

# The pursuit of lightness: Jhumpa Lahiri's Italophone writing

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I redress the gap in the reception of Jhumpa Lahiri's Italophone writing by studying it within an American and Asian American critical framework. I highlight how her Italian-language work contributes to a transnational and translingual understanding of American and Asian American literatures and to their inclusion in the domain of world literature. Through an analysis of *In altre parole* (2015), I explore some of the reasons behind Lahiri's choice to write in Italian. In particular, I discuss how her sense of imperfection and failure toward literary expectations in the Anglophone context as well as her aspiration to free herself from the weight of a definite (ethnic) identity – which I call 'the pursuit of lightness' – have played a fundamental role in her choice to distance herself from English.

## Keywords

Jhumpa Lahiri, *In altre parole*, Asian American literature, world literature, lightness

In Italian, despite the constant effort, I'm more joyous, lighter.  
Jhumpa Lahiri, "What Am I Trying to Leave Behind?" 2017

## Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri (b. London, 1967) is a very successful Bengali American writer: her works about the Bengali American experience have been read not only in the United States, where she was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), but also internationally. Her recent choice to write in Italian has been disapproved of or completely overlooked by Anglophone readers and scholars outside Italy. In this essay, I redress the gap in the reception of Lahiri's Italophone writing – which includes the collection of essays *In altre parole* (2015; *In Other Words*), the book-length essay *Il vestito dei libri* (2017; *The Clothing of Books*), the novel *Dove mi trovo* (2018; *Whereabouts: A Novel*) and the collection of poems *Il quaderno di Nerina* (2021) – by analysing it within an American and Asian American critical framework. I highlight the significance of her Italian creative production for both American and Asian American studies since it contributes to a transnational and translingual understanding of these literatures and to their inclusion in the domain of world literature.<sup>1</sup>

As an ‘interpreter’ of the Bengali American community, Lahiri found a consolidated, acclaimed position within the Anglophone literary realm. Yet, she has chosen to give up all the advantages of such a position to become a writer in Italian. In this essay, I explore some of the underlying reasons behind Lahiri’s choice to abandon writing in English. While some scholars mention her need to become ‘invisible’ and anonymous, they do not explain such a desire in relation to the Anglophone context, where her reception has been shaped heavily by the perception of her as an ethnographic guide (see Chetty 2009). I will argue that Lahiri’s sense of imperfection and failure towards literary expectations in this context as well as her aspiration to free herself from the weight of a definite (ethnic) identity – which I call ‘the pursuit of lightness’ – have played a fundamental role in her choice to distance herself from English.<sup>2</sup>

### A window on the world

Lahiri is a second-generation Bengali American,<sup>3</sup> and much of her writing portrays the experience of Bengali immigrants and their children in the United States. As Lahiri herself has highlighted, both she and her work have been “copiously categorized” (2002). Indeed, she has been variously defined as an American, Indian American, British-born, Anglo-Indian, NRI (non-resident Indian) and ABCD (American-born confused desi) author,<sup>4</sup> and her writing as diasporic (mostly by Indian academics) and immigrant (mainly by U.S. scholars) (Lahiri 2002). Lahiri’s desire to escape these categorisations – by publishers, readers, reviewers and academics – in the Anglophone world is one of the main reasons why she has recently chosen to write in Italian, an idea to which I will return later.

In particular, Lahiri is seen as “the acclaimed chronicler of the Bengali-immigrant experience” (Chotiner 2008), “the indigenous ethnographer *par excellence*” (Cardozo 2012, 8), “the current luminary of the ‘ethnic’ authorship in the United States” (Srikanth 2014, 342) and “the interpreter of the new Indian diaspora” (Monaco 2015). As Raj Chetty indicates, Lahiri is perceived in the United States – but also in other Western countries as well as in India – as “a native ethnographer-informant” who fulfils (in an either ‘authentic’ or ‘fake’ way) “her responsibility to interpret between India and America” (2009, 62-63). Thus, Lahiri’s Anglophone works have been read as anthropological, ethnographic and sociological guides or as guided ‘Little India’ tours.<sup>5</sup> Lahiri’s great critical acclaim in the United States is precisely related to her perceived position as the interpreter or guide to what is marketed as an exotic reality that, moreover, is not too political or “spicy” (Shankar 2009) and therefore appeals to mainstream audiences.

Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Floyd Cheung, whose 2012 edited book was “the first full-length literary analysis” of Lahiri’s body of work, note how, despite her international success, scholarship on Lahiri in the United States had until then been “sporadic” (2012a, xiv). If Shankar and Cheung’s book marked an increase in scholarly attention to her *oeuvre*, Lahiri’s

shift to Italian has alienated Anglophone scholars of her work outside Italy. Both readers and scholars in the United States were so accustomed to reading Lahiri's works as 'interpretations' of the Indian American community that since she changed subject matter and language, "[è] come se avessero smesso di nutrire un interesse verso i [suoi] lavori" "[i]t's as if they had lost interest in [her] works] (Lahiri 2018c; my translation). Indeed, her Italian-language works have been discussed mostly by Italoophone scholars or by Italian Anglophone scholars (see Monaco 2014, 2017, 2019; Adami 2015, 2017; Concilio 2016; Groppaldi and Sergio 2016; Federici and Fortunati 2017; Lutzoni 2017; Reichardt 2017; Saroldi 2017; Spagnolo 2017; Grutman 2018; Malandrino 2018; Frigeni 2019). They have not received any attention from Anglophone scholars outside Italy, notwithstanding the English translations of her Italian works. The sole exception is Steven G. Kellman, who describes Lahiri's work in Italian as a "humiliation" and a "mortification" of her "command of language" (2017, 125). Kellman's comments reveal his discomfort with Lahiri switching to Italian and betray Anglocentric anxieties toward other languages, as will be argued below.

Other Anglophone readers share Kellman's unease, which we see in the very different responses to *In altre parole* and *In Other Words* of those reviewers and their Italian counterparts. Italian reviewers of *In altre parole* (Adami 2015; Bonvicini 2015; Frau 2015; Lauro 2015; Gosetti 2016; Spagnolo 2017) are enthusiastic about Lahiri's writing in Italian and praise her linguistic choices and style. A few Anglophone reviewers of *In Other Words* are equally positive (Moore 2016; Luzzi 2016), but most are quite negative: the unfavourable reviewers describe Lahiri's prose in English translation as "flat" and "banal" (Downing 2016), the book as "unilluminating" (Finch 2016), "tedious" (Hadley 2016), "repetitive" and "self-dramatic" (Garner 2016) and hope that she will return to English.

As with Kellman, the negative reviews of *In Other Words* expose an insular attitude, pointing to a difficulty within the English-speaking world towards opening up to other languages. Already in the 1990s, Werner Sollors had identified a tendency among U.S. scholars – which still seems to be widespread – to overlook literary works written in languages other than English and to assume that the United States is a monolingual country (1998, 5-6). This approach originates from U.S. and British imperialism and exceptionalism, that is, from the real and imagined power of the United States and the United Kingdom over other countries and their need to protect their position. Within such Anglocentrism, languages that have fewer speakers, like Italian, are perceived as "strange" and lacking the potential of languages spoken world-wide, including the global circulation of cultural products, such as books and films (Kellman 2017, 123-124). Overall, the critical comments on Lahiri's use of Italian ignore – or dread – the less material benefits that acquiring a foreign language can bring about, which include access to other cultures and viewpoints.<sup>6</sup>

Anglophone reviewers' negative responses to and Asian Americanists' neglect of Lahiri's Italo-phonetic work represent a parochial attitude that is at odds with the now widespread scholarly emphasis on the transnational dimension of American and Asian American studies and on the need to consider their positioning beyond the United States and the English language. It seems that Asian Americanists and Anglophone scholars more generally, despite their calls to decentre the United States and include it within a global network, are not truly ready to embrace more radical attempts to place "American literature in the world" (Dimock 2017). Analysing Lahiri's adoption of the Italian language answers Wai Chee Dimock's appeal to read American literature as world literature, that is, to decentre the United States by exposing its interconnections with and interdependencies on other literatures and geographies (2007, 2017). With regard to Asian America, Lahiri shows how Asian American writers' transnational links might go beyond the country of origin and settlement – or country of origin and ancestral country – to embrace other localities outside the well-known transpacific axis that includes Asia and America. Hence, Lahiri's Italo-phonetic writing contributes to the worlding of American and Asian American literatures, a contribution that Italian and Italo-phonetic scholars have neglected, by placing her Italian-language creative production within a European or Italian/Italo-phonetic framework, or within the field of exophonic and/or migrant literatures.<sup>7</sup>

According to David Damrosch's definition of world literature as "multiple windows on the world" (2003, 15) – that is, as literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin and therefore enable readers to access another world or culture – Lahiri's work was part of world literature even before she employed Italian. Indeed, her works have been read internationally through translations in various languages. In contrast, her Italian-language works have struggled to reach an Anglophone audience even after being translated. If "[a] determining feature of world literature [...] is that it does well in translation" (Damrosch and Ning 2011, 176), *In altre parole* does not satisfy this requirement given that its translated version, *In Other Words*, has not received many positive reviews. Yet, Lahiri's Italo-phonetic writing is still an example of world literature insofar as it crosses prescribed geographical boundaries – those of Asia and America – and so provides American and Asian American literatures with 'a window on the world'.

Lahiri's choice to write in Italian is also significant in the domain of world literature. Her rejection of English resists the threat of an English monolingualism that risks reducing world literature to a homogenised field where linguistic and cultural particularities are erased. Such a risk emerges, for instance, in Franco Moretti's approach to the study of world literature, which, as Jonathan Arac argues, implies an acceptance of the "imperialism of English" and "the diminishment of language-based criticism in favour of a monolingual master scheme" (2002, 44). It is a fact that "world literature still relies on English as the main global vehicle for its institutionalization and dissemination" (Tsu 2012, 161). Indeed, English is spoken by 1.1

billion people whereas Italian is spoken by only 67 million people (both figures include native and non-native speakers) (Ethnologue 2021). Thus, Lahiri's choice to produce her recent work in Italian challenges the supremacy of the English language in world literature and in the global literary market. Although the reception of her Italian-language work in Anglophone contexts depends upon its English translation, Lahiri's decision to present *In Other Words* in a bilingual version, with the Italian parallel text (the left-hand pages are in Italian and the right-hand pages in English), forces the reader to notice, at least, the Italian origin of the text and leads to comparisons between the English and Italian versions (see Malandrino 2018, 151).<sup>8</sup>

Hence, Lahiri's embracing of the Italian language and her relocation to Italy indicate once more that the United States and Asian America have to be understood as part of a larger geography – indeed, the world itself – and in connection with other cultures and languages. American and Asian American literatures can therefore be seen as part of world literature, understood not merely as a mode of circulation and reading that goes beyond the borders of a single nation (Damrosch 2003) but also as a type of literature that is “aperta al mondo” [open to the world] and in which language is freed from its exclusive contract with a particular nation or culture (Albertazzi 2013, 165-166; my translation) and vice versa.

### Rewriting the self

In *In altre parole*,<sup>9</sup> Lahiri describes her encounter with Italian during her first visit to Italy in 1994 as “Un colpo di fulmine” [Love at first sight] (23): she senses that although she does not have to learn Italian for any cultural or social need, learning it will make her feel whole (22-23). Lahiri started to study Italian in the United States, and, 18 years after her first visit to Italy, she returned to this country with her husband and children (18, 35, 49). After her three-year stay in Rome from 2012 to 2015, Lahiri published her first work in Italian, *In altre parole*, a collection of essays that – with the exception of “Penombra” [“Half-Light”] and “Postfazione” [“Afterword”] – had been previously published in the weekly news magazine *Internazionale*. These essays form together “[un]autobiografia linguistica, un autoritratto” [[a] linguistic autobiography, a self-portrait] (156). Lahiri declares: “Indagando la mia scoperta della lingua, penso di aver fatto un'indagine su di me” [Investigating my discovery of the language, I think I have investigated myself] (134). Indeed, as Graziella Favaro points out, “[i]l legame tra lingua e i processi identitari è intricato e inscindibile” [the link between language and identity formation is complicated and indissoluble] (2013, 33; my translation). *In altre parole* is a meditation on Lahiri's identity, on her relationship with language and on the relations between the languages that have marked her life: Bengali, English and Italian. She explains her passion for Italian, recounting by way of metaphors the process of learning it.

Lahiri's shift from English to Italian is already hinted at in the title of the book: *In altre parole*, or *In Other Words*, refers to the book being written ‘in another language’. Literally, the

expression ‘in altre parole,’ or ‘in other words,’ indicates the act of saying the same thing in a different way. Lahiri, however, is not repeating words that she has already formulated in English, which is why her writing in Italian hardly constitutes an act of self-translation, not even in Susan Bassnett’s understanding of it as “rewriting” (2013, 23-24). Indeed, Lahiri has changed subject matter since she started to write in Italian: she has produced personal reflections on themes such as language (*In altre parole*) and the art of the book jacket (*Il vestito dei libri*), and she has explored the conflict between movement/change and immobility/rootedness from a more abstract perspective (*Dove mi trovo*).

Nevertheless, if we take the notion of self-translation in its broader, more metaphorical meaning to indicate “the [...] ways in which writers’ identities [...] are remolded by the move to a new country and the integration into a new language-culture, a physical [and psychological] ‘translation’ that can be accompanied or not by actual translations” (Grutman and Van Bolderen 2014, 323), then we can effectively employ this term to describe Lahiri’s writing in Italian. Indeed, she started to employ Italian in order to satisfy her need to replace the defining themes of her work and to refashion her very self. Therefore, if, at first, Lahiri was driven to Italian by an irrational love or desire, she then used it to satisfy some specific artistic and ontological needs that I will outline below.

As Chetty observes, “many ‘ethnicized’ authors struggle against an audience eager to define, behold, know, and consume ‘ethnic’ others” (2009, 57). Both readers and scholars of Lahiri’s *oeuvre* have greatly contributed to the solidification of her identity as an Anglophone Bengali American writer. Indeed, as we have seen, Lahiri has been strongly associated with the Bengali American community and repeatedly presented as its ‘interpreter’. However, in *In altre parole*, she writes: “Più che mai mi sento una scrittrice senza una lingua definitiva, senza origine, senza definizione” [I feel more than ever that I am a writer without a definitive language, without origin, without definition] (98). Given her ongoing struggle to accept her Bengali American identity, Lahiri considers the categories into which she has been pigeonholed to be inaccurate and constraining (Lahiri, Sabrynex and Taji 2018). Furthermore, she was occasionally subjected to criticism for not fulfilling the task assigned to her by her readership of interpreting between India and the United States, which generated a sense of failure and imperfection in her (Lahiri 2002; see also Shankar and Cheung 2012a, xv).

In a letter to Elena Ferrante, Lahiri praises the Italian writer’s decision not to appear in public and to keep her identity secret (2014). Lahiri’s praise of ‘invisibility’ in this letter especially reveals her anxiety toward readers’ and publishers’ expectations about her works and persona. Therefore, when Kellman asks why she gave up English, a language that “can provide access to the most influential publishing houses [...] as well as the largest number of readers and the most glittering prizes of any contemporary language” (2017, 123), the answer



might be: to avoid all this and become somehow invisible to the eyes of her Anglophone readers, thus escaping their literary expectations.

### Fighting the Medusa

It is through Italian that Lahiri has been able to move away from her successful and consolidated identity as an Anglophone Bengali American writer and from the ‘ethnic’ subject matter with which she has been widely identified. While she wrote her Anglophone works to bring back to her parents a lost world, in *In altre parole*, Lahiri finally writes for herself and about herself (161; Lahiri, Sabrynex and Taji 2018): “[i]n questo libro io sono, per la prima volta, la protagonista” [[i]n this book I am the protagonist for the first time] (158). Italian therefore constitutes a way out of an existential and artistic impasse: “una fuga dal lungo scontro, nella mia vita, tra l’inglese e il bengalese. Un rifiuto sia della madre sia della matrigna” [a flight from the long clash in my life between English and Bengali. A rejection of both the mother and the stepmother] (113-114; my emphasis). Lahiri’s “flight” from and “rejection” of both English and Bengali and her efforts to “difendere il [suo] italiano” [protect [her] Italian] from English (91) are immediately visible in the text. Contrary to many migrant, postcolonial and Asian American literary texts, *In altre parole* is characterised by the absence of a hybrid language: it is entirely in Italian and those very few words in English are linked to upsetting episodes in Lahiri’s life (107-108). Clearly, this is not due to a lack of originality on Lahiri’s part (Groppaldi and Sergio 2016) but to a specific existential and literary need: the need to move beyond the two languages and cultures that have anchored her work and identity to the Bengali/American binary. Italian represents “a third direction, a third way, a way out” (Concilio 2016, 119), although not in Homi Bhabha’s sense of a third, hybrid space (1994, 56). Indeed, Lahiri does not create a hybrid space where her multiple cultural and linguistic references – Bengali, American, Italian – coexist. Already in 2002, Lahiri declared that she had stopped “incorporating Bengali words into [her] stories,” thus refusing to employ a hybridised version of English. With *In altre parole*, she makes an even more radical choice as she uses a third, adopted language and tries to exclude both English and Bengali from her Italian textual space.

This urge to find a third, alternative dimension had already emerged in Lahiri’s previous work: for instance, through Moushumi’s stay in Paris in the novel *The Namesake* (2003) and through Hema’s sojourn in Rome in the short story “Going Ashore” contained in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Lahiri has argued that “the second generation [...] leads lives where there can be a third or a fourth place, for whatever reason – career, marriage” (Lahiri 2011). Lahiri’s choice of a third place is evidently less practical than this, but it is certain that the second generation’s condition of “double displacement” (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 172) – in the United States and in India – leads them to explore new spaces in which to feel at home. When in Paris or Rome, neither Moushumi nor Hema “share the kind of alienation [...] and nostalgia for

America (their home) in these foreign cultures, as the first-generation women [...] feel in America (about their past nation India)” (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 172). Although in Europe they are still foreign, they do not feel “obliged to fit in[to] either the Indian or the American cultures” (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 172), and, therefore, they feel liberated.

In Italy, although she is labelled as a migrant writer (Lutzoni 2017; Reichardt 2017), Lahiri is freed from literary and cultural expectations toward which she always felt a sense of failure and imperfection (85, 122-123). At the same time, she realises that imperfection plays a positive role in the creative process: writing in another language is like climbing a mountain with poor equipment, but it also makes her feel “libera, leggera” [free, light] (52). In an interview, Lahiri (2016b) quotes the writer Italo Calvino, who emphasised the ethical value of lightness. In his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (2016 [1988]; *Lezioni americane*), Calvino explains that literature has “an existential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living” (32). Lightness is the sole antidote to “the heaviness, the inertia, the opacity of the world” (4), to the paralysis or stagnation of social and political structures. Such a state of “petrification” (4) is personified by the mythical figure of the Gorgon Medusa and her “inexorable gaze” (4). Yet, Perseus, who flies on winged sandals, manages to cut off her head by avoiding looking at her directly and looking instead at her image reflected in his shield. Calvino sees in Perseus the embodiment of the future intellectual, who should not adhere completely to reality and provide mimetic representations of it (such as in historical and autobiographical accounts) but rise above it and look at it from a distance. The intellectual can thus gain the necessary detachment from reality and the vantage point from which he or she can still observe and interpret reality without crystallising him or herself in a given position (Calvino 2016 [1988], 3-36).

The idea of fighting the fixity and hardening of one’s position is very much present in Lahiri’s approach as well. Indeed, Lahiri has stated that giving up her authority as an Anglophone writer “risponde alla [sua] ricerca di leggerezza nella scrittura e nella vita. [È] uscita volontariamente dal contenitore autrice anglosassone per non sentire più il peso di un’identità precisa” [responds to [her] search for lightness in both writing and life. [She has] voluntarily left the container of Anglophone author not to feel the weight of a definite identity anymore] (2016b; my translation). Thus, Lahiri follows Calvino’s advice to face “heaviness” by “fly[ing] like Perseus into some other space,” that is, “chang[ing] approach, [...] look[ing] at the world from a different angle, with different logic, different methods of knowing and proving” (2016 [1988], 8). Lahiri is able to reach this “other space” – the third dimension that I mentioned earlier – and change her “approach” through Italian: “[s]crivendo in italiano, non mi sento più con i piedi per terra” [[w]riting in Italian, I feel that my feet are no longer on the ground] (161). Hence, she is deprived of a weight that was sinking her, and the lightness that she acquires enables her to move on and to take on a new identity, “[u]na nuova voce” [[a] new voice] (56).



Italian becomes Lahiri's "filtro, [... i]l distacco senza il quale non riesco a creare niente" [filter, [... t]he detachment without which I can't create anything] (162), and so, her 'shield', her means to distance herself from a readership whose 'gaze' petrified her and her art.

The link between lightness and the Italian language can also be seen in Lahiri's descriptions of Italian as "evanescente" [evanescent] (33); words "evaporano nell'aria, colano come l'acqua tra le dita" [vanish into thin air, they flow like water between my fingers] (46); the authors' writing in this language is "impalpabile. Vaporosa come la nebbia" [impalpable. Nebulous, like the fog] (79). English, instead, is an aspect of her past that is "pesante" [heavy] (123). Lahiri sometimes combines lightness with heaviness, thus evoking Calvino's idea of their complementarity (2016 [1988], 18). For instance, when she learns new words, she feels "frizzante" [in high spirits] (or 'effervescent') but also "carica" [loaded down] (45) and declares that when "si vive senza la propria lingua ci si sente senza peso e, allo stesso tempo, sovraccarichi" [you live without your own language you feel weightless and, at the same time, overloaded] (97). Lahiri therefore experiences a paradox: she feels lighter writing in Italian but also "inchiodata" [confined] (literally, 'nailed down') because of the weight of this whole new linguistic baggage (70, 122). Lahiri wonders "come una prigioniera possa somigliare al paradiso" [how a prison can resemble a paradise] (70). Here, the writer compares her Italian to the confining space of a prison because it is limited. Yet, it is through limitation that she can rediscover language as well as the pleasure and wonder that accompany writing (52). Indeed, Lahiri reads and writes in a less passive way as she goes back to an elementary stage that requires more effort but also more awareness of words and linguistic processes (38-39, 43).

### Toward abstraction

As learning Italian makes Lahiri rediscover words, "la ragione per cui scriv[e], la gioia insieme all'esigenza" [the reason that [she] write[s], the joy as well as the need] (52), thus providing her with new inspiration and creative energy, Italian and Italy have become her adopted language and homeland. In 2015, Lahiri affirmed that Rome was the only place in the world where she felt rooted. But then she added: "quello che mi radica veramente è sempre la letteratura, sono le parole" [what makes me feel truly rooted is always literature, words] (CasaltalianaNYU 2015; my translation). Lahiri's feeling of rootedness in Rome has less to do with the city or the country itself, its culture, than with its language. Because her link to Italy is more linguistic than cultural, Lahiri does not "reinvent herself [...] as an Italian writer but as a writer in Italian" (Moore 2016), that is, as an Italian-language writer and more precisely as an Italophone Bengali American writer.

Lahiri's claims that she has found rootedness in Rome, together with her rejection of hybridity, might indicate a trend toward localisation rather than an expansion of one's boundaries. However, Lahiri does not become attached to Italy as a concrete, localised reality

but rather as an abstract, linguistic space whose language enables her to transcend national borders. Indeed, she asserts in the “Afterword”: “In italiano mi muovo verso l’astrazione” [In Italian I’m moving toward abstraction] (161), and in a recent interview she has stated: “I am working to free my work from geographic coordinates, and to arrive at a more abstract sense of place” (2018b) and identity. Lahiri has not adopted the Italian language in an attempt to become more local than global but because through Italian she can, to a certain extent, free herself from identity labels that are too specific. Lahiri’s desire for abstraction is evident in *Dove mi trovo* (2018), a postnational and postethnic novel, in which the author somehow appropriates Calvino’s understanding of lightness as writing characterised by abstraction (2016 [1988], 20). The nameless protagonist lives in a similarly anonymous city, devoid of specific features that might help the reader identify it. In addition, the protagonist is not marked by her ethnicity. Thus, Lahiri’s new identity as an Italophone Bengali American writer grants her identity more fluid boundaries and her readers greater interpretative possibilities as to whom her characters might embody.

Lahiri has therefore developed an alternative way to expand her identity: not by multiplying her national links as in transnational practices but through a subtraction of them that is not necessarily nihilistic but responds to a quest for ‘lightness’.<sup>10</sup> In a world where people are increasingly crossing borders, and where it would be myopic to continue to keep literatures and languages within closed national compartments, Lahiri endorses a sort of postnationalism that releases languages from any essential link to a particular culture or country and vice versa. Hence, she has managed to world American, Asian American and Italian literature.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Yet, as I will discuss, the idea of world literature needs to be revised, if not criticised, for some of its assumptions, such as its dependence upon the English language for its circulation (see Arac 2002; Spivak 2003; Tsu 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Only Raffaella Malandrino (2018) discusses Lahiri’s positioning within the Anglophone context, mainly focusing on the tension between ethnic and aesthetic in Asian American literature. Although we share the same argument that Lahiri needed to free herself from literary categorisation, I focus on how this need emerges in *In altre parole* and in Lahiri’s interviews as a quest for ‘lightness’, engaging with the ‘worlding’ effects of such a quest on American and Asian American studies.

<sup>3</sup> Lahiri more correctly belongs to the “1.75 generation,” a term used to describe individuals whose migration occurred during early childhood (ages 0-5) and whose “experience and adaptive outcomes are closer to that of the U.S.-born second generation” (Rumbaut 2004, 1167).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Anglo-Indian’ is an especially inaccurate label given that it indicates individuals of mixed Indian and white British ancestry, while ABCD is “an acronym coined by Indian nationals to describe culturally challenged second-generation Indians raised in the U.S.” (Lahiri 2002). In South Asia, the word ‘desi’ indicates an indigenous person or thing; outside South Asia, it denotes a person of South Asian origin or descent (“Desi” 2020).

<sup>5</sup> This definition is modelled on Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s description of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century second-generation Chinese American autobiographies as “guided Chinatown tours [...] providing explanations on the manners and mores of the Chinese-American community from the vantage point of a ‘native’” (1992, 262). It has to be noted, however, that the Indian American sites explored by Lahiri are not exactly metropolitan enclaves, but mostly suburban Bengali American households in New England.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, promoting language diversity is instrumental in countering the hegemony of languages, such as English in the United States, that threaten to ‘mute’ other linguistic and cultural models.

<sup>7</sup> Exophonic writing is produced in a language different from the writer's mother tongue (see Arndt, Naguschewski and Stockhammer 2007; Wright 2008).

<sup>8</sup> *In Other Words* is also available as an audiobook recorded by Lahiri herself in both English and Italian.

<sup>9</sup> Henceforth, the page numbers without other indication are from *In altre parole*, and, unless noted otherwise, the translated quotations are from *In Other Words*.

<sup>10</sup> Transnationalism has been defined as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995, 48).

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