

# Postcolonial Italian Studies: Rhizomatic Notes from the South

Anita Virga, Brian Zuccala

## Abstract:

This essay draws on the first (of two) edited volumes of ISSA dedicated to “Postcolonialismi Italiani ieri e oggi appunti (sudafricani) per una (ri)concettualizzazione ‘rizomatica’ dei postcolonial Italian studies” (Virga, Zuccala 2018) and on some of the new concepts introduced therein. The essay tackles in a more thorough fashion and from a broader perspective some of the methodological and terminological issues raised – albeit in a necessarily cursory manner (and in Italian) – in Virga and Zuccala 2018. The essay starts by geographically positioning writers in the context of global academia and claiming an epistemological consequence of their geographical position. It then gives an overview of the field of postcolonial Italian studies in order to explain how the concept of rhizome, when applied meta-critically to the whole field, might provide a useful starting point for a paradigmatic reconceptualization of postcolonial Italian studies.

**Keywords:** Italian Postcolonial Studies, Hypertext and Italian Postcolonialism, Postcolonial Italian Studies, Post-colonial Metacriticism, Post-colonial Rhizome

## 1. A “Positional” Introduction

Albeit with a certain belatedness (Oboe 2016, 9) when compared, for instance, to academic developments in the Anglosphere, “Italian (post)colonialism” has been the subject and object of scholarly discussion in the fields of *italianistica*/Italian studies and European studies for a long time. More and more scholars operating either in Italy or – like us – across the globe, have found, within this theoretical framework, useful and diverse perspectives from which they attempt to (re)read not only the artistic and cultural phenomena of contemporary Italy, but also those linked to the history of the Italian Unification and the post-Unification periods, as well as the cultural formations of the fascist era.

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Since Italy has begun to confront, with all the delays and hesitations that are also characteristic of other European nations<sup>1</sup>, its own colonial past<sup>2</sup> – thanks to the work of historians such as Giorgio del Boca (1976, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1986a, 1986b) and Nicola Labanca (2002) – literary and cultural studies have also started to interrogate the cultural actors and phenomena of the present and of the past in light of the critical tools made available by (post)colonial studies and postcolonial theories.

Judging purely on the basis of the geographical distribution of the above mentioned studies, one is likely to think that the positionality of these researchers has been highly relevant to the ways in which these theoretical frameworks have been negotiated in the field of *italianistica*/Italian Studies. It is well-known<sup>3</sup>, in fact, that on the one hand the first Italian academics to be exposed to postcolonial theory were the Italianists operating in the Anglo-American circuit. On the other hand, postcolonial theory and (academic) practice have been influencing the Italian academy through departments such as English and American studies, anthropology, and sociology more than through *italianistica*/Italian studies per se<sup>4</sup>.

Likewise, our own positionality as researchers – we both trained in the West and now work in the Global South (the South African academy, to be precise) – is one of the starting points of this reflection. As said by Chambers (2016) – our southern(most) location turns “from geography” into “epistemology” (31): it has progressively become the theoretical presupposition for a different approach to the field. More specifically, operating from “the margins” of the “central” Euro-North American circuit of Italy-related postcolonial scholarship has become one of the reasons for us to be drawn to a more “distant” and comprehensive assessment of the field. By the same token, the racially nuanced postcolonial discourse that permeates the South African academy perpetually and entirely, has arguably

<sup>1</sup> It is opportune to refer here to the case of France, which is possibly the closest example to the Italian scenario in the context of Mediterranean Europe. One may refer to Jean-François Bayart’s provocative essay published in 2011, which is particularly relevant here, as will become evident through the numerous times we invoke Sandra Ponzanesi’s scholarly response to Bayart.

<sup>2</sup> A past that is full of atrocities and aberrations. One can just think of the use of chemical weapons, which were prohibited by the Geneva Convention but used by Italians in Ethiopia, nonetheless. On this and some of the other ignominious and unacknowledged acts committed by Italian colonialists, see Del Boca (2005). Without having to compile a long list, and exploiting the intrinsic link between (post)colonial matters and “spaces”, see Karen Pinkus (2003) for a thorough exploration of Italy’s amnesia of its colonial past as evident in topography.

<sup>3</sup> As well as easily verifiable through departments’ and courses’ websites (hence no reason to reproduce them here).

<sup>4</sup> The point about positionality and/in epistemology is made both implicitly and explicitly by postcolonial thinkers such as de Sousa Santos (2016) and collective initiatives such as *Postcolonialitalia* and clusters of postcolonial critical thought such as Franco Cassano (2001).

made us more prone to try and capture the nuances of such a multifaceted field as postcolonial Italian studies. Our “decentred” reading of the field will unfold in three sections: after reviewing in a necessarily passing manner the main critical (sec. 2) and metacritical (sec. 3) contributions in the field, we will formulate a proposal as to how the concepts of rhizome (sec. 4) – while applied metacritically – could provide useful theoretical tools for the field.

## 2. Postcolonial Criticism and/in Italian Studies

An exhaustive review of the field is beyond the scope and reach of this piece, and of arguably any article-length contribution that aims to go beyond a literary review. Yet, to the end of the argument that this essay aims to develop, it is important to point out that within the overall disciplinary framework of postcolonial Italian studies, one can distinguish an initial, and primarily “exploratory” period of, one may say, “applied criticism”, and another and more recent phase that can appropriately be termed “metacritical” (Henderson, Brown 1997). The beginning/early stages of what we now have come to refer to as postcolonial Italian studies (the late 1990s), as often happens<sup>5</sup>, were characterized by years of more or less “pioneering” research, which foreran those works that could be framed as postcolonial proper. This research, drawing upon fundamental (mostly Anglo-American) theoretical works and following the “diverse temporalities and locations” (Chambers 2017, 18) of the postcolonial, has ramificated in various directions of artistic and textual analysis<sup>6</sup>. This was done firstly with the aim of problematising the paradigm of cultural and national “homogeneity” (Lombardi-Diop, Romeo 2012) associated with Italy, and subsequently with the objective of drawing theoretical conclusions that were alternative to that very paradigm. Moreover, within any given sub-area/sub-sector, the objective was to enrich the definition of what Mezzadra referred to as “la condizione postcoloniale [italiana]” (2008). These were the trajectories followed not only by those early scholarly pieces, which engaged most explicitly with cultural features of the former Italian colonies (from Tomasello 1984 to Re 2003), but also by the studies on Italian diasporas (Verdicchio 1997; Gabaccia 1988, 2000; Gabaccia, Ottanelli 2001) and on migrant writing (possibly the largest corpus which begins with Parati 1997, 1999; Picarazzi 2001). These were also the paths pursued by studies on the Southern Question, (Teti 1993; Moe 1992, 1998, 2002)<sup>7</sup> which should be remembered in relation to the pluri-centennial orientalisation of the South, and by those – heavily intertwined with these – on the racialisation of the political and cultural discourse both pre- and post-Unification. All these critical streams started before an explicit academic postcolonial consciousness was formed (at

<sup>5</sup> But some make the case for an epochal and postmodernist driven macro-shift toward metacriticism, which occurred in the last third of the 20th century. See Leitch (1981).

<sup>6</sup> For which it may be useful to refer to the “Inizi” section in Derobertis (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Pivoting on rethinking Gramsci, regarding which see Bhattacharya and Srivastava (2012).

least as far as the terminology goes), but they continued afterwards with reinvigorated theoretical energy within, and overlapping with, the “metacritical” phase this piece is particularly focused on. This is as true for Diasporas/Immigration/Emigration studies, continued for example by Fiore (2012, 2017) as it is for the Southern Question (Wong 2006; Dickie 1997) and self-orientalization (Re 2009; Coburn 2013; Sorrentino 2014; Virga 2017, but also Sneider 1998; Lombardi-Diop, Giuliani 2013). It is particularly true for migrant writing studies, with Parati (2005), Di Maio (2001, 2008), Mauceri and Negro (2009), Quaquarelli (2010), Portelli (1999, 2006), Comberiati (2009, 2010), Brioni (2015), Burns (2003, 2013), Lori (2013), Ponzanesi (2004, 2017) to mention but a few book-length studies<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. Postcolonial Metacriticism

Recently and with increasing frequency, contributions of equal scholarly insightfulness, but of a more marked meta-critical nature have begun to appear. These are contributions aimed at summarising not only the whole Italian cultural and artistic production ascribable to the postcolonial, but also crucially the whole exegetic landscape that has formed in the past two decades. This exegetic landscape, one may be tempted to say, has formed “structuralistically” at the intersection of two (variously understood) conceptual matrixes, which are the “Italian” and the “Postcolonial”. These contributions have endeavoured to establish and illustrate the areas of greatest productivity and effectiveness within that landscape, and indicated, on the contrary, those areas that remain seemingly less explored. These meta-exegetic contributions have therefore reflected upon the potential already expressed, and upon that which is still to be expressed of this critical (set of) tool(s), with specific reference to the Italian context.

What happened at this metacritical level can be understood as a relative distancing from the “close reading” of each of these artefacts, be it a text or an audio-visual piece. The gesture toward what can be described – perhaps with some indulgence of scholarly fashion – as “distant reading” of the field<sup>9</sup> is also a movement toward “conceptual modelling”, an abstract spatialisation and geom-

<sup>8</sup> Progress study of the postcolonial audio-visual (De Franceschi 2013; Virga, Zuccala 2018; preceded by Parati 2001).

<sup>9</sup> It has become customary and obvious for quite a while at this point to refer to Moretti’s monograph *Distant Reading* (2013). But a short and poignant account of Moretti’s relationship with distance itself and hence abstract, quasi-geometrical modelling is in “Franco Moretti: A response” (2017), which in turn has to be understood in the context of the whole *PMLA* 2017 issue dedicated to “Distant Reading: the book.” The point to be made drawing on both *Distant Reading* (the book) and the long-lasting debate on the validity and even appropriateness of “distant reading” (the concept), is that the operation of “distancing” oneself from the micro-analysis of the object, precedes and works somewhat independently from the computational method, which nonetheless becomes an integral part of it at some point. A captivating discussion of these concepts – in the form of an interview – is also in Ruben Hackler and Guido Kirsten (2016).

eticisation of one's understanding of the field as a whole. According to such a move, these abstract conceptualisations themselves become the object of study in the field. It is this very conceptual move – which the remainder of this essay will endeavour to unveil further – that grounds the perspective from which this article proceeds.

Before any attempts are made, however, to try and formulate new readings and introduce new concepts – either at the micro-level of individual cultural actors or at the macro-level of the whole field –, the above-described metacritical turn in postcolonial Italian studies should be illustrated further. This can be effectively done by briefly discussing and comparing the content of the main pieces addressing such a turn. At this meta-level, Ponzanesi's works (2012, 2016) and Lombardi-Diop and Romeo's contributions – both as authors (2014, 2016), and as editors (*Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* 2012 and 2014 in an expanded Italian edition) as well as Bouchard (2018) are particularly central and exemplary of the aforementioned trends<sup>10</sup>.

In her essay “Colonial Legacies and Postcolonial interruptions”<sup>11</sup> Norma Bouchard – drawing on Chambers' monograph (2017) – recounts in a necessarily cursory fashion the main streams of both Italian postcolonial cultural production and postcolonial scholarly investigation, regarding them as manifestations of a multi-faceted “postcolonial consciousness” (2018, 34) that arose in the 1970s. Yet, Bouchard continues, the discipline became academically “institutionalised” only in the past two decades, and in a way that leaves it still somewhat imper-

<sup>10</sup> A metacritical aim is also at the basis of (at least) the first issue of *From the European South* by the title of “Archives of the future Italy, the postcolonial and the time to come” as clearly stated by Annalisa Oboe in her editorial “Archiviare Altrimenti: Riflessioni ‘Postcolonialitaliane’”: “Questo primo numero [...] propone una ricognizione critica sulla presenza e le potenzialità del pensiero e delle pratiche del paradigma postcoloniale nel contesto italiano” (2016, 3). Coincidentally, this reflection draws on the public debate that took place in 1998 in Cape Town between Derrida and Mbembe on the occasion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). One should not forget, however, earlier contributions such as Mellino's “Italy and Postcolonial Studies: A Difficult Encounter” (2007), and De Donno's and Srivastava's introductory essay, “Colonial and Postcolonial Italy” (2006), to the special issue of the same title, as well as the mentioned essay by Derobertis (2014). Nor should one forget subsequent contributions such as “Italian Postcolonial Literature” by Romeo (2017). In particular, the opening pages of his essay (1-5) provide a more accurate overview of the meta-critical reflections we refer to than we would be able to provide under the constraints of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> Bouchard's piece was generated by the intrinsically “metacritical” need to deliver a keynote speech at the 2017 A.P.I. conference in Johannesburg, which was also the occasion that led to the production of our piece. The programme of the conference can be accessed through this link: <[http://www.cons johannesburg.esteri.it/consolato\\_johannesburg/resource/doc/2017/08/programma\\_\\_locandina.pdf](http://www.cons johannesburg.esteri.it/consolato_johannesburg/resource/doc/2017/08/programma__locandina.pdf)> (03/2022). Film director Fred Kuwornu brought an artist's perspective to the conference, contributing a paper titled “Black-Italiano: Imagining the Black Body in Contemporary Italy”. For a critical perspective on Kuwornu's South African tour one can refer to Virga, Zuccala (2019).

meable – and regrettably so – to the socio-cultural challenges concretely posed by acknowledging the contemporary “postcoloniality” of/in Italian society.

The discipline is so impermeable that Sandra Ponzanesi – in a somewhat more provocative fashion – has gone as far as asking: “Does Italy Need Postcolonial Theory?” (2016). This suggests that hitherto, the trend of postcolonial Italian studies might just have been a way of giving in to Anglo-American academic trends. After analysing the ramifications along which the specificities<sup>12</sup> of the Italian Postcolonial is articulated, the critic has shown how, on the one hand, it is true that some of the notions grounding postcolonial studies were already present in the Italian academic discourse well before they were gathered around/under the umbrella term of “postcolonial studies”. On the other hand, the postcolonial framework has allowed scholars to group within a coherent conceptual structure/architecture those theoretical and interpretative hints otherwise isolated, to connect them better to one another and to blend them more harmoniously within a trans- and post-national perspective. It might be appropriate to re-propose the excerpt in full:

The postcolonial turn in Italian studies is [...] not just a novelty or a new academic fashion but the confirmation and consolidation of a genealogy in Italian studies that has a long tradition and roots in different discourses connected to the history of Italian migration, racial formations and intellectual thought based on the specificity of the Italian nation formation. This relates to Italy’s denied but pervasive colonial legacy and the fragmentation of its identitarian politics based on ethnic, racial and religious complexities. These are not imported or emerging concepts because of the increasing success and academic establishment of postcolonial critique but pressing issues that find an articulation and connection thanks to a new language and methodological tools that stem from a new global understanding of patterns of domination and resistance that have historical and geopolitical specificities that need to be accounted for. [...] [T]his demonstrates that, if Italy has been postcolonial all along, critical awareness and critique of its postcolonial condition have been lacking or scarcely brought to light. [...] [T] herefore [...] Italy not only needs postcolonial theory but [...] within a wider European and international scholarly landscape its belatedness and specific critical apparatus can yield new, important insights into the origin and future of postcolonial thought. (Ponzanesi 2016, 159)<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On specificities intended as “variations” rather than “exceptions”, see Labanca 2002: “Un approccio [...] ‘eccezzionalistico’, aleggiato assai spesso fra i sostenitori del colonialismo italiano [...] e persino fra i suoi contestatori. Quello italiano fu una variante, piuttosto che un’eccezione, dell’imperialismo coloniale Europeo” (473), and Bouchard (2018, 27).

<sup>13</sup> Lombardi-Diop and Romeo had articulated their position in a similar manner in the same year (but it is possible to find the passage in English in 2014, 427): “[G]li studi postcoloniali applicati al contesto italiano riposizionano la storia coloniale e la sua eredità al centro del dibattito sulla contemporaneità e la collegano alle immigrazioni transnazionali, sottolineando anche come i rapporti di potere creati dal colonialismo vengano riprodotti e rinforzati nelle società postcoloniali contemporanee. Diversamente da altri Paesi europei, l’analisi

The scholar had already, a few years earlier (2012 in English, 2014 in the Italian translation), summed up the progresses made by the sub-discipline of postcolonial Italian studies by identifying and describing three streams or areas. The first stream is one that “reassess[es] and evaluate[s] the colonial past from new critical perspectives, accounting for subaltern positions, but also offering new insights into the colonial encounter” (Ponzanesi 2012, 59). The second stream “acknowledge[s] texts, voices, and images by migrants (either from former colonies or not) and other minorities; revise[s] the literary canon and redefine[s] the notions of cultural value and aesthetics” (*ibidem*). A third stream, which “rethink[s] theory and epistemology in accordance with perspectives of alterity and dissonance” (*ibidem*), is identified.

Already in that meta-critical piece, the researcher underlined how the advances in those three areas – two of which can be understood as being more strictly content-focused (colonies, migration), while the third is more self-reflexive and meta-exegetic (postcolonial Italian theory) – there was a visible discrepancy. On the one hand, Ponzanesi writes that regarding the first and the second areas, “[w]e could argue that Italian Studies are truly flourishing” (*ibidem*)<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand,

The last field – developing a home-grown postcolonial theorizing – is where most of the work still needs to be done. This should not only account for the adaptations of existing critical tools to the specificity of Italy and its culture but also make sure that new postcolonial tools are developed from the reality and materiality of Italian culture itself to then travel further. (Ivi, 60)

This is certainly, and quite proverbially, easier said than done, not lastly because – as follows from the aforementioned articulation – a lot seems to depend on the definition of “homegrown (postcolonial theorising)”: should Ponzanesi’s formulation be understood as geographically “homegrown”, in the sense of Italianists operating in Italian, or rather “homegrown” in a broader sense, referring to Italian studies specialists (whatever that may mean) who operate in Europe and beyond, or who only operate in the Global South, or some (which?) combination thereof?

storica del passato italiano include però anche l’emigrazione di massa (e gli emigranti come ‘soggetti colonizzati’) e la Questione Meridionale (come forma di ‘colonialismo interno’). Inoltre, le questioni sulla storicità e sulla temporalità sono cruciali per il dibattito italiano, visto che l’era postcoloniale è cominciata decenni dopo la perdita delle colonie e il processo di decolonizzazione non è iniziato simultaneamente in tutte le colonie italiane” (2016, 54).

<sup>14</sup> As for the Italian colonial enterprises: “[N]umerous scholars – ranging from historians to anthropologists and cultural theorists – [...] have carried out pioneering work in recent decades, opening up not only an obscure chapter of Italian history but also transforming the way of dealing with the colonial archive and reinterpreting knowledge production from a postcolonial perspective” (Ponzanesi 2012, 59). Likewise, in relation to the second scholarly area: “[t]he second aspect is also extremely buoyant at the moment with scholars operating not only in Anglo-Saxon academia but also in Italian departments in Italy on appraising, acknowledging, and interpreting new literary voices and artistic productions by migrants in Italy” (ivi, 59-60).

A tenable way of qualifying the word “homegrown” in this context would be to consider it metacritically, and to draw on Ponzanesi herself: in “Does Italy Need Postcolonial Theory?”, Ponzanesi has effectively rearticulated the critical and conceptual landscape of the Italian Postcolonial into five areas, which she refers to as “intersections”:

1. The precedent in supposedly ‘postcolonial thinkers’ or those who have instigated and influenced the development of postcolonial theorising (Vico, Gramsci, Levi).
2. The internal subaltern question in Italy, namely the Southern Question and its relations to *Pensiero Meridiano*/Mediterranean studies.
3. Italy’s history of double colonisation (paradigms of emigration as immigration or what is usually referred to as external and internal colonialism) with very specific consequences for the Italian notion of national identity but also geographical reach and scope.
4. Race theories and eugenics. How the discourse on race has followed a specific track in Italian studies and merges and diverges with studies on colonialism and postcolonialism (from Lombroso to Sergi to Burgio, Sorgoni, Barrera, Poidimani, Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop).
5. Contemporary thinkers are readdressing the operation of nation state, empire and globalisation vis-à-vis patterns of migration, capitalism and sovereignty (Negri, Agamben, Dainotto, Passerini, Verdicchio, Mezzadra, Mellino, Passerini [sic] and so forth). (2016, 149)

What Ponzanesi does here – in what can well be regarded as one result of the pervasive influence of the recent “spatial turn” in critical theory and cultural studies (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2016; Warf, Arias 2009) – is to spatialise the field of postcolonial Italian studies in such a way as to create subfields that intersect the peculiarities of the Italian Postcolonial. If that is the case, the “domestic” landscape of postcolonial scholarly practice can therefore be understood as the critical space wherein one attempts to move away from the constraints of “foreign” critical tools. Indeed, the latter are somewhat imposed or forcefully assimilated into the Italian field.

Viewing this peculiarly shaped field as being the “domestic” terrain from which to grow “domestic” critical and metacritical theory – however arbitrary it may appear – becomes more plausible when one looks comprehensively and retrospectively at the bulk of contributions illustrated above. By juxtaposing and comparing these contributions, one gets the impression that postcolonial Italian studies either are, or should be, according to recent scholarship, on the verge of a leap. These essays envision a substantial advancement of a primarily theoretical nature, which might well consist of, they argue, framing new categories and/or epistemological paradigms specifically suited for the Italian context, and yet organically linked to the European as well as global dynamics to which that context is increasingly and inextricably connected. More specifically, Ponzanesi’s series of essays, being the most “deliberately” theoretical, is arguably the most useful at this metacritical level: if one cross-checks the latest mapping by Ponzanesi (2016) and her previous reflections on the need and possibility to



elaborate new paradigms within this critical horizon, it is tenable to assume that this foreseeable theoretical leap might come from new ways of (re)combining or (re)elaborating the existing relationships amongst the aforementioned “intersections”. More precisely, it seems to us – as we will try to make apparent in the next part of this essay – that an interesting point of departure for expressing such a reformulation might be represented by Deleuze and Guattari’s image of the rhizome.

#### 4. The Postcolonial Rhizome

The well-known yet very complex image of the rhizome is visually reproduced and then descriptively conceptualised in the first chapter of *Mille Plateaux* (1980) by Deleuze & Guattari<sup>15</sup>. Beginning with an analysis of the concept and object as complex cultural “*agencement*” (ivi, 10), the image of the rhizome is deployed to illustrate a non-binary system of conceptualizing the real. A rhizomatic system, in Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualisation, is rhizomatic because it escapes the hierarchical notion of unified root and tree-like architecture, which characterises the largest portion of modern Western thought from metaphysics to Chomsky’s linguistics, to Freud’s psychoanalysis.

What characterises – although, as the two philosophers themselves concede, with approximation (*ibidem*) – the rhizomatic quality of a system are several abstract principles: those “de connexion et d’hétérogénéité” (ivi, 13), according to which “n’importe quel point d’un rhizome peut être connecté avec n’importe quel autre, et doit l’être” (*ibidem*); the “[p]rincipe de multiplicité” (ivi, 14); the “[p]rincipe de rupture” (ivi, 16), which is in opposition to “les coupures trop significatives qui séparent les structures, ou en traversent une” (*ibidem*), and which implies the possibility of accessing a rhizomatic structure from any point; the principles of “cartography” and “decalcomania”, according to which “le rhizome [est] *carte et non pas calque*” [...] Si la carte s’oppose au calque, c’est qu’elle est tout entière tournée vers une expérimentation en prise sur le réel” (ivi, 20).

These guiding principles concur to form a figure of open relationships, and whose nature is multiradical, non-hierarchical, infinitely and unpredictably expandible. A figure that has been immediately and intuitively associated with the postcolonial condition.

Within the context of postcolonial studies, the image of the rhizome has been famously reread and reinterpreted – in a language and manner that were less botanical and experimental and more literary and cultural – by Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* (1997). Glissant used it as a metaphor for indicating, to begin with, the plurimus root of subjective identity – both individual and collective – of the Caribbean populations.

<sup>15</sup> In English *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) and in Italian *Millepiani* (1997), *Mille Plateaux* is the second volume, after *L’Anti-Œdipe*, of *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, dated 1980 in its original French.

By virtue not so much of the absence of roots, but of the repositioning of those roots in a multidimensional and complex structure, this identity, explains Glissant, is a “nomadic” one. For Glissant, “rhizomatic”, multiradical and multi-layered are the relationships of the Caribbean people with their land, with their languages, with written and spoken words, and with themselves. This metaphor of the “postcolonial rhizome” is also found in Ashcroft’s fundamental monograph as metaphorising the essence of postcolonial power relationships. (Post) coloniality, according to Ashcroft, is characterised by a rhizomatic propagation of power and an equally rhizomatic opposition to it:

The metaphor is useful firstly because the concept of a root system, of a trunk spreading out and colonizing areas of space in a clearly hierarchical way, is, both as an *idea* and a *policy* (or lack of a coherent policy), fundamental to the project of imperialism. But this notion is just as constructed as that of centre and margin, just as much in the interests of perpetuating power as the Manichaeic binaries of self and other, colonizer and colonized. The operation of power, like the operation of social relations themselves, is both perpetual and discontinuous and propagates laterally and spatially like the rhizome. (2001, 50)<sup>16</sup>

It is useful to point out that here, Ashcroft is – to remain within the terminological rails from whence we departed – primarily “critical” rather than “meta-critical”, that is, he uses the rhizome to define, in line with the scope of his monograph, the postcolonial condition and the postcolonial dynamics, rather than postcolonial studies in their entirety. Even in the more specific context of the studies on/of the Italian postcolonial, the rhizome is not completely absent. Traces of it can be found – in its original formation and with the full reproduction of the image used by Deleuze and Guattari, in Barbara De Vivo (2011), with reference to Ali Farah’s *Madre Piccola* (2007), where it is used as a model for (re)reading the structure of the novel<sup>17</sup>. The term had already been employed by Sonia Sabelli (2005) in relation to three other migrant writers – Geneviève Makaping, Christiana De Caldas Brito and Jarmila Očkayová. In her essay, Sabelli contends that writing and language become a way not only to reinstate multiple and “other” roots (2005, 442) within a culture that continues to consider itself as largely monolithic and monochrome, but to also use them strategically as tools of resistance. Importantly, these tools enable the one who yields them to emancipate themselves (ivi, 443) from a condition of intersectional subalternity. The rhizome appears again in *The Somali Within* (2015), by Simone Brio-

<sup>16</sup> The same argument is also found in the key concepts section of the *Postcolonial Studies Dictionary*, third edition (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2013, 232-233).

<sup>17</sup> De Vivo writes: “Ho cercato a lungo una figura che potesse rendere l’immagine mentale che le ripetute letture di questo romanzo mi hanno dato della sua struttura e del molteplice e simultaneo infittirsi e districarsi di fili narrativi. Ho disegnato tante figure stimolata dalle [sic] parole stesse di Ali Farah sul suo romanzo e nel suo romanzo [...]. È stato solo nel momento in cui ho iniziato la lettura di [...] *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*. È il rizoma la figura che cercavo” (2011, 160).

ni, in its Glissantian acceptance of “identity-rhizome” (Brioni 2015, 138), with reference to the embodiment of multiple identities, which becomes polyphonic writing by male and female Italian-Somali writers. Lastly, one finds traces of it in Sarnelli (2018), in relation to the work of another writer of afro-italianness – Igiaba Scego – in such a way as to combine Glissant’s rhizomatic identity and the sixth principle of Deleuze and Guattari’s map. In “Affective Routes in Postcolonial Italy: Igiaba Scego’s Imaginary Mappings” (2018), Laura Sarnelli analyses, through the image of the rhizome, the operation of mapping diasporic identities performed in three works by Igiaba Scego (*La mia casa è dove sono* [2010]; *Adua* [2015]; *Roma negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* [2014], the latter co-authored with Rino Bianchi)<sup>18</sup>.

On the basis of the parallels drawn by the aforementioned scholars, it is clear that the interpretative value of the rhizome can be extended further. The critical deployment of the image of the rhizome might slide/shift from being an exegetic paradigm for these texts or groups of texts, to becoming a meta-critical framework of the current form/condition of postcolonial Italian studies. As arbitrary as this leap toward a “meta-critical” use of the rhizome might first appear, in reality it is intrinsic, theoretically necessary, and in some sense already implicit in the mentioned *A Thousand Plateaus*. The text that should in effect introduce the figure of the rhizome, to some extent does not do so, if not elliptically or, indeed, “rhizomatically”. Reading *A Thousand Plateaus* therefore leads one to think that a matter as rhizomatic as “the postcolonial” cannot be approached in any way that is not rhizomatic, that, if postcolonial conditions – and the Italian postcolonial condition in particular – are rhizome-like, then to an extent, postcolonial Italian studies must also be rhizomatic.

It is not our goal to suggest – along the lines of Ashcroft – that the rhizomatic structure could also be used as a macro-model for all texts, cultural products, and discourses related to Italian postcoloniality, or for the condition of Italian postcoloniality itself<sup>19</sup>. What we are arguing is something epistemologically more limited and at the same time more exquisitely metacritical: we maintain that it is useful to approach the present state of postcolonial Italian studies as described by Ponzanesi in her five intersections (1- foundational theory, 2 - Southern Question, 3 - double colonization, 4 - race theory, and 5- Italian contemporary thought) in a “rhizomatic” fashion.

In line with the scholar’s provocation (“Does Italy Need Postcolonial Theory?”), we contend that it is not inappropriate to ask, in an equally provocative manner, whether it would be feasible to understand Ponzanesi’s intersections rather as *plateaux*, that is, as Deleuzo-Guattarian “layers”. If the theoretical and

<sup>18</sup> A passing mention in relation to Scego and Bianchi’s text can also be found in Carotenuto (2016, 216).

<sup>19</sup> For example, that individual and collective Italian contemporary postcolonial conscience might be understood as part of a rhizomatic system. This is certainly a feasible and possible hypothesis – in line with Glissant and Ashcroft –, but not practicable in the limited space of this essay.

conceptual necessity of Italian Postcolonial – which is also its specificity – is to be found somewhere comprised and/or implied within these intersections in a way that is not fully unveiled, conferring on these intersections the characteristics of rhizomatic *mille plateaux* should by default increase the exegetic potential related to the mapping of those necessities and specificities.

The geometrical abstractedness along which our argument has so far unfolded might be brought to the concreteness of literary criticism and cultural investigation by restarting from the originary definition by Deleuze and Guattari, according to whom:

[L]e rhizome connecte un point quelconque avec [L]un autre point quelconque, et chacun de ses traits ne renvoie pas nécessairement à des traits de même nature [...] Le rhizome ne se laisse ramener ni à l'Un ni au multiple. [...] Il n'est pas fait d'unités, mais de dimensions, ou plutôt de directions mouvantes. [...] [L]e rhizome se rapporte à une carte qui doit être produite, construite, toujours démontable, connectable, renversable, modifiable, à entrées et sorties multiples [...] [L]e rhizome est un système acentré, non hiérarchique et non signifiant [...]. (1980, 31-32)

This succinct definition of rhizome, we believe, can be applied to the five-point scheme elaborated by Ponzanesi in order to confer further dimensions and possibilities on the latter. It is thus useful to understand the five streams as linked to one another through rhizomatic connections. None of these connections can be considered the core matrix from which the Italian Postcolonial has come: not the studies on the colonial enterprises, which are grounded in the studies on the pre-existing European notion of race and the connected practices of self-orientalisation; not those very self-orientalising practices, the understanding of which is grounded in the understanding of the orientalising patterns traversing Europe before they traverse Italy, and not the study on contemporary migration, which cannot prescind from those of the Italian diasporas in the last couple of centuries. The Italian Postcolonial proceeds neither chronologically nor hierarchically from the stated rhizomatic connections; because each connects to all the others.

It does not seem possible, nor does it feel appropriate to postulate the existence of a centre around which all the other connections revolve in an ancillary fashion. Thus, a binary (or tree-like) hierarchical genealogy, which could allow the tracing of the complete map of those relationships, does not exist. The links between them are not univocal or unilateral, but rather heterogeneous and multifaceted. Also the chronological aspect, as the aforementioned scholars point out, seems to characterise and distinguish postcolonial Italian studies in a way that might well be thought of as “rhizomatic”. If, in the case of other colonial powers, (the beginning of) decolonisation and the beginning of migratory fluxes coincide, in the Italian case the end of the direct colonial domination “did not coincide with the beginning of the postcolonial era” (Lombardi-Diop, Romeo 2012, 1). With Deleuze and Guattari, this becomes one of those “ruptures” that yet reveal themselves as being productive of further segments of criticism, pecu-

liar to the paradigm of postcolonial Italian studies. Along these lines, the Italian context appears less “binary” and more rhizomatic than the French and the British ones, for example. This is also true from a spatial perspective: while (im)migration in the French and British contexts meant bilateral exchange exclusively or especially from/to the colonies, in the Italian case the migratory routes are characterised by a larger variety and more variously linked to colonial history.

Due to the specificities hitherto illustrated, it is proficuous to try and decipher the commonalities between different “streams” of Italian postcolonial critique along these rhizomatic connections, so as to determine where and how the streams overlap. These are connections that escape too-rigid hierarchies and that, at the same time, allow one not only to highlight the interruptions that characterize all postcolonialisms, but to also underline how, in the Italian case, those discontinuities are particularly marked and significant knowledge-producing features. The point is therefore not so much that of trying to uncover, at all costs, “strong links”. It is also not an endeavour to offer a final and definitive mapping. Instead, it is an attempt to acknowledge the fact that we are facing a “broken archive” (Chambers 2017, 6) of postcolonial fragments whose *reductio ad unum*<sup>20</sup> is as unfeasible as it is anachronistic. Acknowledging the rhizomatic nature of the Italian Postcolonial might be a way to highlight the awareness and the wish that, even though the unified archive of a “unified story” is broken and forever compromised, these cracks and fractures will feed postcolonial Italian studies for decades to come.

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<sup>20</sup> We use a Latin formula that is philological in nature quite deliberately here, with the aim of suggesting the impossibility of reconstructing in a close fashion.

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