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A Language of Her Own: Willful Displacement and Feminist Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri

Abstract

In Other Words (2016) is the first of Jhumpa Lahiri's writings to be published in Italian, charting the journey to self-expression enabled by her twenty-year relationship with this foreign language. Tracing Lahiri's literary production, this study argues that the autobiographical prose of In Other Words is facilitated by a series of 'willful' displacements, reworking and revising the notion of displacement which is a pervasive theme of Lahiri's earlier work. Moreover, it is precisely by means of these self-conscious geographical, bodily, linguistic and literary dislocations that Lahiri articulates a specific kind of feminist subjectivity, where otherness and multiplicity are re-privileged as a source of creative energy and self-affirmation.

In a 2014 article entitled 'Writing in Two Languages: An Existential Challenge,' journalist and author Silvia Ricci Lempen, writing about the decision to abandon her native Italian in favor of publishing in her adopted French, asked the following: "Is it possible to become so deeply immersed in a second language that it is genuinely transformed into a literary tool...?" (177). One year later, in 2015, Jhumpa Lahiri, an American writer of Bengali descent and author of several critically acclaimed English publications including the Pulitzer prize-winning *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), performed just such a literary experiment by publishing her first collection of writings conceived and written entirely in a foreign language. The culmination of two decades of arduous study of and fascination with the Italian language, *In Other Words* (published in English in 2016, translated from the original Italian by Ann Goldstein) marks a radical point of linguistic and textual departure, as well as a subversive yet creatively-stimulating move from a major to a minor language. Since its publication, the author has continued to write first and foremost in Italian, only recently returning to English, not as

writer, but as translator of her short story ‘The Boundary,’ published in *The New Yorker* in January 2018.

In the course of a 2016 interview for *The Guardian*, Lahiri stated that “Italian is useful to me, in that it is the language in which I feel absolutely happy, inspired, free,” going on to comment that “I find that my writing [in Italian] is more essential and that my thoughts are less inhibited” (Bromwich). *In Other Words* can therefore, I suggest, be read as a powerful performance of the ways in which a self takes shape in language, in contrast to the unresolved fracturing of identity expressed in Lahiri’s acclaimed English-language work. The collection resulting from, in the author’s own words, a “passionate affair” (Bromwich) with the Italian language traces the ways in which reading, writing and speaking Italian allows Lahiri to construct a space of linguistic selfhood, adopting a language of her own which stands in contrast to the painful sense of displacement associated with her first two languages: Bengali and English.

I further suggest that, by means of the experimental and intensely personal linguistic and literary project articulated in *In Other Words*, Jhumpa Lahiri enacts an alternative experience of displacement to the painful geographical displacements which form the backbone of her published work in English. This alternative displacement is a *willful* one, which constitutes a reclaiming of authorial and linguistic agency, and enables the author to pose fundamental questions about notions of belonging, self-expression, and identity more potently and personally than ever before. Working within the limits of an imperfect knowledge of Italian as adopted language, Lahiri is able to embrace a multiplicity which, though not without its own painful moments, resists settled notions of linguistic, national and cultural identity, and frees her from the sensation of a perpetual foreignness experienced negatively as loss and failure to assimilate.

Importantly, this re-privileging of multiplicity also intersects with a revised postmodern feminist conception of subjectivity, where “the speaking subject is not one but always already a plurality” (Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* 110), and the self constitutes “a strange land of

borders and otherness, ceaselessly constructed and deconstructed” (Kristeva 191). Taking such an understanding of subjecthood as its starting point, I shall seek to explore a fundamental question: how might the willful linguistic displacements of Jhumpa Lahiri’s recent literary production be considered an exercise in feminist subjectivity?

In order to trace displacement as a fundamental motif of Lahiri’s work, I will begin by discussing the drama of dislocation which characterizes her pre-Italian linguistic experiences, considering how this displacement has been variously refracted and reflected in the English-language writings which catapulted her to fame. These earlier novels can be seen to constitute a kind of displacing of the experience of displacement itself, where Lahiri’s own experiences become interwoven with the fabric of fictional narratives. In contrast to the unresolved sense of fracture expressed in *The Namesake*’s Gogol Ganguli and the displaced characters of *Interpreter of Maladies*, the Italian of *In Other Words* creates space for the expression of a ‘narratable self’ (Cavarero) and a point of exit from the linguistic no-man’s-land which had previously discouraged her from composing overtly autobiographical prose.

Building on this idea of a linguistic space of self-expression, I will secondly move to evaluate the fundamental role played by spatial imagery in the author’s relationship to her new language. Sara Ahmed’s writings on the significance of orientations, as well as her work on willfulness and ‘willful subjects,’ will be used to consider how bodily (re-)orientations and mental and physical leanings towards a desired object open up new possibilities for expressing the multi-faceted relationship of distance and proximity between Lahiri and the Italian language.

Finally, I will conclude by addressing the space of feminist subjectivity created by the literary and linguistic experiment which *In Other Words* represents. Choosing to write in an Italian “without style” (Lahiri, *In Other Words* 59) provides the author with a fresh, unencumbered narrative voice, and allows her to perform a radical linguistic and textual re-orientation. However, where “being in-between languages constitutes a vantage point in deconstructing identity” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 12), it is also significant that writing ‘in other words’ is

also always writing 'otherwise,' in a hybrid Italian, shaped and affected by past histories of linguistic involvement. Ultimately, it is only by writing from within this space of hybridity and multiplicity, where displacement is no longer experienced as unresolved duality but as a kind of nomadic belonging, that Lahiri is able to produce her "linguistic autobiography" (*In Other Words* 213), and narrate her most essential self.

Jhumpa Lahiri's multiple displacements

Lahiri's relationship to the workings of displacement is complex and long-standing. In testament to this, she confirmed in an interview for the podcast 'Conversations with Tyler' in January 2017 that what had most attracted her to writers like Hawthorne and Hardy as a teen and young adult was "the sense of displacement in those authors, in any author" (Cowen). Moreover, displacement has been a primary aspect of the author's academic trajectory, her family life, and her published writings to date. It played a key role in her formation as a scholar; at the time of realizing her passion for the Italian language she was in the process of completing a doctoral thesis on the significance of displaced narrative action in Jacobean drama. This academic interest in dislocated narratives is perhaps, in turn, rooted in the experience of geographical displacement which Lahiri describes as knitted into the fabric of her domestic life; she speaks often about the dilemmas associated with being the child of first-generation migrants to the United States, watching her parents as they grappled with a radically different society and culture.

Out of a family history of migration is also born a linguistic disjuncture. "When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign," Lahiri writes, "you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement" (*In Other Words* 19). Indeed, Rosi Braidotti comments in her writings on nomadic subjectivity that the polyglot - a subject caught or suspended between languages - constitutes "a specialist of the treacherous nature of language" (*Nomadic Subjects*

8). The nomad is broadly defined as “a subject in transit,” (*Nomadic Subjects* 10) resisting fixed and bounded conceptions of identity. Lahiri’s nomadic linguistic history means that she, too, understands well the deceptive qualities of language and fixed notions of identity; she is deeply familiar with the linguistic and cultural paradoxes which haunt her family’s geographical shift to the United States, recalling how her mother wrote poetry in Bengali whilst living in America (*In Other Words* 19), and speaking of her own unease in relating to parents who continued to speak “the language of elsewhere” (Djebar 23) at home.

Perhaps the most jarring of these incongruities, however, is that Lahiri’s knowledge of the language of her parents is limited; she speaks Bengali stiltedly and hesitantly, with an accent, and confesses that “I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language, too” (*In Other Words* 21). Likewise, her adopted mother tongue of English, figured in *In Other Words* as a “stepmother” (147), is the product of a kind of linguistic divorce, despite being a language in which the author has achieved critical success. Thus, unable to fully identify with either language, caught between these linguistic “adversaries” (*In Other Words* 149), Lahiri feels herself to be the subject of a double expatriation in which “I felt like a contradiction in terms myself” (*In Other Words* 149).

Interpreter of Maladies and The Namesake: Displacement as unresolved fracture

Such a sensation has necessarily colored the English-language texts for which she first became known. Urmila Seshagiri, in an online article for *Public Books*, comments that the fictional characters whose stories have brought Lahiri success are “displaced, exiled, willingly mobile, or otherwise living lives fragmented by geography”. These characters reflect something of the trajectory of Lahiri’s own experiences - a kind of displacing of displacement itself onto fictional personages - as she affirms when she states that she has always conceived and nourished her identity in writing: “Before I became a writer, I lacked a clear, precise identity. It was through

writing that I was able to feel fulfilled” (*In Other Words* 83). Yet, in so far as Lahiri’s own experience of displaced identity is reflected in her English-language writing, this writing captures only the part of herself represented by a dividedness figured as the lack of a coherent homeland, culture, or identity.

This fundamental split is reflected particularly strongly in the chapter titled ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,’ taken from Lahiri’s 1999 collection of English-language short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*. Narrated in the first person by an unnamed little girl, a second-generation Bengali-American, the story - set in America - follows the unfolding of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. The roots of the Indo-Pakistani conflict are multi-faceted, but include Partition in 1947 and the volatile Bengali Language Movement of the 1950s. The latter advocated for Bengali to be included as one of the official languages of the then Dominion of Pakistan; Bengali itself is thus a contested linguistic space with an attendant history of conflict and violence. Yet the child narrator - like Lahiri - is largely divorced from the wider resonance and significance of the Bengali language, her principal connection with which is through the migrant parents who speak this (m)other tongue in the displaced spatial context of America.

This originary disjuncture is captured here in the narrative juxtaposition of the little girl blithely preparing for Halloween festivities with the characters of her parents and the eponymous Mr Pirzada. The latter is a refugee from Dakha, who along with the parents is absorbed in the television coverage of the distant war, watching from afar the pictures of an “unruly sweltering world” viewed in the dislocated and jarring setting of the child narrator’s “bright carpeted living room” (*Interpreter of Maladies* 32). Mr Pirzada himself, whose wife and children have been left behind in Dakha, is a kind of personification of displacement: his watch is set to Dakha time, eleven hours ahead, so that all of his actions appear as “a lagging ghost of where Mr Pirzada really belonged” (31).

The colorful, volatile world displayed on the television is alien to the narrator; a part of her heritage that she is incapable of fully understanding, being versed only in American history.

Her parents and Mr Pirzada, on the other hand, follow the coverage with trepidation, “as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, a single fear” (41). Yet at the same time as not being able to share in the adults’ fears, neither does the child narrator fully belong to the English-language, culturally American context of her schooling and her predominately white neighborhood. Whilst trick-or-treating with friends, it becomes clear that she - too - is perceived as a contradiction in terms: she notes that “several people told me that they had never seen an Indian witch before” (39).

Also contributing to the drama of in-betweenness which characterises Jhumpa Lahiri’s early work are Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, whose migration from Calcutta to New England for Ashoke to take up a position at MIT opens the 2003 novel *The Namesake*. The Gangulis move in a carefully constructed social circle of displaced Bengali families, whose primary connection to one another is a shared displaced linguistic identity and a shared loss of homeland. This “makeshift extended Bengali family” (*The Namesake* 204) is, however, itself marked by a pervasive sense of cultural cross-contamination and dislocation; the children of the Gangulis’ first-generation migrant friends (amongst which their own, Gogol and Sonia) are caught precariously between the Bengali culture of the domestic environment and the American spaces of their socialization and education.

These second-generation Bengali-Americans speak English to one another (Gogol must attend Bengali language and culture lessons, and his knowledge of this supposed mother tongue - like Lahiri’s - is shaky), and the Ganguli household is slowly transformed into a meeting-place of more or less discordant cultural practices; a kind of ‘third space’ (Soja 1996) marked by the presence of Christmas trees in December and hamburgers for dinner once a week alongside the traditional household shrine and Ashima’s elaborate Indian cooking. To this end, trapped between the split spaces of a remembered and longed-for Calcutta and a Boston which they “still cannot bring [themselves] to refer to [...] as home” (108), Ashima and Ashoke’s children are strange hybrids; a discomfiting embodiment of their own divided personal geography: “it

never fails to unsettle them [...] that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still sometimes confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust” (65).

However, it is the character of Gogol who most potently captures something of Lahiri’s own experience of painful duality prior to her decision to immerse herself in the Italian language. The journey of self-discovery undertaken by Gogol, whose very name expresses a primary sense of displacement (it is neither Indian nor American, but Russian, and one of Gogol’s father’s primary reasons for settling on it is that Nikolai Gogol spent most of his adult life in a foreign land) is that of an endless and ultimately fruitless search for “an alternative identity, a B-side to the self” (*The Namesake* 76).

Despising the fracture that his name inevitably expresses, as Gogol matures he embarks on a quest of self-invention: he legally changes his name to Nikhil (the ‘good name’ his parents had selected for him alongside the accidental pet name of Gogol) and seeks to distance himself as much as possible from his confusing origins. In moving away to college and adopting the name ‘Nikhil,’ Gogol experiences a kind of temporary euphoria, a perceived but ultimately illusory breaking down of boundaries: “He wonders is this is how it feels for an obese person to become thin, for a prisoner to walk free” (102). The persona of Gogol thrust upon him by his family is now confined to the family home at Pemberton Road in Massachusetts, and will no longer plague him in public settings; the constructed persona of Nikhil, conceived as a direct response to the most painful and jarring experiences associated with his life as ‘Gogol,’ is associated with the joyful independence of his time at college in Connecticut and, later, with his burgeoning career as a professional architect in New York.

However, the protagonist’s desire to suppress his complicated heritage, to adopt a seemingly coherent and uncomplicated persona, is revealed as nothing but the marker of a dual and disintegrated self. In creating Nikhil, Gogol must be suppressed. His is thus a duality which mirrors Lahiri’s own sense of dividedness: it does not result in harmonious multiplicity, but

rather in the consolidation of the painful space of disjuncture between two conflicting versions of the self, a notion encapsulated in the novel in the metaphor of performance: “At times he [Gogol] feels as if he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different” (105).

Thus, at the narrative’s close, “the thought of this eventual demise [of Gogol] provides no sense of victory, no solace” (289). Indeed, it becomes merely a further articulation of the atmosphere of loss which pervades the novel, compacting the threefold losses of his father’s sudden death, his mother’s subsequent decision to return to Calcutta, and the breakdown of his ill-fated marriage to childhood friend and fellow Bengali-American Moushumi. Perhaps most distressing of all to him, however, is that in the legal changing of his name, Gogol has already lost that first and most essential expression of himself, passed down to him by his migrant parents: now, “Nikhil will live on, publicly celebrated, unlike Gogol, purposely hidden, legally diminished, now all but lost” (290).

A language of her own: Constructing a narratable self

Jerome Bruner has argued that “self-making is a narrative art” (210). In the same vein, I contend that the search for the most essential expression of the self - a narratable self - is the salient theme of Lahiri’s work. Indeed, as she commented in a 2018 interview for *The New Yorker*: “all my work is about identity, about belonging” (Leyshon). This search is, then, also the driving force behind the decision to write in Italian - a *willful* displacement to counteract the history of jarring dislocation which characterizes Lahiri’s life and work, and a language supposedly free of past associations and of the cacophony of voices (amongst them, her own) which have influenced and directed her past creative endeavors.

Italian is a language with which Lahiri feels an immediate affinity and a powerful affective tie; she describes the first encounter with its sounds and cadences, during a trip to Florence in 1994

for her doctoral thesis, with the evocative image of “love at first sight” (*In Other Words* 15), referring - as she does frequently - to her relationship with this new and exciting language as a kind of passionate romantic entanglement. In Italian, unlike the cultural, social, and familial weight associated with her first two languages, she states that “I earned every word: nothing about it was handed down” (*In Other Words* 223). To write in Italian is thus also the desire to write in such a way that “I no longer feel bound to restore a lost country to my parents” (*In Other Words* 221), freeing herself from the fixation on an ‘imaginary homeland’ (Rushdie cited in Luzoni 111) as ultimate emblem of displacement, and from the unresolved fracturing of identity which pervades her English-language novels. “In this book,” she writes of *In Other Words*, “I am the protagonist for the first time” (217), making of the book “an act of demolition” (207) - a break with the past which enables the *construction* of the self in language.

In her writings on the notion of a ‘narratable self,’ Adriana Cavarero posits that “the ‘self’ comes to desire the tale of his or her own life-story from the mouth (or pen) of another” (Kottman xi). The notion of a narratable self, then, in contrast to the linguistic no-(wo)man’s-land of phallogocentrism, constitutes a kind of relational identity. In the original Italian social context of this idea, the ‘other’ by means of which the self could be narrated was another member of the Milan women’s groups engaged in the process of ‘autocoscienza,’ a coming to self-awareness as female speaking subject through communion and discussion with other women, taking ownership of language and defying patriarchal patterns of exclusion.

Furthermore, Julia Kristeva (1991) has posited that perhaps we are all inherently ‘other,’ both to one another, and to ourselves. If this is true, then it means that “the foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners” (192). And ultimately, if we are all ‘strangers to ourselves’ then it is, fundamentally, “on the basis of the other [that] I become reconciled with my own otherness-foreignness... I play on it and *live by it*” (182) [my italics]. Marrying the ideas of Kristeva and Cavarero, an alternative picture begins to emerge of ‘otherness-foreignness’ in which *the other is useful to me*. It tells me who I am. It helps me

to voice my subjectivity. Read through such a lens, the self-conscious transition from the English language in which Lahiri has achieved fame to the primitiveness of an imperfect and ever-changing Italian performs precisely that process of detachment, that recounting of the self by means of the ‘other,’ which makes possible what Cavarero terms the “desire for biography” (62). It is, in this sense, a kind of queer trajectory which strays from established paths, allowing Lahiri to address overtly, for the first time, the question of autobiography.

To this end, it is deeply significant that *In Other Words*, with its “urgent aesthetic tenor” (Seshagiri), marks such a distinct break with the sophistication of Lahiri’s award-winning English prose. Conversely, this text seems almost, even to the author herself, to flow from the pen of another; the stranger’s pen, which has here become her own, enables her to write in such a way that “I don’t recognize the person who is writing [...] in this new, approximate language. But I know that it’s the most genuine, most vulnerable part of me.” (*In Other Words* 57). Polish-American writer and academic Eva Hoffman has articulated a similar sensation of authenticity and emancipation in stating that:

There are people for whom leaving one’s mother tongue is a liberation; they feel they can invent a new personae in new words, or finally express their true personality - a self that had been inhibited in their first language because of cultural constraints or early inhibitions (51).

Thus, to write ‘I’ in a language of one’s own, ‘other’ than those inherited from family or the process of socialization, also creates a space of agency, of willfully displaced linguistic subjectivity. Lahiri writes revealingly that “I see before me a new room, empty” (*In Other Words* 35). The allusion to Virginia Woolf is palpable; for a woman to dedicate herself to writing, Woolf (1928) famously argued, she must have access to this room, occupy this space of her own from which to produce and create. For Lahiri, this empty room performs just such a

function; it is “a space where I can wander, learn, forget, fail. Where I can hope.” (*In Other Words* 51).

Building bridges: Spatial and bodily figurations of proximity and distance

Claire Kramsch observes that foreign language acquisition is not merely a cognitive experience, but a “spatial, physical challenge” (61). Indeed, in addition to representing a joyful encounter within a language of Lahiri’s own, *In Other Words* is also characterized by an ever-present and constant struggle between the simultaneous proximity and irreconcilable distance - geographical, textual, and psychic - between the author and the Italian language. It is, in every sense, a physical challenge. Additionally, the link between linguistic acquisition and physical space speaks of a relationship between language and the location of the body which is worth elaborating; the space of linguistic agency discussed previously is at once dynamic and performative, and implicates a certain willful displacement or physical engagement of the body. Sara Ahmed has written extensively about precisely the importance of ‘orientations’ and the positionality of the body in the achievement of desired outcomes or goals. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), she argues that “the question of orientation becomes... not only a question of how we ‘find our way’ but how we come to ‘feel at home’” (7). What we do with our bodies, then, the directions in which we face and turn, can have a profound impact on the outcome of our desires, and can be crucial in defining the boundaries of the familiar and the unfamiliar. How one comes to ‘feel at home’ (or not) in displaced settings, moreover, is a ubiquitous feature of Lahiri’s work.

Further to this, in *Willful Subjects* (2014), Ahmed focusses more particularly on the question of the ‘will,’ and inaugurates the idea of the ‘willful subject’ as s/he who “*leans toward* what is being willed,” because “to get behind something is to orient the body that way” (35) [my italics]. It is precisely such an active engagement of the body in ‘leaning’ towards a desired object which

resonates in *In Other Words*. To this end, the various encounters with Italian which Lahiri describes in the text are lived as an incorporated linguistic experience, where “I want to be in contact with them [the words]. I want them to become a part of me” (49). The Italian language therefore comes to represent a kind of body-grammar, where Lahiri’s reflections chart a succession of bodily actions which enact a ‘getting behind’ Italian, in order to increase her chances of assimilating the desired linguistic object.

Leaning - the default position of the willful subject - is all about pushing into new spaces, and extending the space around us. Ahmed states that “the project form of the will is how a body comes to *stretch out*, in the very process of actively converting a possibility” (*Willful Subjects* 39) [my italics]. From her very first encounter with Italian in Florence Lahiri is aware that there is room within her for this other language: “I realize that there is a space inside me to welcome it” (*In Other Words* 15). The remainder of *In Other Words* then centers on a process of leaning; a conscious narrative stretching out of this linguistic, psychic and textual space of the emancipation until it is expansive enough to function as a space of subjectivity. To this end, although for many years “my relationship with Italian takes place in exile, in a state of separation” (*In Other Words* 19), the author performs a systematic turning *toward* Italian; a kind of “inversion of myself” (*In Other Words* 101), which is simultaneously a turning *away* from English.

The act of renunciation can also be a willful displacement; Lahiri begins to read exclusively in Italian, keeping herself *inside* the language even whilst geographically separated from it, creating a deliberate break with the spoken and written English that surrounds her: “Although I’m still in America, I already feel elsewhere” (*In Other Words* 37). In this sense, too, linguistic objects can create a sense of displacement in and of themselves, connoting a longed-for ‘elsewhere’ in a discordant geographical context, just as in the case of *The Namesake*'s Ashima Ganguli and her continued attachment to a tattered copy of *Desh* magazine brought with her on the plane from Calcutta.

From *inside* the Italian language, moreover, Lahiri is transported *beyond* - beyond linguistic dichotomy, and ultimately beyond reductive definitions of identity. This crucial 'beyond' constitutes a second prepositional relationship to language, this time communicated in the image of the bridge ('il ponte'). Although *In Other Words* is littered with a variety of spatial imagery, the bridge is perhaps the most concrete spatial figuration of the drama of separation and closeness, inside and outside, self and other, which characterizes Lahiri's relationship with Italian and - ultimately - with herself. Whilst holidaying in Venice, she describes being forcefully struck by how the "fragmented, disorientating topography" (*In Other Words* 97) of the city provides a material spatial point of reference for her own sense of mental and geographical disorientation. The space of communication evoked by the very structure of Venice as a series of disparate spaces linked by manmade structures aptly mirrors the dual nature of her relation to Italian as "a state of both separation and connection" (*In Other Words* 97).

However, what is perhaps most significant about this image is the manner in which, in the text, the bridge is transformed from an emblem of liminality - the midpoint between two locations, a kind of indefinite suspension, "neither here nor there" (*In Other Words* 97) - into a powerful tool of arrival. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, suspended between New England and Calcutta, are described as "bridging that distance as best they could" (*The Namesake* 281) with relatively little success. In *In Other Words*, however, the bridge - and indeed the act of bridging - symbolizes the author's ability to 'go beyond,' dispelling the specter of English which haunts her. "*I build bridges*" [my italics] (*In Other Words* 99), she states, the verb in the first person emphasizing that self-made linguistic bridges are the glue which knits together the disparate elements of the self presented in the text. "Both in Venice and on the page," Lahiri affirms, "bridges are the only way to move into a new dimension, to get past English, to arrive somewhere else" (*In Other Words* 101).

Writing with the wrong hand: A willful feminist displacement

At the same time, in the desire to get 'beyond' the monolithic English language, Lahiri states that following her literary success "I was looking for a new direction for my writing. I wanted a new approach" (*In Other Words* 57). 'Getting beyond' is about pushing into new spaces, yet it seems it might also be about pushing *against* the constraints of old ones (itself a transgressive feminist undertaking). In this desire for a new direction, the willful leaning of which Ahmed writes indicates another kind of rebellion: for Lahiri, switching to Italian involves pushing against and turning away from perceived literary and linguistic mores in a kind of "official renunciation" (*In Other Words* 36) of and "voluntary exile" (*In Other Words* 37) from the hegemonic Anglophone literary tradition. Writing from within the new linguistic space created by *In Other Words*, Lahiri affirms, "I don't accept the words I already know, the ones I should be writing with. *I look for others*" (211) [my italics].

This is a different kind of fracture from that expressed in Lahiri's earlier texts, and this most radical of re-orientations is a *bodily* struggle as much as a mental one, where pursuing another (and an 'other') literary path feels like "writing with my left hand, my weak hand, the one I'm not supposed to write with. *It seems a transgression, a rebellion...*" (*In Other Words* 55) [my italics]. Writing with the wrong hand, I suggest, is also always a kind of writing 'otherwise'; a kind of pushing against transformed into *writing against*, allowing Lahiri to 'talk back' to the binary linguistic relationship between Bengali and English which has negatively defined her. It expresses a sense of being willfully out of joint, and represents a source of tremendous creative energy, in contrast to which Lahiri writes that "this old knowledge [of English], this skill, depresses me" (*In Other Words* 117). In this sense, demarcating a linguistic and literary space of feminist subjectivity appears to be *necessarily* a work of dislocation - of writing with the wrong hand.

Perhaps willful feminist displacement is an exercise in *becoming ambidextrous*. Such a work itself is not without its painful moments. Indeed, as Ahmed states in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), when you are pushing against the crowd “for you to keep going, you have to push harder than any of those who are going the right way” (82). However, as she has also observed: “How important it is, especially for women, to claim that space, to take up that space through *what one does with one’s body*” (*Queer Phenomenology* 11) [my italics].

Yet ambidexterity can only take us so far. Crucially, it is also possible for the willful subject to *lean the wrong way*, to compromise a desired outcome in situations of disorientation. ‘Getting behind’ does not always lead to ‘going beyond’ (Gogol’s experience in *The Namesake* is a potent reminder of this, as are the experiences Ahmed recounts in *Living a Feminist Life* of the frustrations and hurdles associated with diversity work). With regards to Lahiri’s desire to ‘get behind’ Italian, she did not self-translate *In Other Words*, precisely because of the tendency - as she then felt - of such an undertaking to disorient and disrupt her delicate linguistic balancing act.

Thus, although the relationship of English and Italian on the adjacent pages of Ann Goldstein’s bilingual edition of the text is a relationship of *beside*, this prepositional relationship of equality between languages is not how the author herself has experienced the act of translation. To Lahiri, the idea of self-translation begins as the opposite of ambidexterity; it is a forced return to writing again with the ‘right’ hand. Paradoxically, in the attempt to de-transition from Italian to English, it is the previously reliable hand, the hand which composed award-winning English prose, which now feels strangely out of joint, dislocated from lack of use. Going back marks a fracture; in the space of transition between languages things get broken. As such, when recounting how she was asked not long into her language-learning project to translate a piece she had written from Italian to English for a literary festival, the experience feels like an unsolicited dialogue with a literary specter, an author who no longer exists, and whose pen

Lahiri no longer desires to wield: “Who is this writer, so well equipped?” she asks, “I don’t recognize her” (*In Other Words* 117).

The Wall: Pushing against the unmovable

It would seem, then, that some constraints are harder to push against than others. Choosing to be willfully displaced is not without its negative consequences. It is also possible that the fulfilment of a subject’s will can be compromised by factors beyond her control; objects which refuse to be re-oriented, which refuse to lean the right way, are equally disruptive. Ahmed categorizes such disobedient objects as ‘willful objects,’ defining these as obstructions “that do not allow subjects to carry out their will” (*Willful Subjects* 42). Perhaps all three of Lahiri’s languages might be classed as ‘willful’ objects, in so far as they consistently ghost one another, always leaving the others inaccessible, out of reach. This is the essence of the powerful spatial metaphor of the wall (*il muro*) which she dwells upon at length, and which is itself characterized in spatial terms as “the border that I will never manage to cross” (*In Other Words* 137).

In contrast to the bridge, which facilitates a moving forward, a crossing from one space to another, the wall is a metaphor for the halting of movement. It is also an example of a metaphorical structure which plays a material role in demarcating the confines within which certain bodies are permitted to move, and within which certain lives can be lived: a kind of “defense system” (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 137) designed to keep minorities ‘in place’. To this end, it is important to bear in mind that willfulness itself comes with its own attendant history of punishment: willful subjects are to be disciplined (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 68-69).

All of Lahiri’s fictional characters come up against walls - whether geographical, psychical or physical - but for the author herself, the wall (perhaps the ultimate willful object) is the cultural,

linguistic and physical barrier to her desire to take on 'Italianness' as part of her identity. It is thus most potently expressed in her inalterable "physical appearance" (*In Other Words* 137), where the color of her skin means that she will always be perceived as irreducibly 'other' in Italy, despite her affinity for the language, culture and people.

Race is precisely one of the lived bodily experiences which concretize the metaphor of the wall in the lives of those who come up against such structures. Indeed, as Ahmed writes in *Living a Feminist Life*: "Some perceptions are walls. What you are perceived as being can be what stops you from being" (143); whiteness itself can become a wall for those who fail to inhabit this category (146). In this sense, too, a body-grammar of ambidexterity can only take us so far, because "coming up against walls teaches us that social categories *precede* a bodily encounter, deciding how a body appears in an instant" (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 147) [my italics].

Speaking, for Lahiri, has always been an exercise in uttering her own peripheral positionality in relation to the cultures surrounding her, with none of which she has been fully able to identify. It has also been an exercise in incomprehensibility, not because she has been incapable of expressing herself, but because those around her have refused to engage with that expression.

Referring particularly to the experience of conversing in Italian in Italy as a woman of color, she comments: "They don't understand me because they don't want to understand me; they don't understand me because they don't want to listen to me, accept me. This is how the wall works" (*In Other Words* 139). Becoming intelligible, then, is partly about the willingness of the interlocutor to understand. Indeed, bilingual writer Nancy Huston has commented of additional language acquisition that "I try to speak *like* you in order to be able to speak *with* you" (58) [italics in original]. What are we do, then, when our interlocutors put up walls of their own?

Those Italians who are resistant to her seem to say to Lahiri: "Don't touch our language [...] It doesn't belong to you." (*In Other Words* 141). As testament to this, she recounts how in a shop in Salerno her Spanish-born American husband, who easily passes for Italian despite his inferior knowledge of the language, is enthusiastically praised by the assistant, whilst her own far

superior Italian goes unnoticed. This episode functions as a kind of demolition, erasing an entire history of painstaking language acquisition. Lahiri's immediate mental response is the desire to cry out "I read only your literature. I can now speak Italian in public, do live radio interviews. I keep an Italian diary, I write stories" (*In Other Words* 137). Yet these words never make it past her lips; outside in the street, following the incident, she comments to her husband that "I'm speechless" (137).

Walls, then, are about how people are silenced; about how certain experiences and certain journeys are truncated or discounted altogether. It is also important, however, to remain aware that the kind of walls which Ahmed (*Living a Feminist Life*) describes coming up against when carrying out diversity work are often far more pernicious than those encountered in the experience of personal and intellectual migration by an acclaimed writer. Indeed, how much more concrete that wall, how much more violently the barrier it creates is enforced, when that migration is *not* academic or affective, not privileged in any way. And how much easier the construction of that space of self-expression when one has the "money and a room of her own" of which Woolf (6) speaks.

Yet at the same time, that the wall is higher and harder to circumvent for some does not mean that it does not exist for others. Nor does it mean that passing through is not still difficult, still painful. Pushing against this architecture of metaphor, in a social context in which "what is the hardest for some does not even exist for others" (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 142), a feminist response to the building of walls might itself involve demolition, taking a sledgehammer to those bricks, and seeking to build better, more inclusive structures in their place. At the very least, means must be found of circumventing these mental and physical walls in order to keep moving forward. With this in mind, we might extract an additional layer of meaning from Lahiri's reference to the text of *In Other Words* itself as "an act of demolition" (207). "I write in order to break down the wall," she adds, "to express myself in a pure way" (144). It is, therefore,

precisely by playing on her own perpetual foreignness, no longer resisting it but living by it, as Kristeva writes, that Lahiri is free to explore the creative stimulus of hybrid identity.

The triangle and the imperfect: Multiplicity as a source of creativity

Where linguistic objects are disobedient, and all too often 'leaning' towards Italian is really leaning against a seemingly insurmountable wall, Lahiri realizes that the Italian part of her, too, is dichotomous; simultaneously a liberation and yet the marker of exclusion and marginality. However, it is important to re-privilege such a lack of fixity, not as a failure to assimilate or be assimilated, as is often the case for the dislocated subjectivities of her displaced fictional characters, but as the establishment of a new kind of heterogeneous subjectivity, where, as Ahmed observes, "we can think of the experience of being out of time as a way of staying attuned to otherness" (*Willful Subjects* 50).

Ricci Lempen (179) has stated that "knowing another language from the one you are writing in gives you a feeling of *permanent strangeness* which stimulates creativity" [my italics]. Similarly, in *Nomadic Subjects* Braidotti makes specific reference to the figure of the polyglot as "the prototype of the postmodern speaking subject" (14), who is "capable of some healthy skepticism about steady identities and mother tongues" (12). With regards to *In Other Words*, it seems to be precisely this sensation of perennial strangeness, this skepticism about fixed linguistic identity and this nomadic conception of the self which represents the generative impulse for the book's composition. Staying 'attuned' to alterity, embracing the disorientation which the other provokes as a creative stimulus, is a feminist project in itself, as well as being the greatest strength of the polyglot writer. This transgressive openness to the other is captured in two significant metaphors which surface in Lahiri's linguistic autobiography: 'the triangle' ('Il triangolo') and 'the imperfect [tense]' ('l'imperfetto').

In her observations on the narratable self, Cavarero argues that “there is no *who* who is not always already intertwined with its *what*” (73) [italics in original]. Lahiri, too, comes to realize that there is no Italian-speaking and writing Jhumpa Lahiri, who is not already dynamically involved with the Bengali and English-speaking parts of her linguistic past. Thus, the dynamic shape of the triangle which Lahiri invokes as a metaphor for her linguistic project comes to represent the necessary relationship of co-dependence between the constituent elements of her identity. Importantly, this linguistic triangle is able to act as “a kind of frame” (*In Other Words* 157); an antidote to the straight line connecting two languages which have always been “intolerant of each other” (*In Other Words* 149), and a resting place for the often conflicting parts of the self which now come together - crucially - to form a ‘self-portrait’ (*In Other Words* 157). Ahmed suggests that “Hope is an investment that the ‘lines’ we follow will get us somewhere” (*Queer Phenomenology* 18). The third line of Lahiri’s linguistic triangle appears to be drawn in precisely such a hope.

Secondly, the self-making narrative of *In Other Words* is characterized by a primary relation to the notion of imperfection, which Lahiri defines in the text accordingly: “I identify with the imperfect because a sense of imperfection has marked my life” (111). Significantly, when speaking of nomadic identity, Braidotti defines the grammar of this shifting subjectivity - ‘the nomadic tense’ - as “the imperfect; it is active, continuous” (*Nomadic Subjects* 25). Lahiri dedicates an entire chapter of *In Other Words* to her difficulty mastering this tense in Italian, and eventually defines constructions in the imperfect as expressive of “an action suspended rather than contained” (111) - much like the act of autobiography itself, one might argue. It is a definition with which, moreover, she associates herself, “suspended rather than rooted” (111) as she has been between English and Bengali.

However, the ‘imperfect’ also represents a potentially negative linguistic experience which is re-cast (re-oriented, perhaps) as source of positive creative energy. “Imperfection inspires invention, imagination, creativity,” Lahiri writes, “*It stimulates*. The more I feel imperfect, the

more I feel alive" (*In Other Words* 113) [my italics]. Imperfection, then, is a strategy of survival, and a dynamic metaphor for the renewed appreciation of the partial, the unfinished and the ephemeral which drives her to write. As an illustration of this, the author asks: "How is it possible that when I write in Italian I feel both freer and confined, restricted? Maybe because in Italian I have *the freedom to be imperfect*" [my italics] (*In Other Words* 83). Stuttering in one language - a language of one's own choosing - can be more fulfilling than speaking fluently in a language mired in "family, cultural, social pressure" (*In Other Words* 153).

Ultimately, the true significance of imperfection to *In Other Words* is that Lahiri's Italian words are always, to some extent, 'altre parole' (other words); an imperfect, ever-developing and willfully displaced Italian which allows her to write "without style, in a primitive way" (59). "I write on the margins," Lahiri announces, in an important affirmation of the creative power of fragmentation and peripheral positionality, "just as I've always lived on the margins of countries, of cultures" (*In Other Words* 93). Multiplicity is then further echoed in the very syntactic composition of her self-reflections, where a polished and evocative Italian is expressed in terms of a predominately Anglophone 'staccato' sentence structure. In this way, engagement with Italian as a vehicle of self-articulation is exactly the kind of constant deferral encapsulated in the imperfect tense, where liminality represents not a no-(wo)man's-land but "an in-between space of potentiality" (Tally Jr. xi), whose primary function is to demolish those linguistic and social walls which silence: "to be understood and to understand myself" (*In Other Words* 59).

Conclusions: Successful stuttering

As a textual marker of this renewed authorial freedom, it is striking that the two fictional short stories contained within *In Other Words* ('The Exchange' or 'Lo scambio' and 'Half-Light' or 'Penombra') exist in a kind of spatial and geographical vacuum. "In Italian," Lahiri tells us, "I'm

moving toward abstraction. The places are undefined, the characters so far are nameless, without a particular cultural identity” (*In Other Words* 221). The result is a “fluid, immediate” (*In Other Words* 221) kind of writing which articulates a mobile, shifting, lively authorial voice, not tied to geographical or linguistic constraints, and making possible in turn the narration of the self. This is also a willful displacement; a move away from the geographical specificity of her earlier work towards an abstractness and a universality which she finds liberating.

Writing from the margins, hybridity becomes the sledgehammer with which to smash those walls, where liminality is lived as “a discomfiting albeit necessary position to occupy” (Downey, Kinane and Parker 13). This kind of decentered writing also affirms that, for the polyglot writer, “whichever one I write in, there is another one in the background” (Ricci Lempen 180), and upholds the self not as a unified entity but as “a complex collection of fragments” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 23). In the postscript to *In Other Words*, Lahiri tells us that “even today the disconnect between me and Italian remains insuperable” (91). Yet, crucially, this is not the mark of a failed linguistic or aesthetic project, but rather of a shifting subject, moving between languages, aware of the things that get broken in the process, but no longer defined by that brokenness. Indeed, Lahiri goes on to argue to the contrary that “If it were possible to bridge the distance between me and Italian, I would stop writing in that language” (*In Other Words* 95). The other has become useful to her; *it helps her to voice her subjectivity*.

In this sense, the author’s most recent work completes her project of linguistic self-realization by crossing the final bridge: the translation of her own prose from Italian into English. ‘The Boundary,’ published in *The New Yorker* in January 2018 and translated by Lahiri herself, embraces precisely the new and liberating style which her study of Italian has allowed her to adopt: the setting is indistinct, the characters unnamed, the style fluid and direct. Foreignness is still a pervasive motif; the narrative follows a migrant family who have settled in the countryside, “an unnamed place that protects” (Lahiri, ‘The Boundary’), following a brutal

racially-motivated attack. Yet what is of most significance here, as Lahiri stated in an interview following the story's publication, is that, as her sense of herself as a polyglot writer has matured, "translating myself no longer feels like a step backward, like undoing the great labor of the original or erasing it away" (Leysdon). The linguistic project has come full circle.

I began by asking how the willful displacements enacted by Jhumpa Lahiri in the process of acquiring Italian as a third language might be considered an exercise in feminist subjectivity, and a break with the critically-acclaimed publications which present stories of the unresolved and often painful fracturing of geography, culture and identity. *In Other Words* therefore sets a significant authorial precedent for Lahiri in testifying to Rosi Braidotti's assertion that shifting between languages offers a powerful "vantage point in deconstructing identity" (*Nomadic Subjects* 12). Choosing to write 'otherwise,' remaining "hybrid, slightly outside the frame" (*In Other Words* 231), Lahiri is able to recount her most essential self, whilst never losing sight of the fundamental plurality of this self as a constant space of encounter between the different constituent elements of linguistic, cultural and social pasts.

On this basis, I have argued that the burgeoning self-narrative to be found within *In Other Words* is a fundamentally *feminist* subjectivity of a specific kind, where an endlessly interactive flow of overlapping linguistic and cultural engagements questions the very notion of what is 'foreign,' and illustrates what it means to harness that otherness-foreignness as a means of pushing against fixed narratives and identities. Moreover, as with all undertakings which push against dominant narratives and societal structures, willful displacement is not without its consequences. Nevertheless, it is a significant political and social project; "do not adjust to an unjust world," Sara Ahmed (*Living a Feminist Life* 84) reminds us.

For this reason, Jhumpa Lahiri does not allow - or no longer allows - her encounters with the limits of language and expression to create a void of selfhood. Rather, her recent literary production demonstrates how intersecting linguistic displacements can come together to form a self-narrative which delights in its multiple orientations and leanings. We might call this an

exercise in *successful stuttering*; that is: a willingness to acknowledge and embrace the displaced in all languages, and an understanding that, however inadequate the expressions or imperfect the words, nothing need go without saying.

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