Hybridization and Enunciation in Arab-Italian Migrant Literature

Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores two memoirs and two poems written by three migrant Arab writers, Nassera Chohra, Mohamed Bouchane, and Aziz Bouzidy, in the emerging genre of Italian literature of migration. Issues of identity formation are paramount to these works as these migrants seek to define themselves and assert their individuality in the face of dominant cultural norms. The work draws especially from the critical theory of Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Cultures* (1996) and his definitions of hybridity and enunciation and their role in identity formation. However, shortcomings in the notion of hybridity, as demonstrated in these works, are discussed and analyzed. The term hybridization is proposed, and supported with textual examples, in order to better contextualize the migrant experiences narrated in these writings.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated with love to my fiancée, Caroline Mae Stidworthy.
Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Once a country of outward emigration, Italy has been changing into a destination for immigrants over the course of the past thirty years. Although the presence of immigrants, particularly from the Arab Middle East and North Africa, in Italy is certainly not comparable to that in other European countries, specifically Britain and France, the changes in Italian society are still apparent and important. The consequent transformations of Italy’s demographic and political scenes have been well discussed and analyzed in the fields of sociology and politics.\textsuperscript{1} However, evolving developments in Italian literature analyzing migration are more recent and less comprehensive.

The emergence of “an Italian literature of migration” written in Italian by these recent arrivals can be studied in order to better understand the ongoing phenomenon of Arab migration in Italy.\textsuperscript{2} Migrant texts had their peak of publishing and circulation during the early 1990s, when migration was still rather new in Italy.\textsuperscript{3} Few of these texts received any widespread attention and none achieved “canonical” status in the corpus of


\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, 86-7. The two memoirs addressed in this thesis are from this period. Mohamed Bouchane’s memoir Chiamatemi Ali was published in 1991, Nassera Chohra’s Volevo diventare bianca in 1993. Other works include: Io venditore di elefanti (1990) by the Senegalese-Italian writer Pap Khouma; Immigrato (1990) by the Tunisian-Italian writer Salah Methnani; La promessa di Hamadi (1991) by the Senegalese-Italian writer Saidou Moussa Ba; and Canto lungo la strada written in Arabic by the Tunisian-Italian Mohsen Melliti and translated into the Italian by Monica Ruocco.
Italian literature, often being labeled as “minor” literature, that is works that described current sociological conditions, but lacked significant literary value. Many of these memoirs and compilations of poetry and prose were issued by minor publishing companies. Nevertheless, these texts deserve recognition and an adequate evaluation because they are literary and sociologically relevant works that provide a means for immigrants to speak and engage with Italian society. These works are a way to enter into a dialogue with the “major” culture and occupy a niche area to explore the circumstances and problems of migration from the perspective of the immigrants themselves. The experiences of these Arab migrant writers and the common themes in their works are increasingly relevant since migration (both Arab and non-Arab) to Italy and Europe seems to be an unavoidable consequence of the post-colonial condition.

This thesis seeks to explore certain works written by Arab migrants in Italy and their overarching themes of the way in which they grapple with identity. These texts include two memoirs: *Volevo diventare bianca* [I wanted to become white; 1993] by Nassera Chohra and *Chiamatemi Ali* [Call Me Ali; 1991] by Mohamed Bouchane; and two poems by Aziz Bouzidy: *Nessuno* [No one] and *Nostalgia* (1995). These works deal primarily with questions of identity and issues in fashioning, expressing, and articulating identities. Utilizing literary theory and textual examples, the themes of hybridity, in-between identities, and notions of Otherness can be explored and analyzed in these

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works, using a nuanced approach and taking into account Italy’s uniqueness in the history of colonialism, language unity, and immigration.

The struggle to express a true, false, or changing identity is a reoccurring theme in Arab-Italian migrant literature. The concept of hybridity, as outlined by Homi Bhabha, is an important tool for reading these works. However, the memoirs of Chohra and Bouchane and the poems of Bouzidy demonstrate certain shortcomings in Bhabha’s concept of hybridity; the term hybridization is proposed to better understand and contextualize these works. Nevertheless, these texts are attempts for the Arab-Italian migrant writers to define and express themselves through writing and all demonstrate the power of enunciation as a way to engage with Italian society.

Along with Bhabha, the works of literary critics and cultural theorists, such as Armando Gniisci, Graziella Parati, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said, are useful in analyzing the twenty-year old phenomenon of Arab-Italian migrant literature. An exploration of the works of Chohra, Bouchane, and Bouzidy cannot be undertaken without an exploration of the pertinent concepts of these theorists and their application to Arab writers in the Italian literature of migration genre. The relationship between major and minor languages, the connection between migrant literature and minor literature, and the debate over an appropriate appellation for these texts (Italophone or Italian literature of migration) all aid in the textual analysis of these works. These issues become useful interpretive tools when confronted with instances of hybridization and enunciation in Chohra and Bouchane’s memoirs and Bouzidy’s poems.
Chapter 1: The Power of Language and the Dichotomies of Major and Minor Languages

Gli italiani non sanno prestare ascolto…In questo paese la gente non sa ascoltare. A tutti piace parlare, ma non rispondono mai alle domande che gli si fanno, perché dimenticano di stare a sentire. –Salah Methnani

[Italians don’t know how to lend an ear…In this country, people don’t know how to listen. Everybody likes to talk, but they never respond to the questions that you ask because they forget to stay and listen. –Salah Methnani]

Italian literature of migration is a conscious effort for migrant writers to engage with a society that overlooks and generalizes the foreign Other. Methnani’s memoir Immigrato, like other migrant testimonies, gives the author an opportunity to share his experiences as a migrant and his experience and views on Italian society and culture. In addition to allowing the migrant to speak for and signify himself, migrant literature also provides an alternative worldview outside a Eurocentric one. Gnisci explains:

Il migrante, da qualunque mondo provenga, porta negli occhi, nelle gambe e nelle mani il messaggio e l’utopia della pluralità e della parità dei mondi: è questa la sua prima e più alta dignità che offre, perché la si possa conoscere e, se è possibile, imparare, a noi oltreoceano occidentali. Proprio noi che siamo convinti di aver costruito l’unico—e migliore—dei mondi possibili, e di averlo fatto innanzitutto per noi e per tutti, ma alle nostre condizioni.10

[The migrant, regardless of where he comes from, brings in his eyes, legs and hands, the message and the utopia of plurality and of the equality of different worlds: this is the foremost and most dignified act that he offers since we, as Westerners, can know, and if possible learn from this message. We are convinced that we have constructed the only—and best—of possible worlds, and having

7 Gnisci, 86-7.
8 All translations henceforth are by mine, unless otherwise noted.
9 Methnani memoir’s Immigrato (co-written with Mario Fortunato) is another example in the genre of an Italian literature of migration written by an Arab migrant. His memoir, like the two addressed in this thesis, deals with issues of identity, hybridization and enunciation.
10 Gnisci, 103.
done so, above all, for ourselves and then for all others, but nevertheless based on
our own conditions and requirements.]

Migrant literature challenges the notion of a unified worldview and the signified status
that is generally placed upon migrants and foreigners in Italy and in Europe as a whole.
In Saussarean terms, migrant literature allows the migrant to signify himself, become the
signified, not the signifier. Gnisci recognizes this:

L’italiano viene preferito dagli scrittori immigrati perché permette il contatto
diretto con l’udienza che essi cercano, con il pubblico che a loro interessa: i
cittadini indigeni della nuova residenza che possono diventare, attraverso l’arte
della parola che può far conversare, che ci fa deviare insieme verso lo stesso
luogo comune, ospiti e conviventi. Si tratta di noi altri italiani. La lingua italiana
viene decisa, insomma, perché questi scrittori vogliono farsi ascoltare proprio da
noi.11

[Italian is preferred by these immigrant writers because it allows direct contact
with the audience that they are seeking, with the public they are interested in
reaching: the local citizens of their new residence who can become, through the
art of the word that can converse, and veer together toward a common area, hosts
and cohabitees. It deals with us Italians. Italian is decided upon, therefore,
because these writers want to be heard by us.]

The appropriation of the Italian language by these migrant writers allows them to narrate
their experiences, assert their identity, and speak for themselves.

Ferdinand de Saussure’s writing on the relationship between the signified and the
signifier ultimately relates to the construction and understanding of language, as well as
an articulation of identity. Saussure states that the bond between the signifier, or sound-
image, and the signified, or concept, is arbitrary and lacks any “natural connection.”12
Words are collective products of social interaction and “language is only one particular
semiological system.”13 There are other nonverbal sides of language and communication

11 Ibid, 75-6. (Italics in the original text.)
12 Leitch, Vincent B. “Ferdinand De Saussure.” Trans. Baskin, Wade. The Norton Anthology of
Theory and Criticism. 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 854.
13 Ibid.
and community that are necessary to set up their value and general acceptance. Saussure explains that language is “a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others.”\(^\text{14}\) Language depends on consensus and context. Signifiers are recognized and processed according to their difference from other signifiers. Meaning is never inherent in the signifier. Consequently, things cannot be understood “as essences sufficient unto themselves.”\(^\text{15}\) Whether taking into account the signified or the signifier, “language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.”\(^\text{16}\)

By utilizing and appropriating Italian, migrant writers challenge “conceptual and phonic differences” that have issued from the language. Their speech and process of enunciation disrupts the mold of consensus that has formed in language and “the system of interdependent terms” that constitute it. Migrant writings are an example of, what Saussure defines as, *parole*, that is speech or utterance, since they are instances of migrants appropriating the dominant language and societal discourse to speak for themselves and narrate their experiences. These texts also demonstrate the difference between *langue* and *langage*. *Langue* is the most general term for language itself and is used when describing specific languages, such as *la langue italienne*. *Langage* is the general human faculty, which includes body language, or specific jargon particular to a group of people.\(^\text{17}\) It includes the nonverbal aspects of language and communication and their acceptance by a community. Hence, migrant literature is composed of instances of

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\(^{14}\) Ibid, 856.


\(^{16}\) Leitch, 862.

\(^{17}\) Ibid, 847.
parole written in the Italian langue to challenge stereotypes and the signifier status of migrants present in the Italian langage.

Through the very act of writing, these Arab authors, writing in Italian, are contesting the “signifier” statuses placed upon them. They want to contest the signifier status, or sound-image, of the migrant identity imposed upon them. These writers aim to challenge the comprehension of signifiers only in relation to other signifiers. They are attempting to produce the meaning of their own identities and are challenging the idea that migrant identities are “essences sufficient unto themselves.” They hope to be viewed as individuals, not as a collective, since there are no typical or universal characteristics of migrant identity. Any generalizations of this identity are mere constructs, which have been agreed upon in the langage of the dominant culture. Rather, migrant identity is constructed and formed in juxtaposition to the society and circumstances in which migrants finds themselves. Furthermore, each instance of identity formation is distinctive and cannot be generalized.

Although an attempt to adequately define and wholly signify themselves is impossible (since the relationship between the signifier and the signified is ultimately arbitrary), migrant works are important contributions to combat stereotypes and general misconceptions. These testimonies demonstrate there are multiple ways of understanding the migrant psyche. In fact, the arbitrariness of the signifier/ signified is best expressed in the notion of hybridity, as analyzed by Bhabha, which is useful for understanding and contextualizing these works. Bhabha states a stereotype is “an arrested, fetishistic mode

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18 Parker, 49.
of representation within its field of identification.”\textsuperscript{19} Stereotypes become embedded in the societal \textit{langage}, which is what these migrant writings attempt to challenge. These texts try to move beyond any fetishistic modes of representation that are imposed by the society and allow the migrant to define himself according to his own experiences, appropriating or rescinding aspects of the dominant culture to mold an identity.

These works by migrant writers demonstrate the power of \textit{parole} in that they attempt to enter in a dialogue in order to challenge the misconceptions the society holds. Gnisci has recognized this fact since he realizes that the works in the Italian literature of migration genre seek specifically to engage with Italians. They are instances of \textit{parole} in the Italian \textit{langue}, allowing migrants to appropriate the dominant language for their own expression. The works disrupt the notion that Italians exclusively own the Italian language, using the power of \textit{parole} in the Italian \textit{langue} to challenge misconceptions present in Italian societal \textit{langage}.

The Italian literature of migration genre demonstrates the “major” and “minor” aspects of language, in this case Italian, as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari and its connections with, what they define as, “minor” literature. The notions of major/ minor languages do not always refer to two different languages “but rather two usages or functions of language.”\textsuperscript{20} Minor literature is written from a minoritarian position and the language employed becomes “minor” as is it appropriated by the marginalized writer. The dichotomy between major/ minor languages exists solely because of the relationship with the other and the artificial distinctions between language and speech, \textit{langue} and

\textsuperscript{19} Bhabha, Homi K. \textit{The Location of Culture}. (London: Routledge, 1994), 76.
Furthermore, minor languages are not characterized by a sense of lacking, incompleteness, or unsuitability. In fact, the minor is “potential, creative and created, becoming.” The power of a minor language is its ability and power to dialogue, engage, and perhaps disruptive the major, dominant narrative, or langage.

The aim of a minor language is “deterritorializing the major language” as it intends to appropriate the dominant language and narrative for its own purposes. However, the major and minor languages are not in opposition to one another and the minor does not aspire to topple the major. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari state: “There is no becoming majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian.” “Minor” literary works in the major language are not defined by their dialectical or regional linguistic elements, but rather by their very presence, which interrupts or deviates from the major tradition in theme, style, and/or content. These authors are writing from a marginalized position within society and their works are thus labeled as “minor.” “Minor” authors utilize the major language to achieve recognition, consciousness, and a degree of autonomy in the dominant tradition. They aim to utilize the major language as a means to dialogue and engage with the dominant culture. Italian literature of migration is considered “minor” because it challenges the dominant langage in society’s langue. It embodies the deterritorialization of Italian as migrant writers are utilizing the language to express their identities and recount their experiences. The way in which they use Italian also reflects their marginality since aspects of their minor position becomes evident in the writings.

21 Ibid, 150.
22 Ibid, 149.
23 Ibid, 150.
Chapter 2: Migrant Literature as Minor Literature

Migration literature emphasizes and expounds upon personal experiences, and the subsequent cultural and identity difficulties immigrants face. It deals with the Other’s experiences with dominant cultural practices and hegemonic norms and directly confronts social problems and injustices. It is sometimes criticized for its lack of “literary” qualities and is studied as sociology, rather than literature. The presence of clear sociological value, however, does not undermine its literary qualities. In her book Migration Italy: The Art of Taking Back a Destination Culture, Graziella Parati describes migration literature as “the most innovative contribution to contemporary Italian literature” which moves beyond “canonical representations of ethnicity to explore identities that are post-ethnic and post-migrant in order to complicate the concept of otherness.”

These testimonies challenge stereotypes of the migrant, and seek to talk back to the dominant discourses concerning migration. Parati explains:

The migrant writer deterritorializes Western cultures into a text, becoming the agent in an interpretative process. Writing becomes a means to assert a migrant’s position as interpretative subject and to reject the essentializing definitions of migrants presented in political rhetoric.

Migration literature is thus counter-hegemonic because it attempts to engage with and criticize accepted notions of migrants and migration, and because it is also a “minor” literature, regarded today outside the accepted Italian literary canon.

\[24\] Parati, 102.
\[25\] Ibid, 15.
\[26\] Ibid, 102-3.
the value and contribution of migrant literature draws from Deleuze and Guattari’s concept and definition of a “minor” literature, which also places the genre outside of a “major” canon. Deleuze and Guattari maintain: “Majority assumes a state of power and domination, not the other way around. It assumes the standard measure not the other way around.”27 Italian literature of migration, like minor literature, does not assume that it occupies a place of authority. The genre is an attempt to contest stereotypes and generalizations faced by migrants and to challenge any notions of “standard” migrant identities.

Deleuze and Guattari state that “a minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language,” but is rather a literature constructed by a minority “within a major language.”28 It must be noted that, in the case of Italian literature of migration, Italian is not pitted as a major language against Arabic and French. There is no doubt that these languages are more “major” than Italian, in the number of native and second-language speakers. If these languages are even viewed as “minor,” it should only be within an Italian context, where Italian is obviously the major language of Italy. Italian becomes the “major” language with regard to the Arab writing in Italy, who must use this language to communicate with the society in which he finds himself.

Minor literatures, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are characterized by three main features, which include “the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective language of enunciation.”29 The deterritorialization of language is employed at the moment when the minority author

27 Deleuze & Guattari, 150.
29 Ibid, 154.
utilizes the major language in his writing. Deleuze uses the Jewish-Czech writer Franz Kafka, who wrote in German, to elucidate his argument. Although he lived in Prague, Kafka used German, the official language of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the preferred language of business and the arts in Prague, to write his novels. German is essentially a “paper language”\textsuperscript{30} for Kafka, and by adopting this preferred and “major” language, he is able to reach a wide audience. The language itself becomes deterritorialized since Kafka appropriates it for his own means of expression. Deleuze and Guattari state that the deterritorialization occurs when Kafka opts for the “poor” and “simple” German of Prague. Kafka opposes the symbolic in favor of the arid, but this change still allows the language to “vibrate with a new intensity.”\textsuperscript{31} This style is similar to that of Arab-Italian migrant writers who also use simple and straightforward language. However, Kafka’s starkness of language is a conscious choice since he grew up speaking German and was educated in the language. Migrant testimonies of Arab-Italian writers are characterized by an austerity of language because the authors had few, if any formal, education in Italian, and often learned the language through their experiences in Italy.

The second key aspect of minor literature is the interconnection of the individual to the political. Deleuze and Guattari do not maintain that a major literature is apolitical, but rather that minor literature is “cramped” in that individual issues are pressed down by politics. The individual concern becomes “magnified” since “a whole other story is vibrating within it.”\textsuperscript{32} The minority’s personal problems are always inextricably linked to the writer’s position within a majority society. For migrant literature this is apparent since

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 155.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 153.
these writings always focus on issues of identity, personal and political clashes with the majority culture. Similarly, to adopt Salman Rushdie’s definition, because of a minor literature’s political nature it must always, and in fact, can only exist “outside the whale.”\textsuperscript{33} Disagreeing with George Orwell’s opinion that “politics ruins literature” and that authors should disengage from politics in their writings, Rushdie maintains that it is indeed impossible to completely retreat from politics in literature. Rushdie is not necessarily saying that all worthy literature should aspire to be a political littérature engagée of a “protesting, noisy type,”\textsuperscript{34} but rather that deliberately avoiding political engagement, as Orwell advocates, is not feasible. Rushdie states: “If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history’s great and most abject abdications.”\textsuperscript{35} Italian literature of migration demonstrates exactly the political nature as outlined by Deleuze, Guattari, and Rushdie. Migrant literature is at its very core a type of littérature engagée since it gives a collective voice to migrant experiences and allows the writers to paint a picture different from what society and politicians portray. However, this is true not just of migrant writers, but of good writers in general, as Rushdie indicates.

Finally, a minor literature “takes everything on a collective value” since, as Deleuze and Guattari claim, “talent isn’t in abundance in minor literature.”\textsuperscript{36} Individual enunciation is not possible because there is no single “master” in minor literature. However, this apparent weakness is actually a strength. What every author says individually adds up to a common action in which minor literature “finds itself positively

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 99.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 100.
\textsuperscript{36} Deleuze & Guattari, 153.
charged with the role and function of a collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation.”  

Despite its sometimes relegated status, minor literature has relevant sociological, political, and ethical concerns. These are the aspects that give the genre its literary value. The sociological importance of migrant works does not undermine their literary worth. Rather, it is exactly this aspect that gives migrant literature literary significance.

By consciously drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Parati categorizes migrant Italian literature as minor. She explains that this migration literature itself becomes “the signifier of cultural hybridizations contained in weaker texts that reject policies and politics of exclusion” and allows the migrant to speak as an “agent of change in the new culture he/she inhabits.” Parati acknowledges the inherent political nature of these texts and sees migrant Italian literature as a way of talking back to the dominant Italian culture, as the minority writer adopts and utilizes the language of the majority. She sees the political nature of these works as a testimony to their literary importance. Her classification of these works as “migrant” and “minor” are also a way for her to rescue these works from being overlooked or sidelined. Parati is attempting a broader categorization for sociologically, politically, and literary relevant migrant writings in the hope that these works will be recognized as important contributions to the Italian literary scene.

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37 Ibid, 154.
38 Parati, 57.
Chapter 3: Italophone Literature or Italian Literature of Migration?

Parati attempts to categorize the emerging genre of an Italian literature of migrations under the term “Italophone,” although she admits that this term is fluid and complex. Furthermore, many of these migrant texts “offer various and evolving self-definitions that resist rigid categories.” Nevertheless, the term is useful, she contends, to describe the phenomenon of migrant Italian literature that appears at the beginning of the 1990s. However, in adopting the designation Italophone, Parati is aware that a comparison must be made with Francophone and Anglophone literatures. The distinctions of Italophone from the two other “phones” must be outlined.

First is the issue of language, since Italophone literature differs fundamentally from Francophone or Anglophone literature in this regard. Francophone and Anglophone writers have often been in contact with French and English since childhood, may have had partial or exclusive schooling in these languages, and have often spent time in France and Britain before publishing their works. This is not true for contemporary Italophone writers, who overwhelmingly include non-native speakers who have acquired a new language in the process of migration. Furthermore, Francophone and Anglophone are often familiar with the respective literary and cultural traditions of France and Britain and can attempt to place their works in the genealogical chain of these canons. The exact

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39 Parati, 15.
opposite marks Italophone writers, who have recently gained fluency in the language and are often not familiar with Italian literary works.\textsuperscript{40}

The definition and categorization of Italophone literature is also difficult since many of its writers are not from former Italian colonies, as is the case with Francophone and Anglophone writers who hail from the previously held colonies. Italy had so few colonies and its cultural and linguistic influence is incomparable compared to colonial France and Great Britain. For the vast majority of migrant Arab writers, Italy is not the former colonial power. In fact, “Italy becomes a chosen destination in migration in order to interrupt the linear conditions between former colony and a ‘mother’-land.”\textsuperscript{41} Many Italophone writers betray their cultural and linguistic colonial heritage by using Italian. They are privileging Italian as a way to counter French and English, which many of these Arab migrants know well. The power of enunciation in Italian is thus compounded as it is used not only to narrate migrant experiences and injustices found in Italian society, but also to contest the power of the colonial languages. Writing in Italian is a conscious decision intended to address Italians, but at the same time, it is also a choice to not write in Arabic, or French or English, the languages of colonization and prestige for intellectual and political elites in the former colonies.

Even by highlighting Italophone literature’s differences with Francophone and Anglophone genres, Parati cannot provide a complete definition or categorization. This is perfectly acceptable since any definition of an Italophone literature is predicated upon a comparison with the other two “phones” and could never stand alone. She also realizes

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 13-6
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 13.
that the term does not fully capture the complexity of these migrant texts written in Italian. However, she states:

The neologism “Italophone” is useful since it emphasizes the acquisition of Italian as a new language in which to inscribe one’s life, and was particularly necessary for defining migrants’ literature at the beginning of the 1990s.²²

However, Parati does not recognize that the notion of Italophone is not necessarily novel to migrant experiences to Italy in the last thirty years. The term could just as easily be applied to canonical, established authors within the Italian literary tradition who consciously choose (standard) Italian, instead of other languages or dialects.

The title Italophone could also be extended to take into account the history of linguistic complexity in Italy. Unlike France and Great Britain, Italy achieved political, and subsequently linguistic, unification late. The official date of Italian unification is 1861 with territorial additions following until World War I.²³ Linguistic unification of the country was realized thanks to compulsory schooling, but the broadcasting power of television and radio following the Second World War had a greater impact on the diffusion and adoption of the Italian language.²⁴ Furthermore, a variety of dialects are still spoken throughout the peninsula today. The term Italophone could refer to any author who chose to write in standard literary Italian, instead of his native dialect. It could even be applied to Italian migrant testimonies that emerged in the wake of mass Italian migration to the New World at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Secondly, the term Italophone could be used not only to categorize the recent Arab migration literature in Italian, but also to define prominent Italian writers. Examples

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²² Ibid, 15.
²⁴ Ibid, 7.
include Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827), and Italo Svevo (1861-1928). Goldoni, a playwright, relied heavily upon the Venetian dialect, his native tongue, in his works. He moved to Paris in 1762 in order to work for the “Comédie italienne” theater and began to publish in French, translating many of his own works into Italian. Goldoni even wrote his memoirs in French and died in Paris in 1793. As for Foscolo and Svevo, both were from geographical peripheries of Italy and, analogously, could be considered migrants themselves. Foscolo was born on the modern-day Greek island of Zakynthos (Zante in Italian), then a part of the Republic of Venice and moved to Venice definitively in 1793. His mother tongue was Greek and it is even recorded that he had some initial difficulties adjusting and speaking in Italian after moving in his teenager years. Despite initial linguistic difficulties, Foscolo was still an ardent Italian nationalist and thoroughly disappointed when Venice became a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Italo Svevo, the pen name for Aron Ettore Schmitz, was born in Trieste under Austro-Hungarian rule to a Jewish family originating from Germany. Svevo deliberately chose to embrace Italian culture, even after studying in Germany as a youth. However, he did not forget his German heritage and his pen name demonstrates and embodies his hybridity. Italo Svevo literally means “Italian-Swabian.” Svevo was

46 Ibid, 363.
48 Italo Svevo’s works can inevitably be compared with those of Franz Kafka. Both were cosmopolitan Jews living in major cities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, there is an important difference between the two. Kafka chose to write in German, the dominant language of the empire. Svevo, instead, chose Italian, one of many “minor” languages in the empire.
clearly proud of his mixed identity and embraced it. In conclusion, the hybrid identities of these authors, their knowledge of other languages, and their publishing of (certain) works in Italian can also classify them as Italophone.

Furthermore, categorizing migrant writings under the term Italophone, simply because they are written by migrants whose second, or sometimes even third language is Italian, can relegate this literature to below the status of “Italian” literature, whatever that definition may be. Parati is by no means trying to place, what she terms, Italophone literature, as a phenomenon with less literary worth than canonical and established Italian literature. Her use of this designation and her categorization of these works as migrant and minor are a way for her to save these texts from being overlooked. Parati is actually acknowledging the literary worth of migrant testimonies by labeling them as Italophone. She is attempting to contextualize the emerging phenomenon of Italian migrant literature and demonstrate its sociological and literary value. She also realizes the limitations of the term Italophone. For example, any utilization of this term naturally creates binary distinctions, just as French/Francophone and English/Anglophone does. Criticism of the term Italophone is not a criticism of Parati’s advocation for the reading and worth of Italian migrant testimonies, but rather a recognition of certain shortcomings in this specific appellation, which even she acknowledges.

Edward Said’s analysis and description of Joseph Conrad’s style of writing can be utilized to understand the emergence of Arab migrant literature in Italian, as well as to highlight the shortcomings of the term Italophone when applied to migrant writings. Said
states that Conrad “was a self-conscious foreigner writing of obscure experiences in an alien language, and he was only too aware of this.”\textsuperscript{50} Despite Conrad’s inherent “foreignness,” as a Polish-born exile, whose third language was English, after his native Polish and French learned during childhood, his works are never characterized as Anglophone. Similarly, the works of Foscolo and Svevo are never classified as Italophone.

Nevertheless, Conrad’s works, as Said argues, leave clear traces of his migrant experiences and exiled and émigré mentality, and it is these traces that form the essence and uniqueness of Conrad’s work, earning them a special place in English literature. Said states that Conrad “was, he felt, simply a man tortured by a finite number of intolerably fixed situations to which he seemed to return everlastingly, and this very fact had a curious pull on him.”\textsuperscript{51} For Said, “Conrad’s sense of \textit{vécu},” that is, the fact that “he has lived what he describes”\textsuperscript{52} is important to understand his works. His particular migrant experiences are thus central to his work and in no way diminish them. The “aura of dislocation, instability and strangeness”\textsuperscript{53} are what, according to Said, makes Conrad’s works so compelling and unique. Parati acknowledges these same characteristics in her insistence of the importance of migrant texts that form Italophone literature. However, Said does not attempt to label Conrad’s works as Anglophone, even though the author was a migrant whose exilic experiences highly influenced his writings. Like Conrad, neither would the works of Rushdie or Nabokov be characterized as Anglophone, minor, or migrant. Their value goes beyond the limitations of the authors’ biographical

\begin{footnotesize}


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 7.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 8.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 4.

\end{footnotesize}
information and the subjects of their works. However, this is not true in Italophone literature, which is defined by the background of the author, not necessarily the content of the work.

Parati seems to be the first critic advocating for the appellation “Italophone” to be applied to migrant texts.54 Unlike Parati, Gnisci does not use the term Italophone at all in describing the emerging phenomenon of migrant texts written in Italian. Gnisci advocates for the term “an Italian literature of migration,” *una letteratura italiana della migrazione*, over “a literature of immigration,” *una letteratura dell’immigrazione*, which would “naturally” appear to describe this literary phenomenon.55 According to Gnisci, the second designation does not adequately describe this genre. The first term consciously aims to situate these migrant texts within an Italian framework. It also avoids the binary relationship which would inevitably result from a distinction between “Italian” and “Italophone” literatures. However, Parati should be excused for using Italophone since her primary goal in using this term is to give worth to migrant testimonies. Additionally, her use of the term takes advantage of the widespread term “Francophone” and thus makes “Italophone” immediately understandable.

Gnisci compares this burgeoning Italian literature of migration with the tradition of “an Italian literature of exile,” *una letteratura italiana dell’esilio*, whether dialectical or describing an actual voyage, as typified by the well-known works of authors such as

54 Her book *Migration Italy: The Art of Taking Back a Destination Culture*. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press: 2005 was published two years after Armando Gnisci’s *Creolizzare l’Europa: Letteratura e migrazione*. (Rome: Meltemi, 2003), which itself is a collection of previously published essays. See footnote 2. She is also listed as a specialist in Italophone literature under Dartmouth College’s areas of study in the French and Italian Language Department. See http://www.dartmouth.edu/~frandit/study/.
55 Gnisci, 76.
Dante Alighieri, Marco Polo and Primo Levi. In this sense, Gnisci’s analysis is parallel to that of Said’s regarding Conrad. For Said, Conrad’s exilic experiences are necessary to understand in order to fully contextualize the author’s works. Conrad’s migrant identity leaves traces in his works. The fact that he was not a native Englishman, nor even a native English speaker, does not diminish his prominence in English literature. Said never labels him as Anglophone. Gnisci’s comparison of “an Italian literature of migration” to “an Italian literature of exile” is an attempt to place the former collection of texts, written by migrants to Italy within an overall Italian context, and not something completely separate or foreign from an “established” Italian canon. Gnisci aims to situate “an Italian literature of migration,” within a greater Italian canon, which itself is characterized by linguistic confusions, geographical diversity, and even themes of voyage and exile, which are not only unique to Italian literature, but can even be traced back to Homer. Finally, the designation “an Italian literature of migration” more adequately imparts the issues of identity that are central to these works. Gnisci acknowledges that these texts are “Italian,” but do deal with the specific field of migration. Both of these terms have equal footing in the definition and are essential to its characterization. Gnisci’s appellation better recognizes the inherent themes of hybridity in these texts and realizes that issues of enunciation and signification are also important, as the writers are expressing their individual episodes and histories of migration in Italian. In sum, his designation “an Italian literature of migration” is more useful and can lead to a better comprehension, contextualization, and critique of Homi Bhabha’s term “hybridity,” which is especially relevant to this emerging field in contemporary Italian literature.

56 Ibid, 77.
57 Ibid, 76-8.
Chapter 4: Migration, Identity, and Hybridity

Migration in the modern world is often a result of post-colonialism, as immigrants from former colonies make their way to their ex-“metropolis” countries and their large metropolitan centers. Large numbers of migrants moving to Europe have led to a reshaping of these societies and a reconstituting of identity. Furthermore, it is important to remember that post-colonial societies are not just the former colonies—India is as equally post-colonial as Great Britain. The binary relationship between colonized and colonizer, mother country and colony, no longer exists in the modern world, which is increasingly characterized by fluidity and a degree of “in-betweenness.” Modernity is especially distinguished by this “in-betweenness” and “hybridity” in which previous binary relationships have broken down, resulting in a multiplicity of changing identities no longer tied to clear ideological models. Nevertheless, these hybrid and in-between identities are just as much colonial as they are post-colonial and modern. Homi Bhabha has elucidated these ideas, which are closely tied to migration and lead to a better criticism and contextualization of Arab writers in the Italian literature of migration.

Bhabha specifically promotes a reading of migrant literature in order to better comprehend modernity and hybridity. His views are consistent with those of Graziella Parati, who has clearly acknowledged his influence in her book. Bhabha states:

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness.’ Where, once, the
transmission of national traditions was the major theme of world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees - these border and frontier conditions may be the terrains of world literature.\textsuperscript{58}

The particularities of modernity, which Bhabha cites as “interstices,” “Third-Spaces,” “hybridity” and “cultural differences,” appear in migrant literature and constitute an integral component of Bhabha’s conception of world literature. The emergence of interstices and in-between space has led to an overlap and a replacement of previously set and anchored identities and cultural referential points. Bhabha explains that it is necessary “to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.”\textsuperscript{59} It is exactly these in-between spaces, which “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood…that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”\textsuperscript{60} Since a migrant occupies a position in an in-between space, his identity is defined by hybridity. Furthermore, the migrant is also an intermediary between two cultures. This is why Bhabha sees value in migrant literature since the migrant is in a unique position to speak to both cultures, specifically the dominant culture in its own language.

Hence, Bhabha’s explication of migrant literature would most likely lead him to prefer Gnisci’s term “Italian literature of migration” to Parati’s “Italophone” literature. The terms “Italian” and “Italophone” when describing literature indicate a duality and binary opposition that have no place in Bhabha’s fluid conception of modern and hybrid

\textsuperscript{58} Bhabha, 12.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 1
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 1-2
identities. These two designations do not recognize the in-between space that a migrant occupies, which allows him to construct an identity. The contrast also continues the division of the national tradition, i.e. “Italian,” from the other, lesser tradition, i.e. “Italophone.” Additionally, the very title “an Italian literature of migration” indicates its transnational value and better conceptualizes “an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity.” Bhabha would advocate that when approaching Italian literature of migration, just as for any other literature that narrates “frontier conditions,” the goal is to focus on the “inter” aspect, or the “in-between” space, and avoid “politics of polarity” that would potentially create divisions and categorizations of identities and experiences.

Furthermore, analyzing and contextualizing Arab writers in Italian literature of migration from a purely Arab perspective or a purely Italian one would prove fruitless. Both viewpoints must be taken into consideration. Bhabha advises against a one-sided analytical position:

The native intellectual who identifies the people with the true national culture will be disappointed. The people are now the very principle of ‘dialectical reorganization’ and they construct their culture from the national text translated into modern Western forms of information technology, language, dress.

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61 It can be reasoned that Bhabha would also frown upon the distinction between French/ Francophone and English/ Anglophone literatures. These definitions create a two-fold opposition that heavily stresses the separation between the former colonizers and colonized, relegating anything produced by authors in the former colonies, or even migrants in France and Britain as Francophone/ Anglophone and not French/ English literature. The distinction is more pronounced when approaching French/ English literature since Italy had so few colonies compared to the previous countries. Furthermore, the terms Francophone and Anglophone do not appear in the index of The Location of Culture, further suggesting Bhabha’s natural aversion to these designations.

62 Ibid, 38. (Italics in the original text.)

63 Ibid, 39.

64 Ibid, 38.
When the Arab writer chooses to write in Italian, as opposed to Arabic (or the colonial languages, French and English), he is attempting to translate his personal episodes and history into an Italian discourse, or langage. The act of writing in Italian is an act of “dialectical reorganization” in which the Arab migrant appropriates the Italian language and discourse for his own aims. Bhabha states that “in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid—neither the one thing nor the other.”\(^65\) This is the same situation that Deleuze and Guattari describe in which writers of minor literature “deterritorialize” the major language, utilizing it for their own purposes to engage and contest the major culture. Although traces and experiences of “Arabness” are central to writings of Arabs in Italian, they cannot solely be deciphered in this context. Once recorded in Italian, the works also have an inherent “Italianness.” The texts themselves are testimonies of hybridity.

These testimonies are instances that allow the migrant to engage with Italian society and are examples of the enunciation that Deleuze and Guattari have defined, allowing the migrant to speak not only for himself, but also for his community. The ability of the migrant to speak rests in the recognition and acceptance of cultural difference, rather than cultural diversity. Bhabha makes a clear distinction between the two:

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object – culture as an object of empirical knowledge – whereas cultural difference is the process of the enunciation of culture as ‘knowledgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification…Cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity. Cultural

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\(^{65}\) Ibid, 33.
diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs…[It] is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations.  

This contrast could also be applied to the previously outlined differences between the designations of Italophone literature and an Italian literature of migration. Cultural diversity, along with the appellation Italophone, acknowledges binary distinctions between different cultures. Italophone literature indicates a separate field in contrast to Italian literature that does not influence and is not influenced by Italian literature. However, an Italian literature of migration connotes an exchange and intertextuality. As Gnisci states:

La migrazione…è una qualità primordial (di ordine primo: alla lettera) del destino degli umani ed è la condizione della scrittura.  

[Migration…is a primordial quality (of first order: to the letter) of human destiny and is the condition of writing.]

Writing itself is concerned with the moving, shuffling, and challenging generalizations. An Italian literature of migration can also be recognized as the “social articulation of difference from the minority perspective” that is “a complex on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.”

The goal of cultural difference is “to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization.” In Saussurean terms, the migrant attempts to challenge his “signified” status through literature. Cultural difference also concentrates on the issue of “ambivalence of cultural

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66 Ibid, 34. (Italics in the original text.)
67 Gnisci, 77.
68 Bhabha, 2.
69 Ibid, 162.
It rejects a notion of cultural supremacy that leads to distinctions and emphasizes cultural diversity. Cultural difference is opposed to binary distinctions and aims to move toward a hybridity of identities, which focuses on “in-betweeness” and “interstices.” It is an active, enunciating process, which aims to break down totalizations and set cultural models and norms.

The act of enunciation allows migrants to introduce “a split in the performative presentation of cultural identification.” This is a split “between the traditional culturist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference, and the necessary negation of certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance.” Speaking and enunciation lead to hybridity as it allows the migrant to define himself by appropriating the dominant societal discourse, or langage, and use it for his own ends. The ability to speak, or in the case of literature, to write, moves the migrant outside the realm of “signified.” This explains the importance of migration literature and its ability to negate certain “cultural demands, meanings, [and] strategies.” This literature is a way of talking back that removes the barrier between signified and signifier. Minor literature is an act of enunciation, as Deleuze and Guattari outline, and through it, the migrant has the ability to speak and define himself.

Utilizing the major language is essential in the process of defining and creating identity. Using the dominant language leads to recognition, visibility, and the acknowledgement of presence. Frantz Fanon also realizes this when he states in Black

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70 Ibid, 34.
71 Ibid, 35.
72 Ibid.
Skin, White Masks: “To speak is to exist absolutely for the other;”73 and “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.”74 Speaking allows the migrant, or the Other, to define and create himself. Fanon explains that a black man essentially has two dimensions: one with fellow blacks and one with whites.75 Yet, speech can be a way to bridge these two clearly defined ideological spheres. This is what Bhabha’s notion of mimicry does. According to Bhabha, mimicry is “like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically.”76 It allows the Other to appropriate the culture’s langue in order to contest its langage. Mimicry demonstrates the power of enunciation, which confers authority upon the speaker. As Fanon states: “A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.”77 Similarly, migrant literature allows marginalized Others to take possession of the dominant cultural language as a way to talk back to the society and express themselves.

Fanon and Bhabha agree on the power of enunciation as a way for the migrant to signify, define, and create himself. However, their views regarding hybridity and identity are sometimes at odds. For Bhabha, hybridity is positive, something that will eventually be realized, and indeed should be strived for in a post-colonial world. An open and even malleable identity is an effective way to incorporate cultural difference and the multiplicities of in-between spaces. Fanon, however, does not completely agree with this assertion and his background and training in psychiatry explain his views. Bhabha’s in-

74 Ibid, 38.
75 Ibid, 17.
76 Bhabha, 80.
77 Fanon, 18.
between area could perhaps be interpreted as Fanon’s “zone of nonbeing.” As a psychiatrist, Fanon was preoccupied with the psychological aspects of identity. Hybridity was not always positive since dominant societal norms sometimes enabled and promoted it. Here, identity is at times imposed and can take the form of a fake, inauthentic mask. Hybridity forces the minority to adopt the presiding cultural conventions and de-emphasize or even abandon aspects of his identity that are not consistent with the hegemonic culture.

In Fanon’s context, however, hybridity was more of a neurotic obsession and desire of the minority to take up the cultural conventions of the majority. He states: “For the black man, there is only one destiny. And it is white.” Fanon would recognize the oppressive power of Bhabha’s definition of cultural diversity. He also realizes that cultural norms are dictated and that the dominant culture aims to separate and categorize foreign cultures, sometimes in order to deliberately create divisions. Fanon may not believe in the “separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations.” However, he recognizes that there is one dominant culture that is imposing its norms and identity on another. These hegemonic cultural norms resulted in a split identity in which the Other voluntarily or involuntarily took up a mask to conform to the dominant culture. This split identity is also different from Bhabha’s definition.

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78 Ibid, 10.
79 Ibid, 10.
80 The Frenchmen does not like the Jew, who does not like the Arab, who does not like the Negro…The Arab is told: “If you are poor, it is because the Jew has bled you and taken everything from you.” The Jew is told: “You are not the same class as the Arab because you are really white and because you have Einstein and Bergson.” The Negro is told: “You are the best soldiers in the French Empire; the Arabs think they are better than you, but they are wrong. (Fanon, 94)
81 Bhabha, 34.
Bhabha’s and Fanon’s views on hybridity, enunciation, and cultural difference and diversity vary because of the different eras in which the authors lived. Fanon was writing within a colonial context and was heavily influenced by the Algerian War of Independence, which was still ongoing at the time of his death in 1961. As for Bhabha, his viewpoints stem from a post-colonial world characterized by migration. Bhabha also draws heavily from Fanon in *The Location of Culture* and engages with his predecessor. Although it may be difficult to force the views of these two theorists together, given their very different backgrounds, their views on hybridity and enunciation are important tools for interpreting themes of identity found in the works of Chohra, Bouchane, and Bouzidy.
Chapter 5: Shortcomings and Limitations of Hybridity: 
Toward a Hybridization of Identity

Nassera Chohra’s memoir *Volevo diventare bianca* [*I wanted to become white*] is an example of the hybridity of identity and the appropriation of Italian on the part of a Arab migrant. Nevertheless, it also exhibits some perceptible limitations in Bhabha’s definition and interpretation of hybridity. Bhabha maintains:

[The] interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.82

Chohra’s memoir demonstrates (as do Bouchane’s memoir and Bouzidy’s poems, as we will see) that hybridity is often correlated with hierarchy and cultural power, as Fanon recognized. Migrants take on aspects of the culture in which they find themselves because there is a strong compulsion to adopt certain characteristics. Although Chohra’s memoir does reflect instances of hybridity, perhaps the term “hybridization” could more adequately describe her experiences and difficulties in formulating and synthesizing her identity. Whereas Bhabha uses “hybridity” in a clearly positive tone that “entertains differences,” the term “hybridization” can indicate some shortcomings in his definition.

These shortcomings are the focus of Nikolas Kompridis’ article “Normativizing Hybridity/Neutralizing Culture.” According to Kompridis, hybridity has become “a difference erasing concept, negating the foreignness of the foreigner, the otherness of the

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82 Bhabha, 4.
other.” He maintains that the concept has undergone a “largely unnoticed normativization, thereby making available a framework within which the political claims of culture can be tamed and domesticated.” He outlines some of these normativized aspects. First, he criticizes the normatization of cultural fluidity and change and the idea that anyone criticizing these aspects is labeled as anti-modern and guilty of “primitivism, exoticism, backwardness, and childlike naïvité.” Second, he finds fault with the normativization of the endless “contestability and renegotiability of cultural identity, making it nigh impossible to resist the pressure to contest and renegotiate one’s cultural identity without appearing to be unreasonable from the start.” Third, he denounces the normativization of a “radically individualist reaction to one’s culture’s attachments and identifications, such that, ultimately it is entirely up to the individual how and to what extent he binds himself or is bound by them.” Finally, he criticizes the normativization of “an attitude towards minority cultures and languages that amounts to cultural Darwinism.”

In sum, Kompridis outlines four limitations in Bhaba’s concept of hybridity. These include: 1) the normativization of fluidity and change and the recognition that certain aspects of cultures cannot be blended; 2) the infinite ability to question and renegotiate identity; 3) the idea that identity formation is exclusively individualistic and not related to notions of community inclusion or exclusion; and 4) the privileging of the cultural norms of the dominant society. Kompridis does not believe that identities remain

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
constant and unchanging. Rather, his criticism of hybridity underlines dimensions of cultural power and collective identity that are absent from Bhabha’s definition. Bhabha only views hybridity through the lens of the individual who wishes to adopt and synthesize his personal identity. For Kompridis, the dominant culture is also responsible for imposing cultural norms and the person who is against synthesizing these characteristics with his own is seen as unreasonable. Additionally, Bhabha does not take into account that minority communities are in favor of maintaining certain cultural practices and that the preservation and continuation of these practices acknowledges an inclusion in the community. Certain practices cannot be reconciled with the dominant culture.

Using Kompridis’ arguments outlining the flaws of hybridity, we can, perhaps, move toward a definition of hybridization. Although it may be difficult to define exactly what hybridity is, Kompridis demarcates what hybridity is not. By taking into account these non-hybridity characteristics in the definition of hybridization, the phenomenon of cultural amalgamation and appropriation can, optimistically, be better understood and contextualized. In Chohra’s memoir, there are certain cultural aspects of the author’s Arab identity that cannot be blended with French culture. Hybridization may indeed include characteristics and expressions of hybridity, but may also acknowledge certain distinctions in cultural expressions and traditions that cannot be blended. Chohra’s memoir, *Volevo diventare bianca*, reveals instances of hybridization.

Chohra grew up in France as a *beurette*, French-born to Algerian parents. She later moved to Italy, where she married an Italian man. Her memoir primarily discusses her childhood and upbringing in Marseille. The book is a series of vignettes
dealing with issues relating to identity and race. Although it does not take place in Italy, the memoir is still an important contribution to the genre of Italian literature of migration written by an Arab. The book is written in Italian and is clearly destined for an Italian audience. Chohra could have easily written in French, but, as Gnisci explains, this book attempts to converse with Italians so that Chohra and her Italian audience can “veer together toward a common area.” This common area is the recognition of the migrant’s identity and presence in society. Chohra aims to narrate her experiences to Italians so that Italians can have a better understanding of the migrant’s current place in Italian society.

Additionally, Chohra’s story is a trans-migration narrative across generations that contains important themes and examines difficulties experienced by other migrants in Italy. Her “post-ethnic, post-migrant identity translates into the Italian context, where [she] lives and marries an Italian man, by creating her self as different from the new migrants who are living the lives her parents experienced.” Chohra does occupy a position of in-betweenness in which her identity is constantly being refashioned. As a child in France, she is regarded as a culturally hybrid Arab, but in Italy, as a young woman, she is seen as a culturally hybrid European. As the title suggests, the memoir has parallels with Fanon’s work. Chohra’s various childhood attempts to become white demonstrate her preoccupation with race that characterizes Fanon’s work and his examples of the split identity of blacks who adopt, or attempt to adopt, aspects of the

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89 Like many works by migrant writers, an editor assisted Chohra in writing the memoir and narrating her experiences in Italians. As indicated in the bibliography, the editor was Alessandra Atti Di Sarro. 
90 Gnisci 75-6. (See footnote 12.)
91 Parati, 88.
92 Ibid.
majority culture. The title of the memoir indicates that Chohra was once searching for a white mask and identity to cover her dark Arab skin.

Chohra’s childhood experiences demonstrate that she once inhabited a “zone of nonbeing,” which Fanon states is characteristic of many people of color. Chohra is French; she grew up in France and speaks French fluently. However, her Algerian background, dark skin, and Muslim faith and traditions unmask her as the Other in French society. Chohra’s desires to overcome these barriers in order to become “completely” French, but only according to how French is defined in the culture’s langage. Chohra aims to bring her identity into line with prevalent cultural norms. As a child, she narrates that she wanted to change her skin tone in an effort to become more “French.” Fanon recognizes “the internalization—or better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority.” Chohra realizes her inferiority comes from, above all, her skin color, which places her in a “zone of nonbeing” and a desire to become white.

As she matures and comes to realize that changing her skin color is impossible, Chohra attempts to become “white” in other ways, primarily by adopting French cultural customs. The following examples demonstrate that an assumed and imposed cultural hierarchy influence Chohra’s aspirations of hybridity. They also indicate that there is a degree of “fixed identifications” and that the “interstitial passage” between the two will ultimately favor one cultural norm, demonstrating the cultural Darwinism as outlined by Kompridis.

Chohra’s awareness of her inferiority came at a young age in a disturbing exchange with a neighbor. Chohra was not even aware of her skin difference until it

93 Fanon, 10
94 Ibid, 11.
was pointed out to her. One day, while playing with her French neighbor, Chohra asks to have one of her neighbor’s old, but still beautiful dolls. The neighbor’s response was simply no and her reason was because Chohra had dark skin, while the doll’s skin was white. At that moment, Chohra first grasps the epidermalization of her inferiority.

Fu come se mi avesse dato uno schiaffo. Nessuno me lo avevo mai detto—per la verità non me n’ero mai accorta—che il colore della mia pelle facesse differenza, che essere nera fosse peggio che essere bianca.  

[It was like someone had hit me. No one had ever told me before—and truth be told, I wasn’t even aware of it—that the color of my skin was different and that being black was worse than being white.]

She runs home to look at herself in a mirror and convinces herself that the fact she has darker skin explains all the unhappiness and unfairness in life, such why she does not have any dolls or why her family is poor. At that moment, Chohra vows to “become” white. From this point on, she is determined to escape her “inferiority” and undertakes various attempts to assume a white mask.

The comparison of white/black and the understanding that the former is preferred in French society leads to Chohra’s obsession with becoming white. This realization accentuates the emphasis that French society places on cultural diversity. According to Bhabha, cultural diversity is “the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs” that cannot influence or be influenced by other cultural contents and customs. Cultural diversity marks distinctions between different peoples, cultures, and traditions and often places one in a privileged position. When it comes to skin color, Chohra realizes that the privileged position in French society is white and that she cannot

95 Chohra, 11.  
96 Bhabha, 34.
overcome this. Fanon remarks that this “juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a psycheexistential complex.” This “psychoexistential complex” characterizes most of Chohra’s childhood in her quest to become white.

Her first attempt is the most radical: she asks her mother for bleach in order to change her skin tone. Chohra is disappointed to have her mother’s skin tone, which is much darker than her father’s. She distances herself from her mother when she goes to school and tells the other students that her mother is blond and has blue eyes. Her mother is infuriated when Chohra says she wants her father’s much lighter skin tone. The mother realizes that she embarrasses her daughter and is also reminded of her own dark skin color. Chohra’s childish wish to use bleach makes her mother aware of her inferiority. However, the mother knows very well that bleach cannot make her escape the “zone of nonbeing.” She is frustrated that her daughter does not realize this.

Fanon explores this same preoccupation with bleach in the memoir written by Mayotte Capécia called Je suis Martiniquaise. In this book, the protagonist’s preoccupation about being black stems from early childhood as well. At first, Mayotte attempts to “blacken” her fellow pupils by throwing ink on them. However, her efforts to negrify the world prove futile and so she tries “in her own body and in her own mind, to bleach it.” Mayotte becomes a laundress and is proud to be the most sought after laundress in all of Martinique. She sees her work as whitening the world and laundry becomes a metaphor for whitening herself. It is an opportunity to exit her “zone of nonbeing” as black and enter the white world.

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97 Fanon, 12.
99 Fanon, 45.
Although bleach may be an impossible way to assume a white mask, the adoption of certain clothing provides another way to adopt the dominant culture’s conventions. Clothing is an example of a cultural tradition. Embracing the clothing style of the society can lead to recognition and acceptance. However, it also demonstrates an imposed hierarchy and cultural dominance as the hybrid adopts the clothing standards in order to be acknowledged. It is an instance of cultural Darwinism as the hybrid recognizes the superiority of the dominant language over her own. This situation is apparent in Chohra’s memoir. In one vignette, Chohra becomes jealous of her fellow classmates’ First Communion ceremonies and is enthralled by the beautiful white dresses of her Catholic friends. After one First Communion party, she states:

Non avevo più dubbi, dovevo a tutti i costi diventare cattolica, così avrei potuto indossare anch’io l’abito bianco della prima comunione.100

[I no longer had any doubts. I had to become Catholic, so that I too could wear the white dress of First Communion.]

Becoming Catholic is another way of assuming a white mask, which, for Chohra, is realistically represented in the pure white clothing of the First Communion ceremony.101 It is also part of becoming a member of the majority culture and religion. Chohra wants this and continually asks her parents why she can’t have a First Communion or why the family doesn’t celebrate Christmas.

The pithy response “perché tu non sei cattolica” (because you’re not Catholic) eventually begins to irritate her. Chohra soon plans her own First Communion and begins to invite her fellow students until her teacher interrupts her, asks if her parents know of

100 Chohra, 65-6.
101 This again draws parallels with the concept of purity, bleach, and clothing Fanon discusses in his analysis of Capécia’s memoir.
the ceremony, and reminds her that religious differences are a fact of life. The teacher attempts to explain the existence and equality of various ways of living:

Ognuno ha la sua maniera di vivere, di concepire, di preiare, di vestirsi o di mangiare in modo differente. Questo non vuol dire che certe persone siano peggiori o migliori di altri, semplicemente hanno una cultura diversa. E devi sapere che nel tuo caso non è possibile fare la comunione perché i tuoi genitori sono musulmani e non credo che condividerebbero questa tua decisione.102

[Everyone has a different way of living, conceiving, praying, dressing and eating. This doesn’t necessarily mean that certain people are worse or better than others. They simply have a different culture. And you must know that in your case it’s not possible to have a communion because your parents are Muslims and I don’t think they would share this decision of yours.]

Previously Chohra had seen her Arab identity only in contrast to French society. She regards her Arab customs as inferior and lacking and attempts to reach a hybridity through the adoption of French cultural practices, in this case the First Communion. However, the teacher explains that this is impossible. First, there is a binarity between Islam and Catholicism and no amount of “in-betweenness” or creation of a “third space” can change this. Chohra does not realize this at this stage. She responds that she has become Catholic simply because she now eats salami and drinks wine.103 The teacher chuckles and tries to explain that being Catholic entails more than wine and salami. Other important rituals must be performed even before the First Communion. Shocked by this news, Chohra realizes that she is still Muslim.104

Additionally, this example proves that a hybridity of identity is not exclusively up to the individual, as Kompridis explains. Chohra is tied to her Muslim community through her heritage and leaving it is not so simple. It is not only Chohra who determines

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102 Ibid, 68.
103 Ibid, 68. “Io mangio il salame e bevo il vino, perciò sono cattolica.”
104 Ibid.
her inclusion or exclusion from this community, but also the community itself. As the teacher explains, Chohra’s parents in particular have a role in defining her identity, especially at her young age. Her parents who see a value in their Muslim traditions, and aim to impart them to their daughter, would inevitably reject her individual appropriation of French cultural customs and her desire to become Catholic. Chohra alone does not have total power in refashioning her identity. As Kompridis maintains, it is not completely up to the individual to what extent he binds himself or is bound by the traditions of his community or heritage. The individual’s aspirations for hybridity may be rejected by his community, which could regard hybridity as impossible.

In this instance, Chohra’s attempt to achieve a hybridity of identity exemplifies the shortcomings that Kompridis outlined. Bhabha’s assertion that “cultural hybridity…entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” is disproved here. Chohra’s desire to become Catholic demonstrates that dominant cultural norms influenced her actions; her attempt of hybridity privileges the French Catholic cultural tradition over her own. Her inability to merge certain aspects of her identity in order to create an area of “interstices” disproves Bhabha’s view that all cultural exchanges eventually result in hybridity. This vignette also refutes the notion that all instances of identity formation are individually based. Whether she likes it or not, Chohra’s parents, and even the greater Muslim community, have a say in defining her Muslim identity. The fact that she ate pork and drank wine does not immediately make her Catholic. Rather, this episode is an instance of hybridization since it acknowledges certain demarcations in cultural expressions and traditions that cannot be synthesized. The explanation of Chohra’s teacher describes these cultural distinctions. It also outlines the absurdity of
Chohra’s attempt to become Catholic since she completely ignores other important traditions and practices in the religion. The teacher attempts to explain to Chohra that her Muslim traditions are not inferior nor do they make her any less French. She speaks French and lives in Marseille and is already a hybrid of different cultural circumstances. However, she cannot maintain this hybrid identity according to Bhabha’s definition of hybridity since it would result in her idealizing, adopting, and synthesizing characteristics of the dominant culture with her own. She must maintain her hybrid identity through hybridization, which recognizes certain distinctions and seeks to preserve them.

Limitations to Bhabha’s definition of hybridity and examples of hybridization can also be found in Mohamed Bouchane’s memoir *Chiamatemi Ali* [*Call Me Ali*], which documents the author’s life as a young Moroccan migrant in Milan. Bouchane leaves Morocco at twenty-four in order to find better economic opportunities in Italy. His published memoir is a translation of his diary, originally written in Arabic, in which he recorded his daily schedule and quotidian frustrations, which included, above all, his difficulties in finding work and a stable place to live.105 However, issues of identity are also central to the work as Bouchane struggles to keep his faith, culture, and customs alive during his time in Italy. The back cover of the book explains:

Nel quotidiano, lacerante confronto con un altro stile di vita, con un’altra civiltà, si fa strada la percezione di una differenza e, con essa, la necessità di salvaguardare la propria dignità di uomo.

[In the daily and agonizing confrontation with another way of living, another culture, the notion of difference is made clear, and, with it, the necessity to protect man’s dignity.]

105 Bouchane acknowledges that his friends Carla de Girolamo and Daniele Miccione, a married couple, encouraged him to publish the work. They are also the editors of the memoir and assisted him in the writing process. De Girolamo was Bouchane’s Italian instructor at a language school for immigrants in Milan.
For Bouchane, his dignity is inexorably connected with his Muslim and Moroccan identity, which must be upheld and defended. This dignity needs to be preserved from certain Italian customs that are contrary to his own Moroccan traditions. Bouchane aims to avoid instances of hybridity, as he has no desire to embrace certain Italian norms. He acknowledges his hybrid status as a migrant experiencing new cultural standards and interacting with Italians in the Italian language. However, he strives for a hybrid identity in line with hybridization that demarcates certain distinctions between cultures that simply cannot be blended.

Bouchane’s notion and understanding of cultural variety falls within Bhabha’s definition of cultural diversity, which acknowledges “pre-given cultural contents and customs.” Bhabha favors the term cultural difference and links this expression with his definition of hybridity. He states:

> The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization…The subject of the discourse of cultural difference is dialogical or transferential…Cultural difference does not simply represent the contention between oppositional contents or antagonistic traditions of cultural value. Cultural difference introduces into the process of cultural judgment and signification that sudden shock of the successive, non-synchronic time of signification.\(^\text{106}\)

Bouchane’s narrative would most likely not accommodate Bhabha’s definition of cultural diversity as an example of “totalized cultures unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations.”\(^\text{107}\) Bhabha criticizes the notion of a complete detachment of different cultures and Bouchane’s presence in Italy and meaningful interactions with Italians disrupts any totalized separation. Nevertheless, Bouchane does believe in certain “oppositional contents” and “antagonistic traditions of cultural value.”

\(^{106}\) Bhabha, 162.
\(^{107}\) Ibid, 34.
realizes that there is a degree of cultural dominance in cultural difference and hybridity, just as Kompridis outlined. Bouchane encounters certain traditions in Italy that he has no desire to appropriate or blend with his own. Contrary to Bhabha’s statement above, Bouchane often takes his “signifying position of the minority” to accentuate variations between Moroccan and Muslim culture and Italian and Catholic culture. He refutes the notion of the inherent “dialogical or transferential” nature of cultural norms. He avoids a degree of hybridity as a way to defend his identity. His experiences are better characterized as a hybridization of identity, as he does respect and adopt certain features of Italian culture, particularly the language, while still maintaining his distinct Muslim and Moroccan identity.

As that of a young migrant, Bouchane’s faith in Islam acts as a bastion, giving him direction and a sense of distinctiveness, as well as collectiveness. Religion is central to his life and the reader realizes this immediately since the memoir opens with the basmallah (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) in Italian. Faith provides Bouchane with a cultural identity, giving him self-esteem and a sense of place. The familiar Arabic phrase Insh’Allah, or God willing, is also found in the memoir. These phrases that are particular to Bouchane’s cultural langage are present in his memoir that utilizes the Italian langue. He is making his Italian identifiably other. By mixing aspects of his own langage with the dominant culture’s langue, Bouchane and his Italian audience can veer together toward a common area of understanding, as Gnisci explains. By using these phrases, Bouchane seeks to assert and emphasize his Muslim identity to his Italian audience. His use of Italian as a “minor” language demonstrates

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108 Gnisci, 75-6. (See footnote 12.)
his marginalized position and also shows his hybridization.

Bouchane writes that he goes to the mosque often, and enjoys doing so since it gives him a sense of calm and community. He makes sure that he fasts during Ramadan and is very attentive about eating halal meat. These instances stress his Muslim identity to those around him, as well as to himself. They are a means to deal with “the daily and agonizing confrontation” of living in a foreign country and participating in a foreign culture. At the mosque, Bouchane seeks out friendships with other Muslims migrants, particularly those from Morocco, as a way to preserve his Muslim and Moroccan identity. He states:

Il mio coure si apre e finalmente, dopo tante preoccupazioni, mi sento bene. Fra tanta gente che parla la mia lingua e professa la mia stessa religione sono a casa. Mi sembra di essere un naufrago che rischiava di annegare e all’improvviso ha trovato un pezzo di legno al quale aggrapparsi.109

[My heart finally opened and after so much anxiety I felt okay. Among so many people who speak my language and profess my religion, I truly feel at home. It was like being a castaway from a shipwreck who was at risk of drowning and at the last moment found a piece of wood to grab hold of.]

The mosque provides relief for Bouchane since he is able to express his Muslim identity fully and meet and interact with others like him. He feels a collective identity with the fellow migrants there. He is not attached to the mosque because it is a place of tranquility and reflection, but, rather, because it is a venue where he can meet other Muslims and assert his religion and cultural practices. Bouchane’s feelings demonstrate one of Kompridis’ shortcomings of hybridity: the “normalization of cultural fluidity and change.”110 Bouchane does not possess a flexible identity than can be situated to every new setting. His Muslim identity does not change in Italy. Rather, he becomes

109 Bouchane, 15.
110 Kompridis, 322.
uncomfortable that he cannot always articulate it. The mosque provides Bouchane a clear reference point where he can uphold his Muslim and Moroccan identity in the face of the foreign cultural norms that he encounters in Italy.

Despite his attempts to preserve his Muslim and Moroccan identity, Bouchane is very diligent about learning Italian and having meaningful exchanges with Italians. He gets to know people through his Italian language classes. These include migrants from other parts of the world and even friends of his Italian instructors. Bouchane begins to go with them to pizzerias and even bars, although he never orders alcohol. He is even invited to a Christmas celebration at the house of his Italian instructor, Carla, where he has a significant conversation with a young Italian woman in which he acknowledges and respects the differences of Italian culture from his own:

A un certo punto Laura mi chiede a bruciapelo: “Ma tu cosa pensi di noi, delle donne italiane?” Non so cosa rispondere. Forse crede che stia zitto perché non apprezzo il loro comportamento e non voglio offenderla, però non so davvero cosa dire. Gli italiani hanno uno stile di vita talmente diverso dal nostro che non sono in grado di giudicarlo. “Non lo so,” ammetto. “Ma ci penserò e cercherò di darti una risposta, prima o poi.”

[At a certain point Laura asks me point-blank: “So what do you think of us Italian women?” I don’t know how to respond. Maybe she thinks I’m being quiet because I don’t really like their behavior and that I don’t want to offend her, but I really just don’t know what to say. Italians have a style of life completely different from ours and I don’t think that I’m in a position to judge it. “I don’t know,” I admit. “But I’ll think about it and give you a response sooner or later.”]

If Bouchane did respond to Laura, the answer to her question is not found in his published memoir. His inability to answer perhaps stems from the fact that he has not spent enough time in Italy to provide an adequate response. Bouchane does not want to risk unfairly characterizing Italian society and people, even though he has often

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111 Bouchane, 119.
been unfairly classified himself. He is hesitant to articulate his thoughts and opinions.

In this example, Bouchane approaches and understands cultural variances in a way that fits Bhabha’s definition of cultural diversity, rather than cultural difference, which Bhabha maintains is the preferred way to understand such variances. In the exchange, Bouchane acknowledges the fundamental distinctions between his own culture and Italian culture. Although he himself may be in an “in-between” space, as a young Moroccan migrant in Italy, he does not use this position to enter into a “discourse of cultural difference.” He simply does not want to (mis)judge Italian culture and does not even attempt to “rearticulate” his opinions on Italy based on his personal experiences and perspectives.

Bouchane simply states that “Italians have a style of life completely different from ours,” which includes some pre-given cultural traditions and customs that he cannot yet understand. His recognition of certain distinctions makes him understand culture more along the lines of cultural diversity. He realizes that there are divergent cultural norms and traditions that cannot be completely blended. The migrant, who occupies a hybrid position, will not always adequately understand them. Bouchane realizes that there are some aspects of Italian culture that even his “in-between” position will not allow him to fully grasp, nor can his presence and articulation of these differences influence Italian culture, as Bhabha maintains. Bouchane’s “signifying position of the minority” will not always result in a “dialogical or transferential” discourse of diverging cultural norms. Hence, Bouchane’s identity formation fits better within the definition of hybridization, which recognizes that the minority will not always appropriate the dominant culture’s

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{112}} \text{Bhabha, 162.} \]
norms, nor will his unique position result in an adequate understanding of these divergent traditions.
Chapter 6: Negated Identities and Sentiments of Alienation

These instances of hybridization from the memoirs of Chohra and Bouchane provide examples of the authors expressing and fashioning their identities, despite obstacles. However, the preoccupation of being completely ignored and overlooked in society is also a serious concern for many migrants. An erasure of identity or a lack of acknowledgement is probably more common than a continual re-creation. This preoccupation of having no identity, or the lack of its acknowledgment, is demonstrative of the obsession of inhabiting a “zone of nonbeing,” as described by Fanon. Often, the migrant is simply not recognized and completely ignored in the foreign culture.

The short poem *Nessuno [No one]* by the poet Aziz Bouzidy, originally from Morocco, captures the sentiments of alienation and estrangement of the migrant experience. The inability of the migrant to speak for himself is present in the short poem. The first lines are:

Non chiedetemi il mio nome
tutti i nomi sono il mio nome
la mia vita così corta
eterne, sono le sofferenze. 113

[Don’t ask me my name
all names are my name
my life so short,
but eternal are the sufferings.]

Bouzidy’s poem does not conform to the hybridity and fluidity of identities as articulated by Bhabha. The “third space” or “in-between” area, as Bhabha defines, is an

113 Ramberti & Sangiorgi, 27.
optimal area for the Other, or migrant, to contest cultural diversity, accentuate cultural difference, and construct a hybrid identity through a dialogical appropriation of various cultural expressions. In the poem the narrator has lost all sense of singularity. The poem expresses the negation of the singularity of identity, which is so crucial to Bhabha’s definition of hybridity.

The poem exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari’s characteristic of collective enunciation in minor literature. Deleuze and Guattari explain that, in minor literature, what “each author says individually already constitutes a common action.”114 This allows the individual author to express a sense of community and to forge the means for a shared consciousness and sensibility.115 However, the narrator of Nessuno is not relishing in the opportunity to give a shared voice to his fellow migrants through the poem. Rather, he laments the fact that Italian society views migrants as a collective mass lacking differences and incapable of individual identities. The phrase “all names are my name” does not indicate that the poet believes he has a varied, hybrid identity. Rather, he believes that Italian society regards all migrants as a singular mass. Migrants are often viewed as a joint group that is not even worthy of being identified as individuals. This negation of identity is thus imposed by society, which regards the migrant as an unequal Other. In the poem, the narrator attempts to articulate his individual identity, not a collective and negated one.

Furthermore, the presentation of the migrant and his participation in society is faked in order to conform to the expectations of those around him.

Sono un sorriso
sulle labbra di una faccia triste.

114 Deleuze & Guattari, 153.
115 Ibid. 154
Sono un fiore
che spunta dalla cenere.
Sono il sogno
che i futuristi hanno negato,
e hanno manipolato un fantasma
che siamo costretti ad imitare.  

[I am a smile
on the lips of a sad face.
I am a flower
which sprouts from the ashes.
I am a dream
which the futurists have negated,
and manipulated a specter
that we are forced to imitate.]

The narrator’s pessimism is apparent; he does not share the more positive outlooks on hybridity that characterize Bhabha’s analysis. For the narrator, a migrant’s identity is imposed and demands conformity, much as in Fanon’s clear-cut black and white interpretation. The migrant is a “specter” of his former self and is destined to “imitate” the established societal views of migrants and non-Italians. There is no hybridity or refashioning of identity, but, rather, the imposition of collective identity and expectations.

_Nostalgia_, another of Bouzidy’s poems, deals with these same themes. The poem is in the form of a letter written to the narrator’s mother describing his difficulties as a migrant in Italy. The poem is also self-referential and explores the efficacy and usefulness of writing. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker tells his mother that he does not know what to write. He states: “Non riesco più trovare le parole” [I can no longer find the words], but he must write something since “la penna nella mia mano diventa pesante e le parole…” [the pen in my hand is becoming heavy and the words…].  

The narrator does not even use an adjective to describe these “words,” nor

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116 Ramberti & Sangiori, 27.
does he finish the phrase. The pen is a weight in his hand and indicates that he carries a burden, which forces him to write. However, the narrator does not initially tell his mother (or the reader) what he must exactly communicate. He does not have any premeditated or specific intentions to convey. He is using writing as a way to express himself and his thoughts. Nevertheless, his letter has a clear message and does not recount any romantic notions of his time and experiences abroad in Italy. While the poet has difficulty expressing himself, he is still committed to describing his difficulties.

The narrator of the poem simply begins to write “senza introduzione” [without introduction]. \(^{118}\) He starts by comforting his mother asserting from abroad: “Posso dividere ancora il bene dal male” [I can still tell good from bad]. \(^{119}\) Nevertheless, he feels out of place [strano] and begins to doubt if his mother even raised him correctly. He states: “qui cara madre è cambiato il gioco/ le regole del gioco qui si parla un altro linguaggio” [here dear mother the game has changed/ the rules of the game, here they speak another linguaggio]. \(^{120}\) It is interesting and significant that Bouzidy chose the word linguaggio, instead of lingua. \(^{121}\) Lingua means language and refers to specific languages, i.e. la lingua italiana, or the Italian language. Linguaggio indicates the way in which lingua is used in communication refers to the specific mode or style that people adopt when they employ lingua. The narrator’s feelings of estrangement are not tied to his difficulty in understanding Italian. Rather, he seems out of place since Italian society employs a medium that he cannot fully comprehend and with which he cannot always

\(^{117}\) Ibid.
\(^{118}\) Ibid.
\(^{119}\) Ibid., 27
\(^{120}\) Ibid., 28
\(^{121}\) The definitions and usage of lingua/linguaggio are analogous to the French langue/langage that have already been used throughout this thesis. The French terms will be re-employed after the discussion of Bouzidy’s poem.
adequately engage. His feelings of nostalgia are directly connected to his inability to understand this other *linguaggio*.

The inability of the narrator to fully understand the Italian *linguaggio* also indicates the limits of hybridity and cultural difference. Bhabha’s “third space” allows the migrant to use his unique position to enter into a dialogue with the major culture by appropriating its language. However, a knowledge of the major Italian language may not simply be enough to understand the culture’s *linguaggio*. The lack of understanding of the *linguaggio* indicates that certain areas of cultures cannot be totally crossed. The narrator thus acknowledges cultural diversity and hybridization. The narrator certainly is a hybrid who can speak *la lingua italiana*, but he cannot always fully comprehend *il linguaggio italiano*.

In addition to these linguistic difficulties, the narrator is also frustrated by the stereotypes that he confronts daily. He is judged immediately before being able to express and identify himself. He states: “sinceramente non mi piace affatto quando e come sono stato schedato” [frankly I do not like when and how I am categorized].

Regarded as a foreigner and an Other, the narrator is perceived as being the same as every other migrant:

> Siamo più o meno tutti uguali,
> lo sporco lava-vetri
> il delinquente spacciatore
> e il ’vu cumprà ignorante
> siamo tutti in uno
> e non siamo nessuno.

[We’re all more or less the same,
the dirty window washer
the criminal drug dealer]

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122 Ramberti & Sangiori, 28,
123 Ibid.
and the ignorant ‘vu cumprà’
we’re all one
and we’re no one].

He claims that he is treated worse than animals and people never take pity on his situation. Instead, he is mocked and derided. Furthermore, he states: “dicono che capisco solo il linguaggio dei cammelli” [others say that I only understand the linguaggio of camels]. The narrator is not only mocked for his foreignness within Italian culture, but his original Arab culture is also derided and belittled. It is apparent that the narrator is frustrated with his own personal difficulties as a migrant in Italy. Yet, he is equally infuriated with the cultural chauvinism that he finds in Italy, another factor that contributes to his estrangement from Italian society and his feelings for nostalgia.

Bouzidy’s poem Nostalgia stands out from the previous poem because it specifically addresses feelings of estrangement and distance from his homeland, and not only within Italian society. Nessuno deals with the narrator’s inability to be recognized within Italy. Others define the narrator by imposing a collective identity on him. The narrator is not even afforded an opportunity to express his true self, and is thus regarded as a no one. Nostalgia, however, portrays the double perspective of the narrator as an outsider both within Italian society and as estranged from his home country. The poem is as equally critical of Italian culture as it is of Arab culture. The narrator tells his mother:

Siamo maltrattati
in oriente e in occidente
solo perché la nostra storia
è sporcata
dai nostri piccoli grandi sultani

124 The term “vu cumprà” is a derogatory term for a migrant who works as an itinerant street vendor. The term comes from the Italian phrase “Vuoi comprare?” or “Do you want to buy?” and indicates the foreigner’s difficulty in Italian pronunciation and verb conjugation.

125 Ibid.
e scritta da grandissimi bugiardi.¹²⁶

[We are maltreated
in the East and the West,
because our history
is sullied
by our little big sultans
and written by huge liars.]

Here, the narrator cites and condemns the reasons for his migration. The disrespect and derision he encounters in Italy is denounced, but he also criticizes the leaders and intellectuals in his home country as causes for his migration. The nostalgia that he feels is not a yearning for the difficulties and obstacles that forced him to migrate, but rather a hope that these problems will soon be resolved. The narrator ends the poem with the following statement:

Dovunque siamo
la patria rimarrà la nostra causa
la nostra ferita permanente
quando l’avremo curate/ il tè alla menta
lo gusteremo assieme.¹²⁷

[Wherever we are
the homeland will remain our cause,
our permanent wound,
and when we’ve cured it/ we will enjoy mint tea together.]

Although the geographical origin of the narrator is never made explicit, the reference to “mint tea” betrays the narrator’s Moroccan origins and gives the reader reason to believe that the narrator may well be Bouzidy himself lamenting the factors and problems in Morocco that forced his migration to Italy.

These factors include the economic and political problems of Morocco under the

¹²⁶ Ibid, 29.
¹²⁷ Ibid.
reign of King Hassan II who ruled the country from 1961 until his death in 1999. (The poems were published in 1995.) During that time, and even today, although the situation is improving under King Muhammad VI, economic disparity was a major issue in Morocco. According to a 1980 UN Report, “more than 5 million people live in rural areas and 2 million in the towns lived below the absolute poverty line with $200 a head a year or less.” Yet, the upper class, and the king in particular, lived in extreme wealth. Corruption was also prevalent at all levels of government. Financial aid of Western governments largely remained in elites’ private pockets and lucrative business contracts often included bribes. The immense capital of the Dar al-Makhzen, or the royal treasury, was not fully utilized to better the economic situation of the Moroccan people. These economic hardships during Bouzidy’s childhood most likely motivated his migration and are the source of his frustrations articulated in the poem *Nostalgia*.

Political factors during King Hassan II’s also caused great frustration among the Moroccan lower classes. Above all was the king’s unyielding power. Although Morocco enjoyed “the principles of a constitutional monarchy, the legislative and executive structures, the multi-party system, and the ideals of freedom and democracy enshrined in the constitution, [the king’s] reluctance to delegate any real power made him vulnerable.” Two failed assassination attempts only strengthened his rule and the four constitutions written during his rule were done so “without consulting either the people or the parliament, and then adopted with over 90 per cent of the vote in referendums by a

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129 Ibid, 221.
130 Ibid, 113.
131 Ibid, 4.
population which was 70 per cent illiterate.” In short, the king was an all-powerful autocrat with a cadre of loyal elites, or “little big sultans,” as described in Nostalgia, that buttressed the economic and political disparities Bouzidy laments in the poem.

The political overtones of Nostalgia reflect Bouzidy’s economic and political hardships not only in Italy, but also Morocco. This poem demonstrates Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that minor literature is inherently political since it links personal experiences with greater political problems that specifically pertain to and affect the minority within the dominant culture. Deleuze and Guatarri explain:

The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.

Issues of identity and obstacles faced by migrants are presented as collective, not individual, problems in Bouzidy’s two poems. Bouzidy destroys any notion of individuality by titling one of his poems Nessuno in which the first lines state: “Non chiedetemi il mio nome/ tutti i nomi sono il mio nome” [Don’t ask me my name/ all names are my name]. In this poem, the narrator’s individual alienation and marginalization is an opportunity to demonstrate that other migrants in his position share the same concerns and frustrations. The poem speaks for these migrants as well. This awareness of collectiveness is also found in Nostalgia when the narrator states: “siamo tutti in uno e non siamo nessuno” [we’re all one and we’re no one]. Through these two poems, Bouzidy seeks to express the difficulty in asserting and affirming his identity within Italian society as he is often unfairly grouped and stereotyped with his fellow migrants. His individuality is negated and ignored. A hybridity of identity is impossible

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132 Ibid.
133 Deleuze & Guattari, 153.
134 Ramberti & Sangiori, 27.
135 Ibid, 28.
since the *langage* of Italian culture cannot be completely overcome. Yet, Bouzidy uses this imposed collectiveness of his identity in order to give a voice to himself and his fellow migrants. His personal problem of a negated individuality is common to all migrants and accentuates the marginalized position and alienation of migrants in Italian society.

Bouzidy’s poems are particularly interesting because they cannot be classified solely within the tradition of a minor, Italian literature of migration that appropriates the major language in order to engage with Italian society. Bouzidy has left traces of his “Arabness” in these two works and these poems could even be placed within the Arab tradition, despite the fact that they are written in Italian. The poems are not only an example of a minor literature as described by Deleuze, but also an example of *adab al-iltizām*, or *la littérature engagée*, that is committed, often political literature, a distinct literary movement in contemporary Arabic literature.\(^{136}\) The political and economic factors of Morocco cited above are crucial to understanding the poem. Bouzidy criticizes both the East and West for his current condition. The “little big sultans” in his own country that deprived him of economic opportunities and the ability to express himself politically are condemned along with Italians who reject his individuality. Hence, these

\(^{136}\) In his book, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.), M. M. Badawi traces the emergence of *adab al-iltizām* to the early 1950s. In some ways, *adab al-iltizām* is a reaction against Romanticism, which had characterized previous Arabic literary output, from emigrant, or *mahjar*, writers like Jibran Khalil Jibran to writers still residing within the Arab world, such as the famous Tunisian poet Abu’l Qāsim al-Shābbī. English Romantics, such as William Blake and John Keats, particularly influenced these Arab Romantics. The *multāzim*, or engaged/ committed, writers of the subsequent generation were likely influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of *engagement* in literature in his essay “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?,” as well as internal factors within the Arab World at the time, particularly the recent independence of many Arab countries and the creation of Israel and the Palestinian refugees in 1948. *Adab al-iltizām* calls for the writer to have a pertinent and important message in his text and not simply to produce a creative and imaginative work. Committed literature must bring attention to an important societal and/ or political issue facing Arabs at the time.
poems of fall within the realm of minor or migrant literature, as well as the genre of *adab al-iltizām*.

Roger Allen states that *adab al-iltizām* serves as a “mirror and a critic of the society within which it is conceived.”\(^{137}\) He cite the Lebanese novelist and sociologist Halim Barakat to explain the nature of the genre:

Contemporary Arab writers have been preoccupied with themes of struggle, revolution, liberation, emancipation, rebellion, alienation. A writer could not be part of Arab society and yet not concern himself with change. To be oblivious to tyranny, injustice, poverty, deprivation, victimization, repression is insensitively proper. I would even say that writing about Arab society without concerning oneself with change is a sort of *engagement* in irrelevances.\(^{138}\)

*Adab al-iltizām* clearly exists “outside the whale,” as described by Salman Rushdie.\(^{139}\) Its content is political and seeks to engage with pertinent issues of the time. Bouzidy’s poems simultaneously fall within the *adab al-iltizām* genre of contemporary Arabic literature and within the emerging Italian literature of migration genre. The poems have two levels of criticism, one that describes the narrator’s difficulties as a migrant in Italy, and another in which he laments and criticizes the reasons that caused his migration.

The poems provide an example of the “double” perspective of the migrant. Bouzidy is not only articulating the difficulties he has faced in Italy, but also in his home country. This “double” perspective engages with the problems of the foreign society, Italy, as well those of his native land, Morocco. In doing so, Bouzidy demonstrates “the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority,” as articulated by Bhabha. This ambivalence is defined as “the attempt to dominate in the *name* of a cultural


\(^{138}\) Ibid, 69.

\(^{139}\) Rushdie, 1991.
In these poems, Bouzidy not only challenges the cultural supremacy of Italy, which has denied him an individual identity, but also the “little big sultans” of his home country, Morocco, who are equally responsible for his current predicament and his migration. The poems are politically relevant for two cultures. It is clear that the issues at the center of what Deleuze defines as “minor” literature are also the same as those in the adab al-iltizām genre, a prominent movement in the Arab world that cannot be considered “minor.” Bouzidy is challenging Italian cultural authority from the marginalized position of a migrant in Italian society and criticizing Moroccan cultural authority from the marginalized position of a citizen forced to migrate.

The poems’ relevance as a way to engage with Morocco is apparent since the word patria (homeland in English) appears once in Nessuno and twice in Nostalgia. In the final lines of Nessuno, the narrator states:

l’amore della libertà
della vita
e della patria
è l’unica cura della nostra
ferita profonda.¹⁴¹

[the love of liberty
of life
and of the homeland
is the only cura in our
profound wound.]

These lines are similar to those in Nostalgia:

la patria rimarrà la nostra causa
la nostra ferita permanente.

[the homeland will remain our cause,
our permanent wound.]

¹⁴⁰ Bhabha, 34. (Italics in the original.)
¹⁴¹ Ramberti & Sangiorgi, 27.
In both poems, the *patria* is described as a “profound wound,” or *ferita* and in the first instance the *patria* is the *cura* for this profound wound. The choice of the word *cura* is very important. It can mean “cure,” “heal,” or “medical treatment,” but can also be interpreted as “concern,” “care,” “preoccupation,” or “worry.” The *patria* is both the reason and the cure for the migrant’s current alienation. The deep pain that migrants harbor is not solely tied to their difficulties abroad, but also to the distance from their country of origin. These fond memories of nostalgia for the home country can alleviate the migrant’s suffering abroad, but these same memories remind the migrant of the reasons that necessitated his migration and reinforce his feelings of alienation.

Although the *patria* is also a sore that needs to be healed, the narrator does not exactly outline how to go about doing this. Nevertheless, this instance of writing brings attention to this important concern and criticizes those in power in the homeland for abusing their authority and causing economic difficulties that forced citizens to migrate. This criticism is directed against the regime of King Hassan II and the political and economic disparities and inequalities present during his reign. Feelings of alienation were already present in his homeland where the narrator was exploited and overlooked. Instances of negated identity also existed in the *patria* where liars wrote “our history.” Even in his homeland, the narrator does not have the ability to define himself and personally mold his identity. The “little big sultans” imposed a collective identity on him and others. Migration was regarded as a solution to these injustices, but unfortunately the narrator confronts these same issues in Italy.

The sentiments of negated identity and imposed collectiveness found in Bouzidy’s are similarly recounted in Bouchane’s memoir. In the poem *Nostalgia,*
Bouzidy complains that Italian society regards all migrants as the same, devoid of any cultural differences: “siamo tutti in uno e non siamo nessuno” [we’re all one and we’re no one]. Bouchane encounters these same sentiments when he is talking with his boss, who is also a landlord. The frustration Bouchane holds for his boss’ ignorance, stereotypes, and even hostility toward foreigners and migrants in Italy is apparent:

[Antonio is proving to be more unbearable every day. After all, he told me frankly that he doesn’t like foreigners. He’s a landlord and owns many apartments, and one of these, he rented out, naturally under the table, to a man from Senegal. When he tried to kick him out, the man refused and since Antonio didn’t even have a contract, he couldn’t even resort to legal measures. Truthfully, when he told me this story he said: “I rented a house to a black Moroccan from Senegal.” I was shocked when he said this since, for him, like for almost all Italians, foreigners are always Moroccan even if they come from Algeria, Senegal, Tunisia, or Pakistan. I told him if Moroccans from Pakistan or Moroccans from Algeria really do exist, then what am I? A Moroccan from Morocco? Or rather, a white Moroccan from Morocco?]  

The boss’ response to Bouchane’s questioning is not documented in the memoir. Yet, the recording of this exchange and publishing it is an act of challenging the negation of his Moroccan identity. Like Bouzidy, Bouchane appropriates the imposed collectiveness as a way to assert his individuality. Bouchane not only tries to demonstrate his “Moroccan-
ness,” but also the nationalities and cultural variations of other migrants who are often incorrectly labeled as “Moroccan.”

The issue of negated identity is also present in Chohra’s memoir. In one vignette, the author recounts an episode in which she responded to a casting call for an Arab actress, but when arriving at the audition, Chohra is told that she is, in fact, not Arab enough for the part. The female director tells Chohra bluntly:

Cara, ci deve essere sicuramente uno sbaglio. Io cerco un’attrice araba, con i lineamenti arabi, non una ragazza di colore. Anche se sei carina, mi dispiace tanto, ma non sei affatto quel che sto cercando.\(^{144}\)

[My dear, there certainly must be some sort of mistake. I’m looking for an Arab actress with Arab features, not a black girl. Even though you are charming, I’m very sorry, but you’re just not what I’m looking for.]

Even though Chohra explains that she is Arab of Algerian descent and offers to speak in Arabic, the director still does not believe her. In fact, she responds:

Ma, credimi, in tanti anni di questo lavoro ne ho viste di ragazze arabe, e tu, a quelle lì, non assomigli nemmeno un po’.\(^{145}\)

[Believe me that in all my years in this line of work I’ve seen plenty of Arab girls, and you don’t resemble them in the slightest.]

Shocked by the director’s insistence that she is not Arab, Chohra continues to assure her that she is indeed Arab. The director, however, is persistent and quickly asks Chohra to leave.

Reflecting on this incident, Chohra remarks that it was ironic that for so long she wanted to become white since at that moment she wanted nothing more than to resemble the “typical” Arab, or at least the typical Arab that the director was casting. She states:

Quando penso che da bambina volevo a tutti i costi assomigliare a una francese!

\(^{144}\) Chohra, 103.
\(^{145}\) Ibid, 104.
In quel momento, la cosa che più avrei desiderato al mondo era assomigliare a un’araba!\(^{146}\)

[Now I can’t believe that as a child I wanted nothing more than to resemble the French! In that very moment, the thing that I wanted more than anything else in the world was to resemble an Arab!]

Chohra realizes that being Arab in France is not always about identifying oneself as Arab, but rather being identified by the French as Arab. This identification depends on skin color. Chohra disagrees with this:

Una persona non è mica araba perché ha dei particolari lineamenti, o un modo di vestirsi un po’ più orientale degli altri, una persona è araba perché ha del sangue arabo nelle vene. E basta!\(^{147}\)

[A person isn’t Arab just because of certain physical features, or a particular way of dressing that may be a little more ‘Oriental’ than others. A person is Arab if he has Arab blood in his veins. That’s all!]

In this instance, Chohra is contesting the “Oriental” and “Arab” identity projected upon her. While she identifies as being completely Arab, the director does not define her as Arab. Chohra disrupts the director’s “Orientalist” view of Arabs. Said notes that this Orientalist discourse places the power of identification not with the Arab, but with the European who attempts to deal with the Orient “by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, [and] ruling over it.”\(^{148}\)

This is exactly what the director does when she holds the final judgment of “Arabness.” For the director, the Orient and the Arab’s role in it is “essentially an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality.”\(^{149}\) Chohra disrupts the director’s idea and creation of the “typical” Arab and is thus dismissed for not holding up to the “realistic” standards.

\(^{146}\) Ibid.

\(^{147}\) Ibid.


\(^{149}\) Ibid, 5.
Chohra remembers this episode with particular anger because it reflects the negation of her Arab identity after she has come to terms with it. The director didn’t see Chohra as Arab because of her darker skin tone. Furthermore, Chohra was particularly upset that she wasn’t given the opportunity to adequately speak for herself, in Arabic or French, in order to articulate and demonstrate her Arab identity. In addition to the frustration stemming from her negated Arab identity, Chohra was also disappointed that she was not able to assert herself. This example also shows the power of speech in articulating identity. The only way for the Other, or the migrant, to identify himself is though speech and enunciation.
Chapter 7: Enunciation as a Means to Articulate and Affirm Identity

As the previous two chapters illustrate, there are instances from Chohra and Bouchane’s memoirs, and sentiments expressed in Bouzidy’s poems, that reveal the shortcomings in Bhabha’s concept of hybridity as outlined by Kompridis. These include: the recognition that certain aspects of cultures cannot be blended; the infinite ability to question and re-negotiate identity; the idea that identity formation is exclusively individualistic; and the privileging of the cultural norms of the dominant society. Kompridis does not discount a continual refashioning of identity. Rather, he is against the normativization of the definition of hybridity to describe such a process and wants to demarcate certain areas that cannot be so easily transcended. Kompridis’ argument is useful in highlighting the limits of Bhabha’s definition of hybridity in order to move toward an alternative perspective, or hybridization. However, he does not outline how one can adequately express and articulate identity, as Fanon and Bhabha do.

Fanon does not even seem to believe in any realistic mixing of identities and cultures, especially if one culture holds a dominant position. His position is understandably different from that of Bhabha since he was writing in a colonial context where one culture was clearly dominant. Fanon would acknowledge the cultural distinctions apparent in the definitions of hybridization and cultural diversity. For example, he states: “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion
to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards.” In other words, there is no complete fusing of cultures, but rather only the appropriation of the dominant culture by the Other. The more dominant cultural standards and conventions the Other adopts, the more he is welcomed into society. This is consistent with inherent notions of cultural supremacy and cultural Darwinism that Kompridis finds in hybridity. However, there is one way that the Other can be recognized: speech. Fanon realizes this when he states: “To speak is to exist absolutely for the other” and “A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.” True signification comes through speech and enunciation. The appropriation of the dominant culture’s langue results in signification and the power to articulate and affirm identity. Any complete or total appropriation of a foreign culture’s langage is impossible and even undesirable, as evidenced by the examples in the works of Chohra, Bouchane, and Bouzidy. However, the dominant culture’s langue can be utilized to counteract stereotypes and generalizations and can counteract and question unfair and untrue notions in the prevalent langage.

The notion of mimicry is a central component in Bhabha’s theoretical discussions of hybridity and identity and can be useful in as an effective way to articulate and express identity. According to Bhabha, mimicry represents “an ironic compromise” between two different identities. It accentuates differences in “a process of disavowal.” Bhabha explains that “mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask.” The act of

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150 Fanon, 18.
151 Ibid, 17.
152 Ibid, 18.
153 Bhabha, 86.
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid, 88.
mimicry does not result in a false mask assumed to contest hegemony and imposed identities. Acts of imitation are not necessarily untruthful. Rather, mimicry is a way of revealing and affirming identity and a clear way of talking back to the dominant culture, which imposes and expects certain norms and identities.

Chohra’s memoir demonstrates the power of enunciation and the use of mimicry as a way to contest expectations and conventions, and ultimately expresses her identity. The vignette from her childhood recounting her school play particularly reflects Bhabha’s discourse on mimicry and its connection with identity and enunciation. Assigned the role of the waitress in her childhood school’s play, Chohra only has four lines, every one including the word “Madame.” Being “una ragazza con la pelle nera e i capelli crisi”\(^{156}\) [a girl with black skin and curly hair], she was not surprised that the role was assigned to her. Nevertheless, she was still happy to be part of the play and states that she had also memorized everyone else’s lines. Chohra remembers that she was very excited to act in front of “un pubblico vero”\(^ {157}\) [a true audience].

Her joy of acting in front of a “true audience” is very revealing. If a play’s audience is “true,” would the everyday audience of daily life be “fake?” The division between reality and theater is blurred in this scene as Chohra takes her assigned subservient role as an opportunity to truly speak and express herself through mimicry. Her rewriting and re-scripting of the scene is a chance for her to mimic the “Madame,” as a way of revealing her true identity. In front of all her classmates, their parents and teachers, the school play is a perfect chance for Chohra to speak and make herself be heard. The play is very real in the sense that she has a rare opportunity to signify

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\(^{156}\) Chohra, 88.

\(^{157}\) Ibid.
herself in front of a large crowd and force them to listen.

In the scene, Chohra approaches her classmate, the Madame, walking to the center of the stage with a tea tray. A crazy idea then comes to her and she decides to spill the tea on her classmate’s dress. The classmate is forced to momentarily leave the stage in order to change, leaving Chohra alone on the stage facing the audience and giving her a chance to speak. Her ensuing improvisation and mimicry prove successful:

Il professore dal fondo della sala mi guardava severo, ma il pubblico rideva e applaudiva. Era il mio grande momento. Rubai il ruolo di “Madame” ampliando sino al ridicolo. Il monologo che ne scaturì era una sorta di parodia del copione esistente che—come ho detto—conoscevo per filo e per segno.\footnote{Ibid, 89.}

[My teacher in front gave me a stern look, but the audience laughed and applauded. It was my grand moment. I stole the role of “Madame” and expanded it to a point of ridiculousness. The monologue that ensued was a sort of parody of the existing script that—as I said—I knew line by line.]

In her brief soliloquy, Chohra asserts that the role of the waitress was unsuitable for her.

Chohra tells the audience:

Sapete, miei cari ospiti, mi hanno fatto fare la cameriera, ma questo ruolo non mi si addice. Io sono una signora, una vera signora; del resto è superfluo dirlo, si vede a colpo d’occhio.\footnote{Ibid, 89.}

[As you know, my dear guests, they assigned me the waitress role, but this part doesn’t suit me. I am a Madame, a true Madame; moreover, it’s unnecessary to say so, since you can see it with your own eyes.]

Chohra states that she is no mere servant, but rather equal with the “Madame” herself, and deserving of attention and respect. Chohra also explains that she does have to state this explicitly. Her “Madame-ness” should be evident right away and does not even need to be asserted and explained. This is ironically apparent in her name since in Arabic “chohra” means fame.
Chohra’s speech refutes her imposed role in the play as a servant, as well as her societal definition as an Other. Her parody of the script is an example of mimicry and presents a problem to cultural authority in the actual representation and assertion of herself. In fact, by declaring herself a “Madame” equal with the casted “Madame” in the play, she resists an imposed identity and definition of herself. She is contesting the societal role and expectations imposed upon her in the figurative form of the play. Chohra refuses to let others define her role. She resists being categorized simply as the Other and uses the play as a means to do so. In this instance, Chohra demands that everyone recognizes her as an equal and the speech that she performs, an inversion of the set script, is an effort to signify herself and affirm her identity. She is resisting signification by using, mimicking, and mocking the very langage, which she cannot completely comprehend nor appropriate. However, she does use the dominant langue to express herself thus confirming Fanon’s statement that speaking is existing for the Other.

This vignette exemplifies Fanon’s statement: “Mastery of language affords remarkable power.”\textsuperscript{160} The instance can be understood as an instance of mimicry in which Chohra appropriates langue to contest langage. However, if the culture’s langage, can be interpreted as representing the script, then Chohra is in fact taking possession of the dominant discourse, or langage, as well. What the audience sees and hears during Chohra’s interruption is the Other suddenly speaking and thus controlling the discourse. This is the remarkable power to which Fanon refers. Through the act of enunciation, the Other has the ability to control the dominant discourse by combating stereotypes, contesting generalizations, and asserting and articulating identity.

\textsuperscript{160} Fanon, 18.
Similar instances of enunciation that demonstrate the power of language are present in Bouchane’s memoir. In the beginning of the memoir, he explains that his difficulties with Italian add to his feelings of marginalization and alienation. For example, when Bouchane begins to sell lighters and other trinkets in one of Milan’s large piazzas, he realizes that no passerby glances or even notices him. Unfortunately, he is unable to resolve this situation since he cannot speak Italian yet. He is ignored not only because he is a migrant, but also because he cannot adequately express himself in the language of the society. Bouchane lacks the capacity to signify himself and thus is easily disregarded.

Bouchane’s increasing facility with the language is a huge personal success since he can finally interact with Italians and speak for and define himself. This linguistic prowess is viewed with astonishment by Italians who are shocked to meet a migrant who can speak, and in Bouchane’s case, write, as well. Bouchane recounts one instance in which his boss was surprised after he had taken notes and calculated some of the construction expenses. Throughout the memoir, Bouchane describes how he attends Italian language classes and is very diligent about studying and progressing. He is very proud of his linguistic capabilities. His improvement in the language leads to friendships with Italians and his interactions and conversations with them are some of the first meaningful exchanges they have had with an Arab or a migrant. He even begins teaching an elderly Italian couple Arabic.

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161 Bouchane, 14.
162 Ibid, 44. Finalmente riesco a farmi capire, e con il mio italiano improvvisato posso anche mettere insieme brevi frasi di senso compiuto. [Finally, I succeed in making myself understood, and with my makeshift Italian I can also put together brief sentences of definitive meaning.]
163 Ibid, 98. E’ sinceramente stupito che io sappia leggere e scrivere. [He was truly astonished that I knew how to read and write.]
Despite these meaningful interactions, Bouchane is surprised at the ignorance some Italians have for his country. He takes advantage of his improving Italian to dispel stereotypes since Italians often categorize and label him without knowing his background. His enunciative power is a way to express and assert his identity, even if it presents him with opportunities to dispel clichéd and incorrect notions about Moroccans and Muslims. These opportunities, however, also become frustrating. He states:

E l’idea che gli italiani non sappiano nulla del mio paese si è andata rafforzando. Tutti hanno una conoscenza del Marocco legata forse a confuse ricordi cinematografici. Credono che sia un paese deserto, popolato dai selvaggi o quasi. Perché? Provincialismo? Ignoranza? Disinteresse? Fatto sta che sono veramente stanco di spiegare ogni volta che paese è il Marocco e che gente siamo noi marocchini.164

[And the idea that Italians know nothing about my country is growing. Everyone’s understanding of Morocco comes perhaps from mixed up cinematic recollections. The believe that Morocco is a desolate country inhabited by near primitive people. Why? Provincialism? Ignorance? Disinterest? The fact is that I am becoming a little tired of explaining every time what kind of country Morocco is and how Moroccans are as a people.]

He is shocked when someone asks him if there is even olive oil in Morocco.165 In another instance, Bouchane writes that he is astounded that many Italians do not realize that Morocco is only fourteen kilometers from Spain. He even becomes frustrated when explaining to two of his fellow construction workers that there are in fact automobiles in Morocco. He complains in his diary:

E non mi credono nemmeno quando dico che non ci sono cammelli fermi ai semafori: io ne ho visti soltanto due in tutta la mia vita. La prima volta in un parco, a Marrakesh, e la seconda ad Agadir, un animale tenuto lì per i turisti che vogliono fare una fotografìa esotica. Maurizio e Carlo, invece, pensavano che in Marocco ci fossero i cammelli al posto delle macchine!166

[And they (the construction workers, Maurizio and Carlo) don’t believe me when

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164 Ibid, 139.
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid, 78.
I say that there are no camels stopped at traffic lights: I’ve only seen two in my entire life. The first time, at a park in Marrakesh, and the second at Agadir, which was kept there for tourists who wanted to take an exotic photo. Maurizio and Carlo had thought that in Morocco there were camels instead of cars!

Bouchane is also questioned twice about the number of wives a Muslim man can marry. In each instance, he is taken aback and does not feel that he can adequately answer. His boss, who Bouchane describes as vulgar and rude, asks him on the first occasion. Bouchane states that the number is four “se ormai sono in pochi ad avere più di una moglie” [even though there are so few that actually have more than one wife]. He maintains that it is very difficult to explain this situation “a una persona che ha una cultura così diversa” [to a person that has a completely different culture] who knows nothing about Morocco or the lives of Muslims. Bouchane becomes irritated when his boss is amused by the answer and states that he would enjoy living in Morocco. Although Bouchane does not respond to his boss, he expresses his thoughts frankly in his diary: “non conosce niente della nostra vita” [he doesn’t know anything about our lifestyle]. The second instance occurs at a dinner among friends. Again, Bouchane finds it hard to describe and defend the reasons for marrying up to four wives. Instead, he acknowledges that there are differences between cultures that cannot always be easily explained.

These examples show the Orientalist attitude some Italians have for Morocco and are comparable to Chohra’s audition vignette in which the director told her that she was not Arab enough for the movie role. Bouchane realizes that Italian conceptions of Morocco are not based in reality, but, rather, are tied to false ideas and generalizations that stem from cultural misrepresentations, such as film. They are tied to the idea of

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167 Ibid, 72.
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid, 73.
European hegemony and the notion of “European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.” Bouchane is frustrated by Italians’ ignorance and the proliferation of misconceptions of Morocco that he finds in Italian culture. However, his interactions with Italians and explications of his cultural practices provide an opportunity to challenge these misconceptions and can contest the “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”

Gnisci believes Bouchane can just do this in his text. He explains that the most dignified lesson that the migrant can impart in his writings is a plurality of views and equality of different worlds. Gnisci hopes that Westerners will come to regard migrants as signifiers of their own cultural traditions, rather than as already defined by Orientalist misconceptions that have been imposed upon them.

These instances also demonstrate Bouchane’s recognition of cultural diversity and perhaps even the limits of enunciation. He realizes that there are set and distinct cultural conventions that cannot be explained so easily. Furthermore, he accepts that even explanations will not completely bridge these differences. There is an inherent difficulty in cultural translation, not necessarily linguistic translation. Even though he now knows the Italian langue, Bouchane cannot explain the rationale of his culture’s langage. He is aware of certain binary divisions between cultures. Bhabha explains that cultural difference is “a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity.” In these two examples, Bouchane refuses an opportunity to

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170 Said, Orientalism, 7.
171 Ibid, 3.
172 Gnisci, 103. (See footnote 11.)
173 Bhabha, 34. (Italics in the original text.)
sufficiently identify and define himself by explaining aspects of his culture since he believes that they cannot be adequately expressed. There are other examples of the limits to the power of enunciation in Bouchane’s memoir in which he does take the opportunity to identify and define himself.

During one episode, Bouchane and his fellow construction workers must go fix a roof at a convent. After a long day of work, they are invited to stay the night. Upon entering the monastery, Bouchane is amazed to see such a huge crucifix at the entrance, even bigger than the one at the Duomo in Milan. When one of monks asks him and the other workers where they are from, Bouchane becomes nervous. Immediately, his fellow construction workers say that he is Neapolitan, but Bouchane cannot help but laugh when they say this. He decides just to tell the truth and the monk responds simply and tersely: “Ah, Mohamed, il nome del Profeta. Sei musulmano?” [Ah, Mohamed, the name of the Prophet. You’re Muslim?].” Bouchane answers as his coworkers try their best “per trattenere le risate” [to stifle their laughter]. The monks’ exchange with Bouchane after he reveals that he is Muslim is not recounted in the memoir.

The title of Bouchane’s memoir itself is a testimony to the power of speech and enunciation and the signification that results. The title stems from an incident when the author was forced to assert his Moroccan and Muslim identity after his Italian coworkers tried to give him an Italian name, nearly imposing an inauthentic identity upon him. Bouchane explains:

L’unico problema è il mio nome, che non riesco a pronunciare correttamente. Prima che mi affibbino un nome italiano…passo al contrattacco. “Se non proprio riuscite a chiamarmi Mohamed” dico “allora chiametemi Ali. Scelgo Ali perché è

174 Bouchane, 59.
175 Ibid.
[The only problem is my name, which no one can ever pronounce correctly. Before I get stuck with an Italian name…I quip back: “If you really just can’t pronounce Mohamed, then call me Ali.” I choose Ali because it’s simple and, like Mohamed, is a popular and beloved name in Morocco.]

Here, Bouchane consciously decides to adopt another name when his own is too difficult for Italians to pronounce. However, he is sure to emphasize his own Moroccan and Muslim identity when taking the new name. He doesn’t want to be branded with an Italian name that he does not like and could never identify with. This name would be an imposed identity that Italian society forces on the migrant. Taking an Italian name would be a clear break with his Moroccan heritage, something Bouchane has no desire to do.

Bouchane certainly does reinvent himself in the process of migration when he takes on a new name, but it is not a refashioning of his persona in order to blend in with Italian society and cultural norms. He deliberately chooses Ali so that people will still be able to identify him as Moroccan and Muslim. The changed name is an assertion of his Moroccan and Muslim identity and cannot be characterized as hybridity. Rather, it is an example of hybridization since it recognizes the fact that there are certain cultural distinctions that cannot be transcended. Additionally, Bouchane himself does not want to transcend these distinctions. If he must take on a new name, he does not wish to be called Giovanni or Angelo, but would prefer a name that reveals him as Moroccan and Muslim. He still is a hybrid, no longer Mohamed, but still definitely not Italian.

Bouchane does not want to privilege the cultural norms of the dominant society. In Kompridis’ explanation, hybridity favors one cultural norm over another and

\[176\] Ibid, 155.
Bouchane avoids favoring Italian norms over Moroccan ones. Hence, this name-changing is an instance of hybridization. Bouchane’s name has indeed changed as a result of migration. Yet, he has not succumbed to imposed hierarchical norms that the Other faces in fashioning a hybrid identity. Bouchane’s selection of a different, but culturally significant name is a conscious decision to be recognized as a migrant within Italian society. As the previous example with the monk demonstrates, he does not wish to be mistaken for Italian. Any new name must articulate and assert his new Moroccan and Muslim identity.
Conclusion

The idea of language as the means for enunciation, signification, and expression of identity can be used to categorize and explain the phenomenon of Arab writers in the Italian literature of migration genre. These writers are using the dominant language, or langue, of the society in order to talk and engage with an Italian audience. As Gnisci explains, Italian is chosen because the writers want to reach Italians. Enunciation becomes an effective way for the migrant to signify himself because it disrupts the signified/ signifier relationship in the Italian langage. Through instances of speaking, as recounted in the memoirs, and the act of writing, as demonstrated by all these texts, the writers seek to challenge the stereotypes and generalizations placed upon them. These writers aim to move beyond the signified concepts that have been unfairly imposed as definitions and descriptions of their identities. They seek to contest untrue Orientalist projections and power dynamics that have come to define them and their cultural backgrounds. These texts also outline the cultural dominance that is evident in Bhabha’s definition of hybridity, where prevailing cultural customs unduly influence the Other’s identity formation. These works demonstrate the hybridization of identity in which certain cultural distinctions remain separated and are not blended. They also show examples of a resistance to a mixing of divergent cultural norms by the migrants themselves.

The writers of the texts aim to define and express their own identities by recounting their experiences and revealing their thoughts and opinions. This
can be perceived as a shock to Italian society, which often generalizes all migrants, assigning them a collective identity stripped of any individuality. However, enunciation provides the opportunity to appropriate this collectivity as a way to express individuality. Arab migrant experiences express general concerns faced by all migrants, but placed in an individual context. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, the individual speaks for the collective.

The texts of the Arab Italian migrants discussed in this thesis are a form of contestation and engagement with Italian society. The experiences and views articulated in them challenge the notion of “Otherness.” They espouse an identity, which has been formulated and created by the author, and not necessarily the hybrid result of imposed norms and conventions of the dominant culture. Their sociological value is apparent as they can be used to comment on and protest societal injustices. Furthermore, the sociological value of these works does not detract from their literary worth. In fact, the literary worth of the writings of Chohra, Bouchane, and Bouzidy, stems from the exploration of complex issues, related to contemporary social and economic life and its intersection with and influence on identity. The sociological value of migrant works also exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of minor literature, particularly the interconnection of the individual to the political. The works explored in this thesis are “cramped” with individual issues that are pressed down by politics and sociological concerns. Economic factors are especially prevalent in the works of Chohra, Bouchane, and Bouzidy. Each author comes from a disadvantaged economic position, which is the primary factor in his or her migration, not political circumstances. The issue of class is thus central in these works since Bouchane and Bouzidy, and Chohra during
her childhood, represent the economically disadvantaged class in European society.

Both Parati and Gnisci have recognized that the literary value of these works stems from their sociological relevance, which can bring Italians to question aspects of their own culture, specifically its relations with the ever-growing class of migrants and their children, and the economic disadvantages of these migrants. Parati and Gnisci’s different names and categorizations of the phenomenon of migrant literature are both attempts to give worth to these migrant writings. In conclusion, an examination of these and other Arab Italian migrant texts is necessary to understand the continuing phenomenon of migration to Italy, particularly since these works provide an opportunity for migrants to speak for themselves and recount their experiences, even if they are not always doing so in their own words.


