018: 5) (“My grandmother was a refugee. But I only realized this a few years ago”). She is surprised to find a refugee so close, within her family. Anche Superman era un rifugiato similarly aims to push the reader’s understanding of who is a refugee to be more inclusive.

Migrant, refugee, and in exile: a long literary history

Viet Thanh Nguyen’s introduction to The Displaced also starts with a consideration of the negative connotations of the word “refugee”: “I was once a refugee, although no one would mistake me for being a refugee now. Because of this, I insist on being called a refugee, since the temptation to pretend that I am not a refugee is strong” (Nguyen, 2018: 11). Nguyen highlights how the term refugee is controversial, demanding, and threatening. He builds on a tradition of refugee, transnational, and migrant authors
reflecting on what they should be called. Hannah Arendt’s “We Refugees” (originally published in 1943) also begins with the problems of the term:

In the first place, we don’t like to be called “refugees.” We ourselves call each other “new comers” or “immigrants.” Our newspapers are papers for “Americans of German language”; and, as far as I know, there is not and never was any club founded by Hitler-persecuted people whose name indicated that its members were refugees. (Arendt, 1994: 110)

“Refugee” authors repeatedly confront a description they would not necessarily choose for themselves.

As Nguyen makes clear in his introduction, the term “refugee” does not neutrally describe a person who has fled from their homeland, but also often connotes a negative judgment that the descriptions “migrant” or “in exile” do not necessarily. The terms “refugee” and “migrants” began to be used more than “in exile” in the 1930s. Exile, described by Julio Cortázar as “a universal theme, at least since the laments of an Ovid or a Dante” (Cortázar, 1994: 171), often suggests a longer tradition and greater status than “refugee” or “migrant.” “In exile” potentially indicates that the person has found a new place to be (in exile), as opposed to a “refugee;” again in Nguyen’s words, “These displaced persons are mostly unwanted where they fled from; unwanted where they are, in refugee camps; and unwanted where they want to go” (Nguyen, 2018: 17). A modern author in exile points to the individual’s experience and often characterizes a writer who wrote before leaving their home, whereas a refugee writer tends to suggest that the writer is part of, or even represents, a group of people who left their country.

Briefly considering The Heart of a Stranger: An Anthology of Exile Literature (2020) in terms of The Penguin Book of Migration Literature and Anche Superman era un rifugiato highlights the complicated relationship between the way exile, migration, and refugee are used when discussing literature. The Heart of a Stranger, edited by André Naffis-Sahely, an Italian-Iranian who grew up in Abu Dhabi and now lives in Los Angeles, and The Penguin Book of Migration Literature, edited by Dohra Ahmad, both include works by Olaudah Equiano (born in the 1740s) and Phillis Wheatley (born in the 1750s). Due to the view that writers in exile are part of an extensive literary history, Equiano is preceded chronologically by a range of writers in The Heart of a Stranger, in contrast to The Penguin Book of Migration Literature where he is the earliest author. Like The Oxford Book of Exile, the 2020 collection starts with biblical selections that show the longevity of this literary tradition (Simpson, 1995). Exile literature underscores how humans reflecting on being forced to find new homes is a central element of literary history. With selections from authors such as Homer, Sappho, Xenophanes, Plutarch, Du Fu, and Abd al-Rahman I, The Heart of the
Stranger includes translations not only from Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Chinese, and Arabic, but also a sizable list of other languages from around the world. The collection’s numerous translations from the Italian range from Dante’s encounter with Cacciaguida in the Divine Comedy to Ribka Sibhatu’s twenty-first-century poem “In Lampedusa.” Dante appears again in The Heart of the Stranger as the focus of Giacomo Leopardi’s “On the Monument to Dante Being ERECTED IN Florence,” which dwells on the need for a monument honouring Dante in the city from which he had been exiled.

While Dante’s placement in collections of exile literature is part of a long tradition, Aeneas and Dante’s roles in Anche Superman era un rifugiato prompted several far-right journalists to react with vehement denial of the appropriateness of the term “refugee,” since they viewed the term as a disparagement. In Il Primato Nazionale, a publication connected with the far-right group CasaPound, Marco Scarsini questions, “in che modo Enea può essere definito un rifugiato in Italia se il fondatore della sua stirpe vi era nato?” (Scarsini, 2018) (“in what way can Aeneas be defined a refugee in Italy if the founder of his race (stirpe) was born there?”). This tortured attempt to claim that the fictional character Aeneas was not a refugee because of his bloodlines reveals not only the negative connotations of “refugee” for certain readers, but also the significance of Aeneas as a founding figure for Italy.

It is hard to imagine a similar critical debate in the United States over categorizing American authors or characters as refugees, because of literature’s insignificance for the country’s national identity. From Aeneas, to Dante, to contemporary fiction, literature plays an especially large role in Italy’s concept of itself, which relates in part to the country’s literary history and later unification. Italy as a literary concept long predates its existence as a nation. In response to Klemens von Metternich’s jab at the Congress of Vienna that Italy was merely a “geographical expression,” Giosuè Carducci claimed that it was instead “un’espressione letteraria, una tradizione poetica” (a literary expression, a poetic tradition). The sense that Italy and her literature were one and the same continued well after the Risorgimento and Italy’s unification. Every issue of the Fascist magazine La difesa della razza (The Defence of Race, 1938–43) has a Dante quote on the front cover. The Fascists who put together the journal found Dante as significant as statistics, history, or racist science for persuading the public that Jewish and Black people should be excluded from Italian society. In 1960, Carlo Levi again highlighted the important relationship between Italy and her literature: “Tutti i suoi artisti e i suoi poeti l’hanno, descrivendola, determinata” (Levi, 1960: viii) (“All of her artists and poets have, in describing the country, determined it”). In Italy the literary plays an important role for members of diverse political parties and perspectives.
Critics have observed that Italian migration literature does not always fit well into the model provided by earlier discussions of migration literature, in part because of how quickly migrant writers engaged the Italian canon, again revealing the importance of literature to being Italian.20 This suggests both the difference of the Italian situation and the need for models of migration literature to consider multiple cases since literature varies in its relationship to nationhood and identity. Anglophone criticism and works have increasingly been invested in authors primarily representing their own experiences, which could suggest the collaborative stories of Anche Superman era un rifugiato are problematic, as the Italian writers incorporate tales from the past and also stories from refugees that the authors themselves obviously did not experience. Most of the authors contributing to Anche Superman era un rifugiato were born in Italy. This lack of direct connection between the authors’ backgrounds and their subject matter distinguishes it from many English-language collections.

The penultimate piece in Anche Superman era un rifugiato is, however, non-fiction by a refugee author. Alidad Shiri describes his experiences while making his way from Afghanistan to Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, and eventually Italy: “Il viaggio di un migrante spesso dura anni, è una lotta continua tra la vita e la morte” (Shiri, 2018: 181) (“A migrant’s journey often lasts years, it is a continual struggle between life and death”). While several of the ideas in this work relate to ones found in the fictional stories, he addresses a refugee’s travails and the reader more directly: “Vorrei invitare voi lettori, grandi o piccoli, a fare leva sulla vostra sensibilità e umanità: non c’è nessun motivo, nessuna giustificazione, per trattare male chi è arrivato o arriva, rispendendolo al mittente come fosse un pacco indesiderato” (Shiri, 2018: 182–3) (“I would like to invite you, readers young and old, to employ your sensitivity and humanity: there is no motive or justification to treat poorly those who have arrived or arrive, returning them to their senders as if they were an undesired package”). Shiri ends by saying that his request is not a political manifesto, but “un semplice invito all’umanità” (Shiri, 2018: 183) (“a simple invitation to humanity”).

His non-fictional contribution, entitled “Un semplice invito all’umanità,” suggests one way all of the collection’s stories could be understood, but part of the power of literature is that it does not have to be interpreted in just one way. This simplistic statement may seem unnecessary, but with migration literature there has been an increase in approaches that assume a strong correlation between biography and literature, which flattens the potentialities of literature. Especially when a work partly asks the reader to reconsider identities or the relationship between writing and history, recent English-language criticism has tended to focus on authors whose biographies inspired their characters. Many of the authors selected for The
Penguin Book of Migration Literature share similar backgrounds (if not the same) to those of their characters and several of the works are also categorized as memoirs. The collection includes powerful works by a variety of important authors, but the selection process set certain limits to what “migration literature” can be and, therefore, suggests limits to how much authors can imagine beyond their own experiences and what fiction means when it comes to crossing borders.

“Migrant literature” now often refers to people who migrated to Europe or America from somewhere else in recent decades and who write about migration, with an assumption that biography should reflect literary content or literary content biography. The shift from a discussion of “authors in exile,” which tended to emphasize writers who had intellectual status before migration, to “migrant literature” aimed to draw attention to migrant voices that had been ignored. Carine M. Mardorossian has called attention to how “while the shift from exile to migrant literature helped challenge an unproblematic reliance on the category of experience as the basis of explanation in literary criticism, the same kind of undertheorized relation to experience seems to have resurfaced in critical approaches to the new migrant aesthetics” (Mardorossian, 2003: 18). This trend of identifying experience with literature has only grown in more recent critical discourses. Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration (1995) analyzes Cesare Pavese’s La luna e i falò (The Moon and the Bonfires, 1950) (White, 1995: 7–8). Today, authors like Pavese, who never saw the America described in his novel, are frequently excluded when it comes to “migration literature.”

Considering The Penguin Book of Migration Literature and Anche Superman era un rifugiato together raises the question of what migration literature can encompass and how important an author’s background is for the label. In “Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction,” Zadie Smith argues against the collapse of authorial identity and literary perspective:

Full disclosure: what insults my soul is the idea – popular in the culture just now, and presented in widely variant degrees of complexity – that we can and should write only about people who are fundamentally “like” us: racially, sexually, genetically, nationally, politically, personally. That only an intimate authorial autobiographical connection with a character can be the rightful basis of a fiction. I do not believe that. I could not have written a single one of my books if I did. (Smith 2019)

She points to how limiting what an author can describe would restrict literature in terms of production, content, and form:

Fiction was suspicious of any theory of the self that appeared to be largely founded on what can be seen with the human eye, that is, those parts of our selves that are material, manifest, and clearly visible in a crowd. Fiction – at
least the kind that was any good – was full of doubt, self-doubt above all. It had grave doubts about the nature of the self. (Smith 2019)

Smith’s persuasive argument for the power of literature in part takes aim against the – as she describes it – popular belief that identity determines perspective, including in literature. The contrasts between Anche Superman era un rifugiato and The Penguin Book of Migration Literature indicate how culturally determined this belief might be. The structure of Anche Superman era un rifugiato fits the concept of literature as a conversation, one that takes place between different people from across time periods and that leads authors as well as readers beyond themselves.

From Superman to 1938: literary collections as dialogues

The long lists of authors, past refugees, recent refugees, illustrators, and editors (Scego and the UNHCR) highlight the amount of collective work that went into Anche Superman era un rifugiato – with collaborations between the artists who provide the images for each story with their authors, as well as collaborations between the authors and the artist refugees, who narrated their experiences before the authors composed their stories. Three of the authors of Anche Superman era un rifugiato also contributed to 1938: Storia, racconto, memoria (1938: History, Story, Memory), a volume of works reflecting on the 1938 Racial Laws that marked the beginning of official Fascist antisemitic policies. The overlap of authors contributing to 1938 and Anche Superman era un rifugiato indicates perhaps a stronger belief in the power of literature to express the doubts Zadie Smith describes, because the authors’ backgrounds did not determine their inclusion in the collections. The authors who contributed to both 1938 and Anche Superman era un rifugiato – Igiaba Scego, Carlo Greppi, and Helena Janeczek – are, respectively, a Roman author whose parents left Somalia for Italy, a historian and author from Turin, and an author who grew up in Germany and whose Polish mother was a concentration camp survivor.

Scego, Greppi, and Janeczek’s stories reveal the connections between migration, racism, antisemitism, and colonialism in Italy. As migration to Italy has increased, Italian writers and critics have paid more attention to Italy’s role as a colonizer and the country’s history of racism. Migration raises questions about a country’s colonialism, even if most of the immigrants did not arrive from formerly colonized countries. Italy’s over sixty years as a colonizer in places now known as Libya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Dodecanese Islands, and Albania, contributed to destabilizing these countries. People are escaping wars and poverty partially resulting from the earlier
Italian presence, and Italy’s membership in Frontex (the EU’s unified border agency) reveals the continuities of Italy’s involvement in these areas. In the past, critics often left Italy out of examinations of colonialism, racism, and antisemitism. Italian scholars and authors redress this gap, offering critiques of what has been ignored in Italy, but also of the problem of ignoring Italy. The wide range of Italianists have revealed Italy’s particular position as a country of emigrants and immigrants, invaded and invading, in terms of dealing with its colonial legacy. The titles of their works, such as Teresa Fiore’s Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy’s Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies, Stephanie Malia Hom’s Empire’s Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy’s Crisis of Migration and Detention, and Pamela Ballinger’s The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy, indicate the dynamic relationship between Italy’s colonial past and its present day, especially in terms of migration.

In Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora, Sandra Ponzanesi explores Italy’s perception of itself as colonized: “despite its aggressive past, Italy still perceives itself more as a colonized country than as a colonizer. Its internal divisions are in fact due to a long history of invasion. Foreigners were always on its territory, including the Greeks, Arabs, Spanish, French, Austrians, and Germans” (Ponzanesi, 2004: 105). Issues of colonization, migration, racism, and antisemitism were long ignored in Italy, but are topics of increasing analysis. The Italian phrase Italiani brava gente (“Italians, good people”) sums up the wilful ignorance of Italians’ role in violent acts of the twentieth century. By offering a particular myth of Italy, the phrase portrays Italians as incapable of any great wrongdoing, especially in contrast to Nazi Germans or imperialist Brits and French. But in exploring how Italians did, in fact, play a role in twentieth-century atrocities, scholars today have identified Italiani brava gente as a sign of Italy’s refusal to entirely confront its past (Fogu, 2006; Del Boca, 2005; Levis Sullam, 2018: 143). This is a past that includes, among other tragedies, the devastating violence of Italy’s more than half a century as a colonizer and the persecution of Jews in the 1930s and 1940s.

By weaving together scenes from the Fascist period with life in the twenty-first century, Scego, Greppi, and Janeczek make explicit connections that were accentuated under Fascism and often ignored after Fascism. They emphasize that colonialism, racism, and antisemitism were not products of Fascism, but that Fascism showed the way they intersect and reinforce each other. The discourses about postcolonialism, the legacy of the Shoah, racism, migration, and sexism have sharply increased in Italian studies and are therefore more interconnected than in some places where the fields are more established, and have become at times not just separate, but also contentious.
While many scholars have explored the connections between racism, colonialism, and migration in Italian literature, I want to highlight how Italian authors who focus on these topics also often incorporate Jewishness and antisemitism into their works, adding another layer to these debates.

“La chat” (“Chat”), Scego’s contribution to 1938, connects what is happening in Italy today to the Fascist period in Italy, not directly equating them, but showing the dangers of considering Italian racism and antisemitism under Fascism as a period of exceptionalism, rather than elements of society that need to be constantly confronted. In present-day Italy, the narrator considers a chat group composed of mothers. Her son lets her know that certain mothers, the parents of Eritrean immigrants, have been excluded from the group. The narrator confronts the other mothers, who respond with disparaging comments about Africans and Black people, which causes the narrator to consider her Jewish grandmother’s experiences of hiding to avoid persecution during World War II. Though there is no resolution to the mothers’ racism, the narrator continues to speak up for the Eritrean refugees, reflecting that her grandmother would be proud of her for taking a stand. Italy’s histories of antisemitism, colonial racism, and present-day racism are linked in the story. While there are relatively few Eritreans in Italy today, their inclusion in this story points to Italy’s history of colonialism, since Italians were present as colonizers in Eritrea from 1882 to 1941. Under Fascism, prejudices were encouraged to foster antisemitism and colonization. The journal dedicated to promulgating racist thought, La difesa della razza (The Defence of Race, 1938–43), contains side-by-side articles on rejecting Jews from Italian society and the need to colonize Africa because of proposed Italian superiority.

Similar to Scego’s “La chat,” Greppi’s story in Anche Superman era un rifugiato points out parallels between experiences of Jewish Europeans during World War II and those of African refugees today. In Greppi’s “I posti che siamo” (“The places we are”), the narrator addresses Abdillahi Ahmed, a refugee from Somalia, in part to highlight the correspondences between his story and Hannah Arendt’s: “In Europa in quegli anni c’era la Guerra, nel periodo in cui Hannah attraversava le frontiere di nascosto, dico, esattamente come in Somalia quando sei dovuto scappare tu” (Greppi, 2018: 121) (“In Europe in those years there was the War, in the period in which Hannah crossed the borders hidden, I mean, exactly as in Somalia when you had to escape”). The narrator calls attention to how the nationalism of the 1940s contributed to the problems refugees face today: “Molti dei problemi che la Somalia ha avuto negli anni successivi sono dovuti a questo: al fatto che gli italiani hanno rapinato il paese a lungo, proprio nel periodo in cui Hannah cercava di scappare dal nazzismo” (Greppi, 2018: 120) (“Many of the problems that Somalia had in subsequent years are because of this:
the fact that Italians ransacked the country for a long time, in the period in which Hannah was trying to escape from Nazism”). Greppi highlights Italy’s role as colonizer in Somalia and how many current international issues can still be traced back to national aggression before and during World War II.

Janecek’s “Il viaggio più lungo è diventare chi sei” (The longest journey is to become who you are) in Anche Superman era un rifugiato and “Trieste in Love” in 1938 both highlight the ways private experience and history intersect and how invisible background can be. “Il viaggio più lungo è diventare chi sei” weaves together the life of Freddie Mercury and Amani Zreba, starting with Queen’s participation in the Live Aid concert: “Però nessuno di quelli che seguono l’esibizione legendaria ha la più pallida idea che anche Freddie Mercury sia arrivato dall’Africa” (Janecek, 2018: 127) (“However none of those following the legendary show had the faintest idea that Freddie Mercury had also arrived from Africa”). This story emphasizes how a person’s “refugee” identity is not necessarily visible. In “Trieste in Love,” characters also have multiple identities and names that do not always reveal how they are part of political change or what they have experienced in their own journeys.

In an article about Janecek winning the prestigious Strega prize in 2018, Scego considers how the award is notable both because a woman had not won it in 15 years and because it was the first time an author not born and raised Italy had received the prize:

Ed è questa migrazione linguistica che fa della sua vittoria allo Strega una vittoria storica non solo per lei, ma per il paese. È la prima volta che la letteratura italiana è così dichiaratamente multiculturale. Lo è sempre stata, ma non si è mai raccontata in questo modo. Pensiamo solo al padre dell’italiano, Alessandro Manzoni. Anche lui in fondo ha scritto il suo capolavoro, I promessi sposi, in una lingua non sua. (Scego, 2018c)

(And it is this linguistic migration that makes her Strega victory not only a historic victory for her, but also for the country. It is the first time that Italian literature is this overtly multicultural. It has always been, but is has not ever described itself in this way. We need only think of the father of Italian, Alessandro Manzoni. Even he after all wrote his masterpiece The Betrothed in a language that wasn’t his).

As Scego’s comment suggests, Italy and its literature have always been in a dynamic process of development. Who are the real Italians, or what real Italy is, has been a debate since before Italy’s unification in the nineteenth century or it becoming a republic in the twentieth century.

While the challenge of responding to immigration is a newer one for Italy, the country’s regional differences and late unification in the 1860s
mean that Italy has continually interrogated what being Italian means, from before its founding to today.²⁵ Roberto Dainotto calls attention to how the diversity of Europe is often ignored in formulations of European identity: “Europe (in Theory) questions Eurocentrism not from the outside but from the marginal inside of Europe itself” (Dainotto, 2007: 4). His work ends with an analysis of how the Muslim history of Sicily has been overlooked in constructions of European identity and historical narratives. In Chapter 4 above, Akash Kumar examines how the writing of Ibn Hamdîs both should and has been included in explorations of Italian literature.

The concept of a homogenous Italy, anachronistic in any time, also entails ignoring its vast regional diversity, like that of Sicily’s, which was developed in part by the regions’ varied relationship with other kingdoms, empires, and nations. Showing how people have always been in movement and crossing the boundaries we have created, Anche Superman era un rifugiato emphasizes how refugees create art and change the world with it. The volume includes not only new voices, like those of Joudeh and Brhane, in the Italian cultural landscape but also other figures, like Aeneas and Dante, who have long been part of the Italian imaginary. The volume confronts potentially negative stereotypes of refugees with historical, fictional, and present-day examples. In its incorporation of historical and literary figures, the volume suggests the power of drawing not only on the past, but also what has been imagined in the past.

In the Anglophone world, critics have increasingly focused on how literature draws, or perhaps even should draw, on reality and have given a decreasing amount of attention to its potential power to act upon the world. Anche Superman era un rifugiato and The Displaced share a number of similar goals, including narrating the experience of refugees, changing the perception of who a refugee is, and highlighting the significance of art for understanding displacement. Both also make a material donation to refugee causes. One Euro for every copy of Anche Superman era un rifugiato goes to the UNHCR and 10% of the proceeds from The Displaced goes to the International Rescue Committee. In the introduction to his collection, Nguyen argues, “Readers and writers should not deceive themselves that literature changes the world” (Nguyen 2018: 20). He urges readers to close the volume, go out, and do something. The subtitle of Anche Superman era un rifugiato – Storie vere di coraggio per un mondo migliore (True Stories of Courage for a Better World) – indicates a conviction that stories can change the world. Anche Superman era un rifugiato is brought into schools for students to read, demonstrating a belief that literature shapes our reality.

An Italian anthology of migration literature from 2010 also bears a subtitle that suggests literature influences the world: Rondini e ronde: Scritti
Superman in Italy: the power of refugee artists

migranti per volare alto sul razzismo (Swallows and patrols: Migrant writing in order to fly above racism). The introduction of this collection ends: “Nello spazio della frontiera tutto può accadere e il catalizzatore di questo avvenimento possibile è la letteratura” (Tuadi, 2010: 10) (“In the frontier space anything can happen and the catalyst for this possible happening is literature”). Literature is framed as a catalyst, as something that causes change. Discussing Italy, where literature plays a more visible role in the country’s national awareness also points out the significance of paying attention to the transitory places of migration, politically and culturally, since they offer different ideas of place and the canon.

As evidenced by the title of Rondini e ronde (Swallows and patrols), rondini, “swallows,” are consistent images in discussions and representations of migration in Italian work. They appear in the title of the first story of Anche Superman era un rifugiato and in the title of Helena Janeczek’s powerful novel Le rondini di Montecassino (The Swallows of Monte Cassino). In Farina’s story “Gli uomini rondine” (“The swallow men”) – which focused on Joudeh, Nureyev, and swallows – and in Janecek’s novel, the rondini are both actual birds and symbols for the movement of people in their works. Free and beautiful, migratory birds move back and forth and belong to multiple places. This image of migration contests the metaphors often used in journalism to discuss migration. Refugees, for instance, “flood” into a country, or the numbers of refugees “surge.” In “Migration, Metaphor and Myth,” Liudmila Arcimaviciene and Sercan Hamza Baglama argue that the English-language metaphors commonly used to discuss refugees create “a feeling of insecurity and panic that people generally experience in the face of natural disasters” (Arcimaviciene and Baglama, 2018: 9). Metaphors are determined in part by a language, its culture, and its literature.

Both Anche Superman era un rifugiato and Rondini e ronde forcefully portray the aesthetic position that Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord argue for in their introduction to Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: “Rather than being a representation of the world, art is an act of world making that alters, however subtly, the fabric of cultures in which we live” (Durrant and Lord, 2007: 13). Migration literature, in contrast to visual art, exists in a language. Migrant authors often make a choice about the language they will use. In her discussion of migratory aesthetics, Mieke Bal highlights the site-specificity of art making: “Since art making is a material practice, there is no such thing as site-unspecific art” (Bal, 2007: 25). The questions of materiality and the book are more complicated and abstract than with many other art forms. A longer literary work can, in fact, be produced in multiple places – and exile, migrant, or transnational literature often is. The end of Ulysses, whose author Ezra Pound called “a refugee from Trieste” (Ellmann, 1966: 358), locates the places where James Joyce wrote his
masterpiece: “Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914–1921.” The question of a text’s location in terms of its production relates to the more discussed and broader issue of where a finished work of literature exists, as F. W. Bateson asked, “If the Mona Lisa is in the Louvre, where are Hamlet and Lycidas?” (Bateson, 1972: 9–10).

In part because the location of literary works is open and fluid, language and literature are framed as homelands for writers who have left or had to leave their countries.26 Theodor Adorno claims, “For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live” (Adorno, 2005: 87). Émile Cioran states, “One does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language. That is our country, our fatherland – and no other” (Cioran, 2012: 12). Czeslow Milosz is often quoted as having said “Language is the only homeland.”27 Ignoring non-English works creates an image of the world that is primarily Anglophone and potentially erases these homelands, where migration and the nation have distinct histories. Not only are language and literature sometimes described as a homeland for migrants, but also migration leads to literature in terms of experience and the need to narrate. André Naffis-Sahely argues, “Civilization begets exile; in fact, being banished from one’s home lies at the root of our earliest stories, whether human or divine” (Naffis-Sahely, 2020: 1). While Naffis-Sahely points out the long history of the relationship between migration and literature, Aleksandar Hemon suggests its power today to lead to narrative: “Migration generates narratives; each displacement is a tale; each tale unlike any other” (Hemon, 2018: 92). How these tales intersect with each other and build on those of the past is formulated through both the construction of anthologies and critical work. The multiple migration narratives in Italian draw on a somewhat different literary tradition, intellectual landscape, and metaphors for refugees, migration, and exile. Considering the construction of not just English-language anthologies but also others, like Italy’s, suggest the possibilities of multilingual world making. Anche Superman era un rifugiato: Storie vere di coraggio per un mondo migliore (Superman Was a Refugee Too: True Stories of Courage for a Better World) offers a vision of hope in which literature plays a central role, serving as a potential example, not just for Italians, but also more broadly.

Notes

1 Fiore’s Pre-Occupied Spaces (Fiore, 2017) examines the complexities of Italy in terms of migration, pointing out how it is much more complicated than a change from emigration to immigration, since emigration did not end and there were earlier examples of immigration.
2 Gabaccia notes that this is when Italy, as a country, began to keep track of the movements of its citizens; before then they would not have been Italians emigrating but categorized by their regional identities.

3 *The Black Mediterranean* discusses the racism on the part of the politicians who proposed these laws: “consciously instrumentalized the trope of African invasion to push through exceptional political measures, which dangerously infringe on basic human rights (amongst others by directly financing Libyan border guards who notoriously abuse migrant’s fate) and which have dramatically reduced the possibilities of political asylum across Mediterranean waters” (Danewid et al., 2021: 11).

4 Discussed during the July 14, 2020 virtual conference “Razzismo strutturale: Scambi di prospettive tra Italia e Germania / Struktureller Rassismus: Italienische und Deutsche Perspektiven im Austausch”.

5 See Hawthorne (2019a; 2019b). For more on Italy’s citizenship laws see also Tuckett (2018).

6 “While all Italians have at times been racialized by such concepts, not all Italian populations have been targeted equivalently by racist ideology. The north of Italy has historically been protected from many of the racializing distinctions that disadvantaged Italians of the south and the islands. Italian race discourse also held a prominent role in Italian attempts to establish colonies in northern Africa. Jews, the Roma and Sinti peoples, and minorities of non-European origins within Italy have also endured particular disadvantages” (Coburn, 2013: 13).


8 The anthologies vary in their modes of composition, from ones that comprise works written specifically for the collection to ones that offer a selection of already published works that span different historical periods and locations. Bond (2019) analyzes the development of the genre of the refugee anthology. She focuses in particular on *The Displaced* and *Banthology*.


11 “This projected image [of an African women who demands respect from a European country] is in stark contrast with the daily images of the clandestine emigrants who risk their lives in the boats of fortune that have sadly transformed the Mediterranean into a giant cemetery for African migrants” (Sarr, 2019: 65).

12 For a discussion that engages Italy, past and present, see Wallace (2015–16).

13 For a scholarly treatment that makes Italy central to the understanding of migrant literature, see Gnisci (2006).
See M. NourbeSe Philip’s “Zong! #5” and Edwidge Danticat’s “Children of the Sea” for the works that have blank spaces.

For a discussion of refugees, Italy, Europe, and borders see Sredanovic (2019).

In 2018 Joudeh danced with Bolle on his program “Danza con me” (“Dance with me”) to “Inshallah” sung by Sting at Bolle’s request.

The languages include Russian, German, Burmese, Armenian, Persian, Kurdish, Irish Gaelic, French, Spanish, and Italian.

Quoted in Jossa (2006: 20). Stefano Jossa’s *L’Italia letteraria* explores how Italy’s late founding and literary history gave its literature a large role in the country’s perception of itself.

While the UNHCR websites in English, French, Spanish, Slovene, Dutch, Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, Indonesian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Russian contained similar content in 2019, the Italian one highlighted *Anche Superman era un rifugiato*. The significant cultural and intellectual role authors play in Italy is also demonstrated by the number of them who are also journalists and academics.

There were exceptions to the general neglect of Italian colonialism. Angelo De Boca’s extensive work (*Gli italiani in Africa orientale* – three volumes, 1976, 1979, 1982) marks an important moment in the study of Italian colonization and is often pointed to as the beginning of its study. He has also produced a huge amount since then, including *Italiani, brava gente?*

See the work of, for instance, Fiore, Parati, Ben-Ghiat, Fuller, Lombardi-Diop, Ponzanesi, Ballinger, Hom, and Duncan. As Parati has stated: “Past and present narratives on internal and external otherness propose Italy as a crossroads where difference and the recognition of sameness meet and invade cultural and linguistic territories” (Parati, 2005: 37).

For foundational examples of the wide-ranging work on Italian colonialism that exists in English see Andall and Duncan (2005); Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2005); and Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2012).

“Never before has Italian culture faced the challenge of welcoming and allowing different cultures to grow and flourish on its own soil, in its own language, through its own publishing and film industries” (Bond et al., 2015: 2). This edited volume, *Destination Italy*, offers a productive and varied overview of Italy, migration, and artistic representation.

In “We Refugees,” Hannah Arendt meanwhile talks about losing language as a refugee: “We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings” (Arendt, 1994: 110).
27 This quote appears in many places without further bibliographic details. I have quoted it from the *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women’s Anthology* (Klepfisz, 1990: 160).

References


