

Narrative medicine, health literacy, and the archive of migration traumas and translingualism in Igiaba Scego's *Cassandra in Mogadishu*

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Abstract

This essay analyzes Igiaba Scego's diasporic, choral, and translingual pathography *Cassandra in Mogadishu* (*Cassandra a Mogadiscio*) from the perspective of the construction of an archive of migration trauma (Pnrr/The spoke 10/5 2022-2025). The first part of the essay identifies the archival and iconic power of pathography, the cypher for which lies in the oscillation between obfuscation and vision triggered by the ocular disease of the narrator, a female "wounded storyteller" of narrative medicine. The second part analyzes the interaction of pathography with health literacy and narrative medicine by interweaving Italian L2 didactic theory with the autobiographical narratives of migrants, which provide a privileged point of view for dealing with the topic of health.

Parole chiave

Narrative Medicine, Migratory Traumas, Archival Power

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Part one

Tiziana de Rogatis

1. Narrative medicine, archival images and the storytelling of migration trauma in Igiaba Scego's *Cassandra in Mogadishu*

1.1 *The archive's secret compartment*

This co-authored essay was conceived as a means of supporting and complementing the research-based endeavor to build an online and open-access transmedia archive of migration trauma within the regional healthcare ecosystem of Tuscany (Pnrr/The spoke 10/5 2022-2025)¹. The methodology of the archive and the project itself were born in an interdisciplinary context, breaking down narrative medicine into the categories of storytelling, migratory trauma, and health literacy.

Migratory traumas generate a double level of untranslatability. A first level is structurally connected to every trauma, understood as a rupture of the mental system and as a more-or-less marked refusal to translate into memory and language the entirety of the traumatic event. A second level is generated instead by the Babelic variables of multicultural differences and the difficulty of tracing them back to some shared legibility.

Images stem from this dual dynamic of untranslatable migration trauma and therefore occupy an important space in the online and open-access transmedia archive of migration trauma within the Tuscan healthcare ecosystem (Pnrr/The spoke 10/5 2022-2025). From a multicultural perspective, images are indeed a way to negotiate meaning: enigmatic, ambiguous, and yet also shared. From the mental perspective, the image is an instantaneous neurocognitive synthesis that captures «the shrapnel of traumatic time»² and persists where the long duration of memory and language may have been

¹ The translation of the essay, by David Geoffrey Lummus, was funded by the European Union - Next Generation EU, Mission 4 Component 2 Inv. 1.5 CUP: E63C22001050001. An original form of this essay (*Illness, Migratory Traumas and Mythical-Historical Images in Igiaba Scego's «Cassandra in Mogadishu»*) was selected by the *Institute for Medical Humanities* (Durham University, UK), as part of the symposium *Gender and Genre: Medical Humanities and the Moving Image* (18 September 2024) as dissemination of Pnrr/The spoke 10/5 2022-2025 research. The first part of this essay (*Narrative medicine, archival image and the storytelling of migration trauma in Igiaba Scego's «Cassandra in Mogadishu»*) is by Tiziana de Rogatis; the second part (*From archive to cure: applied narrative medicine and health literacy for migration trauma in «Cassandra in Mogadishu»*) is by Andreina Sgaglione.

² Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence. The Photography of Trauma*, Cambridge (MA) and London, MIT Press, 2002, p. 7. See also Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 149-150; Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, *Toward a New Aesthetics of Trauma*, in Tiziana de Rogatis-Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, *Introduction: A Theoretical and Italian Perspective*, in *Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women's Writing*, edited by T. de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, Sapienza Università Editrice (open access), 2022, pp. 22-33. Cfr. also George Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All. Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, translated by S. B. Lillies, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 167 ff.

fragmented and/or jammed by trauma. Situated beyond the gap of memory and speech, images are imprints or traces that lead to what cannot be spoken. On the plane of traumatic disruption and on the plane of multicultural differences, images act as centripetal vectors, as objective correlatives.

From the perspective of the archive of migratory trauma, the autobiography *Cassandra in Mogadishu* (*Cassandra a Mogadiscio*³) by the Italo-Somali writer Igiaba Scego has appeared to me, ever since its publication in 2023, as a paradigmatic text, capable of embodying the theoretical and practical importance of the category of migratory trauma and its interrelation with the image and the archive. Indeed, the metaphor of the archive and its nexus with migratory trauma and images are central to this choral and genealogical story. The text revolves mainly around the Somali civil war, which began in 1991 and is still ongoing, around the enduring diaspora of the Somali people and the Scego family itself, with continuous shifts location that bring the plot to Italy and rest of the world, and finally around the resulting collective loss of memory.

In *Cassandra in Mogadishu*, the threefold resistance of public and private archives underlies the plot, within which Somali cultural memory comes to terms with a multifaceted antagonist: the *Jirro*, a word that means «'disease'» in Somali (cm 16). The text is an «unending letter»⁴, a «letter [...] in eternal becoming» (cm 225), that an aunt – Igiaba Scego – writes to her distant niece, Soraya. The diaspora of the Somali people separates them. Soraya lives in Canada while her aunt (*edo*) resides in Italy with her mother (*hooyo*), who is also Soraya's grandmother (*ayeyo*). The intention that motivates the aunt to write the letter is to give her niece resources and tools to cure the *Jirro* in herself and others, a disease which includes among its initial symptoms the weakening or erasure of the private and public memory of Somalis in the diaspora. Indeed, the literal meaning of 'disease' is dynamic for Scego and translates first into a formula of diasporic *pathos*: «*Jirro* is our broken heart» (cm 17). Where the possessive adjective «nostro» reveals the choral and intersubjective nature of this account of the *Jirro*, a «post-war trauma» that is in reality still ongoing («unfortunately we are still in it») of an entire family that has been «shattered by the diaspora» (cm 362, 68). The traumas of migration etch cracks in the teeth, carve grooves in the faces, and creep inside the bodies of this family genealogy: «the war was like mold; it spreads everywhere, even into most the remote openings. Within your lungs. Within your pancreas. Into your groin. Among your armpit hairs» (cm 16, 23, 33, 130).

³ Igiaba Scego, *Cassandra a Mogadiscio*, Bompiani, Milano, 2023. Henceforth the volume will be referred to as cm, both in the notes and in the body of the text. Scego's autobiography is written in Italian and it has not yet been fully translated into English. A partial translation by David Geoffrey Lummus is provided in this essay.

⁴ Oral communication by Igiaba Scego during her talk on «*Cassandra in Mogadishu*» and the *translingual imaginaries* in the seminar *Translingualisms, multicultural imaginaries and teaching* (seminar curated by Tiziana de Rogatis, Università per Stranieri di Siena, January 17, 2025).

Cassandra in Mogadishu is not only an epistolary and genealogical pathography⁵, but it is also a linguistic pathography, that is one in which the autobiographical narrative of pain and illness passes through the narrative of the languages spoken by the diasporic *Jirro*. In fact, the narrative is certifiable as translanguaging thanks to the large space attributed to the «linguistic experience» of Igiaba, Soraya, the mother/grandmother Chadigia, and finally the entire family, who no longer share a common language because of the diaspora⁶. The letter and the archive are thus a twofold and intertwined collective treatment. It consists in repeatedly pushing Soraya to learn the Italian language, so that she will be able to read a communication that is currently inaccessible to her and thus to tap into the only Somali archive available to her: the stories of her grandmother, whose «past is part of a national archive, of a nation that lost its memory in war» (cm 193). In this sense, «this letter, which was started a thousand times and torn up a thousand times, is memory made flesh» (cm 230). *Cassandra in Mogadishu* is thus configured as a thaumaturgical act of healing, in which the power to repair the traumas that have been told originates in narrativity and in the very act of enunciation: the translanguaging positioning of voices.

1.2 *The object-palimpsest*

Scego uses the discourse on private and public archives to express an act of threefold and interconnected resistance: against the disintegration of her own family, dispersed like all Somali families across the different continents of the world; against the emptying out of a national identity, deprived of the rootedness of records and thence of memory; and against the first stage of this collective uprooting, namely Italian colonialism in Somalia. According to the writer, «we can find our lost memory again inside the archives of the colonizers» (cm 230). Reviewing the colonial archive thus allows us to metaphorically find within it a secret compartment, cluttered with everyday objects and/or minor episodes, of which the narrator wants «to demonstrate the pain» (cm 223). This formula evokes a stratigraphic method, which recovers the hidden trace of the trauma and of its pathos from the very material of the object discovered: a second secret compartment, then, hidden this time within the object. This stratigraphic and

⁵ Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness. Studies in Pathography*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 1999; Ann Jurevic, *Illness as Narrative*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012; Mariarosa Loddo, *Patografie: voci, corpi, trame*, Milan, Mimesis, 2020

⁶ The topic is further explored by Andreina Sgaglione in the second part of this essay. On the restorative power of narrativity cf. Stefano Calabrese, *Narrazione e cura*, in Stefano Calabrese - Valentina Conti - Chiara Fioretti, *Che cos'è la medicina narrativa*, Rome, Carocci, 2022, pp. 53-70. On the notion of «vissuto linguistico» cf. Eva Maria Thüne, *Sprachbiographien: empirisch und literarisch*, in Michaela Bürger-Koftis - Hannes Schweiger - Sandra Vlasta (Hrsg.), *Polyphonie – Mehrsprachigkeit und literarische Kreativität*, Wien, Praesence Werl, 2010, pp. 59-80.

archaeological technique brings to light what Derrida called the «archive of evil»⁷, gradually compiled from what has been «dissimulated or destroyed, prohibited, diverted, repressed»⁸. By framing the colonial and postcolonial system from a different perspective, these palimpsest-objects rewrite their surface and, along with it, the surface on which History writ large has etched the destinies of the colonized.

I use the notion of «framing» in the metaphorical sense, but also in the literal sense. Indeed, in *Cassandra in Mogadishu*, one of the decisive junctures of the archival metaphor revolves around the ekphrasis of a colonial-era painting that Scego discusses in *Intermezzo decoloniale*. The tenth of the sixteen chapters of the autobiography, *Intermezzo decoloniale* is the only one that does not feature a title with a bilingual transcription in Somali and Italian. Here the translation process comes to a standstill, because when facing the colonial past and its archive, there can be no equivalence between the two worlds but only the acknowledgement of Italian responsibility. Scego contemplates the painting in question in Rome, inside the *Museum of Civilization*.⁹ Never has a name been more contradictory, and in fact the presence of the writer in this museum, located in the Eur district and planned by Mussolini for the *Universal Exposition of 1942*, is part of a comprehensive and ongoing rethinking of the original colonial structure. With its endless accumulation of «sacred vestments, skins, orientalist paintings, photographs, documents, accessories, statues, teff and lentils» (cm 224), this space first and foremost achieves the effect of deactivating the vital power of the catalogued artifacts. For Derrida, «the archive always works, and a priori, against itself»¹⁰. This is because, regardless of methods, every archive is «hypomnesic»¹¹ because it is a prosthesis of human memory and its mnemonic limits. This hypomnesic structure compensates for the limits of human memory thanks to its quantitative storage of data.

If taken to an extreme, however, this tendency can deactivate the very memory that the archive aims to pass on, reducing it to an accumulative repertoire of disembodied and inert data. Since it is also, in this specific case, an archive structured according to a colonial ideology, the accumulation of artifacts risks objectifying and

⁷ Translation by Cathy Caruth (*Literature in the Ashes of History*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2013, p. 76) from the original French version of *Mal d'archive* (Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne*, Paris, Galilée: 1995, p. 1), not included in the English translation.

⁸ Translation by Caruth (op. cit., p. 76) from the original French version of *Mal d'archive*, not included in the English translation. Here follows the original text: «dissimulées ou détruites, interdites, détournées, refoulées» (ivi, p. 1).

⁹ For a reflection on the space of the Museum and the urban space of Rome in *Cassandra in Mogadishu* see Katrin Wehling Giorgi, *Beyond the Eternal City: Topographies of Trauma in Elsa Morante's «La Storia» and Igiaba Scego's «Cassandra a Mogadiscio»*, «Allegoria», 90, 36, pp. 133-151.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, translated by E. Prenowitz, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 12.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 11.

naturalizing colonial rule. Even worse, the archive risks reproducing colonial trauma, that is, reactivating it¹² through the anesthetized form of violence generated by the seriality of the artifacts. Scego in fact dwells on this reactivation, which passes through the silencing of her own words and pain: «I said nothing about the repositories. [...] Not a word came out of my mouth, not even about the replicas. [...] The *Jirro* grips my stomach like a vise» (cm 224).

For the *Museum of Civilization's* archives to bring out the «dissimulated or destroyed, prohibited, diverted, repressed» colonial trauma, the trauma hidden in its secret compartment, it requires the iconic strategy through which Scego selects and narrates images, starting from the smallest details. In fact, her focus is on a painting from the 1930s by colonial painter Milo Corso Malverna, in which a nude Somali woman is portrayed crouching while untangling her hair with a wooden comb. For Scego, the painting is «a slap in the face» because «that woman's body is superimposed upon the pain and humiliation of a thousand other women I have glimpsed in archives, books, and old photos found during my flea markets excursions» (cm 228). This nude painting is in fact part of a broader iconic code of representing wartime sexual prey: a stereotype produced (and re-produced) by racist Italian colonial ideology and its archives, particularly during the years of the Ethiopian War and Italian East Africa.¹³ But Scego's ekphrasis generates another perspective starting with a detail that – as the writer points out – «opens doors that I didn't imagine existed» (cm 228): « focusing my gaze on a wooden, ornate, handmade comb, the same painting of a naked, submissive, black woman changes» (cm 229). The «afro comb» functions here as an object-palimpsest, for it is a fragment of reality capable of rewriting the law of domination inscribed on the naked body of a Somali woman. Its power to revise the archive consists in the fact that a recovery of Somali memory and its materiality is grafted on top of its ekphrasis. Scego points out that it is in fact an object that has by now disappeared, due to the Civil War and the resulting loss of «language, knowledge, and connection» that began with colonialism. This commonly used object is thus narrativized by the writer as the fruit of Somali craft knowledge, as an object of her childhood, and as the means of a *recherche* undertaken by her mother, intent on untangling the hair of her infant daughter. Its ekphrastic recovery is a revendication of lost time and knowledge; its focus in the painting is a redemption of that woman's decolonial freedom, and with her of an entire «matrilineal genealogy of traumas transmission and narration» of which the writer herself and her mother are also part.¹⁴

¹² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press, 1996, p. 130.

¹³ David Forgacs, *Colonie*, in *Margini d'Italia. L'esclusione sociale dall'Unità a oggi*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2015, pp. 59-140.

¹⁴ Wehling Giorgi, *Beyond the Eternal City*, cit. p. 150. On the matrilineal dimension of Scego's poetics and the categories of «matria» and «dismatria», see also T. de Rogatis, «La mia casa è dove sono» di

1.3 *The wounded narrator, ocular metaphor, and the iconic narrativity of Cassandra in Mogadishu*

According to Arthur Frank, the victimization paradigm of illness is reversed the moment when the sick person conceives of illness as a «call for stories». The power of storytelling thus pertains specifically to the «wounded storyteller», that is, one who gives up a detached narrative position and instead tells their story from the perspective of their own vulnerability, becoming a «wounded healer» as well: «the wounded storyteller, ending silences, speaking truths, creating communities, becomes the wounded healer». This reversal of passivity into thaumaturgic narrativity is based on two restorative elements of stories. On the one hand, «stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going»; on the other, «stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destination».¹⁵ From this perspective, stories of illness are first and foremost identifiable by the way in which they are told and therefore the point of view from which they are told. Thus, stories of illness should not be formulated merely as a type of content, but as a form which conveys the style of that specific experience of vulnerability. A paradigmatic figure of the narrative power of the wounded storyteller is the mythical figure of Tiresias: «his wound gives him his narrative power»; his blindness generates his vision.¹⁶

Between Tiresia and Scego, between the male narrator and the wounded female narrator, there are striking similarities. The first consists in the fact that, among the many variants of *Jirro*, the one that generates the pathographic style is related to the writer's eye disease (a low-pressure glaucoma) and to the several scenes during which Scego, alone in the house, practices with a blindfold, preparing for the potential blindness she might face in the future.

I put a blindfold on my eyes. And I walk around the house. Wandering. Groping. One step after another [...]. Blindfold on my eyes. Groping my way down the hallway. I slam against the walls (cm 264, 268).

Obfuscation pre-exists the disease, since for Scego it is the equivalent to myopia, which becomes the metaphor of an existential «fog» and of a second vision or historical «truth»:

Without glasses, everything I see is obscured by a gray cloud; my eyesight is truly terrible [...]. I struggle to make out images of a story, of a Somalia that

Igiaba Scego. Mapped stories, maternal and dismaternal, in Homing/Ritrovarsi. Traumi e translinguismi delle migrazioni in Morante, Hoffman, Kristof, Scego e Lahiri, Edizioni Università per Stranieri di Siena (open access), 2023, pp. 145-166.

¹⁵ Frank, *op. cit.*, pp. XVII, 53.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. XVI

I'm unable to grasp. [...] Everything in front of me becomes a fog. But perhaps it is in the fog that the truth is hidden (cm 193-194).

The antidote to *Jirro* is the ability «to look at things with all the other organs, to always be in the light», to contemplate things by «sucking them in like a vampire» (cm 358, 271). The ocular metaphor of the oscillation between «fog» and «truth», between obfuscation and vision is the style of pathography, from which the strategy of iconic narrativity as cure is derived.

A second continuity between Tiresias and Scego lies in the fact that the «mosaic» of *Jirro* (cm 106) is held together in the pathography precisely by the connective thread of Cassandra, a mythical figure strongly complementary to that of the blind soothsayer:

I see it [: *Mogadishu*] sitting next to a bleeding Troy, while Cassandra, the daughter of Hecuba and Priam, observes its lesions. [...] And what if I, Soraya, were that Cassandra? [...] A Cassandra who sees the *Jirro* towering over the continents. A Cassandra in Mogadishu (cm 119).

Cassandra is Scego, but she is also every single member of the family. In the title and plot, Cassandra stands out as a metamorphic androgyne capable of adapting the focus of her own unheard foresight to the different bodies in which she enters:

We are a family of Cassandras. [...] Each of us had a vision of a part of the catastrophe, but [...] we did everything we could to not believe our own eyes (cm 141).

Cassandra/Scego is thus a «communicative body», that is, a body that escapes the confines of the «monadic body» in which Western paradigms enclose physicality traversed by illness and pain. Also, through this «other relatedness», this lattice-like porosity of the story, *Cassandra in Mogadishu* stands out as a foundational text for contemporary narrative medicine.¹⁷

A third element of continuity between Tiresias and Scego, between the male narrator and the wounded female narrator, lies in the fact that the eyes, already the focus of the twelfth chapter (*Indho. Occhi*), also return in the final pages of the story, underscoring the importance of the ocular metaphor for the entire pathography. These final pages evoke a lecture by Pilar del Rio, Saramago's widow, who reconstructs the writer's distressing experience in Italy. Having suffered years earlier, in Rome, a retinal detachment, Saramago received little care or reassurance from the hospital to which he had been rushed. His widow dwells on the final act of that difficult day. Once discharged from the hospital, Saramago chooses to use his eyesight, potentially destined to be

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 57 e pp. 48-49. On the nexus of care, «other relatedness», and the reversal of testimonial roles, see Tiziana de Rogatis, *La narratrice ferita, la leggerezza dello storytelling e la cura*, forthcoming in *Illness and narration*, edited by Stefano Calabrese and Paola Villani, Milan, Mimesis, 2025.

extinguished altogether, to contemplate the beauty of Rome from Trinità dei Monti, which for him represents «everything good that humanity has done on this Earth» (cm 357). Moving through Pilar del Rio's lecture and identifying with Saramago's distress from his own glaucoma, Scego in turn wonders what specific form of beauty she would like to contemplate in a similar situation. The writer answers to herself that her choice would be writing, which for her is «shared beauty» and «preserved memory» (cm 359). This ocular imagination is the foundation of *Cassandra in Mogadishu*.

A fourth motive for the oscillation between obfuscation and vision as an extensive interpretative key to the style of *Cassandra in Mogadishu* is the precarious and almost always partial attempt to fully reconstruct the family histories of *Jirro*, to search for «truth» in to the «fog» of memory through an «autobiography in motion» (cm 361). The «kaleidoscope letter» (cm 362), the mosaic that is composed in *Cassandra in Mogadishu*, is always moving, bravely exposing itself to the risk of implosion generated by the fragmentary nature of the tiles, by their being made up of traumatic memory. The method of inquiring into memory, a form of inquiry that relies on the recovery of stories and their orality, pushes Scego into «slippery territories» (cm 363) in which, nevertheless, the writer learns to move and draw provisional maps akin to the variable designs of the «kaleidoscope».¹⁸ Walking gropingly with a loss of vision seems to be not only the threat hanging over an individual woman but a symbolic synopsis of a family genealogy besieged by the *Jirro*. The vulnerable style that the pathography evokes is generated precisely by its resistance to this fate. If darkness threatens Scego and the entire diasporic genealogy, it will then be images to impose themselves in their clarity, in the course of a story that unfolds essentially through multiple icons and ekphrases of trauma.

1.4 Images, preverbal languages, and the «mother alphabet»

The image and its narrativity are disseminated in endless refractions and variations throughout the story, such that *Cassandra in Mogadishu* becomes an ekphrasis of migration traumas, an archive struggling against the *Jirro*, but also an archive that is constituted through the narrative of the *Jirro*, that is, of diasporic pain and its diseases. From these images and the iconic/traumatic strategy underlying them, the online and open access transmedia archive of migration trauma (Pnrr/The spoke 10/5) draws other important methodological lessons, which are noted below.

An initial methodological direction emerges the fact that the traumatic fragments of the pathography are details that cannot be strictly ordered into a hypomnesic principle of serial cataloguing. They are tiles of a «story-mosaic» (cm

¹⁸ For a discussion of this method see de Rogatis, *La narratrice ferita* cit.

106). The entire text forces the reader to think in visual fragments, right from the beginning, which opens with the synesthesia of a drawn laugh: «If I could, I would draw the moment when you burst with sudden joy» (cm 9).¹⁹ Also gravitating around Soraya is an area of transmedia icons, generated by the ekphrasis formed when her face is framed by the screen of her cell phone or computer during diasporic video calls between her, her aunt, and her grandmother. These conversations are sown in the narrow terrain of the English language and are translated into Italian for Chadigia. These are images that highlight the special illusion and delusion of media exchanges in diasporic families, who perceive in a more extreme and conscious way the mixture of presence and absence structurally generated by this type of communication: «you popped out of the screen like a Madonna» (cm 9); «your eyes greet us cheerfully on the screen» (cm 123); «you swim around on the screen like a goldfish» (cm 124).²⁰

Lateral, anti-monumental, anti-hierarchical, off-center, and posthuman images subsequently emerge from the secret compartment of the archive, whose vital energy is connected to the story of *Jirro*, its spreading of the traumatic fragment within bodies. The iconic strategy focuses particularly on the civil war in Mogadishu, experienced firsthand by the mother. Chadigia's posthuman narrative dwells on the fate of a ferocious rooster, who lives in the large garden of the manor house in Mogadishu. Like other barnyard animals, it has been driven away by the bombings, deprived of his reassuring home, so the scornful rooster follows Chadigia and his sister as they flee, until the two runaways lose sight of him. Chadigia will meet him again long afterwards, when he is annihilated in manner and appearance, as he feeds on the carrion of a dead donkey: «it is one of the few images I have [...]. A rooster and the carcass of a dead donkey» (cm 122). In fact, Chadigia's prevailing images are synesthetic, recounting trauma beginning with its dissociation into «auditory memory», into acoustic snapshots of the civil war and rapes in Mogadishu in 1991: «the screams of women [...] raped even in mosques», «the rustling of women's robes as they left town without underwear», «the grumbling of her stomach», «the fire that had destroyed the national archives», «the crackling of a radio», «the thud of the collapsed utility poles»,

¹⁹ On the vital power of this incipit and the idea of care in *Cassandra in Mogadishu*, see below Andreina Sgaglione.

²⁰ On the topic of the digital diaspora in the global context and the specific context of Somali communities, see Claudia Minchilli, *Localizing Diasporic Digital Media Practices: Social Stratification and Community Making among Somali Women Living in Rome*, «Journal of Global Diaspora & Media», 2020, 2, 1, pp. 73-89 https://intellectdiscover.com/docserver/fulltext/gdm/2/1/gdm.2.1.73_Minchilli.pdf?expires=1740231665&id=id&acname=guest&checksum=D96EE9827FF821A6674567BDCB230E89 (accessed: 6 November 2024).

«rockets, grenades, the earthquake of the artillery», «the cold silence of fingers [...] on a trigger», «the crash of a broken window», «the explosion of glass», hearing «your teeth clattering against each other», «your heart skipping a beat» (cm 122-123).

A second methodological direction, also valuable for the archive of migratory trauma (Pnrr/The, spoke 10/5), comes from the attention that the pathography pays to extra-linguistic communication, including silence. Indeed, Scego's story becomes the container for an unspeakable that speaks to us precisely insofar as it bears witness to the epistemic silencing of those who would like to testify and who instead only manage to express «sonorous stammering» «at times screams» (cm 226). By putting us in touch with the unspeakable element of a traumatic memory, which would sink into the swamp of the repressed without the help of the story, the pathography values as an emblematic presence Igiaba's mother, as well as the objects and images connected to her, which combine to form an overall «mother alphabet» (cm 39) that predates speech and language.

In the reconstruction of her mother's adolescence and youth, the pathography repeatedly emphasizes that Chadigia's belongs to the oral culture of Somali shepherds, highlighting the double cut she suffered: that of infibulation and that of a schooling that ended unsuccessfully because the alphabet had «evaporated», flown away from a wound on her head, one of the many signs of *Jirro* (cm 206-210). The letters of the alphabet became «phantasms», «cast into an unreachable oblivion» (cm 206). Rightly, Scego points out that «the term 'illiterate' does not fit the complex and multifaceted figure» of her mother (cm 144) and thus she proceeds to describe her using negative formulas: «*hooyo* does not know how to write»; «*hooyo* has never even read the books that her I, her educated daughter, has published over the years» (cm 144). In Chadigia's case, the word «illiterate» should, if anything, be connected with «the other way of knowing the world» (cm 144), which Elsa Morante placed at the center of her novel *History*, beginning with epigraph from César Vallejo: «for the illiterate to whom I write».

Following this derivation from Morante, the mother truly imposes herself as the holder of truth and wisdom that are different from and therefore silenced by – we might say more appropriately *cut off from* – institutional and literate knowledge. And yet this «other way of knowing the world» is always ready to re-emerge from the scar, to speak through other languages. These include not only oral histories but also additional signs: obvious, and yet less translatable. These are «deferred actions»²¹ of trauma but also transformative practices of trauma and its

²¹ S. Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), in James Strachey (ed.), *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1990), translated by J. Strachey, London, Vintage, p. 356.

cuts, which gather around mute objects and images. Prominent in this sphere are the *maro*, crocheted textiles in heterogeneous colors and shapes that her mother begins to create only after the trauma of the Somali civil war:

There, in those *maro*, in those cheap fabrics, she transforms the *Jirro*, that which explodes inside of her, into tapestries of pure splendor. [...] She picks the needle back up. She starts to embroider again. I look at the spirals and I see her schooling tangled up in them (cm 37, 206).

For this very reason, the power of the archive to revise resides above all in Chadigia. Her stories, her body, her *maro* are an «mother alphabet» for the daughter who writes, a sort of Rosetta Stone which Scego translates:

There, in those concentric circles, is her alphabet.

A mother alphabet. *Alifbeetada hooyo*. And I want to understand it. To decipher my mother. Her *maro* are my Rosetta Stone; I feel like Champollion in front of the silent hieroglyphics, in need of being revealed to modernity. Of being revealed to you, my Soraya. And to me, who was once terrified of them (cm 39).

The power of the archive to revise first resides in the mother, but then it is guaranteed by the daughter who translates. Indeed, because they were generated by this «other way of knowing the world», these «silent hieroglyphics» also require, like the languages of the Somali diaspora, a translation and repositioning of the voice. And, in this case, the transition from one expressive context to another is even more complex, because – as the daughter admits – it reckons with a radical otherness that can also produce «terror».

1.5. *The mother, the father, and the power of archival review*

From the perspective of the online and open-access transmedia archive of migration trauma within the regional healthcare ecosystem of Tuscany (Pnrr/The spoke 10/5 2022-2025), there is great value in the way in which each individual image of *Jirro* reverses the power relations of an entire scenario.

The only existing photo of Chadigia as a young girl, also the cover of the pathography, is a foundational discovery in this archive of trauma. It is, however, a photo in which the mother cannot recognize herself, while the daughter alternates between doubt and certainty. According to the paradigm of the oscillation between obfuscation and vision at the heart of the pathography (see para. 1.3), from this uncertainty about attribution an enigma emerges that surrounds an image that is nevertheless sharp and intense in its beauty. The ninth chapter (*Sawir*. Photograph), which places this picture at its center, revolves not coincidentally around two cuts: that of infibulation and that of the alphabet that the mother sees flying off her own wounded

head as a young girl, one of the many stages of *Jirro*. Two lacerating firsts in adult life, capable of eroding the very status of identity related to the photo. Taken in 1956 at the Fiera Campionaria in Milan, the photo depicts her mother – a young Somali woman who has arrived with a delegation from her country – helping an Italian peer to sew two flaps of a shoe (cm 216): a re-composition of a form in opposition to the lacerating drift of the cuts, an obvious reference to Chadigia's language of *maro* and non-literate knowledge (see par. 1.4 above). Chadigia's photography later returns in the final pages of *Cassandra in Mogadishu* as the keystone of its poetics:

That gesture of female hands, of piercing a piece of fabric with a needle and joining the edges to create new beauty, that way of paying attention to the front side that must be impeccable, while on the back side the threads get tangled and tied in small, very solid knots, seems to me to wonderfully encapsulate the meaning of writing and of my writing in particular (cm 362).

In the archive, therefore, the photo will have to be deposited along with the ekphrasis of its enigma and poetics. While it is the image of her granddaughter Soraya in which the mother will be able to find again with certainty her own young face: they do not resemble each other, but they share «the same joy of being in the world and the same dismay» (cm 217). But the archival power is such that it enables Chadigia to deliver, along with the joyful addition of her granddaughter's face, also a painful and intense fragment. It is the only event truly etched onto her memory of the whole journey. Her memory evokes the posthuman image of some dromedaries, symbolic animals of Chadigia's nomadic past, deported by ship while she was about to embark at the port of Mogadishu to go to Milan:

From that journey, *hooyo* only remembers some dromedaries. Being loaded onto a ship bound for the Persian Gulf, they were crying. The whole journey she had a thorn stuck in her heart. The tears of those dromedaries, thin, hungry, and alone, shook *hooyo* to her core (cm 217).

Another decisive ekphrasis presents itself in a frame from a German documentary,²² which in the fourteenth chapter (*Soo noqosho*. Return) depicts Scego's father as a Somali parliamentarian visiting West Berlin and the Wall in 1965. The frame

²² The documentary, which can be viewed at the link, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KudA5LoIrcQ>, runs 13 minutes and 18 seconds. Marked as part of Das Bundesarchiv or The Federal Archives of Unified Germany, the documentary is titled *Star and Eagle. State Visit of the President of Somalia to the Federal Republic of Germany* (film editor: Gudrun Pohl; script by Juergen Haese; photography by D. Arndt, R. Jürgens, W. Lupp, G. Pahl, R. Starke, W. Vlasdek; Deutsche Wochenschau Production). At the link, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6308MfjAQTA>, the Somali Facebook Archive has obtained a shorter version titled *1965, Sharaftii Somalia ay Lahayad, Madaxweyne Aadan Cabdulle oo si weyn loogu soo dhoweeyey Jarmalka (1965, Somalia's Honor, President Aden Abdulle Receives a Warm Welcome in Germany)*.

strikes Scego from her first viewing to such an extent that she comments on it on Facebook and attaches a screenshot (fig. 1).

My dad (the one without a hat) in front of the Berlin Wall in 1965, together with the Somali presidential delegation on an official visit to West Germany. PS my brother sent me the video he found on youtube. What an incredible find. Ps look at the expression on my dad's face and that of the other Somalis. They're expressions of pain... of dismay in front of the wall (fig 1)²³.

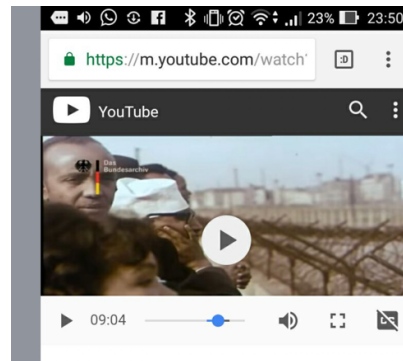


Figure 1

With deep archival insight, Scego immediately grasps the discontinuity of the paternal gaze, which breaks with a visual rhetoric present not only in this documentary but also in a documentary tradition within which it is inscribed. In this typology of «government-commissioned PR (public relations) films», the propaganda of the Federal Republic of Germany distills a vertical view intertwined with a monumental typology of themes, which functions to celebrate the politics of West Germany.²⁴ The propagandistic purpose is also revealed by the language chosen for the voice-over commentary, which is not German but English, i.e. the hegemonic language of NATO. In the documentary's earlier sequences, the Somali delegation, led by the President of the Somali Republic Aden

²³ From Igiaba Scego's post, 1 may 2017. I would like to thank the writer for permission to publish the post.

²⁴ Jan Uelzmann, *Staging West German Democracy. Governmental PR Films and the Democratic Imaginary 1953-1963*, New York London Oxford New Delhi Sidney, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, p. 3. Uelzmann reconstructs the formal structures of these PR films, identifying the years 1949-1963 as a chronological reference period. These years «focus on the Federal Republic's foreign policy, on Konrad Adenauer as the Federal Republic's charismatic chancellor, and on the newly established West German capital Bonn» (ivi, p. 5). Although it was produced in 1965 and thus exceeds by two years the chronological span 1949-1963 indicated by Uelzmann, the PR film under analysis here falls perfectly within the thematic-formal parameters investigated by the scholar, which are focused on «the particular kind of collective postwar identity that the Adenauer administration actively pursued in these films» (ivi, p. 5).

Abdulle Osman Da'ar,²⁵ panders to the institutional and celebratory slant of the film, gazing watchfully at the military parades (fig. 1), marching to the rhythm of the two national anthems (fig. 2) and in tune with the goals of West-German technological progress indicated by the guests: among others, the Museum of Mechanical Engineering and the bridge under construction over the Rhine in Cologne, the Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg (fig. 4), and so on.



Figures 2, 3, 4

The monumental vision is blurred, however, the moment the Somali presidential delegation, having arrived in Berlin, stands in front of the Brandenburg Gate, from which the division between West and East Berlin is accessed (fig. 5): here «every formality has been basically eaten by History» (cm 334). But the trauma is revealed in its full extent only a few minutes later, when the shot shows the President and the Somali delegates in profile, intent on contemplating the Wall (fig. 6). Scego's father breaks the visual convention of gazes directed toward prescribed destinations and suddenly looks straight into the camera. In *Cassandra in Mogadishu*, ekphrasis of this frame deepens and becomes a prefiguration of the Somali diaspora and its *Jirro*, which is recounted once again in the mythic key of Cassandra and her clairvoyance.

Aabo has a restless look on his face. Almost unrecognizable. He and a man in the background seem worried. Like Cassandra on the slopes of a Troy still intact before the hatred of the Achaeans, perhaps they are both catching a glimpse of the future. A future of fire and Kalashnikovs. Of denied freedom and blackmail. If it happened to the Germans, it can happen to anyone. Even to us.

In that video, aabo is afraid,

²⁵ The Somali spelling of the name is Aadan Cabdulle Cismaan Dacar. The President of the Somali Republic can be seen wearing a white hat in Figure 1 and Figure 2, where he is with Karl Heinrich Lübke, President of the Federal Republic of Germany.

[...] I pause the video. I isolate the frame. My father is staring at us. He's watching us living in this future. He knows that after swallowing Berlin, the same wall has come to chase us. To separate us (cm 335-336).



Figures 5,6

Once again, the archive's revisionary power has selected a frame able to speak a truth, to witness it with a vision that calls into question not only the Somali diaspora but also the dramatic and current geopolitical tensions in the heart of Europe.

Part two

Andreina Sgaglione

2. From archive to cure: applied narrative medicine and health literacy for migration trauma in *Cassandra in Mogadishu*

2.1 'Archiving' trauma: migration, health literacy, and narrative medicine in dialogue

Designing and implementing an archive on migration trauma today in a context where increasingly complex migrations intersect and where there is a cogent need for attention to the dynamics of linguistic and cultural inclusion means imagining a space for authentic and open listening and dialogue. Such a project tangibly embodies a symbolic place where data gleaned from field research can inhabit reside together with an interweaving of relationships with migrant learners of Italian L2, who are capable of transforming language from a mere communicative tool into a vehicle for personal expression, emotional care, and social *empowerment*. The sensation of being defined and limited, sometimes inextricably linked to the idea of the archive, is here overturned and subverted not only by the extended size of its digital makeup, but by the multiple nuclei

of reflection that it contains: the idea of a Europe not circumscribed by the sea as a boundary²⁶ but as a place consecrated in time by the meaningful displacements of peoples; the conviction that movements of people can be conceived as vital cultural grafts of imagination, language, and experience that should be developed; the desire and urgency to achieve a better quality of life and health for those who are metaphorically in line, waiting to reach an elsewhere made of the coexistence of multiple languages; the importance of providing adequate and innovative tools to those who work in the field of migration in various capacities; and the need to give voice to stories as powerful acts of care²⁷. The structure of the archive stems from the interconnection of the teaching of Italian L2 and the autobiographical narratives of migrants, which act as privileged lenses for observing and dealing with the central theme of health. The archive serves multiple functions: on the one hand, it offers an easily searchable repertoire for those who face the complex issues of the world of migration across different contexts, from health to education to mediation; on the other hand, it becomes a valuable working tool that can simultaneously reinforce health literacy and reverse engineer the principles of narrative medicine using more authentic methods with those who have suffered ruptures related to migration trauma. This section will analyze the conceptual links established between the archive and health literacy, migration trauma, and narrative medicine – a polyphonic dialogue that restores an osmosis of the interdisciplinary exchanges on which the project is based.

Health literacy (HL) is an individuals' ability to access, understand, evaluate, and use basic health information to make informed and appropriate decisions regarding their health. Proper advocacy of health literacy involves conveying comprehensive information to individuals on various health-related topics, providing tools to access reliable sources of information, and promoting critical thinking²⁸. Individuals with low health literacy are more vulnerable and at greater risk of misdiagnosis, poor care management, and misuse of health services, with significant consequences for individual and community health, as exemplified by the following:

A two-year-old is diagnosed with an inner ear infection and prescribed an antibiotic. Her mother understands that her daughter should take the prescribed medication twice a day. After carefully studying the label on the

²⁶ David Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: a Human History of the Oceans*, London, Allen Lane, 2019.

²⁷ Rita Charon et al., *The Principles and Practice of Narrative Medicine*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p.1.

²⁸ Kristine Sørensen et al, *Health literacy and public health: A systematic review and integration of definitions and models*, «BMC Public Health», 12, 2012, pp. 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-12-80> (accessed: 22 February 2025).

bottle and deciding that it doesn't tell how to take the medicine, she fills a teaspoon and pours the antibiotic into her daughter's painful ear²⁹;

A 29-year-old African-American woman with three days of abdominal pain and fever was brought to a Baltimore emergency department by her family. After a brief evaluation she was told that she would need an exploratory laparotomy. She subsequently became agitated and demanded to have her family take her home. When approached by staff, she yelled "I came here in pain and all you want is to do is an exploratory on me! You will not make me a guinea pig!" She refused to consent to any procedures and later died of appendicitis³⁰.

In the case of migrants, these difficulties are exacerbated by language and cultural barriers³¹. In Italy, the problem is particularly evident:

As part of the general system of Italian public and social communication, the language use in the health system does not shine for clarity, transparency, or linguistic precision: too often it seems that there is less attention to the interlocutor's explanations and linguistic abilities than to the bureaucratic-medical-administrative jargon that feeds the disparity in the social relationship between citizen-users and those that provide the service³².

Levels of competence in HL are also closely related to the likelihood of engaging in health-promoting behaviors, participating in screening programs, or using prevention services³³. Monitoring these levels in the population is a complex task both because these indicators are not static but vary over time, due to the relationship between individual skills and needs linked to the context, and because people may be considered health literate in one country but not in another³⁴. Data collection from the archive facilitated in-depth work on HL. The first step was to build a climate of trust to facilitate reducing the affective filter that can be interposed in the relationship between the teacher and the learner³⁵, using specific teaching activities dedicated to health issues through which

²⁹ Ruth Parker et al., *Health literacy: a policy challenge for advancing high-quality health care*, «Health Affairs (Project Hope)», 22 (4), 2003, pp. 147-153: p. 150. doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.22.4.147 ([accessed: 22 February 2025](#)).

³⁰ Lynn Nielsen-Bohlman et al., *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*, edited by Lynn Nielsen-Bohlman et al., Washington D.C., National Academies Press, 2004, p. 31.

³¹ Ivi, p. 35.

³² Massimo Vedovelli, *Guida all'italiano per stranieri. La prospettiva del Quadro Comune Europeo per le lingue*, Rome, Carocci, 2002, pp.161-163.

³³ Stephan Van den Broucke, *Health literacy: a critical concept for public health*, «Archives of Public Health» 2014, 72, 1, p. 10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2049-3258-72-10> ([accessed: 22 February 2025](#)).

³⁴ Chiara Lorini et al., *Health Literacy as a Shared Capacity: Does the Health Literacy of a Country Influence the Health Disparities among Immigrants?*, «International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health», 2020, 17, 4, pp. 1-20: p. 2. [10.3390/ijerph17041149](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17041149) ([accessed: 22 February 2025](#)).

³⁵ Paolo Emilio Balboni, *Didattica dell'italiano a stranieri*, Rome, Bonacci, 1994, p. 50.

participants approached the topic in a gradual and nonintrusive way. These methods made it possible to identify learners' HL levels in a context of listening to and recognizing prior health skills related to their culture of origin, based on the assumption that no fragment of human experience, not even illness, therefore, is conceivable outside one's own cultural sphere³⁶. At the same time, these practices opened the possibility of identifying and filling emerging gaps. Encountering migrants' experiences, especially in terms of their health profile, also means crossing into the dimension of migration trauma. This nexus, however, has been recognized and statistically recorded mainly regarding mental health risk factors found during the stages of the migration or flight process and during settlement in the host country. Post-traumatic stress disorder, mood disorders, and depression are the most frequently reported conditions among international migrants³⁷. It should also be kept in mind that the individual and community cost associated with the migration experience appears to be very high, even when it does not necessarily result in clear psychiatric disorders³⁸. Migration trauma is not always the same for everyone, but it is related to the dramatic contexts of migration and is intertwined with factors related to gender, possible LGBT orientation, age, ethnic, religious, and racial affiliations, as well as the type of migration (be it single, group, family, or as part of a migration chain), individual resources, psychic structure, and the social and cultural conditions of each individual³⁹. The relationship between trauma and illness has been extensively documented, even if in different perspectives related to events that have occurred in diverse places around the world, but evidence suggests that historically traumatic events are associated with just as many historically traumatic responses, such as increases in mortality and morbidity from heart disease, hypertension, alcohol abuse, depression, and suicidal behavior⁴⁰. If we look at an archive on migration trauma as if it were labyrinth, the thread of Ariadne that will lead us out of it lies in the search for non-destructive responses to historical trauma, which focus on recognizing signs of resilience and its strengthening and maintenance⁴¹. We have

³⁶ Virginia De Micco, *La frontiera mobile: migrazioni e sanità in una prospettiva transculturale*, in *Le culture della salute. Immigrazione e sanità: un approccio transculturale*, a cura di Virginia De Micco, Naples, Liguori, 2002, pp. 7-54: p.42.

³⁷ WHO = World Health Organization, *The health of refugees and migrants in the Who European Region*, 2023, <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/fact-sheets/item/the-health-of-refugees-and-migrants-in-the-who-european-region> (Accessed: 22 February 2025).

³⁸ De Micco, *op. cit.*, p.1.

³⁹ Tiziana de Rogatis, *Homing cit.*, pp. 30-31.

⁴⁰ Maria Yellow Horses Brave Heart, *Gender Differences in the Historical Trauma Response Among the Lakota*, «Journal of Health & Social Policy», 10 (4), 1999, pp. 1-21, https://doi.org/10.1300/J045v10n04_01 (Accessed: 22 February 2025). See also Amy_Bombay et al., (2014), *The Intergenerational Effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the Concept of Historical Trauma*, «Transcultural Psychiatry», 51 (3), 2014, pp. 320-338, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513503380> (Accessed: 22 February 2025).

⁴¹ De Rogatis, *Homing cit.*, p. 3.

proceeded in this direction with the collection of stories in which storytelling, according to the principles of narrative medicine, becomes the principal tool for acquiring, understanding, and integrating information about experiences that impact health. Storytelling thus becomes an integral part of care:

From the now well-known relationship between the narrative dimension – also and above all autobiographical, when patients talk about themselves – and the general conditions of health and well-being, which is not only physical but also mental and social, and which reflects and narrates the identity of each person, derives a plurality of practices proper to narrative medicine and related to different contexts, objectives, and actors. The idea is that nothing exists if it is not formatted in the temporal and sequential chain of a narrative, and that the ego can recognize itself, heal itself, transform itself through narrative too⁴².

The narrative medicine-inspired approach to data collection in the archive allowed for an emotionally safe environment, free from conditioning that could make freedom of expression feel coerced or expose learners to the risk of dangerous backlash. As a result, the archive has become a place to test and develop the skills of attention, reflection, representation, and affiliation for all those involved with this process in various roles: a kind of fabric made of clinical thoughts, care, and the ability to tune in to the needs of others⁴³, but also a place to imagine and better understand others through the world of stories⁴⁴.

2.2 *Toward an applied narrative medicine: Cassandra in Mogadishu as a model for the archive and a tool for trauma care*

Collecting stories activates the human capacity to feel empathy for those in a state of distress, facilitates active listening, and predisposes one to better grasp the meaning of difficulties and offer help⁴⁵:

To know what patients endure at the hands of illness and therefore to be of clinical help requires that doctors enter the worlds of their patients, if only imaginatively, and to see and interpret these worlds from the patients' point of view. [...] Medicine can benefit from learning that which literary scholars and psychologists and anthropologists and storytellers have known for some time -- that is, what narratives are, how they are built, how they convey their

⁴² Stefano Calabrese et al., *Che cos'è la medicina narrativa*, cit., p. 25.

⁴³ Charon, et al., *The Principles and Practice* cit., p. 3.

⁴⁴ Rita Charon and Martha Montello, *Stories Matter. The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*, edited by Rita Charon and Martha Montello, New York-London, Routledge, 2002, p. 62.

⁴⁵ Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine. Honoring the Stories of Illness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 3-4

knowledge about the world, what happens when stories are told and listened to, how narratives organize life, and how they let those who live life recognize what it means. Using narrative knowledge enables a person understand the plight of another by participating in his or her story with complex skills of imagination, interpretation, and recognition. With such knowledge, we enter others' narrative worlds and accept them -- at least provisionally -- as true. Our genuine curiosity and commitment toward the truth enable us to peer through the twilight of another's story as we try to see the whole picture and as we reflect on what it might mean. We recognize what parts we play in one another's lives and how entailed we are in our shared creation of meaning. We get to know ourselves as a result of the vision of others, and we are able to donate ourselves as instruments of others' learning⁴⁶.

In this sense, Igiaba Scego's work *Cassandra in Mogadischu* shatters the element of isolation that can characterize traumatic experiences by providing a glimpse into physical and mental pain. The work uses unconventional imagery that foregrounds the body, which is recounted in an interoceptive way. Such a mode can potentially produce prodromes of healing⁴⁷ by going to the heart of the pathological symptomatology of trauma, according also to what is described in some scientific studies on *Somatic Experiencing*:

A form of trauma therapy that emphasizes guiding the client's attention to interoceptive, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive experience. SE™ claims that this style of inner attention, in addition to the use of kinesthetic and interoceptive imagery, can lead to the resolution of symptoms resulting from chronic and traumatic stress [...]. We emphasize the importance of taking into account the instinctive, bodily based protective reactions when dealing with stress and trauma, as well as the effectiveness of using attention to interoceptive, proprioceptive and kinesthetic sensation as a therapeutic tool⁴⁸.

Cassandra in Mogadischu is a breeding ground for ideas within which to find guidance tools for each category in the archive. In the context of narrative medicine, various approaches can be applied directly to people who belong to multicultural and multilingual realities, on the basis of methodologies already in use⁴⁹. This new perspective encourages us to look differently at some thematic nuclei of the work that could become therapeutic tools, in the context outlined above. Such analysis can take

⁴⁶ Ivi, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁷ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score. Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, New York, Penguin, 2014, ebook, p. 256.

⁴⁸ Peter Payne et al., *Somatic experiencing: using interoception and proprioception as core elements of trauma therapy*, «Front Psychol.», 2015, 6, 93, pp. 1-18: p. 1.

⁴⁹ Lorenza Garrino, *La medicina narrativa nei luoghi di formazione e di cura*, Milan, Centro Scientifico, 2019. See also Stefania Polvani and Armando Sarti, *Medicina narrativa in terapia intensiva. Storie di malattia e di cura*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2013; Calabrese et al., *op.cit.*

place on multiple levels: the search for and use of restorative strategies that serve as antidotes to *Jirro*; active listening to what is not sayable in the first person; and reflection on memory as a form of pedagogy. The following provides, for illustrative purposes only, three points of intersection between *Cassandra in Mogadishu* and possible practical applications, which are translated into corresponding stages of laboratorial work aimed at data collection for the archive.

To start with, the first powerful tool we encounter are languages, which are crucial components in *Cassandra in Mogadishu* for exploring spaces of negotiation and healing. Although the multilingual universe represented by Scego in her works has been extensively analyzed in numerous studies⁵⁰, the focus in the present examination is not so much on how the varieties of Italian have been interpreted and used by the author, but on the power that languages have to represent and manifest whole parts of one's cultural identity and sense of belonging and to create spaces of expressiveness in which one may release, cathartically, both positive and negative emotions. The use of languages that come up in the narrative becomes an indicator of the speaker's state of discomfort or well-being, as is clear in the following examples:

In your speech, however [...] every now and then the Somali comes out unexpectedly. It's not the Somali of the Banaadir region that we speak in the family [...]. Your Somali, Soraya, smells of home, diapers, first steps, first tooth. An almost newborn Somali, sweet and tender like a Sachertorte filled with clouds and sugar. It's a childlike Somali, casually mixed with your upper-class British accent, blossoming in your young adult mouth. [...] And every time I listen to it with amazement. Hearing you speak enchants me, Soraya, and makes me feel alive (cm 12);

Italian, the language of those who colonized our ancestors in Brava as well as in Mogadishu, a language that was once an enemy, once a slave ship, but which has now become, for a generation between my mother and me, the language of our affections. Of our most intimate secrets. The language that accompanies us despite its contradictions. The language of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Elsa Morante and Dacia Maraini. The language of Pap Khouma, Amir Issaa, Leila El Houssi, Takoua Ben Mohamed, and Djarah Kan.

A language that was once singular and is now plural.

A Mediterranean language, a language of crossroads. (cm 15);

⁵⁰ See, among others, "Italia mia, benché...". *La dismatria linguistica nella narrativa di Igiaba Scego*, in *Lingue migranti e nuovi paesaggi*, edited by Maria Vittoria Calvi, Irina Bajini, Milin Bonomi, Milan, LED Edizioni Universitarie, 2015, pp. 67-81. See also Gabriella Cartago, *La lingua degli scrittori italiani multietnici*, «Mondi Migranti», 2018, 2, pp. 223-233; Edoardo Buroni, *L'italiano per vocazione. Aspetti metalinguistici nella narrativa di Igiaba Scego*, «Italiano LinguaDue», 2019, 1, pp. 57-104.

She was afraid of the Italian language. After all, she had only heard it spoken by the prostitutes of Shangani, by women badly exploited by an unjust power. For her, Italian was corruption (cm 203);

With your father, your *aabo*, you speak English. [...] he has perfect pronunciation, a strong American accent, a bit like Will Smith's [...] an accent that smells of bodies, moons, planets, flirting, and misunderstandings (cm 12);

That *chimini* that I cannot speak or even dream of. Language of my regret, of my suspended being (cm 12);

When he was angry, *aabo* spoke to us in the Queen's English. [...] it was enough to hear him pronounce the article "the" to predict the storm in arrival. [...] English changed his corporal being. When he spoke it, he had a less upright posture, sometimes almost hunchbacked. His shoulder blades and chest were almost pulled forward by an invisible string, and his knees supported a body that, word by word, seemed more massive, heavy, and uncomfortable than a moment before. Mouth puckered, nose scrunched up, eyes sunken. English would shake him like an earthquake within. And every time I felt as if it were taking over the innocence of his golden mouth. Brutally forcing into exile the other languages he spoke, to seek a new home in an unknown elsewhere (cm 318);

Languages can also become weapons of healing – essential parts of narrative medicine:

Medicine is extraordinary and improves our lives every day, but its power is linked to correct diagnosis, to patience, to seriousness, and to the ability to truly listen. The miracles of medicine are triggered by words, by the will to truly understand (cm 270).

These reflections are embedded in the resulting practical application that consists in integrating all of the learners' languages and dialects in the workshops, using strategies based on the pedagogy of translanguaging⁵¹. Plurilingualism is legitimated within a symbolic and educational framework capable of generating new ways of relating with one another with and through languages, as Tullio De Mauro has pointed out:

The right to use one's own language, and even more so the right to have it respected, is a primary human right and its satisfaction in practice is a decisive component in the intellectual and affective development of the individual. It is a mediocre, inefficient love of one's country that even today, in some countries, leads some to believe that one should try to hide, erase, and perhaps trample on linguistic otherness. [...] But above all, Italy lacks an

⁵¹ Ofelia García, Susanna Ibarra and Kate Seltzer, *The Translanguaging Classroom: Leveraging Student Bilingualism for Learning*, «Journal of Immersion and Content-Based Language Education», 2017, 5, pp. 300-303.

anthropological and linguistic culture that is widespread enough to allow us to have a meaningful social relationship with others⁵².

Ample space can be given to linguistic autobiography, an increasingly widespread and meaningful tool in the field of applied linguistics⁵³, which is able to open avenues toward the investigation of personal experience by facilitating the construction of a system of relationships between words, codes, and events that come into contact. Autobiographical narratives make it possible to highlight the inner worlds of speakers left uninvestigated by experimental methodologies and to explore the processes of language acquisition, language attrition, and language loss⁵⁴, promoting a greater awareness of the role that language plays in each person's universe.

For literate learners who have an intermediate proficiency in Italian, languages can be used for multiple activities of both free and guided writing: in *Cassandra in Mogadishu* there is an abundance of themes that might arouse the interest and cooperation of participants, such as the relationship with memory, reflections on one's mother tongue, dreams and metaphors, nostalgia, language learning, and the theme of love understood in a variety of ways. Scego teaches readers that from language comes an immense wisdom that helps deal with pain and loneliness. A major prompt is provided by the proverbs collected by her brother Abdul, which act as a restorative strategy and remedy for the *Jirro*:

Those sentences, with their rhythm, their development, their duration, their commentary, their moral, had something sweet about them; they managed to calm the gusts of his restless heart. [...] When he opened his book [...] he gave me a world. [...] He was the person who contributed most to this writing madness that I carry within me. He gave me the weapon that has defended me from *Jirro* and its abyss (cm 62, 64).

The therapeutic power of proverbs stems from the fact that they condense collective experiences, moral teachings, and practical advice into a few words, conveying universal messages across the ages. They function as instantly accessible pills of wisdom, as effective emotional support tools deeply rooted in the culture of each language. Spaces can easily be devoted to rediscovering proverbs in this new light, the educational

⁵² Tullio De Mauro, *Seimila lingue nel mondo, Introduction to I Mappamondi*, Roma, Sinnos Editrice, 1995, p. 5.

⁵³ Giampaolo Anfosso, Giuseppe Polimeni, Eleonora Salvadori, *Parola di sé: le autobiografie linguistiche tra teoria e didattica*, edited by Giampaolo Anfosso, Giuseppe Polimeni, Eleonora Salvadori, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2016.

⁵⁴ Eva Marie Thüne, Rita Luppi, *Lingua, identità e memoria. Il lavoro con biografie linguistiche nella didattica universitaria. Un'introduzione*, in *Biografie linguistiche. Esempi di linguistica applicata*, edited by Eva Marie Thüne and Rita Luppi, Bologna, Amsacta, 2022, pp. 1-14: p. 1.

use of which is also recommended by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, for developing both linguistic and intercultural competence.

A second element that deserves attention in the search for useful tools linked to narrative medicine is provided by the need to find spaces for resilience, sublimation, and the joy of living despite the abyss of trauma. It is meaningful that the memoir begins with Igiaba's question to her granddaughter Soraya, «Beloved girl, how do I depict your laughter?», and goes on at numerous points to reiterate the need to activate skills that can generate zones in opposition to pain that can prevent thoughts from continuing to bleed: «Laughing. Living. It was always the wall your *aabo* erected against the *Jirro*» (cm 72). In practice, conditions must be created so that interaction with migrant learners takes place in a serene environment, where there is room for playful moments⁵⁵, in an atmosphere of exchange and absence of judgment. In this way, conditions are actualized for widespread well-being that can generate the therapeutic power of smiles and laughter, which can in turn reverberate beyond the boundaries set by the interactions for the archive.

The vital space from which we can draw energy does not end here; instead, it is fed by the relationships of affection inside and outside of the family and by many other means for the intensity of existence to be expressed: celebrations, prayer, art, literature. Other positive habits consist in consciously activating the power of hope and cultivating a conscious presence that brings one back to the present⁵⁶, by means of rewarding activities that require concentration and attention. This is precisely what the author enacts when she describes her mother sewing her textiles:

She sews her secrets with needle and thread, using one of her *maro*, for which the family is famous, to express everything that her mouth cannot say. She uses rough fabrics bought at market stalls. She fills them with rainbow patterns and transforms them into dreams, into Miró paintings, maneuvering the roughness of the fabric with a steel crochet hook and a lot of imagination.

All our houses, mine and my siblings', are full of her creations. Concentric circles followed by straight lines. Followed by pyramids. Followed by trapezoids. Followed by triangles. And then oranges that plunge into green. Edges laced with raw wool, love added to love, giving kick after kick to oblivion, to sadness, and to the cowardice of silence. There, in those *maro*, [...]

⁵⁵ See Giovanni Freddi, *Gli adulti e le lingue*, Milan, Minerva Italica, 1974; Giovanni Freddi, *Azione, gioco, lingua*, Padua, Liviana, 1990; Duccio Demetrio, *L'età adulta. Teorie dell'identità e pedagogie dello sviluppo*, Rome, Carocci, 1990.

⁵⁶ Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, Connie Burk, *Trauma Stewardship. An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*, San Francisco, Berrett-Koheler Publishers Inc., 2009, p. 172.

she transforms the *Jirro*, that which explodes inside her, into tapestries of pure splendor (cm 37).⁵⁷

In practice, the tools implicitly suggested by the writer can be translated into an invitation for migrant learners to reflect on what occupations and strategies can bring relief, support, and respite in daily activities and to use them as caches from which to draw strength on a daily basis.

The third point taps directly into one of the cornerstones of pathography, namely the psychosomatic symptoms of trauma. Conflicts and ambivalences that cannot be resolved often pave the way for illness. Evil can move from the body to the soul in a way that certainly does not respect the canonical division of the medical or psychiatric practice⁵⁸. *Cassandra in Mogadishu* is a treatise on the anatomy of trauma:

In those first weeks of the war I lost my body, Soraya. It slipped off me like a designer silk shirt. In those first weeks, the *Jirro* completely possessed me. My feet had lost all feeling. My mouth had become a desert. My hair a tangle of brambles. My skin cracked in several places. My eyes swollen beyond belief from too many tears. My cheeks haggard. My nails yellowed. My face tired.

I spent much of my time in the bathroom with two fingers shoved down my throat. [...] my perpetual *Jirro* (cm 98-99);

The *Jirro* has always had the ability to dig deep into the soft matter of our lungs (cm 35);

Throughout my life, my eyes have always been a question mark. My most obvious fragility. They were the ones who paid for all the *Jirro* that overwhelmed our family, our people, our geography. In the background a war of uncalled-for intensity. A war made of losses. Separations. Vomit. Pus. Uncertainty [...] the *Jirro* wanted to scream inside our patched-up bodies that were once healthy. But now there isn't even a single healthy vein left. After a twenty-year dictatorship and a thirty-year civil war, we are exhausted. Every internal organ is exposed. Ravaged (cm 272).

But for individuals in migration what could be the use of confronting the bodily effects of trauma recounted in detail? One possible answer lies in the ability of Scego's testimony to break the loneliness of experiences, eliminate the stigma associated with illness, stitch together cause and effect, and legitimize listening to pathological experience. By centering the reading of these fragments of individual and collective memory, dignity is given to stories, triggering an initial nucleus of care related to the choice to pay attention to the other in his or her weakness, to be able to see him or her⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ On the preverbal language of the *maro* and its ability to repair trauma, see de Rogatis in par. 1.4 of this essay.

⁵⁸ De Micco, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵⁹ De Micco, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

We recognize that inhumane conditions make people sick, but if contexts are changed, the body can learn to heal. Practical application takes the form of offering reflections on the symbolic meaning of the body as a metaphor for trauma, making room for stories as maps in which physical descriptions of pain represent nodes of connection with lived traumatic experiences. A discussion of how different cultures express suffering and trauma is therefore encouraged. An autobiographical storytelling⁶⁰ that can be composed not only of words, but of images, music, and objects.

The intensity of the experience of reading *Cassandra in Mogadishu*, in its potential to make available pathways different from the walls of trauma, has allowed us to create a working space with migrant learners and to identify some of the categories for the archive on migration trauma. The memoir is Scego's story, but the archive has given us the opportunity to honor the stories through the pain, nostalgia, love, and memory of those who have chosen to recount themselves – stories that do not disappear, but, like seeds, have the potential to flourish again.

⁶⁰ Stefano Calabrese, *Storie di vita. Come gli individui si raccontano nel mondo*, Milan, Mimesis, 2018. See also Paola Villani, *Dalla Medicina narrativa alla Narratologia medica. L'Homo patiens come Homo textilis*, in *Ripensare il Modernismo*, edited by Emilia Di Rocco e Iolanda Plescia, «Rivista STUDIUM Ricerca», 119, 1, 2023, pp. 280-328.