

Crimes of diction

Language and national belonging in the fiction of Amara Lakhous

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Abstract

The article offers a study of the use of language in the fiction of Algerian-born writer, Amara Lakhous. It focuses on his two popular novels set in Rome, *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator at Piazza Vittorio* (2008) and *Divorce, Islamic Style* (2012), in which the author describes changes in Italy and in definitions of Italian identity as the country undergoes the threefold process of migration, globalization and European integration. The article argues that the novels adopt a structure that displaces a single authored text and which suggests an authorship that is *plurivoce*, or plural voiced, and therefore able to overturn the marginalization of migrant voices. Exploring the author's foregrounding of linguistic practices – including voice, diction, and ethnic labelling – the article engages with Italy's history of regional, national, and transnational identities to argue that these novels are a postcolonial satire of the tenuous link between language and national belonging in Italy.

Keywords: Amara Lakhous, genre fiction, immigration, Italy, Mediterranean, national identity, postcolonialism

Amara Lakhous's subalterns speak (Spivak 1988). They utter, they fulminate and they wail; they express their disgust at the orthodoxy of the Italian diet and with national identity performed on a soccer field and engage in ebullient and humorous stream of consciousness monologues.¹ The style of Lakhous' popular fiction seems largely to depend on its use of the vocative. Lakhous evokes the story of contemporary immigration through narratives that are rich in allusions to historic and national memory in Italy. His characters intimate the subtle, ironic and often absurd intermingling of identity and otherness that has characterized Italian national identity since its unification. Re-routing



Italian identity through historic experiences of regionalism, emigration and imperialism in the Mediterranean, Lakhous reminds his readers how Italian cultural geographies reverse any stable notion of the Global South. The Italian piazza becomes the site that overturns Gayatri Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak with new postcolonial voices telling the story of contemporary immigration from the margins.

Lakhous's popularity as a 'subaltern' writer in Italy is unchallenged. The recipient of several prestigious literary awards in Italy and in his native Algeria, Lakhous has helped to move so-called migrant writers, and migrant writing, to the centre of new trends in Italian literature.² Yet Lakhous subverts the migrant writer label while positioning himself as an eminently 'Italian' author. Acutely sensitive to the way in which immigration has activated old political fault-lines and anxieties about the elusive nature of Italian identity or *italianità*, Lakhous points to and subverts Italian literary traditions that have sustained the project of Italian national identity. In his re-appropriation of popular Italian genre fiction – the Italian film comedy and the Italian *noir* or *giallo* – Lakhous shifts his position from being a foreigner, immigrant and outsider in Italy to an insider intimately familiar with Italian culture. This shift in position is in alignment with the author's playful reversal of categories of identity and alterity, self and Other-ness. His unstable authorial position opens up new modes of speaking and ways of telling stories that reject the notion of a single-authored text.

This article reads closely issues of voice and diction within Lakhous's fiction, arguing that the ebullient and incessant talking of his characters points to larger questions about the author's experimentation with a de-centred composition of his novels. In the two novels that established him as a literary force and a postcolonial writer, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (2006) [*Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator at Piazza Vittorio*, 2008] and *Divorzio all'Islamica in viale Marconi* (2010) [*Divorce, Islamic Style*, 2012], the power of language to disguise and transform identity feature prominently on both narrative and meta-narrative levels. In *Scontro di civiltà*, Ahmed is mistaken for Amedeo, an Italian native, who emulates perfect spoken Italian – even the bigoted landlady of the condominium remarks that he is 'gentile,' meaning kind, well mannered, and educated in an eminently 'Italian' way. In *Divorzio all'Islamica*, Lakhous takes up this same theme, but the masquerade is reversed. Christian poses as Issa, a Tunisian immigrant, in order to carry out a covert operation by the Italian secret service to spy on the 'Little Cairo' community. Christian's performance is a success precisely because of his linguistic aptitude: 'parla l'arabo come un madrelingua' (155) [he spoke Arabic better than the Arabs, 183].

Building upon a rich literature that has explored Lakhous as a ‘translingual’ writer who embeds border crossings and hybridity into his texts, this article attends to how the author’s foregrounding of issues of voice and linguistic practices establish Lakhous as a postcolonial and transnational writer attuned to issues of national belonging.³ As Europe (and of course Italy) undergoes processes of integration and globalization, national stereotypes have emerged to play an ever more prominent role in cultural discourses about immigration. Throughout his fiction, the author indexes the language of ethnic reification while also exploring the power of language to activate new voices and ideas about identity. Lakhous’s Rome is a cosmopolitan city where Maghreb immigrants blend in easily and Italians recognize in these ‘Others’ their own narratives, albeit repressed, of mobility and emigration.⁴

Minority fiction

Who is Italian? Someone who has an Italian passport? In Brazil and Argentina there are people who have an Italian passport and who don’t speak Italian and who have perhaps never lived in Italy. Are they Italian? When people say Italians are those who speak Italian ... this discourse of identity being tied to some sort of grid, of linguistic entrapment, of nationalism, is troubling. (Esposito 2012: 426)

In asking who and what is an Italian, Amara Lakhous posits an historical question that has long troubled a country that lost one-third of its population to emigration between the unification and the World War Two (Negri 1997). The spectre of Italy’s emigrant past clearly haunts public perceptions of immigration today: while the overwhelming majority of illegal migration occurs not through boat migrations but through visa overstays, the former receive a degree of attention in the media that broaches the level of a national obsession. Arrivals by boat provoke a combination of moral outrage and hysterical fear about barbarian ‘invasions’ and may unconsciously point back to Italy’s past as a sending country. Italy’s contemporary view of itself as a gateway country with a position as bridge between North Africa and Europe reprises popular imaginaries first incubated during the nineteenth century, the age of European empire, when such expressions as ‘Africa begins South of Rome’ typified stereotypes about Italians (Verdicchio 1997). Such stereotypes were eventually internalized in Italian cultural discourses, and in some instances, producing views that Italians were the heirs to an ancient ‘Mediterranean’ race.⁵ The view that Italy supports an undue share of the migration burden because the peninsula is closer to Africa and that it mediates the journey to France or Germany, where migrants are most likely to find

paid work and legitimize their position vis-à-vis the state, glosses over some facts about migration patterns in Europe: eight migrants out of ten first arrive in the European Union not through Italy, for example, but through another Southern European country, namely Greece (Coll 2012).

The image of Italy as a bridge to Europe and the trope of the Italian landscape as defined by its porous borders girding the Mediterranean Sea evokes very powerful practices of cultural self-stereotyping. Typifying these is Berlusconi's cloying self-fashioning, in 2008, as a postmodern pasha while forging an unexpected alliance with Muammar Gaddafi. The so-called 'friendship treaty' preposterously claimed to make reparations to Libya for Italian colonialism while, in reality, it funnelled five million dollars into the Libyan economy in the form of energy investments and brokered a commitment from Libya of long-term help to Italy with the policing of illegal migration in the Mediterranean (Gazzini 2009). For several years, the two leaders obliged a fascinated public with a spectacular waltz that intimated their shared imperial past: Gaddafi arrived in Rome wearing pinned to his lapel a photograph of Omar Mukhtar, Libyan resistance leader, hanged by the Italian colonial authorities in 1931. Berlusconi responded in kind by honouring the Libyan leader with a gift of five hundred showgirls and by donning, in several public appearances, a headscarf that resembled a turban. The Arab Spring followed by the NATO invasions of Libya dismantled the friendship treaty and showed that the alliance had been strategic at best. Berlusconi, masquerading as the Oriental Other that he is supposed to befriend, evokes a long tradition of 'posing and passing' within Italian culture – one that Lakhous similarly indicates in his fiction (Spackman 2011).

Even as Italians leave behind the Berlusconi era, the particular question of the integration of immigrants into Italy remains highly fraught. The current form of citizenship on the basis of Italian heritage, or *jus sanguinis*, is the historical legacy of Italy's epic levels of emigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Mark Choate has persuasively demonstrated, emigration away from Italy was severe enough to generate new cultural programmes to export Italian identity, or *italianità*, abroad. Italian emigrant communities became referred to as 'colonies' and Italian emigration became entangled with imperialism (Choate 2008). In 1911, Italy invaded North Africa to establish a colony in Libya and to inaugurate a settler empire on what was, in the words of Gabriele D'Annunzio, a 'fourth shore' of Italy. At the same juncture as victory over the Turks were reforms in the Italian citizenship law to enable dual citizenship policy; emigrants living outside of Italy could automatically preserve their link to the peninsula and their Italian identity. The long life of *jus sanguinis* as the normative definition of Italian citizenship means that Italy is

able to exclude migrants that seek full inclusion on the basis that to be Italian is to be ethnically Italian. As the Somali author and activist Igiaba Scego succinctly describes, these Italian persons are inscribed as 'Italians with residence permits' (Afro-Europe International Blog 2013).

Meanwhile, a growing community of Italian heritage persons in Latin America has begun to use their Italian citizenship, acquired through the right of heritage, to migrate to the European Union, although they go more often to Spain where they are fluent in the language (Tintori 2012). As Italy undergoes a dual process of European integration and globalization, immigrants have assumed the role of 'significant other', while acting as an out group that helps Italy to affirm a concept of national identity and belonging vis-à-vis the social exclusion of immigrants.⁶ It is worth noting that the 2008 re-emergence of Berlusconi coincided with the introduction of 'performative legislation', not uniformly acted on, which included a provision for a compulsory Italian language test for access to permanent residence for long-term migrants (Pastore 2009). Within this context, writing by immigrants like Lakhous looks less like 'migrant writing', as it has sometimes been termed, and more like a project of 'minority literature' – in other words, a minority writing in a major national language, but in such a way that the style may undercut the territorializing and nationalizing power of language (Deleuze and Guattari 1975). As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the pure and unrestrained vocal production, the 'utterance', is one of the main prerogatives of minority literature as it stakes out a protest against the linguistic entrapment of the nation-state.⁷

The deceptively simple plot of *Scontro di civiltà* turns exactly on the question of the Italian language as a proxy for Italian national identity. The novel departs from the discovery that the protagonist, Amedeo, is not an Italian native as his pitch-perfect and accent-less Italian has led everyone to presume, but one of the immigrants in the piazza. The discovery of Amedeo's 'real' identity is as upsetting as his concomitant disappearance that leads to him being the chief suspect for a murder that has taken place in a building. As the characters exonerate Amedeo/Ahmed, they reveal their anxieties about the instability of Italian identity: the busybody doorwoman of the condominium, Benedetta Esposito, exclaims, 'Che dite! Il signor Amedeo è forestiero? Non ci credo che non è italiano! Non ho ancora perso la testa,, sono ancora in grado di distinguere tra gli italiani e gli stranieri [...] se il signor Amedeo è forestiero come dite voi, chi sarebbe l'italiano vero?' (43–44) [What are you saying? Signor Amedeo is a foreigner? I haven't lost my mind yet, I can certainly tell the difference between Italians and foreigners [...] And so what, if Signor Amedeo is a foreigner, as you say, then who's a real Italian?] (33–34). As the characters exonerate Amedeo, they reveal implicitly racist attitudes typical of the linking of

immigrants with criminality. The characters fulminate about the behaviour of other inhabitants, and the communal elevator of a condominium becomes the focal point for their disagreements. What appears as a crime fiction transforms into a send up of Samuel Huntington's theory of a 'cultural clash' in which each of the characters recounts his or her version of the truth in a series of theatrical monologues that contradict one another, often to humorous and satiric effect (Huntington 1993).

Amedeo's success at undermining definitions of Italian and immigrant identity illustrates the link between language and national belonging while also underlining some of the many stereotypes that have characterized Italian discourses about immigration in recent years. Lakhous is not merely inserting himself into a well-worn literary tradition of Italian *noir* fiction, but is also proposing a contrapuntal reading that negates the genre's more egregiously racist conventions. Mussolini's censorship of the *cronaca nera* or crime section of the newspaper – all crime having theoretically vanished under the Fascist regime – has contributed to crime fiction's enduring role as an informal/formal mode of cultural dissent or denunciation (see Somigli 2007). Called *giallo* fiction because mystery novels were originally printed on a cheaper and therefore yellow printing material, the apparently humble form of the mystery novel had often condemned social exclusion, the Fascist past, growing violence in Italian society, as well as increasing political indifference, and often mirrored feelings about decadence and decline in Italian society (Peri 2009). However, although the Italian *giallo* has registered the recent social transformation in Italy caused by immigration, through its inclusion of African characters, much of it, including works by some of its most popular practitioners, such as Andrea Camilleri, still perpetuates clichés of the foreigner as exotic and/or erotic and reinforces an automatic connection between immigration and delinquency (Gnisci 2010).

In comparison with these other popular works, *Scontro di civiltà* masquerades as an Italian *giallo* fiction but fails to fulfil many of the conventions of the genre. Amara Lakhous reflects, with some critical distance on the question, that in a sense he was able to re-appropriate the media's own strategies of selling newspapers through crime stories and by marketing his novel as crime fiction he boosted the sales and popularity of his book.⁸ As the novel veers away from the typical sleuth story, theatrical and diegetic styles emerge. Throughout the novel, a movement toward the vocative and the inter-subjective overrides the crime story. As Graziella Parati has noted: 'the plot is not driven by the desire to discover who the murderer is [...] but rather is polyphonic in that each character is carefully developed and contributes to constantly displacing the role of protagonist in the narrative' (Parati 2010:

433–34). Each mock deposition reveals ‘new social dynamics – with a marked emphasis on the conflictual side of these interactions’ (Wilson 2011: 241).

The ‘clashing’ nature of the monologues also privileges the subjective and pluralistic nature of the migrant’s experience and offers a new way of experiencing migration literature. Literature by immigrants, since its first appearance in the 1980s, has often been prefaced by an Italian authored introduction. As Jennifer Burns has described, such a practice may well undermine the voices of the immigrant, ‘in that the commentator is implicitly privileged with authority which weakens that of the author’ (Burns 2001: 161). The choral nature of *Scontro di civiltà* displaces the single authored text in order to suggest an authorship that is *plurivoce* and able to overturn the marginalization of migrants.

Language and the speech abilities of the immigrant characters are prevalently fore-grounded in the novel. The first story we hear is that of Parviz who seeks political asylum. Wrongfully accused of a crime in Iran, Parviz has been labelled an *extracomunitario* and cannot extend his *permesso di soggiorno*, or residence permit, without a work sponsor. As critics of the Bossi-Fini legislation note, the strict application of laws that require migrants to carry paperwork on their person when they arrive in Europe render the notion of asylum virtually obsolete since political asylum seekers typically arrive with only the clothes they are wearing. To protest against his unfair treatment by the Italian authorities, Parviz begins what he calls a *sciopero della parola*, or speech strike, and, taking a needle and thread to his lips, sews them closed, which leads to his arrest and removal to a sanatorium. Willing to grant Parviz madness but not political asylum, the authorities do not understand (as we readers do) that Parviz’s gesture signifies his lack of agency in the face of what Gayatri Spivak might call the ‘epistemic violence’ that prevents the subaltern from speaking (Spivak 1988). Ahmed/Amedeo intervenes in the next monologue to gloss this episode, explaining that Parviz’s speech strike has been a way of speaking in itself: ‘Parviz ha detto la sua verità con la bocca cucita e ha parlato con il suo silenzio’ (36) [Parviz spoke his truth with his mouth sewed up: he spoke with his silence] (30).

Parviz’s way of speaking through silence reinforces Ahmed/Amedeo’s rejection of ‘truth’ and his embrace of unfettered and pure expressions of voice, or the ‘ululation’: ‘Oggi il mio odio per la verità è aumentato e la mia passione per l’ululato è cresciuta’ (36) [Today my hatred of truth has increased and so has my passion for wailing] (30). The fact that Ahmed/Amedeo’s monologues, which gloss the other characters’ testimonies, are always referred to as ululations deserves attention. While yet another level of Lakhous’s satire of Western representations of Islam as fanatical and ideological, in the course

of the novel, the ululation also makes Ahmed/Amedeo into a symbol of Otherness and insanity that reaches beyond the narrow world of the novel's setting in piazza Vittorio and points to other important literary figures of global regionalisms.⁹

Far from silent or speech impaired, Lakhous's migrants ably describe their baffling encounters with Italian natives who misunderstand them and misinterpret their religious beliefs. They relate how Italian stereotypes about migrants affect them, as does the Italian propensity to self-stereotype. Iqbal Amir Allah relates his encounter with an Italian who stereotypes Muslims as prolifically sexual pashas, projecting his own sinister pride that Roman men are 'studs':

Tu non sei un vero musulmano, e quindi niente vergini per te in paradiso perchè il musulmano è obbligato a fare il Ramadan e sposare quattro donne. [...] Io rispetto voi maschi musulmani, perchè amate molto le donne come noi stalloni di Roma e vi stanno sul cazzo i froci. (63–64)

[You're not a real Muslim, so no virgins for you in paradise, because Muslims are supposed to pray five times a day and observe Ramadan and marry four women [...] I respect you Muslim men, because you love women the way we Roman studs do, and faggots really piss you off.] (48)

The passage reveals multiple layers of stereotyping in Italian perceptions of immigrants. Misguidedly attributing polygamy to all Muslims, the Italian speaker introduces prototypically Orientalist discourses of the Middle East as a place of eroticism and unbridled sexuality. In turn, he projects this stereotype back on Roman men. He asserts an arrogant familiarity with the religion of Islam that shows how Italians have internalized Orientalism and may even use it to excuse some of the worst types of behaviours and attitudes, including those that denigrate women and homosexuals. It is not only Italian characters like Sandro Dandini, the owner of a bar on Piazza Vittorio, who traffic stereotypes about Muslims. Iqbal Amir Allah complains that another Arab, Abdallah Ben Kadour, is an 'extremist' who accuses him of offending Islam while bearing a name that means 'Prince of God' (64/48).¹⁰ The same Abdallah Ben Kadour explains that he is committing religious blasphemy when shortening his name to Allah so that Italians are able to pronounce it (160/113). Iqbal Amir Allah finally goes to the police to denounce the reversal of his first and last names (65/49). The characters show how racism is both multi-valance and hard to detect. Racism often begins as an attack on identity and ends with something as insipid as a misspelling or a misplaced name – a crime of diction.

The language of stereotypes

In *Scontro di civiltà*, Lakhous pointedly mirrors the linguistic registers that have reified Italian debates about migration in recent years. The Neapolitan doorwoman Esposito explains that she suspects the ‘Albanian’, by which she means another character who is in fact Iranian (47/36). For Esposito, Parviz is not an individual; he is a symbol of the mass mob of foreigners that she imagines are bringing crime and social deviance into Italy. Another character, Elisabetta Fabiani, suspects that the ‘Chinese’ are responsible for the disappearance of her dog. The characters mimic what has been a common practice in Italian media. Since the first uptick in immigration in the early 1990s journalists have commonly described immigrants by using ethnic signifiers, e.g. as an Egyptian (*egiziano*), as opposed to an Egyptian man (*uomo egiziano*). This simple linguistic device, the making of an adjective into a noun, overtly emphasizes the ethnic, national or religious background of a person, and leads to stereotyping. These nominalizations help to produce racialized identities and label immigrants as ‘non-persons’ with neither juridical nor human rights (Dal Lago 1999).

Interestingly, what I call nominalizations of ethnicity have increased in equal proportion across the spectrum of right and left media (Hanretty and Hermanin 2010). Some of the most egregious examples of this type of racialization occur within the related process of the criminalization of migrants, as exemplified by headlines like the following: ‘I don’t want to sell drugs says disfigured Moroccan’ (*Corriere della Sera* 1996), or ‘Robbed and Knifed in Milan, Egyptian stopped’ (ANSA 2008), or ‘Two North Africans released from jail for the robbery downtown’ (*Metro* 2008). The immigrants sometimes reverse the essentializing gaze used on them by Italians. Parviz laments that he has seen a young Italian woman eating a pizza ‘grande come un ombrello’ (11) [as big as an umbrella] (13). Parviz’s frustration is poignant, coming as it does in a city that suspended a multicultural programme to include one internationally themed lunch per month on the pretext that some Italian mothers were anxious that falafel or curry might not be high enough in nutritional value (Kimmel 2008). Parviz turns the Italian orthodoxy about their diet back on the Italians, fantasizing that someday there could be ‘no pizza eating’ signs in the subway in the same way there are no smoking signs (11/13).

Lakhous rehabilitates piazza Vittorio for the immigrants that have inhabited it in recent years and made it into a controversial symbol of immigration in Italy. By the late 1990s, the piazza had shed the stately manner in which it was designed, in 1871, to house an incoming class of politicians when the capital was moved from Florence to Rome. It became the home for multitudes

of migrants from Africa, the Middle East and China, thanks in large part to a nearby Caritas shelter. Until an overhaul in 2002, the piazza transformed overnight into the city's largest and most affordable open-air market: vendors pitched tarps to make shade, which helped to give the market the atmosphere of a covered bazaar – or as one journalist sardonically quipped, the feeling of a North African 'suk' (Vitale 2003). Lakhous himself has remarked that the piazza reminded him of Algeria and said that he felt at home there when he first arrived in Rome and had yet to fully adjust to his new life in Italy.¹¹ *Scontro di civiltà* fits into a pattern of immigrant literature that privileges the textures and smells typical of Italian society and the new relationships and friendships that form within the landscape of contemporary urban Italy, now a place of immigration (Ponzanesi 2004: 162). Indeed, the market at Piazza Vittorio becomes the place where Amedeo is first recognized as Ahmed by one of the other immigrants, Abdellah Ben Kadour, who grew up with him in the same neighbourhood of Algeria (162/114).

The monologue by the fishmonger Abdallah Ben Kadour is further typical of how the novel thematizes piazza Vittorio as a place of encounter, or 'contact zone', where the immigrants rewrite their representation by Italians (Pratt 1992). Kadour reflects that the Italian proverb 'L'ospite è come il pesce, dopo tre giorni puzza' [Guests are like fish, after three days they stink] aptly describes his experience as an immigrant: 'L'immigrato è un ospite né più né meno, e come il pesce si mangia fresco e poi si butta nella spazzatura quando si perde il suo colore' (164–65) [The immigrant is a guest, no more or no less, and, like fish, you eat him when he's fresh and throw him in the garbage when he loses his color] (116–17). More obliquely, Kadour's words refer to the controversial CIE/CPT (Centres of Identification and Expulsion/Centres of Temporary Permanence), intended mostly for immigrants who arrive by sea, and which hold immigrants for several months and in extraordinary cases up to a full year, until either deportation or the granting of short-term asylum visas:¹² an indefinite detention of immigrants is achieved through their construction as 'guests' (Rovelli 2006: 54). Lakhous leaves this inference for his readers with Kadour making a different linguistic connection: his boss refers to new women immigrants arriving from Eastern Europe as 'pesce fresco' [fresh fish]. Ignoring the obvious sexual undertones of his boss's statement, instead Kadour feels victorious that he has undermined his label as an immigrant and activated the Italian language to speak about his own experience.

This discussion of stereotypes and linguistic labels extends to the Italian characters and to Italy's multiple national and regional self-stereotypes. One of the novel's most successful characters, the busybody doorwoman of the

condominium, Benedetta Esposito, proudly assumes the once ignominious status of ‘Neapolitan’: ‘Mi chiamo Benedetta, però a molti piace chiamarmi la Napoletana, Questo soprannome non mi dà fastidio’ (41) [My name is Benedetta, but a lot of people like to call me la Napolitana. That nickname does not bother me] (32). As she self-stereotypes – using nominalization in her nickname, ‘La Napoletana’ – Esposito advances typically xenophobic views that foreigners are backward and uncivilized. She imagines the immigrants as filthy, atavistic and hopelessly Oriental: ‘nei loro paesi vivono all’aperto o dentro le tende, mangiano con le mani, si spostano con i ciucci e i cammelli e trattano le donne come schiave’ (50) [In their countries they live outside or in tents, they eat with their hands, they travel on donkeys and camels and treat women like slaves] (38). Lakhous’s exaggerated representation of Esposito’s Neapolitan dialect reminds readers, however, that such stereotypes are reminiscent of similar ones once used about Southerners. As she embraces her Neapolitan identity, Esposito includes herself in a revival of Italian regionalism spearheaded by the *Lega Nord*, or Northern League party. Once the bane of the project for a unified Italy, regionalism and dialects have resurfaced in anti-immigrant discourses, reviving the so-called ‘language question’ about what it is the ‘real’ Italian language (Polezzi 2012: 101). Esposito represents Lakhous’s satire of these recent social transformations in Italy: as she claims a one-time negative label as a source of regional pride, she clumsily includes herself in a group that also maintains an Anti-Southern discourse.

The use of dialect in the novel constitutes an important way in which Lakhous extends his critique of language, and its power to reify national belonging, to the Italian characters. It is not just immigrants whose voices need to be rehabilitated but the other subaltern speakers as well. Some have criticized the fact that *Scontro di civiltà* presents characters as ‘tokens’ of different ethnic and cultural groups (Mari and Schvanyukova 2012: 121). Yet this ‘proliferation’ of stereotypes arguably reflects a preoccupation with the construction and performance of a national and ethnic identity. In contrast with the classic by Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto in via Merulana* (1947), to which *Scontro di civiltà* is sometimes compared (thanks to initial reviews of the novel on its first release), dialect in the novel is part of a broader critique of the relationship between language and Italian identity. Lakhous admits that, like Gadda, he employed an assistant to help with the accuracy of speech patterns and dialect to give his characters a regional inflection. The dialect that inflects the monologues of the Italian characters such as Benedetta Esposito and Antonio Marini, the middle-aged and curmudgeonly professor at La Sapienza, do more than just provide cultural

and regional affect. The dialect historicizes and situates Italian regionalism within a broader history of internal migrations that have affirmed the South as Italy's internal Other (Pugliese 2002). Marini, for example, slips into dialect only when he remembers his father urging him to move to Rome to pursue his career: 'Antonio, te ghe d'andà a Ròma, lassa minga scapà l'ucasiun de laurà quand gh'è l'ucasiun, fiu!' (104) [Antonio, go to Rome, don't lose the chance to work when you have it, son! Work is precious] (74). We learn that the father of this self-affirmed *Leghista* (member of the Northern League party) was a Southerner and one of almost two million Southern Italians who migrated to Northern Italy in the postwar period – a phenomenon captured in classic works of Italian cinema like *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960). Lakhous's use of dialect, in other words, serves to underscore how second-generation Southern Italians like Marini repress their own history of internal migration and Southernness as they turn against immigrants: 'Per me non c'è differenza tra gli immigrati e la gente del sud' (106) [To me there is no difference between immigrants and people from the south] (76), Marini complains. He laments that he does not see the 'eternal city' represented in postcards, but the beginning of the so-called *mezzogiorno*, or Italian South. Lakhous draws on a wellspring of stereotypes originating with Italian *meridionalismo*, or the Southern Question, to show how Marini's ideas of Italian identity are at the crossroads of multiple migrations.

Many of the Italian characters offer a counterpoint to conflict and racism while describing their need for a new language to describe a plural Italy, one that is, both politically and socially, less obdurate and more flexible – more able, in other words, to account for the presence of an Other. Stefania Massaro's double encounter with the 'Orient' – first during childhood vacation through the Sahara in which she sighted Tuaregs, and then as an instructor of Italian to immigrants – leads her to ask about the difference between clichés of the exotic and the complexities of real people. Massaro admits to equating Ahmed/Amedeo with Rudolph Valentino, the 1920s Italian sex symbol and frequent actor in silent films set in the deserts of North Africa, but Ahmed/Amedeo's disappearance leads her to question the fantasies that have framed her narrative. Although she says that her lover remains an enigma to her – like the Sahara – she reveals in her monologue that her love of Ahmed has made her long to be able to think past a Hollywood script: 'Credetemi, non c'è paragone tra la mia storia con Amedeo e *Love Story* di Erich Segal!' (145) [Believe me, there is no comparison between our story and Erich Segal's *Love Story*!] (102). Stefania is not alone in her desire to move past stereotypes.

Similarly, another of the building's residents, the Dutch filmmaker, Johan Van Marten, staying on the piazza to produce a work in the spirit of Italy's

classic postwar film, *Ladri di biciclette* [*Bicycle Thieves*] by Vittorio De Sica, determines that he will make a film about immigration. Van Marten plans to revive neorealism by documenting the alleged ‘cultural clash’ of the inhabitants of Piazza Vittorio. The title of Van Marten’s prospective film, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator at Piazza Vittorio*, is the *mise-en-abyme* through which Lakhous makes plain to his readers, if they have already grasped it by now, that immigration, racism and stereotypes dovetail with Italian culture and Italian identity. Van Marten asks whether it is logical that Amedeo, a foreigner, should be the one to represent Italy (121/87). The reference gestures in part to the author himself and to the Algerian ‘migrant writer’ who tells the story of contemporary Italy. Yet multiple characters in the novel probe exactly what the definition of an ‘Italian’ is. Although he is a European, Van Marten is also a foreigner. The prevalence of Italian characters originally from Southern Italy also notably destabilizes popular regionalist imaginaries of Rome as a city populated primarily by Romans who speak with their own dialect and who cook and eat *cucina romana* (Roman food). Rome is neither the melting pot nor the salad bowl but the city where Italian regionalisms, European capitalism, globalization and immigration all mix to create a linguistic overload of signs and referents to possible cultural identities.

The final ululation of the novel’s hero rehearses a ‘deterritorialized’ answer to the questions the novel has raised about identity. ‘Chi sono? Ahmed o Amedeo?’ (186) [Who am I? Ahmed or Amedeo?] (131)]. The protagonist can be either Algerian or Italian, but not both at once, and unable to find a stable identity in Italy, he commits himself to a sanatorium. His unexpected disappearance then reduces him to a ‘non-person’ in the eyes of the law. The monologue by Inspector Bettarini that underlines two ‘truths’ both undermines crime fiction’s commitment to an epistemology of fact, discovery and proof and the practice of linking immigration with delinquency. Amedeo’s disappearance makes him the chief suspect for a crime while simultaneously Amedeo was Ahmed, a troubled Algerian immigrant who disappeared because he was having a nervous breakdown. Lakhous leaves his reader unsure whether or not the protagonist is able to recover his sanity. We never learn whether he is to be Ahmed, an Algerian living as a stranger in Italy, or whether he is to remain Amedeo, an Algerian claiming an Italian identity.

Humour in identity and difference

In his next novel, *Divorzio all’Islamica* (2010), Lakhous takes the theme of performing Italian identity and applies it to the Italy of the global War on Terror. Many elements of the crime fiction genre also inhabit this text. A darkly cynical Captain Judas plays the familiar role of the bombastic boss to

the straight man detective (Christian/Issa); Christian/Issa is frequently derailed in his mission to discover the identity of the spies behind an alleged terror cell; Lakhous intimates the post 9/11 atmosphere of paranoia, spying and wire-tapping only to subvert it. Christian's mission to ferret out a terror cell within the 'Little Cairo' community requires him to make frequent visits to a call centre owned by a certain Akram (suspect number one). Rather than intercept important information in these visits to the call centre, Christian spends his time on the telephone with a fake family in Tunisia in a strategy to consolidate his cover as a Tunisian immigrant. Christian's Tunisian 'family' is remarkably similar to a 'real' one. His 'mother' is affectionate, worrisome and full of injunctions on how Issa should avoid catching a cold, women, gambling and debt.

Film references also act to anchor Lakhous's plot and create a powerful re-reading of Italian culture. In *Divorzio all'Islamica*, the author resituates classic tropes of Italian film comedy, including the encounter between opposites – such as North and South, modern and rural, tragic and comic – into the present-day context of the encounter between Italians and foreigners (Fournier Lanzoni 2008). By tethering the plot of his second novel to Italian film comedy, Lakhous succeeds in displacing notions of alterity and identity at the core of the genre. Compare *Divorzio all'Islamica*, for example, with Lina Wertmuller's *Travolti da un insolito destino nell'azzurro mare d'agosto* (1974) [*Swept Away*] where the love story between the snobbish (and masochistic) Northerner and the disgruntled (and sadistic) Southerner results in a slapstick comedy in which the moral of the story is that Italy's regionalisms are absolute. In Lakhous's novel, opposition underscores the relationship between identity and performance. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that Safia/Sofia and Christian/Issa are characters that Lakhous draws together not as attracted opposites but in order to reveal the arbitrariness of assumptions about identity and difference.

It is of course Pietro Germi's 1961 *Divorzio all'Italiana* [*Divorce, Italian Style*], in which the protagonist decides to end his marriage by capitalizing on an antiquated criminal code in Italy that allows for honour killings (divorce, on the other hand, is still illegal), that is the clear intertext for the novel. Lakhous's novel refutes the Orientalist commonplace of Muslims as 'backward' by underlining the relative ease with which one can obtain a divorce in some Islamic countries. The female perspective is a further re-reading of the well-known film: this is not the story of a stereotypical Italian male with a voracious sexual appetite that desires divorce so he can marry a younger woman, but that of a young Egyptian woman who falls in love with an 'Arab Marcello', by which the reader infers an Arab Marcello Mastroianni.

Lakhous sets up a double irony: the ‘Arab Marcello’ is the very Sicilian that Safia/Sofia metaphorically imagines him to be because Christian’s Sicilian-ness allows him to easily play the role of an Arab. The plot device is the fulcrum for a larger comment on the intermingling of identity and difference, especially in the Mediterranean. Not only does Christian don the garb of an immigrant, but Safia also poses as Sofia while allowing her Muslim namesake to be Italianized. She further adopts a trade (haircutting) that underlines her powers of self-fashioning: ‘Bionda si diventa e non si nasce!’ (19) [Blondes are made not born!] (28). Safia also plays the role of a Muslim wife relenting to her husband’s request that she wear a veil in public because it is what all Muslims do outside of Egypt – an allusion to the husband’s own need to perform his religious difference when abroad.

Lakhous provides a historical subtext to the novel’s meditation on identity and difference through his clear reference to the Italian community in Tunisia. Christian quickly adapts to the role of Issa, a Tunisian immigrant, because he is the Sicilian grandson of a Tunisian fisherman. As Julia Clancy Smith has shown in her magisterial study of migration in the nineteenth century, with Tunisia only one day’s distance by sea from the ‘big islands’ of the Mediterranean (Sardinia, Sicily and Corsica), locals in Tunis commonly referred to the seasonal arrival of Italian fisherman as an ‘invasion’ (Clancy Smith 2011). Issa’s infiltration of the Egyptian community in Rome points to the history of Italian ‘invasion’ of the Orient that led to the establishment of Italian communities throughout the Mediterranean basin: in Tunisia, Egypt and the ‘Levant’ or eastern Mediterranean. Lakhous updates the literary metaphor of the Orient as a theatre for spiritual conversion to narrate the emergence of new postcolonial identities that blur categories of nation and Other (Spackman 2011).

Issa does not convert to Islam, however, but back (or rather more fully) to himself. As a Tunisian/Sicilian/Italian he proves the perfect double agent, able to cross cultural and linguistic borders while already ‘at home’ in the Orient; he is therefore offered a permanent position with the anti-terror unit of the Italian secret service. As the text alternates between the perspectives of Issa and Sofia, it doubles themes of Orientalism and Occidentalism and erodes the sense of difference between ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ that the two contrasting perspectives lead readers to expect. The linear flow of the narrative is disrupted by Christian/Issa’s digressions on the Muslim community in Rome that reflect ‘the stance of an ethnographic observer, intent on translating Muslim practices for an Italian readership’ (Spackman 2011). Yet the chapters from the perspective of Christian/Issa are counterbalanced by Safia/Sofia’s mirroring ethnography of Europe: her apprehension of the lengthy and bureaucratic

procedure of divorce in Italy (69/84), the risks and benefits of cosmetic breast enlargement (86/101), and the history of the Italian dictatorship, World War Two and the partisans (88/104). The differing perspectives of Issa and Sofia create an opera-like duet in which Issa and Sofia converse about contemporary life Rome (the daughter in the novel is by no coincidence named 'Aida' after Verdi's famous opera set in Egypt) with male and female voices only intersecting at the very end of the novel, and then only briefly.

One final plot twist remains: Christian discovers that he has not been spying on the Egyptian community while posing as Issa, but that the Italian secret service has been testing his patriotism and loyalty. Prescient of recent revelations about the National Security Association's free range to spy on citizens globally, the ending builds upon the novel's referencing of transnational surveillance and the Abu Omar case: the rendition and torture of the Muslim Imam of Milan accomplished by the CIA together with SISMI (Italian Military and Secret Service).¹³ Christian/Issa links the abduction and return of Omar to Egypt to a repressed memory of Italian political exile, a forgotten era when Italian nationalists such as Garibaldi and the radical *Carbonari* found safe harbour with the Tunisian Bey.

Ma gli interrogativi rimangono: I nostri servizi erano al corrente? E com'è stato possibile riconsegnare un rifugiato politico al suo paese d'origine? Mi viene spontaneo pensare a Giuseppe Garibaldi e alle centinaia di oppositori politici mazziniani che in Tunisia godevano della protezione del bey di Tunisi. Nessuno pensava mai di consegnarli ai Savoia. Occorre ricordare che su Garibaldi pendeva una pena di morte. (120)

[But the questions remain: did our secret services know? And how was it possible for a political refugee to be handed over to his original country? Instinctively I think of Giuseppe Garibaldi and the hundreds of Mazzinian political opponents in Tunisia, who enjoyed the protection of the Bey of Tunis. No one ever thought of giving them up to the Savoy. It should be remembered that a death sentence was hanging over Garibaldi.] (142)

Lakhous's critique of immigration, surveillance and Islamophobia discloses his invitation to readers to reflect that in a different century Italians emigrated in the other direction and crossed the Mediterranean into North Africa. This sense of Italian national identity as being at the interstice of regional and Mediterranean histories helps to explain the author's ability to so successfully evade the label that he is an immigrant writer on the margins of the cultural conversation. Like his subaltern speakers, Amara Lakhous shows that he is no less 'real' than any other Italian.

Notes

1. First published as *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* (Lakhous 2006). All textual citations are from this edition and all English translations are from *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator at Piazza Vittorio*, trans. Ann Goldstein (Lakhous 2008).
2. On the inadequacy and problematic nature of the term ‘migrant writer’, see Bouchard 2010.
3. Amara Lakhous has generated a large body of criticism due to the author’s experimentation with different genres as well as the way in which he has created a postcolonial voice that adapts linguistic and novelistic strategies of some of the best Francophone writers. This article is indebted to the criticism of Claudia Esposito (2014), Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (2012), Rita Wilson (2011), Graziella Parati (2010), Barbara Spackman (2011). On the relationship between contemporary racism and identity, see Wendy Brown (2006); and on the relationship between national identity and immigration, see Anna Triandafyllidou (2003).
4. This article began as a conference paper at the conference ‘*Denuncia: Speaking up in Modern Italy*’, held at New York University in March 2009. I would like to thank the organizers of this conference, Alessandra Montalbano, Jonathan Mullins and Valeria Castelli, for their feedback on earlier versions of the article. I would also like to thank Rebecca Falkoff and Jason Badgley for their editing, Amara Lakhous for his generosity with his time when discussing his work with me, and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for further revision.
5. See Verdicchio 1997, Schneider 1998, Moe 2002.
6. The term ‘significant other’ has been meaningfully developed by Anna Triandafyllidou in her comparative study of immigration and the European nation-state: Triandafyllidou 2003.
7. On Italian postcolonial writing as minority literature, see Wright 2004.
8. Interview by author with Amara Lakhous, 15 July 2010.
9. The bellows of mentally handicapped Benjy Compson in William Faulkner’s *Sound and the Fury* echo the ululations of Lakhous’s Ahmed/Amedeo who similarly is unable to find either self or meaning.
10. Page numbers refer to the Italian edition followed by the English translation of the novels.
11. ‘My memories of Algiers with its crowded, working-class neighborhood were strong and obsessive. The market at Piazza Vittorio filled the void and calmed my anxieties. Walking through the crowds and listening to the cries of vendors, I felt as if I were once again in the market of Algiers’ (Amara Lakhous 2009).
12. The precursor to the Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione was the Centro di Permanenza Temporanea, which was in fact created by the centre-left in 1998 (*decreto* 286/1998), often referred to as the Turco-Napolitano legislation. ‘The CPA (Induction Centres): foreign nationals who arrive in Italy by sea are held

- in these centres. The duration of residence is in theory limited to “the time required to establish the legitimacy of the foreign national’s presence in the country”. In practice the duration of detention is unlimited and can extend to several months, or even several years. These centres created in 1995 to handle the increased migratory flow into Italy have never been subject to clear regulations’. Department of Citizens Rights and Constitutional Affairs (European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs), “The conditions in centres for third country national (detention camps, open centres as well as transit zones) with a particular focus on provisions and facilities for persons with special needs in the 25 member states” (European Parliament, December 2007).
13. The Abu Omar case was the subject of several Italian inquiries and one case against twenty-six CIA agents by Italian public prosecutors.

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