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Kaha Mohamed Aden, *Fra-intendimenti* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2010), 144 pp., ISBN 978-88-7452-232-3, 13 euro

*Reviewed by* **Alessandra Marino**

*Fra-intendimenti* is Kaha Mohamed Aden's first, brilliant collection of short stories. For this young Italian and Somali author, who lives in Pavia and works as an intercultural mediator, writing is both triggered by autobiography and rooted in the experience of connecting cultures and migrant communities through the task of translation. With its very title, *Fra-intendimenti* introduces the central theme of the precariousness of intercultural communication as a border practice. The deconstruction of the Italian word *fraintendimenti*, literally meaning "misunderstandings", refers both to the migrants' condition of living in-between (*fra*) languages and discourses (*intendimenti*), and to the risk of failure that is embedded in the exercise of cultural negotiation.

Aden engages complex and delicate political themes in captivating, fluid prose: "Nonno Y. e il colore degli alleati" and "1982: fuga da casa" dig out the history of Italian colonialism and relate it to the post-colonial clan wars in Somalia; the condition of the African state, shattered in pieces and continuously put together again – recollected – like a puzzle according to contingent political needs (50), is staged in "La casa con l'albero". "Eeddo Maryan", "Nadia" and "Xuseyn, Suleyman e Loro", among other stories, depict fragments of migrants' lives in the Mediterranean peninsula, sometimes presenting controversial characters like the housekeeper Nadia, who considers lying a liberating force, freeing her from her patronizing white and liberal employer; "Che ore sono?" and "Un te' serio bollente" discuss the language of inclusion and racism and provocatively question the vocabulary connecting migration with illegality. These and other stories in the collection openly address the issue of colour, or 'the fact of blackness' to borrow Frantz Fanon's famous title, and its intersection with gender in a growing multicultural Southern European country influenced by the xenophobia of the Northern League.

Placing colonialism, migration and racism at the heart of her literary production, Aden's book further expands a network of publications constituted by the works of Italian authors of African origin, such as Cristina Ali-Farah's *Madre Piccola* (Frassinelli, 2007), Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* (Donzelli, 2008) and Gabriella Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Donzelli, 2007), among others. These postcolonial Italian writings' engagements with such urgent political issues have a significant impact on the contemporary literary canon and, more importantly, question the common understanding of what the national tradition, and Italianness itself, can be.

Employing the theoretical framework provided by Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen's *Acts of Citizenship* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008), I suggest that Aden's

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writing may be looked at as an act of citizenship, for it intervenes and tries to actively modify dominant discourses on nationality and belonging.

Nielsen and Isin explain that rather than being merely a document or a definite status, citizenship can be seen as a practice whose *enactment* questions its construction as a biopolitical device, linking bodies to territory, and its foundation in the law of blood. An example of the disruptive and transformative acts the book takes into consideration is the Montgomery boycott initiated by Rosa Parks; an act ignited by a single subject that triggered a radical revision of rights. Actors putting citizenship on trial exercise their political subjectivity by calling into question the monolithism of juridical language, thereby opening a way to future possible articulations of a form of “citizenship to come”.

Conceiving an act of writing as an ‘act of citizenship’ means to underline the political and imaginative potential that literature can mobilize and how it intervenes, if it does, in the redefinition of a resistance to the logic of state inclusion. Aden’s stories, containing an open call for a restructuring of social relations, may implicitly provide a key to answer these questions. On the one hand, her constant call for allies, as in the title of the second short story “il colore degli alleati” (“the colour of allies”), aims at challenging the foundation and reproduction of the community on the law of blood and on the ‘naturalness’ of birth. On the other, the liquid genealogy of feelings and emotions that emerges from her writing is already a step beyond the orthodoxy of binary and heteronormative parental relations and an opposition to the fixity of the language of law and belonging.

Analysing in detail the prologue of the book can help exemplify the affective process Aden’s writing initiates. *Fra-intendimenti* begins with the author’s “self-portrait”: a choral introduction in which Kaha presents herself through three grandmothers. Disrupting the normativity of nuclear family ties, the women accompanying Kaha beyond the threshold of the book are not two, but three. Suuban embodies autonomy: she prefers to face exile in the desert rather than living in the shadow of her son; Xaawa is an activist for women’s right to vote and her life teaches rebellion and disobedience; Xalima symbolizes care, because her double role includes both taking care of her children and nourishing hope for independence.

Since the forties, Xaliima’s house was the place where children used to receive their education, but her household was also the site “where one could *absorb* the language of independence” since it was here that the liberation movement used to meet. In this matriarchal house, “full of mystery and filled with relations” (7), independence could be absorbed like an affect transmitted in the air. The affect of freedom was the primary material to be handled and the basis for the construction of a network of relations enabling political activities with a highly transformative purpose.

Relationality is one of the key elements highlighted in the theorization of the acts of citizenship: by challenging normative ideas of identity and the “exclusiveness” of belonging to the state, acts mobilize other subjects. The affective power of the

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language of liberation constituting the foundation of the author's education becomes the means, in *Fra-intendimenti*, to initiate new links via other words and via the Italian idiom.

The relation with and through words immediately comes into play with the introduction of the granny-teacher Xaliima, whose motto had to do with remembering to keep words "well composed" (it. *ben composte*). In its double connotation, the adjective 'composed' seems to suggest that words should always properly appear in their place, without any grammar mistakes; but the expression also evokes a different dimension: single words create new meanings when they are joined together in new structures.

*Fra-intendimenti* is the result of this configuration of different words, idioms and life, putting to work an affective dimension. Aden's 'composed words' reveal the opacity of the translation of conversations and tales, including expressions in the Somali language or literal translations of idiomatic phrases into Italian (as in the case of the phrase 'opening a dream', 65). Such a creative use of the language originates narratives that, while constructing imaginary communities or communities of the mind, also destroy their monolithic status.

Even though the book opens by linking the affect of independence to words, the author moves on to propose her own writing be considered the basis for new creative political production. If the social dimension is animated by an affective production that redefines the formation of subjectivity and stimulates the emergence of agency, narrations can undoubtedly intervene in this process. The performativity of literature can stimulate a desire to oppose the repetition of normative discourses and creating newness.

Aden's short stories do not just speak about bodies; they speak *to* the bodies, triggering the propagation of what Clotilde Barbarulli, in an essay on migrant literature entitled "Parole, corpi e passaggi nell'in-finito arazzo urbano", labels as "corporeal feelings" that resist any attempt at dematerialization. The power of the body lies in its capacity to be a figure of desire and, consequently, in its ability to make projects (*Il Sorriso dello Stregatto: Figurazioni di genere e intercultura*, Pisa: Ets, 2010, 134). Desire and project are central to *Fra-intendimenti*, as they constitute the interconnection between affective production and political praxis.

The productive force of Aden's texts shapes images of the Italian society that do not appear in every day media reports. Her writing questions the state of collective memory and challenges the aggressive language of news and politics, often assimilating migration to criminal offence. Her resistance takes place by enacting the disruption of an Italian identity constructed on the amnesia of colonialism and by presenting concealed images of the postcolonial state.

It is also important to notice that the publication of this book comes at a time of crisis and in a context in which the language of politics is unable to respond to instances of representation for second generation Italians, migrants and so-called *clandestini* (illegal immigrants), whose exploited black labour significantly sustains the national economy. After the revolt in Rosarno and migrants' strikes on March

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1st, social acts and writing intertwine in the common request for rethinking participation in the public sphere.

Aden's writing shapes what Liana Borghi in her introduction to *Il sorriso dello Stregatto* ("The Cheshire Cat smile") calls "affective citizenship" (Pisa: Ets, 2010, 12): the creation of a relation with alterity that cannot simply be reduced to the binary logic of inclusion/exclusion. Aden translates Borghi's expression into "elective citizenship" and represents it as the "house of emotions" where her three grannies live together (10). The creation of this house, which at the same time is a desire and an antidote against the aggressiveness of the state's exclusiveness, is a political project. It performs a possible drive away from the law of blood defining her double belonging: her Somali citizenship, drenched in the blood of clan wars, and her Italian citizenship, rooted in the violence of colonialism and in the assumed 'naturalness' of filiation reproducing nationality.