

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# On Rhythms and Rhymes: Poetics of Identity in Postcolonial Italy

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*Music, media and the arts in general have become a prime site of deep cultural contestation and polarization in Italy, generating unprecedented fractures in how Italian identity is conceived and lived. This article examines how the borders of Italian identity have been gradually stretched and challenged in the music of contemporary artists such as Mahmood, Ghali, and Amir Issaa. Through their beats, their lyrics, and, in the case of Issaa, his writing, these artists have given voice to a facet of Italianness that is rarely spotlighted in the media. In this sense, these cultural productions complicate the Italian collective memory by adding a layered understanding of contemporary identities, rooted in different cultures, speaking different languages, and embracing a way of being Italian that is looking to the future through the lens of the country's colonial past.*

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Every February since the mid-1950s Italian public television RAI has broadcast a national musical competition aimed at showcasing the best Italian songs of the year. The Sanremo Music Festival, which takes its name from the Ligurian town hosting it, started in 1951 as an attempt to evade the drudgery of post-war destruction. Defined by some as “the great evasion” (Rotondi, 2019), the Festival depicted the image of a country looking ahead, embracing the sunny side of modernity and singing the prospects of economic recovery. Public television broadcast the event in 1953 for the first time and, since then, the Sanremo Festival has become an annual, inescapable media event for millions of Italians, recording an average of 49% audience share. This spectacle of Italian culture, aptly named “the Festival of the Italian Song,” has featured a variety of Italian pop artists, who used this platform to launch their careers, as in the case of international stars Andrea Bocelli, Eros Ramazzotti, Laura Pausini, and Il Volo. Embracing the ultimate, almost stereotypical essence of Italianness, these and other artists used melodic music and emotional

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lyrics to perform their winning songs. More importantly, though, each year's winner represents Italy in the transnational Eurovision Song Contest.<sup>1</sup> For decades these performances have been tailored to sate the palate of mainstream audiences, usually middle-aged or older citizens, who find reassurance in the traditional conformity of many Sanremo performances. Since the early 2000s, though, demographic and technological changes have shifted the typology of the audience by drawing more on younger generations' use of social media and their cultural heterogeneity. At the time of this writing, the Festival's Facebook page has close to 800,000 followers, while their Twitter and Instagram accounts record approximately 200,000 and 340,000 followers, respectively. The use of these and other digital platforms has revived the popularity of this almost septuagenarian event and has opened the doors to a more eclectic, cosmopolitan public.

It is in this context that the controversial 2019 winning performance must be examined. "Soldi" ("Money") is an unconventional song about Milan's multicultural outskirts, lost relationships, and the disingenuous lure of money. Unlike other trap<sup>2</sup> songs to which "Soldi" has been juxtaposed, here wealth is not the ultimate goal, but it is rather the breaking point of an already fraught bond—that of the narrator with his long-lost father. Besides the trap/urban pop rhythms of its beats, "Soldi" disrupted the uniformity of Sanremo performances by introducing a line in Arabic. Repeated a couple of times, "waladi waladi habibi ta3ala hina" ("my son my son my love come here") re-routes the listener towards the multiculturalism of contemporary Italian society and its younger citizens. "Soldi" was written and performed by Mahmood, a 26-year-old Milanese. Born Alessandro Mahmoud of an Italian mother and an Egyptian father, this artist grew up in the Gratosoglio neighborhood, located in the southernmost edge of the city, a culturally diverse area characterized by large apartment blocks and relatively high crime rates. Mahmood's victory was met with mixed reactions in public discourse and engendered heated debates about the cultural roots of the "Italian song." While many used social media to applaud the symbolic triumph of a new mode to embody Italianness in popular culture, others poured their disappointment and even disgust on Twitter and Instagram.<sup>3</sup> The essence of such frustration elicits the implausibility of Mahmood's background (and even his name) as a worthy representative of Italian music nationally and transnationally. Some tweets go so far as to call on the country's president Mattarella or its minister of Interior Salvini to step in and change the results:

"Presidente, faccia qualcosa (...) a questo tizio di non si sa quale origine non può essere permesso di rappresentare l'Italia all'Eurovision."

[President, do something (...) we can't allow this dude from who-knows-which-origin to represent Italy at the Eurovision song contest.]

"Dajee Matteee! Vedi di fare qualcosa! Boicottiamo Sanremo! Non può vincere uno non italiano oh, svegliaaa! Sono preoccupato, spediscilo a casa sua a cantare!!" (Followed by a face screaming in fear emoji).

[Come on, Matteo (Salvini)! Try to do something! Let's boycott Sanremo! A non-Italian is not allowed to win, oh, wake up! I'm worried, send him back to sing in his own country!]

“Festival della canzone italiana vinta da un egiziano hahahahahaha il peggio è che lui che non è Italia ci rappresenterà all'eurovision (...) tristezza infinita (...) oggi l'Italia è morta.”

[An Egyptian won the Italian music festival hahahahahaha the worst part is that he is not Italy and he will represent us at the Eurovision contest (...) infinite sadness (...) today Italy died.]

These examples are indicative of the sentiment at the heart of many online conversations on the 2019 winner. What emerges from these words is an intrinsic desire to define Italianness as irrevocably monocultural and inherently homogeneous. Mahmood's Egyptian background from his estranged father's side takes center stage in these comments and becomes grounds for labeling the singer as a “foreigner.” Here, Mahmood's Italian citizenship, his half-Italian blood, his Milanese accent, and his Lombardy upbringing are all nullified by his father's foreign origins. For many commentators, this fact alone sufficiently corroborates Mahmood's inadequacy to represent Italy on an international stage, such as Eurovision's. As the last tweet bemoans, “he is not Italy and he will represent us at the Eurovision contest.” The vivid juxtaposition of “us” vs “them” in this sentence otherizes the Italian citizen of mixed origins, thereby relegating him to an inferior and unworthy status. The colonialist and Orientalist lens through which this victory has been construed is characteristic of much contemporary discussion on identity, nationality, and belonging in Italy. The case studies I chose are, in this sense, illustrative of the confining restrictions a white, Eurocentric approach can have when contemporary culture is assessed for its compliance with fixed, long-standing, and, currently anachronistic and divisive ideals about national belonging.

### Race and emerging populist discourse

Despite the deafening outcry following his victory, Mahmood was not the first Italian of mixed origins who participated in and won the Sanremo music festival: two Italian-Albanian singers won in 1989, 1999, and 2018 (Anna Oxa and Eralda Meta, respectively), while Franco-Italian Riccardo Cocchi rose to the top in 1991. All these victories were received with the usual set of commentaries reserved for any song: some acclaim, some critiques, but no particular controversies. In these previous instances, the singers' non-Italian parental origins did not cast doubt on their Italianness or their representative role at the Eurovision song contest. Of particular relevance for this analysis, though, is the example of Lara Saint Paul, an Italian Eritrean singer, who first performed at Sanremo in 1962. Throughout her career, Saint Paul renegotiated her *meticcio* identity in Italian television and music scene, thereby challenging existing notion of both whiteness and blackness. As Brioni

and Brioni noted in their analysis, “Savorelli’s [Saint Paul’s real name] lighter skin tone provided her with mimetic qualities and certainly facilitated the transformations of her star persona. Savorelli’s multifaceted meticcio stardom and her negotiation of difference that at times seemed relatively free of racial bias is rather exceptional in contemporary Italian history and popular culture” (Brioni and Brioni, 2018, p. 364).

If half-Italians had performed and won this traditional competition before, what was different in the 2019 edition? Why did Mahmood’s victory anger so many? Some answers to these questions are to be located in the unique socio-political culture that has characterized Italy since the mid-2000s. The debate on immigration is at the forefront of political and cultural diatribes that take place in mainstream media, public squares, and local bars. For several years Italy has been host to hundreds of thousands migrants, who reach Italian Southern coasts to escape poverty, war, and violence in their home countries. Right-wing parties, such as Lega Nord, Forza Italia, and Fratelli d’Italia, among others, have embraced strong nationalist and often xenophobic stances, which caution the public against the inherent peril of these newcomers. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are thus seen as inherently violent, inept, deficient, and utterly inferior to the true Italian. The Orientalist, populist sentiment that shapes much rhetoric on migration heralds the nationalist call for “Italians first” and has concretized in inhumane anti-immigration policies<sup>4</sup> (Coman, 2018). The fear propaganda intrinsic to much political discourse has inevitably generated high levels of distrust and hatred towards those that do not fall into preconceived notions of Italianness. In fact, in the late 2010s, the number of racist attacks—whether verbal or physical—has skyrocketed throughout the country, targeting in particular black and brown bodies (Camilli, 2019). As such, African and Middle-Eastern bodies are regularly marked by assumptions of alterity and foreignness, despite the millennial interconnections Mediterranean populations share and the atrocious history of Italian colonialism in East Africa and Libya. It is in fact crucial to contextualize contemporary episodes of racial discrimination and bigotry within the country’s colonial past. Only through a careful reassessment and revisitation of the racial relations that shaped the Italian colonial experience between the late 1800s and the mid-1940s can one understand the layered rhetoric that informs today’s mainstream debate on Otherness, difference, and Italianness. While an in-depth discussion of human and cultural relations during Italian colonialism is beyond the scope of this writing,<sup>5</sup> a note must be made on the differential power relations that governed interactions between white colonizers and black/brown colonized locals. While these differed based on the gender of the colonized, such relations were framed within a logic of war and superiority that gave the white Italian male colonizer the power to hegemonize—metaphorically, psychologically, and/or physically—the local black/brown bodies (Barrera, 2003; Ponzanesi, 2012). The subaltern role of the local population was reiterated through policies, printed materials, and Fascist songs, such as the infamous “Faccetta Nera” (“Little Black Face”) which invokes Africa as a virgin land that could be possessed through its exotic(ized) women.<sup>6</sup> As Ponzanesi argues, the theoretical deconstruction of essentialism does not necessarily entail its

political and cultural displacement (NYU Florence, 2015). In fact, what an analysis of contemporary Italian culture reveals is precisely this kind of essentialized discourse on the boundaries of national identity, as they become increasingly less porous.

This article examines how the borders of Italian identity have been gradually stretched and challenged in the music of contemporary artists such as Mahmood, Ghali, and Amir Issaa. Through their beats, their lyrics, and, in the case of Issaa, his writing, these artists have given voice to a facet of Italianness that is rarely spotlighted in the media. As part of the so-called “seconde generazioni” (second generations of migrants), these and other artists grew up in Italy with at least one foreign parent. Their experiences as youth in Italian public schools and culture have thus been somewhat different from those of most Italian youths; yet, their trajectories are less unusual than what mainstream media would have us believe. In fact, as argued above, multiculturalism is a lived reality for many in urban areas, where public schools, playgrounds, and sports teams comprise young people of varying ethnic and linguistic origins (Clini, 2015). While a few documentaries have addressed this diversity,<sup>7</sup> most mainstream media—particularly RAI and Mediaset platforms—are still impervious to the shifting demographics and remain obstinate to showcase programs where diversity, when explored, is extraneous and exogeneous to Italian culture.<sup>8</sup> In this context, while the intercultural background of these music artists is shared by many, their music still acts as a disruptive narrative in the homogenizing landscape of mainstream media. By including Middle Eastern and Afro beats, Arabic, English and French words, and generally calling for a more flexible and permeable notion of *italianità* in their music, these artists challenge the normative representation of their generation and engage in a process of cultural decolonization. Music, media and the arts in general have become a prime site of deep cultural contestation and polarization in Italy, generating pathbreaking disruptions in how Italian identity is conceived and lived. In this sense, the cultural production of the artists I analyze here complicates the Italian collective memory by adding a layered understanding of contemporary identities, rooted in different cultures, speaking different languages, and embracing a way of being Italian that is looking to the future through the lens of the country’s colonial past.

### **New Italian vistas: Ghali’s disruptive rap**

In January 2018 Ghali, a Milanese rapper with Tunisian parents, dropped his much anticipated single “Cara Italia” (“Dear Italy”), a rap-trap piece where the artist expresses his love for Italy (“my better half”), while reproaching it for its treatment of foreigners and its circumstantial closed-mindedness. During the first 24 hours after its release, the “Cara Italia” video recorded 4.2 million views, 226,000 likes and 19,000 comments on YouTube, thus becoming the most successful YouTube debut for an Italian artist. Soon after its release, the song was for many weeks at the top of the charts in Italy, Tunisia, and Switzerland and quickly became a tune that young and older generations would recognize and hum. The popularity of “Cara Italia” can be

attributed to its catchy rhythms and its polished video production. Yet, one could also argue that the intensity of the lyrics engaged young listeners with its plea for a country that accepts and recognizes the multicultural demographics of its citizens. Prior to the release of “Cara Italia,” Ghali contextualized the genesis and meaning of the song with the following Instagram post:

Dear Italy, I dedicate to you this song, which I created as I was coming back from my first trip to America. You are every bit as good as these great countries we see in movies. I hope you won't be offended because I highlighted your flaws, we all know you're beautiful but this helps you become better. Dear Italy, I wrote:— you are my better half because it is true. You saw me being born, you raised me and now from every corner people scream my name, how can I turn my back to you? You, the abode of my desires, the bed of my dreams. Infinite painful days within your walls and infinite angry nights, but how could I turn my back without regretting it?

Dear Italy, I ask of you only three things: NEVER TALK TO ME again of borders and I will no longer speak with skepticism. DON'T FEEL inferior and I will measure up. DON'T LOOK AT ME as an enemy and I will look at you as a sister, a friend, a mom. I hope you will take my words into consideration. I love you, Dear Italy. [author's translation]

The hummable chorus captures the essence of the song, as Ghali repeats: “Oh eh oh quando mi dicono ‘A casa’/Oh eh oh rispondo ‘Sono già qua’/Oh eh oh io T.V.B. cara Italia/Oh eh oh sei la mia dolce metà” (“Oh eh oh when they tell me ‘Go home’/Oh eh oh I answer ‘I’m already here’ Oh eh oh I love you dear Italy/Oh eh oh you are my better half”). The salience of these lyrics is foregrounded by Ghali’s own background, born of Tunisian parents who migrated to Italy before his birth. While his Tunisian heritage is never buried in his music—neither through language nor beats—here Ghali emphasizes his rightful belonging in Italy and his different Italian identity. “Home” is the Milanese periphery where he grew up and not, as some would claim, his parents’ country.

“Cara Italia” asserts the artist’s own Italian identity, while warning against a perilous media trend that otherizes migrants: “C’è chi ha la mente chiusa ed è rimasto indietro come al Medioevo/Il giornale ne abusa, parla dello straniero come un alieno/senza passaporto, in cerca di dinero” (“Some are closed minded and backward like in the Middle Ages/The newspaper takes advantage of this, talks about foreigners as aliens/without a passport, looking for money”). For decades Italian news sources have approached the topic of immigration through a sensationalistic lens that frames the non-white Other as poor, ignorant, and inherently violent (particularly in the case of young men), while drawing a direct link between immigration and terrorism, criminality, and security threats. A 2018 study on the media’s representation of migration, conducted by the association Carta di Roma, found that Italian news sources have steadily decreased the coverage of stories on hospitality to give more space to migratory flows as an ongoing phenomenon that is deeply tied to the push-

back policies embraced by the current government (Milazzo, 2018). The continuous coverage of migratory flows, paired with the frequent use of terms such as “invasion,” “emergency,” “criminality,” contributes to creating a perception of threat and incongruity with Italian social norms. This is oftentimes reinforced by headlines that articulate the inherent danger of a culturally diverse society and the inevitable loss of national identity, as one can see in the following titles: “Armi e Corano: così l’Islamico ci conquisterà” (“Weapons and Quran: this is how the Islamic will conquer us”) and “Prove di sharia. L’Islam conquista gli ospedali italiani. A Lodi le pazienti musulmane saranno curate solo da medici e infermiere donne” (“Sharia rehearsals. Islam will conquer Italian hospitals. In Lodi female patients will be treated only by female doctors and nurses”). In a similar vein, television newscasts insist on broadcasting images of migrants in rubber dinghies, stranded in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, waiting to be rescued. These high-angle shots frame migrants and refugees as part of an indistinguishable mass, deprived of their individuality and ultimately marked as disposable black and brown bodies. As several scholars have argued, this voiceless and faceless representation conveniently categorizes migrants as Others and somewhat justifies the public’s estrangement from them (Chouliaraki, 2006a; Chouliaraki, 2006b). To this I would also add that by focusing solely on migration Italian media systematically reiterate the notion that cultural and racial diversity is alien to Italian culture and is rather forced upon national and local identity through the mere presence of ethnically and religiously diverse population in their midst.

In “Wily Wily,” Ghali speaks to this flattening characterization in the first verse: “Tuo padre è meglio se lo avvisi/Ho capito c’è la crisi/In tv ci riempion di stronzate/Le palle giran come frisbee ma/Tu digli che sono un tipo easy/Figlio di ma’ e i suoi sacrifici/Sì, sì, sì, sì, si crede in Dio/Tu pensi che l’Islam sia Isis perché/Hai un amico marocchino/E ti ha insegnato solo parolacce/A mandare a fare in culo/E forse forse pure a dire grazie/Assalam aleikum assalam aleikum/Son venuto in pace/Questa guerra, questa merda/Giuro, wallah, fra’ non mi piace” (“You’d better warn your dad/I got it there’s a crisis/Tv fills our heads with bullshit/I’m very pissed off but/Tell him I’m an easy guy/Son of my mom and her sacrifices/We, we, we, we, we believe in God/You think Islam is Isis because/You have a Moroccan friend/And he taught you only swear words/And how to say fuck off/And maybe maybe to say thank you/Assalam aleikum assalam aleikum (Peace be upon you peace be upon you)/I came in peace/This war, this shit/I promise, bro, I don’t like it”). The video of this song, shot in the Jordanian desert, its Arabic chorus,<sup>9</sup> and its Arabized beats foreground Ghali’s North-African roots and underscore the genuine intersectionality of his identity. As in most other songs, here five different languages—Italian, Arabic, French, Spanish and English—alternate seamlessly to convey the intrinsic diversity of Ghali’s upbringing and his unexceptionability. These lyrics, memorized and sung passionately by thousands of young Italians at his sold-out concerts, challenge the monolithic discourse on diversity and embrace a post-colonial vision of Italianness, where identities are plural and layered.

In January 2019 Roberto Saviano, an Italian journalist and writer known for his reporting on Camorra, interviewed Ghali and asked him to comment on the current political status quo in Italy. Ghali proclaimed his ignorance on the matter (“per me parlare di politica è come andare dal commercialista: non capisco nulla”; “talking about politics is like going to my accountant: I can’t understand anything”) and asserted his desire to bring a relevant message without engaging directly with politics (“Una volta che l’ascoltatore capisce è come se avessi dato un messaggio politico. Senza essere esplicito. Il messaggio è nel tipo di viaggio che gli faccio fare (. . .) Prima delle regole di uno Stato ci sono le regole dell’umanità. Il flow può convertire i nazi”; “Once listeners understand it’s as if I sent a political message. Without being explicit. The message is part of the journey I take them on. Before the government’s rules there are humanity rules. The flow can convert Nazis.”) (Saviano, 2019). Yet, despite his resistance to take sides in the fraught Italian political landscape, Ghali’s ideological position permeates indelibly his music, which is deeply embedded in the plural positionality of his own identity and the embedded call to reframe Italianness within the postcolonial awareness of the 21st century.

Research on postcoloniality in Italy has been slow to emerge, perhaps because of an undeclared perception that the Italian colonial experience was somewhat different (i.e., better, less violent, more humane) than its British and French counterparts, or perhaps because postcolonialism has often been construed as dealing “with objectives and themes that are not at bottom closely connected with Italy, its history and cultural identity, its present and past” (Mellino, 2006, p. 463). The myth of *italiani brava gente* mentioned by the postcolonial scholar Mellino is quite indicative of this widespread and commonly accepted perception of Italians as innately good-hearted and unable to commit the heinous crimes of colonial history (Fogu, 2006; Rodogno, 2005). Thus, the concentration camps, deportations, acts of gendered violence and torture that defined the Italian colonial experience in Eritrea and Libya were regularly characterized as less cruel and barbaric than what they actually were: in a sense, the Italian colonizers’ conviviality and exuberance were used as legitimate scapegoats to camouflage the savagery of their actions in the colonies and the racist ideology that pitted Italians (superior and civilized) against Africans (inferior and barbarian) (Andall & Duncan, 2005; Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2016; Brioni & Gulema, 2018). This myth of Italians as “good colonizers” has permeated public discourse and media representation for almost a century and is still remarkably present in today’s discussions on diversity and colonial history. Here is, for instance, a statement made in 2004 by Gianfranco Fini, then Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Berlusconi government, during a visit to Libya:

There is not the slightest doubt that colonialism in the last century was one of the most difficult moments in the relations between Europe and, in this case, North Africa, but, and this is obviously a personal view, in speaking of Italian colonialism I think we should speak of it bearing clearly in mind the fact that it is others in Europe who should be ashamed of certain ugly events. We have our responsibility too, but, to Libya at least, the Italians brought not only roads

and employment, but also those values, that civilization and those laws that are a lighthouse for a whole culture, not only for Western culture (Fini cited in Salerno, 2005).

While colonialism is defined by Fini as one of the most trying moments in cross-Mediterranean relations, the unique Italian take on colonialism is, once again, characterized as “special,” as it generously brought civilization and laws. This jarring argument used in 2004 by one of the highest officials in the Italian government to justify the colonization of North African territories reveals the extent to which the myth of *italiani brava gente* is still prevalent in contemporary Italian society and is further embraced as a logic and legitimate explanation of the country’s colonial past. Besides betraying an evident ignorance on Italian history, this argument also disregards the inherent connection that underlies the Italian colonial past and the multicultural society that is challenging the limits of Italianness. As Paul Gilroy reminds us, “the political conflicts which characterize multicultural societies can take on a very different aspect if they are understood to exist firmly in a context supplied by imperial and colonial history. Though that history remains marginal and largely unacknowledged, surfacing only in the service of nostalgia and melancholia, it represents a store of unlikely connections and complex interpretative resources. The imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer imperial countries” (Gilroy, 2004, p. 2). The *italiani brava gente* myth I mentioned above is symptomatic of this continuity between colonial past and contemporary multicultural society. Scholars and intellectuals have engaged in a deconstruction and re-contextualization of this trope (Fogu, 2006; Rodogno, 2005). But in public life and mediated discourse, this myth still holds strong and is used boldly to characterize inroads by Italian troops in the 1900s as well as the 2000s. One such example is the television series “Nassyria. Per non dimenticare” (“Nassyria. Not to Forget”), where the Italian *carabinieri* are presented as more humane and less callous towards the local Iraqi population than their Anglophone counterparts (Mellino, 2011). As Gilroy pointed out, here, as in many other media events, history is narrated through the lens of nostalgia and melancholia, a lens that has constantly obfuscated the complex layers of meaning embedded in colonial relationships. Thus, while numerous scholars have produced valuable work on the need for a postcolonial re-reading of Italian history (De Donno & Srivastava, 2006; Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012), particularly as a framework to understand the cultural complexity of contemporary society, public discourse opts for a convenient silence on the most atrocious aspects of colonialism. Vagueness, oblivion, and purported negligence coalesce in contemporary Italy to ensure that well-trodden myths live on and do not destabilize the apparent homogeneity of Italian culture. The problem inherent in these colonialist depictions relies certainly in their factual inaccuracy, but also and above all in how they are commonly used to justify cultural and racial homogeneity and frame diversity as Other to true Italianness. In this sense, the artists analyzed in this article contribute to reframing a vision of Italianness that defies, deconstructs, and destabilizes outdated perceptions of national belonging. Through their music and,

in the case of Amir, his writing and social engagement, these rappers move beyond the nostalgic appeal to cultural sameness and reclaim their diversity as an intrinsic facet of their Italianness. The importance of their work must thus be discerned as a different contribution to postcolonial Italian culture. Unlike the writings by Afro-Italian authors such as Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ali Farah, or Gabriella Ghermandi, which have received wide scholarly attention, contemporary Italian hip hop does not necessarily question the relationship between colonizer and colonized, nor does it call for an explicit reinterpretation of Italian colonial history. Instead, these artists enter the postcolonial debate by providing an alternative epistemological vocabulary to talk about identity and belonging in Italy at the end of the 2010s. Their work must thus be contextualized as an example of what Homi Bhabha calls “the right to narrate,” “the authority to tell stories, recount or recast histories, that create the web of social life and change the direction of its flow” (Bhabha, 2014). The act of narration and the ensuing narrative become more than a mere linguistic exercise, Bhabha argues. The right to narrate encompasses a desire to be heard, to be recognized and represented. It allows for a recounting of stories, histories, experiences that have been marginalized or outright silenced in mainstream records. As a “sign of civic life” this kind of narrative is an indispensable component of a dialectical logic, one that aims at shattering the walls of silence erected around marginal voices in contemporary societies. The danger embedded in this silence is grave, as Bhabha reminds us: “When you fail to protect the right to narrate you risk filling the silence with sirens, megaphones, hectoring voices carried by loudspeakers or from towering podiums” (Bhabha, 2014). Much mediatised discourse on identity and belonging in Italy has used the megaphones of politicized television and sounded the loud sirens of fear and xenophobic retrenchment. In this sense, the right to narrate constitutes an important dimension of Italian hip hop as it allows for artists to set the record straight about the populist and official elisions of Italian history.

### Contested memories and new poetics of belonging

Born in 1978 Amir Issaa belongs to an earlier generation than Ghali and Mahmood, and his approach to music, writing, and social justice reveals the experience of an artist who has been on the public scene for several decades and understands the power of his music and words. Like Mahmood, Amir (who goes often only by his first name) was born in Rome from an Italian mother and an Egyptian father, and in his early years as a rapper he was known as Meticcio (mixed-race) to highlight, and perhaps also justify, his brown skin. Like that of his peers, Amir’s music was influenced by the American rappers who were emerging in the Italian music market at the time. In particular, Amir was influenced by Nas’ 1994 album *Illmatic*, a hardcore hip hop album which he defines as a “timeless masterpiece”: “[this album] had all the ingredients of a story I could see myself in. Its strong ties to the inner city and his neighborhood, its sensibility towards the weakest and its technical prowess

make this a unique album and certainly an important point of reference for me” (Issaa, 2019).

In the 1990s, when Amir debuted as an artist, skin color was an essential marker of *italianità*, and those bodies who deviated from the normative expectations of Italianness were immediately pigeonholed as foreigners, migrants, refugees. While this is still true to a certain extent in contemporary Italy, such practice was much more widespread and ran unquestioned in the 1990s, when there were fewer second-generation Italians and social media had not yet become an echo chamber for marginalized groups. Hence, Amir’s choice to launch his career using his Arab name (and not the Italian “Massimo” he had adopted in the first 18 years of his life) or the title of “*meticcio*” speaks to the need of these early artists to claim a particular kind of space in the national music landscape: their space straddled the local of their neighborhood and the translocal of their parents’ origins, thereby traversing the invisible, yet unwavering boundaries of Italianness. The in-between position of Amir and many of his peers is proudly reclaimed in his early song “*Straniero nella mia nazione*” (“A foreigner in my own country”; 2006), a hymn to the cultural richness of *métissage*.<sup>10</sup> The opening lyrics plunge the listener into the biography that shaped his place in Italian society:

Born in Italy/Amir written on the sand/take my name and translate it/Arabian prince/a voice screaming/from Rome all the way to Taba/in this cold society/I look for warmer air/son of love and the heart/of two people/a mix of blood cultures races and religions/I’m here as a spokesperson/I’m on a mission against desperation/that afflicts too many people/second generation/I look at my son/he’s the third [generation] and if you try to even barely touch him/I’ll blow your head off/if you don’t understand that you found richness/we are precious stones in the midst of all this garbage/I write with the hunger/of one who doesn’t give up/I take your hate and I transform it in this pen/S.O.S. negative balance/if they call me foreigner in the place where I live.

Although this song was written in the mid-2000s, a decade prior to Ghali’s debut music, the lyrics emphasize a similar call to acceptance in Italian society, where Amir claims his rightful place. As for Ghali and Mahmood, his looks and foreign-sounding name do not warrant the suspicious reception of institutions and fellow citizens alike, who still determine belonging in terms of skin color. Amir’s best-known songs, released in the mid-2000s, insist on drawing a clear distinction between their author and newly arrived migrants in Italy. In “*Non sono un immigrato*” (“I’m not an immigrant”), Amir embraces an “I vs. Them” approach by distancing himself from individuals who didn’t grow up in Italy: “I don’t need integration/I was born here/I’m not my father/I’m not an immigrant/I’m not a terrorist/I’m not a refugee/I eat pasta and pizza/I’m Italian/My name is Amir in the same way that your name is Mario/I don’t come from the desert with a turban and a dromedary/I don’t have a (market) stall I don’t sell carpets/I’m not a clandestine I’m not a windshield washer.” These lyrics express Amir’s desire to separate himself from the images of immigration that have populated mainstream media for several decades. Yet, in doing so, the rapper

also subscribes to the myopic perception of migrants as either illegal aliens, criminals, or exotic peddlers. In this song, the term “immigrant” becomes easily associated with the negative connotations that are commonly adopted in news media: the images of an utterly Other who opts for a life of surreptitious means is held as the diametric mirror to define the Self. While this approach might have been warranted at the time when Amir broke into the national hip hop scene, it also reiterates the divisive logic whereby migrants are regularly defined by their Otherness and their ultimate inability to be completely Italian. Pasta and pizza are here elevated to the *ne plus ultra* of Italianness, symbols of a culture that is firmly anchored in its own traditions and to which others (i.e., migrants) must adapt. What we see in these lyrics, therefore, is an attempt to tear down the wall of intolerance towards the second generations, only to erect a somewhat softer (but still significant) barrier between Italians and migrants. Thus, unlike Ghali’s music, which pushes the boundaries by incorporating different languages and beats, Amir’s is rooted in a more conventional view of identity: he claims his place as a rightful Italian citizen because of his linguistic fluency and his familiarity with culinary and cultural traditions. The country Amir sings about in the mid-2000s is perhaps not ripe to espouse the possibility of including other languages, other food staples, other beats as elements of Italianness. In this sense, more than being indicative of Amir’s limited view of Italianness, I’d argue that his early approach to hip hop is reflective of the need to break ground by adopting an epistemological lens that people found familiar. Fifteen years after Amir’s debut, Ghali is able to fill the stadiums with fans memorizing an Arabic chorus or singing about Islam as a religion of peace.

Beginning in the early 2010s, Amir’s work takes on a more socially engaged tone, as he soars as a spokesperson for the *ius soli* movement to claim the “right of the soil” for young people born in Italy of foreign parents. In fact, in 2019 the Italian nationality law is still largely based upon the principle of *ius sanguinis* (“the right of blood”) that allows individuals to become Italian citizens only if at least one parent has Italian blood (Della Puppa & Sredanovic, 2017; Patriarca & Deplano, 2018; Sigona, 2016). Passed in 1991, this law poses severe obstacles to children of foreign parents, who are often caught in a legal limbo as culturally Italian and bureaucratically foreigners. During the first 18 years of their lives these youth cannot leave the country for an extended period of time, may be unable to travel abroad, and must be constantly either in school or employed. Only if these (and other similar) requirements are satisfied will they be allowed to apply for the Italian citizenship once they become adults. Since the early 1990s second-generation activists have engaged in countless campaigns to change the law according to the *ius soli* principle, and in 2014 Amir joined the fight with his appeal song “Caro Presidente” (“Dear President”), a brief, one-minute call to President Sergio Mattarella to intervene in the debate on citizenship law and allow children of non-Italian parents their rightful place in the Italian legal system. This call was followed by a petition (with 75,000 signatures) and two other songs on the same theme (“Ius Music” and “La mia pelle” [“My Skin”], both released in 2014). Through this music, which partially shifts the optics of his earlier production, Amir re-appropriates his bicultural, mixed identity

and uses his Italianness as a platform to make room for other youth. While in the mid-2000s he sang about his difference from his Egyptian father (“Io non sono mio padre”; “I’m not my father”), 10 years later Amir celebrates his dad’s sacrifices and his Middle Eastern roots (“Se sono qua io/ringrazio mio padre/che ha lasciato tutto/e ha trovato il coraggio per scappare/(...) La mia pelle mi ricorda chi sono”; “If I’m here/I thank my father/who left everything/and found the courage to escape/(...) My skin reminds me who I am”). In more recent years Amir’s social engagement has extended to writing (his autobiography *Vivo per questo* [“I live for this” was published in 2017] and teaching workshops in schools and prisons across the country and abroad.<sup>11</sup> For several years now Amir has taken part in anti-discrimination teach-ins in numerous high schools in Italy as part of the project “Potere alle parole” (“Power to the words”), a series of events organized by UNAR (National Office for Racial Anti-Discrimination) whereby rappers teach local students how to use words, rhymes, and music to write anti-discriminatory lyrics and celebrate diversity. Overall, Amir’s music and activist work contribute to a much-needed probing of the populist rhetoric that has shaped mainstream discourse on diversity and identity in Italian media. As Chambers and Iannicielli argue in their work on migration and modernity:

Art today, more than ever, poses a political interrogation of the status quo. Not only does it historically harbor an aesthetics that displaces common sense with the unsuspected and unexpected, but it also requires that we renegotiate our sense of belonging in a world that clearly precedes and exceeds our grasp. If fundamentalism is the refusal of a poetics that draws us toward the infinite truth of ambiguity and delivers us over to the uncertainties of a disquieting elsewhere, then the ubiquitous hegemony of realism betrays the fundamentalism of vision for which the truth is believed to be transparent, immediate, graspable, conclusive. It is that particular hold on the world, reconfirming the subject in his or her immediate centrality, that postcolonial art rightly seeks to challenge and displace. (Chambers & Ianniciello, 2016, p. 44)

These emerging Italian rappers not only challenge the political and cultural status quo that pervades contemporary society, but also extend the aesthetic reach of an Other lived reality in postcolonial Italy. Their identities are thus charted within and between the alterity of their families’ origins, the mainstream mediatized sameness of Italian television news and entertainment programs, and the foreign musical and linguistic influences that shape both lyrics and beats. On the one hand, rappers like Amir, Ghali, and Mahmood are deeply influenced by the invisible figure of their North-African fathers, whose frequent absence in their lives marks the ineffable quest at the heart of several songs. On the other hand, their personal and artistic identities are utterly Italian and reveal nuances of new Italianness that are often obliterated in mainstream entertainment. Ultimately, Mahmood’s, Amir’s, and Ghali’s productions reflect stylistic influences from US hip hop and Arab traditional beats. The cultural and intellectual ferment in the work of Ghali, Amir, and other artists creates new border spaces of identity and charts the path of new, ambiguous postcolonial routes which young generations can navigate in search of their own spaces of belonging.

Admittedly, the postcolonial identities discussed in this analysis are limited to a male and masculine perspective, and their position in Italian society is bounded by these gender markers. The gendered component of Italian postcolonial hip hop is indeed an important aspect that future research should pay attention to. Despite the overwhelming predominance of male artists, this genre is slowly opening the doors to women rappers like Chadia Rodriguez, and their poetics of identity in postcolonial Italy might have a different imprint.

## Notes

1. Based on the Sanremo Festival, Eurovision is an international song competition held primarily among members of the European Broadcasting Union. Started in 1956, Eurovision now includes 50 countries and reaches an audience of approximately 500 million internationally ([Eurovision Song Contest, 2005](#)).
2. Italian trap music originates in the 2010s from the urban peripheries, loci of poverty, unemployment and few opportunities for their youth. The most popular trap artists in Italy are Gue Pequeno, Sfera Ebbasta, and Dark Polo Gang, whose lyrics often celebrate wealth and material success ([Erminsino, 2018](#)).
3. Italian newspapers and news agencies underscored the controversial nature of Mahmood's victory by opting to lead with headlines such as "Sanremo 2019, scontro tra giurie e televoto. Mahmood è un caso politico" (*Il Messaggero*), "Sanremo, il vincitore è Mahmood. 'Io, cento per cento italiano.'" (*La Repubblica*), "Sanremo 2019, Mahmood e le polemiche: 'Sono italiano al 100% faccio Marocco-pop'" (Agenzia ANSA). These news sources emphasize the need to re-assert Mahmood's Italianness in the face of widespread disagreement about his win in some political and social circles.
4. In the summer 2018, for instance, the Italian government, led by Lega's Matteo Salvini, closed all its ports to migrants rescued in the Mediterranean, forcing the boats to stall at sea for several days and eventually dock in other countries. These measures have been strongly criticized for their barbarous approach to the refugee pleas and their disregard for the root causes of recent migration flows ("Il calo degli sbarchi in Italia e i porti chiusi voluti da Salvini," n.d.; [Stephen, 2018](#)).
5. For more on this, see: [Andall & Duncan, 2005](#); [Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2016](#); [De Donno & Srivastava, 2006](#).
6. Igiaba Scego writes a compelling history of this song in her piece "La vera storia di Faccetta Nera" ("La vera storia di Faccetta nera - Igiaba Scego - Internazionale," n.d.).
7. See, for instance, Fred Kuwornu's documentaries *18 Ius Soli* (2011) and *Blaxploitalian* (2016).
8. In July 2019, Netflix Italia announced the production of a new original fiction series titled *Zero*, written by African-Italian writer Antonio Dikele Distefano. Set to launch in 2020, *Zero* will be the first series focusing on the lives of black Italian youths.

9. In the chorus, Ghali sings: “Habibi/Ya nor l3in/Ndiro lhala sans pitiè/Fratello ma 3la balich/En ma vie ho visto bezaf/Quindi adesso rehma lah/Ndir lhala sans pitiè/Fratello ma 3la balich/En ma vie ho visto bezaf/Quindi adesso rehma lah/Baba menchoufuch/Wily Wily, Nari Nari/3andi dra 9addech/3andi dra 9addech/3andi dra 9addech/Nari Nari, Wily Wily/W y golouly kifech/W y golouly kifech/W y golouly kifech/Wily Wily, Nari Nari/Sa7by lascia stare/Non voglio più stress/Nari Nari, Wily Wily/Khoya, come sto?/Hamdoullah lebes” (“Honey/you are the light of my eyes/we’ll do things without pity/brother don’t think about it/in my life I’ve seen a lot/so now no compassion/we’ll do things without pity/brother don’t think about it/in my life I’ve seen a lot/so now no compassion/Dad I don’t see him/Oh my God/I’ve got a lot/I’ve got a lot/I’ve got a lot/Oh my God/And they tell me how/And they tell me how/And they tell me how/Oh my God/My friend let it go/I don’t want any stress anymore/Oh my God/My brother how am I doing?/Fine thank God”)
10. The title of Amir’s song was inspired by the homonymous 1993 single released by one of Italy’s first hip hop group, Sangue Misto.
11. In his autobiography Amir takes the reader through a chronological, spatial journey from the public school where he used the Italian-sounding name Massimo all through the different areas in Tor Pignattara where he experimented with graffiti first and rap later. Besides his work in Italy, Amir has travelled extensively in the United States and Japan to present his work at local colleges.

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