ITALIAN WOMEN WRITERS, 1800–2000

Boundaries, Borders, and Transgression

Edited by

PATRIZIA SAMBUCO

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Introduction

Italian Women Writers 1800–2000: Boundaries, Borders, and Transgression deals with concepts of spatial and cultural boundaries, hybridity, border identity, and expressions of excluded identities. It connects therefore to a vast literature on theorizations of space, marginal identity, and power relationships that has enriched disciplines ranging from social sciences to humanities in contemporary and modern times. From geographers to literary scholars many have drawn from other disciplines to investigate theorizations of space, which have led to a variety of ramifications relevant to the discourse of boundaries and borders.

Concepts of space, as the ones theorized by Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, and Henry Lefebvre[1] highlight a relational function which have become also a characteristic trait of the theorization around place, especially in the era of globalization. While place has been often considered as "a bounded type of space"[2] significant for expression of belonging and identity, scholars such as Edward Casey and Doreen Massey have highlighted the fluid boundaries of places, or as Massey states: "This is a notion of place where specificity (local uniqueness, a sense of place) derives not from some mythical internal roots nor from a history of isolation—now to be disrupted by globalization—but precisely from the absolute particularity of the mixture of influences found together there."[3] Concepts of influences, exchanges, and fluidity are also relevant to the lively debate on borders, global versus local tensions that have enriched many fields of analysis from literary to political and social studies.

Gloria Anzaldúa, in her seminal, autobiographical work *Borderlands* (1987), presented the concept of border identity as explanatory model for the Chicano woman living in the geographical space of the US-Mexican border. Crucially in Anzaldúa work, the localized characteristic of border identity has repercussions on the psychological and sexual identity as well

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as on the writer's need to express herself.[4] Anzaldúa's work has generated over the years a cascade reaction, which has led to expanding the analysis of borders to numerous geographical situations from the US-Canadian border to European countries and to Asia.

The discourse initiated by Gloria Anzaldúa in some respects resembles the analysis of postcolonial identity that has developed in particular in the Anglo-American world, and has generated ramifications in other countries. Starting from Edward's Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the analysis of the power relationships between Western societies and the rest of the world and the effects of their interrelations has been developed further by the work of postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha. A particularly relevant point in his work is the concept of hybridity. Bhabha's work destabilizes the opposition colonized/colonizer that characterizes postcolonial theorization, on the contrary he highlights how the two sides are interrelated in the very construction of their identities. As Bart Moore-Guilbert reminds us, Bhabha's take, in terms of the concept of agency relates to an area "in-between the dominant and subordinate cultures, across which an unstable traffic of continuously (re)negotiated (counter-) identifications is conducted. . . . [T]hat affective 'borderland' also opens up unexpected and hitherto unrecognized ways in which colonial power can be circumvented by the native subject, in a process which might be described as psychological guerrilla warfare."[5]

It is clear that both Anzaldúa's idea of border identity and Bhabha's hybridity are political concepts that address the possibility of agency outside prefixed identities. In a similar way concepts of borders and boundaries are pivotal also in feminist and women's studies as metaphors for going beyond prefixed identities; theories such as Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subject and Donna Haraway's cyborgs, all derive from the concept of boundary-crossing and have all been central within gender and women's studies.[6]

While in modern and contemporary times, discussions on metropolises and cities, on national borders and immigration are intense, the female subject acquires a particularly privileged standpoint of observation. The traditional association of domestic space and family has made the analysis of the woman subject central to the discourse of space. The importance of space for the development of a female subject disentangled from patriarchal constrictions has been argued by Elizabeth Grosz who, elaborating on Luce Irigaray's thought, states: "When women have a place or space in which to live their bodies, sexualities, and identities, the false duality or symmetry of phallic domination—where woman is seen as man's negative double, modeled on *an economy of the same*—can be shattered."[7]

As far as women writers and women intellectuals are concerned, the discussion on boundaries also involves the debate on women's marginal position within established literary or cultural canons and their modes of expressions.

Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation of marginal literature opens up new analysis in this sense.[8] The topics of spaces, margins, or borders and boundary-crossing become therefore intertwined and particularly significant in the works of women writers. Italy's particular geopolitical position, with its southern borders central to the most recent phenomenon of immigration, and with the controversial history of its eastern borders has in fact provided a substratum for reflection, for women writers in particular. At the same time, historical factors such as the political relevance of the private/public sphere at the time of the creation of the nation, have given Italian women writers a privileged standpoint for the consideration of boundary-crossing.

Italian Women Writers 1800–2000: Boundaries, Borders, and Transgression investigates narrative, autobiography, and poetry by Italian women writers from the nineteenth century to today with the aim of considering the topics of borders and boundaries in their writings. It takes into consideration works by women writers who have dealt with confinement and entrapment, either physical or professional; it investigates works by women writers who have given significance to writing about national borders; it also discusses forms of writing as a privileged mode of expression for what, as Giuliana Morandini states in her contribution to this volume, is "often excluded." Through the contributions in this book it will be possible to highlight how, from the nineteenth century to postcolonial literature, concepts of spaces and of confines in women writers are often interlocking with the search for mediating modes of expression, and how behind discussions of domesticity and social entrapment women writers offer views of agency expressed through marginality, writing, and conceptual and literary boundary-crossing.

The first section of *Italian Women Writers 1800–2000: Boundaries, Borders and Transgression* deals with ideas of confinement and marginality in nineteenth century and twentieth century women writers. The articles show confinement as both a physical and professional trait, and also highlight a correspondence between space and intellectual life. The section is opened by Ann Hallamore Caesar's analysis of a group of novels written by women writers of different historical and literary periods: Neera and La Marchesa Colombi, Sibilla Aleramo and Anna Banti. Hallamore Caesar's reading focuses on the representation of domestic space in the work of these women writers and its correlation with intellectual life. This chapter highlights a common preoccupation for socially imposed and internalized spatial boundaries, but also gives evidence to the voicing, in more or less explicit ways, of contrasting views, dissatisfaction and also emancipationist visions. Both Neera and Colombi describe in their work rooms in the house whose accessibility is gender based, as the "gineceo," a room where women gathered for domestic activities and the study room where only male family members could stay. Ann Hallamore Caesar

shows how the fiction by Neera and Colombi lets surface their criticism for prescribed monotonous domestic life. In Aleramo's *Una donna*, the domestic space becomes a prison for the woman protagonist. As the space of artistic creation allowed Neera and Colombi to express their discordant views with the prescribed social norms, intellectual life as a writer is in Aleramo the fundamental element through which to physically evade the home confines and through which to construct a sense of autonomous self. In Banti's *Un grido lacerante* the domestic space is an area of almost total exclusion for the woman protagonist, Agnese Lanzi: as an intellectual who has reframed her interests, and as a childless wife, many parts of the house become alien to Agnese. Ann Hallamore Caesar argues that, in contrast with the politics of confinement that has shaped women's lives as this group of texts testifies, the works analyzed in this chapter highlight a marginal position and express the need for an intellectual life that cannot find its own dimension within prescribed and socially imposed spaces.

In the second chapter, Catherine Ramsey-Portolano discusses Neera's experience as a woman writer through the analysis of her correspondence and autobiographical writings. The depiction emerging from Ramsey-Portolano's reading is one of a writer who constantly fights against the male-dominated literary world, as she did from an early age against a culturally stifling family environment. The correspondence with her publishers also shows Neera's determination to affirm her authority and therefore not to be confined into a prescribed literary identity.

Ramsey-Portolano first of all establishes the kind of cultural environment women writers, and Neera in particular, were obliged to share at the turn of the century. Enlightening in this sense is Neera's explicit condemnation of the sense of rivalry perceived by male writers toward women writers, as well as the comments of male writers such as Luigi Capuana or of the director of the literary journal *Pungolo*. This chapter very clearly highlights Neera's belief that she did not belong to a marginal group of writers and above all her constant determination to break the boundaries that male writers, critics, and publishers were creating around her and other women writers of the time.

Chapter 1.3 by Ombretta Frau and Cristina Gragnani further discusses the issues of marginality of women writing in the nineteenth century, introduced in Chapter 1.2 by Ramsey-Portolano in her study of Neera. Frau and Gragnani focus their analysis on less known women writers with the aim to show their positive role within the literary panorama. This large group of women writers (among them Mara Antelling, Maria Bobba, Flavia Steno, Emma Boghen Conigliani, Ida Baccini) who were very active in their time but are now mostly forgotten, expressed progressive views under apparently more traditional writing. Frau and Gragnani look in particular at the editorial work by Ida Baccini who with her established magazine *Cordelia* contributed to the development of the cultural environment.

Frau and Gragnani show that Baccini's work in *Cordelia* aimed not only at a specific, selected readership and therefore wished to keep a high quality standard for her journal, but also relied on a solid group of women associates. The writing of this group of women writers such as Jolanda, Silvia Albertoni, Evelyn, characterized by sobriety and a lack of sentimentalism, would often represent images of independent protagonists and intellectual women. In their chapter Frau and Gragnani show how women writers orchestrated a systematic and positive action against the professional and cultural boundaries of their time. As the history of *Cordelia* highlights, this group of women writers not only resisted the tendency to confine women's creativity within specific parameters, but also modified the cultural environment. More significantly Frau and Gragnani's research underlines the limits of contemporary literary criticism which, by neglecting research in this field, recreates the systemic boundaries that this group of women writers had successfully overcome.

In the last chapter of the first section, Rhianedd Jewell analyzes the interlocking roles of identity, images of confines, and writing in *Marianna Sirca* and *Cosima* by Grazia Deledda. Jewell's chapter acts as a passage from Section 1 and Section 2. In fact through textual analysis of Deledda's books, she shows both the images of confines, and resistance to them, and also the importance of writing in the expression of an identity which struggles to be seen within prescribed parameters.

Jewell's discussion of Deledda's character's search for identity is sustained by the theorization of Paul Ricoeur and in particular by his analysis of self-interest and self-identification as opposed to the construction of identity deriving from interaction with others. This theoretical framework is particularly suitable for the reading of Deledda's characters who fight against the entrapment of their confined and isolated society by searching within themselves for their own sense of identity.

Section 2 analyzes the function that writing has in the expression of identities that are marginalized or excluded. The articles demonstrate the search for narrative forms undertaken by women writers to express what is marginalized or excluded and therefore their engagement in elaborating border strategies of expression. The section opens with an original contribution by writer and critic Giuliana Morandini. Boundaries and borders have been dominant topics of her works of fiction, while as a literary critic her books on women writers have been fundamental in breaking the confining boundaries of modern criticism highlighted by Frau and Gragnani in this volume. In her chapter Morandini offers an overview of the motivation of her literary works and identifies the concept of borders as a privileged space of narration; a clear interrelation between the internal space of imagination and the external space emerges in the creative process of her writing.

According to Morandini writing needs sources and forms of expressions that investigate what is "often excluded." This approach to writing, which seems to echo Anzaldua's concept of borderzone, is also pertinent in Morandini's motivation to study women writers of the seventeenth and nineteenth century, as it is through their writing that they give fuller meaning to their lives. The function of writing and reading is not only limited to the self-expression of these writers, but produces long-lasting effects, as can be sensed through Morandini's acknowledgment of women writers of the nineteenth century, as a source of inspiration for herself as a writer.

In her work, from her book on the experience of mental disorder, to her stylistic choice of stream of consciousness in *Caffé Specchi*, to the geographical space of cities depicted in her novels, Morandini emphasizes the repetitive occurrence of concepts of boundaries and borders. It becomes clear that border space, be it psychological or geographical, is connected to writing and self-expression and to the possibility of giving form to dreams and places of the personal and collective unconscious in order to create new meanings. Writing is therefore for Morandini, a means to change social structures and conveys messages that are "unthinkable through worn-out ideological traditions."

In the second chapter of Section 2, Eleanor David's analysis of Patrizia Valduga's poem *Requiem* exemplifies, in the reworking of the "ottava" in her commemorative poem, the expression of "what is often excluded" discussed by Morandini. David retraces in *Requiem* the influences of poetic tradition that contributed to the interpretation of Valduga's work as an example of classicism, and demonstrates how her use of the metric form is far form being only an imitative structure.

Within the closed construction of the *poemetto*, Valduga deviates from tradition to express physical and emotional pain, and above all to create a distance with the world of the dead and at the same time an impossibility to communicate with the suffering father at the last moment of his life. Valduga then uses structures of the commemorative poetry tradition, to give voice to what cannot be told. David's analysis shows Valduga's ability to create new meaning on the basis of traditional structures. It is important to note that as David argues, the autobiographical self of the *poemetto* shuns the immediate expression of grief.

The chapter by Anne Urbancic analyzes the problematic border between fact and fiction that Annie Vivanti's fictional mothers seem to erect. Through an analysis of magazine and newspaper articles of the time, personal interviews with family relatives of Annie Vivanti, and literary and theoretical criticism, Urbancic analyzes not only the devouring daughter that critics have highlighted in the reading of Vivanti's *The Devourers*, but also the devouring mother.

The creation of the persona Annie Vivanti that characterizes much works of this author and which Urbancic sees originating in a 1905 magazine article, is a literary device that blurs the border between reality and fiction. What emerges from this analysis is the oblique expression of the narcissistic and artistic self, and the ambiguous "abjection of daughters." The persona Vivanti is a literary device that expresses what cannot be expressed, and gives voice to the autobiographical self.

Margherita Ganeri's chapter on *La Storia* by Elsa Morante touches on topics similar to Urbancic's analysis of Vivanti; in Ganeri's analysis also an intricate autobiographical aspect, a conflict of identity and maternal figures plays a role in the construction of modes of expression. Focusing on the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist in *La storia*, Ganeri unveils a fluid boundary between the narrator and the female protagonist Ida. At the same time this also hints at the ambivalent position of the author with her own identity as an intellectual and as a woman.

Ganeri establishes that the narrator, easily identifiable as female in the Italian text, is a confident narrator aware of her belonging to an intellectual establishment. On the contrary, the female protagonist Ida Ramundo, because of her naivety and simplicity does not represent a medium of identification with the author herself. As a woman, if regarded as the Other in a Lacanian or post-Lacanian perspective, the critical protest of the author against 2,000 years of injustice falls outside the parameters of history. As *La Storia* presents itself as an anti-historical novel aiming to criticize the world itself as inhumane, it does offer an ambiguous position of the author. This position, which necessarily breaks the boundaries between narrator, character, and author, makes possible the book's denunciatory impact.

The third section of *Italian Women Writers 1800–2000: Boundaries, Borders, and Transgression* investigates geographical interpretations of borders in women writers. It does refer to concepts of migration as well as of nationalism, two elements that have been and are in dialogue, and that in their interactions, as Graziella Parati and Anthony Tamburri assert, highlight the multiplicity of difference, rather than the opposition of same and other.[9] The section opens with Rita Wilson's chapter on the discourse on cultural borders emerging both from the writing of Giuliana Morandini, and from the narrative works of new emerging migrant women writers who also problematize the concept of border as self-creation in a social and geographical space.

In her contribution to this volume, Morandini has argued that in her narrative the psychological dimension of the characters as well as the forms of expressions are related to a border position. Wilson, focusing in particular on the Trieste of *Caffè Specchi* demonstrates that in Morandini the topography of the cities creates a correspondence with the consciousness of the female protagonists. Issues of identity are central to Morandini's narrative both

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because of the heterogeneity of the culture, history, and linguistic heritage of the city, and because of the function of the female protagonist who crosses boundaries as an intellectual nomad. Wilson puts the culturally nomadic role of Katharina in dialogue with the transcultural identity of contemporary migrant women writers who also wrote on Trieste.

The image of Trieste as border city is further enriched by the "translated identities" of the new generation of migrants. Wilson, through the analysis of Laila Waida's *Amiche per la pelle* interprets both the city spaces and the domestic spaces as transformed and creolized language areas, also uncovering a postcolonial view of canonical literary figures, whose name is embedded in the topography of the city. In bringing together the analysis of border city in Morandini and Waida's literary texts, Wilson clearly illustrates that both a transnational preoccupation, as well as the interest in a border expression is a longstanding recurrence in Italian women writers.

Simone Brioni's analysis of Ribka Sibhatu's work, further expands on concepts of transnationalism and translingualism in postcolonial writers introduced in Wilson's chapter. Sibhatu's international experience and plurilingual writing make her a valuable case study for an analysis of postcolonial writing, but it is her particular use of the Eritrean literary genre of the *aulò*, as Brioni demonstrates, that exemplifies her desire to cross cultural boundaries and national borders. The *aulò*, as oral poetry, is in itself a means to hand down cultural traditions and at the same time to adapt them to new socio-political context, as Eritrean poets constantly transform and create new poems in different circumstances.

Sibhatu's manipulation of the *aulò* is of great significance for the creation of a different mode of narration. Such a culturally centered literary genre is transported into the Western tradition and evoked in various forms of expression from autobiographical writing to film documentary. In so doing Sibathu sets up communication between Italian and Eritrean language and culture, the history of the colonized and the colonizers. In *Aulò. Canto poesia dall'Eritrea* she presents a bilingual text, Italian and Tigrinya, within a hybrid structure, in part autobiography, poem, fable, and didactic book that aims to address the Italian audience. In other poems Sibathu evokes the *aulò* through onomatopoeia in order to convey the existence of a transnational space, but also further experiments with language by writing both in French, her daughter's first language, and in the dialect of Rome, currently her home. In her poems her search for a different language goes together with her criticism of racism, more systematically carried out in her essay production. Finally in the most recent documentary *Aulò: Roma postcoloniale* the emphasis on language as a place of identity is further emphasized through a mingling of all the languages significant to Sibathu's identity: Ahmaric, Tigrynia, Italian, French, and English. The sense of place or rather the revisitation of history though a

reconsideration of the toponym of Rome, becomes fundamental in the creation of new perspectives of identity, and in the redefinition of national borders. Brioni's analysis demonstrates the creation of a postcolonial topography of the city, which echoes Wilson's analysis of Waida's Trieste.

While the discussion on national borders has expanded in the last decades in relation to migrant writers as seen in the chapter by Wilson and Brioni, the examination of the traumatic history of Italy's eastern borders has been by and large neglected. De Ferra's chapter looks at the case of the 1919 *impresa di Fiume* and its consequences, through the analysis of Antonella Sbuelz Carignani's novel *Greta Vidal*. As in the case of Sibathu's work, Sbuelz's novel opens new understandings on a case of historical amnesia of Italian culture. If in this case also, the connection to fascist Italy was at the origin of the oblivion, the particular history of that part of Italy, as De Ferra underlines, creates a "double ex-centricity of Fiume" because of its location on the border of Austria-Hungary first and of the new Yugoslavia after the Second World War.

Sbuelz's novel intertwines the story of the young Greta and her family with a variety of historical documents found, with an *escamotage* typical of the historical novel, in a trunk. Through the voice of a narrator in contemporary time, as De Ferra argues, Sbuelz puts in relation the past and the present as well as history and fiction, constructing a discourse of "historiographic metafiction," as Linda Hutcheon defines it. Sbuelz offers an interesting view of the concept of border, as she emphasizes a pre-1919 multinational vitality, where the varieties of languages and cultures would constitute the intrinsic characteristic of Fiume's border identity. The narrator's contemporary perspectives heighten the importance of the transmission of experience through the generations and therefore of an anti-hegemonic culture enriched by the exposure to a border zone history. While the multilingual and multicultural aspect is part of the city identity, in the micro-history of the novel forms of nonverbal communication are deployed to express a resistance to the hegemonic confinement of a monolingual identity.

My chapter concludes this collection by returning to the discussion of nineteenth century confinement explored in the first section of the book and by furthering the discussion on national borders investigated in the last section. I analyze Matilde Serao's two travel books, *Lettere d'una viaggiatrice* and *Nel paese di Gesù. Ricordi di un viaggio in Palestina* and consider how in her travel writing, Serao mediates the transgressive image of the woman traveler and of the woman of arts by emphasizing the international cultural relevance of Italy.

Serao's travel books provide a much wider perspective than their general objectives may lead one to expect. As a reflection on a series of journeys, *Lettere d'una viaggiatrice* presents itself as "una serie di visioni" (VII–VIII;

a series of visions), without a particular chronological or itinerary structure, and yet it is possible to undercover a systematic discourse on the importance of the arts and also of international women artists such as Duse. *Nel paese di Gesù*, written with the clear objective to provide a depiction of Serao's pilgrimage to the Holy Land, offers an interesting insight into the representation of the Other from the point of view of a woman of a nationality underrepresented in the mass tourism of the area and a tourist destination in itself. Serao negotiates the element of transgression often associated with women travelers and women writers in that period. She pays tribute to the greatness of her country, to its culture and to its monarchy, but behind this open tribute she reveals a keen interest in negotiating and mitigating the perception of eccentricity of women who set out on unusual paths. In this way the analysis of Serao's texts provides an appropriate conclusion to this volume which has shown how Italian women writers have negotiated boundaries that have been material or social and cultural, but also how their literary imagination has created dimensions of boundary-crossing.

NOTES

1. In the mid-twentieth century, theorists such as Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, and Henri Lefebvre have been determinant in the development of work in this field. Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* of the 1920s Paris and his *Arcade Project* are symptomatic of the modern sensibility, of the rich experience that the subject walking through the city perceives. Michel Foucault's emphasis on the disciplined role of spaces such as prisons offered a fundamental distinction of the power relationships created by spaces. Lefebvre saw the possibility of each and every society producing different spaces according to their own organization, therefore a religious society creates spaces which are different from those of capitalism. He suggests an interrelation of "cultural practices, representations and imaginations" at the basis of spatiality (Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin and Gill Valentine, eds., *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, London: Sage, 2004, 5).

2. Hubbard, ibidem.

3. Doreen Massey, *Power Geometries and the Politics of Space-Time* (Heilderberg: University of Heilderberg Department of Geography, 1999, 22).

4. 'Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create' (Glorie Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012, 95).

5. Bart Moore-Guilbert, "Spivak and Bhabha," in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 458).

6. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 1994), *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press,

2002), *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), *The Post-Human* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

7. Grosz, "The Hetero and the Homo," 347.

8. An interesting discussion on the devices employed in the construction of agency by marginal identities is given in the edited volume by Anne Meadle Stockdell-Giesler, *Agency in the Margins* (Madison Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010).

9. Graziella Parati, Anthony Julian Tamburri, *The Cultures of Italian Migrations* (Madison Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011, 1).

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