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Abstract: Four women, from four corners of the world, sit at the kitchen table in a cramped, run-down apartment in downtown Trieste, awaiting the arrival of a fifth woman, their Italian language teacher. This little group of students is the focus of Laila Wadia’s novel *Amiche per la pelle*. As the title suggests, these women are close friends, but, as the layers of meaning in that title hint, their friendship is shaped in large part by race. Indian, Chinese, Albanian and Bosnian, these women are all marked by their cultural, racial and linguistic otherness in the Italian setting. In the U.S. the topos of immigration and language, and the adult foreign language lesson in particular, has a rich history and a specific tradition or function in the perpetuation of certain national myths of unity and opportunity. In the Italian context, on the other hand, the scene is a relatively new one. But the significance of linguistic unity is certainly not a new theme. As Loredana Polezzi notes in her discussion of the current politics of Italian language, “In the case of Italy, language and nation are linked, if possible, by particularly intricate connections, as eminently demonstrated by the centuries-old debate on the *questione della lingua*” (87). Wadia’s text offers what I see as a critique of this historical conflation of language and culture – suggesting that we interrogate the weight given to the idea of linguistic unity. *Amiche per la pelle* is, as the title suggests, a meditation on female friendship (“amiche”) and racial difference (“pelle”), challenging assumptions of belonging and integration in an increasingly diverse Italian cultural landscape. This is an unusual conversation in the Italian context, where race is conflated with im/migration and where the women’s movement has been reserved for “Italian” women. This article uncovers the precarious, temporary quality of categories like race, gender and language, categories typically treated as self-evident, and critical to shaping conversations about national belonging.

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**“Almeno non hai un nome da negra:”¹ Race, Gender and National Belonging
in Laila Wadia’s *Amiche per la pelle*
SOLE ANATRONE**

Four women, from four corners of the world, sit at the kitchen table in a cramped, run-down apartment in downtown Trieste, awaiting the arrival of a fifth woman, their Italian language teacher. This little group of students is the focus of Laila Wadia’s novel *Amiche per la pelle*. As the title suggests, these women are close friends, but, as the layers of meaning in that title hint, their friendship is shaped in large part by race. Indian, Chinese, Albanian and Bosnian, these women are all marked by their cultural, racial and linguistic otherness in the Italian setting. They are neighbors, living with their husbands and children in the same squalid apartment building at via Ungaretti 25. Together they share the experience of being identified by difference and of coming together, across that difference, to learn a new language.

There is one tenant, however, who feels no such comradeship: signor Rosso, the lone Italian in the building. An elderly bachelor, signor Rosso is distinguished from his neighbors by his lack of family, his vehement racism, and his affiliation with the racial and linguistic majority in Italy. For Signor Rosso, national identity is confirmed through racial and linguistic conformity, and unity is defined against the other. In other words, his understanding of what it means to be Italian relies on a logic of racism in which an implicit association of Italian with whiteness fosters a paranoid fear that dark skin represents a threat to the nation.² This is a tacit, but widely shared attitude in Italy, in part because it is so deeply ingrained in myths of national destiny; as Caterina Romeo writes, “racism is a pervasive element in Italian society and a constitutive factor in the process of national formation.”³ The conflation of national and racial identity has bolstered beliefs about Italian as a shared trait of biological and cultural heritage. At the same time, conversations about racism are consistently excluded from public debate; race is rhetorically replaced with ethnicity, thus shifting the focus from racial prejudice to cultural integration, and putting the responsibility of social harmony and national stability on the (racial, ethnic and linguistic) other.⁴

¹ “At least you don’t have a negro name.” All translations are my own.

² As Alessandro Portelli writes, “we [Italians] do not see our own color, or we think it is invisible or transparent” (30). He cautions that “this may be more subtle and less immediately violent than other forms of racism; yet these attitudes are a sign that the monster is among us, and it gets uglier every day” (38). Alessandro Portelli, “The Problem of the Color Blind: Notes on the Discourse of Race in Italy,” in *CrossRoutes –The Meanings of “Race” for the 21st Century*, ed. Paola Boi and Sabine Broeck (Hamburg and London: LIT Verlag, 2003), 29-40.

³ Caterina Romeo, “Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature,” in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 230.

⁴ Romeo cautions that “by obliterating race from the critical and theoretical debate and substituting it with ethnicity, one runs the risk of erasing a crucial category in the analysis of European colonial history” (“Racial Evaporations,” 223). This is a very important point. It is also an example of the way current efforts, like Romeo’s, to make race a critical part of Italian studies tend toward a conflation of Italian race(ism) with Italian colonialism, making it difficult to talk about other forms and targets of racism. Romeo’s is a strategic move aimed at revealing a specific set of deeply ingrained cultural and political myths and linguistic traditions that perpetuate imperialist attitudes towards Africa. I think there is a different history and a different quality to the racism that impacts people from Eastern Europe, Asia, and South America, people who are not perceived as being black Africans. I don’t mean to quantify one form of racism as more or less painful than another; what is useful, I contend, is thinking about the histories, stereotypes and traditions of oppression that shape people’s different experiences of exclusion, discrimination, assimilation or integration. By assembling a cast of immigrants from disparate corners of the world, who fit a variety of stereotypes about racial appearance, Wadia is able to highlight some of the forms of aggressiveness, hostility and objectification that people face as a consequence of their perceived difference.

Signor Rosso's proud identification with Italian culture and language is, paradoxically, what causes him to be excluded from the social life of the building. His only source of companionship will come through his interactions with Kamla, the five-year-old daughter of one of the women. Rosso befriends Kamla and teaches her to love the great Italian poets, beginning with Ungaretti and setting her on the path toward a proper, nationalist education.

That it should be Ungaretti to serve as the privileged figure in this city of poets is worth noting, as he too, like the characters in the text, is an import to Trieste. Born in Alessandria d'Egitto, Ungaretti has no ancestral connections to Trieste, but in 1915 he enlisted in the Italian military and served on the Carso Triestino. His writing during this time touches on themes of national identity, difference and unity: "Sono un frutto / d'innumervoli contrasti d'innesti / maturato in una serra / Ma il tuo popolo è portato / dalla stessa terra / che mi porta / Italia."⁵ This message of unity despite difference will be central to the characters in Wadia's text. Ungaretti functions, for the inhabitants of number 25, as a figure of unification (embodied by his name on the street that brings everyone together). Like the Italian language itself, Ungaretti's is a controversial unification. Signor Rosso uses the poet as a tool to educate his young friend in the ways of *italianità*, teaching her to recite his poems and to recognize the name as more than just a street, using literary and cultural education as a way of marking Kamla as different from the other, decidedly non-Italian neighbors.

The themes of teaching, language and community-building figure prominently in this novel, though the goals are not always the same for teacher and student. For the women at the kitchen table, language lessons serve as a space to bond across cultural and linguistic differences, as women, wives and mothers, as immigrant outsiders in a new land. The topos of immigration and language, and the adult foreign language lesson in particular, has a rich history and a specific function in the perpetuation of certain national myths, particularly in the United States where immigration and multiculturalism have long been part of public discourse.⁶ Italy, on the other hand, has become a significant immigration destination only in the last quarter century, and the nation remains very divided about how to negotiate this new reality. "Multiculturalism," however, as Cornelius and Tsuda explain, "has not been pursued as a social integration policy because of the widespread belief that the cultures of Third World immigrants threaten Italy's social cohesion and national identity."⁷ As a result, the scene of the Italian-as-second-language classroom a relatively new one.⁸

The theme of linguistic unity, however, is by no means new in the Italian context. As Loredana Polezzi notes in her discussion of the current politics of Italian language, "[i]n the case of Italy, language and nation are linked, if possible, by particularly intricate connections, as eminently demonstrated by the centuries-old debate on the *questione della lingua*."⁹ Wadia's text offers what I see

⁵ Giuseppe Ungaretti, "Italia," in *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, (Milan: Mondadori, 1969). "I am the fruit / of countless contradictory grafts / ripened in a greenhouse / But your people are carried / by the same earth / that brings me / Italy."

⁶ It is useful to keep the North American context in the back of our minds when we think about this text, and about migration in Italy more generally, because the public conversation about immigration that has been taking place in the U.S. for the past 150 years has made itself felt in policy and attitudes around the globe. In "(Im)Migration Research in Italy: A European Comparative Perspective," Tiziana Caponio offers a compelling analysis of changing trends in Italian immigration studies and the related influence of North American theory, legislation and cultural representation.

⁷ Wayne Cornelius and Takeyuki Tsuda, "Controlling Immigration: The Limits of Government Intervention," in *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective*, 2nd edition, ed. Wayne Cornelius and Takeyuki Tsuda (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 34.

⁸ For a more detailed account of the changes in immigration to (and through) Italy see: Kitty Calavita, "Italy: Economic Realities, Political Fictions and Policy Failures," in *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective*, 345-380.

⁹ Loredana Polezzi, "Polylingual Writing and the Politics of Language in Today's Italy," in *New Perspectives in Italian Cultural Studies Definition, Theory, and Accented Practices*, ed. Graziella Parati (New Jersey, USA: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2013), 87.

as a critique of this historical conflation of language and culture, suggesting that we interrogate the weight given to the idea of linguistic unity.

In the context of the language lessons in this novel, the goal of learning a shared vernacular is not conformity but community:

Due persone che vogliono abbattere il muro linguistico tra di loro sono due esseri ansiosi di costruire un mondo migliore. E noi, armate di mattoni—libri di grammatica e di esercizi, vocabolari e audiocassette—e con tanto di cemento di buona volontà, stiamo tirando su con non poco sacrificio l'impalcatura del nostro futuro.¹⁰

I propose a reading of this text that picks up on this notion of language learning as world-building and follows it beyond the confines of the lessons, thinking about language acquisition as a mode of *bridging* and integrating difference, rather than a path toward assimilation. Assimilation and integration represent two different beliefs about what constitutes a livable society; in the first case there is the idea that difference must be subordinate to a shared set of cultural, political and linguistic practices (dictated by the governing majority). Integration, on the other hand, implies a possibility of living successfully together in a plurality of customs and practices.¹¹ The message of inclusive difference that I read in Wadia's text is not presented as a moral lesson, but rather an alternative, an option that is desirable even as it is contested and challenged.

The specificity of Trieste as a setting for this story is significant. The truth that the text highlights by way of its setting in Trieste, is that Italy is not newly multicultural—there have always been people from different lands, languages and cultures—particularly in Trieste.¹² In the last 150 years, Trieste and the surrounding region have been part of both the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the Italian Republic; it was contested as a symbolic and actual battleground during the Risorgimento as well as in both World Wars; it has been, and continues to be, home to Slavic, Balkan, Austrian, German and Italian-identified people, customs, and languages. Because of this complicated history, Glenda Sluga suggests that Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Trieste in particular, are “a vantage point for the study of conceptions of Italian national identity and nationalizing practices.”¹³ In other words, Trieste's position as a border city and its diverse demographic makeup has made it a sort of testing ground for the (often extreme) education of national subjects, from Liberal era and Fascist programs of enforced assimilation, to more recent efforts at defining *italianità* by ethno-nationalist groups like

¹⁰ Laila Wadia, *Amiche per la pelle*, (Roma: E/o, 2007), 53. “Two people that want to tear down the linguistic barrier between them are two beings eager to build a better world. And our group, armed with bricks – grammar books and exercises, vocabulary lists and audiocassettes – and the cement of good will, is laying the foundation of our future, despite all the sacrifices.”

¹¹ Cristina Lombardi-Diop discusses assimilation and immigration in contemporary Italy in her article “Staying Longer in Water Does Not Turn a Stick into a Crocodile: The Transformative Powers of Senegalese Culture in Italy,” in *The Cultures of Italian Migration: Diverse Trajectories and Discrete Perspectives*, ed. Graziella Parati and Anthony Tamburri (Madison, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 141-152. Lombardi-Diop puts into question the model of assimilation immigration and studies the ways both the “host” nation and the homeland are transformed through the immigration experience. She argues that stricter EU immigration policies result in reinforcing cultural and affective (my term) ties with the home-country. Mark Mitchell and Dave Russell discuss the consequences of integration versus assimilation policy in broader context of contemporary Europe in “Immigration, Citizenship and the Nation-State in the New Europe,” in *National Identity in Contemporary Europe*, ed. Brian Jenkins and Spyros Sofos (London: Routledge, 1996), 101-124.

¹² For a comprehensive history of Trieste see: Elio Apih, *Trieste. Storia della città Italiana*, (Rome: Laterza, 1988).

¹³ Glenda Sluga, “Italian National Identity and Fascism: Aliens, Allogenes and assimilation on Italy's North-Eastern Border,” in *The Politics of Italian National Identity: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Gino Bedani and Bruce Haddock (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 163.

the League.¹⁴ One of the most apparent and contested examples of the complexity of imposing national uniformity is language; this has been particularly apparent in Trieste, which, because of its history and geographical position, has an unusually high number of widely spoken languages and dialects. This polylingual setting, while only indirectly addressed in the novel through the presence of periphery characters, brings into relief the complexity and urgency of linguistic identification.

It is in the context of this historically and culturally unique Italian city that we meet the narrator and protagonist, Shanti Kumar. Shanti comes to Italy by way of an arranged marriage, leaving her parents' home in India as a young woman, just out of college, to marry Ashok, an Indian man living in Italy and working as a waiter in an Indian restaurant. Like Ashok, all the men in the apartment building work, when they can find it, as unskilled laborers in jobs secured almost exclusively by way of racial affinity. The women approach paid labor in different ways; some, like Boccio di rosa, the Chinese woman, and Lule, the Albanian, are employed from the moment they arrive in Italy, working out of necessity as waitresses and housekeepers.¹⁵ Others, like Shanti and her Bosnian neighbor Marinka, must persuade their husbands to allow them to work, pushing against cultural prescriptions concerning women's behavior. Wadia's novel constantly returns to this question of the significance of gender difference on the experience and expectations of immigrant life, highlighting the ways integration, gender and space (public and private) are simultaneously interdependent and held to different, often conflicting, standards. Before entering the workforce as a babysitter, the language lessons and interactions in the building are Shanti's only occasion to socialize.

Shanti's first experience of Italians in Trieste happens in the building, through her neighbor signor Rosso. He steps out of his apartment as she is moving into hers:

“Cazzo, altri neri” ha borbottato. Mi trovo in Italia da pochi giorni e non capivo bene la lingua. Per di più ero giovane e ingenua. “Io mi chia-mo Shan-ti Ku-mar” gli ho risposto, scandendo le parole e allungando la mano. “Mio marito è Ash-ok Kumar. Abi-teremo terzo piano. Piacere di co-no-scer-la, signor Cazzo Altrineri.”¹⁶

This interaction brings together the themes of language and race, revealing tensions and hostilities *as well* as possibility. The humor in Shanti's naïve misunderstanding suggests that the immigrant, the new arrival, needs not necessarily understand herself as Other, as a foreign object (of curiosity or, in

¹⁴ For a detailed reading on the Fascist government's efforts at the forced assimilation of the Slav population of Venezia Giulia (by way of urban planning, language bans and searches of homes and businesses for evidence of foreign affiliation) see: Sluga, “Italian National Identity and Fascism.” For a study of the different narratives and “contested memories” of the northeastern border area, see: Bojan Baskar, “‘That Most Beautiful Part of Italy’: Memories of Fascist Empire-Building in the Adriatic,” in *Mediterranean Frontiers: Borders, Conflict and Memory in a Transnational World*, ed. Dimitar Bechev and Kalupso Nicolaidis (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 109-128. For a more contemporary analysis of the role of ethno-nationalist groups like the Northern League in the Trieste area see: Anna Cento Bull, “Challenging the Nation-State: the Northern League Between Localism and Globalism,” in *The Politics of Italian National Identity: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Gino Bedani and Bruce Haddock (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 259-276.

¹⁵ The type of work the women in this novel are able to secure is representative of the limited employment options available to the majority of immigrant women. Women have been immigrating to Italy in record numbers in the past two decades, working predominantly in the domestic sphere, as care givers, house cleaners, and as sex workers. For a useful study of the demographic changes in immigration to Italy over the last century, and the new gendered distributions of labor see: Calavita, “Italy: Economic Realities, Political Fictions and Policy Failures.”

¹⁶ Wadia, *Amiche*, 20. “‘Shit, more negroes’ he muttered. I had only been in Italy for a few days and I did not understand the language well. Besides, I was young and naïve. ‘My na-me is Shan-ti Ku-mar’ I answered, carefully articulating my words and extending my hand. ‘My husband is Ash-ok Kumar. Li-ving third floor. Nice to meet you, Mister Shit Morenegreos.’”

this case, hate). Shanti's failure to "correctly" understand signor Rosso's racism is also a translation, a resignification of that racism; reversing the direction of the hateful speech, so that the speaker, not the object, is named.

Shanti's only other interaction with an "authentic" Italian is with her language teacher, Laura. Laura teaches language *and* encourages a particular kind of cultural assimilation: she is the mouthpiece for a brand of Western worldview that measures progress in terms of female emancipation. She encourages a model of gendered experience that is based on Western notions of equality, individuality and self-worth. While not entirely rejecting this ideal of Western feminism, Wadia's text highlights the ways in which this model is culturally specific and, paradoxically, blind to that specificity. For instance, Shanti feels enormous pride and a new sense of independence when she finally convinces her husband to let her work and earn her own money. Even as Shanti comes to assume some of the traits of independence that Laura encourages, she refuses to feel ashamed of her arranged marriage, taking pride in the beauty and tradition despite Laura's indignation: "Com'è possibile che succeda una cosa così a una donna istruita nel ventunesimo secolo?" exclaims Laura.¹⁷ The logic behind Laura's remark is one of choice and freedom but, to echo Jasbir Puar, this position also masks a criticism of non-normative integration;¹⁸ in other words, Laura represents a narrative in which the immigrant woman is expected to reorient her desires and values to coincide with a Western heteronormative ideal of the modern woman. In Shanti's words: "Assieme ai verbi irregolari e alla 's' impura, cerca d'inculcarci l'importanza di questa libertà, e spesso ci parla di quello che l'emancipazione femminile ha significato per la sua città natale. A volte però, sembra dimenticarsi che non sempre viene offerta la stessa possibilità a chi è nato altrove."¹⁹ Shanti's comment brings to the fore the tension between different modes of integration: linguistic, cultural, economic and ideological. Laura's attitude is in an example of what Polezzi calls

[the] curious reversal of positions [that] seems to be taking place, in which the Italian left (or what is left of the left), once characterized by internationalist tendencies but also by a national aspiration which managed to incorporate a clear stand against nationalist ideologies, now finds itself defending the myth of national unity together with the equally elusive entity that is a standard Italian language.²⁰

In this case, the message of female emancipation as a measure of "proper" integration, coming through the mouthpiece of Laura as teacher and "authentic" Italian, causes the women of Via Ungaretti not to feel ashamed of their difference, but to keep it hidden, sharing it only with each other. On one occasion Laura organizes a field trip to the theater. Despite the anxiety and trouble this will cause each woman as she invents an excuse to fool her husband, what they are most concerned about is Laura's anger:

¹⁷ "How could something like this possibly happen to an educated woman in the twenty-first century?" Wadia, *Amiche*, 56.

¹⁸ Jasbir Puar has written extensively about the hypocritical stance Western feminists and human rights groups frequently take with regards to the imposition of a specific type of freedom on "brown" bodies (non-Western, non-white). Puar explains that even as these groups recognize forms of oppression governing brown women, they fail to acknowledge that there may be different forms of freedom, and that in this model of liberation, what occurs is the replacing one set of values with another without ever obtaining the consent or granting agency to the brown woman. A particularly useful reading is: Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: the War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 117-148.

¹⁹ Wadia, *Amiche*, 54. "Alongside the irregular verbs and the 's'-consonant, she tries to instill in us the importance of this freedom, and she often talks about what women's emancipation has meant for her hometown. At times, however, she seems to forget that these options aren't always available to those born elsewhere."

²⁰ Polezzi, "Polylingual," 88.

[...]a quel punto del nostro cammino culturale non avevamo più tanta paura della reazione dei nostri mariti. [...] No, il nostro timore era un altro: non avremmo saputo reggere l'ira di Laura. Se le fosse venuto il minimo sospetto che dovevamo organizzare la serata alla chetichella...niente più teatro, e basta anche con le lezioni, magari! Laura odia i sotterfugi. Ancora più delle donne sottomesse, detesta quelle subdole.²¹

The two levels of deception the women must engage in—hiding the outing from their husbands and hiding the hiding from Laura—displays an awareness, on the part of these women, of the type of integration expected of them *as* immigrants. Lidia Curti writes that this self-awareness is part of the immigrant condition; “[l]a migrante,” she explains, “ha costante coscienza di sé, di ciò che è e di ciò che diviene. La nuova appartenenza richiede un passaggio interiore tra quello che è e ciò cui aspira—o deve aspirare—ad essere.”²² Wadia’s women are negotiating the delicate interplay between assimilation, understood as the washing over of difference, and integration, understood as the living together in difference.

In the last century of Triestine history both of these approaches have been implemented. During the Liberal and Fascist eras, assimilation was forcibly demanded not only of immigrants, but of all peoples not conforming to the (then new) norms of Italian identity. In the post-war period the preservation of linguistic variety was held up as an example of a new democratic Italy, where difference was not only tolerated but also encouraged. Following the collapse of most of the post-war political parties in 1992 and the subsequent development and rise in popularity of ethno-nationalist groups like the Northern League, difference was rebranded, once again, as a potential threat to the purity and survival of Italian culture.²³ These multiple histories can be heard in the conflicting attitudes immigrant people are confronted with today, as they are encouraged to share their cultural specificity while also reassuring Italians of the innocuousness of that difference. Implicit in this equation is the idea that Italian culture is inherently superior and that, as a result, immigrants should gladly give up their native culture in favor in this more enlightened and advanced set of beliefs and practices.²⁴ Holding on to one’s linguistic and cultural difference can, therefore, be understood as a failure to recognize the superiority of Italian culture or, even worse, as an act of cultural aggression, threatening the survival of *italianità*.²⁵ Wadia’s women, by contrast, learn Italian

²¹ Wadia, *Amiche*, 63. “...at that point in our cultural journey we were no longer very afraid of our husbands [...] No, our fear was of something else: we would not have known how to deal with Laura’s anger. If she had even the slightest suspicion that we had to organize the evening on the down low...no more theater, and probably no more lessons! Laura hates deceit. She hates devious women even more than she hates submissive women.”

²² Lidia Curti, “La condizione migrante: nuove soggettività tra poetica e politica,” in *World Wide Women: Globalizzazione, generi, linguaggi – vol. 3*, ed. Tiziana Caponio, Fedora Giordano, Beatrice Manetti and Luisa Ricaldone (Turin: CIRSD, 2011), 162. “[t]he migrant woman,” she explains, “has an awareness of herself, of what she is and what she will become. Her new appearance requires an interior journey from what she is toward what she wants – or what she should want – to be.” All translations are my own.

²³ For further readings on immigration, assimilation and integration policy in Trieste during these different historical moments see my footnote n. 14.

²⁴ In their volume *Women and Immigration Law*, Van Walsum and Spijkierboer discuss this dynamic as it impacts women throughout Europe, creating a hierarchy between “emancipated” Western women and “repressed,” “non-Western women: ““The purportedly emancipated position of European women is being contrasted with that of their immigrant (especially Muslim) sisters, who supposedly differ in that they are still suffering under a patriarchal system and are in urgent need of consciousness raising” (Van Walsum “Introduction,” 7).

²⁵ Mitchell and Russell explain that this anxiety about non-assimilation is specific to certain immigrant populations: “it is migrants and asylum seekers from so-called Second and Third World countries who are identified as problematic by the potential ‘host’ countries of Western Europe. Not only do these groups lack the necessary cultural capital to enable them to participate in the accepted ways of living in the countries concerned and to share and enjoy its values and traditions;

primarily to communicate with each other, not having any other language in common; in other words, they learn Italian not to erase difference but to communicate despite, or across, specificity. However, they *perform* the experience of assimilation demanded of them by narratives of “successful” or “proper” immigration.²⁶

The theater outing highlights a theme that resurfaces again and again in this text: the conflicting expectations of immigration. Is it an escape from something? A journey toward something? Must we necessarily consider origin and destination when thinking about immigration? Wadia’s novel refocuses the narrative of immigration on the immediacy of the experience of difference and the shared affective dimension of that experience. It does this by foregrounding the very real and very problematic relationship between language and race.

At the heart of this discussion is, of course, the question of national unity and the dangerous myth of mono-culturalism. The tension between these terms circulates throughout the text, but nowhere more obviously than around the fascist signor Rosso. Shanti is not sure what “fascist” means: “Bocciolo di rosa mi aveva detto che il signor Rosso era un gran fascista e che la odiava perché lei era comunista. Quella sera ho chiesto ad Ashok cosa voleva dire ‘fascista,’ e lui mi ha spiegato che significa uno che odia gli stranieri.”²⁷ With the repeated use and redefinition of the word “fascista,” Wadia reminds us that racism disguised as nationalist pride is by no means a new thing in Italy—it cannot, in other words, be “blamed” on the new wave of immigrants.²⁸

This Italian brand of racism is not a reaction, but an institution, a point emphasized by the repeated references to the Risiera di San Sabba, the former Nazi concentration camp in Trieste. That Shanti and her husband confuse this Sabba with the homophonous author (Saba) reinforces the

they frequently lack any interest in acquiring these cultural values and thus represent, in the eyes of many, a potential challenge to the integrity of the nation and to the maintenance of a strong sense of national identity” (Mitchell and Russell “Immigration,” 56).

²⁶ Cristina Giordano discusses this question of performance and immigration in an interesting study about the legal options available to immigrant women sex workers in Italy. Giordano explains that certain narratives (in which the women are unwilling victims of sex trafficking) are offered to migrant women by Italian state and cultural institution. These prefabricated identities are imposed on the migrant women who, in exchange for survival tools like legal residency, agree to give their voices to these narratives. She talks about the real risks and consequences of refusing or failing to fit into one of the prescribed identity narratives, consequences that can include social condemnation or deportation. Cristina Giordano, “Practices of Translation and the Making of Migrant Subjectivities in Contemporary Italy,” *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 4 (2008): 588-606.

²⁷ Wadia, *Amiche*, 33. “Bocciolo di rosa (Rosebud) had always told me Mr. Rosso was a fascist and that he hated her because she was communist. That evening I asked Ashok what ‘fascist’ meant, and he explained that it refers to a person who hates foreigners.”

²⁸ Racism is a controversial topic in Italy today, both within the academy and without; the claim that there is a connection between contemporary attitudes about immigration, and fascist and colonial beliefs about race and nation, is even more radical. There is, however, a small but growing body of scholarship broaching the issue. Among these are: *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, a 2012 volume edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo. This collection of thoughtful essays tackles the question of national identity by investigating connections between Italian colonial history in Africa and within the Italian peninsula, as well as emigration from and immigration to Italy. Sandra Ponzanesi’s 2011 article, “Passaggi migranti: genere, generazioni e genealogie nella letteratura postcoloniale italiana,” in which she outlines a genealogy of Italian postcolonial literature by women writers who bring to the fore untold stories of colonial and contemporary oppression. Anna Triandafyllidou’s 1999 article “Nation and Immigration: A Study of the Italian Press Discourse,” is also a useful resource for thinking about the persistence of certain myths about race and migration in Italy. She talks about myths of invasion and of the immigrant presence being presented as a threat to Italian culture and tradition. Triandafyllidou explains that these myths are stoked by the rise of ethno-nationalist groups (like the Lega Nord) and rely on a logic that, paradoxically, denies racism in Italy, relying instead on terms like economic and cultural “protectionism.” Triandafyllidou uses the following, very descriptive quote, to discuss the denial of racism that characterizes a great deal of Italian discourse about difference: “Racists? Us? Are we joking? We are not like Americans in Alabama,” (Triandafyllidou “Nation,” 80).

notion that language is at play in everything; questions of national belonging, racial exclusion and cultural production are all equally tied up with issues of language.

Just as language acquisition often steers towards assimilation, Ungaretti, as the representative of national literature and culture, evokes a tradition of the erasure of difference for the inhabitants of #25. One tenant remarks that,

Lor signori non fanno altro che scriver poesie, tanto troveranno sempre dei morti di fame come noi per fare i lavori sporchi! Poi questi mangiarane si prendono tutta la gloria. Hai mai visto una via dedicata a uno straniero che si è fatto il mazzo così mentre loro stanno lì a fare le rime?²⁹

Language becomes inseparable from institution, it is the visual representation of government, emblazoned on the street signs; that these signs are reserved for the names of Italians belonging to a certain racial, cultural and economic class serves to institutionalize a practice of nationalist separatism.³⁰ The anger directed at the street sign acts, in this way, as an expository tool, rejecting as false the notion that language is natural and impartial, and revealing it to be, instead, a manifestation of the ideology of nationalism.

Confusion around names is a recurring theme in the text. For instance, Shanti's Chinese neighbor is called "Bocciolo di rosa" (rose bud), a nickname that calls attention to stereotypes and persistent orientalism.³¹ This is just one of many instances in which Wadia uses racial stereotypes in the service of a comedic yet pointed social critique. No one in the building calls signor Rosso by his real name. Bocciolo di rosa calls him signor "Lo So" (Mister "I know"), a play on the stereotype of Chinese people pronouncing "R"s as "L"s, and a way to poke fun at the man's inflated sense of superiority; and Shanti, of course, first knew him as "signor Cazzoaltrineri." Only Kamla, Shanti's daughter, knows his name is Alberto. He, in turn, calls Kamla "Camilla."

"Come ti chiami?" ("What's your name?") he asks the girl when they first meet. "Kamla" she answers. "Camilla. Bene. Almeno non hai un nome da negra." (Camilla. Good. At least you don't have a negro name.) He hears her *as white*. "Conosci Ungaretti?" (Do you know Ungaretti?) he asks her, testing her participation in his racial and cultural identity group. "Sì." (Yes.) "Veramente? Be', cosa conosci di Ungaretti? Sentiamo." (Really? What do you know? Let's hear it.) The girl answers, "Via Ungaretti 25."³²

As Kamla becomes the Italian Camilla, signor Lo So becomes, for Kamla's mother, signor Rosso, "una persona italiana. Una persona estremamente colta" (an Italian person. A very educated person).³³ He transforms from a person defined by his arrogance and racism ("Lo So" and

²⁹ Wadia, *Amiche*, 41. "Those (elite) people don't do anything other than write poems, because they will always find some starving people like us to do their dirty work. And then these fat cats take all the glory for themselves. Have you ever seen a street named for a foreigner who broke his back while they sat there making rhymes?"

³⁰ Glenda Sluga discusses the toponomy laws of 1923 that "reinvented the identities of these provinces, from their street names and monuments" in an effort to impose cultural uniformity by replacing any traces of non-Italian identity (Sluga 2000: 169). I contend that the passage above from Wadia's text shows the persistence of this strategy of national identity formation, despite the current lack of explicit laws or policy.

³¹ Bojan Baskar notes that Italian scholars refer to the northeastern border as "il confine orientale" ("the oriental border"), an attitude which may influence the perception and representation of the Other in that region. (Although it may be coincidence, it is worth noting that the inhabitants of via Ungaretti n. 25 are exclusively from the "east," from the Balkan region, India and China, perhaps inviting reflection on orientalist attitudes which persist in the use of terms like "il confine orientale." Baskar, "Most Beautiful," 113.

³² Wadia, *Amiche*, 28.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

“Cazzoaltrineri”), into a man revered for his erudition and culture (*colta* and *italiana*); this transformation hinges on his association with the poet.

Poetry has always held an important place in Italian history and society and, as a result, continues to play a major role in the myth of Italian national identity. As Maria Serena Sapegno explains,

è la scrittura in poesia, piuttosto che quella in prosa, ad occupare il piano più alto di una gerarchia dei generi letterati che è stata insegnata lungo il corso dei secoli nelle scuole della penisola e praticata nelle sue Accademie cittadine e nazionali. È la poesia a fornire un pressoché illimitato patrimonio d'immagini e di emozioni che toccano la sensibilità e tendono ad imprimersi in profondità nell'inconscio collettivo a cominciare dal periodo formativo.³⁴

Poetry, Sapegno continues, has been used to incite Italians to action, to defend their country and expand their borders, “la poesia intrisa di miti e di sangue aveva il compito di contribuire ad infiammare i giovani italiani alla riscossa contro lo straniero e alla conquista dei territori lontanissimi e sconosciuti costituiti inizialmente dalle terre dello stesso mezzogiorno italiano e poi da quelle dell’Africa e, di altri lidi ignoti.”³⁵ This is an interesting point to consider when we think about the role Italian poetry has in this text, passed down from a man to a girl, from a former Fascist soldier to a child learning to be Italian. In this light, it would seem that poetry does, in fact, continue to serve the function of educating new patriots, bringing with it Italian histories and traditions of war and exclusion. However, the choice of Ungaretti complicates this, revealing perhaps some of signor Rosso’s own ambivalence about the nation he served.

Ungaretti’s writing conveys a sort of melancholy patriotism, as Sapegno observes, “quel senso di disagio e di mancanza di identificazione semplice [...]. Essere italiani è divenuto molto problematico.”³⁶ Ungaretti’s poetry touches on themes of nationalism, of his own military service to his country, but also of sadness and loss, of travel and difference. In a similar vein, signor Rosso’s story speaks to these problematics of being Italian. Born and raised in Trieste, he enlists in the Fascist military as a young man, serving a nation that Trieste has only recently joined. He participates in the colonial mission in Africa where he meets and falls in love with a local woman, a woman different from him in culture and skin color. The two marry and produce a child and in doing so commit a crime, breaking the laws of miscegenation. Signor Rosso’s resolve to stay with this woman falters when his mother calls him back to Trieste. The loyalties to mother and nation are thus conflated. He returns to Trieste and publicly performs the role of devout patriot, speaking out angrily against all who are not Italian. Privately, however, signor Rosso feels torn, and he continues to write and send child support to his family in Africa. In fact, it is his persistent letter-writing that causes his grandson to travel from Africa to Trieste and knock on the door of via Ungaretti n. 25 at the end of the novel. The arrival of this unexpected prodigal son symbolizes, in no subtle manner, the optimistic belief in a future multicultural Italy that drives this novel. Signor Rosso’s death marks the symbolic end of an era of anger and racism in via Ungaretti n. 25, but his death has practical consequences as well when Kamla discovers the old man’s will and the residents learn that they will

³⁴ Maria Serena Sapegno, *L'Italia dei poeti: immagini e figure di una costruzione retorica*, (Roma: Aracne Editrice, 2012), 11. “poetry, rather than prose, has for centuries occupied the highest place in the hierarchy of literary genres taught in schools in the peninsula and practiced in the national and civic academies.”

³⁵ Sapegno, *L'Italia dei poeti*, 24. “poetry, steeped in myth and blood, had the task of inspiring young Italians to join the fight against the foreigner and to conquer far off lands and strange territories of southern Italy, at first, and later of Africa and other unknown places.”

³⁶ Ibid. “that feeling of unease and lack of identification [...] Being Italian had become very problematic.”

be able to defend themselves against the threat of eviction thanks to the generous gift left to them all in signor Rosso's will. Signor Rosso's behavior is, in many ways, inconsistent and contradictory; he is an angry racist, an ethnic purist, but also a father of a beloved black daughter, and benefactor to his culturally and racially diverse neighbors. While he seems ambivalent about the present and future of his country and his town (always lamenting the damage wrought by immigrants), he does not seem ambivalent about his identity as an Italian, and this is nowhere clearer than in his decision to teach Ungaretti's poetry to Kamla; what is at stake is the tradition of teaching and nurturing Italian identity.

Kamla represents not only a new generation, but also a new type of citizen. Born in Italy, she is the only character to fully participate in a multicultural world. As Elisa D'Andrea writes, "[i]mmigrati di seconda generazione o italiani di prima generazione. È questa la grande difficoltà che si incontra nel momento in cui si cerca di collocare stabilmente i figli degli immigrati, nati e cresciuti in Italia, all'interno della società italiana."³⁷ D'Andrea proposes the term "interculturalità" (interculturalism) as a way of thinking through this new subject position. Physically Kamla "looks Indian," sharing the same dark skin tone her parents have. But she has never been to India. She was born and raised in Italy, but she speaks more Hindi than Italian. Kamla represents a subject position that, while familiar to a U.S. audience, is new in the Italian context—one whose identity is complicated by multiple cultural and linguistic allegiances.

The confusion about language and identity that surrounds immigration reverberates in the academy as well. There is much discussion over whether to label a text or an author as immigrant, or migrant, postcolonial or "other."³⁸ Caterina Romeo notes that the labeling of immigrant or postcolonial writing as such is a process of racialization: "[t]he editorial market, as well as the Italian academia and the media, have constructed the nation's literary and cultural space as white precisely through a process of naturalization of native authors' whiteness."³⁹ In other words, it is part of an implicit "whitewashing" (and normalization) of a specific brand of Italian of culture. Rather than participating in the debate over whether to use the terms such as "migrante," "immigrante," "extracomunitario," "postcoloniale," and "nuovo italiano," Wadia uses all of these terms (and more) playing with notions of specific, "precise" identification and arbitrary labeling. This refusal to use one term helps reveal the artifice, the contextually specific nature of all identity labels and the ways in which all labels can be reread, rewritten, differently heard as prejudice. These themes are brought together particularly, though not exclusively, in the figure of the daughter, Kamla.

The Italian language group also functions in a similar way. Learning the language means, according to teacher Laura, also learning "Italian" values of feminism and so forth. The response of the women students is complicated, they learn Italian primarily to communicate with each other, but they recognize their learning as a symbolic and practical gesture of integration. The title—*Amiche per la pelle*—reminds us that even in this narrative about language learning, these women will continue to

³⁷ Elisa D'Andrea, "Lingua letteraria e interculturalità: le scrittrici italiane di prima generazione" (PhD diss., Università degli studi di Tuscia, 2008): 4. "[S]econd-generation immigrants, or first-generation Italians. This is the difficulty one faces when trying to situate the children of immigrants – born and raised in Italy – within the landscape of Italian society."

³⁸ Nadia Setti, in a discussion of another of Wadia's text ("Curry di pollo," a short story in the collection *Pecore nere*) considers the implications (primarily theoretical) of interpellating the migrant writer as such. Setti draws on the theoretical work of Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler to make the claim that because the migrant is understood as "Other," she is expected to offer an account of herself. Building on Setti's analysis I argue that the imposition of the label "migrant" has the effect of producing a particular type of story, one that fits with assumptions about the immigrant experience. [Nadia Setti, "Raccontarsi insieme: il libero racconto di sé in altri/e," in *World Wide Women: Globalizzazione, generi, linguaggi* – vol. 3, 197-206.]

³⁹ Romeo, "Racial," 224.

be marked by racial difference. The effect is a commentary on how language is used as the measure of integration, covering over a deep-seated racism that, by and large, goes unacknowledged or is rebranded as the unavoidable consequence of a new multicultural Italy.

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