The Writers' Assembly

The Writers' Assembly is a conversation among six prominent Italian writers of African and Asian descent across three generations, featuring Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Gabriella Ghermandi, Espérance Hakuzwimana, Djarah Kan, and Gabriella Kuruvilla. Angelica Pesarini (University of Toronto) serves as respondent and Emily Antenucci of Vassar College acts as moderator. This session was organized by Juliet Guzzetta (Michigan State University) and led by the Women's Studies Caucus and recorded on day three of the American Association for Italian Studies 2024 conference in Sorrento, Italy.

The translation and subtitling of the video were made by former Michigan State University student, Martina Chimento with the help of Claudia Karagosz, Anna Marra, and Guzzetta.

The unedited, complete dialogue is accessible here:
https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/AAIS+2024%3A+The+Writers+Assembly/1_zc6y81e4

Angelica Pesarini curated the revision, editing, and adaptation of the translation for *CIS*.

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Gabriella Ghermandi: I'm going to start with a question if that's okay?

Juliet Guzzetta: Yes, thank you Gabriella.

Ghermandi: First of all, I want to thank you for inviting me here. It has been wonderful to reconnect with people I hadn't seen in a long time, and to finally meet others who are very dear to me through their writing, even though we had never met in person before. I also want to express my gratitude because when Juliet asked me who I would like to be in conversation with, I requested that Angelica join. While it is true that she is an academic, what truly connects us is that we share a similar path of liberation from trauma; for her, through academic work; for me, through writing. In this sense, she feels like a sister to me. I wanted to ask a question inspired by a novel I am currently reading, which I felt resonates closely with our stories. It is titled *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* by Linda Hogan, a Native American author who has published several novels and essays in English. To my knowledge, none of her work has been translated into Italian, except for this one. What struck me most is how closely it reflects the experiences of those who are not "foreseen" (*prevista*) in this culture, those who, in some sense, are not supposed to exist.

[Editor's note: Reading of an excerpt from Linda Hogan, *La donna che veglia sul mondo*, ed. Paola Carini (Como: Ibis Edizioni, 2004). Original title: *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*]

> Starting from the silence of history and that of my family as a girl, I had very little of the language that I would need to make sense of my existence. Unable to use my words, I wasn't even able to know her from an internal view. The unnamed discomfort that I felt wasn't felt by just me. There were girls that cut, hit, and burned themselves to kill their own God or to battle with physical suffering. The suffering that resided inside of them. Not ever having the language to transform what was happening in a picture, in a story, or on a map,

not even to retell it to ourselves, or to historically reconstruct it, but then the words would come.

I found many similarities, even though our stories are very different, because there is one factor we share: in this part of the world, we were not foreseen. Yet we were able to move beyond this, in part through writing. I wanted to ask if any of you have had a similar experience. Have you felt this same sense of negation? And if so, when did you find the words to describe the invisibility that, in some way, we were expected to accept?

Shirin Ramzanali Fazel: I would like to start, because something struck me when you said "we weren't foreseen." For me, it was different. I believed I belonged in Italy, that I was foreseen. After all, it was Italy that came to us. In Somalia, where I was born and raised, during the Italian Trust Administration, there were no strict boundaries between Italian and Somali culture. The same was true for food, music, theater, schools, basically everything. Living in Italy, I felt I was foreseen, I was recognized not as a "white Italian," but people knew who I was. That is why it was such a shock when others failed to recognize me, not as a person, but in terms of where I came from and the fact that I spoke Italian. Some genuinely believed that in Somalia we wore skirts made of straw. They would even ask, "Do you have cars there?" From that moment on, it felt like a slap in the face, both morally and physically. I was eighteen at the time, an age when insecurity is already strong. I tried to suppress those feelings and look like others, simply to feel less invisible. It took a long time to move past that. In fact, I no longer wanted to stay in Italy. I wanted to leave and find a place where I wouldn't be bothered or seen as different. Yet the Italian language remains a part of me. It has no borders; for me, it carries no nationalist ties. This is a hurdle we all face, often painfully. I think it is somewhat the same for everyone, for those born here, those who moved here, or those who lived here for a long time. Over time, you fall in love with the language, and it becomes part of your existence. Yet you are always an "intruder." Since I started wearing a headscarf, I feel like a "double intruder" because of Islam. It's no longer only about the color of your skin, it becomes another taboo. I want to keep this brief, because there are many voices here, and I want to give space to my fellow writers. I am happy to be here with all of you, and I am grateful that this space exists.

Espérance Hakuzwimana: Thank you very much to the organizers. It sounds like a beautiful book [Gabriella,] I'll have to read it sometime. Another one to add to my list. Good afternoon to everyone. In my life, I have always chosen the books I wanted to read. Even before I began writing, I made these choices in a world where I wasn't really seen. Actually, it wasn't that I was invisible they saw me so much that I felt like a coffee bean in a cup of milk. Yet there were no words to describe me, and that emptiness drove me to find them. Once I discovered the local library in the town where I was raised, I never stopped going. My relationship with literature and research has always been profound, especially in moments of crisis, because I wanted to be free to use words to convey more than just my suffering. I have always reminded myself that through reading, words can also carry beauty, joy, light, entertainment, and happiness. For that, I am deeply grateful. But for me, it is really about kinship. I have always said that books and words are my family, my chosen family. A family that has always been there, even when I didn't know how to speak, even when I had to change languages without memory of the old one, but in some ways it remained inside me. When I began writing children's books, the real struggle became clear: entering Italian schools and seeing children who didn't have the words to speak about themselves. These kids need to see me—not me in particular—but subjectivities like mine entering their classrooms, in order to understand themselves and begin piecing together their identity. Yet Italy continues to put obstacles in their way. This is my greatest

pain. I could write twenty books, I could work in screenwriting, but until *Jus Soli* is adopted, and as long as current laws remain, these problems will persist. These children will not have the words they need, and that puts me in a difficult position and creates even more suffering.

Djarah Kan: If I think about my writing in relation to this country and my experience of it, it becomes very interesting. Some of the things that have been said here may seem disconnected, but they are closely related. For example, the question of feeling "unforeseen" and the experience of waking up one morning to realize that you are not who you thought you were. I relate strongly to this. When I was younger, I didn't perceive myself as different until someone made me notice it. I thought I was Italian, even though I partly grew up in an African family. Mine is a strange story: I was part of an Italian family for a short time before returning to my biological family. Perhaps that is where some of the misunderstanding began. For years, I believed I was Italian, or at least what I thought being Italian meant. Then one day someone told me, "You're not Italian." I replied, "What do you mean I'm not Italian? I don't understand." They said, "No, you're not Italian, for a whole bunch of reasons." At that moment, I didn't feel sadness, I felt an intense, ferocious anger. I was very, very, very, very, very mad. The difficult part was that I was embarrassed by my own anger. I felt as if I didn't have the right to feel this way. To not feel part of a country that, in retrospect, presented itself so differently to me, that was the problem. I inhabited a Black body, yet I wanted to feel part of a larger body, the body of the nation. Meanwhile, my heart knew the people who said I wasn't Italian were right. When I looked in the mirror, there was no coherence between what I felt and what I saw around me. I could not see myself reflected in the people around me. I longed to see myself reflected in white people, because they seemed happier, more successful, while Black people in my community endured much suffering. Living in a small town in southern Italy, Black families were often poor, living in the worst housing and conditions sometimes reminiscent of slavery. For a little girl, whose natural inclination was to pursue happiness, why would she want to belong to something defined by suffering and difficulty? Adding to this, people in my community would sometimes disappear. Some were repatriated. Italy does this even after someone has lived there for ten, twenty, or thirty years. Others simply gave up and saw hope in their return home. Without a sense of rootedness, and unsure where you belong, you ask yourself, "Why get mad if they're right?" You feel you shouldn't be angry. Yet, amidst this sea of mixed emotions, shame and uncertainty, I realized I had anger that needed release. In my house, we could never afford books; they were always too expensive. Poor people can't read unless the books are donated. Yet my mother, despite our poverty, cared deeply that her daughters had access to literature. The bigger the book, the happier she was to bring it home. I remember her walking in with a pile of books. I would ask, "Mom, what did you bring?" and she'd say, "A ton of heavy books! We'll put them there, and one day, when you grow up, you'll find a way to read them." At fourteen, I discovered a massive book in our home library by Malcolm X. It was huge, and I told myself I was going to read it. It was beautiful and it changed my life. For the first time, I felt I had the right to feel anger. That anger, I realized, was necessary. As the book explained, anger does not have to be destructive; it can be creative, generative. From that moment, I understood that amazing things could emerge from my anger: new life, new opportunities. It didn't mean I wanted to go around hitting and shooting people. But it was as if I had found a ghost speaking directly to me, saying: "Listen, my daughter, sweet little Black girl, born and raised in Castel Volturno. You have the possibility to no longer feel embarrassed. Embrace your anger—it can liberate you. It can create beauty. Listen to me and write." And that's when I began to write. It was Malcolm X's fault! All the books I read at the time were about dead Black people, yet these voices spoke to me far more clearly than the living. The dead would speak. These books became like oracles to be consulted: not to answer questions about the past, but about the present. I was struck by the lives of Malcolm X, my

Black classmates, my own life, the African community in Castel Volturno but also all the peripheral areas in the South. I realized how little had changed from the 1920s until now. Despite different political contexts, the living conditions and suffering of Black communities remained astonishingly similar. It was terrifying. And even today, when I write, I reflect on how Black lives change and evolve, yet still carry a persistent, tragic dimension.

Fazel: Can I add something? Djarah was talking about anger, and I think sometimes anger is necessary, not just the creative kind. It's the same anger I felt twenty years after I left Italy, when the civil war started in Somalia. I felt this anger because the war had begun. Suddenly, all the newspapers focused only on the war. They didn't talk about Somalia's colonial history or what the country was like before. It was portrayed as just another African place where Black people killed each other. It was terrible. I saw a place I knew turned into a disaster. It was so stressful, you couldn't even make phone calls, and in some places, there were no post offices. There was no way to communicate. The anxiety grew with every two-minute news update showing more and more violence. My anger was also a feeling of being let down because my mind went back twenty years: How could this happen? Twenty years ago, I came here, and they knew nothing about us, and now they still chose to ignore us. This anger turned into something constructive, because it wasn't the kind of anger Djarah spoke of, the one that makes you hurt people. Instead, everything that had been hidden came out, things from twenty years before: racism, the feeling of being ignored, as if we didn't exist. Then I started writing about Somali culture, about the beauty of Somalia and how I grew up, because even during a civil war, there are always people who work, who show solidarity. There are many beautiful, universal things we all share. But those who only watch the civil war see nothing but brutality; they think there's no humanity left. For me, that's what really sparked my writing. I also wrote about the 1990s, when immigrants began arriving, and how they were treated. They had no homes, nothing. There were places where they gathered, only to be evicted by the police. In the north, you'd see graffiti on the walls: "Black people, go away, we don't want you." Forty years have passed, and we still hear the same things today. It's hard. When I went to the U.S., to New York City, seeing the skyscrapers and everything at first was amazing. But after living there, I realized that racism existed even there, Rodney King was beaten [by the police]. In the end, history repeats itself, as if we never learn from the past. These topics keep coming up, and that's such a shame. I see younger generations still talking about the same issues we thought we'd overcome, especially now that Italy has become a multireligious and multicultural place. It's sad that innocent young people still have to think about these things. This also led me to go to England. There, you feel invisible—but in a good way—because there are so many different communities. There's no feeling of alienation, and that makes you feel good. But there's always this kind of pain. I ask myself, "Is Italy also my home?" I don't know, because I can't write in Somali. When I left, Somali wasn't yet a written language, so when it comes to my deepest feelings, I write in Italian. At home, we also spoke Italian. I think about this new generation's desire to leave Italy, but you can't just leave a mother, even an adoptive one. In the end, Italy is that for us. Instead of saying, "Okay, I'm going, I'll find somewhere else and feel better," there's always this strong connection with Italy. It's a shame that nobody understands it. When people see someone with darker skin or a headscarf, they say, "You're not Italian." But who is truly Italian? Who are the real Italians? When I first lived in Italy, in Novara, we were one of the first brown families. At first, people were kind; they'd say, "What a beautiful girl," and touch my child, which bothered me: "Please don't touch my daughter without asking, she's just a little girl." Then I realized there was also racism among Italians themselves. Some expressions suggested that not all Italians were considered truly Italian. You end up learning a lot living here. Now we've moved past the north–south divide, but we've created new groups to blame. There's always this urge to build stereotypes or hatred toward

someone, instead of simply living peacefully and building something beautiful together. Even so-called "migrant literature," I think that it's a type of enrichment that provides with new expressions and ideas. Something that makes a place stronger, not weaker.

Ubah Cristina Ali Farah: We can say that you were the first to write about this concept, the idea that you knew everything about Italy, but Italy knew nothing about you. This dynamic really reveals the kind of relationship that exists, for example, between the master and the slave. As [source inaudible] once said, "I knew everything about white people, but they knew nothing about me." So, the question becomes: how do we counterbalance this paradigm, especially in relation to women? How do we use this strength, this knowledge, and the language that we have the privilege to know? Earlier, Gabri, you said that we weren't expected. I also think that, at a certain point—or in a certain sense—there's a story, as Shirin was saying, about Somalia in relation to violence and colonization. Yet, if it weren't for that story, we wouldn't exist. We are, in a way, the fruit of that story. So, what do we do with this existence, this presence, now that we are here?

Gabriella Kuruvilla: When you read that piece [Gabriella Ghermandi], I thought about how, when it comes to migration or skin color, I often feel like an outsider, in the sense that I don't fit into any category. It depends on how much sun I get. Right now, my skin is beige. I can be very dark, or I can be Milan gray. I destabilize people's gaze. I wrote a short story for children about this, titled "This Isn't the Babysitter." It takes place in August in Liguria, when I was very dark and had braids. I was walking with my child—white, blond, blue-eyed—and all the babysitters around us kept smiling at me. Then an older woman assumed I was his babysitter. My son didn't correct her but kept on calling me "Mamma." Genius! It's about how others see you and how you see yourself, as Djarah was saying. I don't see myself as beige, gray, or white. Fundamentally, I don't even see myself as a woman, partly because I have this male trait of not being able to do two things at once [laughs]. And then there's my voice. When my son was younger, people would call and ask to speak to his mother. I'd answer, and they'd say, "Is this the grandpa? Or the dad?" "No." So, based on my voice, they thought I was not only a man, but an old man. It all depends on the situation, because sometimes I feel like I'm fourteen, which, honestly, is the age that best represents me. And then came COVID, and we all kind of got stuck at fourteen. But of course, I can also feel old. This helps me in my writing. One of the most beautiful compliments I ever received came from [editor's note: Senegalese Italian writer] Pap Khouma, about a story I wrote concerning a Senegalese man. He told me, "When I read it, I thought it had been written by a Senegalese man." That was one of the best compliments, because it meant I was able to give voice to someone else. Earlier, something was said that made me think of a book I'm reading now, *The Unit*, by a Swedish author [editor's note: Ninni Holmqvist]. The story is about "useless people," unwanted individuals trapped in a kind of cage inside a building. They are all over fifty, both men and women. The color of their skin doesn't matter; what matters is that they have no children, no partners, and many of them once dared to pursue creative work. At fifty, they're considered useless because they have no family to care for and no traditional social role: no mothers, fathers, children, or employees. They're confined in this place and subjected to physical and psychological tests. It has nothing to do with skin color. As I said this morning during an interview for [editor's note: the radio program] *Eccellenze Afrodiscendenti* ("Afrodescendant Excellence"), I am Italian Indian: India is not in Africa. Also, I would have a lot to say about that word "excellence." We need to return to the individual, and that's what I try to do. My first novel was labeled as "migrant literature," but I didn't think that was what I'd written. Yes, it was a novel about immigration—there was an Italian mother and an Indian father—but I thought I had written a story about bulimia. That was the focus. Yet, it ended up being labeled not only as "migrant literature" but also as a

comedy. The title was *Media chiara e noccioline*, and in the bookstore I found it shelved next to Luciana Littizzetto's *Sola come un gambo di sedano*, I suppose for culinary reasons. If there was any comedy in my book, it was on a very different level. Earlier we were talking about "migrant literature." There is literature, period. You might deal with migration, and of course you can't ignore it in a contemporary novel or, in my case, in a painting that reflects the present—migration is part of it. But the idea that migrants or children of migrants must write about it, that's something the publishers need, to fit it neatly into a box, to sell it, to label it. As for me, I'm called a "migrant writer" and a "migrant painter," even though I've never even done an Erasmus abroad. I was born and raised in Milan and have never moved away. The one who migrated was my father. So yes, I can be sensitive to the theme—and I am—but it's not as if we, as migrants or children of migrants, are the only ones entitled to speak about it. I feel like I still haven't fully answered the question, but the words in my first novel, *Media chiara e noccioline*, came from a kind of suffering at work. I expressed my anger through a symptom that passed through the body. I started therapy with [editor's note: Massimo] Recalcati, and that was the result. And if anyone here follows him, beware: there are side effects. I decided to take the language that came from therapy and transform it into literary language. I didn't intend to write a diary, or a comic book, or a "migrant" book. I'm also the daughter of a feminist activist so, for me, the personal is political. It's important to transform, which isn't always possible, but at least to have the instinct to do so. Otherwise, what's the point of what we write? What would be the point if it were just a diary? As Zanko, an Italian Syrian rapper, says: it's important, in our own way, through the narration of migration in rap, painting, or writing, to leave a mark on the canvas, like one of [editor's note: Lucio] Fontana's cuts. It overturns the concept. But it's our mark, along with those of others, that allows for multiple narratives and ensures there isn't just one voice.

Ghermandi: Can I respond to the point about the fact that we are the fruit of that story? It's true, we are the result of that story, and that's why we need to talk about it. I have to say, I'm loving this novel [editor's note: *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*]. I read five pages and then think about it all day. There's a moment in the book when the author writes that one night, when her husband came to bed, she told him, "In this bed, there are eight of us." Then she reflects on it, saying that it's true: we never really sleep alone, because we are connected to our stories, to the ones that came before us, to our families' histories. So yes, we are the result of this story, of this confrontation. While the Italian part resonated deeply, all the pain from the Ethiopian-Eritrean side was never carried forward; it was never told. I have to say, I completely absorbed that pain from my mother. I can't help but be obsessed with talking about it. But I also recognize that this is both my obsession and my limit as a writer, as a storyteller, as an artist, as a musician. I don't know how to free myself from it. I learned that my mother had been affected by the racial laws. Even after the end of Italian colonization and up until 1952, under the British protectorate, there were still nets on the buses separating people: Black people in the back, white people in the front. In Asmara, there was a fenced-off area called *Campo Cintato*, where Eritreans weren't allowed to enter, and there was an Eritrean-only neighborhood that you could reach only by taking bus line number 4. There were separate entrances to the movie theaters. My mother attended a school run by nuns where, every day, the girls were shown the cover of *The Defense of the Race*, edited by Giorgio Almirante, who later became a leading figure in the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI). On one of the covers, there were a white hand and a Black hand reaching toward each other, and between them a grey flower that was dying. So yes, unfortunately, I know this is my limit, but I can't avoid talking about it. I have a friend from Senegal who tells me she always goes to demonstrations because, if she doesn't go, she doesn't know who will take her place. I feel the same way. I can't help but be there.

Fazel: Can I add something? You mentioned your mother's experience with racism. For me, it was different. I didn't see racism in Somalia. In the 1950s, during the Italian Trusteeship, there was actually a great sense of freedom. It wasn't like what you described, there weren't separate movie, theaters or buses. My anger came later, when I saw racism here in Italy. My writing has always been a kind of literature that both protests and reminds people of a historical period that Italians have largely forgotten. It's about bringing that story back to light and saying: "Look, it's not as if we just arrived now. You came first. So it's not a simple exchange—you came to us first, and now we're coming to visit you, like two friends who take turns inviting each other to dinner. You have to understand that this story is also your story, so you can't ignore us." I always feel this need to speak up when I see injustice or suffering, whether through a poem or prose. Lately, I've also written about Islam and Islamophobia, because we simply couldn't bear the silence anymore. It had become as if Islam didn't even belong to Europe, which is not true. Islam has always been part of Europe: in Spain, in Sicily. We can't deny these real historical ties, because without them we wouldn't even be here. We are the result of them. For me, writing has always been a way to reverse that narrative. I found out I was "African" only later. Before that, I was Somali—Somali-Pakistani—but I became "African" when I left for Italy. Suddenly, we were all labeled as "Africans," all put into one group, with no distinctions, no nuances. But Africa isn't like that. It's made up of countless languages, religions, and worlds. People sometimes talk about Africa as if it were a single country. They ask, "Do you speak African?" and I answer, "No, African, I do not speak it." My writing comes from this different kind of suffering, from the urge to restore complexity, to say: we are not a single story. Who do I pass the microphone to?

Hakuzwimana: It's been truly beautiful for me to listen. I can feel the gazes, the years, that have allowed so many things to happen and take shape. One thing I know is that I want to write everything. For me, everything comes down to age and genre, because writing, as the result of the freedom it has given me through the books I've read, must coincide with freedom. Unfortunately, in the city where I live, where my body lives— a body that is political—every time I step out the front door, that freedom disappears. I am not free. Earlier I mentioned that there have been moments in my life when I've had to choose whether I simply wanted to be a twenty-year-old girl or a Black person. And when I didn't know which to choose, I stayed home and read. That was my solution, and it still is, whenever possible. When I talk about literature, when I think about literature, I want the freedom to write whatever I want. So far, I've only been able to do that through children's books. Lately, though, I've been reflecting on an important moment in my life: in July I'll be returning to Rwanda for the first time in thirty years, the country I left because of the genocide that brought me to Italy. A genocide that severed connections and forced me to lose so much. If there is something deeply tied to my relationship with writing, it's that I have never written about Rwanda, or even thought about writing about it. I remember when I was younger and we first got a computer at home, I searched for "Rwanda." The images that appeared were so violent that I decided I wanted nothing to do with it. There's a process we all go through with our own stories, a process of dealing with the places of suffering, and the pain we carry. For me, that distance began as rejection, but over time it became a form of protection or/and respect. Something the publishing world doesn't always have. That's why I'm trying to protect this experience. In fact, my editors don't even know about this trip, because it has to remain something that belongs only to me. When I presented my first novel project at the writing school I attended, the Holden School, and met with professionals, they weren't interested in my novel. They were interested in my personal story. That was incredibly sad. I already had to fight with the school, saying: "Let's not write about my biography," because I wanted the focus to be on what *I* had written, what *I*

had built over the past two years, years in which I invested not only money, but also my mind and my emotions. Yet every professional I met, every publishing house—Feltrinelli, Bompiani—said the same thing: "So, you're going to write a book about the genocide?" That was my first real contact with the publishing world, and it was terrifying. One of the things I've been reflecting on, and that I'd like to ask all of you, is this: What am I willing to give to literature, and what am I not willing to give? I think about this constantly because I know my own writing ability. I know I can write about many things. I love expressing deep emotions through words. I love understanding things, processing them, and then transforming them into language. But I also know there are things I am not willing to give. I wonder if you all struggle with this too. And something even harder to recognize is how much my white side—which exists, and which I've had to come to terms with—surfaces every day and inevitably enters into my writing.

Farah: I wanted to ask something about what you said, this idea you mentioned about the publishing world and what it asks of you, what it asks you to represent. I guess for those of you who belong to a different generation than ours, what do you think about that? What are the underlying risks are in this kind of dynamic? And how do we protect ourselves from it?

Kan: I have a weird relationship with the Italian publishing industry, in the sense that I tend to do what I want, because I believe I have that right. Many times, I've been asked: "Why don't you write an interesting story about your trauma? Or something more combative? Why don't you write more political stories, since it's clear you're a political writer, that you write about political things?" For me, this has never been a problem, because literature is political. Even the most romantic novels, those that tell grand love stories, contain political elements if you look closely enough. We are political beings. Our relationships are shaped by secret, well-established rule, sometimes we're aware of them, sometimes we're not. But we are not delicate flowers acting at random, unaware of our motives. We can recognize the patterns that underlie our behavior: what we accept and what we refuse, often profoundly and unconsciously. At times, we may even wonder why we hesitate before certain things. Let me give an example.
A friend told me recently:
"You know, I can't stand this girl—she's so annoying."
I asked why.
She replied, "Because her breasts are always out."
I said, "Excuse me, but what problem do you have with her breasts?"
She answered, "I find her vulgar."
So I asked, "In what sense?"
She said, "Because I think a woman shouldn't present herself that way. A woman should maintain a certain self-image that allows her to be on the same level when speaking to a man. If your breasts are out, a man may respect you, but he won't listen to you."
This reaction, this discomfort she felt toward that woman, was born of a patriarchal mindset. If you think you must cover up, chastise, or punish your body so that a man will listen to you, you are already submitting to an unequal power dynamic. Whether naked or completely covered, a person should be heard. The concept of vulgarity is, in fact, a political one. It is not simply a feeling or a casual way of seeing things. This famous "vulgarity" has patriarchal roots. As Espérance said, we inhabit political bodies. Each time we engage with publishing houses that are entirely white, whose ways of interacting are often violent—and this must be pointed out—it becomes difficult to navigate those relationships. If we do not recognize our right to refuse certain things, we become vulnerable to their demands. Women, in general, are rarely granted the right to refuse. When a woman says no, she is often labeled as a bitch or annoying. So, imagine us. We are Black, and we are women. We are also perceived as arrogant when we

decline to seize what they call "amazing opportunities" to say what they want us to say. "Okay, you're Black. I want you to write a book where you complain, where you say that we white Italians are mean, and you don't even want to take this chance to complain? You're so ungrateful!" I can't count the number of times I've argued with people who accused me of being ungrateful because I refused to take part in projects that, to me, had no political value. For me, writing political literature is a profoundly dignified act. I'll say it again: if it weren't for Malcolm X, I'd probably be in Castel Volturno crying, or more likely, in jail. Actually, definitely in jail. I wouldn't be crying. Maybe. The way publishing houses understand "political writing" often diminishes the value of our work. Many see our work simply as a product to sell, and they push us to keep producing until nothing is left of us. They work us to exhaustion. [Pointing at Espérance] She is my friend, we've known each other for years. I have never asked her about her childhood or to tell me about her past. I've approached her with respect and gentleness, because I am a human being. So, imagine what it means when someone comes to you and says: "I'll give you money and visibility in exchange for your trauma."

Hakuzwimana: And sometimes, it isn't even about money. This past April, during the thirty-year memorial for the Rwandan genocide, a figure from RAI Radio Tre contacted me, saying she wanted to collect testimonies about the genocide. I told her I didn't have testimonies, only my own personal reflections. She responded that she would send me something to read. The script she sent, however, required me to read lines that interpreted the voices of the executioners of the Rwandan genocide. I would have had to narrate what was broadcast by Rwandan radio stations at that time. I remember forwarding this email to Djarah and Oiza, because we have this [WhatsApp] chat going on for years. I was in such disbelief because human decency—something I assume of everyone—has no fixed boundaries when it comes to trauma. My first encounter with the publishing industry was at the Holden School, where I already had to go into some debt to be able to pay $20,000 tuition for two years of classes, yet it was the only space to meet professionals in the field. And the approach of these professionals was similar. Five years passed in which I could not dedicate myself fully to writing books because I needed to pay rent, buy food, pay for my pads. Thanks to Igiaba Scego, I eventually found a literary agent who organized a literary auction, which allowed publishing companies to take more interest in my work. Yet, during every meeting with the five main publishers, the same pattern persisted: I had to tick the checkbox "new Black voice." That was it. Bompiani discussed with me Roberto Saviano's new book series and then commented: "We read your manuscript. We would like it to be a bit more political." Feltrinelli was the same. The only publisher who gave me genuine hope, and whom I chose as my favorite, was Einaudi. They made it clear that they valued not just the book, but me as an author. When someone acknowledges that, then it means they truly see your work. The problem, as Djarah noted, is entering a publishing house where everyone is white. This isn't merely about skin color; it's about preparedness for the work. The person handling your story, the person designing the cover, the person editing your language choices—all are white. And these same people often advise you to change your work without understanding the reasoning behind your choices: "It might be better to add translations, so people will understand," when you put words in foreign languages to make the Italian reader aware that there are a variety of languages in this country and that these are part of our lived experience. There are white guards outside the publishing houses who stop you when you go to deliver your drafts and ask you: "Who are you?" I often felt embarrassed to identify myself as an author. Why are you stopping me? Because my body is seen as political. Writing a book is exhausting because of these compromises, and it doesn't end there. We were talking about it last night. When you publish, what do you become? A writer? No. You become a Black person who wrote their story. It took me six years to complete my novel: six years of separating my personal experience from the story I wanted to tell. Six years after which, during interviews,

people would ask me: “Shall we do it in Italian, do you understand?” Six years where my work was questioned: “Where should we categorize your book, foreign literature?” Six years where the public would ask: “What’s your relationship with your adoptive mother now?” and I would respond: “But I just wrote a book.” Of course, I published with an important press, in the same series as that of my favorite author, Cesare Pavese. But consider the effort required: I did the editing with my editor and I had to offer training about my work; no one paid me for educating others, but I did it anyway. Entering the publishing world as a novice, without money, is profoundly challenging. The economic, social, and cultural imbalances are extreme. I did the editing at Giulio Einaudi’s desk. The pressure was rather high. They would ask, “How about we remove this word?” even if that word was fundamental. The imbalance makes it difficult to make your story matter, to ensure that your professional experience is recognized even before your personal experience. The publishing world puts you at a disadvantage from the start. There are numerous intersecting barriers, and when you attempt to assert your value or explain your work, it often goes unrecognized. I interrupted my book tour because I could no longer bear being treated as a character rather than a writer. When I tried to explain this, it was not understood. Stories are important, but one must find a point of contact to convey that. For me, the ability to write is invaluable, but you also need to protect yourself and the publishing world does not yet know how to preserve you. They want you, but they do not see you.

Fazel: I want to add something about the idea of being labeled “ungrateful.” For example, in a debate about Islam in Italy, if a woman wearing a veil speaks openly and tries to explain her perspective, people often have no way to respond. The joke they make is: “You can talk like this now because you’re in Italy, if you were in your country, you couldn’t do that.” They try to silence you with this logic, based on a simplistic, monolithic idea of the Islamic world—which doesn’t exist. There are many interpretations of Islam, yet the conversation is shut down. It’s very frustrating to realize that I can’t even have a voice or a constructive discussion. Instead, you’re silenced, and eventually you stop attending these debates because you become a puppet, someone they don’t want to listen to because their preconceived idea is already fixed. In fact, for my last book, someone even accused me of “proselytism.” It’s absurd. This notion of being “ungrateful” isn’t limited to the publishing industry; it appears in many situations. “You’re lucky because you’ve lived here, you’re privileged.” Wow, okay, thanks…

Ghermandi: I’d like to ask another question, which I want to direct to Gabriella, though it may also indirectly concern the others. From my readings, there’s one text I particularly like by the conductor Daniel Barenboim, *Music Wakes Up the World*. In its prelude, he writes [editor’s note: note Italian translation]:

> The opening of a concert enjoys more privileges than the beginning of a book. In respect to words, you could say that sound itself is privileged. A book is composed of the same words we use every day to explain, describe, ask, argue, implore, insult, tell the truth, and lie. Our thoughts take the form of words, so words on the written page must compete with the words already in our minds. Music allows a world much broader in its associations, by virtue of its ambivalent nature. It exists in the world, yet also outside of it.

When I read this, I thought of you and painting. I also thought of us and the multilingual forms we use in our writing, which are like different musical arrangements. I wanted to ask you [Gabriella Kuruvilla]: what is your relationship with painting, with color? Do you see it like a conductor ensuring that all instruments are in tune before a concert begins?

Kuruvilla: Before discussing my relationship with painting, I want to go back to literature, specifically what's labeled as "migrant literature." As I said before, it's a box. Just like the honey section at a grocery store, there's a "migrant literature" section, but it's there to sell you on it. My last novel, that is not published yet, talks about everything: being a daughter, being a mother, relationships with men, private experiences that I hope resonate with the public. Yet people told me "more India." I'm sorry, but what the fuck does India have to do with it? Yes, it mixes in with the father figure and relationships with men, sure. India, as a country, cannot be called feminist, ok; there is the trauma related to the father figure and how that affects relationships with men. Ok. But let's not go there again. I understand that my last name is Kuruvilla although, when people see it, they don't think "Indian," but rather someone from Napoli with an "exotic" part. Returning to your question: words matter. Even what we're discussing here arises from anger, but also from urgency. Then you must find the expression that communicates this to another person through writing. Writing, unlike orality, is something we can control. I spend a lot of time reading and rereading, making sure the internal word, the one I don't know yet, coincides exactly with what I think and want to say. It's not easy. Then comes all the work on punctuation. My mom once asked, "Is this use of commas a stylistic choice or a nervous tick?" and I said, "It's a stylistic choice." For me, music is fundamental: reggae, hip-hop. These are types of cultural expression. In dance, painting, even in literature, you can hear reggae and hip-hop too: when you write about the street, when you adopt a metropolitan, syncopated rhythm. That music resonates within me, and when I write, I try to make it resonate on the page as well. As for painting, every painting is a story. A painting is an iconographic synthesis of thought, emotion, and narration. Sometimes words exist to describe them, but in my head the words already have an image, and that is what I paint. In my last art show, Moleskine notebooks with written stories were displayed near the canvases, and then those stories were represented through the drawings and colors. Painting, in a way, bridges worlds. For me, the bridge between Italy and India has many linguistic holes: I don't know English, Hindi, or Malayalam, yet I reproduce elements of Hindi and Malayalam on my canvases. When I went to India with my mother, I took some pictures and then reworked them. I transformed the images through painting and writing, giving them back in a new form, reflecting my experience and relationship with India with paintings and the relationship between the Italy and India.

Ghermandi: I wanted to comment on something you said, which finds me in the opposite position.

Kuruvilla: That's great!

Ghermandi: The idea that writing is uncontrollable in comparison to orality.

Kuruvilla: No, writing requires work. Talking with someone is different from writing them a letter. You have much more control because it's a damn monologue! [they laugh].

Ghermandi: I am very attached to orality. For me, sitting and listening to stories is deeply important. I think back to when I worked at the Open University in the U.K., where they did something quite particular. Their focus was on researching the sediments of the same microbes that their rover had found on Mars. Essentially, it was an attempt to analyze whether life could exist on Mars. One of the two locations they were studying was in Ethiopia, the Dankalia Rift, in the Afar region. It lies 260 meters below sea level, with the Earth's crust fully exposed, lakes of sulfur, lava fields, and other extreme conditions. They had asked me to oversee the cultural

aspect because the person in charge, Alessandra Marino, to whom I am deeply connected, cared greatly about cultural respect. Through some friends, I got in contact with representatives of the local community. I have to say, I really love the Afar people; they are my favorite population on Earth because they do not claim ownership of the land where they live. They consider themselves the owners of the animals, but not of the land. In terms of survival, they practice *dagu*. *Dagu* is the moment in which when you meet someone, we sit down and exchange everything we have seen along our respective paths. It's a way of living: sharing information about water sources, pastures, or other resources. What's fascinating is that this is a completely oral culture; there is nothing written down. One might think, "Wow, very romantic." But it requires extraordinary skills. For example, if someone is sued, the judge must be able to recount everything exactly as the lawyers presented it, without forgetting a single comma. I remember speaking with the political representative at the time, who later became a spiritual leader and, unfortunately, passed away a couple of years ago. He told me: "You all are so comfortable in the West. You put everything you know into a book, leave it in the library, and consider it done. We, on the other hand, carry everything we know within us."

Response by Angelica Pesarini

First of all, thank you so much for organizing this panel and for the invitation. It was such an honor and privilege to listen to all of you here, in this room, speaking and sharing your stories. I was in awe. It's a difficult task to add something after everything that has been said; you have already said so much! I wrote down some notes, and I will try to weave them together with my own experiences in this canvas that connects all of our stories. One of the key words that emerged in your talks was certainly *trauma*. You began with that, Gabriella [Ghermandi], you said "we are trying to liberate ourselves from trauma." And it's true that our stories are very connected. You asked, "How did you find the words to tell this trauma?" A trauma that, very often, remains invisible until later in life, when certain symptoms emerge, revealing the pain and suffering that has been passed down to us. One of the traumas you mentioned was the feeling of not being foreseen, or of realizing that you are not what you thought you were, something that Djarah described. This, too, was a formative experience for me. I remember my own childhood in the Bassa Padana. I had a lovely childhood, but I could see color. I remember elderly women stopping me, asking where I came from or why I spoke such good Italian. "Where do you come from?" is a question loaded with meaning. It is not an easy question to answer, not even for an adult, because behind it lies an entire history. So, when I was asked, as a six-, seven-, or eight-year-old child, "Where are you from?" and I replied, "Rome," the inevitable follow-up was: "No, where are you *really* from?" That adverb—*really*—has haunted me for a long time because I couldn't understand what they wanted to hear from me.

The words. The words to speak that trauma. I began doing what I do because I couldn't find the words. I couldn't name certain experiences. I wasn't aware of the racialization and eroticization of my body. I didn't know that my body was a living archive, carrying a colonial history. When I entered the institution of knowledge, in my case the University of Rome "La Sapienza," where I studied anthropology for five years, I mainly studied dead white men. I didn't know women could be anthropologists. I didn't know anthropology could be radical. After five years, I decided to leave the discipline because it made me nauseous. I couldn't find the language or frameworks I needed—Black Studies, Black Feminist Epistemologies, Gender Studies—with the tools that would have helped me understand my own identity. These were all missing pieces. So, like Alice Walker, I felt the urge to write the things I *should* have been able to read but weren't there. I loved it when Djarah talked about Malcolm X and said she had found "someone else's ghost." I think these ghosts are, in truth, the voices of our ancestors. Ancestors we may never have met, but on whose shoulders we sit. We are here because

someone carried us here. Some of us, for many reasons, don't know our ancestors; we can only go back a few generations, if we're lucky. But those voices are still with us. What we are trying to do, in a way, is to excavate those voices, to recover those stories. They are counter-stories: stories of resistance, stories of rage and ferocity. "The dead would speak. They were oracles to be consulted." I love quoting you, Djarah, because what you say is so quotable! It's true though: the dead speak. Sometimes we had to find our voices through books. It was the same for me. I read endlessly, because every time I stepped outside, especially as a teenager, I was confronted with the gaze of others, with how they saw me. Adolescence was not a good time for me. I became acutely aware of my body and of the lack of beauty, respect, and meaning assigned to it. I had to learn to love myself: but how can you love what you cannot even imagine?

The language. All of us write in Italian, and some of us do not speak the mother's language, a language that was quite literally severed from us. [Gabriella Ghermandi], you spoke about your mother; I think about my exchanges with my grandmother. Without her words, I would not know about my great-grandmother, a Somali woman who had a child with a fascist who then disappeared. When she died, her child (who was to become my grandmother) was placed in a Catholic institution marked by violence, where little girls were called "whores," like their African mothers. These are the stories I have collected from women now in their eighties that still remember, with painful clarity, the abuse they suffered as six- and seven-year-old children. But where are their stories? Where are their voices? They do not appear in Italian history textbooks. So I began searching for them, going into their homes to record their testimonies. My oldest respondent was born in 1916. When I interviewed her in a hospice in Asmara—blind in one eye and hard of hearing—she became for me that living history book I had never read. She told me: "We were the shame of the Empire."

We have been given this language, Italian. I would love to speak Tigrinya or Somali, but mine is a mutilated tongue. I do not possess those words, so I must use the language of the father, a language imposed upon us. In the Catholic institutions where my grandmother grew up, speaking the mother's tongue was brutally punished. For us, then, speaking, writing, and thinking in Italian is not a neutral act. We have to reckon with the legacy of this language. Yet it is also a language of resistance, one we can use against the colonizer to produce counter-narratives and stories of defiance. I was thinking about what you said [Gabriella Kuruvilla] regarding gender binaries and the heteronormativity of the language inscribed on the colonial and gendered body. Women's bodies are often treated as surfaces onto which meanings are imposed, without recognizing their agency in choosing how to use those bodies. I think of the work of Ruth Iyob, an Eritrean historian based in the United States; she wrote something that deeply struck me about the *madama*, the so-called "whore." In reality, some of these women used the money they earned from their relationships with Italian men to open taverns and then, in the basements of those taverns, they hosted clandestine anti-colonial meetings. This is the power of women, and yet these stories are missing. When you enter the colonial archives, Black women seem not to exist. The children placed in Catholic institutions appear to emerge from nowhere. Reading the documents, I found only initials, adjectives, collective nouns such as *l'indigena*, *l'africana*, while abundant information is given about the Italian fathers. To find the women, you must read between the lines. They appear invisible, yet they are not; they appear inaudible, yet their voices demand to be heard.

"I would inhabit a Black body, but I wanted to be part of a bigger body, the body of the nation. I couldn't mirror myself. Being Black meant to suffer." I think this is an experience we share. There is a red thread connecting our lives, and inhabiting a Black body is one of those threads. The Black body is political, as [Espérance] said: a body that is scrutinized, dissected, and returned to us distorted through the white gaze, as Frantz Fanon described it. We must therefore perform maneuvers of readjustment and reparation, not only of our bodies but also of our souls.

"Eight of us would sleep in this bed." I love that image, not only as a metaphor for relational intimacy, but also as a reminder that we are never truly alone. Sometimes we may feel extremely lonely, but we are not alone, we carry the presence of those who came before us. Someone spoke for us, someone was killed, someone was tortured or enslaved so that we might be here. Yesterday we watched the documentary "The Black Italian Renaissance," and I thought about Lucia's story. A Black couple, enslaved in fifteenth-century Florence, gave their baby girl, Lucia, to the *Istituto degli Innocenti* so that she might grow up free. They leave her there so she can be free. I think of Lucia as one of our sisters from the 1400s. Using Saidiya Hartman's method of critical fabulation, I like to imagine what became of her. Perhaps she left the orphanage, perhaps she married a young Florentine and had children. And their children had children. These are our stories. We come from them. Although they are often difficult, almost impossible to trace, these stories do exist. What we are doing here, each in our own way, is piecing together the missing fragments of a vast, complex history, a shared canvas on which our bodies may seem invisible. But we are here because we are part of this story.

Afterword: Practices in Co-Creation

Juliet Guzzetta

Following the above transcript of the dynamic conversation at the Writers' Assembly at the annual conference of the American Association for Italian Studies (AAIS) in Sorrento in 2024, I would like to offer a narrative blueprint of how it came to be. For the future and some former administrators who might read this, and of course the colleagues who have already engaged in or who will endeavor similar undertakings, I want to emphasize the long sense of time, the collaboration, and the serendipity involved in these efforts. Many forces pull together the kinds of meaningful encounters like the one we shared at the Writers' Assembly, and that type of magnetism comes from openness, commitment, and collaboration.

There are two main threads of thought and experience that converged to create the possibility for the Writers' Assembly 2024. Three or four years prior, circa 2020–2021, when the deep isolation of the pandemic and, in my case, mothering very young children, melded days into weeks into months with little distinction, I found myself in search of a contemporary and updated understanding of Italian feminism. I contacted Graziella Parati, one of the most prominent scholars of several facets of contemporary Italian culture including feminism, and asked her to think through this with me. Together we decided to ask other colleagues and writers, eventually forming a round table for AAIS's annual conference in 2021, which was held virtually. The session was so successful—a win for Italian feminism!—with panelists and attendees contributing so enthusiastically, that we adjourned when our allotted time terminated only to resume on a separate zoom channel so that we could keep talking, as we might have done over a coffee after spilling out of an in-person meeting. When we ran the session again at the conference in Bologna in 2022, it was clear that we needed to create a volume from these conversations; one of the first pieces that we received was from a then-graduate student named Emily Antennucci, who wrote about Espérance Hakuzwimana's breakout book *E poi basta: manifesto di una donna nera italiana.*

Intrigued by Antennucci's analysis, I sought out Hakuzwimana's book on my own and was inspired by the directness of her tight yet intimate prose. I was drawn to her experimental genre-pushing style. And I deeply admired her frank clear tone. When I discovered that she lived in Turin where I was then on sabbatical (now we're in 2023), I went to a reading of her newly released *Tutta intera* (2022) and was moved by the same characteristics in her prose, there before me, embodied: honest, kind, serious, vulnerable. When we later met for breakfast, chatting for over two hours about reading, writing, and living, she very casually mentioned her

desire to spend more time with the authors that she admired. She also agreed to write a short piece for the volume I was co-editing with Parati.

Work, projects, life wore on. Graziella introduced me to the critically acclaimed Ubah Cristina Ali Farah and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel over email as we also solicited their work for our volume. Her discipline-shifting scholarship on and with Farah, Fazel, and many other Afro- and Asian-descendent Italian authors has contributed to their becoming household names in Italian studies programs, in which students have marveled at and learned from their stories for several decades now, creating a base for the vision that Espérance had. Her comment about engaging with her interlocutors had lingered with me. In my position as co-president for the Women's Studies Caucus (WSC) for AAIS, and thanks to my professional relationship with Ubah and Shirin, WSC colleagues Anna Marra, Claudia Karagoz and I were able to present a vision for a future encounter to the association's executive committee, with Ellen Nerenberg at the helm. Despite the full schedule of events already in motion for the conference, they made every effort, taking on extra labor, to make sure this event could happen.

One aspect that Shirin, Ubah, and Espérance brought with them was generational breadth, a key tenet of feminism, and we wanted to maintain that at the gathering. As organizers, we had a certain privilege, but we wanted to transfer what we could to the authors given that it was one of them who had the initial vision. We decided to ask them with whom they would like to be in conversation, rather than choose the make-up of the group. Some unknowingly suggested the same person. There were others that I contacted who were enthusiastic but ultimately had to decline. And there were a few individuals that those we had already invited thought would not gel well with the group. Not everyone knew each other beforehand, but there were also some close friendships. Dynamic was a careful consideration, in which we were led by the authors.

We also wanted the writers to shape the contours of their conversation. This proved to be one of the trickier goals because—only fairly—they also wanted a guide. "What do you want us to talk about?" they would ask. "Whatever you would like," we would answer. What does it mean and look like to find new forms of exchange, and to design those together? There was no model for this conversation, which was performative, since it was before an audience of scholars and students, as well as intimate, since the first part was closed and unmoderated. Obviously, the writers are all Italian women, and all Afro- or Asian-descendent, but we recognized them in this setting first as writers. Our idea was that they could choose the extent to which they would talk about race and gender, if at all.

Finally, we wanted to be able to give the authors a meaningful honorarium and fully fund their travel and lodging, which meant aggressive fundraising by the WSC representatives. A positive note was that the chair of my English department at Michigan State University, where my majority appointment is, had the idea to film the event and wagered an increase in the funding he could offer if I could make such arrangements. This not only gave me incentive and leverage as I sought more funding resources across my campus, but meant that the encounter could be available as archival material via our library for students and—as a public institution—for anyone worldwide (it is the first hit when googling "writers assembly Sorrento"). So even after the event there were many weeks of work in the translation and subtitling of the video by a former MSU student, Martina Chimento, with supervision by Claudia, Anna, and me. The record here in *California Italian Studies* is yet another iteration of collaboration towards shared goals.

I would like to conclude with a future vision for anyone to run with, or for those who might want to think together across our institutions and organizations: a multiday Writers' Assembly that maintains some of the goals above, executes them even better, and involves our students. Could there be a more public event at such a gathering with interested community members? Could there be a more private event too, in which the writers can meet away from an audience?

The writers that we featured are writers who many of us admire and whose work we teach and translate. We recognize how much they have given us with their skills. What can we do to nourish their work, nourish our students, and nourish our own intellectual pursuits, as we all strive together to create the kinds of societies which we are proud to call home?