

Transnational Identities and the Subversion of Language in Contemporary Italian Literature*

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In this paper I analyze the literary works written in the Italian language by three women authors: Geneviève Makaping (who migrated to Italy from Cameroon), Christiana de Caldas Brito (from Brazil) and Jarmila Očkayová (from Slovakia).

After a long history of emigration, only recently Italy has transformed itself into a site of immigration. Between the end of the Eighties and the beginning of the Nineties, writers intending to settle definitely in Italy – and to participate actively in the Italian social and cultural life – started to publish poems, novels and short stories in the Italian language. In these literary texts migration is not only a biographical experience, it is an existential condition: it is a kind of critical consciousness where knowledge and behaviour are not taken for granted.

According to Christiana de Caldas Brito, migrants abandon the motherland, the mother tongue and the biological mother, to immerse themselves in the new country.¹ She considers the experience of writing in Italian as the only way to make sense of her own experience, and to represent her own subjectivity (instead of being represented by others). This crossing of language borders, this appropriation of a new sound, is a way to establish a real contact with the “other”.

Many of the migrant writers now living in Italy can speak at least three languages: the mother tongue, the hateful language of the European colonizer country (used as a vehicular international language), and the Italian language: considered as a neutral and uncompromised language. Of course this model does not work for people coming from the former Italian colonies (Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia): in this case it is necessary to take into account the deep “removal” of the colonial past that has been perpetrated inside the Italian culture, the absence of a postcolonial critique and of any revision above the Italian history.²

I recognize some common features in this new literary production: cultural contamination, linguistic hybridization, an intense connection with the rhythm of oral speech (especially in African writers), and a strong presence of irony, as a result of the increase of multiple standpoints. What is taking place in these texts is a process of estrangement, in which our everyday life is observed from outside, it is seen as something strange and unusual. These writers appropriate the Italian language, they transform the Italian literary tradition, liberating it from provincialism and creating something new: an intercultural literature that corresponds neither to the literature of their country of origin, nor to the one of their country of arrival.

Of course this process of cultural integration through the use of a new language is problematic: Geneviève Makaping feels she does not have a full command of Italian,³ and because language is a site of fight and resistance – it is a way to recognize ourselves and to take possession of ourselves – she considers this lack as a weakness. On the other hand, Jarmila Očkayová states that the Italian language is part of her everyday life, and the choice of using it is a means to escape from a condition of “internal isolation”, to overcome the “barrier between herself and her perception of the world”.⁴ The use of memory and the experience of autobiographical writing are the only possibilities to bridge two different cultures: comparing her nostalgia for the origins with the will to assert her role inside the host country.

I consider their conscious choice of writing in the Italian language to be a claim for being listened to by us – the “native” Italians – and as a way to join the Italian community and to intervene in the Italian literary tradition. All these texts reveal a deep connection between language and identity. The renouncement of the mother tongue is often experienced by the writer as a betrayal of her roots, and sometimes it makes her feel guilty and frustrated. On the other hand, it is the starting point to recognize the plurality of the identities acquired by the author as a woman and as a migrant, and to question the integrity and the completeness of her subjectivity.

Geneviève Makaping argues that – “if language is the ground of identity construction” – she must recognize that her identity is a “kaleidoscopic” one: it is “like a mosaic”.⁵ But nothing can be completely pure: neither language, nor culture or identity. The simultaneous contact between languages and cultures typical of contemporaneity, forces us to abandon the belief that one's identity is valuable and recognizable only if it excludes the identity of another. Edward Said points out that today Europeans and Americans have to face a huge population of immigrants, whose voices require to be listened: as intellectuals, we must recognize this general historical trend towards transnational mobility. Nowadays – even because of imperialism – all cultures are interconnected, hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and not monolithic, thus – as Said claims – we need a “contrapuntal” and “nomadic” literary hystoriography, able to reveal their mutual interdependences and their power relations.⁶

Even though migrant writers experience on their bodies the process of “creolization” pointed out by Édouard Glissant,⁷ the aesthetic value of their literary production has always been underestimated and neglected by the Italian academia. But I believe that we – as people engaged in literary critique – cannot continue to ignore this new area of our literature. We must be ready to question the whole set of our certainties, methodological criteria and theoretical assumptions. We must problematize the dualistic thought of Enlightenment, which based identity on a series of oppositions (male/female, body/mind, nature/culture, civilized/primitive, us/they). This kind of

thought confined the difference – sexual, gender and ethnic difference, only to name a few – in a subordinate position. On the contrary, Édouard Glissant suggests a notion of identity as a rhizome – following Deleuze and Guattari – a notion of identity not as a unique root which excludes any other root, but as a root which meets other roots. Then the modern writer is not an absolute identity, s/he is always changing, for s/he writes in the presence of all the languages of the world.⁸ From this perspective, Christiana de Caldas Brito describes the migrant as someone who “exposes” her/his roots to the others, without any fear of been diluted by this encounter. She considers the condition of migration as a process of consciousness-rising, grounded on the recognition of multiple points of view.⁹

Makaping adds that she wants “the religious, social and political borders of her identity to remain open”,¹⁰ without falling in a relativistic perspective: she does not command all the languages she speaks, so none of these languages possesses her, nor she possesses any of them.¹¹ She experiments the “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries”, which Donna Haraway considers as an efficacious remedy for the racism and the phallogocentrism typical of western capitalism.¹² In this claim for a multiple belonging, I see the possibility of a world in which people do not fear either incomplete identities or conflicting points of view: a world in which people are not worried about reconsidering the borders between the subjects, their bodies and the outside world.

In the following pages I analyse the different strategies adopted by this three women writers to subvert the normativity of language in order to represent their experience of crossing different physical and/or metaphorical borders.

Geneviève Makaping writes an anthropological essay using the methodology of participant observation, but reversing the usual gaze of her discipline, which traditionally focuses on the “others”.¹³ Her book – *Traiettorie di sguardi. E se gli altri foste voi?* – is also an autobiographical diary, in which her personal experience of suffering violence and intolerance becomes a study on ourselves – the “native” Italians – disclosing our alterity, and revealing “*The black conscience of the white man*”.¹⁴

When the migrant writer decides to establish a dialogue with the Italian readers, she faces the alternative between the need for speaking the same language of the oppressor – the white majority – and the possibility of creating a new linguistic code. Geneviève Makaping decides to use the Italian language: her strategy consists in re-naming everything we have already marked, labelled and judged as negative and inferior. She engages herself in the deconstruction and the reconstruction of given meanings and concepts. First of all, she states: “I want to be the one who says my name”;¹⁵ and later she adds “Call me nigger”.¹⁶

In this way she touches a recurring issue in the Italian migrant literature, the preservation of the name: in many texts Mohamed becomes Ali;¹⁷ Fitahianamala becomes Mina;¹⁸ Yousef becomes Marco, “Mustafa becomes Mino and Hussein becomes Enzo”¹⁹. As a matter of fact, the practice of the “italianization” of the migrants’ name is a way to misappropriate a slice of their identities. This practice is not innocuous, on the contrary it is an attempt to normalize whatever seems to be different and deviant.

Makaping's claim to say her name is a clear act of resistance against the “cannibalistic” misappropriation of the works and experiences of black people. According to bell hooks – who is a great source of inspiration for the Cameroonian writer – this misappropriation is performed by the academic system to affirm its theoretical supremacy, preserving the distinction between colonizers and colonized.²⁰ Instead Makaping means to create a space in which the oppressed can affirm their own subjectivity and can articulate their own perception of the world.

The critical re-appropriation of the term “nigger” – which deliberately gives rise to embarrassment and uneasiness in Makaping's interlocutors – is a strategic one as well: it suggests that the disvalue traditionally attributed to negritude is no longer justified. I suggest to interpret it by the light of other strategic re-appropriations: for instance the one of the term “queer”, as the deconstruction of a label used to exclude and to relegate all the sexual identities alternative to the dominant heterosexual perspective to the range of the “abject”. Taking off from Julia Kristeva's notion of the “abject”, Judith Butler reverses the term “queer” from a term of abuse against homosexuals to a positive, radically anti-normative notion, comprising a wide-ranging diversity of sexual identities and practices.²¹ In the same way, Makaping wants to deconstruct and reconstruct the negative meaning of negritude, turning it into a creative and positive notion.

Christiana de Caldas Brito uses a different strategy: she creates a new expressive code grounded on the parodic mimesis of the “mistakes” typical of migrant people at their first contact with a new language. The result is “Portuliano”: a hybrid language in which she mixes the sounds and rhythms of Portuguese and Italian, evoking the language spoken by the Italian immigrants in Brazil. Her short stories – collected in the book *Amanda, Olinda, Azzurra e le altre*²² – give voice to a number of women that have always been silenced or spoken for. For these female characters – all speaking with a different “accent”²³ – the use of language opens new potentialities to express their critical gaze on the Italian society, to reveal the intercultural aspect assumed by Italy, and to establish a contact with the Italian readers.

Christiana de Caldas Brito states she does not want to be “a ‘well-bred’ writer. Grammar cannot be a castrative mother giving me impassable rules on how to behave properly as a writer”.²⁴ She lets her indelible cultural background coexist together with her new Italian identity. She refuses

the standardization imposed by the rules of linguistic correctness and by globalization, reclaiming her creative freedom and defending her dignity as an author.

In this way she breaks up a common stereotype about migrant writers: the belief that – because of their inadequate knowledge of our language and literature – the migrants cannot be good writers (as if literariness depended only on the command of the language). Usually literary institutions take for granted that migrant people are not qualified enough to be writers: evidently what is taking place here is a system of procedures of exclusion and control that – according to Michel Foucault – restrict the power of all the potential discourses (especially the ones that stake power and desire), limiting the access to certain areas and selecting the speaking subjects.²⁵

In this perspective, the hybrid language used by Christiana de Caldas Brito can be seen as a part of a fight for language against phallogocentrism: a fight which Donna Haraway has identified with the politics of the “cyborg”, in opposition to perfect communication, to the unique code that perfectly translates every meaning.²⁶ Even though writing in Italian implies a problematic encounter with the authority of the canon, it embodies the differences experienced by the author.

But Italians are still suspicious or indifferent towards what can be considered as “foreign” and “different”. This attitude permeates also the publishing market, which hardly believes in migrant literature's potential. Migrant writers can hardly find a publisher, their works are expected to be corrected by native editors, and their books – because of the lack of distribution – are almost invisible.

Jarmila Očkayová complains that the right to write in the Italian language is considered as a privilege of nobility, acquired by right of birth. That the foreign writers daring to write in the language of Dante are treated as plebeians yearning for a title. It is not important that elsewhere the literary use of an adopted language is considered as normal. It is not important how much richness the “foreigner” brings from her/his old world, or how deeply s/he enters inside the new world. Also her/his command of the language and of the stylistic features is an issue of minor interest. To be welcomed in the fortress of the Italian literature, the migrant writer still lacks blue blood.

But the choice of adopting a new language compels the author to give up the sensation of tranquil familiarity conveyed by what is already known. It requires a consciousness that frees her from the subjection to the norm of tradition. I refer here to the strategy of cultural decolonization performed by postcolonial narratives: anglophone writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundaty Roy and Hanif Kureishi, and francophone writers like Tahar ben Jelloun and Assia Djébar, have rushed into the mainstream literatures of their “adopted” countries. Furthermore I refer to the proliferation of a variety of Englishes (like Black English, or the musical language of rap and of Caribbean dub poetry). All these phenomena of appropriation, of metamorphosis and of adaptation undergone by

Royal English, contributed to deprive the imperial language of its political and ideological supremacy.²⁷ And finally I refer to the preservation of regional dialects in Italy during the last century, which Antonio Gramsci interpreted as a strategy of resistance that helped the working class to withstand the power of political and cultural hegemonies.²⁸

In the novel *L'essenziale è invisibile agli occhi*,²⁹ Jarmila Očkayová uses a "culinary" metaphor to explain the difference implied by her approach to the two languages – Slovak and Italian: “speaking the native tongue is like finding the food ready on the table, such as it has been cooked in the kitchen of a restaurant. On the contrary, adopting a new language is like being expected to prepare the same dish by yourself: you do the shopping, you dirty the kitchen and you pay attention to every ingredient. Afterwards, when you eat, you are fully aware of what you have in your plate”.³⁰

Then, the adoption of a language different from the native one – not only requires a higher consciousness, since it gives rise to doubts and questions for which the writer does not own ready-made answers – it also allows her/him to overcome the awe imposed by the sense of belonging to a certain tradition. Actually writing in a new language can produce a salutary effect on stylistic courage: since it ensures the possibility to break the rules established for the ones belonging to this high rank.

In this clear refusal of the ideal of the mother tongue expressed by Jarmila Očkayová, I see a connection with the figure of the “polyglot”, defined by Rosi Braidotti as a variant of the nomadic critical consciousness: the polyglot is a person in transit between the languages.³¹ This condition of simultaneous belonging and not-belonging enables the polyglot to look skeptically to fixed identities and mother tongues; to resist the temptation of fixing oneself in one univocal conception of identity, and to face her/his multiplicity.

According to Očkayová, the negative attitude towards migrant writers and the excessive defence of the Italian language displayed by the literary establishment, is grounded on a fear of diversity and on a search for normality, as a consequence of the fragmentation of the Italian national identity and of the lack of cultural cohesion.³² In *Nomadic Subjects* Rosi Braidotti extends her gaze to all Europe, seen as an ethnocentric fortress in which the ideal of the mother tongue increases any kind of nationalism, regionalism and localism. Here Braidotti alludes also to the ethnic rape suffered by women from Bosnia and Croatia, chiefly for their identification with the mother tongue and the motherland.

The polyglot experiences on her/his body the arbitrariness of language that Saussure demonstrated on a theoretical level. The polyglot has already given up any ideal of linguistic and ethnic purity, and any kind of nostalgia for a place of origin. In this perspective – Braidotti states –

the writers are the ones that can be polyglot inside their own language: a writer can speak only one language and be able to write in many different shades of the same language.

Jarmila Očkayová comes to a similar conclusion: she wants her two tongues to cohabit in her mouth, speaking the one of the Italian present without cutting off the one of her childhood. The dialog between Elia and Agata – the protagonist of her novel – suggests that polylinguism is a distinguishing feature of every language and of every discourse.³³ Then the contribution of the Italian literature written by foreign authors can be identified with the potentialities offered by the critical distance typical of people living in transit between two cultures, with the ability to dismantle the essentialist and stereotyped image of the immigrant and of the “third world woman”,³⁴ with the possibility of crossing the borders between different disciplines and literary genres. But above all, these writers remind us that human diversity is the raw material and the reason for the existence of literature.

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¹ Christiana de Caldas Brito, “Lo zaino della saudade”, in *Memorie in valigia*, edited by Roberta Sangiorgi and Alessandro Ramberti, Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara Editore, 1997, p. 11. This book is a collection of poems and short stories that were awarded prizes during the third edition of the Eks&Tra: the first literary prize for immigrants living in Italy and writing in Italian language (see <http://eksetra.net>).

² For an analysis of the removal of the Italian colonial history see Sandra Ponzanesi, “Il postcolonialismo italiano. Figlie dell’impero e letteratura meticcica”, in *Quaderni del ‘900. La letteratura postcoloniale italiana: dalla letteratura d’immigrazione all’incontro con l’altro*, no. IV, 2004: 25-34; and Pasquale Verdicchio, “The Preclusion of Post-colonial Discourse in Southern Italy”, in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, edited by Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 191-212.

³ “La mia espressione linguistica, invece, è ancora solo ‘traduzione’ in italiano di concetti pensati in chissà quante altre lingue contemporaneamente, il francese, il pidgin, l’inglese e la mia lingua madre che è il bahunese del Camerun. Avrò mai la padronanza di almeno una di queste lingue?”. Geneviève Makaping, *Traiettorie di sguardi. E se gli altri foste voi?*, Soveria Mannelli, Catanzaro: Rubettino Editore, 2001, p. 79. [“My linguistic expression is still only a ‘translation’ into Italian of concepts simultaneously thought out in who knows how many other languages: French, Pidgin, English and my mother tongue, that is the Cameroonian Bahunese. Will I ever have a full command of at least one of these languages?”]. All the translations from Italian are mine.

⁴ “Se dovessi scrivere in una lingua lontana dal mio quotidiano – mi autocondannerei a una specie di ingessatura del pensiero, a un isolamento interiore, creerei una barriera tra me e la mia percezione del mondo, della vita”. Jarmila Očkayová, “Al di là della parola”, *Kúma*, no. 2, September 2001, <http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/sezioni/poetica/Ockajova.htm>. [“If I should write in a language that is far away from my everyday life – I will doom myself to put my thought in a sort of plaster cast, I will condemn myself to an internal isolation, I will create a barrier between myself and my perception of the world”].

⁵ “Se la lingua è uno degli elementi fondamentali nella costruzione identitaria, allora io ho un’identità frammentata? O forse, a prescindere dalla mia conoscenza delle lingue, devo comunque riconoscere di avere un’identità caleidoscopica o a mosaico, poiché niente – la lingua, la cultura, la stessa identità – è puro?”. Makaping 2001, 79-80. [“If language is the ground of identity construction, then do I have a fragmented identity? Or perhaps, apart from my knowledge of languages, do I have to recognize that my identity is a kaleidoscopic one, or it is like a mosaic, because nothing – language, culture, even identity – is pure?”].

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

- ⁷ The francophone poet from Martinique defines the process of “creolization” starting from the history of the Caribbean, but he opens up the possibility to use this notion also to understand the condition of the writer in the contemporary world. Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996.
- ⁸ Glissant 1996.
- ⁹ De Caldas Brito 1997, 13-14.
- ¹⁰ “La mia convinzione è quella di tenere aperti i confini della mia identità, confini religiosi, sociali, politici”. Makaping 2001, 108.
- ¹¹ “Se avessi una piena padronanza linguistica [...] Ahimè, non ce l’ho, né in italiano, né in francese, né in bahunese-camerunese, né in inglese, eppure sono tutte lingue nelle quali mi esprimo, ma nessuna ha avuto possesso di me, né io di loro. Credetemi, non è una contraddizione” Makaping 2001, 110. [“If I had a full command of languages ... Alas, I don’t have it, nor in Italian, nor in French, nor in Cameroon-Bahuanese, and yet I express myself in all these languages, but none of them possessed me, nor I possessed any of them. Believe me, there is no contradiction”].
- ¹² Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”, *Socialist Review*, no. 15, 1985: 65-107.
- ¹³ “Guardo me che guarda loro che da sempre mi guardano”. Makaping 2001, 40. [“I look at me looking at them that have always looked at me”].
- ¹⁴ “La coscienza nera dell’uomo bianco”. Makaping 2001, 41.
- ¹⁵ “Voglio essere io a dire come mi chiamo”. Makaping 2001, 31.
- ¹⁶ “Chiamatemi negra”. Makaping 2001, 36.
- ¹⁷ Mohamed Bouchane, *Chiamatemi Alì*, Milano: Leonardo, 1991.
- ¹⁸ Fitahianamalala Rakotobe Andrianamaro, “Chiamatemi Mina”, in *Parole oltre i confini*, edited by Roberta Sangiorgi and Alessandro Ramberti, Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara Editore, 1999.
- ¹⁹ “Mustafa diventa Mino, e Hussein diventa Enzo”. Yousef Wakkas, “Io marokkino con due kappa”, in *Le voci dell’arcobaleno*, edited by Roberta Sangiorgi and Alessandro Ramberti, Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara Editore, 1995, p. 143.
- ²⁰ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness”, in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, London: Turnaround, 1991.
- ²¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of ‘sex’*, London: Routledge, 1993.
- ²² Christiana de Caldas Brito, *Amanda Olinda Azzurra e le altre*, Roma: Lilith Edizioni, 1999. One of these short stories, “Ana de Jesus” – certainly the most effective example of the use of “Portuliano” – has been translated from Italian into English in *Mediterranean Crossroads. Migration Literature in Italy*, edited by Graziella Parati, Madison-London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Associated University Press, 1999.
- ²³ For an analysis of how migrant women writers “writing with an accent” are breaking the rules of Italian language in order to represent their extraneousness both in the country of origin and in the one of arrival, see Graziella Parati, “Living in Translation, Thinking With an Accent”, *Romance Languages Annual*, no. VIII, 1997: 280-286.
- ²⁴ “Linguisticamente non voglio essere una scrittrice ‘ben educata’. La grammatica non può essere una madre castrante che mi dà regole invalicabili di buon comportamento letterario”. Christiana de Caldas Brito, “Editing: un aiuto, non un’intrusione nella creatività dell’autore”, <http://digilander.libero.it/vocidalsilenzio/editingchris.htm>.
- ²⁵ Michel Foucault, *L’ordre du discours: leçon inaugurale au Collège de France prononcée le 2 décembre 1970*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971.
- ²⁶ Haraway 1985.
- ²⁷ Sandra Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture. Contemporary Women Writing of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- ²⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *La questione meridionale*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1966.
- ²⁹ Jarmila Očkayová, *L’essenziale è invisibile agli occhi*, Milano: Baldini e Castoldi, 1997.
- ³⁰ “Parlare la lingua materna è come trovarsi la tavola già apparecchiata, il cibo bell’e pronto che ti portano dalla cucina di un ristorante. Adottare una lingua nuova invece, è come doversi cucinare quella stessa pietanza da soli. Fai la spesa, imbratti la cucina, stai attento a ogni ingrediente. Poi, quando mangi, sei più consapevole di quello che hai sul piatto”. Očkayová 1997: 54.
- ³¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- ³² Očkayová 2001.
- ³³ Očkayová 1997: 54.
- ³⁴ For an analysis of the stereotyped representation of the “third world woman”, in a hierarchical relation with the self-representation of the western woman, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, *Feminist Review*, 30, Autumn 1988: 65-88.