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Italiani DOC?

Posing and Passing from Giovanni Finati to Amara Lakhous

Barbara Spackman

–*Sono un'italiana e amo il mio paese. Ma la verità è che qui non c'è futuro.*

–*Qui non c'è futuro?*

–*Sì, Sofia, dovete andare via dall'Italia prima che sia troppo tardi.*

–*E dove andiamo?*

In Italia non c'è futuro!... Gli italiani lasciano l'Italia per cercare fortuna altrove! Ma noi immigrati veniamo qui per lo stesso identico motivo!

--Amara Lakhous, *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi*, 152

The exchange above takes place between an Italian woman on the eve of her emigration to Australia, and an Egyptian woman, immigrant to Italy, in Amara Lakhous's 2010 novel, *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi*. The novel's protagonist is a "Christian," in both religion and proper name: a Sicilian who studied classical Arabic at the University of Palermo, and who, in 2005, is recruited by SISMI (Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare) as part of Bush's "War on Terror." His assignment: to impersonate a Muslim Tunisian immigrant and infiltrate a purported terrorist cell in the Roman neighborhood known as "Little Cairo," home to an immigrant community made up largely of Egyptians and other North Africans. Both setting and characters contribute to a layering of migrations: Christian's true family origins link him to Southern Italian emigration to Tunisia, and the topic of his *tesi di laurea* – Garibaldi's sojourn in Tunisia – in turn links that emigration to the Risorgimento and its making of Italian identity. The embedding of "Cairo" within an Italian city recalls yet other Mediterranean exchanges, both historically and geographically; the name "Cairo" itself is in fact the Italianization, on the part of travelers in the Middle Ages, of the original Arabic name of the city, al-Qāhira, and Cairo and Alexandria were home to immigrant communities of Europeans in general, and Italians in particular, in the wake of the Napoleonic occupation (from 1798 to 1801). There are resonances closer to our own moment as well. That a Southern Italian should impersonate a North African immigrant plays upon and inverts recent cinematic practice that maps the itinerary of African immigrants in Italy, onto the internal migration of Southerners to the North, and the external emigration of Southerners to the Americas. Think, for example, of Michele Placido's 1990 film *Pummarò*, or Gianni Amelio's 1994 *Lamerica*, in which the historical emigrations of Southerners provide the interpretive key for the contemporary immigration of Africans and Albanians respectively.¹ In this essay, I want to examine these multiple and historically varied tales of migration through the

¹ I am grateful to Marco Purpura and Avy Valladares for calling my attention to the layering of migrations in these two films.

lens of a topos that links nineteenth-century European migrations to Egypt and the Hijaz, with *Divorzio all'islamica in Viale Marconi*'s representation of the Italian infiltration of "Little Cairo": the topos of posing as Muslim in order to enter a sacred space. Lakhous himself invokes the analogy: "Un immigrante musulmano che si fa chiamare Cristiano è una pura provocazione. Sarebbe come andare in giro per la Mecca con una croce al collo! Si chiama apostasia, la pena prevista è la condanna a morte" (2010, 98). The theme and possibility of conversion to Islam plays a starring role in both of these two scenarios, and links the two historical moments in an embrace that conjures with Islamophobia, the historical malleability of a weak national identity in the Mediterranean, and the *frisson* of entry into a forbidden space in a disguise that is in equal measure linguistic and semiotic. At stake is a contrapuntal reading of several of the multiple migrations and identities evoked by Lakhous.

I want to argue that Lakhous reprises Orientalism's practice of representation by updating and recycling the powerful nineteenth-century metaphor of the Orient as, in Edward Said's fortunate phrase, a "theatrical stage affixed to Europe" (1978, 63). The book's title winks at Pietro Germi's 1961 film, *Divorzio all'italiana*, and already on the second page of the novel, Christian-posing-as-Issa underscores the theatricality of his mission: "non ho nessuna intenzione di giocare a fare il James Bond o il Donnie Brasco, mi manca il *physique du role*" (ibid., 12). My interest here, however, is not primarily in this particular filmic reference, but rather in the way that both the metaphor and the medium are updated in Lakhous's novel, as the scripted, cinematic nature of the analogy is underlined from the get-go. Among the particularly rich repertoire of plays upon that stage was the practice of passing and posing as Muslim in order to enter the sacred space of Mecca, prohibited to Christians upon threat of death. In its nineteenth-century version, such passing was the sign of the extraordinary man, alone at Mecca among a sea of authentic, and supposedly "transparent," believers.² Lakhous, instead, takes up the topos in order to generalize it as the condition of post-colonial Italian identities, whether "migrant" or "italiano *doc*," as the novel calls them: "un italiano al cento per cento, un italianissimo" (23).

I owe the pair of terms, "passing" and "posing" to Linda Williams's work on a very different historical context, that of the early twentieth century in the U.S., in *Playing the Race Card*. In her chapter "Posing as Black, Passing as White," Williams contrasts the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* and the 1927 musical *Show Boat*, arguing that "where whites who pose as black intentionally exhibit all the artifice of their performance – exaggerated gestures, blackface make-up – blacks who pass as white suppress the obvious artifice of performance. Passing is a performance whose success depends on not overacting" (2001, 176).³ Another way to put this might be to say that, in the scenario Williams describes, those who pose simulate something that they are not, whereas those who pass dissimulate something that they are; those who pose insist on exhibiting their distinction and distance from a stigmatized identity, whereas those who pass cover over their difference from an identity that confers privilege. Yet already in the case of *The Jazz Singer*, Williams shows that things are more complicated than this. *The Jazz Singer* provides an example not simply of a black/white binary, but a case of an "explicit performance of Jewishness

² On the supposed "transparency" of local populations, see Roy (1998).

³ I am grateful to Marco Purpura for bringing this work to my attention. Recent sociological work has been done on passing on the part of Albanian immigrants in Italy by Romania (2004).

against a foil of blackness mediated by Irishness” (141). Building on Michael Rogin’s argument that blackface “became a means of white-washing the assimilating Jew,” and that therefore “posing as black is ultimately a way to pass as white” (ibid.), Williams argues that the film turned recently emigrated, assimilating Jews into objects of sympathy by associating them with “the by now thoroughly conventionalized afflictions of slaves” (148). The result is to attach “racial pathos” to more recent narratives of assimilation, as well as to allow the Jew to pass as white. I propose to “migrate” these reflections to the cases of Lakhous’s novel, as well as those of his predecessors on the Orientalist “stage,” in order better to explore the intricacies of national belongings and the driftings that take place in two Caïros: one the nineteenth century Cairo that was the gateway to the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the other the “Little Cairo” of post-colonial Italy.

Giovanni Finati: Passing as Muslim and Albanian in Para-colonial Egypt

The evocation of the scholarly tradition that Edward Said so compellingly and controversially characterized over thirty years ago in *Orientalism* authorizes us to place “Christian” in relation to several of those male Orientalists, both professional and accidental, who also took up a disguise and either passed or posed as Muslim in the nineteenth century: the Italian Giovanni Finati (1787 – date unknown), the Swiss German John Lewis Burckhardt (1784-1817), and the British Richard F. Burton (1821-1890).⁴ Finati’s narrative is especially of interest here insofar as it provides us with an “Italian” example whose itinerary in “para-colonial” Egypt provides a counterpoint to that of Lakhous’s “Christian” in post-colonial Italy. Indeed, it is precisely Lakhous’s migration of this tradition to a space within the Italian peninsula that makes a case such as Finati’s newly relevant, for it allows us to resituate discussions of the making of Italian national identity by moving beyond the geographical confines of the Italian peninsula, to “contact

⁴ Elsewhere I have compared Finati-Mahomet’s experience to those of his contemporary John Lewis Burckhardt, and the later Richard F. Burton, both of whom also entered Mecca, Burckhardt as a convert to Islam, and Burton as emphatically not a convert, and hence the one true “Christian” in disguise. If Finati-Mahomet might be called an “accidental Orientalist,” both Burckhardt and Burton were professionals who trained for their roles, which combined both passing and posing. All three made the pilgrimage to Mecca; all three published their accounts in English; and all three claimed to have passed undetected in Egypt and the Hijaz. To be sure, Burton and Burckhardt are the more famous of the trio, and provide examples of the careful linguistic training and cultural immersion necessary for an educated European to pass as Muslim. Burckhardt and Finati both converted to Islam and passed as Muslim throughout their lives as travelers in Egypt and the Middle East. Burton in particular is the most theatrical of the three, he himself invokes the metaphor of “the stage of Oriental life” in the opening lines of his *Personal Narrative*, and it was a point of pride that he entered Mecca not as a *rinnegato*, or convert to Islam, but in a disguise – physical, linguistic, cultural, and semiotic – so successful, he claimed, that his identity as an infidel was undetected by his fellow pilgrims. Burton writes: “Many may not follow my example; but some perchance will be curious to see what measures I adopted in order to appear suddenly as an Eastern upon the stage of Oriental life; and as the recital may be found useful by future adventurers, I make no apology for the egotistical semblance of the narrative” (2005, 1:4-5).

zones” where the imaginative geographies of north and south, east and west, cross, and where nationalities may be strengthened or come undone.⁵

We turn, then, to Giovanni Finati, who, one might say, parodying and re-writing the opening lines of Ippolito Nievo’s 1859 *Confessioni di un italiano*, “nacque Ferrarese e morì, insciallah...Albanese.” Whereas Nievo’s protagonist, Carlino Altoviti, begins the sprawling novel by announcing his desire for the consolidation of a national identity – “Io nacqui veneziano ai 18 ottobre 1775, giorno dell’Evangelista Luca; e morirò per la grazia di Dio italiano quando lo vorrà quella Provvidenza che governa misteriosamente il mondo” (1973, 1) – in Finati’s case, as we shall see, national and religious identity drifts along with his migration. Although by no means entirely unknown in the Orientalist field – the far more famous Richard F. Burton refers to him as “our Italian Candide” (2006, 2: 391) – Finati has not received the kind of attention given to the British cases we have mentioned: those of Burton himself, and of John Lewis Burckhardt. Finati nonetheless provides a compelling account of transnational mobility and the vicissitudes of “turning Turk,” as well as a rousing tale of adventures worthy of later genre fiction, such as that of H. Rider Haggard or, closer to his original home, Emilio Salgari. In a form of co-authorship that anticipates that of the first wave of contemporary migrant writers in Italy who told their life stories to native Italian speakers, Finati dictated his life story in Italian to an unidentified collaborator in Great Britain; it was subsequently translated into English by his one-time employer, William Bankes (1786-1855), an epigraphist, archeologist and accomplished amateur artist who employed Finati as interpreter and janissary during his voyage to Egypt and Syria in 1815-1816.⁶ In his preface to Finati’s narrative, he explains the reason for the expedient of dictation: “His long disuse, however, of European writing (an accomplishment in which he had, perhaps, never been a brilliant proficient) had made him very slow with the pen, and rendered it probable that he would soon abandon the attempt, if he took the whole labour upon himself, which was my motive that he should rather dictate, than endeavour to put his story to paper with his own hand” (1830, xiii).⁷ Bankes’s translation appeared in 1830 under the wonderfully expansive nineteenth-century title *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Giovanni Finati, Native of Ferrara Who, under the Assumed Name of Mahomet Made the Campaigns of the Wahabees for the Recovery of Mecca and Medina and Since Acted as Interpreter to European Travellers in Some of the Parts Least Visited of Asia and Africa, Translated from the Italian, As Dictated by Himself, and edited by William John Bankes, Esq.* Finati’s narrative is unusual in being almost entirely free of the textual mediation

⁵ I owe the notion of contact zones to Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). Such a project is in sympathy with recent work on Italian “diasporas,” such as Donna Gabaccia’s *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (2000) and Mark Choate’s *Emigrant Nation* (2008).

⁶ I am thinking, for example, of Nasser Chora, *Volevo diventare bianca*, co-written with Alessandra Atti di Sarro (1993); Pap Khouma, *Io, venditore di elefanti*, co-written with Oreste Pivetta (1990), and Salah Methnani, *Immigrato*, co-written with Mario Fortunato (1990).

⁷ Finati’s narrative has not been the object of scholarly study for its own sake, but rather for the information it provides about William Bankes. See, for example, Lewis, Sartre-Fauriat, and Sartre (1996, 57-95). An Italian translation of Finati’s narrative was published by Michele Visani in 1941, under the title *Vita e avventure di Giovanni Finati*. Visani searched in vain for what Bankes tells us were the original twelve notebooks dictated in Italian by Finati and translated by Bankes, nor was he able to locate the original English manuscript. In their 1996 article, Norman N. Lewis et. al., report instead that a manuscript of the first volume of the book is to be found in the Bankes collection held in the County Record Office in Dorchester, U.K.; the second half, they speculate, has been lost (58).

that characterizes those of his more learned fellow-travelers, a fact which may have exempted him from the more egregious stereotypes of Orientalist intertextuality. At the same time, his life story is representative of a passing made possible by the encounter of his own “weak” national belonging with the fluidity of identities to be found in Muhammad Ali’s Egypt.

It is worth remembering that Egypt in 1815 was a modernizing state, having been wrested from the Mamluks and held at some distance from the Ottoman Porte by Muhammad Ali. C.A. Bayly has suggested that Egypt in this period should be referred to as a “para-colonial” state, engaged in building a monopoly, export trade and an army of its own and not “a static extra-European world” brought into modernity “simply by the imposition of Britain and its allies” (1989, 228). In the wake of Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt (from 1798 to 1801), and the rise to power of Muhammad Ali, many Europeans, Italians among them, found their way to Cairo and Alexandria, drawn not only by the lure of antiquities (and the possibility of their looting), but also by Muhammad Ali’s modernizing projects, including the manufacture of arms, the cultivation of long staple cotton, irrigation projects, and his various attempts to set up textile factories. Muhammad Ali admired and relied upon European merchants, and surrounded himself with Armenian secretaries and translators, French technocrats, British experts and merchants and Italian physicians. After the restoration in 1815, many others came in search of political asylum. Italian political refugees often went elsewhere (England, France, or Switzerland, especially), before ending up in Egypt, and were thus doubly displaced. By 1819, the Italian population in Egypt had reached 6000, according to at least one source, and was made up of a mixture of patriots and profiteers (Briani 1982). Additional political immigrants arrived after the constitutional uprisings of 1820 and 1821, and Italians were part of the early nineteenth-century apparatus of power that was not strictly speaking “colonialist” (Mitchell 1988). For example, the teachers in the first schools established by Muhammad Ali were Italians, and Italian, then the *lingua franca* of the Levant, was the first European language to be taught (quickly, however, displaced by French) (Hourani 1963, 55). The result was a society in which national identities were in flux: in Cairo and Alexandria, for example, Italians could come under the jurisdiction of Austrian Consuls, French Consuls, or British Consuls. Scholars such as Robert Ilbert have noted that this fluidity of identities was fostered by the system of capitulations in nineteenth-century Egypt, a system which allowed individuals to slide from “indigenous” status to that of foreigner, and back again, with relative ease; indeed it was not rare for individuals of the same family to claim different nationalities (1996, 64-98).

Into this mixture enters Giovanni Finati, *Ferrarese*. Finati recounts how he was conscripted into the Napoleonic army in 1805, and twice deserted, first almost immediately upon conscription, when he returned to Ferrara only to be apprehended and sent to prison; and a second time after he is forced to return to military service and is sent to Albania. There he and his fellow deserters, Italians to a man, find themselves welcomed by the local pasha, who “liberally supplied [them] with all” that they could want, and daily invited them to renounce their faith (1830, 1: 47). The deserters’ resolve is immovable: “Full as we were at that time of true Italian zeal, these overtures made not the smallest impression upon us; we felt indignant at the very suggestion of renouncing our faith, and encouraged one another reciprocally in a resolution rather to die than to

submit to it” (1: 48). Upon hearing his declaration, the pasha’s lavish welcome comes to an end; they are demoted to the status of slaves and set to work in quarries. After three months of hard labor, they find themselves reciprocally encouraging each other rather differently: “Our country was closed against us,” urges a sergeant, “we had therefore no hope as Christians. The Mahometans believed, as we do, in a God, and upon examination we might find the differences from our mother church to be less than we had imagined, or at the worst, we might still retain our own creed, and put up our prayers in our hearts” (1: 52). To which Finati exclaims: “wonderful what a few bold words will do.... We all came at once to the determination of professing to be Mahometans.... We were received as Mussulmen; though I believe that most of us continued in our hearts as good Catholics as we had been before” (1: 53-4). There is a deep irony in this inversion of what we might call a “Jimmy Carter” strategy – they practice Islam, but pray like good Catholics in their hearts – for Finati had, as a child, been destined for religious life, and had been instructed “in all that course of frivolous and empty ceremonies and mysteries, which form a principal feature in the training up of a priest for the Romish church” (1: 5).⁸ To be sure, his British interlocutor is likely to have been the one to supply the designation “Romish church,” but Finati underlines his dislike of the profession several pages later when he admits that, if he disliked the military profession into which he was conscripted, he disliked equally if not more the profession which had been designated for him at home. In any event, there is no further reference to praying in the heart in the two volumes and over 700 pages that follow. Having embraced Islam, Finati takes on the name Mahomet and enrolls in Muhammad Ali’s Albanese militia. We learn not only that he is fluent in Albanian and Arabic, but that he successfully passes *as* Albanian, and the first person plural pronoun which, in the opening pages, referred to the deserting Italians, quickly morphs into referring to the company of fellow soldiers of Muhammad Ali’s army.

The degree to which Finati-Mahomet is able to pass is remarkable. In the second volume of his *Narrative*, his linguistic abilities allow him to leave behind the military life and take up the role of interpreter and tour guide. He falls into the service of the English Consul, Henry Salt; he plays an important role in the explorations of the musclem turned Egyptologist, Giovanni Belzoni, who refers to him only as “Mahomed, a soldier sent to us by Mr. Salt” (2001, 189). The two so-called Italians, Giovanni and Giovanni, do indeed meet, but they do not greet each other *as* Italians in Egypt, neither in Finati’s nor in Belzoni’s narratives. Finati-Mahomet accompanied Mrs. Belzoni to the Holy Land; in *Mrs. Belzoni’s Trifling Account of the Women of Egypt, Nubia, and Syria*, she refers to him simply as “Mr. B.’s dragoman” (interpreter) and writes that “Mahomet passed for an Albanian” (2001, 310). The knowledge that he passes as Albanian is also knowledge that she knows he is “not” Albanian, but something else: exactly what, however, Mrs. Belzoni does not reveal. It is possible, for example, that she supposed him to be an Arab, since she knew he spoke both Arabic and Albanian.

Finati-Mahomet makes the pilgrimage to Mecca, which he “had so long and ardently been desirous of seeing,” and hence can be called Hajj Mahomet. Cairo, where in his words “people of all colours and languages seem to be brought together” (1830, 1: 78) has become his home: “I felt as much as any of them that I was returning to my

⁸ In an infamous 1976 interview in *Playboy* magazine, President Jimmy Carter admitted to having looked upon many women with lust, and therefore to have committed adultery in his heart.

country, so much have I been accustomed to consider Egypt in that light” (2: 54). He frequents, but does not reside in, the Frankish quarter of the city. He seems to identify himself fully as Muslim, and we learn that he passes both linguistically and sartorially. In what is a topos of such accounts, Mr. Bankes wishes to enter the Temple of Solomon, whose entry by a Christian is punishable by death; Mr. Bankes must therefore adopt a disguise, and enlists Hajj Mahomet’s help. Bankes “sat up in his bed, and after commending my care of him, asked if a handsome new Albanian dress could be bought in the bazaar; I replied that it could, and as I always wore one, naturally conceived that it was intended for myself, so I bought one” (2: 281). The dress is for Bankes of course, and the episode among the most suspense-filled. Hajj Mohammed takes care to explain that in fact, he ran a “far greater risk of life than” Mr. Bankes did, for “as a British subject, and a man of substance, they might have threatened, and extorted from” him, “but could hardly have dared to go much further, so that I should have been made the example, who was amenable to their laws, and conversant in their religion and customs” (1:286). No praying in the heart here! That his Albanian identity has been fully embraced is suggested by the final episode. Hajj Mahomet is called to England by Mr. Bankes to make a deposition in a legal case regarding a journey in 1816, whose details are well-known to him. There, in some principal cities, Finati-Mahomet meets with “rude behavior,” where his “dress attracted not only attention, but so many insults from boys and idle people, that I found the necessity of taking refuge in a shop” (2: 428). Giovanni Finati, Ferrarese, could well have taken off his identities, both sartorial and religious, once on British soil, but Hajj Mahomet, Muslim and Albanian, preferred to wear the skirt that Lord Byron modeled for his portrait in Albanian dress, painted by Thomas Philips in 1835. It is likely that, for those “boys and idle people,” Giovanni Finati’s gender identity had drifted along with his religious and national belonging, and their rudeness had more than a little to do with that perception of gendered identity. On that score, Finati himself, however, has no comment.

What is of interest to us here is the success of Finati-Mahomet’s passing, in relation both to class subordination and to racialization. As a *rinnegato*, Finati-Mahomet stood only to gain by passing as a soldier in Muhammad Ali’s Albanian regiment in Egypt, and dissimulation of his “Italian identity” was no doubt aided by the fact that Italian was then the lingua franca of the Mediterranean. It was therefore not necessary to dissimulate his native linguistic identity since, to judge from contemporary travel narratives, it was the norm to use Italian when first encountering a stranger. When he found himself among fellow Europeans, Finati-Mahomet’s Albanian identity may well have shielded him from the disrespect he could reasonably expect, as both deserter and renegade, and the power he wielded as translator may have compensated for his class subordination in relation to his English employers. In any case, his behavior in England suggests that nothing was to be gained by revealing his Italian identity, whereas his Albanian identity was, in London, his ticket to a welcome by the English aristocracy given over to Egyptomania.⁹

⁹ “Egyptomania” names the craze for all things Egyptian (ranging from the Egyptian Revival in architecture to refiguring of race in the American South) that saw its most spectacular outburst in the wake of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. For a transhistorical overview, see Curl (2005).

Amara Lakhous: Posing as Muslim and Tunisian in Post-Colonial Italy

Almost two centuries later, Lakhous reprises the topos of passing and posing as Muslim in *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi*, with its imbrications of multiple migrations in post-colonial Italy. No longer a stage external to Europe, the Orient in *Divorzio* has been internalized as the multicultural call center in “Little Cairo,” locus of the novel’s action and site where Christian takes on his new identity as the Muslim Tunisian “Issa.”¹⁰ In this reversal of the centrifugal movement of colonization, Little Cairo serves as new contact zone and synecdoche for post-colonial Italy, in much the same way as did the apartment building in Rome’s Piazza Vittorio in Lakhous’s previous novel, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore in Piazza Vittorio*.¹¹ The predominantly male zone of Little Cairo is supplemented by the circle of friends of “Sofia,” the Egyptian woman whose first-person narrative alternates with that of Issa, and the name of whose daughter, “Aida,” evokes the nineteenth-century Italian presence in Egypt we have been discussing.¹² Through this combination, Egyptians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Albanians, Senegalese, Algerians, Bangladeshi and Italians *doc* are brought together, and passing and posing become not the exception but the norm.

Williams’s argument can be helpful in conceptualizing the impersonation of a Tunisian Muslim on the part of a Catholic Sicilian in *Divorzio all'islamica* insofar as it gives us a model that takes into consideration both the tendency of a simple binary to impose itself (in the case discussed by Williams, black and white), as well as the mediation of other terms (in that case, Jewishness and Irishness). In our example, the terms are obviously different: a binary between Christian and Muslim carries the insistent and politically charged force of that between black and white, while Italian-ness, Southern-ness, and the ethnicities and nationalities of the immigrant community in “Little Cairo” mediate and complicate the scenario. A Sicilian Italian who poses as a Tunisian Muslim generates multiple implications on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels. By insisting upon the performative aspect, especially in the earlier portion of the novel, Christian’s posing seems to underline his distance from the stigmatized identity of Issa, the Muslim immigrant; at the same time, his pose reminds us that he is an “Italian” Christian, that is to say, it allows Christian-the-Sicilian to pass as Italian, and therefore to distance himself from his own stigmatized identity as a Southerner. Christian/Issa’s linguistic disguise is particularly important in this scenario, and recalls the training in languages so important to the professional Orientalist, and so crucial to the male masquerade in Mecca. Christian, after all, is chosen for the assignment because of his fluency in Arabic, and his training as an “arabista”: “all’Università di Palermo mi misi a studiare l’arabo classico.... Ero uno dei migliori e molti non credevano che fossi di madrelingua italiana” (2010, 17).

¹⁰ Lakhous’s play with the identities of religious figures is quite explicit. The name “Issa” is said to be “il corrispettivo di Gesù per i mussulmani,” and the official of SISMI who hires him consequently adopts the nickname “Giuda”: “Tu farai il buono e io sarei il cattivo, non è così? D’ora in poi chiamami Giuda!” (32). On the importance of naming in Lakhous’s *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* in particular, as well as in post-colonial literary practice more generally, see De Robertis (2008).

¹¹ On spatial representation in *Scontro di civiltà*, see Pezzarossa (2010).

¹² Remember that Verdi’s *Aida* had its debut in Cairo in 1871.

But the role requires yet another linguistic disguise: “Mi accorgo di un problema che avevo completamente sottovalutato: per sembrare credibile devo parlare un italiano stentato, e pure un po’ sgrammaticato.” This “halting Italian” should mimic not only the broken Italian of recent immigrants, but bear the traces of his fictional persona as an immigrant who had lived in Sicily, and thus of his “true” persona as Sicilian Italian: “L’ideale è parlare un italiano con una doppia cadenza: araba, perché sono tunisino, e siciliano perché sono un immigrato che ha vissuto in Sicilia.” This double cadence is produced not through mimicking the speech of actual immigrants, but rather comes into being as a fictional construct through the violation of grammatical norms: “Decido senza esitazione di sospendere momentaneamente molte regole grammaticali, quindi via il congiuntivo e il passato remoto.” And the Sicilian in him adds: “Mi scassa la minchia rinunciare al nostro adorato passato remoto” (45), where the “adored preterite” refers us specifically to the Sicilian preference for that tense. His narrator’s linguistic predicament mimics Lakhous’s own: as he proclaims on his personal website, “I Arabise the Italian and Italianise the Arabic. Io arabizzo l’italiano e italianizzo l’arabo.”¹³ Writing in both Arabic and Italian (his first book, *Le cimici e il pirata*, was published in a bilingual edition), Lakhous, too, speaks with a “double cadence.”

This double cadence can be heard on the extradiegetic level as well, where we can point to yet other ramifications. Christian’s posing within the diegetic world of *Divorzio all’islamica* is in fact an inversion of the posing and passing discussed by Williams, in which the recent immigrant group (Jews) poses as the older stigmatized identity (blacks), and accrues to itself the pathos now conventionally associated with the suffering of slaves. Christian instead is a member of the older stigmatized identity (Southern Italians), posing as a member of the more recent immigrant group (North Africans). This identity has implications for the “Orientalist” stance of the fictional character: the norm to which Christian compares the North African subjects he observes is not that of a homogeneous West, as would the typical nineteenth-century Orientalist, but rather that of the experience of Southern Italians. For example, when Christian/Issa looks for an apartment in Viale Marconi, a residence which would normalize his status as immigrant, he is introduced to the ways of the immigrant community, which he compares not to those of “Italy” or the “West,” but to those of Sicily:

Ormai tutti mi chiamano ‘Issa il tunisino’ o semplicemente ‘il tunisino.’ A me va bene così. Forse diventerò finalmente un residente di Viale Marconi. Akram piglia un pezzetto di carta e scrive il numero di telefono delle proprietaria di casa, una certa Teresa. Ne approfitta per darmi un po’ di consigli utili. Prima di tutto, devo chiamare subito la tizia e dirle che la contatto da parte sua. Da siciliano, conosco fin troppo bene il sistema di raccomandazioni. Tutti vogliono garanzie. (44)

What is more, when we step out of the diegetic world to include the writer himself, we find that the scenario Williams proposes does in fact apply to Amara Lakhous as author:

¹³ See <http://www.amaralakhous.com/>, accessed March 21, 2010.

the recent Muslim/Algerian/Italian writer “poses,” through his narrating character Christian, as the older stigmatized identity, Southerner. As a result, not only do the familiar narratives of Southern Italian suffering and migration attach a domesticating pathos to the stories of the new immigrants to Italy, but, just as the Jew posing as black passed for white, Lakhous the immigrant writer posing as a Sicilian (himself posing as a new immigrant) “passes” as an Italian writer. Lakhous is able to manipulate both dialect and standard Italian, and tracks the migration of dialects along the routes of the mobility of identities. When his apartment-mate, the Senegalese Ibrahim, explains that “il razzismo esiste fra gli italiani stessi. A Milano si dice: uè, terùn,” Christian/Issa comments: “Ieri uè terùn, oggi uè extra-comunitario, marocchino, negro! Che dobbiamo fare? Mi viene un po’ da ridere quando sento il senegalese parlare in milanese” (134). The comic effect of the immigrant who speaks in dialect may refer to Lakhous’s own literary and linguistic practice as well; in both his novels, he weaves standard Italian and dialect together in a way that has occasioned comparisons to Gadda’s “plurilinguismo,” first and foremost by the author himself.¹⁴ Author and narrator thus share the stance of an ethnographic observer, intent on translating Muslim practices for an Italian readership, addressed as Christian (in faith, if not in name), and in need of enlightenment.¹⁵ “Continuo a pensare con la mia testa italiana, non riesco a mettermi nei panni degli immigrati extracomunitari” (49), falsely laments Christian/Issa, describing precisely the goal on the part of Lakhous: to pose as an “Italian brain” in the “panni degli immigrati.” The nineteenth-century Orientalist practice of adopting native dress is here updated as a figure for cross-cultural understanding, the “panni” now both literal and figurative. A double-voiced critique is made possible through a “noi” whose reference alternates between that of the “italiani doc” and that of the “immigrati.” So, for example, at one point, Issa notes that “I musulmani sono dei veri maschilisti, dichiaratamente omofobi. Mentre noi italiani, i soliti furbi, facciamo gli amici dei gay e delle donne, ma sotto sotto siamo ipocritamente maschilisti” (64), but only a few pages later, the *noi* refers explicitly to the group of immigrants who share an apartment: “viviamo in una sorta di enclave egiziana in territorio italiano” (68). The double voice gives equal opportunity to stereotypes about both groups: “Non bado molto allo stereotipo del tunisino spacciatore,” says Issa: “Ormai sono vaccinato da tempo contro questi pregiudizi del cazzo: il siciliano mafioso, il napoletano camorrista, il sardo rapitore, l’albanese delinquente, il rom ladro, il musulmano terrorista” (97).

This authorial stance is present in both the chapters labeled “Issa” and those titled “Sofia”; both touch upon the topoi we would expect in an account of “manners and customs of modern Muslims”; the veil, circumcision both male and female, the ease of divorce in Muslim countries, polygamy, the denial of entrance to paradise to Muslim women are duly evoked and explained.¹⁶ The alternation between chapters named “Issa” and those named “Sofia” introduces gendered spheres of public and private spaces into

¹⁴ In a 2005 interview, Lakhous compares his use of dialect to that of Gadda: “Cerco di usare il napoletano, il milanese a seconda del linguaggio che usano i diversi personaggi. Questa è una grandissima avventura che da solo non posso affrontare, quindi ho bisogno di una figura come quella che Emilio Gadda ha usato per *il Pasticciaccio*, romanzo per il quale ha avuto bisogno della consulenza di un romano” (Farah).

¹⁵ Here, too, there is an autobiographical link, since Lakhous himself earned a degree in cultural anthropology at “*La Sapienza*” in Rome.

¹⁶ I play upon the title of the classic Orientalist study, Edward W. Lane’s 1836 *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*.

the novel, and both Issa and Sofia evoke mediatic forms for the roles they play: *telenovelas* are a dominant reference in the female-gendered space of Issa's narrative while both share references to the *commedia all'italiana*, and to the pilgrimage to Mecca, in Sofia's case *al femminile*. Born in Cairo, Sofia migrates to Italy as a desirable consequence of her marriage: "In fondo non ero felice del matrimonio in sé, ma dell'idea di venire a vivere in Italia: la Mecca della moda" (38). In this Mecca of fashion, Sofia becomes a clandestine hairdresser, forced to wear the veil by her observant husband and hide the profession she practices on the side. It is within Sofia's private sphere that the titular question of divorce is first introduced. The facility of divorce in Muslim countries was already a topos in nineteenth-century accounts such as those of Finati; so, for example, Finati's marriage to a slave-girl, who was not only "young and pretty," but "as it happened, did not come empty handed" (1830, 1: 116), was short-lived, and easily dissolved through divorce, prompting Finati-Mahomet to remark: "Thus easily is this matter disposed of among Mahometans, so soon as the parties become indifferent to one another; and it seems to be perhaps the only mode of preventing those lamentable disorders which abound in countries where matrimony once contracted becomes indissoluble" (1: 192). Lakhous re-scripts this scenario in relation to the Pietro Germi film evoked by the title, *Divorzio all'italiana*, and updates it by transferring it to the female sphere. The situation in *Divorzio all'italiana* is of course precisely that of a country in which marriage is indissoluble; the plot turns upon the impossibility of divorce in Italy in 1961, and the machinations necessary for a Sicilian to rid himself of an unwanted wife. In both the male travelogues of the nineteenth century and the Italian film, however, divorce is understood to serve the interests of male desire. *Divorzio all'islamica* brings these two strands together, but with a twist: divorce is easily obtained, as it is in Islamic law, but the closing section of the novel turns upon Sofia's desire to rid herself of an unwanted husband and marry Christian/Issa, whom she fantasizes as "il Marcello arabo."

There would be much to say about the role of the *commedia all'italiana* in Lakhous's works, but for our present purposes, two things stand out: the role that posing plays already in relation to Southern Italian identity in the Germi film, and the *mise-en-abyme* that is produced in the novel by the introduction of updated mediatic references.¹⁷ The protagonist of *Divorzio all'italiana* is a Sicilian Baron, Ferdinando Cefalù, aka Fefè, played by Marcello Mastroianni, that same Marcello whom Sofia evokes in her fantasy about Issa/Christian as "il Marcello arabo."¹⁸ In *Divorzio all'italiana*, Mastroianni poses: his performance of Southern-ness includes an exaggerated facial tic, greasily pomaded hair, and a use of the *passato remoto* that stands out from his otherwise standard spoken Italian; it is clear that we are to observe the artifice of his performance, to delight in the distance between the star whom we know to be Mastroianni, and the stigmatized Southerner, intent on to exploiting article 587 of the Italian Penal Code (abolished only in

¹⁷ Lakhous also employs cinematic references to add to the layering of migrations his novel evokes; for example, Issa cites Francesco Rosi's 1959 film *I magliari*, which recounts the adventures of a group of Italian swindlers in Germany as an example of "dei vu cumprà italiani" (73).

¹⁸ Sofia first places her "Marcello arabo" fantasy in the fontana di Trevi scene of *La dolce vita*, not coincidentally a film that plays a crucial role in *Divorzio all'italiana* as well. Fefè plots (unsuccessfully) to discover his wife and lover *in flagrante* while the rest of the town attends the debut screening of Fellini's film. Sofia later adds to her "Marcello arabo" fantasy Mastroianni's roles in *Il bell'Antonio* and *Una giornata particolare*.

1981).¹⁹ Here, too, stereotypes circulate: Fefè's wife's upper lip is darkened by a more than a hint of a mustache, women are jealously guarded, and the code of honor reigns in the place of law in a sun-drenched, backward Sicily. The evocation of *Divorzio all'italiana* thus participates in the generalization of stereotypes that includes migrants and "italiani doc" equally, and underlines the practice of posing as characteristic of "identità all'italiana" per se.

Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi follows the Orientalist script to the threshold of the local mosque, when Christian/Issa's supervisor, "il capitano Giuda," announces that "bisogna infiltrarsi nella Moschea della Pace" in order to reveal the head of the terrorist cell, which Giuda claims is none other than Sofia's husband, Felice. "Questa è una vera occasione," says Christian/Issa, "Potrebbe essere un'esperienza unica che arricchirebbe il mio curriculum di orientalista, o meglio di arabista, come si usa dire in ambito accademico." The expected topoi of conversion to Islam and fear of its attendant circumcision are invoked *in via negativa*: "Non ti sto chiedendo di convertirti all'Islam," exclaims Giuda, who then adds: "Mi raccomando, quando vai a fare le abluzioni non mostrare il tuo pisellino. Ricordati che non sei circonciso" (140). Farther than this joking invocation of conversion, however, the novel does not go; Christian does not cross the threshold and enter the mosque, renounce his faith, or submit to circumcision. Soon thereafter we see Christian/Issa take off "i vestiti dell'extracomunitario" (162), with them, his Orientalist pose: "Insomma, la fissazione di dimostrare di conoscere l'altro molto bene, anzi di doverlo sempre stupire. Ecco in che cosa consiste il lavoro dell'arabista! Un mestiere del cazzo, appunto!" (163). The Orientalist script is abandoned, and the boundary between Christian and Muslim is not crossed in the diegetic world of the novel.

Indeed, the novel could well have ended here; Christian has taken off the "panni degli immigrati" and with them jettisons his role as ethnographic "spy." But two chapters remain, and in them not only are the plot lines regarding Sofia tied up, but a double *mise-en-abyme* is introduced. The first is announced by Sofia soon after her husband repudiates her for the third and fateful time, thereby rendering divorce definitive. The repentant husband pleads tearfully for forgiveness in a scene that strikes Sofia as a déjà vu: "Sembra una scena tratta da una telenovela noiosissima. Il titolo potrebbe essere *Divorzio all'islamica 3*" (168); a "puntata" or so later, Sofia extends the title of her telenovela: "Ormai *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* ha superato tutte le telenovelas egiziane, messicane, brasiliane e turche messe insieme" (173). This is not a classic *mise-en-abyme*, in which a miniature version of the work appears within the work itself – *Hamlet's* play within the play – with the effect that the embedded work (the play within the play) makes the embedding work (*Hamlet*) seem to be less fictional, but rather something like its reversal.²⁰ Sofia's *Divorzio all'islamica* recodes the novel in which it appears, making it now appear to be metafictional: Lakhous's *Divorzio all'islamica* contains Sofia's *Divorzio all'islamica*; the literary text embeds a *telenovela*. Such a

¹⁹ Article 587 reads: "Chiunque cagiona la morte del coniuge, della figlia o della sorella, nell'atto in cui ne scopre la illegittima relazione carnale e nello stato d'ira determinato dall'offesa recata all'onore suo o della famiglia, è punito con la reclusione da tre a sette anni." See "Art. 587 codice penale Rocco," accessed April 4, 2011: http://www.liberliber.it/biblioteca/g/grande/1_onore/html/art_587.htm.

²⁰ The semiotician Yuri Lotman suggests that the play within the play "encourages the perception of the remaining space of the text as real" (1994, 377-384).

recoding crosses previously established boundaries between fictional modes, and is given its final fillip by the revelation by Giuda that the entire “operazione Little Cairo” was nothing more than a trumped-up test: “Quindi l’operazione “Little Cairo” è stata tutta una messa in scena?” asks Christian/Issa. “Messa in scene nooo.... L’hai appena letto; niente altro che un test, un training.’ ‘Una sorta di *Scherzi a parte*, un *Truman Show* all’italiana!” (185). The more interesting reference for our purposes is the second of the two, to the American film *The Truman Show*, in which the character of the film discovers that he has been the subject of a reality-TV show since his birth; as Emma Kafalenos has observed, the film embeds the television show in such a way as to render the borders between the two often indistinguishable (2003). In Lakhous’s *Divorzio all’islamica a Viale Marconi*, the revelation that the migrant reality in which Christian/Issa posed and passed was itself one big pose erodes the ground upon which any reliable distinction might be made between authentic identities, and those assumed as part of a “messa in scena.” This sudden shift of ground finds expression in an equally sudden linguistic shift on the part of Christian/Issa, who adopts an accent (“figlio di buttana,” Christian/Issa spits at Giuda) that is as likely to be Egyptian as Sicilian, and that we recognize as that of his apartment-mate Saber, who “potrebbe passare per un italiano doc” were it not for the fact that “non riesce a pronunciare la lettera p, e per sopravvivere linguisticamente si aggrappa come un naufrago disperato alla b. Quando dice la parola ‘buttana’ viene scambiato per un siciliano, per il resto è un bel bordello” (70). Saber’s name itself conjures up “Sabir,” as Lingua Franca of the early modern Mediterranean was also called: derived primarily from Italian and Provençal, the pidgin came to be called “Sabir.” John Holm suggests it probably derived from a phrase such as “Sabir parlar?,” meaning “Do you know how to speak (Lingua Franca)?” (1989, 2: 607-10).²¹ The identities of the Sicilian-Tunisian-Italian and now Egyptian Christian/Issa are thus not untangled in the final moment; instead, Christian/Issa becomes the site of the proliferation and crossing of languages and identities that is generalized as an Italian future in which it is no longer possible to say who is a migrant and who is not. At the same time, the evocation of “Sabir” entreats us to continue to reread the past of the transnational migrations of “italiani doc” as we move toward that future.

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²¹ Holm writes that Lingua Franca (with capital letters) probably began with the First Crusade in 1096, and that the first known text, written in Tunisia, dates to 1353. It is to be distinguished from *lingua franca* (uncapitalized), which has come to mean “any vehicular language” used by groups with no other language in common. What is more, Holm reports that a variety of “restructured Italian” that is used in Ethiopia, which is distinct from Lingua Franca, “uses /b/ in place of Italian /p/,” adding yet further geographical reach to the history of migrations and colonizations evoked by the novel.

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