

## ‘Pens that confound the label of citizenship’: self-translations and literary identities

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The linguistic and cultural identity of transnational writers who choose to write in an adopted language or to self-translate, has gained increasing interest among researchers over the last decade. Approaches to the topic have ranged from textual analyses of translingual narratives and language memoirs to more ontological investigations of the processes of identity-formation in transcultural frameworks. Acknowledging that there is no one-to-one correspondence between linguistic units and ethnic, social or cultural formations, this paper considers the relationship between the literary practices of contemporary translingual writers and the role of language both in the formation of personal identities and in the reconfiguration of constructions of national identity and literary belonging. Specifically, I examine how two contemporary women writers, Francesca Marciano and Jhumpa Lahiri, who each represent a remarkable case of self-conscious linguistic transformation, interrogate the traditional construct of a monolingual, mono-ethnic and mono-cultural national identity. I argue that their autofictions reflect the multi-lingual and transcultural reality of contemporary transnational literature and instantiate broader issues connected with the definition, categorisation and consequent evaluation of literary canons and literary citizenship.

**Keywords:** transnational literature; self-translation; translingual writers; language and identity; Jhumpa Lahiri; Francesca Marciano.

### Introduction

In a review of the Spanish translation of Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei – hat zwei Türen – aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* (1992; *Life is a Caravanserai, Has Two Doors, I Came in One, I Went Out the Other*), the Spanish writer and intellectual Juan Goytisolo (1994, 12) stated that he had long since anticipated that the future of French literature would be in the hands of Maghrebi authors, that of English literature in the hands of authors from Pakistan and India, and that of German literature in the hands of Turkish writers. More recently, Susan Bassnett (2012) has argued that we need new ways of engaging with the intercultural writing being produced today by those with access to more than one language and culture. One possible new way of engaging is to adopt a ‘transcultural’ approach. It is worth remembering that the intellectual roots of the notion of the ‘transcultural’ reside in the scholarship of Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz. In his influential book *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940; 1995), he emphasises not only the outcome of the intersection between cultures, but also the process by means of which cultural contact may somehow modify one or both of the cultures in touch, and

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lead to new creations that emerge from that encounter. The notion of a transcultural process, 'in which both parts of the equation are modified, (and) from which a new reality emerges, transformed and complex' (Malinowski 1947: xi), was taken up by German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch. In his seminal paper, Welsch (1999) argues that modern societies are vertically and horizontally differentiated and that essentialist views of culture are politically dangerous because they lead to exclusionary practices and do not reflect existing contemporary social and cultural configurations (1999: 194–195). Transculturation is seen as a communicative dynamic in which there is a constant requirement for a mutual negotiation of the meanings of social and linguistic interaction. This applies to individuals on both a societal and a personal level. The dynamically connoted prefix *trans* represents, in this context, an orientation beyond the kind of dichotomies suggested by the static, black-and-white cross-cultural division of 'us and them', which, in turn, fortifies the idea of Self and Other. Transculturality reveals this pattern of thought as problematic and refutes the homogeneity and coherence of cultures, noting that the 'mechanics of differentiation has become more complex ... no longer complying with geographical or national stipulations' (Welsch 1999, 203). This greater complexity is particularly evident in the 'trans-spaces' (Garcia and Li Wei 2014) produced by increased and more diversified transnational mobility.

Taking account of the large-scale movement of peoples across geographical and national boundaries and the rapid evolution of cross-media networking in the digital environment, current migration scholarship has seen an increasing emphasis on the transcultural nature of cross-cultural encounters (Harutyunyan 2012, Hoerder, 2012). The term 'transcultural' has come into wider circulation to describe and inquire into the inner differentiation and complexity of cultures. A number of other terms cluster around 'transcultural' in a comparable or related space of meaning: 'multicultural', 'cross-cultural', 'intercultural', 'transnational', 'translingual', 'diasporic', 'migrant', and more. All of these words have gained currency with the discourse of globalisation over the last quarter-century, where globalisation refers loosely to the phenomena of flows, exchanges and connectedness that have come with late capitalism and new communications technology in combination: new and unprecedented in so many ways, but also not totally new. Each of these words can be more or less useful and precise in definition, nuance and applicability. My intention here is not to fill a paper with fine-grained semantic distinctions, since the meanings of all these terms overlap and blur, but rather to identify aspects or processes that might enable a more informed and more complex discussion around notions of belonging, migration and cultural identity. I do this by considering the relationship between the literary practices of contemporary translingual writers and the role of language both in the formation of personal identities and in the reconfiguration of constructions of national identity and literary belonging.

### Mobile identities

Steven Vertovec (2007, 1024) describes the changing patterns of mobility in the era of globalisation in terms of an 'increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants'. In the context of the multidimensional linguistic, ethnic and cultural hybridity of twenty-first-century societies, traditional representations based on the supposed unity of people, culture and territory do not hold. Such a generalising assumption of uniformity within the territory of a state clearly does little justice to the diversity, ambivalence and extreme variation that can and usually will exist between people of the same nationality or indeed within any other group considered to be sharing a culture. Rather, it would be more pertinent to

apply the definition of culture used to capture those parts of human interaction that are collective and which concern everyday life, the creation of meaning, values, customs and habits. ... Culture in this sense is constantly produced in the interaction between people and should not be linked to ethnicity or nationality, as is often done in a stereotyping manner. (Gustafsson, Norström and Fioretos 2013, 189)

However, the individual and different histories of literature and migration in various national contexts show that the national frame is still a powerful and influential aspect. The Italian literary canon, for example, 'strongly connected to Italy's endeavours at nation-building post-Unification (1861), has traditionally excluded authors who did not conform to the ideal of Italian national identity' (Orton 2018, 289). With the rise of so-called migration literature in the 1990s and the steady increase in the literary production of writers from different ethno-cultural backgrounds and/or immigrant origin over the last two decades, questions of ethnicity and citizenship have gained major visibility in the Italian literary context (Orton and Parati 2007; Orton 2018). Through their translingual and transcultural creative practices, these writers give agency to the multiple voices that constitute contemporary Italian society – including those marginal voices that had previously been excluded from the literary canon – thus challenging normalised positionings within discursive spaces (Wilson 2017).

The idea of a national literature is strongly related to a specific geographical and linguistic context. In contrast, the notion of transnational literature is understood as 'a genre of writing that operates outside the national canon, addresses issues facing deterritorialised cultures, and speaks for those in ... 'paranational' communities and alliances' (Seyhan 2001, 10). This procedural notion of transnationalisation captures the opening of national literary fields and the increased forms of linguistic and cultural border-crossings occurring in contemporary superdiverse societies. It also acknowledges that literature is influenced by migratory movements and that its products (literary texts) and agents (authors, but also publishers, critics, readers) are affected by these movements. Thus, the straightforward assignment to specific national contexts is no longer possible: writers are born in one place, move to another and possibly write in yet another place. Translingual authors use languages for their writing that are not their first languages and/or write in more than one language. Hence, it is necessary to revise the concept of citizenship that underlies all attempts to keep track of the repertoire of elements that constitute a particular literary canon.

In scholarly discussions about literary canons, works by translingual writers typically tend to be separated in two categories: they are described either as migrant literature or as diaspora literature. Works are labelled as 'migrant' literature if written in the language of the adopted country, even if stories are exclusively about the writer's country of origin. If writers continue to write in the native tongue, their works are likely to be studied as the diaspora literature of their native land, notwithstanding that the work is about the country of their residence. The vexed question of the reductive labels assigned by literary critics is one that persists in the Italian context. Igiaba Scego (2004), for example, declares that her greatest fear is

to be trapped in a label, that is, 'migrant writer'. I both am and am not one ... unfortunately, sometimes, we non-Italian born authors are trapped by our origins. This is a very tough restriction, to the extent that the publishing houses that approach us, are those that are interested in intercultural writing.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of literary labelling is closely connected to the still dominant notion that individuals are organically linked to a particular ethnicity, culture and nation through their 'mother tongue' and goes together with 'a certain notion of property (as both material ownership and distinctive peculiarity) according to which it is generally accepted that a writer can belong to only one literature, which is authentically his or hers' (Santana 2005, 119). This exclusive vision of literary citizenship ignores – because it does not recognise the possibility of overlapping and multiple cultural

identifications – the vast body of transcultural literature that has been published in the twenty-first century. To give just a few of the many examples of transcultural / translingual writing in any European language that could be mentioned: in addition to Maghrebi writers who write in French and Turkish authors who write in German, there are Iranians writing in Dutch, Guinean and Moroccan writers in Spanish, Tunisian and Senegalese authors in Italian. Sometimes the choice of language can be a political act, but often it is intensely personal, as in the case of the two authors I will focus on: Francesca Marciano and Jumpha Lahiri, whose writing lives are, in a way, mirrors of one another. They each represent a remarkable case of self-conscious linguistic transformation, through which they directly challenge the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between linguistic, ethnic, social or cultural formations.

### Language as the index of identity

Jumpha Lahiri was born in London to Bengali parents and raised in Rhode Island (USA). Author of two commercially successful collections of short fiction, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and two novels, *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013), Lahiri has received some of the most prestigious accolades in the anglophone literary world, including a Pulitzer Prize and a PEN/Hemingway Award. For reasons that turn out to be increasingly complex, in 2012 Lahiri acted upon her long-held fascination with Italian by moving to Rome to immerse herself in the language. She documents the process of reinvention and self-inquiry set off by that ‘linguistic pilgrimage’ in her fifth book, *In altre parole*, a sort of ‘linguistic autobiography, a self-portrait’ (Lahiri 2015, 212), written in Italian.

In an early interview about her Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri (2001) described her own absence of belonging: ‘No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that’s why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile’. This idea of exile runs consistently throughout her narratives and is a fundamental motivation for her choice to write her ‘linguistic autobiography’ in Italian. First published in 2015, *In altre parole* consists of 23 short chapters containing reflections on the idea of writing, translating and learning a second language, and ultimately of coming to terms with the plural notion of identity, or identity evolutions:

I learned to not worry about identity, to move away from it, to have a detachment toward a very oppressive idea and reality for most of my life. Identity is a container, and I want to stay away from containers. ...

Our identity is constantly changing, being rewritten and revised, like a powerful text of Virgil translated all the time. That’s how I approach identity: a kind of translation, open-ended translation as I move through life. I feel like I need to maintain the container opened and see what’s outside. (Lahiri 2017a)

A crucial part of the process of completing her Italian ‘self-portrait’ is analysing her relationship with each of her languages. In ‘Il triangolo’, she sketches the chronology of her linguistic journey:

My very first language was Bengali, handed down to me by my parents. ... My first encounter with English was harsh and unpleasant: when I was sent to nursery school I was traumatized. ... A few years later, however, Bengali took a step backwards, when I began to read. I was six or seven. *From then on my mother tongue was no longer capable, by itself, of rearing me. In a certain sense it died. English arrived, a stepmother...* The part of me that spoke English, that went to school, that read and wrote, was another person. ... I had to joust between those two languages until, at around the age of twenty-five, I discovered Italian. ... *The arrival of Italian, the third point on my linguistic journey, creates a triangle.* It creates a shape rather than a straight line. A triangle is a complex structure, a dynamic figure. The third point changes the dynamic of that quarrelsome old couple. I am the child of those unhappy points, *but the third does not come from them.* It comes from my desire, my labour. *It comes from me.* (Lahiri 2016, 147–153; emphasis added)

The triangle is both a geometric and geographical representation of a transcultural identity: the ‘permanent, indelible’ English is drawn as the base in ink and the other two, Bengali and Italian, are drawn in pencil and form the shifting other sides. The third side of the triangle (Italian) is the one that developed out of choice and allows her to create a triadic and triangular psycholinguistic space all of her own; to complete the frame that contains her self-portrait (157). The quotation above illustrates not merely the act of distancing from her two main languages, but rather the interweaving of codes, signs and resources that is consistent with literary translanguaging seen as an overarching cultural phenomenon, with the ‘movement between languages’ internalising and reflecting ‘both the freedom associated with geographical mobility and the emotional price it inevitably entails’ (Steinitz 2013, 186). From this angle, Lahiri’s multilingual awareness represents a sort of mediation and balance between different languages, all of which are important and integrated within this locus of identity formation. For translanguaging authors, the plurality and combination of languages represent constitutive elements in their modes of writing, acting as markers of the composite nature of both individual and cultural identities, as well as their tendency to go beyond national boundaries.

When it comes to the choice of a writing language, the ‘necessity of free choice’ is key to the formation of translanguaging and transcultural identities (Chanady 2004, 33), which are predicated upon the continual and mutual development of cultural traditions, affirming the ‘the possibility of cumulative as opposed to dissociation identity’ (Chanady 2004, 33). A translanguaging writer’s choice of language can be both declarative and functional. Behind every language choice is a conscious decision, a statement a writer is making: because, ultimately, ‘language acts are acts of identity’ (Pérez Firmat 2002, 433). Lahiri has stated many times that she chose Italian as her third language, as ‘a way to reinvent myself as a person and as a writer’ (Donadio 2015). This is a personal stylistic but also cultural and emotional choice:

My writing is so different that it is almost a second life as a writer. Language leads me in a new direction: in Italian I write completely for myself. Nobody asked me to do it; it’s a project that is completely mine. (Lahiri 2017b)

Francesca Marciano, too, was motivated to change language to reinvent herself:

Actually, I changed my language to change my life. Writing in a language that is not that your mother tongue, you are much freer, you can reinvent yourself, your mental landscape changes, all self-censorship collapses. I talked a lot about this with Jhumpa Lahiri, when she lived in Rome .... She wrote *In altre parole* in Italian, and, like me, she felt the same sense of freedom. (Rittatore 2016)

Marciano is at a similar stage in her career to Lahiri. She, too, has published four books of fiction – three novels, *Rules of the Wild* (1998), *Casa Rossa* (2004), and *The End of Manners* (2008), and a collection of short stories, *The Other Language* (2014). Marciano is a successful screenwriter, credited with more than 20 scripts for Italian film and television, nominated for seven David di Donatello Awards to date, winner of Best Screenplay in 1992 and, more recently, winner of a Nastro d’Argento award for Best Story in 2016 and nominated for Best Screenplay in the Cairo International Film Festival Awards, 2018. While all her screenwriting is done in her native Italian, all her fiction is written in English, the language she began learning in her teens. In a recent interview, Marciano explained she started writing her first novel, *Rules of the Wild*, in Italian but was struggling to make progress until a friend suggested she write in English. Writing the novel in Italian, a language alien to the environment, seemed stilted to her:

The story was set in Kenya, and the characters were English and spoke English (although its narrator is from Rome). And I remember that I first started writing the first few pages of the book in Italian. And it just sounded so inauthentic. And I stopped. And then a very good friend said try to write in English and

see how it goes. And I remember how the minute I started writing in English, I felt I was on this, like, highway that would take me somewhere. (Martin 2014)

While both of these linguistic transformations are motivated by personal choices, they also somehow mirror the fluidity of the contemporary age, the impact of cultures in motion. The conscious (re-) creation of a writing self – this multiple linguistic positioning – requires a re-interpretation of the binary code that underlies the clichéd concept of a split subjectivity.

### Translating the self

A pivotal concept for translingual writers, who fashion narratives that try to encompass both the self that took shape in the native language and the relocated cultural-linguistic self, is that of self-translation (Wilson 2012). It is a way of enacting ‘being-in-difference’ (Bhabha 1997, 438): ‘an ongoing, vacillating process of translation that iteratively crosses the border between external/internal, psychic/somatic’ (Bhabha 1997, 442–443). The processes of self-translation reflect the identity of someone who is in constant movement between cultures, split and doubled by multiple allegiances to different languages and places.<sup>2</sup> By way of illustration, I consider some of the processes of self-translation evident in both Marciano’s short story collection, *The Other Language* (2014), and Lahiri’s mixed genre collection *In altre parole* (2015). Published only a year apart, and with titles that are virtually interchangeable, these works bring into sharp focus how the function and value of linguistic repertoires and skills change as people move between differently ordered social spaces.

Marciano, for example, offers a series of metalinguistic reflections that underscore the connection between translingualism and personal transformation emphasised throughout both her own and Lahiri’s oeuvre and in the arc of their careers. The collection’s title story, for instance, considers self-translation in a metaphorical sense to describe ‘a renegotiation of the self’ (Saidero 2011, 33) of a young Italian girl. Emma hears ‘the clipped authoritative language’ (English) while on vacation in a Greek village with her newly-widowed father and bereaved siblings and begins to spend all her time with two English boys in her effort to learn ‘the other language’:

That summer forever marked the moment when she swam all the way to the island and landed in a place where she could be different from whom she assumed she was. There were so many possibilities. She didn’t know what she was getting away from, but the other language was the boat she fled on. (Marciano 2014, 22)

By the end of the story, adult Emma feels that, thanks to her mastery of the other language, ‘she had finally become the person she had always wanted to be’ (44–45).

Transcultural, transnational, and translingual contact is again emphasised in a manifestly tongue-in-cheek autofiction included in this collection entitled ‘The Italian System’. In this story, an ex-pat Italian teacher living in New York decides to author a self-help book for Americans who want to live like Italians. The book educates Americans on the Italian way of life, one that celebrates elegance, good food, wine, a certain life-style, and whose ‘secret ingredient’ is *lightness*. Marciano emphasises the untranslatability of the term *leggerezza*, to suggest that this is a distinctively Italian attribute:

*La leggerezza*, as we call it, is the necessary quality to execute the flawless dive, the effortless pirouette. The nature of anything truly enchanting has to be as light as a whiff of air. (2014, 240)

This is not just an instance of code-switching to provide local colour; rather, I would argue it is a case of purposeful untranslatability. The untranslated, not immediately understandable, amplifies the text’s meanings. The intentional possibilities, to use Bakhtin’s (1981, 289) formulation, carried

by specific lexical choices, such as the one above, are ‘realized in specific directions, filled with specific content, they are made concrete, particular, and are permeated with concrete value judgements’. In other words, through this literary expedient, Marciano sets a new perspective for the writing of transcultural social relationships. It is also a good example of the back and forth of self-translation: not only signalling the movement between languages but also suggesting how bi-/multilingual authors continuously deal in internal cultural import and export. In effect, translingual writers slide from the limitations of one language to the possibilities of another. There is an element of appropriation in this, a ‘seizure and transformation (of language) into private property’ (Bakhtin 1981, 294). There is also an emphasis on personal versus national or ethnic language use which recalls Lahiri’s creation of a personal psycholinguistic ‘third’ space between the poles of (ethnic) mother tongue and (national) stepmother language as the locus of identity formation.

Marciano feels particularly vulnerable but also particularly exhilarated by the trials of translanguaging, abandoning the comfort and safety of a first language for the freedom of an adopted one: ‘you are more vulnerable because you no longer have control of the situation, but these situations force you to draw on resources you may not have thought you possess’ (Rittatore 2016). It is a feeling shared by Lahiri, who, in *In altre parole*, recounts how the process of moving between the exchange-value (instrumental) and use-value (emotive) functions of her ‘new’ language (Italian) has allowed her to take firmer charge of her writing, to steer it away from a fiction of longing. And, as Lahiri (2002) reminds us, ‘the translation project is a key part of this whole mystery’. It is worth noting that *In altre parole* grew out of the first short story Lahiri wrote in Italian. The short story ‘Lo scambio’ is about a translator who moves to a new town, in search of a life change. The only thing she carries is a black woollen jacket. In strolling around the new city, she ends up going to a sale of hand-made garments. She tries on a few items but decides to leave without purchasing anything. Before leaving, she looks for her black jacket but she cannot find it any more. The salesperson shows her one, but it is not hers: different wool, size and intensity of colour. Failing to find her own jacket, the translator decides to leave with the one that is not hers. Seeing the ‘new’ jacket when she wakes up the next day she decides that, although it does not look like the one she used to have, it definitely belongs to her. In fact, she actually prefers it to the other one and, in wearing it, she feels that she has also become a different person. Transformation of the self, that shifting of identity, is of course what all this is about. Languages, as well as being tools, are the vehicle into a new culture: experiencing oneself in a language that is not native means (ideally) to know others and one’s self in a new way, conveyed here metaphorically by changing clothes: after all, ‘clothes are a language’ (Lahiri 2017b).

Yet, despite recognising that ‘the act of translation is deeply feeding (her) creative process’ (Lahiri 2017a), Lahiri decided not to self-translate *In altre parole*. In the Author’s Note to the English version, she justifies her choice by affirming:

Writing in Italian is a choice on my part, a risk that I feel inspired to take. It requires a strict discipline that I am compelled, at the moment, to maintain. Translating the book myself would have broken that discipline; it would have meant reengaging intimately with English, wrestling with it, rather than with Italian. In addition, had I translated this book, the temptation would have been to improve it, to make it stronger by means of my stronger language. But I wanted the translation of *In altre parole* to render my Italian honestly, without smoothing out its rough edges, without neutralising its oddness, without manipulating its character. (Lahiri 2016, xiii–xiv)

She opts instead to entrust the task to Ann Goldstein, an editor of *The New Yorker* and well-known translator of canonical Italian writers. Interestingly, *In Other Words* is presented as a bilingual edition with the Italian printed on the left and the English version on the right. The paragraphs

are laid out in parallel, encouraging a stereoscopic reading of the work, even for monolingual readers who can glance at the facing page, noting structural diversions and possible linguistic intersections. Thus, the bilingual format creates a space of mediation and renegotiation where transcultural exchange may occur and establishes a process of transculturation for both Italian and anglophone reader.

The 'translative awareness' (Bergvall 2000, 252) exhibited by both Lahiri and Marciano in their autofictions prompts more attention to the process of how new, multi-layered meanings have been generated through each of these author's respective re-locations / self-translations. Notably, their writing opens up languages from within and introduces links to other languages that are not determined by 'natural' connections, as exemplified by Korean-American writer Kryss Lee's response to Marciano's short story, 'The Other Language'. Comparing herself to Emma (Marciano's protagonist), Lee (2015) observes that she becomes a different (better) kind of person when she spends time away from the US, staying in Seoul and speaking Korean: 'I see myself traveling through language toward a desired – or more desirable – image of myself, a better version of my English self, through language'.

## Conclusion

Lahiri and Marciano's self-conscious linguistic transformations serve to highlight the contingency of language and to establish new principles of literary belonging. Working across languages enables them to provide new insights into shifting constructions of citizenship in a period characterised by the transition from national to transcultural communities. In other words, they reproduce ideological linkages as rhetorical ones, and by so doing provide a way of capturing 'the labile quality of self and intercommunal identity construction' (Cronin 2013, 348). By exhibiting how cultural identities are not necessarily experienced through a clear-cut dichotomy of mother tongue and second language ('step-mother' tongue), but rather in the more fluid, less structured transcultural process that encompasses adaptive re-interpretation and contestation, they demonstrate that individuals can and do 'inhabit' more than one linguistic home and, perhaps more importantly, the choice of the linguistic home they wish to inhabit supports individual decisions regarding multiple belonging.

A couple of points that have implications for future studies of translingual literature emerge from readings of their texts. First, both authors inspire a critical reappraisal of the concept of 'mother tongue' and of its association to the notion of belonging to a single, unified nation, culture and ethnicity. Their works reveal that language codes may be strategically deployed as indices of specific identities. They show how traditional conceptions of what it is to be a 'native speaker' break down when instrumental language use is separated from the symbolic value of language as a means of manifesting and asserting one's national/cultural loyalties. In Lahiri's case, the notion of 'native speaker' is further challenged by the separation of language inheritance from language allegiance and from the degree of linguistic expertise (Bonfiglio 2010). She makes it quite clear that minor linguistic competence must not be confused with reduced analytic competence. Her limited knowledge of Italian does not prevent her from asking critical questions with regard to cultural norms with which she is confronted during her time in Italy. The 'simple Italian' she uses in her linguistic autobiography becomes also a political statement on the situation of immigrants and the linguistic barriers to participation in civic society, and so, by extension, on the transnational and transcultural realities in Europe today.

This brings me to my second point: the body of Italian literature is increasingly transcultural. Yet the critical response within Italy has been divided, with the majority of critics resisting the



inclusion of ‘multicultural’ literature as part of the literary canon. This resistance can be attributed, in part, to the fact that migration issues in Italy remain highly charged politically and socially (Orton 2018, 289). The focus on the refugee crisis and the construction of the Otherness of new arrivals within Italian society serves to perpetuate the myth of a clear split between a homogenous national culture and identity (‘us’), and the foreigners (‘them’), while ignoring the fact that many of the country’s immigrants are long-term residents, some of whom have made Italy their home for over thirty years. A primary theme to emerge from ‘us and them’ portrayals is the issue of labelling: there is, for example, still a lack of consensus with regard to the use of terms such as ‘Italian-born’ and ‘second generation’ to refer to any person who has at least one foreign-born parent. The terms are, in any event, methodologically imprecise because they do not distinguish between those who have Italian citizenship (usually referred to as ‘native’ Italians and therefore understood to be ‘native speakers’) and those who do not have citizenship even though they were born in Italy and are native speakers of Italian (Wilson 2017).<sup>3</sup> Such labelling supports a vision of society and citizenship in which ‘native speakers’ are privileged over any other groups and individuals and which creates barriers for inclusion of ‘non-citizens’ in a national literary canon:

[I]f they want to overcome the scrutiny of the literary institutions and advance from the market to the canon . . . , foreign-born authors writing in Italian will have to demonstrate that they can do without specific labels (migrant, Italophone, emerging, diasporic) . . . Next, to become part of ‘Italian literature’, they will have to overcome the barrier of social prejudice, the deeply rooted idea that the home-language is worth more if it is inherited rather than acquired or earned. (Cacciatori 2016)

Critics, scholars, and publishers often seek to categorise authors by language or nationality, yet so many writers constantly transgress and question boundaries of national literary canons. As John Freeman, a former editor of *Granta*, wittily puts it, ‘writers are polyamorous when it comes to nationality, but . . . critical dialogue, since it is about context, tends toward the nationalistic. Critics are . . . very often writing in forums . . . that reinforce national identity rather than complicate or erode it’ (Donadio 2015). The plurality and choice of languages represent constitutive elements in the modes of writing of translingual authors like Lahiri and Marciano, acting as markers of the composite nature of both individual and cultural identities. Lahiri, recognising that categorisations are not universal but socially constructed narratives, positions herself beyond geographical national boundaries:

[F]iction is the foreign land of my choosing, the place where I strive to convey and preserve the meaningful. And whether I write as an American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate, therefore I am. (2002)

Conversely, Marciano enjoys telling interviewers that the experience of writing in English is both a self-challenge and a discovery of self-potential, a form of self-translation that has transformed her into an ‘American writer’ (Astori 2015).

The difficulties some critics evidently have in assigning these authors to a ‘national literature’ might well be taken to instantiate broader issues connected with the definition, categorisation and consequent evaluation of literature and writers. All in all, the transcultural literary work referred to above seems to share an underlying aim, namely, to decentre monolingualism and, thereby, to dismantle a monolithic worldview. Ultimately, by interrogating received notions of ‘national’ and ‘cultural’ in our paradoxical era of globalities and particularities, they help reveal the artifice, the contextually specific nature of all identity labels and the ways in which all labels can be reread, rewritten, and/or be perceived as prejudice. The act of translingual creation reflects a desire to enter, know and become the Other, and then share two (or more) spheres of cultural and linguistic formation through the process of transculturation, reaching out to explore the possibilities of

expression in another language and, importantly, to understand what it is like to achieve linguistic identification with another reality.

### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. All translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise indicated.
2. Together with the growing recognition that self-translation is not limited to a sequential process (Grutman 2009, Bassnett 2013), scholars have expanded the definition of self-translators to include authors who have two (or more) literary languages; write in more than one language; and/or translate their texts between their languages (Hokenson and Munson 2007, 14).
3. Italian citizenship law privileges *ius sanguinis* over *ius soli*, making naturalisation based on residence a drawn-out and complex process, particularly for non-EU citizens. Moreover, the assumption of biological otherness implicit in the *ius sanguinis* framework effectively impedes certain forms and expressions of cultural insiderness.

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### Italian summary

L'identità linguistica e culturale degli scrittori transnazionali che scelgono di scrivere in una lingua adottata o di auto-tradursi, ha guadagnato un crescente interesse tra i ricercatori nell'ultimo decennio. Gli approcci all'argomento hanno spaziato da analisi testuali di narrazioni e memorie translinguistiche a indagini più ontologiche sui processi di formazione dell'identità in strutture transculturali. Riconoscendo che non esiste una corrispondenza individuale tra unità linguistiche e formazioni etniche, sociali o culturali, questo articolo considera il rapporto tra le pratiche letterarie degli scrittori translinguistici contemporanei e il ruolo del linguaggio sia nella formazione delle identità personali che nella riconfigurazione di costruzioni di identità nazionale e appartenenza letteraria. In particolare, esamino come due scrittrici contemporanee, Francesca Marciano e Jhumpa Lahiri, che rappresentano ciascuna un caso straordinario di trasformazione linguistica autocosciente, mettono in dubbio il costrutto tradizionale di un'identità nazionale monolingue, monoetnica e monoculturale. Sostengo che le loro autofiction riflettono la realtà multilingue e transculturale della letteratura transnazionale contemporanea e istanziano questioni più ampie connesse alla definizione, alla categorizzazione e alla conseguente valutazione dei canoni letterari e della cittadinanza letteraria.