

“Il monocolor non esiste”: Postcolonial ekphrasis in Igiaba Scego’s novel *La linea del colore. Il grand tour di Lafanu Brown*

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Abstract: Igiaba Scego’s novel *La linea del colore. Il grand tour di Lafanu Brown* (2020) is a historical novel, a feminist *Bildungsroman*, a contemporary migration novel and a global, political novel. It is also a novel of colours and images. The aim of this analysis is to investigate the function of ekphrasis – defined as verbal descriptions of visual representations – in *La linea del colore*. The question is how this literary device contributes to Scego’s pedagogical and political project of rewriting national history from the point of view of the subaltern, black Italians. Like in her other novels, Scego uses the past to illuminate the present. She relocates colonial memory at the centre of cultural debates in today’s Italy, deconstructing official colonial history. By analysing a small sample of ekphrases, regarding both real and imaginary statues and paintings in the novel, I would like to demonstrate that Scego adds new postcolonial interpretations to the described images. By doing so, she expresses ethical, ideological and poetological contents, aiming to convince her readers that the colour line between black and white people has to be overcome. Scego uses a classical literary device, the ekphrasis, to demonstrate that the line of colour is not only present today but also in Italian Renaissance and Baroque culture.

1. Introduction

Igiaba Scego’s novel *La linea del colore. Il grand tour di Lafanu Brown* (2020) is a novel of images and colours with both literal and symbolic meanings.¹ First, the colour line is an invisible, metaphorical line that separates people because of their skin colour, granting whites privileges denied to blacks – not least the privilege of travelling. It contains questions of colonialism, slavery and racism in past and present societies, and it pays homage to the fundamental essay by sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois, *The souls of black folk* (1903).² Scego draws further symbolic lines in order to point to the inequality due to class and gender, as well as race, and by doing so, she shows nuances of ‘black’ and ‘white’.

Second, the colour line is a visible, pictorial line on a canvas that metonymically indicates the art of painting and thus characterizes one of the protagonists, the Afro-American painter Lafanu Brown: she experiences herself and the surroundings through colours. Colours are central to her descriptions of buildings, landscapes, clothes and art. She grows up in the village of Salenius (corresponding to Salem in Massachusetts), and at nineteen she travels to Europe on a grand tour.³ She stays (involuntarily) in London for six years, and then proceeds to Rome where she settles down. Though considered “the strange negress who drew faces” (20),⁴ she finds a more tolerant environment here and fulfils her dream of becoming a painter.⁵

Scego interconnects these two meanings of the colour line, since the real colour line on canvas represents a way of dealing with and overcoming the consequences of the metaphorical colour line of racism. Lafanu’s art represents her way out of the subaltern condition into which she was born in America in 1842. Thus, paintings and sculptures play a central role in the novel, not only to the plot

¹ In the following, I quote from the English translation, *The Color Line: A Novel*, by John Culler and Gregory Conti (2022), with page numbers in brackets immediately after quotes. References to the Italian original from 2020 will appear in the footnotes.

² “The Problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (Du Bois 1903: 1–2).

³ According to Scego, Lafanu’s name is inspired by Irish author Sheridan Le Fanu who wrote the Gothic novella *Carmilla* (1872). The name also sounds like “l’affanno”, the Italian word for breathlessness and worry.

⁴ Scego 2020: 21.

⁵ Two real-life, black women who both lived in Rome at the end of nineteenth century inspire this character: the sculptor Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907) and the obstetrician and feminist activist Sarah Parker Remond (1826-1894), who was born in Salem.

but also as essential aesthetic elements in the shape of ekphrases.

The aim of the following is to analyse the function of ekphrasis in Scego’s novel, an overseen aspect so far.⁶ How does this literary device contribute to Scego’s main subjects of inequality and racism? How does it contribute to her pedagogical and political project of rewriting national history from the point of view of the subaltern, black Italians? I believe that Scego adds new meaning to the described images and that she, through this transformative strategy, expresses ethical, ideological and poetological contents. She tries to overcome the line between black and white people and to convince her readers that “there are no monotints” (331).⁷

2. Context and concepts

2.1. Italian colonialism

The novel *La linea del colore* does not deal primarily with Italy’s colonial past. However, postcolonial ideology informs Scego’s way of thinking, and, indeed, colonialism provides the framework of the novel: it begins in 1887 with the war at Dogali, where Italy tried to conquer Ethiopia but failed, with the Ethiopian troops inflicting upon the Italians the worst defeat ever suffered by a European nation in Africa.⁸

Scholars claim that the “temporal and spatial axes that link colonization, emigration, and immigration set Italy apart from other European contexts” (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo 2012: 5). Italian colonialism was more limited in time and space than was the case with other European countries, but we should not exaggerate this fact (Brioni 2012). Moreover, Italian colonialism had a significant impact on the development of ideas of race and national identity (Ben-Ghiat & Fuller 2005), and relationships of power created by colonialism are still “reproduced and reinforced” (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo 2012: 2). Economic and cultural effects of colonialism are present in Italy by the “unjust treatment and exclusion of migrants from developing countries who are often denied access to human rights and the privilege of global citizenship” (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo 2012: 2). In addition, until lately, colonialism was absent from public opinion in Italy. Italian colonialism is minimally studied in schools and excluded from mainstream Italian memory (Paynter 2017). Italy had forgotten its colonial past, it had “forgotten about having rained hell upon Somalis, Eritreans, Libyans, and Ethiopians. The Italians had simply wiped that slate clean. This doesn’t mean that Italians were worse than any other colonizers. But they were just like the others. Italians raped, killed, derided, polluted, plundered, and humiliated the peoples with which they came into contact” (Scego 2019: 4).⁹

Several reasons explain this collective lack of consciousness: The decolonization was not the outcome of wars of independence; rather it was the result of the defeat of Fascism (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo 2012: 1).¹⁰ Associated with this, after the fall of Fascism there was a need to rehabilitate the image of the country and erase the crimes committed, including those of colonialism, before and during the regime. To re-establish democracy, the ruling class created a myth of Italian imperialism as less violent than other European powers (Burdett 2007: 121). Finally, Italy did not experience mass

⁶ Many studies have been published on Scego’s work; only to mention a few, see, for example, Negro (2015) on plurilingualism; Paynter (2017) on Scego’s postcolonial affective mapping; Skalle (2017) on female identity and bodily pain; Hogarth (2022) for a comparative study on “afropean” female identity.

⁷ Scego 2020: 360.

⁸ Italy’s first colonial enterprises happened a few years after the unification in 1861 by the new liberal state. The official date of Italian colonialism is 1882 when Italy entered Eritrea. In the following years, Italy conquered Somalia. During Fascism, Italy continued to conquer African territories (Libya 1923-1934; Somalia 1927; Ethiopia 1936), establishing *Africa Orientale Italiana*. When the allies defeated Italy, it abandoned claims to all of its former colonies.

⁹ The first chapter of *La mia casa è dove sono* is translated by Snyder & Williamson (2019). The Italian version is in Scego 2010: 4.

¹⁰ “Having lost the war and, with it, its colonies, Italy believed it had closed a chapter of its history and had atoned for its faults with defeat: we did not have the Algerian or Angolan wars, and we have so believed that it did not need a public and in-depth reflection on our colonial period” (Comberiati 2007: 14; my translation).

migration in the postwar period since the country itself was still an emigrant country sending its citizens to Germany, Austria, Switzerland and to the more industrialized northern Italy as guest workers (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo 2012: 5-6).

During the last 20 years, however, colonialism is attracting the attention of scholars – not least thanks to the literature produced by postcolonial citizens such as Scego. Born in Rome (1974) to Somali parents forced to flee Somalia after the coup d'état in 1969 because her father was part of the new democratic government, she commits herself to a critical revision of the dominant historiography. She holds a PhD in pedagogy; she collaborates with major Italian newspapers and is a prominent voice in the debate on racism, cultural identity and the legal situation of second-generation migrants.

2.2. Theories of ekphrasis

Greek rhetoricians used the term ekphrasis to define the description of a place, mainly the scene of crime or a work of art.¹¹ Ekphrasis is also closely connected with memory (Webb 2009). Today, ekphrasis means the verbal description of a visual representation – most often a painting, sculpture or photo, whether real or imaginary – in a literary text.¹² The ekphrasis aims at describing an image in a dramatic and lively way to visualize otherwise invisible images and meanings (Eco 2003: 208). Something “magical” is required of language when translating a visual image in a written text, according to the American art historian W. J. T. Mitchell (Mitchell 1992: 700), and ekphrasis often requires a special attention to the “corporeality” of words (Mitchell 1992: 700). Moreover, when defining ekphrasis, scholars have reflected on questions regarding the relationship between subject-object, time-space, image-word and men-women:

The position of the narrator in front of the work of art, with the gaze meeting that of the person depicted, has been compared to the encounter between two living beings, between a speaking and observing self and a mute and observed other (Mitchell 1992: 700). Other scholars have pointed to the fact that the observed figure is often anthropomorphized (Sanders 1997: 37). Moreover, the speaking subject often addresses the observed object by means of apostrophes.

Furthermore, literature is traditionally characterized by temporality (and orality) addressing the ear; visual art is characterized by spatiality (and silence) addressing the eye.¹³ Through ekphrasis the observed object becomes a written image unfolding spatially to the inner eye of the reader; the narrative slows down and ekphrasis creates a “still moment” in the text. Conversely, ekphrasis adds stories to the observed image, and temporality of literary narration thus enters the spatiality of the image.

The verbal description, at times, transforms the original image and creates a completely new verbal image. According to some scholars, the new verbal image ‘competes’ with the work of art (Heffernan 1993: 1), and the ekphrasis represents a “struggle for dominance between the image and the word” (Heffernan 1993: 1). This struggle is often “the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening” (Heffernan 1993: 1).

However, the definition of ekphrasis is a contested field among scholars, and Mitchell has argued that “from the semantic point of view, from the standpoint of referring, expressing intentions, and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images” (Mitchell 1992: 701).¹⁴ He compares the perceived opposition between text and image to the perceived differences between gender, race and class often erected “into essential oppositions that

¹¹ <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ecfrasi/>

¹² The following very short and eclectic definition builds on various and different theories of ekphrasis by Mitchell, Sanders and Heffernan.

¹³ This statement was made by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his *Laocoon* (1766). See Heffernan 2015: 37.

¹⁴ “Language can stand in for depiction and depiction can stand in for language because communicative, expressive acts ... are not ‘proper’ to some medium or other” (Mitchell 1992: 701).

can only be overcome in some utopian realm” (Mitchell 1992: 702).¹⁵

Indeed, ekphrasis is an overall “ambivalent stylistic tool”, according to Mitchell, also thanks to the interplay of three phases of ekphrastic fascination: indifference, hope and fear. Indifference indicates the perception that ekphrasis is impossible.¹⁶ “Ekphrastic hope” is when we discover a “sense” in which language “makes us see” (Mitchell 1992: 696). The goal of ekphrastic hope is “the overcoming of Otherness” (Mitchell 1992: 699), it involves a “reciprocity” or “free exchange and transference between visual and verbal art” (Mitchell 1992: 699). This moment, however, is followed by “ekphrastic fear” since this reciprocity is perceived as a dangerous promiscuity (Mitchell 1992: 698).

According to Mitchell, the ambivalent nature of ekphrasis “transfers into the realm of literary art sublimated versions of our ambivalence about social others. Ekphrastic hope and fear express our anxieties about merging with the Other” (Mitchell 1992: 699). This conceptualization seems relevant to the understanding of Scego’s ekphrasis. Indeed, she uses this device to express “anxieties about merging with the Other”; however, her ‘mission’ is (utopian perhaps) to erase any fear about merging with the Other.

3. Analysis

3.1. Colours of pain and joy

In *La linea del colore* the parallel stories of three Afro-descendant women are intertwined: The nineteenth-century female painter Lafanu Brown (with a Chippewa mother and Haitian father) and the contemporary Leila, a Somali Italian art curator in her late 40’s, who discovers Lafanu and prepares a retrospective for the Venice Biennale to honour Lafanu.¹⁷ Moreover, Leila’s younger Somalian cousin, Binti, is a central figure representing the contemporary theme of Mediterranean migration. She embarks on the dangerous journey to Europe but is raped and left in a state of depression and muteness. Her name means ‘girl’ in Arabic, and she represents a broad group of girls who dream of a better life in Europe but who, in contrast to Lafanu, do not have the privilege of travelling. Leila succeeds in helping Binti, heavily marked by the violent experience, and she begins to create art works at the hospital like the other patients who “look like a bunch of dark-skinned Rembrandts!” (287).¹⁸ As in the case of Lafanu, art becomes her salvation.

Leila is the bridge between past and present, and between different ‘Italies’: the colonial Italy, the desired Italy of the travellers of the Grand Tour and of today’s migrants. Leila tells every second chapter in the first person, while the narrating voice tells the other chapters in the third person. She connects the three stories – all of which contain elements of racial discrimination, traumatic violence against female black bodies and the longing for freedom, but also sisterhood, solidarity across skin colours and class distinctions, the love for travelling and for Rome.

When Lafanu realizes that, to her, “Painting was a language” (111),¹⁹ a new life begins. Throughout the novel, Lafanu’s visual way of experiencing the world is underlined. Among numerous examples, seventeen-year-old Lafanu experiences the traumatic assault (probably including a rape)

¹⁵ “The oppositions that inform our theories of the text-image difference—nature vs. convention, visual vs. aural, space vs. time— are similarly loaded with ideological assumptions about the meanings that are proper to the media” (Mitchell 1992: 702).

¹⁶ “It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do (...)” (Mitchell 1992: 696).

¹⁷ Scego is the author of numerous works of fiction and nonfiction. This novel is the final part of a trilogy of colonial violence together with *Oltre Babilonia* (2008, *Beyond Babylon*, 2019) and *Adua* (2015). In the following, I will focus only on the ekphrases and leave out other relevant issues regarding plot, black female identity, Italian colonialism, contemporary racism and migration. I investigate the ekphrases in the rest of Scego’s novels in a forthcoming study.

¹⁸ Scego 2020: 310-313.

¹⁹ Scego 2020: 121.

as the escape of colours:

The first color to fly away from her was the yellow from the dress with the yellow stripes that she'd tailored for herself with such great care ... Of the bright yellow, ... that had made her feel the sun was inside her chest, there remained barely a glimmer. Then the green of hope went away. ... The other colors likewise fled from her, one by one. The orchid blue, the eggplant purple, and the frosted rose petals she'd strewn on her hair ... The amaranth left her too, and the fuchsia, and the cyclamen pink. The orange looked at her for a moment before it vanished, ... Lafanu was lying on the ground and groaning. ... Even the mandarin, the hollyhock crimson, and the cornflower blue turned their backs on her. ... Every color Lafanu had on was canceled. There remained to her a vague trace of mother-of-pearl in her terrified eyes and the black hue of her ebony skin (37-38).²⁰

Despite the pain, Lafanu's project is born from the traumatic event. She decides not to give up. "She'd regather her colors. She'd become an artist" (41). She gradually learns how to spread the colours and how to dilute and mix them. Indeed, later on, the colours return, and she describes the joyful experience of masturbation as a "rainbow of pleasure" (215).

Colours also appear in the many ekphrases found in *La linea del colore* both at the narrative level of the nineteenth century, with Lafanu observing and creating the art works, and at the narrative level of the present day (1992-2020) with Leila as the observer. Scego often follows the same pattern in the ekphrases: she describes the art works briefly, then passes on to the anthropomorphisation of the figures and finally to the identification with them, including reflections or memories. The following examples belong to three categories: real statues, real paintings and fictitious paintings.

3.2. Ekphrases

3.2.1. Real statue

The *Fountain of the Four Moors*, in Marino, a village a few miles south of Rome, has a central function to both Lafanu and Leila. The monument is the city's most important symbol, commissioned to celebrate the victory of the Christians over the Ottomans in Lepanto in 1571, realized by the Emperor, Venice and the Papal State. The monument was made in 1632,²¹ but since it was damaged during the Second World War by American bombings, it was redesigned by Marino Mazzacurati (1969). Indeed, the two monuments differ from one another. Apparently, the female African figures underwent a change: Before 1969 they were more bent forward with their face turned down. In the new version, they are in an upright position and have been supplemented with more visible and sensual breasts and a necklace.²²

With a column, symbol of the Colonna family, at the centre of the statue, the monument celebrates one of the noble lords of Marino, Marcantonio Colonna (1535-84), remembered for his part as the admiral of the Papal fleet in the great battle. The four enchained and naked moors represent the defeat and enslavement of the Turkish enemy. Leila visits Marino during the "Sagra dell'Uva" (Grape Festival), invented in 1925 by the Fascist regime to commemorate the victory.²³ She describes the four statues chained to the fountain; their arms were tied behind their backs (54). Then she passes on to her identification with them, to memories of her mother's diasporic condition and to a reflection

²⁰ Scego 2020: 41.

²¹ It was designed by architect Sergio Venturi and realized in stone by Pompeo Castiglia and Pietro Taccia.

²² Photographs of the old fountain are not easily found, but some can be seen here: <http://www.fotografi-videoperatori.beniculturali.it/iccd-fotografia/scheda/D002274>

²³ Pope Pio V had set up a sacred feast of the "Madonna del Rosario" to celebrate the victory. Though the tradition of making the fountains spray wine instead of water was founded in seventeenth-century Rome (cf. Di Flumeri 2007), this Grape festival did not exist at that time.

on black bodies: Their faces were filled with suffering:

The four prisoners, two men and two women with naked breasts, looked like me. They had black skin like mine, curly hair like mine. ... They had the same nostalgic look my mother had when she thought about her life in Somalia. ... I saw fear there too. I felt as though those prisoners, especially the two women, were calling out to me for help. But I didn't know how to set them free. Poor nameless women. ... We were three Black sisters, foreign to one another, separated by centuries, but companions in suffering. Because being Black meant having to deal once again with the chains that cut into our flesh. ... living in constant fear of losing your body (55).²⁴

The local Italians who are busy eating pork and drinking wine, do not notice the suffering of the figures, while the protagonist has a poetic and ethical epiphany: “I suddenly understood that my mission was to save those four suffering people, and that they had asked for my help with their stricken look. It didn't matter that they were stone statues” (56).²⁵ She decides to help people to see better: “To probe beneath the surface, to decode the paintings, the bas-reliefs, and the statues that were all around them ... I would give others new eyes for seeing the world they made their way through every day. Lenses for understanding the past and laying hold of the future” (56-57).²⁶ This passage is central to Leila's awakening and her choice of becoming an art curator. The importance is confirmed when the nineteenth-century protagonist visits the fountain as well, observing the humiliated women thinking that they wanted someone to give them a voice (73).²⁷

Scego's female gazes tell a counter narrative about the historical event and its consequences. The mute figures are given voice and a place in history, and through her ekphrasis they shout out their pain. She lifts the statue out of the male, white hands and back into history. The gaze of the protagonists assigns power and voice to the mute female figures. Scego's postcolonial and feminist ekphrasis transforms the fountain in a new *lieu de memoire* not only linked to the national history of Italy but also to the transgenerational memory of African people and Afro-American enslavement.²⁸

Scego focuses on the blackness of the figures, and indeed, it sparks curiosity that the four captives of the fountain in Marino (as well as the ones in Livorno) appear racialized. Leila guesses that the four Moors may represent spoils of war. Indeed, it was common in early modern Europe, in particular after the battle of Lepanto, that the Turks in sculpture “were always the same: chained, crouching, and crushed under Euro-Christian victory. In this way, the sculptures could assure the Italians of the defeat of the religious, military, and maritime enemy” and “no longer provoke fear” (Matar 2022: 101). Matar, a scholar on Muslim captives in early modern Europe, suggests that the blackness of the bodies could reflect the involvement of the Italian lord in slave trade (Matar 2022: 103), but it is still not quite clear “why turks [sic] from Tunisia would be Negroid Black” (Matar 2022: 103), while the majority of captives were North Africans. Finally, Matar is struck by the “pornographic element in the posture of the women with their legs wide open, ... their plumb breasts pushing forward, their lips apart, as if inviting sexual seizure” (Matar 2022: 108). In contrast to Scego's narrators, he does not perceive the women as humiliated. Apparently, he is not aware of the fact that the statue in Marino was redesigned in 1969. No matter how we explain the question of the

²⁴ Scego 2020: 60.

²⁵ Scego 2020: 61.

²⁶ Scego 2020: 62.

²⁷ The protagonists also visit the Fountain of the Four Moors, in Livorno, realized in 1607-26, a few years before the one in Marino. In Livorno, Ferdinando I (1595-1626) is represented with four male enchained slaves. See Scego 2020: 235. Lafanu remembers the fugitive freed slaves she had seen at home.

²⁸ In 2017, a citizen of Marino, Ivano Ciccarelli, proposed to demolish the fountain: <http://www.noicambiamo.it/news/2017/09/12/la-provocazione-ciccarelli-demolire-la-fontana-dei-quattro-mori/>

captives' skin colour, the celebration of the victory of Lepanto appears to be a celebration of victory of race and religion.

3.2.2. Real paintings

Many of the works observed by Lafanu and Leila – and described by Scego – belong to a western canon considered part of the classical education when visiting Rome. These art works testify to the presence of Afro-descendant persons in Italy to whom Scego pays attention. Describing paintings, she assigns the black people a history; she imagines their feelings and draws our attention to their inferior roles in the margins of history. This is the case of Lorenzo Lotto's painting *Santa Lucia before the judge* (1532). Leila notices that the young Black maid, whom Lotto portrays, is quite busy; “her scarf slipping off her head as she tries to restrain a particularly mischievous child. ... The servant's holding him back with great difficulty, and thus she remains in the place she thinks is the only one due her: the margin” (131-32).²⁹ Leila then studies Lafanu's sketches of this painting focused on the Black girl and her anxiety.³⁰ Lafanu “transforms the scene into her obsession. Into an investigation of terror.”³¹ She is convinced that the girl is afraid of making a mistake. “Afraid of getting a beating. Afraid of being punished if the little boy gets away from her. She's terrorized. And she sees the child as an enemy, as someone who has the power to do her great harm” (132).³² Through the ekphrasis, Scego adds a personal imaginary story to the portrayed people; she interconnects memories of black slavery and fear from various historical periods and geographical contexts and influences her readers to ‘see’ and feel empathy with the black servant.

Lafanu also visits the church of San Sebastiano in Venice, “an exultant triumph of colors” (197), in which she observes Paolo Veronese's *Martyrdom of San Sebastiano* (1565). In front of the painting, she experiences a moment of ecstasy described in her notebook.

Saint Sebastian is about to be tortured to death. He's lying on a wooden table, his face full of distress. He is going to be scourged ... A tumult of emotions surrounds his condemned body. ... In the middle ... there's a black child, a boy of nine or ten at the most. He's holding the whips that will be used on the saint. His eyes are sad. (198)³³

The narrator quotes from Lafanu's diaries. As is the case with the other ekphrases, the character becomes alive and has feelings: “He's so solemn in his mute sorrow. The child knows that he and the saint will die together. ... The boy's sadness springs from his knowledge that the saint's torture will be his own someday, as it will be mine and our people's” (198-99). Finally, Lafanu identifies with him: “He has the same fuzzy hair I had when I was a little girl. ... At bottom, that sad child painted by Veronese is me. So are we all, all of us who have Africa in our blood” (198-99).³⁴ Scego invites her reader to observe the artwork with a new sensitivity towards the role of black people in Italy's past and present.

The examples covered thus far portray the pain and inferiority of Afro-descendant people. In other cases, however, Scego also highlights their pride and strength, as in the ekphrasis of Andrea Pozzo's allegory of Africa (1691-1694), in the vault of the church of *Sant' Ignazio di Loyola*, in Rome. Lafanu feels invaded by the colours in the church and the representation of the African continent impresses her. It is described as a “regal figure that seemed to be looking right at them”. She identifies

²⁹ Scego 2020: 142.

³⁰ There are indeed two ekphrases ‘in one’ as Leila observes the reproduction of Lotto's painting as well as Lafanu's sketches of the painting.

³¹ Scego 2020: 142.

³² Scego 2020: 142-143.

³³ Scego 2020: 215.

³⁴ Scego 2020: 215.

with Pozzo’s creation; she had “the same black skin, the same frizzy hair, and the same posture, sober and controlled. The figure was clearly an icon of Africa. She was the personification of the continent that Lafanu’s paternal ancestors had come from” (294).³⁵ Later, Lafanu is very inspired by the proud and almost irreverent attitude of this African woman.

3.2.3 Imaginary paintings

The novel also features many of Lafanu’s own (thus imaginary) paintings. By means of ekphrases, Scego sketches the story of Lafanu’s development as an artist. From drawings of eyes, mouths and noses, to portraits of her white patrons, mythological themes and historical paintings regarding Italian Unification. These were exhibited in her hometown, together with a painting of an idealized local hero on horseback, represented with “chromatic contrasts, worthy of Caravaggio” (276), and they were much appreciated by the public, except for one person: the abolitionist activist, Frederick Bailey, whom she loves. He blames her for betraying her origins, “it’s as though she had forgotten she is a negress. Where are we in this picture? Where are her oppressed people?” (277)³⁶ Partly due to this provocation, Lafanu eventually turns into a more socially committed artist. She takes notes on slave trade and makes reproductions of famous classical paintings such as Carpaccio and Veronese focusing on the black faces in the scenes. Most importantly, inspired by the women of Lotto and Pozzo, and of the monument in Marino, Lafanu makes a portrait of Africa in her own way. She works day and night painting an enchained woman, but the work leaves her unsatisfied until she realizes that “Africa had to be freed” (296).³⁷ The result is a smiling, naked African woman at the centre of the canvas. “The woman with her bare breasts and short hair who was looking out at the world with an air of defiance. ... The woman was standing on a seashell, proud of her skin, a black Venus. On her wrists, those broken chains that the young woman displayed with pride, *Forever Free*” (311-312).³⁸ Despite the explicit reference to Botticelli’s Venus, the title of the painting, *Forever Free*, seems to stem from the homonymous statue made by Edmonia Lewis (1867).³⁹

Unlike the male gaze of traditional ekphrastic poetry, Scego aims to liberate the silent and often suffering female figures of the paintings. She gives them a voice and portrays them not only as victims but as proud individuals who challenge the observer and inspire revolt. In the terms of Mitchell, we might say that Scego expresses an “ekphrastic hope” to overcome differences (Mitchell 1992: 699), to make her readers feel involved and to make them see – that is, understand and acknowledge – the Other; the other human being who is different from oneself by skin colour, class and/or gender.

4. Conclusion

La linea del colore combines different historical moments in which African people have felt the humiliating consequences of the invisible colour line – in North America, in Great Britain and in Italy – from sixteenth-century society, nineteenth-century colonialism and twentieth-century Fascism to the contemporary era of migration from the global south to Europe. Scego uses the past to illuminate the present; she relocates colonial memory at the centre of cultural debates in today’s Italy. Her novel

³⁵ Scego 2020: 320. Among the other paintings copied by Lafanu there is the “gondoliere elegante” at the center of Vittorio Carpaccio’s “Il miracolo della croce a Rialto” (141), also mentioned by Scego in her “Making of” as a “magnifico gondoliere afrodiscendente” (349). He, too, bears witness to the presence of black people in sixteenth-century Italian society.

³⁶ Scego 2020: 300.

³⁷ Scego 2020: 321.

³⁸ Scego 2020: 340.

³⁹ The sculpture is visible at Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forever_Free_%28sculpture%29 Scego may also be inspired by marble statues like Hiram Powers’ *Greek Slave* (1846) or by Harriet Hosmer’s *Zenobia in Chains* (circa 1859). The first one represents a captive by the Ottoman Turks and was seen as an emblem of moral purity (her nudity fully to blame on her captors), and it was hugely popular in the US despite being the first fully nude female sculpture made by an American to be exhibited in public.

is a feminist *Bildungsroman*, a historical novel, a contemporary migration novel and a global, political novel that places itself in opposition to the right-wing government in contemporary Italy, whose representatives have expressed revisionist claims denying the colonial past.⁴⁰

Summing up, Scego uses a classical literary device to deconstruct perceptions of the other in Italian culture. Her ekphrases, often regarding works from the classical high culture, reveal the presence of black people in early-modern Italy and the western, patriarchal gaze on Afro-descendants. The ekphrases function as a vehicle of individual and collective memory; furthermore, they are transgenerational, feminist and postcolonial. Scego adds new interpretations to well-known art works and monuments, and her ekphrases thus represent a battlefield not only between word and image, but between memories and identities of colonizer and colonized, men and women, blacks and whites.

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⁴⁰ A few years ago, the president of the regional assembly of Calabria, Domenico Tallini, from *Forza Italia* defended Fascist colonialism: "Fascism was not racist, it brought civilization to Africa". <https://www.open.online/2020/06/21/il-colonialismo-fascista-per-domenico-tallini-fi-non-era-razzismo-porto-la-civilta-in-africa/> Accessed on November 15, 2023.

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