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Climate Migrations and Reverse Colonisation in Italian Eco-Dystopias

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the representation of climate migration and climate colonialism in contemporary Italian eco-dystopias. After a theoretical introduction, I address the representation of migrants, and of Italians as climate migrants, in Paolo Zardi's *XXI secolo* (2015) and Bruno Arpaia's *Qualcosa, là fuori* (2016). Climate migration is a growing phenomenon that is intimately connected with Anthropocenic violence, and that will produce changes in society and demographics, challenging existing notions of nationality and culture. In the second part, I discuss two novels (Tommaso Pincio's *Cinacittà*, 2008, and Antonio Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte*, 2011) that deal with what I call, following Stephen D. Arata, the anxiety of reverse colonisation. These two novels portray (and express) a fear of a takeover of Italy by the Chinese that is rooted in both long-standing anti-immigration prejudices and the new shapes of contemporary economic colonialism.

SOMMARIO

Questo articolo si occupa della rappresentazione delle migrazioni climatiche e del colonialismo climatico nelle eco-distopie italiane contemporanee. Dopo un'introduzione teorica, viene discussa la rappresentazione dei migranti, e degli italiani come migranti climatici, in *XXI secolo* di Paolo Zardi (2015) e in *Qualcosa, là fuori* di Bruno Arpaia (2016). Le migrazioni climatiche sono un fenomeno in crescita, intimamente connesso alla violenza dell'Antropocene, e che produrrà cambiamenti sociali e demografici, contribuendo a ridefinire tradizionali concettualizzazioni di nazionalità e cultura. Nella seconda parte, vengono presi in esame due romanzi (*Cinacittà* di Tommaso Pincio, 2008, e *La seconda mezzanotte* di Antonio Scurati, 2011) che hanno al centro quella che, secondo Stephen D. Arata, si definisce "ansia da colonizzazione inversa". Questi due romanzi dipingono (ed esprimono) il timore per una conquista dell'Italia da parte dei cinesi che è radicata tanto in pregiudizi anti-migratori di lunga durata quanto nelle nuove forme del colonialismo economico contemporaneo.

KEYWORDS

climate migrations;
colonisation; Ecocriticism;
Anthropocene; science
fiction; eco-dystopia

PAROLE CHIAVE

migrazioni climatiche;
colonizzazione; ecocritica;
Antropocene; fantascienza;
eco-distopia

This article investigates the representation of climate migration and climate colonialism in contemporary Italian eco-dystopias. After a theoretical introduction, I address the

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representation of migrants, and of Italians as climate migrants, in Paolo Zardi's *XXI secolo* (2015) and Bruno Arpaia's *Qualcosa, là fuori* (2016). Climate migration is a growing phenomenon that is intimately connected with Anthropocenic violence, and that will produce changes in society and demographics, challenging existing notions of nationality and culture. In the second part, I discuss two novels (Tommaso Pincio's *Cinacittà*, 2008, and Antonio Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte*, 2011) that deal with what I call, following Stephen D. Arata, the anxiety of reverse colonization. These two novels portray (and express) a fear of a takeover of Italy by the Chinese that is rooted in both long-standing anti-immigration prejudices and the new shapes of contemporary economic colonialism. While none of these authors belongs, strictly speaking, to the field of science fiction as an editorial genre, all the aforementioned novels are, to different extents, works of science fiction; specifically, they are eco-dystopias, which is to say, dystopian fiction centered on environmental degradation. A popular genre in contemporary Italian fiction (both mainstream and genre), the eco-dystopia also presents significant ambiguities in addressing the wider phenomenon of the Anthropocene, and especially its 'slow violence'.¹

The Many Injustices of Climate

Earth, as noted by Kenneth Olwig in conversation with Donna Haraway and others, is not a globe, either physically or symbolically.² While we tend to imagine the planet as a globe in cultural representations and in the lexicon we use to describe climate change (as in *global warming*), it is not: it is an uneven, irregularly shaped ellipsoid. Dipesh Chakrabarty complicates this distinction by arguing that the globe is a humanocentric construction, while thinking in terms of planet (or of Earth system) means to decentre the human;³ 'created by human institutions and technologies',⁴ the image of the globe simplifies Earth, transforming it into a knowable narrative, while the idea of 'planet' embraces the complexity of reality. This notion is relevant to discourses on climate change not simply because climate change affects different areas of the planet in very different, and intrinsically uneven, ways, but also because of its complex and various network of responsibilities and consequences.

One of the most distinctive traits of the Anthropocene is its planetary dimension. The plurality of phenomena defining the age we live in, from climate change to biodiversity reduction, from ocean acidification to extensive pollution, characterises and transforms every part of the planet. At the same time, as noted, the Earth is not a globe, which is to say that the totality of these phenomena and the collective responsibility for them are not equally distributed across the planet's surface and among its inhabitants. As Bruno Latour writes, 'speaking of the anthropic origin of global warming is meaningless [...], if by "anthropic" we mean something like "the human species":⁵ it is anthropic in the sense that it is the product of a very specific form of civilisation, which is to say industrial modernity. When we speak of collective responsibility for the series of critical environmental issues defining the Anthropocene, we mean that they are not the intentional products of single individuals, but rather the unforeseen long-term effects of lifestyles and systems of production, which have coincided, generally speaking, with the industrial era of Western civilisation, later exported outside Europe and the United States. What collective responsibility cannot mean, however,

is that every single individual across the globe (and, in a historical perspective, every society and culture) has the same level of responsibility for what is happening to the planet.⁶ As has been noted, 'people in developing countries will be most affected by climate change, whereas the largest share of [greenhouse gases] in the atmosphere has been emitted in industrialized countries'.⁷ There are nations that will benefit, in the short term, from climate change (countries at higher latitudes will have longer summers, more cultivable land, new plant species they can grow; the melting of permafrost could even result in new veins of gas and metals being made available), while others will be rendered uninhabitable or, as in the case of some Polynesian island states, disappear altogether. Indeed, there is a profound injustice in climate change that does not mirror the paligenetic and retributory logic of the apocalyptic imagination.

For all these reasons, discourses on climate justice are central in current debates on the Anthropocene,⁸ especially the intertwined ones on climate migrations, climate apartheid and climate colonialism. Climate justice is, essentially, the idea that the benefits and burdens of climate change, as well as the rights and duties associated with its mitigation, should be equally distributed across individuals and communities, in order to prevent single, often disadvantaged groups or individuals from suffering more than others. A variety of solutions have been proposed to address the problem, including equalising the amount of emissions between industrialised and non-industrialised countries and introducing forms of payment connected to greenhouse gas emissions – despite the fact that even increased prices 'do not reflect in the least the dangers for all living beings that the burning of the fuels is creating'.⁹ Questions concerning climate justice are, of course, extremely difficult to address, as they require answers on all levels, from the individual to the national to the super-national.¹⁰ The problem of climate justice is also an intergenerational one, as the effects of climate change will be increasingly worrisome for future generations, thus implying that action should be taken not only across national borders and social classes, but also across time.¹¹ And there is, moreover, the matter of interspecies responsibility, as the effects of climate change have a great impact on non-human creatures.

The growing challenges imposed by climate change on societies and individuals are likely to further jeopardise the human rights situation across the world, leading to what Philip Alston has called 'climate apartheid':

the risk of community discontent, of growing inequality, and of even greater levels of deprivation among some groups, will likely stimulate nationalist, xenophobic, racist and other responses. [...] We risk a 'climate apartheid' scenario where the wealthy pay to escape overheating, hunger, and conflict while the rest of the world is left to suffer.¹²

Climate change is also likely to result in new forms of economic colonialism, facilitating land and structure acquisitions in developing countries by international corporations as a consequence of weaker institutions and infrastructures.¹³ Even forcing developing countries to adhere to sustainable schemes of development that make them reliant on foreign support, or that negatively impact the possibility of economic growth, while at the same time outsourcing deforestation or polluting activities such as mining, can be considered a form of colonial violence.¹⁴ It should be kept in mind, after all, that alternative understandings of the Anthropocene reframe it as the Plantationocene. The

industrial revolution was made possible by the plantation system, which is to say a colonial system of production based on 'the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor'¹⁵ – all elements that are still central to current discourses about climate violence. Reading the Anthropocene as the Plantationocene means reading it as a process rooted in Western violence perpetrated on disadvantaged parts of the world, with colonialism at its centre.

Thousands of people are already escaping worsening environmental and social conditions in what have been defined as climate migrations.¹⁶ While climate change is rarely the main cause of migration, it certainly exacerbates 'underlying poverty, environmental degradation and unrest',¹⁷ leading to a 'tipping point' for populations already plagued by a series of problems.¹⁸ At the same time, of course, the existence of climate migrants has been invoked in wealthier nations as a reason to increase border patrols and security efforts.¹⁹ The complexity in perceiving the mechanism of causality in the planetary processes of climate change, together with the fact that, as mentioned, in most cases the climate only plays a concurring role in migrations, makes it difficult to give a strict definition of climate migrations. The term is frequently confused with more traditional migrations due to environmental problems or natural hazards unrelated to global warming. Yet it has been estimated that 'since 2008, over 318 million persons have been displaced because of climate disasters' and that 'in 2020 alone, 30.7 million people were displaced because of environmental disasters, notably linked to climate change'.²⁰ To reprise Rob Nixon's definition, Anthropocenic violence is a slow violence, one 'that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'.²¹ While we are accustomed to violence as something that happens suddenly and in a spectacular fashion, Nixon argues, violence connected to climate change and environmental degradation is difficult to understand, visualise and, most importantly, counteract. Climate migration is both the effect of decades of this slow violence and one of its most painfully visible manifestations.

Loving the Alien? The Case of Italian Science Fiction

As has been noted with increasing frequency, science fiction has been a privileged genre for addressing environmental concerns.²² The most common means through which science fiction reflects on environmental matters, the eco-dystopia is a genre that pivots on views of environmental disaster and merges the catastrophic imagery of the post-apocalyptic tradition and the consequential mode of dystopia.²³ This is true even in Italian fiction, despite it being a literary field that has traditionally been averse to this specific genre. In the twenty-first century, an increasing number of both mainstream and genre writers adopted the means of science fiction to describe the consequences of climate change and environmental degradation on the planet and human societies: beside those discussed in this article, such novels include *Sezione π^2* by Giovanni De Matteo (2007), *Sirene* by Laura Pugno (2007), *Il quinto principio* by Vittorio Catani (2009), *Bambini bonsai* by Paolo Zanotti (2010), *Nina dei lupi* by Alessandro Bertante (2011), *Anna* by Niccolò Ammaniti (2015), *Pulphagus*® by Lukha

B. Kremono (2016), *La festa nera* by Violetta Bellocchio (2018), *Cenere* by Elisa Emiliani (2019), and *L'isola delle madri* by Maria Rosa Cutrufelli (2020).²⁴ These books can be considered, to different extents, eco-dystopias. While not all of them focus explicitly on climate change as a cause of civilisation collapse, they all include details of environmental degradation in a post-apocalyptic or dystopian world.

Given the importance of climate migration among the most visible effects of the Anthropocene, it comes as no surprise that it plays such an important role in the Italian eco-dystopias I discuss in this article. This tendency, however, is far from prevalent, as environmental crises serve in many Italian eco-dystopias as occasions to take refuge in closed communities – which often coincides with a return to childhood. Such is the case in texts such as Zanotti's *Bambini bonsai*, Ammaniti's *Anna*, or Bertante's *Nina dei lupi*. Zanotti and Ammaniti, furthermore, set their portrayals in specific Italian environments (Liguria and Sicily, respectively). Others, however, fully embrace the planetary dimension of the Anthropocene as a scenario, for example Pugno's *Sirene*, which has an international setting with references to Japan, or Cutrufelli's *L'isola delle madri*, whose Mediterranean setting is paired with Eastern Europe and south-western Africa. In the novels I discuss in greater detail in the rest of the article, the cross-cultural interactions forcedly brought about by climate change are central.

Italian science fiction's relation with Italian culture and with otherness is a peculiar one. Italian science fiction was born under the heavy influence of foreign models, with its most important publications reprising the formats and the authors of their Anglo-American counterparts (and even the names, as in the case of *Galassia*, which copied the more famous American magazine *Galaxy*). In the first few decades of the genre, Italian science fiction authors adopted English-speaking pseudonyms to publish their works, and, between 1961 and the late 1980s, virtually no Italian author appeared in *Urania*, the most prestigious and best-selling science fiction periodical. To quote Arielle Saiber, Italian science fiction was born under the sign of a 'vicious circle of anti-Italianness'.²⁵ Perhaps for this reason, it is rare to find strongly xenophobic content (as one might find, for instance, in classics such as Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, 1959) in the genre in Italy: from early on (as, for instance, in the case of Luigi Rapuzzi's *C'era una volta un pianeta*, 1954, or in the work of Gilda Musa and Luce D'Eramo), depictions of aliens, both literal and metaphorical, are almost entirely benevolent. Even in the late 1960s and the 1970s, when Italian science fiction stops being ashamed of its origins, as evidenced by the diminishing use of pseudonyms and the increasing number of stories set in recognisable parts of the country, this attention to otherness is still present. For instance, Lino Aldani, one of the greatest authors of the genre, devotes a consistent part of his work (as can be seen in *Quando le radici*, 1977) to the portrayal of the historically discriminated-against Romani minority in Italy. It is perhaps telling that one of the few academic publications dedicated to the genre in Italy (Simone Brioni and Daniele Comberiati's *Italian Science Fiction: The Other in Fiction and Film*) is devoted precisely to the subject of encounters with otherness.²⁶

As Brioni and Comberiati note, however, Italian science fiction, especially from the 1980s onward (which is to say from the time when heavy migratory flows first began) also presents less serene descriptions of immigration.²⁷ Comics series such as *RanXerox* (which first appeared in 1978) and movies such as Gabriele Salvatores's *Nirvana* (1997) depict a globalised, multicultural Italy in which the presence of immigrants tends to

coincide with the loss of cultural authenticity and urban degradation – a concern echoed in the new cyberpunk vogue, be it in novels (for instance, Nicoletta Vallorani's *Il cuore finto di DR*, 2003) or comics (such as Bonelli's *Nathan Never*). Other authors, like Mario Farneti (*Attacco all'Occidente*, 2003), Simone Faré (*Milano ultima fermata*, 2009) and Pierfrancesco Prospero (*La casa dell'Islam*, 2009), present strongly prejudiced and opposite depictions of the Arab world.

This ambivalence is not uncommon in the Italian context. Italy is a country with a large number of immigrants (as of 2019, Italy had over five million foreign residents out of a population of 60 million,²⁸ but this number does not include so-called illegal immigrants) that yet 'finds it difficult to redefine itself as a multi-ethnic nation'.²⁹ As migrant crises over the last three decades have shown, Italy, due to its peculiar position in the Mediterranean, is bound to be the point of arrival, or at least of transition,³⁰ of most of those fleeing African countries. Of course, Italy is not simply geographically close to North Africa: it is also, culturally and symbolically, at the borders of Europe. What Étienne Balibar argues about Greece is true of Italy as well: a country that was the cradle of Western civilisation, due to the heritage of the Roman world, now occupies a peripheral position in the European (if not Western) world.³¹ Liminal spaces, however, occupy a *central* position in defining the identity of a community, which is usually defined not per se, but by virtue of what is outside its borders: 'border areas – zones, countries, and cities – are not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere but rather are at the center'.³² In this sense, migrations complicate a process of self-recognition by bringing foreigners within the national borders while at the same time assimilating them. Crossing physical and cultural borders, migrations force a community to reconsider and reimagine its identity. Despite the fact that Italy (especially through its younger generations) is becoming a multiethnic country, 'Italians tend to deny this reality' and 'the prevailing opinion rejects the idea of giving a place to immigration in the nation's social organization'.³³ Such tendencies are mirrored by harsh immigration laws (the 2002 Bossi-Fini law) and citizenship laws, and by the openly xenophobic rhetoric of certain political parties, such as Lega and Fratelli d'Italia. As Graziella Parati has argued, while 'in recent years Italy has become a country of migrants', it 'has also gradually adopted rigid positions against immigration, joining the effort of constructing a "fortress Europe", [...] a political entity that wants to protect itself from hordes of migrants, perceived as people who threaten national cultures'.³⁴ As I show in the following sections, Zardi, Arpaia, Scurati, and Pincio oscillate between these tendencies. They depict a country in which immigration (and climate migration) is very much a reality: while Zardi and Arpaia consider this a matter of fact, and either try to be non-judgemental about the issue or try to see its advantages, Scurati and Pincio voice more common fears connected to immigration and the loss of cultural authenticity and sovereignty.

Here Be Migrants: Climate Migrants in Italy, Italians as Climate Migrants

Paolo Zardi's *XXI secolo* was published in 2015 and elicited a strongly positive critical response, such that, even though its publisher is a relatively minor one, it was included on the longlist of the Strega Prize, Italy's most prestigious literary prize. *XXI secolo* is set in the near future, in an unnamed city that readers might recognise as a medium-sized

urban centre of Northern Italy (Zardi lives and works in Padova, in the Veneto region). The story pivots on an unnamed male protagonist whose wife suddenly falls into a coma, after which he finds out that she had a lover. In his quest to discover more about the hidden life of his partner, while at the same time attending to her and their two children, the protagonist moves in a degraded, impoverished urban landscape where there are as many immigrants as there are Italians.

Zardi's novel does not directly depict climate issues, nor does it portray climate change as an apocalyptic event (in this respect, it is concerned with environmental migrations, rather than with climate ones). The portrayal of Italy in the immediate future is coherent with demographic and environmental trends that are already occurring; moreover, the attention to environmental degradation allows the author to frame this novel within the context of Anthropocenic violence. It is easy to recognise, in *XXI secolo*, the urbanised countryside and industrialised areas that characterise Northern Italy's suburban landscape – a distinct heritage of the uncontrolled urbanisation during the economic boom. The characters move in cities that have no recognisable features that could be connected to real places or places with a history, but that are, rather, the endless reproduction of identical spaces – malls, *autogrill*, apartment complexes, semi-detached houses:

Il quartiere era composto, in gran parte, di villette a schiera, con giardini misurati in centimetri quadri, box auto come cassette tirolesi, piscine di gomma che d'estate brillavano al sole, altalene appese ai rami più grossi degli alberi, telai di mattoni grigi per il barbecue, taverne e mansarde quasi sempre abusive.³⁵

Far from being brand new, as their uniformity would suggest, these places have also been corroded by time and use, as in the case of the building in which the protagonist's mother lives, which is described as 'umiliato dal tempo': 'Dai poggioli si staccava l'intonaco svelando una trama di acciaio arrugginito. L'acqua colava attraverso il tetto di rame e amianto e rigava la facciata esterna. Tracciava venature verde muschio sulla sua superficie'.³⁶

Notably, Zardi does not make immigration the cause of crime or decline, but rather portrays it merely as a co-occurring phenomenon. While there are immigrants whose activities seem to point to small crime ('sotto [...] stazionavano i magrebini che avevano cacciato i romeni che avevano cacciato gli albanesi'),³⁷ most do not fit the xenophobic stereotypes that are typical of Italian public representations of immigrants.³⁸ One immigrant, who works as a clerk at the hotel in front of the hospital, is described as 'un nero con l'eleganza povera e dignitosa delle generazioni che hanno appena iniziato l'ascesa sociale'; some women from Moldova work as nurses; a Chinese family owns a barbershop. A takeaway pizzeria (the quintessentially Italian gastronomic experience) is run by Egyptians; while the protagonist collects the food, he witnesses a child teaching his grandfather Italian words. It is worth noticing that, in keeping with the strict Italian citizenship policies (which do not grant immediate Italian citizenship to second-generation immigrants), none of these immigrants is defined as an Italian citizen.³⁹ Nevertheless, despite a lack of official recognition, the country Zardi depicts is definitely multiethnic.

While Italy is populated by migrants, however, it is no longer a destination for them. After the boom at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Zardi narrates, immigration stopped; it is now Italians who are leaving the country as migrants. Some Italian women even move east, to work as caregivers for Russian oligarchs – a

profession stereotypically associated, in Italy, with women from Eastern Europe. On his way to Austria to visit his mother-in-law, the protagonist sees the queue of Italian migrants attempting to reach the neighbouring country. The Schengen agreements having been revoked, the Austrian army controls the border, allowing passage only for those who have a stable job and a house in Italy – which is to say a good reason to go back. Those who do not fit those criteria have to resort to illegal immigration: ‘Per chi aveva perso tutto rimanevano i boschi, i camion col doppio fondo, i finti pullman turistici, i bagagliai roventi di vecchie Mercedes’.⁴⁰ A Vietnamese man sells food and beverages to the crowd of Italians trying to escape.

Unlike in xenophobic propaganda, Italy’s decline is the result not of immigration, but rather of widespread environmental degradation. In other words, the Italian landscape is not degraded by immigrants: they simply happen to arrive at a moment of decline. Reference is made to this environmental decline throughout the novel. For instance, in Zardi’s Italy, people get sick more and more often. While the narrative voice attributes this tendency to a general sense of depression (*‘la tristezza e il declino, la tristezza per il declino’*), it is also connected to *‘l’inquinamento, i rifiuti tossici, le scie chimiche’* – that is, to the degradation of the environment. Even the rain is described as *‘solforica, oleosa’*.⁴¹ The Po Valley is, after all, one of the most polluted areas in Europe, with Veneto’s provincial capitals ranking among the most polluted cities in the European Union.⁴² This widespread pollution is also referenced in the job of the protagonist, who works as a door-to-door salesman for an Indonesian corporation (the foreign origins of the enterprise are another sign of Italy’s lack of vitality as a country) producing water purifiers. Despite the actual need for these products, caused by *‘l’inquinamento delle falde acquifere e il fallimento di tanti Comuni, con la conseguente dismissione degli acquedotti’*, the protagonist finds it increasingly difficult to sell them due to widespread poverty. It should be noted that reference to the infrastructural deficiencies of the hydraulic system is far from dystopic: Italy’s water mains lose 41.4 litres for every 100,⁴³ contributing to droughts and hydraulic emergencies, especially in summertime (in 2011, a controversial referendum was held, in which Italians voted against the privatisation of the hydraulic system). The protagonist’s ability as a salesman leads him to emphasise the importance of the purifiers – public water is no longer safe to drink and even bottled water can be dangerous:

Il cloro provoca tumori al colon, anche a distanza di vent’anni. Lo dicono le statistiche. E le bottiglie di plastica che comprate possono stare diciotto mesi in un magazzino completamente privo di norme igieniche, prima di arrivare sulla vostra tavola: lo sapevate? Beviamo acqua morta, e la paghiamo pure.⁴⁴

Zardi depicts the close relationship between environmental degradation (and subsequent infrastructural collapse) and global inequality, in the form of the separation of Europe between a country of emigrants and a gated community. This relationship is unambiguously presented as something that physically harms the individual: environmental and infrastructural collapse produce violent societies and polluted landscapes. All this is symbolised by the illness of the protagonist’s wife, whose comatose body, at the end of the novel, the protagonist brings home from the hospital during a riot.

Arpaia's work plays on a less subtle, yet occasionally more effective, imagery, as it aims at presenting this relationship in more explicit terms. *Qualcosa, là fuori* presents two storylines: the story of a group of climate migrants travelling through a Europe devastated by climate change in the late twenty-first century is paralleled by depictions of the progressive institutional and environmental collapse of the previous decades. The two storylines share the same protagonist, Livio, a scientist who, after working in the United States, goes back to his native Naples. While in Zardi the depiction of Europe in the twenty-first century is dystopian, but deprived of apocalyptic elements, Arpaia merges these aspects of the eco-dystopia by simultaneously presenting the slow path to collapse and the dramatic effects of this collapse on societies and individuals.

Qualcosa, là fuori's depiction of Europe in the late twenty-first century is based, according to Arpaia, on strict scientific evidence: besides the literary influences (James G. Ballard, Cormac McCarthy, Carlo Lucarelli, Arturo Pérez-Reverte), the author writes, in a closing note, that 'gli scenari di questo libro riprendono (e anzi, spesso ricalcano alla lettera) quelli delineati da Gwynne Dyer nel saggio *Le guerre del clima*', in comparison with 'i rapporti dell'IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) e dell'European Environmental Agency, i quali, però, secondo numerosi scienziati del clima, peccano sistematicamente per difetto'.⁴⁵ Reviewers have noted that, despite Arpaia's claims, his depiction of Europe as a desertified land, with seas rising from 12 to 80 metres in the next hundred years, has no scientific foundation.⁴⁶ Regardless of the scientific soundness of Arpaia's story, however, this exaggeration is useful, as it allows these dramatic changes to be depicted within the lifespan of a single protagonist. Arpaia depicts a world in which slow events gradually reach a tipping point that causes sudden chaos and mayhem:

Nessuno ricordava con esattezza quando era cominciato tutto [...] forse perché si era trattato di una lenta e implacabile alleanza di eventi impercettibili, di alterazioni minime che, almeno in apparenza, cambiavano poco o nulla, finché, quasi di colpo, ci si era ritrovati in quel disastro.⁴⁷

Arpaia's depiction of Europe is catastrophic, to say the least. The rivers have dried up and entire regions have turned into a desert ('Sotto i loro piedi la terra si sbriciolava in una sottile polvere giallastra, che si sollevava e poi ricadeva al loro passaggio, ricoprendo le orme').⁴⁸ The convoy of migrants is able to walk on the riverbed of the Lambro, and even the excavation of the riverbed of the Po leads to the discovery of little to no water. The flora and fauna are now those typical of a desert: 'Le uniche piante in grado di sopravvivere erano mostri che immagazzinavano l'acqua, serbatoi viventi come cactus e agavi [...], oppure qualche raro arbusto simile all'agrifoglio'.⁴⁹ Milan is plagued by guerilla groups, with fights and lynching occurring through the city.⁵⁰

In *Qualcosa, là fuori*, climate change forces migrations from Africa and the Middle East to Southern Europe; later, Italians and the new immigrant communities embark on a journey to the more temperate and secure Northern Europe. Like Zardi, Arpaia does not simply depict immigration occurring in Italy as a result of climate change; he also depicts Italians as climate migrants. Notably, immigration is not indicated as a cause of decline, but is rather presented as a consequence of the dissolution of the state ('l'ultima finzione di Stato si esaurì per stanchezza, per inutilità. Senza troppa sorpresa, le elezioni non vennero più celebrate e nessuno sembrò sentirne la mancanza').⁵¹ The

coexistence of Italians and foreigners causes cultural friction in the beginning (Arpaia depicts the conflict between Muslims and Christians in Naples, culminating in a riot during the *ṣalāt al-maghrib*, the Muslim evening prayer taking place in Piazza del Municipio), but later on ‘*islamici e cristiani, immigrati e locali trovarono poco a poco il modo di convivere e di mescolarsi*’. However, ‘*le temperature sempre più asfissianti, i prezzi impossibili dell’acqua potabile e del cibo, le pubbliche autorità sempre più evanescenti, la miseria, la corruzione e le guerre tra bande*’⁵² force natives and immigrants alike to try to leave the city. The convoy of migrants of which Livio is part is composed of Italians as well as of Arabs (Livio’s wife is of Syrian origin) and Spaniards. As in Zardi’s book, immigration to Italy does not represent an ‘invasion’ that disrupts communal equilibrium and cancels national identities. Although ‘migration has been framed as a problem’ in Italy,⁵³ in these novels it is just an event occurring in the context of a wider crisis, while the multiethnic status of contemporary Italy is openly recognised.

This representation of migration is also connected to the dynamics of climate apartheid. Nations with stronger infrastructures and institutions, like Switzerland, are able to retreat on higher altitudes and to efficiently manage their hydric resources. The European Union, after cancelling the Schengen agreements and trying to outsource to Southern Europe the repression of migratory flows (giving Italy and Spain the same role that Libya and Turkey currently have), dissolves, only to be reformed as a European Union of the North. Only those who can pay a private corporation to escort them on that perilous journey are able to leave the country and reach Northern Europe. This corporation works very much like the present-day people smugglers crossing the Mediterranean, and they raise their price during the journey while threatening and harassing migrants. In *XXI secolo*, the fact that only the dispossessed and immigrants populate Italy, now rendered an unsafe and unsanitary place, while the rich have long left, is a subtle example of climate apartheid. Zardi does not need to imagine futuristic, Edenic gated communities (maybe in the Earth’s upper atmosphere, as in the 2013 movie *Elysium*), where the super-rich retire to live in peace; he only has to portray them silently going to live abroad. Arpaia is perhaps less nuanced, transposing the dynamics that now exist between Africa and Europe to Southern and Northern Europe.

Both novels depict Italy as a country where environmental degradation and institutional collapse have brought peoples of different nationalities together, and in which this new ethnic blending is not represented in a negative way. Moreover, they indulge in a depiction of Italians as climate migrants that dramatises the growing inequalities of the future of the Anthropocene. The representation of Italians as migrants is not new: Italy was, until the late twentieth century, a nation of emigrants, rather than a nation to which people emigrate. In the United States, Italians were not considered to be on the same level as Anglo-Saxons, from a racial perspective.⁵⁴ Italy also experienced great flows of internal migration, from Southern Italy to the richer and more industrialised North, especially in the years of the economic boom. This process coincided with racist attitudes among Northerners towards their compatriots – attitudes that can be backdated to post-unification Italy. By giving migration a central position in the imagination of the consequences of climate change, Zardi and Arpaia re-actualise a latent image in Italian national culture that years of wellbeing and

economic prosperity have not yet cancelled – that of the *emigrante*, the dispossessed Italian seeking his or her fortune abroad. At the same time, this emigration is not the emigration codified by neorealism or by depictions of Italian-American communities, but is, rather, shaped by the experience of current migrants arriving in Italy.

Selling Out to China, or the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation

The expression ‘the anxiety of reverse colonization’ comes from Stephen D. Arata’s 1990 essay on *Dracula*.⁵⁵ Bram Stoker’s novel, Arata argued, pivots on the British middle class’s fear of experiencing the same invasion and subjugation that Great Britain was inflicting on other populations across the globe. Count Dracula, an aristocratic, ‘Oriental’ figure who sought to disrupt the strict sexual equilibrium of Victorian monogamous couplehood and to impose a new order, was the image of such an invasion. Gothic fiction has been defined as the literature of the return of the repressed, and it thus comes as no surprise that a novel like *Dracula* can depict with such precision the unspoken fear of an era. Science fiction, however, is no less important when it comes to addressing widespread anxieties and fears. I believe that Arata’s expression is especially appropriate in describing two Italian eco-dystopias: Tommaso Pincio’s *Cinacittà* and Antonio Scurati’s *La seconda mezzanotte*.⁵⁶ These novels depict two Italian cities, Rome and Venice (both central symbols of Italian imagery), colonised by the Chinese after two extreme climatic events (a heatwave in Pincio, a flood in Scurati).

In *Cinacittà* (a pun on Cinecittà, Rome’s cinematographic studios), the Italians spontaneously leave the city after an intense heat wave and the Chinese start inhabiting it instead. The protagonist, the last Roman in town, lives an increasingly dissipated life, staying in a hotel on via Veneto and working odd jobs, until he is framed for the homicide of his lover, a young Chinese prostitute; the novel is the recollection of the period leading to his incarceration. The heat wave that hit Rome and forced Italians to abandon it is, more specifically, a year without winter, which is to say an entire year of summer temperatures, up to (in Pincio’s novel) 45 or 50 degrees Celsius: ‘l’asfalto [...] si squagliava come burro in padella e le foglie [...] cadevano in autunno ancora verdi. Le auto esplodevano con improvvise fiammate’.⁵⁷

Progressively, Rome loses its traditional traits and turns into a Chinese metropolis:

Via Veneto era invasa da biciclette e riscìo. Uomini in canottiera, incuranti del caldo, spingevano carrelli carichi di scatole di cartone da un negozio all’altro. Davanti all’Excelsior, [...] scatole di mercanzie di ogni genere erano accatastate senza un ordine apparente [...]. Scatole di spaghetti di soia, scatole di grappa di riso, scatole di zuppe in scatola, scatole di riviste cinesi, scatole di lanterne di carta, scatole di ventagli.⁵⁸

As another character remarks, ‘sarà pur sempre via Veneto, ma quando ci passo non vedo nessun Café de Paris. Solo una sfilza di negozi pieni di geroglifici del cazzo. Sembra di essere a Shanghai al tempo dei bordelli e delle fumerie d’oppio’.⁵⁹ The insistence on well-known toponyms of Rome’s physical and symbolic geography, such as via Veneto (notably the setting of some of the most memorable scenes of Federico Fellini’s *La dolce vita*, 1960) and Cinecittà (alluded to in the title), or the Colosseum, re-signify commonplaces of Italianness, shaped by the memory of the Roman empire as well as by the imaginative effort of Italian moviemakers of the economic boom era.⁶⁰

The protagonist is disgusted by what he describes as Chinese customs—Wang using tea leaves to brush his teeth, or a worker spitting on the ground—while Chinese food is described as almost inedible. The Chinese ‘hanno uno spiccato senso del brutto’ and ‘sono il popolo piú materialista dell’universo conosciuto’.⁶¹ As the narrator remarks later in the novel, the Chinese

credono unicamente al dio denaro [...]. L’altruismo, poi, non sanno cosa voglia dire. Non si commuovono nemmeno se schiatti sotto i loro occhi. Si interessano al prossimo soltanto per venire a conoscere i fatti degli altri. [...] Sono spie nate, vipere pronte a spifferare alla prima occasione quel che di vergognoso sanno di te.⁶²

Similarly, the protagonist’s lover is described according to traditional stereotypes that portray Asian women as naturally submissive: she is ‘docile e passiva’ and barely speaks to the protagonist, who, after a while, starts addressing her like an animal (‘Le parlavo come si parla a un cane, ribadendo a me stesso che lei capiva tutto nonostante le mancasse la parola’).

Of course, these kinds of comments (which are expressed with both candor and exaggeration) have, at least partially, a humorous intent: the protagonist and narrator is an inept figure, who expresses frustration regarding his failures, marginalisation and impotence by complaining about the now-dominant Chinese culture. In other words, his opinions are not necessarily Pincio’s, but are meant to address stereotypical representations of Chinese people in Italian culture, as the author himself remarks (‘racconto le paure dell’uomo comune, che proietta le sue insicurezze sugli stranieri, aspetta con angoscia di essere invaso, coltiva la sua aggressività e finisce per credere alla sua paranoia’).⁶³ While there is no question that these comments might sound offensive to a Chinese, or Italian-Chinese, reader, they are not necessarily meant to be taken literally, but are rather intended (given the light-hearted, ironic fashion in which they are expressed) as a satirical critique of how Chinese people are portrayed in Italian culture. At the same time, as Gaoheng Zhang argues in his overview of fictional representations of Chinese immigration, ‘in the end, Pincio’s postmodern rhetoric creates a narrative ambiguity that renders his stand on the Chinese immigrants in Italy elusive’.⁶⁴

In *La seconda mezzanotte*, late twenty-first-century Venice, after a catastrophic flood, is bought and rebuilt by a Chinese telecommunication corporation and transformed into an amusement park. In Chinese-controlled Venice (as in several other cities of the Mediterranean basin), everything is allowed, except firearms, religion and procreation. The Venetians who have decided to remain in the town are not allowed to have children; the best of them are trained as gladiators and perform for the elite tourists. The flood is the culmination of an ongoing process of climate change and increasingly frequent extreme weather events. Glaciers melt, temperatures rise and climatic catastrophes around the world (floods, droughts, hurricanes, and so on) are continuously broadcast on television. Venice, however, is artificially kept in shape by geoengineering technologies (possibly a reference to the dam system currently in place to prevent tidal problems in the city centre): the polluted air of the Po Valley is filtered, while air conditioning keeps the city’s atmosphere consistently pleasant.

As in Pincio, the new city and the old city exist together, but not independently: the old is absorbed and re-signified in the new. Places like St. Mark’s Square are preserved, but

only for the pleasure of tourists. Similarly, the native population is kept in the city only for the amusement of their new masters, or to serve them as 'sguatterti, camerieri, barcaioli, servi, figuranti e spalatori di fango, dediti a meschini commerci, a piccoli raggiri e a ogni sorta di spacci tollerati, votati soprattutto alla prostituzione e all'accattonaggio di massa, formarono un numero oscuro e calante'.⁶⁵ Scurati's dystopia is simultaneously a critique of environmental degradation (which takes a particularly high toll on a fragile ecosystem like Venice's) and of the mass-touristification of Italian cities.

The humorous intent proclaimed by Pincio is absent in Scurati, for whom the presence of the Chinese in Venice seems to raise actual problems. There are no signs of irony in the depiction of the vices and the unpleasantness of the Chinese elite by the third-person, external narrator, whose remarks are echoed in an article by Scurati eloquently titled 'Non voglio morire cinese'.⁶⁶ The Chinese are described as greedy, materialistic and cunning, as well as remorseless in managing other people's lives. At the same time, they are never explored as characters: we mostly see them when the protagonists interact with them. The Procuratore, the Chinese governor of the city, is described as vain and emasculated, echoing racist prejudices about the lack of virility of Asian men:

Le gambe più lunghe del tronco, l'eccesso di grasso su fianchi e glutei, le dimensioni ridotte del pene, il prepuzio ipospadico dovuto a un incompleto sviluppo dell'uretra. E questo è solo quello che si vede: sotto, nel buio dello scroto, Xiao sa di avere il cinquanta per cento in meno degli spermatozoi che aveva suo nonno.⁶⁷

While these physical characteristics are the result of chemicals and hormones in food and beauty products, Xiao is presented as content with and intrigued by his own androgyny. Here, sexual ambiguity is employed to negatively characterise a villain, while at the same time perpetuating stereotypes about his ethnic group. It is the Procuratore himself who voices these prejudices:

I cinesi [...] non hanno mai ispirato complessi d'inferiorità. Nonostante le nuove diete iperproteiche e gli impianti chirurgici, rimangono troppo piccoli, furbastri, meschini. Non incarnano nessuna potenza superiore, né fisica né mentale. Sono semplicemente in tanti. Per questo domineranno il mondo.⁶⁸

The emphasis on the inferiority of the Chinese in Scurati is in keeping with the tendency of narratives of reverse colonisation to focus on the 'primitiveness' of the colonised who turn into colonisers.

Both Pincio and Scurati seem to find the idea of Italy becoming a multiethnic country quite problematic. Their representations of Chinese immigration are based both on the peculiarities of it as a historical phenomenon and the prejudices surrounding it. Chinese immigration in Italy has been characterised by a tendency to create homogeneous urban spaces⁶⁹ and a strong emphasis on economic entrepreneurship in Chinese communities.⁷⁰ At the same time, together with broader stereotypes regarding the submissiveness of 'Oriental' women and the lack of virility of Asian men, the Chinese are associated, in Italian culture, with criminality and, simultaneously, economic competition, leading to campaigns against the made-in-China and in favour of the made-in-Italy.⁷¹ The depiction of the Chinese in *Cinacittà* and *La seconda mezzanotte* echoes these notions: Rome and Venice become dominated by a population that is both ruthless in carrying out their criminal affairs and efficient in

adhering to the cultural and economic dynamics of late capitalism. It is no coincidence that, in *Cinacittà*, the only Chinese character with whom the protagonist has an actual dialogue is the mobster Wang. Of course, the rich and nuanced reality of Chinese immigration cannot be reduced to the unflattering portrayals in this couple of novels, nor in the stereotypes underlying them: on the contrary, especially in the last two decades, Chinese immigration in Italy has produced vibrant realities of integration and cohabitation. A more sympathetic view of the phenomenon can be found, for instance, in Andrea Segre's 2012 prize-winning film *Io sono Li*.

Understanding these novels only as novels about immigration, however, is not enough. What these novels offer is, in fact, a portrayal of climate colonialism, expressing an anxiety about reverse colonisation. As noted, in both novels the Chinese exploit an extreme environmental event to gain ownership of two of Italy's most famous cities. Contemporary colonialism is not shaped as it was in the nineteenth century, when it was based on total control of a territory and its population, but rather focuses on the control of certain key centres and resources. In both novels, the Italian state does not seem to exist at all: it simply evaporates in the face of its inability to address current environmental challenges, leaving an institutional gap that foreign corporations and nations are quick to fill. In *Pincio*, moreover, the Chinese seem to be better equipped to face the extreme weather the city is experiencing. To a certain extent, the 'tropicalisation' of Rome is not simply a meteorological issue, but involves the city's spirit as well: its new owners are simply more in tune with it.

'Fantasies of reverse colonization', Arata continues, 'are more than products of geopolitical fears. They are also responses to cultural guilt'.⁷² While Italy's colonial history is not as extensive, chronologically or geographically, as that of countries like France or Great Britain, it was anything but short or contained. Between 1890 and 1939, Italy occupied Eritrea, Libya, Rhodes and the Dodecanese Islands, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Albania. Italy's colonial past and responsibilities, however, are usually removed from public discourses, and they are unwelcome topics in discussions among Italians. Paradoxically enough, the memory of Italian colonialism is still very much present in a variety of cultural artifacts and toponyms throughout the country (most cities have streets named after the battles of Amba Alagi and Amba Aradan from the War of Ethiopia – "ambaradan" having also become a colloquial expression for "mess"), and campaigns for the removal of colonial references have been met with backlash: a public intervention of that kind would imply an explicit acknowledgement of the country's responsibilities. Nevertheless, as Stephanie Malia Hom argues, Italy's colonial past influences and shapes the way in which Italy addresses migration today: 'Italy's disavowed colonial past not only becomes expressed by this crisis but also emerges with amplified force'.⁷³ Crucially, Italy also held a concession (i.e. controlled an urban area) in Tianjin, China, from 1901 to 1947.⁷⁴ The kind of colonisation *Pincio* and *Scurati* portray, which is to say one involving only a major city centre and not the whole country, is historically rooted in the very same colonial experience Italy had in China.

It is telling of this discomfort in discussing the memory of colonialism and increasing multi-ethnicity of Italy that the four novels analysed in this paper are able to make certain things visible (climate migrations, climate colonialism) only through the means of science fiction. In *Cinacittà* and *La seconda mezzanotte*, we find that this removal of the history of

Italian colonisation from public discourses takes the form of the transformation of Italians into colonial subjects who have to undergo the same processes of foreign domination they once forced on others: and while the experience of Italian colonisation in China has found virtually no space in public memory, it is a significant coincidence that both Pincio and Scurati imagine a Chinese takeover of Italy in a way that is simultaneously coherent with the historical reality of the Italian colonial experience in China and with the new realities of climate colonialism. In the same way, Arpaia and Zardi have to resort to transforming Italians into migrants (re-activating the latent cultural memory of the decades of mass emigrations) in order to represent in the future and across the Alps what is currently happening across the Mediterranean.

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Notes

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48. Ivi, p. 12.
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67. Scurati, *La seconda mezzanotte*.
68. *Ibid.*
69. M. Chu, "'Non voglio morire cinese": crisi e conflitto in *La seconda mezzanotte* di Antonio Scurati', *Narrativa*, 35–36 (2014), 129–41 (p. 129).
70. G. Zhang, *Migration and the Media: Debating Chinese Migration to Italy, 1992–2012* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), p. 4.
71. Chu, p. 131.
72. Arata, p. 623.
73. S. Malia Hom, *Empire's Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 4. The myth of the 'italiani brava gente' also plays a role in this process, especially in relation to the War of Ethiopia, which took place right before the Second World War; see G. Bartolini, *The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Self-Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility* (London: Palgrave, 2021), pp. 51–101.
74. D. Comberiat, 'La colonia cinese: le rappresentazioni culturali e letterarie della Concessione italiana di Tientsin nella letteratura e nella cultura del Novecento', *Forum Italicum*, 48.3 (2014), 398–410.