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Linguistic Encounters Now and Then: Amara Lakhous and Tahar Lamri Engage in the Debate on a (Dis)United Italy

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“Se prima era il nemico da sconfiggere, una volta che è stato sconfitto è ridiventato l'amico, il padre, il nonno da proteggere”¹—in these few lines Umberto Eco brilliantly captures the most salient trends of the linguistic and political history of the Italian dialects since the 1861 Unification. The political fragmentation of the peninsula that had lasted over fourteen centuries has contributed to the establishment of a number of Italo-Romance languages, also known as “primary dialects.” These languages share the same Latin origin as standard Italian and are, in fact, autonomous linguistic systems. Once the Florentine dialect found in the works of Petrarca, Boccaccio and Dante had been codified by Pietro Bembo as the standard written Italian in the sixteenth century, the remaining primary Italian dialects gradually became subordinate to standard Italian in terms of social prestige.

La questione della lingua acquired a completely new political and ideological meaning once the Peninsula had regained its (formal) unity. Alessandro Manzoni and Graziadio Isaia Ascoli's contrasting views on the role of local languages expressed this paradigmatic shift:² while for the former the dialects were an obstacle to the linguistic unity of the nation, the latter sustained the spread of popular bilingualism (where knowledge of one's local dialect would be combined with the national standard Italian) as a major boost for successful civic and cultural education of the new Italians.

Naturally, Manzoni's theory prevailed over that of his opponents. *Sdialettizzazione*, a process of decreasing usage of primary dialects in favour of local hybrid varieties of Italian, began to run its course once compulsory education was introduced in Italy.³ Notwithstanding the diffusion of literacy, increasing internal migratory flows, and the advent of radio, the country had largely preserved its linguistic disunity until the end of 1950s, making it a true exception among European nation-states. Not even school reforms and specific linguistic politics implemented during Fascism managed to succeed in the attempt to eradicate the use of dialects in favor of national Italian language.

Starting in the early 1960s, this situation rapidly began to change with the advent of new mass media and the start of the era of large-scale internal migration. As De Mauro points out, today Italian is a common national language, shared by millions of Italians all across the peninsula.⁴ As such, Umberto Eco's words above confirm the paradoxical situation of Italian dialects in this precise historical moment: while both active use and passive knowledge of dialects are diminishing rapidly,⁵ the proliferation of large-scale regionalisms give rise to a number of initiatives and even legislative proposals that (with varying intents) aim at re-instating the value of what can be called "indigenous Italian multiculturalism."⁶

This kind of "original" or "ancient" Italian multiculturalism had existed long before the contemporary debate on the newest forms of multiculturalism in Italy. Recently, the growing heterogeneity of Italian society has become the subject of heated public debates on how to "manage" recent migratory flows to Italy.⁷ These debates often ignore the vitality of the "ancient" Italian multiculturalism whose main distinguishing trait today is traced in the persistent vitality of Italian dialects, a phenomenon which has always had and still has direct repercussions on literature. Hermann W. Haller, for example, summarizes the connection between indigeneous multiculturalism and literature in the following way:

Nel panorama delle civiltà letterarie dell'Europa occidentale, l'Italia è l'unico grande paese con una tradizione binaria coerente tra il filone toscano classico monolingue e il canone plurilingue in dialetto. [...] Il plurilinguismo e le sue manifestazioni letterarie attraverso tradizioni regionali autonome si presentano, infatti, come uno fra gli aspetti tipici dell'Italia, assolutamente fondamentale per la comprensione della cultura italiana nel passato e nel presente.⁸

In this contribution, we will endeavour to shed light on the role of dialects in contemporary Italian literature. More specifically, we will investigate the functions of Italian dialects in two novels published in 2006: Tahar Lamri's *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* and Amara Lakhous's *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio*.⁹ These Algerian-born authors live in Italy and write in Italian. Both are routinely labelled as "migrant writers," i.e., as representatives of a field that in 1997 Armando Gnisci named *letteratura italiana della migrazione*.¹⁰

1990, the year of publication of *Io, venditore di elefanti* by Senegalese writer Pap Khouma and Italian journalist Oreste Pivetta, is commonly considered the beginning of this new field at the margins of contemporary Italian Literature.¹¹ Traditionally a country of emigration, with the 1981 census Italy suddenly discovered that it had become a country of immigration, significantly later than most of the other European Union member states.¹² This rapid and dramatic transformation took place within the framework of new neoliberal globalization, a phenomenon on a world-wide scale that provoked violent opposition from a

number of political movements all across the globe.¹³ What many of them had in common was a specific kind of identity politics, tied to the concept of local origins.¹⁴ The repercussions of this new Italian cultural dynamic could be traced in the creation of the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), a conservative, right-wing and localist political party, as well as in the liberal debate on the effects of globalization on the fragmented and heterogeneous Italian society.¹⁵

As such, the phenomenon of *letteratura italiana della migrazione* started to attract attention of both academics and the general public in the midst of an ongoing political and cultural fight that exposed the tensions between the global and the local dimensions of Italian society. New Italophone migrant writers also contributed to this debate by adding a trans-national, hybrid perspective to the already problematic national/sub-national divide. Their main achievement was to elicit a comparison between traditional forms of Italian multiculturalism, with its plurilingualism and pluriculturalism and new forms of multiculturalism, emerging due to the ever-increasing presence of immigrants, from various ethnic groups in Italian territory.

This analysis of literary works, in which migrant writers combine the use of standard Italian with that of Italian dialects will aim to shed light on representations of ruptures between such well-established dichotomies as “monocultural/pluricultural,” “Italian/non-Italian,” “insider/outsider view,” etc. As we will demonstrate, the polyphonic structures of Lamri’s and Lakhous’s novels, in the presence of a multitude of characters and languages, obliterate seemingly rigid divisions between familiar and unfamiliar and reflect the arbitrary nature of attributing a fixed national, regional or local identity. Here, Italian dialects are employed to question the idea of static “Italianness” and as a means to engage in a wider cultural debate on the very definition of this concept.

WHERE HUNTINGTON’S CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS AND “COMMEDIA ALL’ITALIANA” COLLIDE: AMARA LAKHOUS’S “SCONTRO DI CIVILTÀ PER UN ASCENSORE A PIAZZA VITTORIO” (2006)

Amara Lakhous is one of the most recent multilingual writers whose literary works in Italian deserve close analysis. More specifically, his novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* (2006) can be regarded as an attempt to reflect on the changing cultural dynamics of Italy.

Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” does not only lend the novel its title.¹⁶ Lakhous’s book is a partial, albeit undoubtedly fictionalized, satirical adaptation of Huntington’s famous political analysis of the post-1989 world. For Huntington, the major global ideological conflicts of the Cold War era have now been permanently replaced by cultural conflicts, or, as Huntington puts it, “clashes of civilizations.” What Lakhous has done in *Scontro di civiltà* is to make Huntington’s thesis look ridiculous by drastically reducing the scale of the “cultural conflicts” (or “clashes of civilizations”) that take place in the novel.

It is quite evident that Lakhous's characters can be easily identified as "tokens" of different ethnic and cultural groups—they come from Italy, Algeria, Iran, Peru, the Netherlands, etc. These characters are confined to a rather limited space of shared living represented by a building in Piazza Vittorio. Seven Italian characters interact with five immigrants; their "cultural differences" lead to a number of domestic quarrels which reduce Huntington's clashes of civilizations down to the quotidian.

The major clash in the book regards the building's elevator. By making such a trivial issue the cause of a bitter dispute, the author manages to show, with strongly ironic understatement, how the idea of a "clash of civilizations" is absurd once transferred to the realm of realistic, domestic settings.

The structure of the novel, in which each of the twelve characters presents a first-person account of the events that lead up to "clash of civilizations over an elevator," functions as the main aid in staging the parody. The different versions of the events reflect the shift of perspective from one character to another. In the end, the clash itself is translated into nothing more than a series of unfortunate, but ultimately comical, misunderstandings that manage to convey only a distant resemblance to large-scale world conflicts.

The events that the reader hears about in these different versions are related to the stabbing of Lorenzo Manfredini, nicknamed *Il Gladiatore*, in the elevator of the building. The almost simultaneous disappearance of the central character of the novel—the Algerian-born Ahmed, also known as Amedeo, who is accused of committing the crime—receives even more attention from the inhabitants of the building.

Ahmed/Amedeo is given a privileged space in the structure of the novel. In fact, it is only through his diary, whose entries are inserted between the chapters told by the rest of the characters, that we are able to obtain a holistic picture of the everyday life of the inhabitants involved in the numerous "clashes of civilization." Ahmed/Amedeo will be acquitted of all charges only at the very end of the novel when detective Bettarini discloses the identity of the killer, an elderly widow called Elisabetta Fabiani who commits the murder in revenge for the killing of her dog.¹⁷

In the contrasting versions told by Italian and non-Italian characters, the issue that resurfaces most frequently has to do with the ever-increasing presence of immigrants in contemporary Italy. Reciprocal mistrust is the cause of failure of meaningful cross-cultural communication. As a result, the book contains multiple examples of stereotypes, commonly associated with immigrants in Italy. The most common of these stereotypes is, of course, related to widespread belief that all immigrants are criminals and a threat to public safety, as one of the Italian characters states rather plainly:

Allora che fine fanno le tasse che paghiamo allo stato? A che servono se non a proteggerci da questi delinquenti? Perché non acchiappano Iqbal e l'albanese e il resto degli immigrati delinquenti e li cacciano?¹⁸

The novel skillfully reveals the absurdity of these xenophobic prejudices, making it plausible to assume that the book's main achievement is to make strong statements against racism and stereotypes. Yet this simplistic reading of *Scontro di civiltà* would ignore the fact that the novel also attempts to engage in the ongoing cultural debate on the very concept of Italianness in this precise historical moment of great transformation in Italian society.

This issue of what Italianness means or should mean is approached mainly through the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the concept by both the native Italian and immigrant characters. Lakhous's major achievement here is his awareness of the long-lasting history of fragmentation of Italian society and culture which has clear repercussions on contemporary debates on new Italian multiculturalism. The new (and problematic) multiculturalism, represented by various forms of "clashes" between Italians and immigrants in the book are complemented by the persistence of internal divisions that signal the continuity of old (and still problematic) "indigenous multiculturalism."

The intersections of different layers of Italian history come alive in the various monologues. Regional differences are especially visible in the frequent use of dialects in the first-person accounts of the Italian-born characters who often use their native dialect (mostly the Romanesco, Napoletano and Milanese dialects). It would of course be more accurate to describe Lakhous's dialect usage as quite limited since it is concentrated for the most part in passages that contain direct speech rather than indirect monologues of their so-called "truth-telling accounts."¹⁹ However, passages that contain phrases and words in one of the Italian dialects do stand out for the attention to detail and range of different dialects used.

The most consistent in the use of dialectal expressions is Benedetta Esposito, the concierge from Naples. She is the first Italian-born character to provide her version of the events and in her chapter we find numerous examples of the Neapolitan dialect:

So tutto dei condomini del mio palazzo, perciò mi accusano di inciuciare. È questa la ricompensa che merito? Io tengo a cuore il loro interesse e sono sempre a disposizione loro. Ditemi voi: questo significa forse entrare nei fatti loro? San Genna', mettece 'a mana toja!²⁰

In other cases, the use of the native dialect is much more limited. The well-educated Milanese-born Antonio Marini, Professor of History at La Sapienza

University of Rome, resorts to dialect much less frequently, and mainly when reporting dialogues:

Quella di lasciare Milano e venire a Roma non è stata una decisione saggia. Ho ceduto alle pressioni di mio padre: ‘Antonio, te ghe d’andà a Ròma, lassa minga scapà l’ucasiun de laurà quand gh’è l’ucasiun, fiu! Laurà l’è pregà!’.²¹

The bar-owner Sandro Dandini, born in the neighborhood of Piazza Vittorio, also uses Romanesco dialect only in direct discourse: “Scusa, Amede’, dimmi de sì o de no: sei de Napoli?”²² The three remaining Italian-born characters²³—Stefania Massaro who is married to Ahmed/Amedeo, the above-mentioned Elisabetta Fabiana, and Detective Bettarini—all use unmarked, standard Italian.

The non-Italian characters, on the other hand, lack first-hand knowledge of Italian dialects, which leads to comic instances of cultural misunderstanding:

Guaglio’ è la parola preferita di Benedetta. Come sapete, guaglio’ vuol dire cazzo in napoletano. Così mi hanno detto tanti napoletani con cui ho lavorato. Ogni volta che mi vede andare verso l’ascensore, si mette a urlare: ‘Guaglio!’ Guaglio!’ Guaglio!’ In Iran siamo abituati a rispettare i vecchi ed evitare le parolacce. Per questo, invece di rispondere all’offesa con un’altra offesa come fanno in tanti, mi limito a una breve risposta: “Merci!”²⁴

Immigrants’ linguistic puzzlement is a direct cause of frequent instances of miscommunication with Italian characters in a number of incidents that culminate in the “clash of civilizations” over the elevator. In any case, the outcomes of these cultural misunderstandings are, in most cases, non-conflict comic situations without any serious negative consequences.

What has to be noted is that the use of dialects by the Italian-born characters serves, to a large extent, also to re-affirm their local identities and to establish a direct link to their specific notion of Italianness. In the following passage, Benedetta Esposito, convinced that Ahmed/Amedeo is Italian and not an immigrant, describes how she tried to find out which part of Italy he comes from:

*Vi ho detto che Amedeo è italiano verace. Gli ho chiesto personalmente più volte di dirmi da dove viene [. . .]. Mi ha sempre risposto con una sola parola: sud. Non ho voluto scocciarlo con altre domande per avere altri particolari, ho detto tra me e me: chissà, sarà siciliano, calabrese o pugliese.*²⁵

Later Esposito makes a connection between new immigration from outside Italy and persistent regional hostilities that still prevent true Italian Unity:

Faciteme 'o piacere di non accusare Amedeo di essere un immigrato.
Noi italiani siamo così: nei momenti difficili non ci fidiamo tra di noi,
invece di aiutarci facciamo di tutto per farci male. Siamo un popolo
che ha il tradimento rint'è vvene?²⁶

This passage from the initial chapter also draws attention to another central issue raised by the book. As Silvia Contarini has noticed, Lakhous's use of dialects, marking exclusively the Italian-born characters, often has the (undesirable) effect of reinstating Italian regional stereotypes about other Italian regional cultures.²⁷ It has already been mentioned that Benedetta Esposito, the Neapolitan concierge, is the character who most frequently resorts to dialect, while a character such as, for example, Antonio Marini clearly prefers standard Italian. It is tempting to conclude that, however unintentionally it may be, this stereotypical representation boosts the widespread prejudice against elderly, uneducated and low-paid women from the South, acknowledging at the same time the cultural and economic supremacy of male Northerners.

As this description of the characters of Benedetta Esposito and Antonio Marini might reveal, the high degree of grotesque present in the depiction of most of the characters in *Scontro di civiltà* is one of the reasons for its editorial success in Italy. This employment of the grotesque is nonetheless a double-edged sword: implicit criticism of clichés, associated both with specific geographical locations in Italy and with different ethnic groups represented by immigrants, has a minor impact on the reader.

Lakhous's architectural style of writing might be the first reason for this failure. None of his characters can refrain from introducing stereotypes in individual chapters. This results in a proliferation of stereotypes that repeats endlessly throughout the book.²⁸

Representation of immigrants living in Rome is probably more coherent with the book's ambition to question the notion of Italianness by providing an outsider's view on a still fragmented, disunited Italy. The insistence on stereotypes, unfortunately, persists also here, as expressed by asylum-seeking Parviz from Iran:

Non sapete chi è Roberto Bossosso? È il leader del partito Forza Nord che considera nemici gli immigrati musulmani! Ogni volta che sento la sua voce mi assale il dubbio, perplesso mi guardo in giro e chiedo al primo che incontro: 'Ma la lingua che parla Bossosso è davvero italiano?'.²⁹

And again in the following lines:

Però mi dispiace dirvi che non sono l'unico che non conosce l'italiano in questo paese. Ho lavorato nei ristoranti di Roma con molti giovani napoletani, calabresi, sardi, siciliani, e ho scoperto che il nostro livello linguistico è quasi lo stesso.³⁰

Foreigners' genuine puzzlement with the unexpected clash between different local cultures and accompanying stereotypes is depicted in a very realistic manner. Their linguistic incompetence, especially when it comes to the knowledge of Italian dialects,³¹ is the main obstacle for coming to terms with the extraordinary diversity of Italian culture. Among the migrant characters, only Ahmed/Amedeo figures as a possible mediator in this knot of cultural misunderstandings. He is universally liked by Italian and non-Italian characters alike and is generally seen as a trustworthy, wise person. He takes care of Parviz, first by preventing a conflict between him and the Neapolitan concierge Benedetta Esposito (see the quotation above) and on a number of other occasions.³² In a similar manner, Ahmed/Amedeo helps other immigrants and, at the same time, finds a way to gain respect also from the Italian characters in the novel. Significantly, this respect is based first and foremost on the conviction that Ahmed/Amedeo is Italian and not an immigrant.³³ As such, his skills in *passing* are exceptional:³⁴ he is Algerian, but throughout the book he passes as Italian.

Lakhous insists on the mimetic/strategic possibilities of passing also in his subsequent book.³⁵ Here, however, the mechanism is reversed: Christian, an Italian born in Sicily, is able to pass for a Tunisian immigrant under the fake name of Issa, in order to infiltrate a group of alleged Islamic terrorists in Rome. As Barbara Spackman has brilliantly argued,³⁶ all of Lakhous's positively-charged protagonists find themselves in a "passing" condition, while negative connotations are reserved to those characters who "pose,"³⁷ be they natives or migrants.

The author's main ideological stance becomes evident here: his characters are portrayed in a state of permanent bewilderment by the unexpected linguistic and cultural heterogeneity that they encounter in daily interactions with the Italians. The voice of the main protagonist Ahmed/Amedeo, on the other hand, acquires the authority of a reliable and omniscient narrator. As such, he is the only figure capable of controlling this extraordinary polyphony in his role of the mediator between (linguistically and culturally) different interlocutors.

Passing as a strategy here is used to subvert Italian nationalist ideology, rather than to promote integration by advertising the knowledge of Italian dialects and Italian regional cultures—this would involve "posing," according to Barbara Spackman's analysis of Lakhous' novels, since the number of migrants who speak or at least understand an Italian dialect is very low.³⁸

Ahmed/Amedeo's ability to pass as Italian illustrates the invalidity of the idea that homogeneity is at the basis of Italian culture, by making Italianness available also to migrants who can mimic and, furthermore, appropriate it.³⁹ In the second

instance, it highlights the ridiculous nature of the threat on the integrity of this already deeply heterogeneous culture from other cultures that are brought to Italy by non-European migrants. At this point, we cannot help but notice how, as a participant in the debate on old and new Italian multiculturalisms, the author himself, through the part of his protagonist, plays the role of similar to that of *deus ex machina*.

Lakhous is, however, “passing” and “posing” at the same time. He is “passing” when he shows awareness of social, cultural and historical conditions that for centuries have been and still are obstacles to true Italian unity. However, he may be perceived as “posing” once we analyze the architectural structure of the novel more closely. The choice to allow all of the characters express their ideological attitude towards the main events of the plot turns out to be rather ambiguous. On the one hand, this choice does succeed in conveying the everyday presence and influence of stereotypes connected with Italian regional/local cultures and dialects. On the other hand, this same choice undoubtedly reinstates these stereotypes by making them grotesque but, first and foremost, comical.

Moreover, the generic hybridization of the text, a grotesque detective story that borrows elements of the cinematic genre of *commedia all'italiana*, contributes greatly to this ambiguity. When it comes to *commedia all'italiana*, the author's main point of reference is the work of Pietro Germi, whose *Divorzio all'italiana* (1961) is quoted in the novel.⁴⁰ However, the connection between Lakhous and the *commedia all'italiana* genre is not limited to a straightforward reference. In Germi's films, especially in the triptych which begins with *Divorzio all'italiana* and continues with *Sedotta e abbandonata* (1964) and *Signore & signori* (1966), very much like in Lakhous's novels, grotesque parody is created through representation of stereotypical characters. These characters, of course, reproduce traits associated with various geographical locations in Italy: while the first two movies are set in an archaic and very stereotyped Sicilian location, the last film takes us to a small and deeply Catholic town somewhere in the Veneto region.

Two contrasting opinions on the value of Germi's work have been given by Gian Piero Brunetta and Enrico Giacobelli. The former emphasizes the centrality, in Germi's oeuvre, of social criticism directed towards a wide range of local manifestations of corruption in Italian society.⁴¹ Giacobelli, on the other hand, has argued that especially the two films set in Sicily belong to the traditional regional genre of “*commedia meridionalista*,” undermining the impact of Germi's criticism and reducing the value of his work to the level of local, stereotypically satirical representations.⁴² Both interpretations can be regarded as partial and incomplete and will have to be complemented by the evaluation given by John David Rhodes. According to the British scholar, the implicit message in Germi's Sicilian films is that “*la condizione dei siciliani (. . .) è forse solo una versione esagerata dello stato delle cose all'interno della nazione intera.*”⁴³

The same concern with Italian national culture, or Italianness, approached through playing with the idea of disunited Italy, is evident also in Lakhous's novels. Both Geremi and the author of *Scontro di civiltà* make extensive use of stereotyped characters who are given traits that are assumed to be typical of a certain Italian region. These choices make the book subject of ambivalent and contrasting interpretations similar to those reserved to Geremi's films.

On the contrary, the comparison of Lakhous's literary merits with such canonical Italian authors as, for example, Carlo Emilio Gadda, seems to be rather far-fetched. This comparison is made (more frequently in non-academic circles) on the basis of presumably strong thematic and stylistic affinities between the two authors.⁴⁴

While the book cover of the 2010 edition of *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* states the following:

Questo romanzo di Amara Lakhous scrittore algerino che vive a Roma, è una sapiente e irresistibile miscela di satira di costume e romanzo giallo imperniata su una scoppiettante polifonia dialettale di gaddiana memoria (il *Pasticciaccio* sta sullo sfondo segreto della scena come un nume tutelare)

we do, indeed, witness something similar to a *pasticciaccio brutto*, an “awful mess” or a “nasty crime case,” also in *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio*, but the rather explicit intertextuality is as far as the reference to Gadda can take us, while any true stylistic, thematic or ideological affinity is difficult to pinpoint.

The difficulty of comparing Lakhous with Gadda is due first and foremost to strong divergences in the way these two authors approach representation of “indigenous Italian multiculturalism” and its linguistic manifestation.

As both Riccardo Stracuzzi⁴⁵ and Stefano Agosti⁴⁶ have shown, Gadda's use of dialects can be interpreted as an attempt to fulfill his expressionistic stylistic research.⁴⁷ In his works Gadda pays special attention to the sociolects spoken in Rome, while other local languages, such as Neapolitan, Venetian and Molisan dialects, are a minor presence. In Gadda's poetics, then, the Expressionism is given more weight than representation itself, or even the deconstruction/reconstruction of what Stracuzzi labels, following Gadda's original quotation,⁴⁸ “concretezza parlata e vissuta prima che ponzata o scritta” of Italian dialects.⁴⁹

In short, Stracuzzi states that Gadda's interest for the use of dialects can be explained with its potential of expressionistic deformation and de-figuration of the text, rather than attempting to mimic one's social reality. In his analysis, Agosti goes even further when he investigates the absence of a *vox media* in Gadda's novels between the high literary register and its most popular, if not vulgar, counterpart. According to Agosti, Gadda's linguistic polyphony aims at deconstructing

the traditional forms of narration—making the narrative and even the authorial voice disappear—with the consequent refusal to reflect on any cultural issue.⁵⁰

Lakhous, on the contrary, seems to privilege the cultural aspects of the linguistic polyphony he attempts to create. As such, he carefully avoids making any expressionistic deformation of the text in *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio*, opting instead for realism which in several occasions borders on the grotesque, and to a *vox media* that is perfectly in line with the *commedia all'italiana* tone of the novel. The author achieves this by manipulating the narrative as a true *deus ex machina*, but, in doing so, he ends up “passing” and “posing” at the same time. His ultimate goal, then, is to take on the responsibility of deconstructing the frame of the national, by conveying—but involuntarily re-affirming—local and regional identities and stereotypes.

FROM ORAL STORY-TELLING TO META-CRITICAL EMAIL EXCHANGE: TAHAR LAMRI'S “I SESSANTA NOMI DELL'AMORE” (2006)

The originality of Tahar Lamri's novel *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* (2006) has attracted critical attention and received very positive reception, both in Italy and abroad. The very structure of the work, partly a twenty-first century adaptation of the epistolary novel, partly a collection of short stories, questions the very concept of the genre. The impressive linguistic polyphony of the text is accompanied by the richness of reflections on such fundamental issues as, for example, the relationship between man and language.

The architectural complexity of the novel's narrative structure bears a formal resemblance to Lakhous's text. *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* consists of a collection of eighteen short stories that are separated (or held together) by a series of emails. This email exchange between an Italian woman, Elena Romagnoli, and an Algerian immigrant in Italy named Tayeb Saadi works as an external meta-narrative framework and, at the same time, is a narrative on its own.⁵¹ Several short stories, now part of the novel, had been previously published separately in Italy.⁵² The English translations of some of the stories have appeared in two volumes dedicated to the most recent literary production of Italian migrant writers.⁵³

Though similar on a structural level, Lakhous's and Lamri's novels differ significantly under closer analysis. First of all, in Lakhous's case, the meta-narrative Ahmed/Amedeo diary entries lack the capacity to function as a story on their own. Their main function is to provide a comment, from the narrator's point of view, on the truth-telling accounts of the other characters and, as such, they depend on the rest of the chapters. This is the exact opposite of what happens in Lamri's novel, where the emails between Elena and Tayeb (which can be read as a stand-alone novella) interact with the short-stories in a way that gives us clues to their interpretation.

These single stories, on the other hand, differ significantly in many aspects. To name just a few examples, on the thematic level Lamri presents several narratives

of migration alongside fictional accounts of events such as the terrorist attacks in Spain in 2004 or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The stories' settings range from Algeria to Europe to fairytale-like destinations. From a narratological perspective, there are first-person narrations, third-person narrations, interior monologues, fictional dialogues, sudden shifts of focalization and so on. Linguistic registers and languages themselves vary, sometimes within a single story: standard Italian gives way to high literary Italian or to one of the dialects, and insertions of words from other languages are frequent as well.

An additional layer of complexity is given in the form of explicit and implicit intertextual references, with quotations taken from classic Arabic poetry and great Italian and European writers alike, which alone would make the novel a fascinating case for a more in-depth analysis.

The novel's inner coherence is accomplished skilfully through the reflections on language and literature that are found in the emails. With a technique reminiscent of cinematic montage, Lamri assembles the fragments of the main question as represented in the single stories within the meta-narrative framework. Once all pieces of the puzzle have been assembled, *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* presents itself as a rich mosaic that offers an insight into the complexity of the human experience. This complexity is not rendered, as in Lakhous's text, by the mere presence of a multitude of characters, but its key component is to be found in the continuity of the reflections on the problematic relationship between man and language.

"L'idioma gentile" is one of the stories in which the linguistic polyphony reaches its apex. The title contains an obvious intertextual reference to De Amicis's treatise on Italian language *L'idioma gentile* (1905) and the text itself starts with a long quotation from Machiavelli's *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua* (1524-1525). In the rest of the story we find standard Italian, Arabic, and samples from early Italian literature.⁵⁴

Half-way through the book we find the short story "The Pilgrimage of the Voice", which had originally been published in 2002. This short story stands out due to the chronological position it is given in the novel, its sheer length, and the extraordinary richness of its thematic and stylistic contents.

"The Pilgrimage of the Voice" is a dense narrative of a long spiritual journey, subdivided into six parts. In the first part, the African griot passes the word to the *cantastorie*, the singer-storyteller from the Padana plain, who speaks his local language, the *Mantovano* dialect. The second part is a short, anonymous first-person-narration that reflects on the very condition of a migrant. In the third part, Lamri's "linguistic tour de force" continues with the use of Romagnolo dialect spoken by a fairytale-like character called Zanubrio, who disappears after accompanying the first-person narrator to the seaside.⁵⁵ The journey to the South proceeds in the fourth part, with the narrator's stop in Casbah and his meeting with a *meddah*. In Tambacounda, the village described in part V, the narrator is

welcomed by a griot, who takes him to the final destination, a baobab tree where the narrator can finally take his refuge.

In her ground-breaking study of migrant literature, cinema, and the legislative aspects of immigration in contemporary Italy, Graziella Parati dedicates several pages to the analysis of Lamri's short story.⁵⁶ In the investigation of the function of Lamri's linguistic strategies, Parati concludes that his linguistic pluralism reflects the presence of the underlying struggles against dominant ideological discourses. In this light, "The Pilgrimage of the Voice" becomes the story dedicated to the politically inferior classes of "the poor and the oppressed," where the characters "are the witnesses of poverty and ignorance in different cultures."⁵⁷ As such, the use of Mantovano dialect, the incorporation of texts by Luigi Dadina in Romagnolo dialect and those of the poet Enio Sartori in Veneto dialect,⁵⁸ would follow the example of Italian writers in the twentieth century, who use dialects in their works to denounce social injustice.⁵⁹

Parati's attentive and sophisticated reading of Lamri's short stories contrasts positively with the superficial categorization that has been reserved for *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* elsewhere.⁶⁰ However, the validity of Parati's interpretation can be questioned once "The Pilgrimage of the Voice" and its specific linguistic strategies are analyzed within the larger context of the 2006 novel, rather than as a stand-alone short story.

In order to analyze possible new meanings that "The Pilgrimage of the Voice" acquires with its integration into the novel, we need first to take a closer look at the central topics that interest the protagonists of the novel's meta-narrative framework.

The centrality of meta-critical reflections on language in Lamri's text is evident from the very beginning of the novel. The first clue is given by the author straight away: the reason the two protagonists start exchanging emails is, in fact, of a linguistic nature. Elena, who is a novelist herself, contacts Tayeb in order to get information on the sixty ways of saying 'love' in Arabic. She needs this piece of information in order to be able to complete a novel she is in the process of writing.

Tayeb is eager to help her. They start exchanging emails and a short while later they meet and fall in love with each other. We get to follow the developments of the story through their emails, collecting pieces of information told from two different perspectives.

The key function of this love story is, however, to provide space for reflections on language and its (in)capacity to represent the complexity of human experience.⁶¹ In fact, language in all its dimensions (speaking, writing, reflections on mother tongue *vs.* foreign languages, etc.) is the main subject of Elena and Tayeb's communication. Lamri is almost obsessive in his persistence to draw our attention to everything related to linguistic experience: certain lexical items (such as *parola/parole/Parola*, *lingua/lingue*, *racconto/raccontare* and *scrittura*) are repeated

endlessly and migrate from one email to another, or from the emails to the short stories or the other way around.

When it comes to “The Pilgrimage of the Voice,” its embedding within the meta-narrative framework of the email exchange is very strategic. In fact, the short story is positioned, as already mentioned above, at the very heart of the novel. More specifically, it is preceded by Elena’s email that finishes with the following question:

Ti scrivo anche per dirti che mi sono scordata di chiederti una cosa che mi ‘tormenta’ da un pò di tempo: i tuoi testi sono narrazioni che si ispirano alla trasmissione orale delle storie e del sapere, cosa accade al testo in questo passaggio?⁶²

Tayeb’s reply, which follows after the story, contains his reflections on the connection between oral literature and the spoken word, its dependency on the dialogic nature which is the primary characteristic of oral literature:

La letteratura orale, non essendo scritta, deve, per definizione, essere il più possibile aderente al significato di ciò che enuncia, nel senso che l’oralità deve sempre tenere conto dell’interlocutore e quindi nel passaggio verso la scrittura, poiché l’interlocutore non è presente fisicamente, si deve assolutamente tenere conto dell’orchestrazione del verbo, della musicalità.⁶³

“The Pilgrimage of the Voice,” then, can be read as an attempt to represent the obstacles that arise when the spoken word appropriates orality. The linguistic polyphony in this piece is at its highest if compared to the rest of the stories in the novel. In the opening paragraph of Lamri’s story absolute truth is connected to silence because the words that we utter will always conceal a part of the truth:

L’uomo è il padrone della parola che conserva nella sua pancia, ma diventa schiavo della parola che lascia fuggire dalle sue labbra.
 COSA SONO IO? Sono un sacco di parole che quando parla tace sempre una verità.⁶⁴

In the first part of “The Pilgrimage of the Voice,” the Italian-speaking griot smoothly passes the word to a *cantastorie* from the Padana plain. The familial saga first told by the griot is re-told by the *cantastorie* directly in *Mantovano* dialect with only slight variations. The different sagas are repeated in cycles, where the pattern always takes us to the fourteenth child, who is both the African griot and the *Mantovano* story-teller. In this way, the two voices speak (or sing) almost in

unison, in which two (or more) cultures merge, removing the danger of a clash of civilizations.

Here, dialect is a vehicle for transmitting intra-generational memory, knowledge of one's roots. It is the *Ursprache*, the only one that possesses the appropriate intensity and emotional charge that allows the correct transmission of this precious information.

A different use of (a different) dialect is found in the story's third part. Here the *Romagnolo* spoken by Zanubrio in his long monologue acquires ironic connotations. In an uncanny twist, this dialect-speaking character, defying *Legga Nord's* lectures on xenophobia and racism, pins down the contradictions inherent to the behavior of Italians towards otherness. If it is true that Italians try to avoid any contact with black people, Albanians or Moroccans, who "should stay in their own countries," the same Italians are just as eager to embrace the otherness that bears the neocapitalist, globalized stamp on it:

U j é una massa d'zent, in Rumagna, ch'i n'supporta i burdel ch'j à la faza negra, o ch'i n'vò ciacaré cun j albanis e ch'i dis che i maruchen j è propi di maruchen.

Sta zent la diz che i rumagnul j à da ste in Rumagna, j africhen in Africa e i albanis in albanì. [...]. Sta zent la dis ch'a j aven da èsar urgilius d'èsar di rumagnul: a j o capì, mo pu i ciamo la su fiola Sue Ellen, i magna int i fast food, d'istè i fa surf, e' sàbat i bala cun la disco dance, i mastiga e' chewing gum, i bev la coca cola, i léz sol i best seller e, stai guérd ben, i s'asarmeia ai Tom, ai Bill o ai Jack di cino americhen.

(‘There are a lot of people in Romagna who can't stand kids with a black face. Or they don't want to talk to Albanians and say that Moroccans are just typical Moroccans.

These people say those from Romagna should stay in Romagna, Africans should stay in Africa, and Albanians in Albania.

[. . .]. These people say that they are proud of being from Romagna. I got it, but then they call their daughters Sue Ellen, they eat in fast food joints, in the summer they surf, and on Saturday they dance to disco music, they chew gum, drink coke, read bestsellers, and if you pay attention, they also look just like any Tom, Bill, and Jack you see in American movies'; our translation).⁶⁵

Zanubrio goes on to offer his own solution to the problem of how to build a truly united and multicultural Italian society. The key, according to him, is to look back at the very origins of this (dis)united country:

A me invézi u m' piés d'pínsé che in Rumagna uíe dal zite pio antighi d'Roma, caglie stedi os averti ae' mond luntan, che da no l'è pas i Fenici, j'Etruschi, i Greci, i Rumén, gli arab, i Tedesch, i Franzis, i Cinis, j'Ebrei e pu 'na massa d'etra zent.

Um piés d'pínsé che nò a sen i fiul d'tota sta zent.

U m' piés d'pínsé che stal fazzi novi ch'al zira per la Rumagna i s'porta 'na massa d'stori ch'a n'cnusen, e che i nostar fiul, se no a sem bon, i sarà piò fortuné che no, parchè j arà dal zitè piò antighi cun 'na massa d'stori, d'lezendi, d'rasunament, prema ngn'avema, e ades sè. (Instead I like to think that in Romagna there are cities that are older than Rome. These cities have kept their doors open to far away worlds. Our land has been walked by Phoenicians, Etruscans, Greeks, Romanians, Arabs, Germans, French, Chinese, Jews, and a whole lot of other people.

I like to think that we are the children of all these people.

I like to think that all these new faces you see around Romagna bring with them a lot of stories that we don't know, and that our children, if we do it right, will be luckier than we were. That's because there will be older cities with a whole bunch of stories, of legends, of arguments, that we didn't have before'; our translation).⁶⁶

In this passage, Lamri's Zanubrio truly re-instates "indigenous multiculturalism," whose acknowledgement, according to Trifone's neat summary, is essential to understanding Italian linguistic and cultural identity.⁶⁷ Zanubrio achieves this without having to use grotesque stereotypes: his way of engaging with the debate on Italianness is through history and memory, through dialects and orality—underlining how these could be building blocks for the foundation of a new Italy.⁶⁸

Profound meta-critical reflections are also present in Zanubrio's monologue. Stories told by other people, new stories that people bring with them from far away, and stories that Zanubrio himself tells, even if no one listens to him anymore, are the key to coming to terms with otherness—which is possible only if we hold these three kinds of stories always together. "The Pilgrimage of the Voice"—accompanied by Elena and Tayeb's emails, where they reflect together on language, literature, universal values and human suffering that transcends national borders—exposes a wide range of tensions inherent in the use of language, be it Italian, Arabic, or dialect alike.

However, language in *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* is not a tool to be used for either "passing" or "posing." While language can certainly play a major role in dividing peoples and cultures, in his novel Lamri explores its power to bring peoples and cultures closer. Ultimately, the author succeeds in making a strong case for language's potential for building bridges and fusing histories, memories and cultures.

RE-INSTATING “LA QUESTIONE DELLA LINGUA” WITHIN “LA LETTERATURA ITALIANA DELLA MIGRAZIONE”

The presence and usage of Italian dialects in the so-called *letteratura italiana della migrazione* is, of course, not limited to the two novels that have been discussed here. Other noteworthy examples include pieces written in Lombardo dialect in *Allunaggio di un immigrato innamorato* by Mihai Mircea Butcovan,⁶⁹ or insertions from the Maceratese dialect used by Adrián Bravi in *Il Riporto*.⁷⁰

Lakhous and Lamri's novels, however, are exemplary for embracing the renewed *questione della lingua* and, at the same time, establishing a connection between the concept of Italianness, old indigeneous multiculturalism, and new forms of multiculturalism in contemporary Italian society.

The use of Italian dialects in the two novels analyzed in this essay clearly shows major differences in thematic, stylistic and functional choices of the two authors. What is common to both of them, however, is the strong focus on “indigenous Italian multiculturalism” as represented specifically by dialectal usage. This focus goes against statistical data that confirms very limited spread of knowledge of local dialects among immigrants living in Italy.⁷¹ One of the reasons for this lack of knowledge has to do with the fact that dialects cannot boast the same prestige as that of standard Italian.⁷² In this light, incorporating words, sentences, or whole passages written in an Italian dialect, in texts written by migrant authors cannot be reduced to the function of merely presenting a truthful account of persistent linguistic disunity in the Italian context.

In Lakhous's case, dialects aim (although substantially fail) at fighting the stereotypes associated with various regional cultures. *Scontro di civiltà* truthfully depicts migrants who find it very hard to come to terms with regional cultural differences or “clashes of civilizations” on an internally Italian scale. However, this deconstructive process fails to have decisive critical impact because of the many stereotypes that proliferate throughout the book. This failure is also due to the combination of truthfulness with the presence of grotesque caricatures and is further propelled by genre hybridization. The uneven mixture of a parody of Huntington's “clash of civilizations” with the popular crime novel genre, plus the satirical tones of *commedia all'italiana*, makes it very hard to establish the necessary critical distance to challenge the existing order of things. Serious cultural tensions, both on native/migrant level (within the national dimension) and local/local level (in an infra-national, regional or local dimension) and in the recurrent use of the trope of “otherness” are rendered in a comic form that has the questionable potential to intervene on the very discursive patterns that determine their existence.

On the other hand, in Lamri's meta-critical reflections on the relationship between man and language—*any* language, including minor Italian dialects—the presence of dialects is both a political statement and a philosophical challenge. The fact that Lamri draws attention to the works of semi-unknown dialectal

authors such as Luigi Dadina and Enio Sartori can be interpreted as a way to subvert the Italian canon and as a means to question the power relationship that exists between hegemonic, mainstream representations (written in standard Italian) and subaltern representations (written/performed in dialect). The African griot in “The Pilgrimage of the Voice” becomes, or simply is, also the *cantastorie*, proving that the literary and cultural legacies of the subaltern discourses cannot be easily dismissed.

The deployment of the trope of “otherness” efficiently demonstrates the connection between (African) traditions of oral-story telling and the (oral) cultural legacy of Italian dialects. It is this enormous patrimony of stories that Zanubrio refers to: “stories told by other people” (written literature together with the patrimony of oral stories, i.e. Italian regional literatures); “stories brought about by people coming from far away” (migrant/postcolonial literatures); stories that Zanubrio—that is, any narrator—tells himself (meta-reflective narratives). Collecting all these different kinds of stories could have a certain refreshing effect on contemporary Italian literature.

The attention to the stories told by others, the same stories that Zanubrio repeatedly invokes, can also be read as an invitation to look at *letteratura italiana della migrazione* in a new light. Lamri, Lakhous and a very large number of other contemporary Italophone writers are routinely relegated to the restricted space of literature written in Italian by non-Italian born authors, making *letteratura italiana della migrazione* a conventional, but dubiously useful label, for criticism, which often stops at writer’s biography and hardly pays attention to the literary work itself. This case is clearly demonstrated in the analysis of Amara Lakhous and Tahar Lamri’s novels: both are Algerian-born Italophone writers whose literary contributions, nevertheless, differ in a very significant manner. The question of what *letteratura italiana della migrazione* is or could be is then intrinsically connected to the renewed *questione della lingua* that continues to expose persistent, albeit changing, dominant/subaltern tensions in the (dis)united Italy of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Umberto Eco, “La lingua degli italiani, trent’anni dopo,” in *Gli italiani e la lingua*, ed. Franco Lo Piparo and Giovanni Ruffino (Palermo: Sellerio, 2005), 35.

2. On the concept of dialect as obstacle, see Alessandro Manzoni, *Scritti linguistici inediti*, Vol. 1, ed. Angelo Stella and Maurizio Vitale (Milano: Centro nazionale studi manzoniani, 2000), 47.

Graziadio Isaia Ascoli’s view on the language question and dialects is expressed in his *Scritti sulla questione della lingua*, ed. Corrado Grassi (Torino: Einaudi, 1975).

3. Today an additional layer of Italian linguistic complexity is constituted by the existence of local varieties of standard Italian, or “secondary dialects”—as they are called outside the Italian context – defined as “italiano regionale.” The distinction between primary and secondary dialects is thoroughly described by Michele Loporcaro in his *Profilo linguistico dei dialetti italiani* (Bari: Laterza, 2009), 5, with a reference to the foundational work of the Spanish scholar Eugenio Coseriu in the 1980s.

4. In Tullio De Mauro’s chapter on “La cultura e la lingua” (in *Ritratto dell’Italia*, ed. Sabino Cassese, Bari: Laterza, 2001), 141–162, the scholar highlights the astonishing rapidity of the processes of linguistic and cultural transformation that took place in Italy between 1950 and 2000, (which is) crucial for understanding the most salient aspects of cultural and linguistic reality of today’s Italy.

5. See Loporcaro (*Profilo linguistico*, 174–182) for the analysis of the most recent trends that characterize the use of dialects in contemporary Italy.

6. The most famous examples here are legislative proposals put forward by *Lega Nord* (Northern League), a right-wing political party known to be the embodiment of the most recent nationalist and localist trends. In 2008 and 2009, *Lega Nord*’s legislative proposals included the introduction of compulsory instruction of the local Italian dialect for immigrants living in Italy: the proposal’s implicit aim was to impede the social inclusion of non-Italophone migrants—who would have to first learn standard Italian, and then an additional language. The proposal specifically targeted immigrants and as such, although it was promoted in the spirit of revival of ancient local traditions, it did little to disguise its true xenophobic intentions.

7. According to the Statistical Dossier on Immigration published by Caritas Italiana/Fondazione Migrantes/Caritas di Roma on 27th October 2011 (www.caritasitaliana.it, accessed November 25th, 2011), foreign citizens that reside in Italy legally account for 7.5% of the population (4,570,317 out of 60,650,000). The same percentage in 1861 was 0.4%.

8. Hermann W. Haller, *La festa delle lingue. La letteratura dialettale in Italia* (Roma: Carocci, 2002), 13.

9. Amara Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* (Roma: E/O, 2010 [2006]); translated into English by Ann Goldstein as *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (New York: Europa Editions, 2008) and also adapted for cinema under the eponymous title in 2010, director Isotta Toso, produced by Emme, Rai Cinema and MiBAC, Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities.

Tahar Lamri, *I sessanta nomi dell’amore* (Roma: Mangrovie Edizioni, 2009); first edition: Tahar Lamri, *I sessanta nomi dell’amore* (Sant’Arcangelo di Romagna: Fara editore, 2006).

10. Now in Armando Gnisci, *Creolizzare l’Europa. Letteratura e migrazione* (Roma: Meltemi, 2003), 75.

11. Pap Khouma and Oreste Pivetta, *Io, venditore di elefanti* (Milano: Garzanti, 1990). Second edition of the book came out in 2006 (Milano: Baldini Castaldi Dalai).

12. For a detailed discussion of the dynamics of this transformation see Enrico Pugliese, *L'Italia tra migrazioni internazionali e migrazioni interne* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), 61–75.

13. What is understood here under the rather vague term of “neoliberal globalization” is the recent acceleration that started off in the economic sphere, of economic, social, and cultural homogenization of different societies across the globe. The ideological framework behind this trend is to be traced in the policies (commonly labeled as “neoliberalism”) introduced in the USA by Ronald Reagan and in the UK by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Already in the early 1990s George Ritzer (*The McDonaldization of Society*, Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1993) the author argues that this neoliberal Anglo-Saxon model has spread at an impressive speed. This opinion has not received much support from several prominent anthropologists and social critics, who express their doubts on the possibility of successful universal cultural homogenization. Among these scholars, Arjun Appadurai’s name is probably the first that comes to mind (*Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimension of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). However, in this contribution we will argue that the debate on the tensions between global/homogeneous and localizing/heterogeneous can still be productive.

14. If the Portuguese scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos has convincingly argued that globalizing processes are always linked to localities, both exerting influence on them from “outside” and spreading some local social patterns on a transnational scale (B. Santos, *Globalizations. Theory, Culture & Society*, 23.2–3, 2006), 393–399, localism is still an important site for resistance to globalization, either on a strategic level (James Clifford, *Taking Identity Politics Seriously: “The Contradictory Stony Ground. . .”*, in *Without Guarantees. In Honour of Stuart Hall*, edited by Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie, London: Verso, 2000), 94–113, or from a thoroughly essentialist position. The latter seems to be the case of some Italian political movements, which are paradigmatically represented by the *Lega Nord* party, whose agenda can be easily defined as conservative, right-wing, localist (being specifically focused on Northern Italy), and xenophobic.

15. Philosopher Gian Enrico Rusconi participated in this debate with his *Se cessiamo di essere una nazione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993). Fully rejecting nationalism, Rusconi affirms that the sense of belonging to a national community has to be attached, first and foremost, to a true concept of citizenship. In its absence, it becomes impossible to fight the disaggregating transnational forces of globalization. However, in his criticism of processes of trans-nationalization, on the one hand, and localist policies on the other, Rusconi does not yet take into account the possibility of a *glocal* approach. The latter develops several years later after Rusconi’s publication, showing the possibility of a positive blending of global and local dimensions whose importance is more than ever crucial today.

16. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

17. Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà*, 181–184.

18. *Ibid.*, 49.

19. As a matter of fact, each chapter is entitled “La verità di. . .” (“The truth according to. . .”), except for Ahmed/Amedeo’s diary entries, which are defined as “ululate” (“howls”)—in order to emphasize his subjective experience of pain—and numbered (“first howl,” “second howl,” and so on).

20. Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà*, 44.

21. *Ibid.*, 104. In Antonio Marini’s direct speech dialect is heard only very briefly, for example: “E la madonna, dove l’è che sem?” (103).

22. *Ibid.*, 132.

23. The seventh Italian-born character is the assassinated Lorenzo Manfredini: although he is killed before the start of the novel, he should nonetheless be counted as one of the seven Italian-born characters as his presence in the truth-telling accounts is constant. But, of course, we do not have any “first-hand” knowledge on the kind of Italian he spoke in life.

24. *Ibid.*, 17.

25. *Ibid.*, 53 (our emphasis).

26. *Ibid.*

27. “Si notino *en passant* i cliché riproposti: i personaggi napoletani sono simpatici, fannulloni e fatalisti, mentre i lombardi sono antipatici, grigi e ligi al dovere. Restando alla lingua, si osserva che nessuno degli altri personaggi, neppure i numerosi stranieri, quando si esprimono direttamente, in dialoghi o monologhi, si distinguono nel lessico o nella sintassi” (Silvia Contarini. 2011. *Lingue, dialetti, identità. Letteratura dell’immigrazione, individu et nation*, 4, <http://revueshs.u-bourgogne.fr/individu&nation/document.php?id=559>, accessed March 21, 2012).

28. It seems that Lakhous makes an effort to balance out his reinforcement of Italian regional stereotypes in *Scontro di civiltà* by making one of the protagonists of his next novel, *Divorzio all’isلمamica a viale Marconi* (Roma: E/O, 2008), overtly denounce prejudices: “Ormai sono vaccinato da tempo contro questi pregiudizi del cazzo: il siciliano mafioso, il napoletano camorrista, il sardo rapitore, l’albanese delinquente, il rom ladro, il musulmano terrorista” (97).

29. Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà*, 14–15.

30. *Ibid.*, 15.

31. Mari D’Agostino, in her contribution entitled “Nuove condizioni linguistiche. Gli effetti dell’immigrazione” (in *Gli italiani e la lingua*, ed. Franco Lo Piparo and Giovanni Ruffino, Palermo: Sellerio, 2005), 70–92, convincingly illustrates the difficulties of assessing linguistic skills of migrant subjects in her analysis of sociolinguistic dynamics of recent migratory flows in Palermo. In this essay, the scholar refers to a study carried out by Chiara Lainati that seems to indicate that for some groups of immigrants the (competence in?) a local dialect acquires certain degree of prestige due to its potential to function as a means for successful social integration (74–75).

However, this data contradicts the findings of a number of more recent studies whose results show that, generally speaking, migrant learners of Italian as second foreign language remain unfamiliar with local dialects. D’Agostino quotes Bernini, for example, who affirms

that “il dialetto è escluso dalla gamma di varietà cui gli apprendenti sono esposti. I nativi che nel loro repertorio dispongono di italiano e dialetto sembrano rivolgersi agli stranieri preferibilmente in italiano” (75).

While it can be said that immigrants living in Italy prioritize acquisition of standard Italian (as taught, for example, in free Italian courses provided by local administrations), they are likewise not encouraged or motivated to learn a dialect, often perceived as being a less prestigious, if not outright negatively connoted, variety in comparison with Italian (76).

32. When Parviz gets in trouble with the police, when he cannot find a job or has difficulties with obtaining documents, or when he is drunk because he is homesick.

33. Only two people, his wife Stefania Massaro and Abdallah Ben Kadour, know that Amedeo's real name is Ahmed and that he comes from Algeria.

34. “Passing” is a sociological concept whose origin can be traced to an early symbolic use, in the eponymous novel *Passing*, written in 1929 by the African American writer Nella Larsen. It stands for the ability to “pass” from one status to another by someone, who is characterized by multiple racial and cultural identity.

35. Amara Lakhous, *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi*, 2008.

36. Barbara Spackman. 2011. Italiani DOC? Passing and Posing from Giovanni Finati to Amara Lakhous. *California Italian Studies Journal*, 2(1), <http://128.48.120.222/uc/item/9tp6d268> (accessed March 21, 2012).

37. “Posing” makes a binary couple with “passing,” as someone who ‘poses’, attempts to mimic traits the she/he does not share in order to acquire a different social status, which is different from the “passing” status where the acquisition is successful and complete integration is achieved. Racial posing, for example, has clear artistic origins, dating back to the black-faced white musicians in Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927). (Spackman, Italiani DOC?, online)

38. Note 31 contains references to studies that document immigrants' poor knowledge of local Italian dialects.

39. Techniques of “passing” are widespread among recent immigrants to Italy, as Vincenzo Romania has brilliantly argued in his sociological essay, *Farsi passare per italiani. Strategie di mimetismo sociale* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), which is based on his fieldwork conducted with Albanian immigrants.

40. In fact, when Amedeo/Ahmed meets the Dutch immigrant Johan Van Marten, who has come to Italy in order to study Italian cinema, Amedeo has a copy of Germi's *Divorzio all'italiana* with him (Lakhous, *Scontro diciviltà*, 119). In the diary excerpt that follows Johan's truth-telling account, Amedeo says the following about this particular genre: “Abbiamo discusso a lungo sulla realtà del cinema italiano, e ho difeso con forza la commedia all'italiana che affronta argomenti seri e tristi molto spesso in modo comico” (125). The title of Lakhous's 2008 novel *Divorzio all'islamica in viale Marconi* is another clear reference to the same film.

41. In his *Storia del cinema italiano* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1998), Gian Piero Brunetta has remarked that, notwithstanding the change in location, social criticism is a

persistent trend within Germi's triptych: "dalla Sicilia del delitto d'onore, si passa all'ombra della parrocchia, delle dame di carità, dell'ipocrisia di una società in cui il potere si esercita con maggiore bonomia rispetto a quello della mafia siciliana, ma non con minore violenza" (372).

42. According to Enrico Giacobelli (in *Pietro Germi*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1993), these two films fit into the category of the "commedia meridionalista" because Germi "applica lo stile e la cattiveria delle commedie del boom a una società arcaica, eterna, una società che vive in un certo senso fuori dall'Italia e dal mondo" (79-80).

43. John David Rhodes, "Divorzio all'italiana/Divorce Italian Style," (in *The Cinema of Italy*, Giorgio Bertellini and Gian Piero Brunetta ed., London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 113.

44. A positive appraisal of this relationship can be found in: Gloria Camesasca. 2009. Il romanzo di Amara Lakhous: un crocevia di civiltà tra Gadda, Sallustio e Agostino. *El-Ghibli*, 24, http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_06_24-section_6-index_pos_1.html (accessed March 21, 2012). The following lines aim to show how Camesasca's emphasis on Lakhous's writing as the product at the "crossroads of literary traditions" appears to be, in many ways, hyperbolic.

45. Riccardo Stracuzzi. 2002. Dialetto. In *A Pocket Gadda Encyclopedia*, edited by Federica Pedriali, *Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies* 2, <http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/walks/pge/dialettostracuz.php> (accessed March 21, 2012).

46. Stefano Agosti, "Quando il linguaggio non va in vacanza: una lettura del *Pasticciaccio*," in *Forme del testo. Linguistica semiologia psicanalisi* (Milano: Istituto Editoriale Universitario Cisalpino, 2004), 255-268.

47. In the aftermath of Gianfranco Contini's 1934 seminal essay "Carlo Emilio Gadda o del pastiche" (in G. Contini, *Quarant'anni di amicizia. Scritti su Carlo Emilio Gadda (1934-1988)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1989), 3-10, Albert Sbragia has convincingly shown how Gadda's linguistic research can be described as "expressionism," or as "macaronic modernism," enabling, therefore, a comparison between his texts and those of James Joyce and Louis-Ferdinand Céline: "All three of these authors share similar macaronic traits. Realism is exploded in the gigantism of physicality and the human body. Referentiality gives way to expressionism. Language tilts from its centripetal pole to the extremes of centrifugality. Narrative (plot) flies apart into fragments and episodes while subjectivity dissolves into a language stretched to the limits of its synchronic and diachronic elasticity" (A. Sbragia, *Carlo Emilio Gadda and the Modern Macaronic*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 24.

48. The original quotation can be found in Gadda's 1945 essay "Arte del Belli": "poiché il dialetto, non meno di certo dialogo di Dante, è prima parlato o vissuto che ponzato o scritto." As Riccardo Stracuzzi has noticed, Gadda dedicated an essay to the dialectal poet Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli (1791-1863), who wrote in Romanesco, in order to underline the difference between himself and Belli, who had a much more conflictive relationship with Romanesco as a language. (C. E. Gadda, "Arte del Belli", in C. E. Gadda,

Saggi giornali favole e altri scritti, vol. 1, eds. Liliana Orlando, Clelia Martignoni and Dante Isella, Milano: Garzanti, 1991), 560.

49. Stracuzzi, *Dialetto*, online.

50. “Nel fatto, l’assenza di rivelazione del colpevole, connessa all’interruzione della storia, riflette, semplicemente, l’assenza d’una voce narrativa che si faccia garante della storia medesima e ne assicuri la gestione, quando non rifletta addirittura l’assenza, il vuoto della voce autoriale” (Agosti, “Quando il linguaggio non va in vacanza,” 258). Agosti’s piece of criticism makes the difference between Lakhous and Gadda even more evident: the lack of solution in Gadda’s crime story together with the absence of the authorial voice contrasts starkly, first of all, with the detailed disclosure of the identity of the killer and the motives behind the assassination and, secondly, with the strength of Lakhous’s authorial voice, mediated by the protagonist Ahmed/Amedeo.

51. In fact, while Stefano Zangrando (Stefano Zangrando. 2007. *Non siamo alberi*. Note a margine di un seminario trentino, *Kúma*, 14, <http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/intercultura/kuma14zangrando.pdf>, accessed March 21, 2012) treats this text as a novel, Marie Orton and Graziella Parati, the editors of *Multicultural Literature in contemporary Italy* (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), present *I sessanta nomi dell’amore* as “a collection of short stories” (119).

52. Tahar Lamri, “Il pellegrinaggio della voce.” In *Parole di sabbia*, edited by Francesco Argento, Alberto Melandri, and Paolo Trabucco (S. Eustachio di Mercato S. Severino, Salerno: Il Grappolo, 2002), 60-70.

Tahar Lamri, “Solo allora, sono certo, potrò capire.” In *Le voci dell’arcobaleno*, ed. Roberta Sangiorgi, (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara, 1995), 43-58.

53. Tahar Lamri, “Only Then, I Am Sure, Will I Be Able to Understand.” In *Mediterranean Crossroads: Migration literature in Italy*, ed. Graziella Parati (Amherst: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 170-182.

Tahar Lamri, “The Pilgrimage of the Voice.” In Orton and Parati, *Multicultural Literature in Contemporary Italy*, 119-135.

54. There are several lines taken from an allegorical poem “Dalla giostra delle virtù e dei vizi” attributed to a Franciscan friar who lived in the thirteenth century by Ernesto Grillo in his anthology of *Early Italian Literature*, Vol. I (London : Blackie and son, 1920). Reprinted also in *Poeti del Duecento*, vol. 2., *Dolce Stil Novo*, edited by Gianfranco Contini (Milano: Ricciardi, 1995), 322-349.

55. Orton and Parati, *Multicultural Literature*, 24.

56. Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2005), 61-76.

57. *Ibid.*, 61-62.

58. The author’s notes after “The Pilgrimage of the Voice” state the following: “Le traduzioni in dialetto mantovano sono a cura del Gruppo Teatrale Il Palcaccio—Mantova. Testi in dialetto romagnolo di Luigi Dadina. Testi in dialetto veneto del poeta Enio Sartori.” (Lamri, *I sessanta nomi dell’amore*, 2009), 130.

59. Haller, *La festa delle lingue*, 61-66.

60. See, for example, the volume edited by Maria Cristina Mauceri and Maria Grazia Negro, *Nuovo immaginario italiano: italiani e stranieri a confronto nella letteratura italiana contemporanea* (Roma: Sinnos, 2009). In this analysis, Lamri's novel is presented as an example of a text that tells a story of an "integrated foreigner" (71-73).

The complexity of the novel is drastically reduced in its description as a story about a foreigner who engages in a love relationship with an indigenous woman. This love story, in its turn, is interpreted as a demonstration of the fact that migrant writers in their work project their availability/possibility to open up to a deeper interpersonal contact (76). As a consequence, the novel's engagement in the debate on *la questione della lingua*, Italian indigenous multiculturalism and fragmentation of national identity is not taken into consideration in this reading.

61. In fact, the story line of the framework is straightforward and utterly basic, factual information is limited to a minimum (geographical references are present, such as Ferrara as the place of their first meeting or a trip to Venice), and very few events take place as the relationship between the two develops.

62. Lamri, *I sessanta nomi*, 112.

63. *Ibid.*, 131.

64. *Ibid.*, 113.

65. *Ibid.*, 118-119.

66. *Ibid.*, 119.

67. "Emerge con evidenza, anche da una mappa storica tanto sommaria, che per riconoscere le linee dell'identità linguistica e cultura italiana non serve marcare i confini, ma occorre invece prendere coscienza di un ricco tessuto di relazioni intercorse tra le diverse regioni d'Italia e con altri paesi, testimoniate del resto da una fitta rete di apporti lessicali." (P. Trifone, ed., *Lingua e identità. Una storia sociale dell'italiano*, Roma: Carocci, 2009), 27.

68. It has to be said, of course, that the intertextual reference in Zanubrio's previous quotation (Lamri, *I Sessanta nomi dell'amore*, 118-119) to one of the most famous and stereotypical marker of Italianness—Renato Carosone's 1956 song "Tu vuò fà l'americano"—is quite obvious. Both the passage in Lamri's novel and the lyrics of the song are based on a list of habits and actions which define one's identity in contrast to what one pretends to be.

69. Mihai Mircea Butcovan, *Allunaggio di un immigrato innamorato* (Nardò: Besa, 2006).

70. Adrián Bravi, *Il rapporto* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2011).

71. Some of these have been illustrated above, see note 41.

72. A number of recent studies that document decreasing use of dialects in Italy emphasize how, especially for younger generations, speaking in dialect has strong connotations of inferiority. This prejudice against dialect is due, first and foremost, to high social prestige of standard Italian. See, for example, a study by Giovanni Ruffino, *L'indialetto ha la faccia scura. Giudizi e pregiudizi linguistici dei bambini italiani* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2006).

