Afroeurope@n Configurations

Afroeurope@n Configurations: Readings and Projects

Edited by

Sabrina Brancato

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To my children,
my twinkling little stars
on their way from Bamako to Frankfurt

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INTRODUCTION

SABRINA BRANCATO

"Afroeurope@ns": an ongoing project

This book comes as a result of a longstanding collaboration with a group of scholars, writers and artists brought together by common interests and affinities. Some of them are former or current members of the group "Afroeurope@ans", while others are part of an extended network.

"Afroeurope@ns: Black Cultures and Identities in Europe" is a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and coordinated by the University of León. It started in 2004, when a group of international researchers decided to join efforts in order to create an operative network and set up easily available resources to spread knowledge about the African Diaspora in Europe.

The group has achieved several objectives. It is especially worth mentioning the following: the creation of a website (www.afroeuropa.eu) providing basic resources on Afroeuropean literatures and other arts; a peer-reviewed online journal (http://journal.afroeuropa.eu) with three yearly issues; several workshops and conferences; a multimedia encyclopedia of Afroeuropean Studies (forthcoming), and several volumes of collected essays.

The present book follows the volume *Afroeurope@ns: Cultures and Identities* edited by Marta Sofía López (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), which offers overviews of African diasporas and their literatures in several previously unexplored national contexts as well as a number of gender-focused close readings. The second volume I now present continues on this path by exploring other national contexts and opening up to other disciplinary areas beyond literature. Far from pretending to be exhaustive, the diversity of the voices represented in this book constitutes a testimony to the variety of equally valuable configurations that Afroeurope can take. "Readings and Projects" follow "Cultures and Identities" in recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives from which this field of study can be approached. For this reason and in consideration of the field as an expanding horizon rather than a niche, any kind of prescriptive

definition of what is supposed to constitute Afroeurope is carefully avoided. Other individual scholars and research groups have been active in recent years, who have chosen different terminologies (for example Black Europe or Euro-Africa), but with whom we share the primal purpose of shedding light on a part of Europe's past and present which is too often overlooked in mainstream discourse. For an effective politics of inclusion to be implemented in Europe, the continent must first acknowledge its diversity in cultural heritage.

Before summarising the single contributions of the present volume, I will start by putting in context my personal motivations and my views on the crucial importance of Afroeuropean writing for the reshaping of Europe for future generations.

Where do I stand? An exercise in ego-criticism

I started working on the African diaspora in Europe little less than a decade ago, when I moved from Spain to Germany with a virtual suitcase filled with sparse ideas for a postdoctoral research project on narratives of migration. My interest in displacement and the gradual canalisation of this interest towards the specificities of African migration in Europe emerged from a clash I sensed between my condition of intra-European expatriate and other expatriate stories I became familiar with. My plural locations (Germany was my third country of residence) and that peculiar coupling of uneasiness and potential enrichment at finding myself in a new environment (with scarce knowledge of the local language and the not unusual set of cultural complexes accompanying the southerner travelling North) naturally led me to bump into narratives of uprootedness every time I selected a cultural product either for personal enjoyment or professional development, be it a book, a film, a scholarly reflection or a piece of art.

Among my readings of that time were some autobiographical texts by Africans from various regions, who had recently settled in Europe and with whom I could easily empathise for a number of circumstances we seemed to share. Some of them were young scholars, teachers or simply people with an acute sense of the literary value of experience. Like me, they were struggling to make sense of their present situation and trying to figure out what to do with their future. Nevertheless, unlike me, these travelling companions did not appear to be granted the freedom to make choices according to their inclinations. Some of them had to work far below their capacities and skills, had to deal with exhausting bureaucratic issues (from not having their qualification recognised to having to live in clandestinity), and had to face various forms of prejudice, rejection and

racism. In short, what distinguished my experience from theirs was that sort of privilege which does not depend on personal qualities but rather on exogenous factors determined by history and ideology (in the broader sense of power discourses and politics). I had no stable position, no funding for my project (it came much later) and no clear plans for the future. However, my rather pale complexion and a European passport made life so much easier for me than it seemed to be for my black or Maghrebi African counterparts. In fact, apart from a few mostly harmless stereotypes about Italians (and southern Italians in particular), I did not have to experience any prejudice, let alone institutional racism, neither in Spain, in Germany nor in other countries I visited for long stays.

If my passport was undoubtedly a crucial element of security, it was especially the fact of being identified as white and Christian (even if atheist) that granted me a degree of liberty not enjoyed by the less fortunate expatriates whose stories I more or less accidentally came across. It did not take long for me to realise that in a western environment Whiteness produces some sort of acknowledgement of a (however artificial) shared identity. Europe, in fact, is assumed to be White (not simply racially but also culturally and religiously). Hence, even if talks of diversity have long entered the political and cultural discourse, dynamics of exclusion will continue to be based mainly on racial criteria unless Europe finally recognises the entanglement of its history and self-definition with racism. A thorough exercise in self-scrutiny and criticism is therefore required before Europe can call itself properly diverse.

As denial of structural racism does not only concern political discourse and the public arena but also the private sphere, self-scrutiny should be carried out also at the personal level by any white European, not excluded those who, like me, are involved in a field of study to which they come as outsiders, those, that is, who pretend to speak about (and in some cases for) the Other. I believe it is therefore necessary for white scholars of Afroeuropean Studies to ‘locate’ themselves, in order to make clear from which position they are speaking. This should not be understood as a form of hypocritical indulgence in ‘white guilt’, but as an essential step to approach the field with honesty and acknowledge one’s limitations.

If I look back on my own life, I find it permeated by both racialism (an understanding of identity based on constructed racial difference) and racism (in the form of overt discrimination). And if my adult self has gradually learned how to recognise and respond to racial prejudice (preconceptions coming from the outside as well as my own assimilated prejudice), I certainly cannot claim the same for my childhood counterpart.

As a little girl from a middle class context in the south of Italy during the early seventies, for a long time the only black people I was familiar with were the ones I saw on television. Images of African children suffering the effects of famine populated my daily meals. Pushing mouthfuls of food in my mouth, my relatives took turns at reminding me how fortunate I was compared to those "poor black children" and at persuading me that eating all my food would be a due act of respect for them. This was my family's way to teach me compassion. However, this was unfortunately not coupled with a positive (or simply realistic) image of black children and black people in general.

I remember my grandmother constantly telling me to keep my fingers out of my nose by threatening that otherwise I would get "negro nostrils". In the model of beauty my grandmother would insistently try to pass on to me (golden hair and ice-blue eyes, which by the way none of us in the family could boast), blackness simply had no place. I also remember that it was assimilated racism that made me drop out of ballet school. After a year or so of training, a public show was organised in which different groups danced dressed in the guise of different peoples of the world. I looked with envy at the older girls' colourful veils and jingling beads as they staged a belly dance in the best tradition of western orientalist taste, while my group was made to wear tight dark brown garments, straw skirts, 'kinky' black wigs, and – our faces, hands and bare feet painted in brown – made to jump around with a fruit basket on our heads. I would like to think that my sharp feeling of humiliation was due to my sensing how demeaning that tribal disguise was for the people we were supposed to represent, but I am afraid it was simply due to the fact that in my little head (I was no older than six) being African and black was nothing to be proud of. And yet people, especially children, are far from being passive receptors of ready-made ideas, and even if stereotypes sometimes unfortunately prove stronger than direct experience, it must not always be the case. In fact, I can recall the exact moment when my childhood prejudice was overturned.

I was seven years old when the televised version of Alex Haley's novel *Roots* was screened in Italy for the first time. On those evenings I was allowed to stay up late, as my mother was eager to teach me the horrors of slavery (what she did also through books and other materials). I think, however, that this further training in becoming aware of unjust circumstances would not have taken me much beyond the idea of black people as human beings deserving compassion, had it not been for the presence of a black young man at our table. Zeweldi B. was an Eritrean with whom my father had shared a room during a long hospitalisation and

who later occasionally visited us. We ate pizza and watched *Roots*, and the adults chatted eagerly while my little self dreamed of growing up fast enough to catch up with the charming gentleman I had grown so fond of (he was a seaman, and his tales of the big world brought home to me, even if unconsciously, the parochialism of my own world). I might have absorbed the adults' responses to the TV series and possibly taken in some critical views but I think it was Zeweldi's sheer presence in the first place that allowed me to see how much dignity and pride could be associated with being black and African.

More than thirty years later I have gone a long way in the process of dismantling prejudice, and yet I constantly have to remind myself that my angle of vision is unavoidably limited. Last year in Rome, on the occasion of a conference where I was invited to speak about the African presence in Europe, I saw in the street the poster of an exhibition on the painting of the Roman Empire. I decided to visit the exhibition for the only reason that the poster featured a black female face in the foreground. By then I was of course already well aware of the multiethnic dimension of the Roman Empire, but it positively struck me to see this feature finally given the proper emphasis. Was this a new development, the sign that the cultural establishment was finally acknowledging blackness as part of European identity, or had this always been there and *I* was to blame for my blindness? Most of the exhibition's paintings representing black people actually came from Pompei, which happens to be very close to my hometown. I had certainly already seen some of the paintings in the past, and yet I don't remember ever having noticed the blissful conviviality of blacks and whites in that ancestral society. I was now looking with new eyes, and for the first time, arguing at the conference about the importance of dismantling the myth of a white Europe, it seemed to me that I was stating the obvious.

As my angle of vision expands, I grow more aware of how personal experience shapes my intellectual development. In the same way as Zeweldi's appearance constituted a turning point in received ideas about black people and the reading of African migration narratives made me aware of my privileged position, what I experience every day allows me to see a little further. From where I stand now, Afroeurope is a reality, and yet there is still a long way to go for this reality to become visible to everybody.

From migrancy to citizenship: writing Europe anew

Afroeuropean literatures are proliferating all over the continent. Beyond the important contribution they make in terms of aesthetic innovation, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential that these writings offer to the dialogue between Europe and Africa and to the formation and consolidation of a new notion of Europe, seen not only as plural but also as effectively transcultural, a Europe finally recognising in its historical, ethnic, political and cultural identity the presence of strong influences from Africa as well as from global African diasporas.

A comparative analysis of Afroeuropean literatures immediately lets emerge a number of extra-literary questions. Exploring the texts of authors of African descent from various linguistic and national contexts in Europe and pointing out shared characteristics and common trends allows us to determine if it makes sense at all to speak of an Afroeuropean identity and to envisage the limits of such a configuration. In the first place, a comparative analytical model should take into account the diachronic asymmetries across linguistic contexts. On the one hand are Afroeuropean literatures which can already boast a long tradition, such as Black British literature, which can be traced back to slave autobiographies of the eighteenth century, or Francophone African literature, strongly influenced by the *Négritude* movement. On the other hand are literatures of more recent development, such as the Afro-Hispanic, Afro-Italian and Afro-German, which do not yet enjoy full recognition from the literary establishment. However, what emerges immediately from a comparative analysis is the strong dependence of these literatures from political discourse and dominant ideologies.

The texts in all their dimensions (the modalities of production, distribution and reception, but also the themes treated and the stylistic choices made by authors) appear to be very much influenced by the political ideology of the national context in question. In Italy, for example, from the early nineties on, starting with a number of works published by authors of foreign background, there has been a strong insistence on the migratory dimension. These literary voices have been received as representative of a ‘literature of migration’ and, if this has undoubtedly contributed to open a public space for new voices, it has also set them limits, pushing many authors to remain thematically circumscribed to the issues of migration and integration and stylistically to a preference for testimonial writing. In Spain, on the other hand, authors of African origins, even those belonging to the second generation, are usually marketed as African rather than Afro-Hispanic, with an emphasis on the exotic elements

of their writing, so that, as a result, in their writing many of them concentrate on their countries of origin rather than on their experience in Spain. This phenomenon also concerns countries with a longer tradition of multiculturalism in their literature. France, for example, has a way of including authors in the national canon (i.e. considering them as French) when they prove particularly successful, while labelling the others either as African or migrants. This illustrates how questions not directly concerning literature, such as the notion of national identity or the way of conceiving citizenship and belonging, weigh on the kind of literature being produced.

All this seems quite disheartening, as it would appear to reduce the autonomy and power of literary creation. However, from here one can start to move towards something more constructive. Once the link between literature and politics has been acknowledged, and once one understands how the dominant ideology influences literature (especially concerning minorities), the question arises about what happens in the other direction, that is, what literature has to offer to political discourse, how these voices can in fact produce a change in the political discourse, subvert it or suggest alternative patterns. Therefore, the crucial question is about the role that Afroeuropean literatures can play in the definition of the identity of the continent. Of course this is related to issues of distribution and dissemination which are quite obvious: in order to have an effective influence on political discourse, these literatures must be visible and accessible to a wide audience.

Some time ago I attended the launch of an Italian schoolbook, a critical anthology for secondary school, which aims to introduce students to the Italian literature of the last thirty years. I expressed to the author, an established scholar, my puzzlement about the fact that no authors of non-Italian origin (first, second or third generation) appeared in the index, and I asked whether he was aware of the implications of this exclusion, especially considering the age of the target readership. He replied unapologetically, explaining that, although the book did not feature any text by authors of non-Italian origin, it did indeed devote a short descriptive chapter to the 'literature of migration' (and that, I gather, was supposed to be sufficient). I believe that this anecdotic episode brings to light something very significant, which concerns not only Italy and not only literature. I refer to this something as the 'ghetto of migrancy'.

At this time, across Europe, a person perceived or identified as non-European, even if indeed a citizen of Europe, is excluded (according especially to ethnic criteria) from the cultural identity of the continent and relegated to the condition of eternal migrant, and thus always kept on the

margins of what is supposed to be the 'authentic' Europe (in the case of literature, on the margins of the national literary canon). Therefore, since citizenship (understood as membership, as belonging) in the end seems to have little to do with the possession of a passport or the experience of a person (it does not matter how long I have been here, if I speak or write in the local language, if I feel really at home), we should ask ourselves when it is that the migrant actually becomes a citizen: what should happen for migrancy to make the transition to citizenship and therefore to a condition of belonging? I believe that Afroeuropean literatures offer an answer to this question. Here we find a way out of an artificial and false idea of Europe, and we find the vision of a Europe which is plural not only in words and which has always been transcultural. In fact, these writings dismantle the notion of culture as a delimited space and emphasise instead the continuous fluctuation of cultural influences and therefore the continuous transformation of everyday cultural practices.

I reject the concept of 'literature of migration' (even having used it myself in the past and still using it occasionally for specific purposes) because of its ghettoising implications. There exist migratory narratives (i.e. stories that tell of a migration experience) and there exist transnational authors (authors clearly linked to various national and cultural contexts, whatever their nationality), but the literature of migration itself is a not a very sensible and useful invention.

In Afroeuropean literatures the migrant does not exist, or appears very briefly as migrant. In the first place, only few of the narratives produced are de facto migratory narratives. Those that are (those that explicitly describe a migratory experience) show that the sense of belonging is immediate (in some cases it starts even prior to physical displacement) and always manifold. These narratives often place Europe and Africa face to face through a process of continuous comparison between the country of origin and the host country. In this context, even those narratives that place the emphasis on differences and on hardly compatible aspects of identity reveal through the experience and the transformation of the characters an ongoing transculturation, an uninterrupted mutation of identity enacted by the negotiation between pre-existent and newly acquired cultural elements, and thus eventually dismantle the idea of a culturally homogeneous national identity. Therefore, they unveil the artificial nature of national myths (it makes no sense to speak of *italianità*, *francité* or Englishness) and outline the figure of a new European citizen, by locating identity in personal experience, in the multiple affiliations and attachments, in the present rather than in ancestral cultural roots. In this way, then, national or continental identity comes to be conceived as open and constantly

fluctuating. Newcomers are not guests to be tolerated or forced to adapt and assimilate to a pre-existing culture, but rather agents of transformation and renewal. This is one of the crucial contributions of Afroeuropean literatures to the rewriting of Europe.

Another important element is the fact that the transnational citizen, the migrant or whoever is perceived as such and therefore experiences alienation (not only in the form of rejection and discrimination but also for being seen as an exotic object) is not at all an outsider to the country, but often more of an insider than indigenous citizens. One must not forget that those who migrate or who are automatically identified as foreigners (as Other) often find themselves in difficult and even painful situations. They might find themselves in a world at the margins which is however all but marginal. It is rather central for the identity of the country, and yet the average white native is often not familiar with this world. My point is that Afroeuropean literatures narrate a Europe which is not to be found in dominant narratives, and reveal aspects of European countries which are not immediately accessible to the average citizen. For example, I, as a Neapolitan of several generations, discover, by reading some Afro-Italian authors, a very different Naples than what I have experienced, and gain through their writings a deeper knowledge of my origins.

Earlier in this text I stated that Afroeuropean narratives reveal a Europe which has always been transcultural. This is another key point. These literatures do not only write the present and the future of Europe, but also the Europe of the past, that is, they rewrite European history bringing to light what does not emerge in dominant narratives. They shed light on the historical interaction of the two continents, not only at the level of domination of a continent over the other (slave trade, colonisation, evangelisation, neo-colonialism, development aid, etc.). In the first place, they show how Africa has always been a crucial element for the definition of Europe itself, how it has served as a mirror image, and how it has actually influenced European aesthetics and philosophy, how European culture has always been permeated by African elements. Moreover, they bring to light the constant African presence in the European continent throughout the centuries, for example by transposing in literary form the lives of historical figures whose African origins are not always remembered (as does, for example, Black British writer Bernardine Evaristo in her novel *Soul Tourists*). In this way, they dismantle the implicitly racial and racist definition of the continent, the myth of a white Europe.

A further contribution of Afroeuropean literatures is the commitment of many authors to undermine stereotypes and prejudices, which weigh not

only on relations between Europe and Africa but also on interpersonal relationships between individuals and on the daily lives of European citizens perceived as foreigners according to racial criteria presented in the form of cultural essentialism. This is an antiracist commitment voted not only to counter the blatant and violent racism of right-wing extremism, but also to implement a process of deconstruction of the structural racism of European and Western imaginary, as it emerges in language, thought, representations and in the dynamics of interaction, a hidden racism as it is revealed also in the so-called positive stereotypes on Africanness. This commitment operates at two levels: on the one hand through an analysis and an explicit reflection on this phenomena, and on the other hand, implicitly, by means of alternative representations that 'disturb' the expectations of readers (especially those who perceive themselves as non racist) and thus come to undermine certain prejudices.

Finally, writing the New Europe also means reviewing, rewriting and reformulating the relationship between Europe and Africa. Afroeuropean literatures crucially contribute to Europe's mental decolonisation. They outline a path to go beyond the still dominant patterns of charity, paternalism and exoticism, and to formulate instead an effective idea of equality and dignity, and implement a conception of citizenship and belonging no longer based on ancestral cultures but on the inevitably transnational and transcultural experience of the people who inhabit Europe today.

The essays in this collection

The contributions contained in this volume offer general reflections as well as analyses of particular national contexts, descriptions of ongoing projects, and close readings of literary works. The first two essays approach theoretical questions and discuss the discursive and ideological frameworks around the idea of Afroeurope. In "What is this Afroeuropean?" British artist Raimi Gbadamosi provocatively addresses the problem of naming and the necessity of uncovering and questioning the "unspoken qualifiers" attached to Afroeuropean identity, as the experience of being black in Europe, he argues, is tightly interrelated to the conundrum of the terminology in use. Therefore, the focus is not on whom but rather on 'what' qualifies for Afroeuropeanness. This perspective, of course, raises the question of the objectification of the Other and the racist assumptions implied, a phenomenon Gbadamosi explores through reference to nursery rhymes, songs, films and other expressions of popular culture. By contextualising the African in Europe

and the European in Africa and highlighting the differences in legitimacy and treatment, the author comes to the bitter conclusion that the "promise of independence within Europe" implicit in Afroeuropeanness might in fact be yet another form of exclusion.

On the other hand, in "Europe, Race and Diaspora" Susan Arndt discusses the dynamics by which bodily differences are fabricated to pillar social hierarchies. She examines notions of race at different points in time in European history and offers a critical analysis of the myth of *whiteness*, from the ethnocentrism of ancient Greece to the "habit of ignoring race" in contemporary Germany. Arguing that racism "continues to exist structurally and discursively" and that ignoring the privileges of *whiteness* actually reinforces its hegemony, Arndt stresses the necessity for Europe to reassess its history of slavery, colonialism and genocide. She then elaborates on the concept of the 'racial turn', which deconstructs the category of *whiteness* as an ideological construction and allows us to resituate it relationally. Finally, Arndt discusses the 'diasporic transspaces' which transcend the borders of European nations and suggests ways by which literary studies can do justice to the "performances of entangled histories".

The second part of this volume contains essays focusing on largely unexplored contexts in Eastern, Northern and Southern Europe, thus contributing to the task of mapping the field and expanding the boundaries of Afroeurope. Taking as point of departure the general indifference to rising racism in post-Soviet Russia, in "Expanding the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic beyond the Iron Curtain" Maxim Matusevich explores the African students' encounter with the Soviet Union in order to contextualise the current configuration of Russia as a "danger zone" for people of colour. The essay provides a fascinating historical account of how African students (mostly young men travelling to the USSR from 1957 onwards) introduced new ideas, lifestyles and artistic forms to Soviet citizens and how they openly voiced their dissent with the contradictions and hypocrisy of the communist regime. Matusevich reads the experience of Africans in the Soviet Union as an extension of the trans-Atlantic experience, and argues that the notions of racial difference widespread in contemporary Russia find their roots in the official and popular representations of Africans in Soviet times, from the Khrushchev era to Gorbachev's *perestroika*.

In "Learning about Africa" Kristín Loftsdóttir takes a look at the peculiar position of Nordic countries, traditionally seen as being exempt from the historical guilt of colonialism, and specifically focuses on Iceland by analysing the representations of Africa and Africans in schoolbooks in a diachronic perspective. Even if Iceland was not directly involved in

colonial enterprises, Icelanders were part of a global system of power based on colonial relationships and shared the dominant ideology by producing and perpetuating racist views of Africa and black people in general. In her analysis Loftsdóttir points out the changes in the modalities and patterns of representation along the twentieth century and observes that schoolbooks published in the past decade destabilise old views of racial purity and homogeneity, emphasising the connections across cultures and engaging with the changing ethnic configuration of Icelandic society.

Crucial questions of ethics and politics of knowledge production are addressed in "Writing Our Future History Together", where, starting from her recent and current work on the African diaspora in Finland, Anna Rastas argues for the importance of applying participatory methods in anthropological research. Providing an overview of projects encompassing both academic and divulgatory work and offering examples from her fieldwork, she shows how active participation of members of the minorities involved can work both as a way of redressing the under- and misrepresentation of African minorities in Finland and as a means of empowerment for the communities.

Finally, in "African Migrants in Spain" Juan Miguel Zarandona discusses immigration policies and research resources in the Spanish context in recent years. The essay presents an overview of texts dealing with African migration from various disciplines, analyses various phases in Spanish public discourse on immigration and tries to determine whether Spain has a civic or an ethnic concept of national identity. Following a rational approach which sees a direct equation between economic growth and hospitality, Zarandona observes that attitudes towards immigrants largely depend on the economic situation and argues that therefore the recent crisis has produced a sudden change in this respect.

Placing literature in the social and political contexts of the countries in which it is produced as well as in the framework of reception, the essays in the third part of this volume provide close readings of works and point out trends and new directions as well as proposing alternative interpretational strategies. In "Liminality as Critical Empowerment" Joana Passos focuses on the "international impact of writers from the southern hemisphere" and in particular on second generation immigrants, *guerrilheiro* memories and nomad women poets in the lusophone context, choosing a selection of works which are central to the literature of present-day Portugal. Understanding liminality as a positive and empowering position providing writers with a subversive perspective as well as skills as cultural polyglots, Passos affirms that their works offer readers "a surplus of awareness and a

seductive journey into deeper insights" and for this reason literatures previously considered marginal are becoming increasingly visible and appealing, as an alternative canon which better represents the interconnections of the globalised world.

Annalisa Mirizio's "Autobiography as Political Essay" tackles important theoretical questions relevant to methodological perspectives in the reading of Black diasporic literature. She observes that current trends in the approach to literature by black authors are mainly based on the *agonal* use (in a Freudian sense) of literature, and contends that this dominant discourse might prevent us from recognising the real contribution of black authors to the reshaping of the literary field, especially in aesthetic terms. Mirizio revisits the Gramscian idea of the political value of autobiography, conceived as an alternative to the political or philosophical essay. This genre, she suggests, has enormous potential for the subaltern subject and it facilitates access to the literary field. Far from being a mere evocation of personal experience, autobiography mirrors life in a social context (as a counterpoint to official history) and provides a drive towards social change. Through a close analysis of a number of recent texts produced in Italian, Mirizio shows, however, how they problematize the notion of integration and move away from identity politics and towards a postmodern view of identity as slippery and illusory. Finally, she argues in favour of a primarily aesthetic reading of black literature, which would allow us to recognise the process of experimentation carried out by a number of authors as well as the interactions with other authors and literary tradition.

In "Transcontinental Shifts" John McLeod takes the literary career of Bernardine Evaristo as indicative of recent developments in black British writing. Shifting the focus from a redefinition of national identity to a continental sense of cultural plurality, Evaristo's work brings forward a "distinctly European, at times self-consciously global" consciousness. This emergent focus on the European space and on the pan-continental histories it contains opens up diasporic postcolonialism to new ways of conceiving identity which apply not only to specific marginalised minorities but to all citizens. In his insightful reading of Evaristo's works, McLeod identifies a "transpositional sensibility" which dilutes dichotomic conceptions and conjures "chronotopic" worlds where a myriad of cultural locations intermingle. However, while acknowledging the enriching potential of the polycultural encounter, Evaristo is also alert to the relationships of oppression and enslavement produced in the course of history. Her vision, as conveyed in McLeod's thrilling interpretation, enables us to gain an understanding of Afroeurope beyond constraining paradigms.

Francesca Giommi's "Black British and Black Italian, two case studies: Andrea Levy and Gabriella Ghermandi" proposes a comparative analysis of two recent novels. *Small Island* (2004) and *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007) are among the most relevant literary works in two national contexts, the British and the Italian, where the notion of blackness is understood in very different ways and where black communities present very different trajectories in terms of history as well as cultural and literary traditions. All the more interesting is, therefore, observing in literary works common narrative strategies and similar dynamics of revisiting and rewriting the canonical history of the hegemonic centre. Identifying a strong bond between history, society and literature, Giommi ascribes to literature the fundamental task of reinterpreting the past and initiating societal transformations. In particular, she argues that Levy and Ghermandi take on the task of transmitting collective memory and heritage, thus transferring some of the prerogatives of orality to the written page.

Also centred on the Italian context, Daniela Brogi's "Being different without fear" offers a close reading of *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), a remarkable novel by Italian author of Somali origins Igiaba Scego. Scego is one of the most outstanding figures of what is still commonly known in Italy as "migration literature". Looking critically at the ideological and institutional frame in which the reception of this literature is inserted, and making the issue of language use pivotal in her analysis, Brogi focuses on one of the literary works which best represent the transformative power of voices with multiple backgrounds and affiliations.

In the fourth and last part of the volume three writers from different corners of Afroeurope reflect on their experiences and their work. "Agnès Agboton: Self-translation and intercultural mediation" is an interpretative essay containing an interview with the author. Maya García de Vinuesa presents the work of a writer whose plurilingualism and multiple belongings are reflected into her literary work. Agboton alternatively writes in Gun, Spanish and Catalan, and translates her own works into those languages, boldly rejecting the idea of a "prevalent language" and, as a direct extension, the notion of the supremacy of origins over experience as well as that of a single home and identity. This piece provides an interesting reflection on the connection between self-translation and intercultural mediation, especially when García de Vinuesa openly discusses her own personal puzzlement in the reception of narratives conveying problematic views about gender roles and admits to have missed an ironical side to the stories, which only becomes clearer in a more attentive reading or a live performance. This, however, would seem to suggest that a reader

untrained to recognise the oral quality of Agboton's narratives might miss the kind of cultural transfer celebrated and wished for in this essay, but it also suggests that orality is so central in Agboton's work that solitary reading can never get us to a complete appreciation of her literary skills. Having myself assisted to some of Agboton's live storytelling sessions, I can only confirm that this is the case.

Isabel Alonso-Breto's interview with Antonio Lozano, founder in 1987 of the *Festival del Sur* in Agüimes and now coordinator of the literary program of *Casa África* in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, takes us to that very peculiar location represented by the Canary Islands. As crossroads of cultures and as centre of the continental triangle Europe-Africa-America, the Canary Islands, which experienced shifting influences in different phases of history, are now a unique site from where to look at the entanglements between Europe and Africa. Lozano' engaging novels deal precisely with the complicated relationship between the two continents, and his longstanding commitment in bringing to light the cultural expressions of those entanglements makes him a central figure in our field.

As a closure to the book, the autobiographical piece by Vamba Sherif discloses the interrelationship of personal and political circumstances in the making of a writer and provides, in the context of the current backlash in Europe, an assertion of belonging which powerfully resists any form of essentialism and celebrates instead a personal journey through multiple cultural influences and passions.

PART I:

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

WHAT IS THIS AFROEUROPEAN?

RAIMI GBADAMOSI

After The Wailers
Don't care where you come from
As long as you're a black man
You're an African

No mind your nationality
You have got the identity of an African
[. . .]
No mind your complexion
There is no rejection
You're an African

'Cause if your 'plexion high, high, high
If your complexion low, low, low
And if your 'plexion in between
You're an African[1]

I remember listening to this as a child, when Peter Tosh was simply that amazing musician making statements that seemed to resonate loudly with everyone I knew. As a boy with access to a reasonable library of books on Pan-Africanism, the song did not serve as a mantra for belief, it was simply a great song. Yet I return to it at this moment to address some of the problems that I face at this moment of new naming, the need to address the unspoken qualifiers of what makes for the position, place, politics, and properties of the Afroeuropean.

Thankfully, for me, Peter Tosh had faced up to the possible contradiction in his own call. Being 'black and African' has never been, will never be, simple (it is after all a way of speaking to racial/political/national difficulties), and being black in Europe is part of the conundrum of naming. If all who meet his criterion are Africans (taking his provisos on nationality and hue into consideration), then who is the African in this quandary? It is possible to argue that Europe, in this

[1] Tosh, "African", in *Equal Rights.*

instance, is easier to define. It is a quasi-geographical entity, all the African has to do is appear in Europe (thereby making the European distinct), and the African qualifies for Afroeuropean-ness.

Posing Questions

The question I seek to unravel is not 'who is the Afroeuropean?' It is something much more obtuse than that. I am interested in the 'what' being raised wherever the term 'Afroeuropean' is invoked. 'What' being the thing or things used to specify something made available to an inquiring cohort, it is instinctively sought when something new is confronted. It is the thing that requires definition before one can investigate the distanced 'who'. Even if the multiple 'who' strives and manages to remain singular, the 'what' will be used to reduce the many new bodies into a manageable form. That the 'what' and the 'who' are inescapably linked in this case does not make the question any less pertinent, being that without the need to define the 'who' there will be little need to clarify the 'what' of the Afroeuropean. Like Stuart Hall, I find that questions require firm placement, and that:

> These moments are always conjunctural. They have their historical specificity; and although they always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this, they are never the same moment. And the combination of what is similar and what is different defines not only the specificity of the moment, but the specificity of the question, and therefore the strategies of cultural politics with which we attempt to intervene in popular culture, and the form and style of cultural theory and criticizing that has to go along with such an intermatch.[2]

Nursery Rhymes

Nothing like controversy to liven debate. And *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep*, an Eighteenth Century rhyme still remains under cultural scrutiny. Known by most European children, it is as follows:

> Baa, Baa Black Sheep,
> Have you any wool?
> Yes sir, yes sir,
> Three bags full,

[2] Hall, "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?" 104.

> One for my master,
> One for my dame,
> One for the little boy
> That lives down the lane.

There is contemporary disquiet and probing that the questioner finds it necessary to point out that the sheep is black. There is acceptance that sheep are normally white, and a black sheep is an abnormality. Wool, as a valuable commodity, relied on bleaching and dyeing to meet market demands, so white wool was sought, and black wool was spurned as not being commercially desired. Add to this the belief held across Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Europe that black sheep were signs of the devil, that the 'black sheep' of the family (still in common usage) was wayward, and we have a complex mess of social, political, economic, and racial messages. So there is no surprise that apocryphal narratives remain around this rhyme.

This may have nothing to with the Afroeuropean, but it does raise questions laying dormant regarding the subtleties of language and the possibilities of defining what the Afroeuropean is. I looked up the rhyme online and came across the question whether it is racist. The preferred answer on Yahoo Answers, by Brooke B, was:

> First of all it's "who lives down the lane" Get it right, it's a classic. No it's not a racist poem. Now if it went something like this:
>
> Baa Baa Black man, have you any crack
> yes boy yes boy up there on the rack.
> One for the Gangsta, one for the Thug
> and one for the baby daddy that don't pay child support, and don't give a fug.
>
> Now that would be racist.[3]

One cannot but be bothered by this aggressive response. The simple collapsing of race and stereotyping tells of deep social encoding. There is also that niggling feeling that points to unspoken opinions, but remains heard and understood. The need to defy and define the other's presence remains paramount.

[3] Baa Baa Black Sheep is a Racist Poem? http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080520151412AAoFiv2 08 Dec 2009. (Went back to check a detail, and this question and answer had been deleted. 20 April 2010)

What is this Afroeuropean? It cannot be 'who', no one is an Afroeuropean. Perhaps this is a way of restating that the African in Europe, in the final analysis, cannot simply become a European.[4] There is congruency between this naming and Peter Tosh's song after all. To define what the Afroeuropean is, we will be consigned to articulating what the essence of the African and European is. And this is outside the scope of this paper. The limits of land are also under question: are we to deal with the concept of Europe as a collective of nations, quasi-continent, or is it Europe as a political entity (The European Union) that is set as a parallel to continental Africa, or is it the nations of the Africa Union which includes all those in the Diaspora?

Who is?

Defining who the contextualised African is, requires pause:

Is the 'African' a person who was born in Africa and made their way to Europe?
Is the 'African' a person born of an 'African' in Europe?
Is the 'African' a person with firsthand experience of Africa?
Is the 'African' a person with historical links to Africa, and how distant?
Is the 'African' a person who identifies with Africa?
Is the 'African' a person that is 'black'?[5]
Is the 'African' a person identifiable as an African?
Is the 'African' a person?

New Land

Now it becomes necessary to explain where Afroeuropa is. It is a place somewhat tied to the imaginative process. Is Afroeuropa a mythical home for an uncertain set of people claiming temporary equality with, or dominance over others? What is the make-up of the gallant individuals equally welcome and at ease in this delightful syncretic land? A land able to adopt the de-homed, or should it be the displaced? I am asking for

[4] In spite of history, birth, and longevity in Europe, there appears a coding that the African is marked in a way that Europeans are not. So Europeans in the Americas or further afield can lay claim to land and place in a way clearly denied to the African.

[5] All Africans are not 'black'. Furthermore, in the United Kingdom, 'black' is a political category.

information specifying some-thing, not some-one. The conceptualisation of Afroeuropa has to come before it is possible to imagine those who will accept its boundaries.

What is a 'thing' in this context? A thing is repeatable or reproducible. Alternately, who is a person? A person is unique, irreplaceable, defined, by their own being. A person is named and identifiable, if one person is an Afroeuropean, is it incumbent on everyone else to be like them (the first), identifiable by a marker rather than selfhood?

So what is this Afroeuropean? What is the fantasy of the African 'other' made apparent to the European? The Afroeuropean does not, cannot, exist in Africa, there are Africans, and Europeans, in Africa. However, the historical and present difficulty Europeans have in acknowledging the humanity of Africans when they share their land in Africa is well documented, be it isolationist techniques, or a clear retention of cultural and political identification with Europe rather than with Africa; it leaves no illusion as to what Europeans see themselves as. This distinction says a great deal about what the African is supposed to be, especially when considering the ever-present calls for Africans to integrate and assimilate themselves in Europe.

> Thank you said the master,
> Thank you said the dame,
> Thank you said the little boy who lives down the lane.

Cinematic Diversion

There is a paradox at hand: how does one separate the reality of Europeans in Africa from the existence of Africans in Europe? I watched *Blood Diamond* with some despair, it was yet another case of Black Africans at each other's throats, or in this case, limbs as well. The European in Africa was always treated with deference, was the one best able to kill effectively and at the end of it all could redeem themselves of all their atrocities. The categorisations of people according to skin colour and origin in the film was simplistic at best, but very telling of a collective imagination. If both the mercenary, in the form of White (European) 'Rhodesian" Danny Archer, and the Warlord, in the form of Black (African) Sierra Leonean Captain Poison, want a large pink diamond so that they can both get out of the mess they are in, how is it that when the Warlord is hacked to death with a shovel in the mud of a riverbank by the Black (African) Sierra Leonean fisherman, Solomon Vandy, the viewer is supposed to feel justice has been done because the Warlord had used Solomon's son Dia to his own ends? However, it was the same for Danny Archer who intended to