Arabising Italian? Transnational literature as multilingual transaction

This article investigates what kind of multilingual operations are carried out as migrant and transnational creative writers deploy in their fictions in Italian (often an acquired language) the languages which they hold in their personal repertoires. Exploring first the linguistic, political and cultural implications of what Algerian author, Amara Lakhous, describes as 'Arabising Italian', or of reformulating any one standard language by means of another, the discussion proceeds to examine a selection of linguistic strategies deployed by migrant and second-generation writers, which work to expose the creative possibilities of linguistic leakage across any rigid borders drawn around 'national' languages and standard forms. Analysis of these forms of translanguaging highlights the linguistic and cultural processes by which subnational, national and transnational forms of Italian may be combined in order both to engage readers in the active creative practice of multilingual social interaction and to challenge the hegemony of standard language and of 'national' cultures and literatures. The article demonstrates how transnational narratives counter the 'monolingual paradigm' (Yildiz 2012) and how, through drawing attention to and practising non-normative uses of the standard language, multilingual creative writing functions as a privileged site of linguistic, cultural – and so, political – transaction.

Keywords: migration literature; translanguaging; multilingual creativity; Italian; Lakhous; Kuruvilla.

Introduction

This discussion takes as its starting point one of the questions posed as the catalyst to the current special issue: 'To what extent do, for example, migrant authors reflect on standard language ideology, and how do they respond to it, e.g. through "non-standard" linguistic creativity?'. In answer to the first part of the question, there is in some instances manifest reflection on language ideology in novels and short stories in Italian written by migrant or transnational writers.[i] As creative writers who have elected to write in a language acquired through migration or developed through bilingual upbringing – often a second, third, or further additional language – these writers arguably have a privileged distance from their raw material, in the form of the Italian language, and are knowing and critical users of it. In relation to the second part of the

question, these writers do respond through 'non-standard' linguistic creativity, but in perhaps surprising and certainly quite individual ways. Whilst considering both parts of the question, it is crucial to note that creative writers of any provenance or background have licence to challenge the standard language. The history of Italian literature is populated by authors who have not only created and experimented with non-standard forms, but also, in the first place, have worked to establish and to question what the standard (literary) language might be in the Italian case. In other words, any assumption that the creative use of 'bad' language is the province of authors who inhabit the national language and literature from outside must be challenged, and the linguistic twists and turns which migrant or transnational authors effect in the standard language need to be scrutinised for their specificity.

Yasemin Yildiz, in her work on the 'postmonolingual condition', offers an indication of how writers might elaborate a distinctive process and product in relation to standard languages. She comments that 'literary multilingualism may relate to quotidian, sociolinguistic practices but does not simply reflect them. […] literary and essayistic texts […] configure languages in ways that imagine new formations, subjects, and modes of belonging and, most crucially, offer a more critical way of dealing with the monolingual paradigm' (Yildiz 2012, 25-26). The capacity of creative writing to 'imagine' innovative and potentially transformative forms of the standard language and, through them, also to imagine diverse ways of being and belonging, is key to my enquiry below. It also helps to articulate the distinction between creative writing – and creative multilingualism – as a means of acting upon the ways in which readers understand themselves and their linguistic and cultural environments, and a simple transcription as 'representation' of the complex linguistic texture of everyday life in a globalised society.

Germany and German language are the primary object of Yildiz's discussion,

but as she indicates, the monolingual paradigm has prevailed widely in the modern

discourse of nation-states, asserting a relation of watertight identity between possession

of a 'mother tongue' and individual belonging to a specific ethnicity, nation and culture

(Yildiz 2012, 2). James Milroy similarly argues that 'languages' as discrete and

bounded entities may be a western European construct and that 'in so far as separate

languages are known to exist, this is largely (or possibly, wholly) a result of social,

geographical, ideological or cultural factors, and not mainly of an internally driven

necessity within *language*' (Milroy 2001, 541; italics in source text). Italy – like

Germany, a nation of relatively late unification (both processes completed in 1871) –

offers a particularly striking example of the construction of national monolingualism,

with subnational forms remaining in use and recognised or promoted by regional

governments to the present day, and two regions within the nation-state (Aosta Valley

and Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol) officially sustaining bilingualism. This indigenous

multilingualism has been complemented and accentuated since the 1980s by significant

population flows into the nation from a range of countries in Africa, the Middle East,

Eastern Europe, and Asia, drawing attention in turn to longer-standing minority

communities from China and South-East Asia.[ii] Standard Italian thus asserts its formal,

national status within a complex multilingual matrix of everyday language use (Marcato

2004; Stewart 2004).

Evidence of what one might expect in terms of lexical or grammatical

challenges to the national language in texts by migrant writers in Italian is scarce. The

principle elaborated within postcolonial critical theory that subaltern writers talk or

write 'back' to Empire by manipulating and denaturing the imperial language (Ashcroft,

Griffiths, Tiffin 1989) is little to be seen in migration literature in Italian, perhaps in

part, as indicated already, because the majority of these writers do not have an immediate postcolonial relationship with Italy. Where the postcolonial relationship is more direct, in so-called 'second-generation' writers of Somali, Ethiopian, or Eritrean descent, the disruption of the colonisers' language through use of the 'mother tongue' is more prominent, but in the writings of first-generation migrants to Italy, Italian may serve as a means of circumventing colonial relationships, enabling the writer to choose to acquire and write in Italian rather than to engage with the political and cultural legacies borne by her/his second language – for example, French (Parati 1997, 174).

The impetus of the majority of writers, of the first generation at least, seems to be not to estrange the native speakers of (standard) Italian who are the presumed readers of their stories, but to engage them, gain their ear (Burns 2010). This may be a product of the period in which Italy became a nation of net immigration (broadly two decades after the main decolonisation period had ended); it may be intended as an antidote to inflammatory media coverage of the immigration 'phenomenon', demonstrating linguistic citizenship; it may well be a condition of the ambition of writers to gain a readership and creative recognition in Italy; and it is certainly an effect of the intervention of editors in publishing houses and cultural mediators in the wider creative and educational fields, whose impetus is either or both to sell books and to foster intercultural understanding, and who in short have no interest in making the stories they publish difficult to read. In the works of migrant writers in Italian, from the earliest published, such as Pap Khouma (Senegal) and Salah Methnani (Tunisia), whose novels were co-written with Italian journalists (Oreste Pivetta and Mario Fortunato, respectively),[iii] to others coming to prominence in the 1990s and 2000s, such as Tahar Lamri (Algeria), Shirin Ramzanali Fazel (Somalia), and Younis Tawfik (Iraq),[iv] the prose in Italian is limpid, supple, and often poetic, demonstrating a command of the

language which implicitly allows the author to accede to a contemporary Italian literary canon and to have some purchase, as a member of a linguistic minority, on the prestige associated with the standard variety of the language (Milroy 2001, 532). More emphatically, perhaps, it distances the authors from the pejorative label of 'vu' cumprà' used particularly in the 1980s and 1990s to describe migrants: the phrase is a distorted rendition of 'vuoi comprare', meaning 'do you want to buy something?', implying that all migrants are street vendors with no access to regular employment and with limited and narrowly functional knowledge of the language. As Susan Gal points out, every standardisation process creates stigmatised forms (Gal 2006, 171), and in this light, the use of a polished standard by writers using Italian as an acquired language for creative writing performs a powerful rejection of the stigma of stereotyped migrant forms. What is surprising, from the point of view of postcolonial theory and of traditions of Anglophone and Francophone literature, for example, is how unsurprising is the standard Italian used in the majority of texts by migrant writers in Italian.[v]

Amara Lakhous: Arabising Italian

Examples of more reflective and critical engagements with relations between languages in migrant-authored narratives are to be found, however. One such is offered by Algerian author, Amara Lakhous, from whose work my title derives. Lakhous migrated to Rome in 1995 and published a first, bilingual novel (Arabic and Italian) in 1999, followed by four further, successful novels written first in Italian (Lakhous 2006, 2010, 2013, 2014). The 'About me' section of the home page of his website consists of the following statement:

> I Arabise the Italian and Italianise the Arabic.
> Io arabizzo l'italiano e italianizzo l'arabo.
> Ich arabisiere das Italienische und italianisiere das Arabische.[vi]

A number of points about this statement merit discussion. The selection of languages reflects not the languages in which Lakhous writes, but those which he presumably sees as belonging to his strongest markets. His novels have been translated into English and German (and also French, which does not feature here). The three languages also reflect the three in which his webpages are available, though interestingly, Arabic is missing – in form, not content – from the statement above but is one of the languages in which the webpages can be viewed. The order of the languages is also interesting: English displaces Italian as the first in priority, for reasons of reach and market size again, one assumes. These are obvious points, and the website of course serves as the author's interface with a much wider world of interlocutors beyond the readers, actual or potential, of his novels. Nevertheless, it remains striking that a statement about the interaction of languages is articulated in other than the languages which are its object.

The coining of the verbs 'Arabise' and 'Italianise', in three languages, is more thought-provoking. Used in the first person singular, it claims singular ownership, on the author's behalf, of an innovative action. Used in the present tense, it suggests an active and ongoing process: the everyday creative work of transforming a language. Used transitively, it articulates a direct action of one language upon the other, but the reversal of the action in each individual statement, turning the verb into the object of the verbal action, creates a mutuality of this action, or indeed a transaction. Bilingualism is thus imagined by Lakhous not as the co-presence of two distinct languages – a double monolingualism – but as a process in which each language is inflected or modified by the other, resulting in a transformed language which contains both, inseparably. As such, it speaks to the translanguaging approach to bilingualism set out by Ofelia García and Li Wei, which 'considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has been traditionally the case, but as one linguistic

repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages' (García and Wei 2014, 2).

Lakhous's position also speaks somewhat to Yildiz's description of 'the postmonolingual mode of reading that [her] book offers – a mode of reading attuned both to the existence of multilingual practices and to the continued force of the monolingual paradigm' (Yildiz 2012, 6). Lakhous accommodates the need, as noted above, to engage a reader of Italian who may not wish to be challenged by the overt or systematic presence of other languages in the text or of manipulated forms of Italian, but his 'Arabising' of Italian brings an awareness – not only cognitive but sensory – of the presence of other languages in the novel and in the nation. His 'Arabised' Italian is formed sequentially after the national language but also acts as its 'postmonolingual' critic and challenger.

The method by which Lakhous effects this challenge is less immediately linguistic, that is, through modifications to the Italian lexis and syntax on the page, than thematic. Lakhous questions the notion that language, as apprehended within the monolingual paradigm, relates to possession of the 'mother tongue' and attachment to a specific ethnicity, nation, and culture, by showing how culture may be appropriated through language. Specifically, he examines in a number of his novels the logic of the capacity to 'pass' as a 'native' of another culture by means of accurate command of the standard language. The entitlement of any one citizen to one language and one culture 'proper' to her/his nation is demonstrated to be radically contingent, and in place of the sentimental notion of 'mother tongue' attachment, Lakhous's characters demonstrate the efficacy of adopted tongues.

An example is *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (*Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio*, 2006), a novel which has at its

centre a protagonist of Algerian birth and upbringing, migrated to Italy and resident in Rome, named Ahmed but known by most in the Piazza Vittorio community as Amedeo. The novel is structured through a range of witness statements commenting on who Amedeo is in the community, given in response to an investigation into a murder for which Amedeo is the key suspect. The novel intrinsically offers a polyphony of voices – native speakers of Italian and a number of other languages (Egyptian Arabic, Farsi, Peruvian Spanish, Dutch, etc.) – all speaking an Italian inhabited by other languages including Romanesco and Milanese dialects. In other words, the national language is figured in a range of its non-standard, subnational and transnational forms, exposing contemporary Roman multilingualism and challenging the uniformity which standardization seeks to impose (Milroy 2001, 531). Italian, this suggests, is constantly and variously being Arabised as well as Romanised, Sicilianised, Milanised, etc. in a fluid translingual mix which creates of it a shared space of expression to which all have access. Yet this is not equal access, as evidenced, somewhat counter-intuitively, by the points at which standard forms of Italian are disrupted. These ruptures do not occur in the narratives of the non-native speakers of Italian, but rather in those of native speakers, such as a Neapolitan character, Benedetta Esposito, and a Milanese one, Antonio Marini, who each sporadically use dialect, especially to express frustration or tension. This reversal of the stereotype of immigrants using 'bad' language and native speakers 'good' language draws attention to language hierarchies, their cultural capital, and to power. In giving testimony to an agent of the State, to 'lapse' into a stigmatised, non-standard form, as a citizen of the State, is an acceptable technique of self-expression, whereas to do so as a migrant would be identified as a failing, a moral lapse situated along a sliding spectrum towards criminality. As Gal notes with reference to asylum seekers wishing to enter Europe, 'The use of African or Asian forms of English,

for instance, is easily interpreted – by those at the centre of standard ideology – as lack of cooperativeness on the part of the speaker, or an unwillingness to tell the truth' (Gal 2006, 173).

In the novel next published by Lakhous, *Divorce Islamic Style* (*Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi*, 2010)*,* the author picks up the theme of passing in a different direction: his main male protagonist is an Italian citizen whose first language is Italian, and who is assigned by the state secret services to an anti-terrorist investigation which requires him to work undercover as a Tunisian migrant in Rome's multicultural community around Viale Marconi. Cristian thus becomes Issa. He is enabled to effect this change by his linguistic and cultural competence: born in Sicily with Italian heritage, with grandparents who had migrated to Tunisia to work in the fishing industry, and having studied Arabic language and culture at university, he passes. What is interesting in this instance is that not only does Lakhous again destabilise the monolingual paradigm and the notion of 'mother tongue', but he points emphatically to the fluid boundaries of the nation-state and the national language. Is Sicily almost the southernmost tip of western Europe, or is it almost the geographical centre of the Mediterranean, the prime (and historical) contact zone through which languages and cultures pass in multidirectional routes across the Mediterranean? The figure of Cristian and his professional and personal practices in Rome works to deterritorialise Italian language and culture and to stretch their boundaries over the Mediterranean to where they are, already, 'Arabised'.

In other words, Lakhous, rather than systematically disrupting the written Italian on the page, thematises the question of Italian in relation to other languages which co-exist in its contemporary proximity, building a reflection on the status and uses of the national language into his diegesis and strategies of characterisation, in order to

'configure languages in ways that imagine new formations, subjects, and modes of belonging' (Yildiz 2012, 25). One of the more complex imaginings of new subjects that he performs occurs when he draws attention in his novels to the points at which command of Italian as an additional language breaks down. Returning to *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, the structure of the novel, as noted above, is built of a series of witness statements about the central character, Amedeo. The core around which these are assembled is eleven short interventions, in the first person, by Amedeo himself. These are configured as confessional pieces or diary entries: intimate, schematic, offering not narrative continuity but, in a sense, a reflective break from the polyphonic accounts of Amedeo by others, in order to engage directly with the protagonist's consciousness. These eleven interventions are labelled 'ululati'. On one hand, they are howls: pre-linguistic, bordering on the non-human, traumatic. In Italian, they recall the foundational myth of Rome, of the brothers Romulus and Remus being suckled by a she-wolf, which is referred to time and again in the novel as part of its questioning of the imaginary of national identity.[vii] On the other hand, the term, 'ululati', recalls the ululations prominent in Arabic-Islamic culture as an expression of powerful emotion, whether at weddings, football matches, or funerals. Notably, though, this is not a practice or a vocal technique confined exclusively to any one culture, but extends across Africa, Middle East, Asia, and globally, in diasporic communities. As such, the term used to describe Amedeo's own contributions to the narrative is interesting in itself, fusing Italian national with transnational cultural histories and practices and drawing attention to a transcultural form of expression which is markedly non-linguistic and yet bears significant meaning.

This meaning strengthens as the text proceeds and as the anxiety of the murder investigation bears increasingly heavily on Amedeo, until the last two to three 'ululati'

in which, notably, Arabic language emerges in snippets within a broader collection of unfinished words or phrases and the transliteration of noises: the howls expressed as either 'Yuuuuuuuuyuuuuuuuuyuuuu' (Lakhous 2003, 174), associated with the celebration by others of cultural milestones, or the more pained, 'Auuuuuuuu' (Lakhous 2003, 186), voicing Amedeo's personal traumatic memory. Amedeo's history in Algeria before migration also emerges in fragments, telling the reader of the violent death of his former partner in the civil war. In the crisis of transnational and translingual subjecthood which the narrative leads to, Amedeo loses language(s). He expresses himself through a vocal sound which does not belong to any language or nation (or species), reminding the reader that there is nothing 'natural' about our acquisition of a language even as a 'native speaker': any language must be learned (Milroy 2001, 537).

Lakhous's narratives thus demonstrate, in ways less immediately striking but arguably more substantive than the unseating of standard Italian on the page, the point made by Yildiz that authors who write in an acquired, 'major' language 'provide a privileged position from which to explore the strictures of the monolingual paradigm and evaluate the means of reimagining the identitarian force of language' (Yildiz 2012, 6). Other recent fictions in Italian, by writers who hold dual citizenship or are of mixed ethnicity, may have been born and raised in or migrated to Italy, and interestingly, are predominantly women, offer more direct linguistic challenges to the monolingual paradigm. These writers – including Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ubax Ali Farah, Gabriella Kuruvilla – introduce lexis and phrasing from non-European languages into the Italian text, often as part of an intimate and direct writing style, highly colloquial, which in effect transcribes the everyday urban vernacular of some contemporary Italian cities and in doing so, echoes its linguistic mix.[viii]

Gabriella Kuruvilla: Translanguaging

An example of the form of fluid multilingualism indicated above is a novel by Italian-Indian writer, Gabriella Kuruvilla, entitled *Milan, So Far So Good* (*Milano, fin qui tutto bene*, 2012). The work tells of four different multicultural zones of Milan through four different narrators, each recounting their experience through a conversational first-person narrative. Each narrator uses the contemporary, colloquial Italian signalled by the novel's title, which is 'standard' as a spoken form but challenges the grammar of the formal standard. Each also uses a second language articulating her/his linguistic heritage, and folds this language, which may or may not be familiar to the reader, into the continuum of the colloquial narrative in Italian.

In this way, the four-part novel is divided along three principle elements: person, language, locality. In the first section, a woman of Italian and Indian parentage, Anita, narrates Via Padova, using the phrases of her deceased mother's idiomatic Italian as her interlocutory refrain. In the second, a male Egyptian migrant, Samir, narrates Viale Monza, using Arabic alongside Italian. In the third, an Italian artist named Stefania narrates Via Sarpi using Milanese dialect with Italian. In the final section, a male migrant from Naples, Tony, brings Rasta patois as well as Neapolitan into the narrative in Italian of the Corvetto area. It is important to note here that Kuruvilla thus avoids privileging the 'immigrant' languages of contemporary Italy, and instead places languages entering from outside of the nation into the same mix as those generated by the social and cultural history of the nation itself. In this way, she reveals both the historic multilingualism and multiculturalism of the peninsula and islands and simultaneously draws attention to the forms of multilingualism which characterise globalised society, such as Tony's personal, cultural choice to use a localised Jamaican English mix as well as regional and standard forms of Italian. Italian may well be Arabised, Kuruvilla indicates, but may also and concurrently be acted upon by multiple

other languages of both subnational and transnational provenance, to produce the fluid and pluralised Italian which the reader finds in her novel. Locating the interconnecting narratives vividly within the locality of Milan, Kuruvilla exposes the postmonolingual reality which Yildiz describes as 'the proximate coexistence of many languages in the same space' (Yildiz 2012, 2).

The particular techniques that Kuruvilla deploys create a colloquial currency of the Italian language which, rather than performing an action upon a presumed coherent and discrete standard Italian, rather than using one language to perform an action upon another (or Arabising Italian), posits and creates Italian as an expansive territory crossed and inhabited by a range of other languages, both formal and not, both indigenous and not. Her use of Arabic, for example, makes Arabic emphatically and visibly present in the text (albeit transliterated from Arabic script). To make this accessible to a presumed native speaker of Italian who is the reader, she performs through translation a suturing operation wherever the narrative in Italian is 'broken' by Arabic, so that the two languages enmesh. An example comes from Samir's story:

> The next day she sent me a message asking to meet for a drink. I didn't reply. Lau kan el kalem men fadda yeb 'a el sekut men dahab, if words are silver silence is golden. Four months later she sent me another message telling me that Nicola had been born. I went to see her. He was amazing: al-hamdulillah, thanks be to God.
> (Il giorno dopo mi ha scritto un messaggio chiedendomi di vederci per un aperitivo. Non le ho risposto. Lau kan el kalem men fadda yeb 'a el sekut men dahab, se le parole valgono argento il silenzio vale oro. Quattro mesi dopo mi ha scritto un altro messaggio dicendomi che era nato Nicola. Sono andato a trovarla. Lui era splendido: al-hamdulillah, grazie a Dio.) (Kuruvilla 2012, 84-85)

In this way, one language follows the other in a fluid continuum which enables the reader not to be excluded from comprehension, but at the same time gives voice and visual presence to Arabic. Within Kuruvilla's highly immersive narrative, this technique reflects somewhat the effect of subtitling in films and television, though the presence in

print of both languages on the page goes some way to disrupting the hierarchy between the language heard and the language seen in subtitling: both languages appear (momentarily) with equal authority. The use of this technique throughout Samir's narrative creates a refrain whereby the reader becomes familiar with the regular interchanges between Arabic and Italian which punctuate the narrative. As such, Arabic and Italian are presented in conversation, complementing each other in a process which estranges the reader from Italian as much as from the 'foreign' language, encouraging her/him to see and hear Italian anew.

The content of the phrases in Arabic is noteworthy. As the examples above indicate, Arabic emerges in Samir's narrative largely as idiomatic phrases or popular sayings, rather than simply as an alternative language in which to narrate events or feelings. A further example places Italian and Arabic idioms into direct conversation. Remarking on the decision of local councils in Trieste and Treviso to remove benches from public areas in order to prevent homeless migrants from sleeping on them, Samir comments: 'out with the tooth out with the pain, you say. Shil il ders tertah: once the tooth is out you'll be at ease, we say' ('via il dente via il dolore, dite voi. Shil il ders tertah: tolto il dente ti riposerai, diciamo noi') (Kuruvilla 2012, 57). In this way, the second language within the text bespeaks a second culture, bringing to the reader's attention the everyday knowledge and modes of explaining the world which form the structure of vernacular culture. The reader is explicitly called, by the use of the second person plural address ('voi'), to reflect upon these shared forms of knowledge. This technique features across the four sections of the novel prominently: in the sections narrated by Anita, Stefania, and Tony, it is the mother's idiomatic Italian and Milanese and Neapolitan dialects, respectively, which engage with standard conversational Italian, again bringing local and vernacular knowledge into the narrative and so telling

cultural histories as well as the events of the plot. In this way, transversal connections

are made between 'local' and 'global' languages across the four episodes and across the

spaces of the city that they narrate, avoiding any fetishism of the foreign, 'minority'

language.

The final section of the novel, 'Corvetto', takes a step further than the quite marked,

albeit fluid, code-switching which features in the earlier sections and which, in the case

of Samir's narrative in particular, is mediated by translation. The technique used by

Kuruvilla here aligns closely with the three principles of a translanguaging approach

outlined by García and Wei (2014, 3), which draws attention to:

- 'a *trans-system and trans-spaces*; that is to fluid practices that go *between* and *beyond* socially constructed language and educational systems, structures and practices to engage diverse students' multiple meaning-making systems and subjectivities'.
- 'its *trans-formative nature*; that is, as new configurations of language practices […] are generated, old understandings and structures are released, thus transforming not only subjectivities, but also cognitive and social structures'.
- 'the *trans-disciplinary* consequences of the languaging […] analysis, providing a tool for understanding not only language practices […], but also human sociality, human cognition and learning, social relations and social structures' (all italics in source text).[ix]

Translation is still used in this section of Kuruvilla's novel to explain the meaning of

Tony's patois, the most challenging to a presumed native Italian reader, whilst

Neapolitan dialect generally goes untranslated. However, the presence here of Jamaican

English, standard colloquial Italian, and Neapolitan dialect, all interweaving with each

other in Tony's account, creates a dynamic multilingual mix, in which the boundaries

between discrete languages are softened or removed. For example:

> Mi a-go lef inna di morrows: I'm leaving tomorrow. I've done my time now, in this place. I need to get out of here. Here is everything and nothing. But the borders of this place are [switch to dialect here] in people's hearts and in their minds: not in the real world.
> (Mi a-go lef inna di morrows: io me ne vado domani. Ormai ho fatto il mio tempo, in questo spazio. Devo schiodarmi da qui. Qui è tutto e niente. Pure i

confini di questa zona stanno dint o' core e dint a' cap da gent: no dint o' munno.) (Kuruvilla 2012, 141)

It is interesting here that even the standard Italian used has elements of creativity, of stretching of standard usage, which help to integrate the standard with the other idioms used, rather than to create hierarchical divisions. The echoes of colloquial English in 'I've done my time' ('ho fatto il mio tempo'), and the lively metaphor in the colloquial 'schiodarmi' ('get out of here'; literally, 'un-nail myself'), assert a toughness which fits the tone of the urban mix of languages.

A close look at the languages which Tony blends, and how he uses them, also helps to reveal the ways in which Kuruvilla's novel as a whole, as well as in specific episodes, posits language as the dynamic, living cypher of the multiple transnational and translocal trajectories which make up both individual and community identity in a global city. Having identified the family members with whom he shares a home (in dialect, 'me, my mum, my dad, my sister, my brother, my grandad'; 'io, mammà, pateme, sorema, frateme e nonneme'), Tony tells his personal history as follows:

> All a dem a me fambly: they are my family. The first to move to Corvetto was my father, then my mother, my sister and I joined him and in the end my grandfather followed us too. We're all here from Scampia [a working-class neighbourhood of Naples], but we feel at home here: this area is even twinned with Scampia. Of course there's a *feeling* [in English] with the people from round here: it's full of 'terroni' here [pejorative term for southern Italians used conventionally by northern Italians]. (Italics in source text.)
> (All a dem a me fambly: loro sono la mia famiglia. Il primo a trasferirsi a Corvetto è stato mio padre, poi l'abbiamo raggiunto io, mia madre e mia sorella e alla fine ci ha seguito pure mio nonno. Arriviamo tutti da Scampia, ma qui ci sentiamo a casa: questo quartiere, con Scampia, è pure gemellato. Ovvio che ci sta il feeling con la gente del posto: qua sta pieno di terroni.) (Kuruvilla 2012, 145)

From patois, duly translated into standard Italian, Tony proceeds into a clear contemporary Italian, standard in terms of syntax and lexis. He then, from 'Of course' ('Ovvio'), shifts to a much more colloquial Italian, though a shared one, rather than one

specific to a region or sub-culture. The verb 'stare' (to stand, stay, be) replaces 'essere' (to be) to de-formalise and de-standardise the language, and interestingly, the use of 'feeling' in English creates an echo of the English elements of the patois which opens the paragraph, and yet is a use of English from a different and more common source; that is, the fashionable contemporary use of 'global English'.

The linguistic mix thus voices the experiences and influences which Tony regards as formative of his individual subjectivity, but in doing so also makes reference to a range of transnational cultural histories which equally make up him and his environment, from the colonisation of the Caribbean to the economic marginalisation of Italy's south, to the global grasp of late capitalism. Interestingly, then, it is an internal migrant in the novel, rather than a speaker from a former Italian colony, who deploys the postcolonial technique of 'writing back' by making 'bad' use of the colonial language, and he does so by proxy, using an acquired form of creatively broken English to articulate his own sense of exclusion from the national language, Italian. He thus calls attention to the status of southern Italy within the history of the Italian nation-state as the colonised object of the economically and politically dominant north, and to intersecting global histories of constructed 'backwardness'.[x]

These intersections are multiply and creatively articulated in Tony's mix of the 'good' language posited by the monolingual paradigm (standard Italian) and other usages stigmatised as 'bad' or minor forms (patois, dialect, slang), rebutting on the page and in the reader's ear the ways in which the monolingual paradigm 'relegated linguistic practices without proper names to the status of deviation, hodgepodge, or simply invisibility, rather than recognising them as "language"' (Yildiz 2012, 7). The forms of languaging which Kuruvilla's novel performs realise the ethical force of

translanguaging, as posited by García and Wei (2014, 44), referring to Gloria

Anzaldúa's border theory (Anzaldúa 1987):

> Translanguaging provides this space *sin fronteras* [without borders] – linguistic ones, nationalist ones, cultural ones. Translanguaging for us refers to languaging actions that enact a political process of social and subjectivity transformation which resist [*sic*] the asymmetries of power that language and other meaning-making codes, associated with one or another nationalist ideology, produce. As García has said: 'In translanguaging the speaker is situated in a space where alternative representations and enunciations can be generated because buried histories are released and alternative, conflicting knowledges are produced' (Citation refers to García and Leiva 2014; italics in source text).

The buried histories of Italian internal colonialism as well as of global imperialism are released through Tony's practices of linguistic expression, and a knowledge of contemporary languaging practices in Italy is produced which resists dominant representations of migration as an emergency delivered from outside the national borders.

Conclusions

I return first to the point noted in my introduction, that the area of creative literary production and its reception requires different strategies for understanding the uses and misuses of standard language. A 'postmonolingual form of reading' (Yildiz 2012, 6) is as urgent as a postmonolingual mode of expression in writing. One of the specificities of the production and interpretation of creative writing is the privileging of what is unsaid in relation to what is said; the premiss that where language is absent, between the lines and in gaps, lies meaning (Iser 1978). In the context of multilingual creative practice this calls for close reading specifically of language acts and strategies in the text: where is one language present but not expressed? Which languages emerge where and are suppressed where? What are the translation acts and processes (including self-translation) which underlie plurilingual literary expression? Lakhous's novels, for example, create a demand for a practice of postmonolingual critical interpretation in

which reading between the lines is construed as reading across and between languages, entails unsettling the monolingual paradigm even where the text appears seamlessly 'standard'.

Where writers, and their publishers, fear losing a reader by doing 'unheard of things' (Achebe 1990, 274) to her/his 'mother tongue', they may well opt to conform to the standard forms of the language of writing. Readers and audiences, as consumers of cultural production, have the capacity to be – and are already, in the digital age, in which texts and images cross linguistic and cultural borders much more fluidly – equipped to read multilingually. This means not just accepting the presence, explicit or not, of other languages in the text only inasmuch as they are identifiable separately with the author's repertoire and are made to appear transparent through translation, but also listening attentively for what exceeds the monolingual paradigm. It suggests seeking linguistic shocks and discontinuities, exploiting the creative and ethical potential of 'bad' language. Kuruvilla's novel offers a provocation and a training for the reader in this respect.

Whether publishers are widely willing to underwrite such linguistically diverse material is questionable, especially where the subject matter matches less immediately the linguistic mix of the text than it does in Kuruvilla's stories of the everyday in a contemporary multicultural urban environment. A signal of this possibility lies in the support that both specialist and mainstream publishers in Italy give to dialect and regional literatures. A powerful recent case is that of a narrative, *Mad Land* (*Terra matta*), written between 1968 and 1975 in non-standard Italian, using a typewriter, by an unschooled Sicilian worker, Vincenzo Rabito. The manuscript was posthumously passed to Italy's national archive of diaries and then published – in an edited version – by Italy's leading literary publisher, Einaudi (Rabito 2007). Though this example

importantly draws attention to the historical porosity in Italy of the monolingual paradigm, owed to subnational linguistic differences, it also raises the question of whether multilingual texts assembled from Italy's 'new' minority languages have similar access to the national literary heritage and its established readership. It is largely small and specialist publishers who have published fictions by migrant writers, in limited print-runs, and though publishing houses have begun since around 2010 to promote second-generation writers in particular more assertively, there remains a sense that texts using non-standard forms identified historically with Italy's regions carry a cultural prestige which is not accorded to non-standard forms inflected by extra-territorial global languages.

Comments in Amazon reviews certainly value *Mad Land* (*Terra matta*) as a national-regional historical and cultural document. Interestingly, one also describes the linguistic challenges of the reading process: 'The prose is difficult and often you need to search for the sound of the words in order to understand them, although after a while you get used even to words you've never seen before'. ('La scrittura è faticosa e spesso bisogna cercare il suono delle parole per capirle, anche se dopo un poco ci si abitua anche a parole mai viste prima'; vaccaricarlo 2014). This seems an apt account of 'a postmonolingual form of reading' (Yildiz 2012, 6). It also speaks to comments that Gal makes about the impact of linguistic diversity upon the notion of public:

> Publics are created through the circulation of discourses as people hear, see or read a message and then engage it in some way: by shows of interest, including imitation, commentary, borrowing, quotation, citation, and of course, translation. At each step there can be acceptance, parody, ridicule, opposition or even rejection. […] A self-aware public emerges as a mutual watching or listening. (Gal 2006, 173)

One of the effects of 'Arabising' Italian in literary fictions, and particularly of the borrowings, translations and imitations which Kuruvilla's writing foregrounds and performs, is perhaps to nurture the transformative process of building new reading publics, and wider discursive publics, in the Italian context. Kuruvilla's novel brings into Italian literature the auditory and visual evidence of translanguaging in many Italian cities and some rural areas today. She signals too that it has historically been taking place in Italy long before Italy 'became' multicultural through large-scale immigration at the end of the twentieth century. Italian appears in the novel as, for generations, a site of multilingual transaction, in which the standard can be witnessed and engaged with as an instrument of creativity, and as the leaky vessel into, through and out of which other languages can be channelled in multiple directions and forms. Readers are invited to 'watch and listen', as Gal notes, and so to become a self-aware public for a 'postmonolingual' Italian language which challenges and reshapes the hierarchies of the standard.

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[i] I use the term 'migrant writers' for those who have themselves migrated to or through Italy and

write in Italian, and 'transnational writers' for those who write in Italian and are second

generation migrants or of mixed heritage. The second term encompasses the first, but it is in

most cases useful to identify the distinction between writers who have acquired Italian

language and experience of Italian culture as a result of mobility and those who are bilingual

or multilingual and multicultural through descent.

[ii] See the website of Italy's national statistics agency, ISTAT, for data on immigration:

http://stra-dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?lang=en. Accessed March 14, 2018.

[iii] The earliest texts authored by immigrant writers were almost all co-authored or edited by

Italian writers or journalists. See Burns 2003, 387-94.

[iv] See references below for examples of these authors' works.

[v] For example, Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, warned, 'Let no one be fooled by the fact that

we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it' (Achebe 1990, 274). On

Beur fiction in French, authored by second-generation writers from the Maghreb, see

Hargreaves 1991.

[vi] http://www.amaralakhous.com. Accessed March 14, 2018.

[vii] The myth is referred to directly in the title of the Arabic version of the novel (2003), which

translates as 'How to Be Suckled by the She-Wolf Without Being Bitten' (*Come farti

allattare dalla lupa senza che ti morda*).

[viii] Kuruvilla and Scego, together with Ingy Mubiayi and Laila Wadia, were published in a

collection of short stories tellingly entitled *Black Sheep: Short Stories* (*Pecore nere: Racconti*).

On Ali Farah's and Scego's writing, see Brioni 2015.

[ix] I replace García's and Wei's emphasis on education with one, in my context, on cultural

systems and structures and on the plurilingual subject's multiple meaning-making systems.

[x] See Lumley and Morris 1997; Schneider 1998.

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