



Reflections on the 'Trans' in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words (In altre parole)*

Margaret-Anne Hutton

To cite this article: Margaret-Anne Hutton (02 Nov 2023): Reflections on the 'Trans' in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words (In altre parole)*, Italian Studies, DOI: [10.1080/00751634.2023.2261832](https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2023.2261832)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2023.2261832>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 02 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 41



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Reflections on the ‘Trans’ in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In Other Words* (*In altre parole*)

Margaret-Anne Hutton 

University of St Andrews

ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri’s translingual text *In Other Words* (*In altre parole*, 2015) functions in the article both as a test case to explore disciplinary boundaries and as a case study to examine the ‘trans’ prefix. Firstly, can the infrastructure of Italian Studies accommodate non-Italianist writers and researchers? What sort of conversations might a Transnational Italian Studies scholar have with a comparatist? Secondly, to what extent does Lahiri’s text merit the prefix ‘trans’, especially if we adopt Jessica Berman’s view of the ‘trans’ prefix as disruptive of the normative? An analysis of *In Other Words* focusing on four trans-prefixed terms – transnational, transgender, transvestite, and translation – reveals a tension between essentialised concepts of national belonging, gender, and language and more performative instances of the same.

KEYWORDS

Lahiri; *In Other Words*; trans-; mother tongue; Jessica Berman

Disciplinary Mobilities

In a recent themed number of *Italian Studies* focusing on the state of the discipline, Charles Burdett, Nick Havely and Loredana Polezzi invite scholars to consider established anglophone author Jhumpa Lahiri’s translingual work *In altre parole* (2015) in a transnational and translational framework.¹ To be more precise, they invoke the author’s ‘Italian novel *In altre parole* and its subsequent appearance as *In Other Words*’.² This invitation to work on a translingual text and its English translation has implications at institutional and infrastructural levels: who, with what scholarly credentials, is entitled to publish on this text? In what sort of academic outlets? With what accompanying metatextual commentary? First then, a disclosure: I am working from the English translation of Lahiri’s text, as I am not an Italian Studies scholar and am unable to read ‘the original’ with any degree of competence. Perhaps, following Lahiri’s wistful assertion that she can write in Italian but cannot be an Italian writer, I might say that with the Italian text set facing Ann Goldstein’s English translation, I can read in Italian (after a fashion) but cannot be an Italian reader.³

My interest in *In Other Words* began in the classroom when I included the text on an undergraduate Comparative Literature methodologies module, in a teaching block which I entitled

CONTACT Margaret-Anne Hutton  mh80@st-andrews.ac.uk  University of St Andrews

¹Jhumpa Lahiri, *In altre parole* (Milan: Guanda, 2015). Prior to this, Lahiri’s book-length publications were written in English: *Interpreter of Maladies* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); *The Namesake* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); *Unaccustomed Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); *The Lowland* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Random House, 2013).

²Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Charles Burdett, Nick Havely, and Loredana Polezzi, ‘The Transnational/Translational in Italian Studies’, *Italian Studies*, 75.2 (2020), 223–36 (p. 234).

³*In Other Words*: ‘I can write in Italian but I can’t become an Italian writer’ (‘Posso scrivere in italiano ma non posso diventare una scrittrice italiana’), pp. 170–71.

'Mother Tongues and Fatherlands'.⁴ Students read Lahiri's text alongside theories of the transnational and critiques of the concept of a 'mother tongue' or 'native speaker'.⁵ Discussions of the latter and of translanguaging came naturally to a class typically composed of a mixture of monolingual students, heritage language speakers and a few modern linguists. Such discussions were a natural extension of a range of language issues familiar to Comparative Literature students: the long-standing, evolving relationship between our discipline and Translation Studies; the pros and cons of reading in translation; the benefits of comparing published translations; changes in technology and marketing leading to the production of 'born translated' texts⁶ – to name just some topics students are likely to have encountered in the course of their degree programme. The need to think beyond the nation – especially the European nation – was also familiar, whether via students' exposure to postcolonial theories, theories of reception and the circulation of texts, or the shifting formulations of World Literature. For the students, 'the transnational' was readily subsumed into the magpie discipline which is Comparative Literature.

My own interest extended further, to disciplinary matters: Italian Studies, it seemed, was engaging in the sort of self-reflexive disciplinary soul-searching for which Comparative Literature is renowned.⁷ Burdett's and Polezzi's discussion of the need for 'intellectual cohesiveness' when 'that which constitutes the object of study and the lens through which we see it do not stay still';⁸ Burdett advocating a shift from a 'Modern Languages' paradigm to 'Languages, Cultures and Societies'; Emma Bond pointing to 'the specifically interdisciplinary possibilities' for Transnational Italian Studies⁹ have a familiar ring for comparatists. Similar issues can be traced through the decennial 'State of the Discipline' reports published by the American Comparative Literature Society. As early as the first report of 1965 comparatists were being invited to reflect on the relationship between comparative literature and other disciplines such as 'psychology, sociology, and anthropology'.¹⁰ By the time of the latest report to date, Ursula Heise was enumerating the many links between Comparative Literature and 'x studies' and 'y humanities' and the role it has to play in 'emergent interdisciplinary humanities'.¹¹

Comparative Literature is a mobile discipline with loosely patrolled borders. Comparatists travel to and from other disciplines with ease, albeit perhaps with periodic moments of anxious self-reflection. To what extent, I wondered, had a transnational approach to Italian Studies broken down

⁴Other blocks on Comparative Literature methodologies modules typically included: Reception and Circulation of Texts; Translation Matters; Intermedial and Intercultural Adaptation; Animal Studies; Postcolonial Studies; Petrocultures; Medical Humanities; Digital Humanities.

⁵Texts included: Kai Wiegandt, *The Transnational in Literary Studies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020); Paul Jay, *Transnational Literature* (London: Routledge, 2021); Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009); Matthew Hart, *Extraterritorial: A Political Geography of Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Neriko M. Doerr, *The Native Speaker Concept* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009).

⁶See Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁷For an analysis of Comparative Literature's self-interrogation, 'indiscipline' and 'meta-humanities position', see David Ferris, 'Indiscipline', in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalisation*, ed. by Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2006), pp. 78–99 (p. 79). As Charles Bernheimer put it a decade earlier: 'Comparative Literature is anxio-genic', 'Introduction. The Anxieties of Comparison', in his *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 1–17 (p. 1).

⁸Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi, 'Introduction', in *Transnational Italian Studies*, ed. by Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 1–22 (pp. 2, 10).

⁹Charles Burdett, 'Embedding Transnationalism in Modern Languages Pedagogy: A UK Perspective', *Forum Italicum*, 57.2 (2023), 315–23 (p. 317); Emma Bond, "'Transnational Italian Cultures': Editing as Method', *Forum Italicum*, 57.2 (2023), 299–305 (p. 304).

¹⁰Harry Levin, 'The Levin Report, 1965', in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, pp. 21–27 (p. 22). This volume includes the 1975 Greene Report.

¹¹Ursula Heise, *Futures of Comparative Literature: ACLA State of the Discipline Report* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 5, 7. This is a modified print version of the online submission dated 9 March 2014, available at <<https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/search-results?combine=heise>> [accessed 31 August 2023]. See also Haun Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalisation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). Calls for contributions to the 2024 online report can be found at Wail S. Hassan and Shu-mei Shih, 'CFP – State of the Discipline Report', <<https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org>> [accessed 31 August 2023].

‘the stubborn defence of disciplinary borders’ – to cite an Italianist – when it came to publication infrastructure?¹² My first objective is (was) a performative one: to publish this article in an Italian Studies journal rather than in other possible outlets whose reviewers would not flinch at my lack of Italian (Comparative Literature, Transnational Studies, etc). It follows that my analysis of Lahiri’s *In Other Words* serves here as a test case. My second objective lies beyond the bounds of the article and is simply to promote more disciplinary discussion with comparatists. Finally, Lahiri’s text is a case study as well as a test case: my third objective is to determine whether, and how, this work, cited in several contexts as transnational (see below), merits the prefix.

Trans as Prefix

The prefix ‘trans’ has gained considerably in critical, politicised force in recent years. According to Jessica Berman, who is citing Susan Stryker’s call for the ‘disruptive potential’ of the prefix to extend beyond gender to other ‘critical crossings of categorical territories’:¹³

When we use the prefix ‘trans’ to mean not just ‘across, through, over [...] or on the other side of’ but also ‘beyond, surpassing, transcending,’ it represents a challenge to the normative dimension of the original entity or space, a crossing over that looks back critically from its space beyond.¹⁴

This stance is increasingly widespread. Berman’s influence, for instance, can be seen in Kai Wiegandt’s *The Transnational in Literary Studies*, which includes the statement that ‘Berman is right to argue that the prefix “trans-” in “transnational” must be understood in a strong sense’ (by which he means with a critical force which questions the concept of the nation).¹⁵ With Burdett et al. and Berman in mind, and drawing also on Paul Jay’s introductory *Transnational Literature: The Basics*, my first reflection on the trans in *In Other Words* will consider just some of the issues at stake in deciding whether the text qualifies as transnational.

Berman’s piece intertwines gender and nation, urging us ‘to recognize that any discussion of world or transnational literature must also attend to the assumptions of embodiment and gender identity that are attached to the concept of the nation’.¹⁶ Berman’s choice of primary texts – which include Woolf’s *Orlando*, Russ’ *The Female Man* and Morris’ *Last Letters from Hav* – clearly facilitates the link between nation and gender.¹⁷ Lahiri’s *In Other Words*, by contrast, has no transgender or explicitly gendered agenda. My discussion will nonetheless introduce two more trans-prefixed words, transgender and transvestite (crossdressing):¹⁸ the former proves useful in examining the implicitly gendered nature of Lahiri’s representation of the relationship between language and nation whilst the latter allows me to consider the significance of wearing ‘the wrong clothes’ in *In Other Words*. The edition of the text I am working with has been published with a facing translation produced by a third party (Ann Goldstein) who is translating *into* Lahiri’s dominant language (English).¹⁹ Translations also appear as both textual and paratextual concerns. For these reasons, translation is added to my list of trans-prefixed terms subject to reflection.

As Lahiri’s first book-length work written in Italian, *In Other Words* demands to be read with close attention to style. This is a highly – some might say excessively – figurative work which bears out Claire Kampf’s observation that metaphors are commonly used by language learners when they

¹²Claudio Fogu, ‘The Transnational Italian Studies Major at UCSB: A Paradigm Shift’, *Forum Italicum*, 57.2 (2023), 342–46 (p. 343).

¹³Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, ‘Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?’, ‘Trans-’ special issue, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 36.3/4 (2008), 11–22 (p. 12).

¹⁴Jessica Berman, ‘Is the Trans in Transnational the Trans in Transgender?’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 24.2 (2017), 217–44 (p. 221).

¹⁵Wiegandt, p. 7, n. 20. Wiegandt goes on to cite Jessica Berman, ‘A Transnational Critical Optic, Now’, *College Literature*, 44.4 (2017), 475–82.

¹⁶Berman, ‘Is the Trans’, p. 218.

¹⁷Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928; repr. New York: Harcourt, 2006); Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); Jan Morris, *Last Letters from Hav* (New York: Random House, 1985).

¹⁸The term ‘transvestite’ has now largely been superseded by ‘cross-dressing’ due to the medicalisation of the earlier term.

¹⁹Lahiri uses the terms ‘dominant language’ (‘lingua dominante’) (pp. 4–5), ‘principal language’ (‘lingua principale’) (pp. 34–35), and ‘stronger language’ (p. xiv: Author’s Note, no translation) to refer to her English.

seek to articulate personal experience.²⁰ Metaphor, too, is a trans word. It finds its roots in the Greek ἡ μεταφορά, meaning a carrying across or change of place, mind, condition, as well as simply ‘metaphor’ (making metaphor a metaphor). The metaphors in *In Other Words* are instances of linguistic carrying across (between vehicle and tenor, or source and target domain) used to convey the author’s experiences. For this reason, the reflections that follow will focus on Lahiri’s use of figurative language.

A word about process: to acknowledge my working reality, and contrary to normal practice in an Italian Studies journal, I will be citing the English text first, with the Italian in a secondary position, though in fact the notion of ‘secondary’ or ‘subsequent’ may need to be revisited. I will not be quoting from critical material written in Italian: although I could enter such texts into Google Translate or DeepL Translate, or perhaps ask ChatGPT for a summary, this would, I suggest, run counter to the spirit of disciplinary mobility I am invoking here.

Transnational

Lahiri’s work is certainly a draw for those seeking to apply the transnational label, but the term is far from stable, and the context of its deployment varies. For Burdett, Havelly, and Polezzi, writing in *Italian Studies*, expanding the concept of Italian culture is key: the latter should be regarded as extending beyond ‘the space of the nation’ and ‘the Italian language’. Their agenda is unapologetically disciplinary: it is Italian Studies itself which should be conceived as ‘a transnational and translational space’.²¹ Researchers and teachers are thus encouraged to consider Lahiri’s text within the figurative territory of Italian Studies:

To complicate the map even further, we may look at the impact of translingual writers who adopt Italian as their language of choice, from recent migrant writing to the case of Jhumpa Lahiri, her 2015 Italian novel *In altre parole* and its subsequent appearance as *In Other Words* (2016), a volume which includes both the original text and its English translation’.²²

Spatial metaphors of this kind (‘space’, ‘map’) can also be found in the subtitle of the article’s conclusion – ‘Directions of Travel’ – and, notably, in the repetition of the phrase ‘transnational turn’, which is used five times, both with and without scare quotes.²³ Judith Surkis notes that the metaphor of the turn ‘implies a change of course or direction, a turning away from at the same time as a turning towards’.²⁴ Both the figurative language and, especially, the repetition, have a performative as well as a descriptive function: the expansion of the boundaries of Italian Studies territory is both naturalised and validated by mobilisation of the metaphor of the turn. As Surkis suggests, turns ‘might be better understood not as historically inevitable disciplinary trajectories, but as specifically located, imaginatively cast, at once multiple, overlapping, and dynamic constellations’ permitting ‘untimely’ thinking.²⁵ With this in mind, it is important to remember that Lahiri’s *In Other Words* can be categorised as something *other* than a transnational work; it may be desirable – to switch metaphors – to opt for a less recent, less fashionable label.

²⁰Claire Kampf, *The Multilingual Subject: What Foreign Language Learners say about their Experience and why it Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 99.

²¹Burdett et al., ‘The Transnational/Translational in Italian Studies’, p. 231. Similar disciplinary discussion can also be found in Burdett and Polezzi, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1–15.

²²Burdett et al., ‘The Transnational/Translational in Italian Studies’, p. 234.

²³From a disciplinary tourist’s perspective terminological hesitations and variations seem symptomatic of the uncertain status of the transnational with respect to the discipline of Italian Studies: Claudio Fogu, for instance, claims that the transnational was ‘no mere intellectual “turn” but that it ‘was, or better, it had to be made into a paradigm shift for the humanities as a whole.’ Fogu, p. 342.

²⁴Judith Surkis, ‘When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy’, *American Historical Review*, 117.3 (2012), 700–22 (p. 704). For Mary Snell-Hornby the ‘turn’ metaphor in general is an example of English language’s ‘definition deficit’ when it comes to academic clarity. See ‘What’s in a Turn? On Fits, Starts and Writings in Recent Translation Studies’, *Translation Studies*, 2.1 (2009), 41–51 (p. 46).

²⁵Surkis, p. 722.

As the cover blurb of Lahiri's text summarises, this is not a novel (as Burdett et al. describe it) but 'an autobiographical work' which 'investigates the process of learning to express oneself in another language'. It might thus be analysed as an instance of 'language learner narrative' as theorised by Helen O'Sullivan in relation to twenty-first-century texts, or, going back further in categorising terms, a 'language memoir', following Alice Kaplan, who 'found' (and the language of discovery hints at the colonising impulse of all acts of academic categorisation) 'an entire genre of twentieth-century autobiographical writing which is in essence about language learning'.²⁶ O'Sullivan differentiates her objects of study from Kaplan's by noting that where the latter looks to works detailing 'the relationship to a language and its role in memory and identity formation', the narratives she identifies, which may be segments of text or entire texts, 'are more concerned with language as an object in its own right'; where the language memoir captures the 'experience' of language learning, language learner narratives centre on 'process'.²⁷ *In Other Words* dissolves this distinction. Lahiri dwells at great length on her identity, which she expresses most often in terms of a fracture born of her experiential relationship with Bengali and English which is at least partly healed by her learning of Italian. At the same time, *In Other Words* declines a range of language learning processes, from using and reading with a dictionary (pp. 7–11, 41–45), to acquiring vocabulary (pp. 47–51), to mastering (or not) the vagaries of the imperfect tense (pp. 103–13).

This is not, however, simply a case of a language memoir interspersed with segments of language learner narrative. Lahiri's prose is densely figurative, drawing most notably on the tropes of both familial and romantic love. Using a dictionary thus shifts from being an experience of parental supervision to one of fraternal companionship (p. 11); reading with a dictionary is nothing less than being in love, arousing longing and even ecstasy (p. 45); acquiring and noting down new vocabulary is likened to carefully recording the weight of the author's growing babies (p. 51). Even passages which focus in detail on how and when to use the imperfect are expressed in experiential terms: transferring the epithet from tense to self, Lahiri states 'I feel more imperfect than ever' ('mi sento imperfetta più che mai'); and, 'The more I feel imperfect, the more I feel alive' ('Più mi sento imperfetta, più mi sento viva') (pp. 112–13).²⁸

Thinking about *In Other Words* in relation to Kaplan's and O'Sullivan's descriptors could usefully prompt a reconsideration of both the language memoir and language learner narrative genres, though that is not my concern here: the point was rather to break from the potential foreclosing of the 'turn' metaphor which could risk setting up the transnational as a superseding paradigm, a definitive turn away from previous scholarship. One approach need not preclude the other, though, as Surkis' image of overlapping and dynamic constellations makes clear.²⁹ Lahiri's text can undoubtedly be read as a new form of – let us call it a language learning memoir but is it, in fact, also transnational? Like Burdett et al., Paul Jay, in his introduction to transnational literature, teasingly ponders the status of *In Other Words*: 'How are we to categorize her [Lahiri's] writing in Italian translated into English?' (a question he does not answer).³⁰ Jay pinpoints a crucial tension at the core of the label 'transnational', suggesting that it denotes both what he calls a 'field of study' and 'a type of literature'. As a field of study which focuses on 'how forces of movement operate', any text can be said to have transnational potential: one need only consider, say, the flows of reception and

²⁶Alice Yaeger Kaplan, 'On Language Memoir', in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. by Angelika Bammer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 59; Helen O'Sullivan, 'Learning Words: Language Learner Narrative in the Twenty-First Century', in *Readings in Twenty-First-Century European Literatures*, ed. by Michael Gratzke, Margaret-Anne Hutton, and Claire Whitehead (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 367–84.

²⁷O'Sullivan, pp. 370, 382.

²⁸Not a fan of the work, Tim Parks is especially riled by 'The Imperfect' chapter, which prompts an exasperated 'What a muddle this is.' Parks continues in parodic mode: 'Floundering with her tenses, Lahiri grabs for the life vest of analogy', 'L'Avventura', *New York Review of Books*, 24 March 2016, <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/03/24/jhumpa-lahiri-lavventura/>> [accessed 31 August 2023].

²⁹Indeed Claudio Fogu, Stephanie Malia Hom, and Laura E. Ruberto note that the mobility of culture and persons leads to an implosion of 'a stable idea of genre': 'Introduction', *California Italian Studies*, special issue 'Italia senza frontiere / Borderless Italy', 9.1 (2019), 1–12 (p. 8).

³⁰Jay, p. 55.

circulation, trace shifting marketing strategies in different countries, or the movement facilitated by translation, and indeed one section of Burdett et al.'s 'The Transnational/Translational in Italian Studies' consists of a discussion of the reception of Dante. It is hard to see how such analyses differ from Comparative Literature work on the reception and circulation of texts, or indeed studies of World Literature: it is tempting to ask what the label 'transnational' adds in this case. Jay, aware of the need to better narrow and define the field, in fact opts for what he sees as the more viable definition of transnational literature; that is literature defined not by methodological approach – what both Berman and the editors of the *Transnational Modern Languages* handbook call an 'optic', which can potentially be directed towards any text, or indeed, 'question or experience relating to languages and cultures' – but by objects of study.³¹ Transnational literature is thus literature which engages a broad range of issues and subjects (migration, displacement, exile, the fluidity of borders both literal and figural, cultural hybridity, identity and citizenship, the status of refugees, etc.), which have become pressing in our own time.³²

Judging by this (somewhat oddly parenthesised) list, *In Other Words* seems at first glance to fit the bill as a transnational text: not only does it explore the author's troubled identity; it also 'engages [...] the subject' of both migration and exile. In their call to expand Italian Studies, Burdett et al. clearly associate Lahiri's text with migrant writing – both, they suggest, potentially fall under the disciplinary remit of Italian Studies – whilst simultaneously registering a distinction ('from recent migrant writing to the case of Jhumpa Lahiri'). Rebecca Walker, for her part, observes without pursuing the fact that Lahiri is not a migrant in any literal sense of the term.³³ Notably, in each case it is the author who is referenced and not the text, a conflation which could be misleading: after all, authors who are migrants are not obliged to write about migration. In fact, Lahiri is not a migrant, nor does she write of migration or exile in *In Other Words* in the manner suggested by Jay's parenthesised list. The text tracks the author's *literal* movement but only *figurative* migration from the US to Italy, a relocation which is freely chosen, interrupted then resumed (the author returns briefly to the US) and temporary (the author's stay in Rome lasts two years).

The gap between figurative and literal migration is starkly, if unintentionally, emphasised from the outset of *In Other Words*, which opens with a chapter entitled 'The Crossing' ('La traversata'). This is not, however, the perilous undertaking of those crossing the Mediterranean (very much part of the 'issues which have become pressing [...] in our own time', to recall Jay's words),³⁴ but a small lake which transmutes into the first metaphor Lahiri uses to describe her language learning experience. Drawing a distinction between types of mobility is, I discovered, central to much recent work in Italian Studies, whether expressed, for instance, as a distinction between an elite class of academics and those designated 'undesirable', or the difference between tourists and migrants, 'those who move by choice and those who are moved by force'.³⁵ Were readers of *In Other Words* to have actual (literal) migrants in mind, the dissonance of Lahiri's language might shock: of learning a new language we are told that 'you can't float without the possibility of drowning' ('Ma non basta galleggiare senza la possibilità di annegare'), and 'To know a new language, to immerse yourself,

³¹A Transnational Critical Optic: 'I want to claim that we might best deploy the transnational as a critical optic or practice that engages with the discursive categories of nationality while recognizing activities that critique and transcend them. Through this optic the term "transnational" comes to function through the power of its prefix, indicating a position, action, or attitude toward the nation and its cultural apparatuses, rather than as a way of describing a given set of texts or a canon of writers', p. 476. Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan: 'the transnational is an optic owning the capacity to sharpen our insight into any question or experience relating to languages and cultures', 'An Introduction,' in *Transnational Modern Languages. A Handbook*, ed. by Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), pp. 1–8 (p. 5).

³²Jay, p. 52.

³³Rebecca Walker, 'A Language of Her Own: Wilful Displacement and Nomadic Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 15.1 (2021), 1–18 (p. 14).

³⁴Jay, p. 52.

³⁵Fogu et al., 'Introduction', p. 1; Stephanie Malia Hom, *Italian Mobilities, Empire's Mobius Strip* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 5. Teresa Fiore points to graduate students' comparing of Lahiri's privileged position with that of immigrant writers in Italy: 'Introducing Transnational Italian Studies to a graduate program', *Forum Italicum*, 57.2 (2023), 347–57 (p. 352).

you have to leave the shore. Without a life vest' ('Per conoscere una nuova lingua, per immergersi, si deve lasciare la sponda. Senza salvagente') (pp. 4–5).³⁶

Such a de-literalising process is typical of the text: the figurative discourse in *In Other Words* is so dense, and so extensive, that literal nations, movements, even human agents, frequently all but vanish. Comparing herself to another translingual writer, for instance, Lahiri states that 'Ágota Kristóf was forced to abandon Hungarian. She wrote in French because she wanted to be read' (Ágota Kristóf è stata costretta ad abbandonare l'ungherese. Scrisse in francese perché voleva essere letta') (pp. 226–27), a strange juxtaposition of statements which erases Kristóf's forced departure from (abandonment of) Hungary, which the author fled for Switzerland in 1956 at the outset of the Hungarian Revolution. In another figurative passage drawn from a chapter entitled 'Exile', it is language, not people, which becomes the protagonist of migration, and it is separation from language, not from geographical location, which is described as exile:

My relationship with Italian takes place in exile, in a state of separation. Every language belongs to a specific place. It can migrate, it can spread. But usually it's tied to a geographical territory, a country. Italian belongs mainly to Italy, and I live on another continent, where one does not really encounter it. (p. 19)

La mia relazione con l'italiano si svolge in esilio, in uno stato di separazione. Ogni lingua appartiene a un luogo specifico. Può migrare, può diffondersi. Ma di solito è legata a un territorio geografico, un Paese [sic]. L'italiano appartiene soprattutto all'Italia, mentre io vivo in un altro continente, dove non lo si può incontrare facilmente. (p. 18)

Immersing herself in Italian similarly becomes a figurative displacement for Lahiri, an oxymoronic exile of choice: 'I enter another land, unexplored, murky. A kind of voluntary exile. Although I'm still in America, I already feel elsewhere' ('Entro in un altro territorio, inesplorato, lattiginoso. Una specie di esilio volontario. Sebbene mi trovi ancora in America, mi sento già altrove') (pp. 36–37). These exilic and migratory experiences are not those mooted by Jay, who insists on historically situated ('in our own time'), geo-political phenomena, texts engaged, as he puts it elsewhere, 'with transnational experience shaped by the combined forces of decolonization, postmodernity, technology, and contemporary globalization'.³⁷

If Lahiri's highly figurative text clashes with Jay's very concrete, very time-bound transnational criteria, it is also, in a sense, at odds with the call of Burdett et al. to consider 'different forms of Italianness', that is forms which do not originate within the territory of Italy. For Lahiri, being an Italian writer means being or at least passing as a 'native speaker' of Italian (more of which below). And this seems to have further implications. The names of many Italian writers, or writers now conceived of as such, appear in her text: not only Ovid (a precursor) and Dante (both of whose literal, permanent exile is likened to Lahiri's own figurative version), but also Umberto Saba, Massimo Carlotto, Natalia Ginzburg, Elio Vittorini, Anna Maria Ortese, Cesare Pavese, Antonio Tabucchi, and Giovanni Verga. Significantly, these are all writers born in Italy, a status Lahiri evidently cannot replicate. She can, however, confer such a – decidedly un-transnational – concept of Italianness figuratively and imaginatively onto authorial substitutes. Drawing again on the familial metaphor, she thus states of *In altre parole*: 'One can say that it's an indigenous book, born and raised here in Italy, even if the author was not' ('Si potrebbe dire che sia un libro autoctono, nato e cresciuto qui, anche se l'autrice non lo è') (pp. 228–29). She can also create a new, fictional self: the first-person narrator in her next full-length Italian-language text, *Dove Mi Trovo* (*Whereabouts*) is Italian and speaks 'our language'.³⁸

³⁶Lahiri's failure to mention the destructive elements of globalisation in *In Other Words*, including migrants crossing into Italy, is noted by Sohomjit Ray, 'Translation, Poetics of Instability, and the Postmonolingual Condition in Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 68.2 (2022), 544–65 (p. 557).

³⁷Jay, p. 71.

³⁸Jhumpa Lahiri, *Whereabouts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). First published as *Dove Mi Trovo* (Milan: Ugo Guanda Editore, 2018): 'Then she starts to teach one of her companions how to say goodbye in our language [...] *ar-ri-ve-der-ci'* (p. 156).

Transgender and Transvestite

There are no literal transgender or cross-dressing characters in *In Other Words*. My deployment of these terms is carried out in the spirit of Berman's exhortation that any analysis of the potentially transnational should pay heed to gender issues, and her own collapsing of transgender and transnational specificity by dropping all but the prefix, a "'trans' text' thereby becoming, in her words, one which 'challenges the normative dimensions of regimes of nationality and disrupts the systems of embodied identity that undergird them'.³⁹ Considering the terms transgender and transvestite in anything but literal terms will not be to everyone's liking, but a shift, or drift, from literal to figurative is common in academic discourse: Berman herself, for instance, uses the expression 'narrative cross-dressing', whilst 'passing', already a metaphor, has become unmoored from its association with race and gender to include such areas as pedagogy and, as will be seen below, second language acquisition.⁴⁰ The following reflection on *In Other Words* will consider Lahiri's use of the metaphor 'mother tongue' and the significance of figurative vestimentary unease in the text, again with the question 'is this a "trans" text?' in mind.

Paying attention to Lahiri's network of familial, and especially maternal metaphors (e.g., 'an indigenous book, born and raised here in Italy') reveals the gendered substructure of her concept of language and national belonging. In her analysis of the monolingual paradigm, Yasemin Yildiz describes one such 'gendered and affectively charged' metaphor – that of the 'mother tongue' – as part of a 'linguistic family romance', a fantasy in which the figure of the mother represents 'a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation'.⁴¹ *In Other Words* is underpinned by just such a conceptual framework, one that is far removed from transnational or indeed 'trans' thinking in Berman's sense. For Lahiri, the link to language is organic: 'This language [Italian] is not in my blood, in my bones' ('Nel sangue, dentro le ossa, questa lingua non c'è') (pp. 42–43); 'a language exists in the bones, in the marrow' ('una lingua esiste nelle ossa, nel midollo') (pp. 92–93). Pondering her linguistic exile, the author segues from her literal mother ('I think of my mother, who writes poems in Bengali, in America', (Penso a mia madre, che scrive poesie in bengalese, in America') to the maternal metaphor: 'My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America' ('La mia lingua madre, il bengalese, in America è straniera') (pp. 18–19). Her use of the metaphor, however, signals a tension in the text revealed in occasional equivocation.

Noting – or rather, admitting, for there is affect involved – that she can neither read nor write Bengali and speaks it with an accent, Lahiri states: 'I consider my mother tongue, *paradoxically*, a foreign language too' ('ritengo che la mia lingua madre sia anche, *paradossalmente*, una lingua straniera') (pp. 20–21, my emphases).⁴² A similar pattern can be seen in her reference to Calcutta as 'the city of my *so-called* mother tongue' ('Calcutta, nella città della mia *cosiddetta* lingua madre') (pp. 142–43, my emphases). Finally, as English becomes the dominant language during Lahiri's school days, the metaphor is extended and the figurative mother destroyed: 'From then on my mother tongue was no longer capable, by itself, of rearing me. In a certain sense it died' ('Da allora la mia lingua madre non è stata più capace, da sola, di crescermi. In un certo senso è morta') (pp. 146–47). Lahiri's equivocation, is, I suggest, symptomatic of an unease, as if her own use of the 'mother tongue' metaphor were perceived to be out of sync with her lived experience. Nonetheless she does

³⁹Berman, 'Is the Trans', p. 218.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 233. Sinead Moynihan explores 'the implications of viewing the acts of writing and passing as analogous' in her *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 10. See also Karen Kopelson, 'Tripping Over Our Tropes: Of "Passing" and Postmodern Subjectivity – What's in a Metaphor?', *JAC*, 25.3 (2005), 435–67, in which she addresses Pamela Caughie's *Passing and Pedagogy* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

⁴¹Yildiz, pp. 6, 9.

⁴²A reviewer of this article kindly drew my attention to Tiziana de Rogatis, *Homing / Ritrovarsi. Traumi e translinguismi delle migrazioni in Morante, Hoffman, Kristof, Scego e Lahiri* (Siena: L'Edizioni Università per Stranieri di Siena, 2023) which explores potentially traumatic relationships with one's so-called mother tongue.

not take the next step and question the essentialised underpinnings of the gendered trope and its restrictive implications for notions of national belonging. If she did, she would realise that as Yildiz points out, it is not unusual for one's so-called 'mother tongue' to be 'a site of alienation and disjuncture',⁴³ whilst other, acquired, languages may lead to highly positive identifications, something Lahiri *experiences* with Italian, and indeed expresses in the figurative language of romantic love, but cannot, or at least does not, conceptualise further.

This entrapment in the monolingual paradigm signalled by Lahiri's use of the figure of the 'mother tongue' also emerges in her use of crossdressing imagery which is linked, significantly, to the equally un-transnational notion of the 'native speaker'. (A brief comment here: the two terms are, I discover upon reading the Italian facing text, much closer in Italian – 'lingua madre' and 'madrelingua' – than in the English translation, rendered by Ann Goldstein as 'mother tongue' and 'native speaker'.) Explaining that she has her Italian writing checked and that she modifies her texts accordingly, Lahiri justifies the process on the grounds that 'one can't contradict a native speaker' ('non si può contraddire un madrelingua') (pp. 178–79), continuing on the subject of her linguistic limitations with two comparisons likening language to costume.⁴⁴ Her eccentric Italian vocabulary and 'graceless' ('sgraziato') writing style are compared to her donning of ill-assorted items of clothing: 'I feel as if I were dressed in an outlandish manner, wearing a long, elegant skirt of another era, a T-shirt, a straw hat, and slippers' ('Mi sento vestita in modo strambo, come se portassi una lunga gonna elegante di un'altra epoca, una maglietta sportiva, un cappello di paglia e un paio di ciabatte') (pp. 178–79). When this image is extended it expresses more than mere incongruity: being 'in Italian' ('in italiano'), Lahiri explains, means being 'in disguise' ('camuffata'), this note of dissimulation developing further into outright transgression: 'In fact, I feel like a child who *sneaks into* her mother's closet to try on the high-heeled shoes, an evening dress, some jewellery, a fur coat' ('mi sento una bambina che si *intrufola* nell'armadio della madre per mettersi le scarpe coi tacchi, un vestito da sera, gioielli preziosi, una pelliccia') (pp. 180–81, my emphases).⁴⁵ Significantly, given these images, it is also in a clothes shop that Lahiri's husband passes as Italian and (thus) as a native speaker ("But your husband must be Italian. He speaks perfectly, without any accent" ("Ma tuo marito deve essere italiano. Lui parla perfettamente, senza nessun accento")) (pp. 136–37), an experience which Lahiri observes – drawing on a spatial metaphor linking language to territory – will always be denied her because of her physical appearance: 'here is the border I will never manage to cross' ('Ecco il confine che non riuscirò mai a varcare') (pp. 136–37).⁴⁶

Lahiri's figurative references to clothing are striking in their echoes of gender issues: not just the crossdressing commonplace of the fur coat and heels, or the closet with all its negative connotations, but the very use of the costume metaphor. Writing before the emergence of trans issues in academic discourse, Sandra Gilbert notes how the use of figurative clothing in female modernist writers – what she calls the representation of "selves" as costumes and costumes as "selves" – works to break down gender binaries.⁴⁷ Sociolinguists, it is important to note, have themselves turned to gender theory to break from essentialising theories of language. As Alastair Pennycook puts it, drawing on the work of Judith Butler: 'Languages are no more pre-given entities that pre-exist our linguistic performances than are gendered or ethnic identities. Rather they are the sedimented products of

⁴³Yildiz, p. 204.

⁴⁴For an extended comparison of clothing and books – specifically book covers – see Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Clothing of Books* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016).

⁴⁵Vestimentary discomfort also troubles the first-person narrator of *Whereabouts*, who struggles to choose the right shoes for the climate (p. 14), catches her scarf in her necklace (p. 20), and finds that her sweater chafes in the heat (p. 38). Clothing is also linked to desire unfulfilled as she recalls how the 'frilly white dress' she coveted in childhood was denied her by her mother (p. 74).

⁴⁶Ingrid Piller comments on a shift of focus in sociolinguistic studies from the production of language to perception, noting 'visual perception may override speech production in the evaluation of nativeness in speech', 'Passing for a Native Speaker: Identity and Success in Second Language Learning', *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6.2 (2002), 179–206 (pp. 183–84).

⁴⁷Sandra Gilbert, 'Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, 7.2 (1980), 391–417 (p. 394).

repeated acts of identity'.⁴⁸ Ingrid Piller notes that the category of native speaker can readily be undone:

As with gender and ethnic passing, passing for a native speaker questions and destabilises the categories of native and non-native speakers themselves. 'Native speaker' is no longer an identity category, and rather than being something that someone is, it becomes something that someone does.⁴⁹

Just as Lahiri's occasional hesitation in her use of the term 'mother tongue' reveals, I suggest, a tension between expression and experience, so here the crossdressing metaphor captures something potentially liberating and self-defining in Lahiri's experience with the Italian language but remains couched in negative terms: dressing up is associated with inadequacy, inauthenticity, and transgression. Accepting that there are no figurative wrong clothes is not possible unless the ideological premises of the concept of the native speaker are undermined.⁵⁰ Rather than operate within an epistemology based on a native speaker/non-native speaker binary in which she figures as a deficient – poorly- or eccentrically-attired – native speaker, Lahiri might more positively be viewed as what sociolinguists call a 'multicompetent language user',⁵¹ one who, if I may labour the metaphor, takes pleasure in her wardrobe selection and realises that there is no regulatory (linguistic) uniform to be worn.

Translation

Given Lahiri's reliance on metaphor, it is worth noting that the prefix 'meta' in the Greek noun ἡ μεταφορά and verb μεταφορεῖν, as well as the Latin 'trans' in *transfere* and *translatio*, suggest both movement across and change, but does *In Other Words* show the trans in 'translation' to have transformative force, that critical potential posited by Berman – 'a challenge to the normative dimension of the original entity or space, a crossing over that looks back critically from its space beyond'? More specifically, does Lahiri's text challenge the hierarchical relationship between an original, primary text and secondary, subsequent translation?

The main focus on translation comes in the chapter entitled 'The Hairy Adolescent' ('L'adolescente peloso') in which Lahiri discusses a text she wrote in Italian for a literary festival then translated into English for the accompanying dual-language catalogue. This chapter is particularly dense with extended metaphor and hyperbole – returning to English to translate herself is 'almost a suicide' ('quasi un suicidio') (pp. 120–21); Italian and English are engaged in a 'bloody struggle' ('lotta cruenta') (pp. 116–17) – which if nothing else suggest powerful affect at work. Lahiri compares her translating into English as an act of infidelity (committed, one assumes, with the now unappealing figurative former boyfriend – English), a variant on the 'traduttore, traditore' trope which, as Polezzi notes, relies on the notion that translating and translations are 'manipulations or falsifications of the originals they replace'.⁵² Lahiri's version, though, defamiliarizes the common trope: given that she is both author and translator, who, or what, precisely is the betrayer and who or what is betrayed? This conundrum is not explored but is picked up several years later in Lahiri's *Translating Myself and Others* where she states: 'there are no rules to obey when the only authority is oneself. What is the meaning of obedience, of faithfulness, when the other does not exist?'⁵³ The notion of faithfulness, is, however, only questioned in relation to self-translation, with the authoritative native speaker and the primacy of the author still lurking in the background.

⁴⁸Alastair Pennycook, 'Performativity and Language Studies', *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 1.1 (2004), 1–19 (p. 15).

⁴⁹Piller, p. 201.

⁵⁰Doerr, p. 38. Doerr identifies the ideological premises of the 'native speaker' concept as: 'its link to nation states, an assumption of a homogeneous linguistic group, and an assumption of a "native speaker's" complete competence in his/her "native language"', p. 17.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 38. The term is taken from Vivian Cook, 'Going Beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching', *TESOL Quarterly*, 33.2 (1999), 185–209 (p. 185).

⁵²Loredana Polezzi, 'Translation', in *Transnational Modern Languages*, pp. 305–12 (p. 305).

⁵³Jhumpa Lahiri, *Translating Myself and Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 57.

Questioning the original/version hierarchy and granting creative rights to the translator is again related to self-translation in Lahiri's later text: 'When it comes to self-translation the hierarchy of original and derivation dissolves, to self-translate is to create two originals, twins, far from identical'.⁵⁴ In the earlier *In Other Words*, though, Lahiri envisages not twins but problematic siblings of very different ages in the form of a vulnerable new-born (Italian) and a hairy adolescent (English), with Lahiri as self-styled protective mother. This shift from the author-translator as unfaithful/betrayed lover to caring mother seems to startle even Lahiri, as she rather redundantly points out that she has just introduced a new metaphor, providing the following justification: 'One type of love follows the other; from a passionate coupling, ideally, a new generation is born' ('Un tipo d'amore segue l'altro e da un accoppiamento amorevole idealmente nasce una nuova generazione') (pp. 118–19). It is hard to know what to make of this. The metaphor is both hypertrophic and unclear, blurring the boundary between the literal and the figurative. Whatever else can be said of it, it marks a return to the language of biology and kinship which is inimical to a critical take on translation, language, or nation. When Lahiri moves on from these erotic and maternal metaphors, however, a different view of translation appears, briefly, and almost as an afterthought. Using a single-word metaphor, she admits (her term) that 'traveling between the two versions' ('viaggiare tra le due versioni') (pp. 120–21) improved the Italian text. Here the notion of movement between is supplemented with that of change. Modifications made to the Italian text point to a dynamic synergy between 'original' and 'translation', a to-and-fro process which effectively undoes any hierarchy as well as a clear notion of temporal primacy (which text is 'subsequent' or 'secondary?').

Where 'The Hairy Adolescent' focuses on an earlier instance of self-translation, the 'Author's Note' in the dual-language Bloomsbury edition explains why Lahiri chose *not* to translate *In Other Words* herself. This intervention is paratextual, and as such can be contrasted to the metatextual 'Afterword', which also reflects on the book we are reading but which was written in Italian and is translated. Lahiri's paratextual intervention is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it sets the textual authorial 'I' at a distance, displacing the Lahiri-then who narrates *In Other Words*; inflecting her authority. Secondly, a different attitude towards self-translation is provided. The figurative lovers and mothers are gone, but the 'traveling between the two versions' metaphor returns. This time, though, Lahiri expresses her reluctance to 'move back and forth between the two [languages]', precisely to avoid making improvements to her Italian. On the one hand, this seems to be a more critical position: Lahiri does not wish to pass as a native speaker of Italian and accepts her haphazard attire (to return to earlier tropes). On the other hand, her view of the translator returns to the notion of fidelity.⁵⁵ Goldstein is merely tasked with a faithful rendering of Lahiri's awkward Italian.⁵⁶

Finally, the 'Author's Note' raises the issue of readership.⁵⁷ Although the Bloomsbury text is a bilingual edition, it is evidently aimed at an English-speaking audience, as signalled not just by Lahiri's thanks to Goldstein for 'bringing this book to English-language readers' (p. xiv), but more obviously by the untranslated nature of the 'Author's Note' (paratextual notes about both author and translator, the dedication and the epigraph *are* translated). Focus on the transnational has brought with it a revalorisation of reading in translation. As Burdett et al. put it:

⁵⁴Lahiri, *Translating Myself and Others*.

⁵⁵Ray, who compares Lahiri's remarks about Goldstein in the 'Author's Note' to her comments on the process of translating *The Clothing of Books*, not dissimilarly refers to Lahiri's view of translation in both cases as one of 'transparent transfer' (pp. 558–62):

⁵⁶Tim Parks ('L'Avventura') suggests that the strangeness of Lahiri's Italian is in fact removed by the translation, but that Goldstein, conversely, renders unproblematic passages of the author's Italian into English which sounds 'quaint and off-key'. Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, which she translated herself, has, I suggest, several oddities including: 'it can't take the upper hand', referring to a bond between the narrator and a male friend (p. 6); 'The new light disorients, the fulminating nature overwhelms' (p. 14); 'she's at loose ends' (p. 16); 'I'm going through a hard patch right now' (p. 100).

⁵⁷See Ray for a useful discussion of the bilingual edition of *In Other Words* and the 'inherent possibility' of translated literature to 'disarm and deter a monolingual reading practice that is assumed to be the norm', (p. 545).

The divide between reading in translation or in the source language has been largely framed in the light of a monolingual model of national literatures and cultures which, as we have tried to illustrate, is far too rigid and does not reflect the dynamic, transnational nature of production, circulation and reception processes.⁵⁸

Polezzi, meanwhile, states that translations provide not a ‘defective understanding of “originals”’ but can, especially when read alongside the source text and when multiple translations are compared, be an important pedagogic tool.⁵⁹ To be truly transnational, I suggest, such thinking, and indeed pedagogy, requires ‘reading in translation’ to be clearly signalled as translation-into languages other than English and for those reading to be envisaged as having different language abilities. There is no reason, after all, why Italian readers should not gain from reading Lahiri’s and Goldstein’s text, and there is clear value in Italian- and English-language students, of whatever level of expertise, reading together in the classroom. With a bilingual edition the potential is also there – academic infrastructure permitting – for colleagues from Departments of Italian to publish collaboratively with colleagues with little or no Italian (allowing for detailed discussion of translation issues), and, perhaps, for those with minimal Italian to publish solo in Italian studies outlets.

Trans, Trans*, Trans-ing

The temporal gap separating Lahiri’s paratextual ‘Author’s Note’ and the main body of *In Other Words* is only one of several fault lines which make this a far from unified text. The presence of two short stories – ‘The Exchange’ (‘Lo Scambio’) and ‘Half-Light’ (‘Penombra’) – which echo several of the themes and concerns found in the rest of the text, represent another fault line, constituting a break from the autobiographical genre and first-person authorial figure (whom we may identify with Lahiri, or at least an earlier instantiation of the author, given the ‘Author’s Note’).⁶⁰

According to the Afterword, ‘The Exchange’ is ‘a story told in the third person, but the protagonist, slightly changed, is me’ (‘È un racconto in terza persona, ma la protagonista, appena modificata, sono io’) (pp. 218–19). The protagonist in question is a translator, allowing Lahiri to try on this role via a fictive persona, just as she goes on to adopt Italian status in *Whereabouts*.⁶¹ This translator has a creative, dynamic approach to her craft, which involves not just translating as a process of carrying across but rather of transforming a text from one language to another (‘trasformare un testo da una lingua a un’altra’) (pp. 66–67). This trans-formative potential can also be detected in the short story’s familiar focus on clothes. ‘The Exchange’ tells of the translator entering a stranger’s house in a country whose language she does not speak and joining other women in trying on clothes designed by the host. Having decided that none are to her taste, she discovers that her own sweater is missing. Failure to locate this item results in her unhappy departure with an unfamiliar, ill-fitting garment. The sweater, Lahiri helpfully informs us just before the story begins, is language (p. 65). Initially this fictional tale of literal dressing up seems as negative as the figurative crossdressing discussed above, but this is a story with a happy ending. Where before garments – compared to the Italian language as used by Lahiri rather than by native speakers – were associated with inauthenticity and transgression, now clothing is owned, in both the literal and figurative sense.⁶² The story closes with the protagonist realising the following

⁵⁸Burdett et al., ‘The Transnational/Translational in Italian Studies’, p. 234.

⁵⁹Polezzi, ‘Translation’, p. 312. When Tim Parks suggests that it is no coincidence that ‘the current enthusiasm for literary translation in the Anglo-Saxon world has come at the same time as a steep decline in language learning’, he is certainly right, but it is also the case that, as Polezzi suggests, language learning can be bolstered by working with translations. Tim Parks, ‘A Translation for Our Time?’, *The New York Review of Books*, 11 September 2019, <<https://www.nybooks.com/online/2019/09/11/a-translation-for-our-time/>> [accessed 31 August 2023].

⁶⁰Ray, though writing about translation, passes over the short stories with a parenthesis: ‘(the volume contains two short stories written in Italian as well)’, p. 554.

⁶¹‘Half-Light’, which opens with a dream which Lahiri herself had, allows her to try on the role of an Odysseus-like male protagonist returning home from a foreign land to feasting and questioning his wife’s fidelity. Speaking the foreign language he has acquired on his travels renders this Odysseus figure ‘a stranger in his own house’, ‘forestiero in casa propria’, pp. 196–97.

⁶²The notion of ‘owning’ a language and of embracing language ‘polygamy’ (a metaphor that Lahiri might appreciate!) is discussed with respect to migrants in Clorinda Donato’s ‘The Linguistic and Cultural Rights of Students in the Italian Language

morning that the ill-fitting sweater (it is tempting to render ‘golfino’ not as ‘sweater’ but ‘jumper’, for the near homophony with Jhumpa) is once more familiar, and, paradoxically, although ‘no longer the same’ (‘non sembrava più lo stesso’), has ‘always been hers’ (‘sempre stato il suo’) (pp. 80–81).

‘The Exchange’ highlights something of the problematic nature of asking questions about the trans nature of *In Other Words*. The intercalated short story, as I read it, has more of Berman’s critical ‘trans’ than other aspects of *In Other Words*. But this is just one small part of the whole text. There is little doubt that Lahiri’s text is on the whole far from critical of notions of essentialised national belonging, gender, or language. Its transnational credentials are undermined by the presence of figurative as opposed to literal migrations and exiles and by a belief that Italianness means being born and bred in Italy. The predominance of familial, and especially maternal imagery speaks of a monolingual epistemology, whilst dressing up is associated with subterfuge and a hierarchical native speaker/non-native speaker binary. Translation, also couched in the language of a troubled family romance, requires a faithful translator in the form of Ann Goldstein. But this is not the whole story. The act of reading the bilingual text, of shuttling between Italian and English, is potentially a form of transnational experience. Lahiri herself hesitates in her use of the ‘mother tongue’ metaphor, as if aware of its inadequacy, and her repeated recourse to images of dressing up hints at a more performative concept of both language and identity. Finally, the notion of a faithful translation carrying across meaning is juxtaposed with the more critical image of travelling or moving back and forth between versions.

The key phrases in the previous paragraph are ‘as I read it’ and ‘on the whole’. Going back to where I started and Burdett, Havelly, and Polizzi’s call for an analysis of texts such as Lahiri’s as specifically *transnational*, I hope I have demonstrated, via Berman’s expansive use of the prefix, that such labelling is far from straightforward. The act of labelling this or any literary text transnational or indeed critically trans in Berman’s sense is premised on the ‘object of study’, to return to Jay’s term, being fixed and unified: something a trans optic may well seek to undermine. Perhaps we could take the next step and call it ‘trans*’ – ‘a diacritical mark that poses a question to its prefix and stands in for what exceeds the politics of naming and regulation’ – though this might not suit the classificatory propensity of academic disciplines.⁶³

My focus has been on the transnational defined in terms of the object of study, which takes me back to disciplinary matters and one final question. How far, and in what manner – bearing in mind disciplinary infrastructures – can the ‘objects of study’ of Italian Studies extend? How, to put it another way and to modify the words of Ferris pondering the limits of Comparative Literature, does Italian Studies square ‘transnationalising without bounds’ and ‘the possibility of a discipline’?⁶⁴

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Margaret-Anne Hutton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2705-3105>

and Studies Classroom’, *Forum Italicum*, 57.2 (2023), 384–89. As an interesting point of comparison see also Nelson Shuchmacher Endebo, ‘“A invenção do Brasile”: Juó Bananére and Non-Italian Italian Literature’, which describes Bananére [pseud.] as ‘an Italian Writer of Non-Italian literature, and a Non-Italian Writer of Italian literature’, *California Italian Studies*, 9.1 (2019), 1–11 (p. 11).

⁶³ Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), p. 50.

⁶⁴ Ferris refers to ‘the ongoing consequences of two defining and contradictory forces within comparative literature: comparison without bounds, and the possibility of a discipline’, p. 82.