



A Victorious Roman Holiday: Life Writing and Loving Beyond Boundaries

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Abstract

Immobile during the Coronavirus pandemic, I question the PhD I am currently working on because it focuses on life writing about frequent international migration in childhood. Feeling stuck and disheartened, I look for a little ray of hope in order to escape my Covid-19 limbo. Thinking about how the life writers I am studying would deal with recounting the past experiences of my mobile family, through this Creative Matters piece, I ultimately win endurance and optimism by telling my parents' story of conquering love beyond boundaries.

Keywords: transnational love, family history, Third Culture Kids, migration in childhood, pandemic limbo

Sintesi

Durante l'emergenza coronavirus mi blocco e faccio fatica a scrivere la mia tesi di dottorato. La mia ricerca si concentra sulla rappresentazione dell'esperienza di migranti minori in varie forme di narrazioni autobiografiche ma io, come tutti intorno a me, sono ferma. Cerco un raggio di luce e cerco di superare la fatica di scrivere. Per uscire dal limbo in cui mi trovo cerco di immaginarmi le strategie letterarie che i narratori che sto studiando userebbero per raccontare il passato migratorio della mia famiglia. Infine trovo il coraggio per ripartire e ritrovo la serenità perduta tramite

questo testo creativo che descrive il primo incontro tra i miei genitori ed il loro amore senza confini.

Parole chiave: Amore transnazionale, storie di famiglia, Third Culture Kids, migrazione giovanile, ansia da limbo Covid-19

Introduction: Dealing with Immobility

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.¹*

Dante Alighieri's deeply autobiographical fourteenth-century poem *The Divine Comedy* begins in a gloomy location. The poet has arrived at the middle of his life and feels lost in a dark forest. Recently, like the Italian poet, I have been somewhat disrupted in the middle of my life and in the current pandemic, I also seem to be obsessed with the number three. Accordingly, I keep splitting everything into three parts, and my life is now divided into BC, DC and AC (Before, During and After COVID-19).

BC, I presented a paper at the conference 'Beyond Boundaries: Authorship and Readership in Life Writing' at Tilburg University, the Netherlands. BC, my aim was to develop the paper into a scholarly article for this journal. DC, however, I am stuck in academic purgatory. Instead of writing new chapters of my PhD, I spend too much time wishing AC will arrive soon. Whereas my neighbours keep boasting (from a distance, of course) that they now have so much time on their hands, DC is mostly a tiresome phase for me. Unsuccessfully, I try to lessen my anxiety, but my worried soul keeps journeying, just like that of Dante.

DC, I observe a wave of nationalism and too many politicians across the globe playing the blame game; I witness the persistence and indeed worsening of stark racial disparities; and I worry about my teenage daughter's future, while I assist her as best as I can during her school's long shutdown. At her age, I was having fun at school with friends, and so I pity her at times. Since she started high school over seven years ago, she has been counting the days until her form's graduation trip to Rome. But DC, the journey has been cancelled, and my daughter stopped counting on day 2,783. *Addio Roma*. And now as I write, my mind quickly moves to the images I saw on the news last evening. BC, seven member states of the European Union had promised to

welcome refugee children stranded in Greece. DC, the pandemic has destroyed these plans. The children are now waiting and playing in the filth of the hellish Moria refugee camp, and I explain to my daughter that her own experience of DC is truly divine.

The paper I presented in October 2019 at Tilburg University was based on research I had carried out for the first two chapters of my PhD. My doctoral thesis explores twenty-first-century life writing that describes the phenomenon of growing up in at least three countries, cultures and languages – an experience that I call ‘moving childhoods’. Various types of both frequent migration in childhood and genres of life writing have been the focus of my research for the past years. However, current travel restrictions, and reports of children around the world who aspire to migrate but are experiencing involuntary immobility, make me now wonder how timely my project is in these very immobile times. Above all, entering my mind while I am trying to work on my PhD are thoughts about my parents, who live in northern Italy, an area that has been particularly badly affected by the global coronavirus pandemic. I am immobilised by the knowledge that they are at risk, alone and so distant. Once upon a time, they were privileged to experience voluntary mobility and to have the choice to travel and live overseas. Their three children were born in three very different countries (my brother in Italy, my sister in the UK, and I was born in Liberia). The negative consequence of their migratory past is that their offspring have followed in their international footsteps, and we all now live apart, scattered around Europe.

Lost and immobilised in purgatory as the pandemic drags on, I look for a little ray of hope, and I find some brightness knowing that my parents have each other and their moving and international story of enduring love. For this reason, rather than concentrating (as I did in Tilburg) on two cross-cultural artists who cross the borders between life writing for children and adults, through this Creative Matters piece, I hope to ultimately win strength and optimism by telling the story of yearning and winning beyond boundaries. Aren't many of us now toying with BC, DC and AC thoughts? It is a game motif that in fact guides this life writing project.

Mobility – Putting my Cards on the Table

Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is divided into three parts: *Hell*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. Each part (called a *cantica*) consists of 33 *canti* (poems) with three-line stanzas. In the fifth *canto* of *Hell*, Dante meets the lovers Francesca and Paolo. After hearing their story of ceaseless love recounted by Francesca, Dante is so moved by pity that he faints. Studying Dante's epic poem at school and university, it was always this fifth *canto* that

fascinated me the most. At my desk, I played with my pencil and the words in front of me, and replaced three vowels. The outcome was that the lovers were then called Paula and Francesco: the names of my mother and father. Paula and Francesco had their share of obstacles to overcome too, but unlike the protagonists of Dante's fifth *canto*, my parents were not condemned to hell. On the contrary, theirs is a story of endurance; and in times like these, amid all the worries, it is important to tell narratives of hope. But then I get stuck again, because I am not a life writer but simply a scholar of life writing. How can I best write about the very special first encounter between my parents? Of a British teenage girl who met the love of her life many years ago on a hot Italian summer's day?

In Tilburg I presented the girlhood experiences of the authors Abeer Hoque and Elizabeth Liang. In her memoir *Olive Witch: A Cross-Cultural Memoir*,² Hoque describes growing up in Nigeria, Bangladesh and the United States, whereas in her one-woman play *Alien Citizen: An Earth Odyssey*,³ Liang performs her experience of moving internationally seven times by the time she was fourteen years old. In their works, both these writers refer to the phenomenon 'Third Culture Kids'. Sociologists, educators and psychologists use this term to describe individuals who were raised outside their parents' countries or cultures of origin; but too few literary scholars consider the specific experience of migrating in childhood. Accordingly, my research focuses on the main aesthetic and generic elements chosen by the life writers to depict their unique girlhoods. Both Hoque and Liang, for example, use the images of masks throughout their works. Both girls, as I argued in Tilburg, repeatedly don masks; and the list of roles they perform, in an attempt to fit in with their continually changing surroundings, is boundless.

Now, at my desk in front of a blank sheet, I think about how my life writers would deal with recounting the love story of Paula and Francesco. Which symbols or props would they choose to accompany the protagonists creatively throughout their life writing? And how would they tackle the contrast between orality and literacy? How can I take the oral story about how my parents met, and translate it effectively on paper? I would like to preserve Paula and Francesco's extraordinary first encounter in writing, but it is a story that was told to me in Italian over and over again. I was the listener, and the story was in constant motion. How does one best fix stories of mobility that are always on the move?

Dante's fainting upon hearing the tale of Francesca and Paolo mirrors the image of myself as a child, sitting up in bed listening to my aunt telling me about her father and my parents when they were younger. Although I did not pass out, every now and again, I would rest my head on my aunt's perfectly ironed pillowcase – faintly, for fear

of creasing it. And then, without warning, the intense whiff of mothballs from my aunt's pillowcase bursts back from the past. This sudden blast conjures up recollections of a childhood card game – and at last I have perhaps found the most fitting motif to reveal and commemorate the heavenly relationship of Paula and Francesco.

Machiavelli is an Italian card game that is derived from Rummy. The game is named after Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli, a sixteenth-century Florentine strategic political philosopher. In fact, to the dismay of their opponents, cunning Machiavelli players can move cards around and completely modify the layout of sets of matching cards on the table. The cards in this game are thus rarely immobile.

Although mobility in childhood was a challenging experience for the life writers I explore, because they and their families were often forced to migrate, my own transient girlhood was an elite one, for many reasons. Many years ago, one of my privileges was having relatives who lived in a scenic seaside resort in Liguria, Italy, between Portofino and the Cinque Terre. Long and sweltering summer school holidays were spent on the beaches of a small town called Chiavari; where, up to my teenage years, I would often share a big bed with Zia Lidia, my father's sister. At night, the two of us would play Machiavelli for money – or rather, for the lightweight Italian five-lire aluminium coins, which in adult hands felt like toy coins (and were worth about the same). Zia Lidia knew that I loved to hear tales about my ancestors, so while playing, she would triumphantly tell stories about both my grandfather's and my father's moving past. Because Machiavelli is not a particularly quick game, a lot of biographical details were disclosed, while the cream-coloured bedspread slowly disappeared under an array of cards.

Apparently, my paternal grandfather Paolo was born a rebel. The island of Sicily, where Paolo was born in the early 1900s, was a part of the Kingdom of Italy, and many Sicilians at that time were both devoutly Catholic and loyal to the monarchy. Thus, Paolo decided to become both a Protestant pastor and a Republican. Protestant theology could then only be studied in Rome, and family legend has it that my great-grandparents threatened Paolo. If he were to leave the island, they would never want to see him again. Bravely, or perhaps stubbornly, Paolo decided to move to mainland Italy, where he soon became one of a handful of Italian protestant ministers at that time, and where he also joined the Republican Party. In 'exile', he did not write about Sicily. Instead, in his spare time, he began publishing booklets about the lives of the Republican leaders Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini, and collecting scarce stamps that portrayed the history of Waldensian-Methodist churches. According to another family legend, there were very few Protestant women in Italy at that time, so

Paolo could not be too picky when looking for a wife who would help him run a church. In the south of Italy, Paolo found the right wife, and together they had five children.

Zia Lidia often recounted that my father, the youngest of the family, was born during a bomb attack, shortly before the end of the Second World War in southern Italy. My dad's siblings therefore named him 'Franco la bomba' (Franco the bomb). As a child, my father, together with his family, frequently relocated within Italy, because my grandfather was moved from church to church at regular intervals. While I was listening attentively to her stories, the matched sets of three or more cards would move across Zia Lidia's big dark wooden bed, while my father was also travelling up Italy's sunlit boot. Francesco, or rather, Franco was now in high school in central Italy, studying to become an accountant. And suddenly, from the deck of cards emerges the Queen of Hearts.

While we are playing, Zia Lidia tells me that it was thanks to more prominent games that my parents met. The 1960 Summer Olympics were one of the reasons why the youth group of my mother's Baptist church, in north-west London, headed all the way to Rome sixty years ago. The British group sojourned in the holiday camp of the Italian Protestant church in Santa Severa, a small seaside resort north of Rome. Fate had shuffled the cards, and my father's congregation was in Santa Severa too. The most important game was ready to begin.

In these childhood memories, my aunt lays a set of three Queens down on one side of the bedspread, and a set of Kings on the other. In 1960, Zia Lidia was in Santa Severa too, and she tells me that the Italian boys had received unequivocal orders: 'Do not approach and harass the British girls!' I have been looking forward to this part of the story, as it is my favourite bit, and I have been waiting for my aunt's cards too. I rearrange the set of Queens and Kings and play my Aces. Now the Queen and King of Hearts are no longer apart but in the same hand in consecutive order, next to each other.

Of course, the rules of the game were broken that summer, and the Italian boys mixed with the British girls. My father had been sent to the station with a cart to help the girls carry their cases to the camp. Zia Lidia will never forget that when her brother came back from the station, he looked different. I know from what my father has told us children that the moment he set his eyes on my slim and energetic mother at Santa Severa station, he knew that this was the woman he would marry one day. No matter how often he remembered that summer day of 1960, he would glow with pride, and every single time he told us about the station episode, I would get goosepimples. I suppose this is the part of Paula and Francesco's story that always makes me dizzy.

Despite all my multicultural and multilingual experiences, and indeed my own intercultural marriage, it is mind-blowing to think that these two teenagers did not have a common language, yet they fell desperately in love with each other within the span of a short Roman holiday. In the language of love, at the end of their vacation, my penniless father promised my mother that he would start earning money and he would marry her within three years. My dad kept his promise of love. Francesco was seventeen and still a schoolboy, but he immediately began doing odd jobs. He worked in Switzerland during school holidays, and Paula was always on his mind. Long before Zoom, Skype and low-cost airlines, those three years in which the couple lived apart must have been unbearable. My father lived in Ancona, in central Italy, and my mother in London. They were both too poor to afford expensive international phone calls and trips. The two lovers only had the means for letters and one ferry trip a year.

When Paula and Francesco finally got married, exactly three years after their extraordinary first encounter, my mother was twenty. In those days Paula, was still underage, so my British grandparents had to give their permission before the couple could get married. Marvellously, it was my grandfather Paolo who performed Paula and Francesco's wedding ceremony in Chiavari. It was on this occasion that my maternal grandparents met my paternal grandparents for the very first time. Although communication by means of gestures must have been exhausting for all of the guests, the three black-and-white photos that I possess of my parents' wedding reveal that the small celebration was a great success. I never got tired of hearing about my parents' wedding, and so I would always make sure that the Machiavelli games with Zia Lidia were strategically complicated and long ones. Deliberately, I would keep rearranging cards and forming new stretched arrays of cards.

Back on my aunt's bed as a child, I am eyeing a new straight – the King, Queen and Jack of Hearts – and I am wondering whether to rearrange the trio. After their honeymoon, my parents moved to Turin in northern Italy, where my father worked in a bank and where my brother was born in 1965. Paula and Francesco were finally a married couple; however, they were scared of having to live apart yet again. Back then, military service was mandatory in Italy, and the couple knew that a letter of conscription was on its way. My father, who was already very thin at that time, decided to go on a diet. More precisely, he went hungry in order to stay with his newlywed wife. Every evening, my mother seized her measuring-tape and checked the size of her husband's chest. In fact, this was a Machiavellian strategy. Because my father was underweight, he was not drafted, and he was allowed to stay in Turin with my mother. The end justifies the means. Francesco managed to keep the second of his three promises of love to Paula.

Conclusion – The Queen and King of Hearts

Why I am so tired? Is it because DC daily routines have changed? Or is anxiety exhausting me? Back to Chiavari. It is late and I am beginning to feel drowsy. Through the open window, the strong smell of cigarette smoke has ceased, and I hear the loud noise of the owner of the bar below heaving down the rusty metal shutters. Chiavari is an olfactory and auditory clock for me: it is now a couple of minutes after midnight. Instead of rearranging the King, Queen and Jack of Hearts, I simply add a ten and nine of Hearts to the three cards. They were my last two cards, and the game of Machiavelli is over for today. I can sleep now, because I know how the story of Paula and Francesco continues. *Grazie e dormi bene*. Thanks for passing down these family stories, Zia Lidia, and sleep well. Because my father has become accustomed to moving frequently in childhood, and because he can speak English so well in his twenties, he does not hesitate when his bank asks him to work abroad. It means that he will finally earn more money for his family, and after Paula and Francesco go overseas, my sister and I are born.

Love is a game that two can play, and both win, said the Hungarian-American actress Eva Gabor. I like to think of my parents as a winning couple. As you can imagine by now, Francesco's third promise of love to Paula was that he would always be there for her. In good times and in difficult ones – like now, when the two of them feel isolated from the world. In the Machiavelli game, a single card or a pair of cards cannot be laid alone on the table. Valid melds in Machiavelli are sets that consist of at least three cards, either of the same rank but different suits, or in consecutive order of the same suit. Although my King and Queen of Hearts are out there on their own, possibly with the help of these words, I hope that they understand that they will never be alone. They have something unique. Just like BC, their love and their family are their third card, the trump card, which they will hold forever. Surely, a sunny future lies ahead for my daughter too. Positive thoughts. AC is on its way, and whatever happens, all roads will always lead to Rome (and beyond).



About the author

Jessica Sanfilippo-Schulz is a doctoral researcher at the University of Leeds. Currently, she is a visiting scholar at the Graduate School 'Practices of Literature' of the University of Muenster. Her thesis explores life writing about frequent international mobility in girlhood. Jessica is also passionate about creative writing.

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Notes

¹ Alighieri, Dante, and Giorgio Petrocchi. *La Divina Commedia*. Varese: Crescere Edizioni, 2012 (9). Allen Mandelbaum translates this opening three-line stanza as follows: 'When I had journeyed half of our life's way / I found myself within a shadowed forest/for I had lost the path that does not stray.' For

further details, translations and a digital edition of *The Divine Comedy*, see Columbia University Libraries' *Digital Dante*, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-1/>. Date accessed: 18 April 2020.

² Hoque, Abeer Y. *Olive Witch: A Cross-Cultural Memoir*. Noida: Fourth Estate/HarperCollins Publishers India, 2016.

³ Liang, Elizabeth. *ALIEN CITIZEN: An Earth Odyssey*. Los Angeles: HapaLis Productions, 2017.