2. Subjectivity through translingual practice in Oltre Babilonia by Igiaba Scego

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Abstract In this chapter, I examine translingual practice in the Italian polyphonic novel Oltre Babilonia by Igiaba Scego. Specifically, I analyze the main protagonist Zuhra’s code-switching as heteroglossia and her translanguaging as an expression of identity and subjectivity. As a result of her language use, she is able to mix, play with, and challenge preconceptions of stable and unitary identities. Thus, through the translingual practice in the protagonist’s speech, as well as through the novel’s polyphonic narrative structure, Zuhra finds the means to express subjectivity and a coming to voice.

Keywords Igiaba Scego | Oltre Babilonia | translingualism | heteroglossia | subjectivity

Ahlan Wa sahlan, salve bambina, questa è Tunisi. Welcome to an unknown place (Scego, 2008, p. 134).1

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this article is the frequent switching between languages in the novel Oltre Babilonia ‘Beyond Babylon’ by Igiaba Scego (2008). Scego, born in Rome in 1974 to Somali parents, is one of the most prominent figures in the Italian public debate on multiculturalism. She collaborates with newspapers, such as La repubblica and Il manifesto, and literary magazines, such as Migra and El-Ghibli, putting the subjects of racism, (trans)cultural identity, dialogue, black Italians’ situation and other related issues on the agenda. Since her literary debut in 2003, Scego con-

1 “Ahlan Wa sahlan, hi girl, this is Tunis. Welcome to an unknown place” (Scego, 2008, p. 134).

The translations from Scego’s novel into English are the author’s own if not otherwise stated.
continues to draw on her own experience as a so-called second-generation migrant, and persists in discussing and portraying the aforementioned issues both in fiction as well as in her journalistic essays. Many of Scego’s literary works portray and discuss the (female) protagonists’ quest for identity and subjectivity (e.g., Scego, 2005a, 2005b, 2020), and this is also the case in Oltre Babilonia (see Skalle, 2017, 2019). In some of her works, like her debut novel La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock (Scego, 2003), where she tells the story of her mother, or in the autofictional novel La mia casa è dove sono (Scego, 2010), the links to Scego’s life are explicit, but even in other works one clearly finds resonance from the author’s personal experience as a black Italian.

The novel Oltre Babilonia is written in Italian, but all the main characters have a strong command of different languages, which is visible in both dialogues and in narrative parts of the novel. However, the focus of the present analysis is on the main protagonist Zuhra Laamane’s translingual practice. My hypothesis is that Scego uses her own translilngual resources in Oltre Babilonia not only to paint a linguistically mimetic picture of today’s Italy, but also in order to let the novel’s characters question and express ideas of identity, belonging and subjectivity. Based on this hypothesis, my analysis will answer the following research questions: To what means does Zuhra employ her translingual practice? Does the frequent code-switching occurring in Zuhra’s speech tell us anything about her problematic search for identity and belonging and her perception of sameness and difference? These research questions will be approached in light of the idea of code-switching as heteroglossia (Bailey, 2007) and the concept of translilngualism.

OLTRE BABILONIA

Oltre Babilonia is structured as a frame story. It starts and ends with Zuhra Laamane’s first-person narration which holds together and frames the novel. Within this frame, we get to know the life story of four other characters as well as Zuhra’s own: the young woman Mar, Maryam and Miranda (respectively Zuhra’s and Mar’s mothers), and the girls’ common, but unknown father, Elias. The novel’s five main characters are each given their own chapters in which they tell their stories in the form of first or third-person narratives.2 Because of this structure, Oltre Babilonia is a polyphonic novel on the narrative level, as it gives voice to a number

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2 The chapters are named by the characters’ nicknames: la Negropolitana (Zuhra, ‘the Negropolitan’), la Nus-Nus (Mar, ‘the half-half’ in Arabic), la Reaparecida (Miranda, ‘the Reappeared’ in Spanish), la Pessottimista (Maryam, ‘the pessimist’), and il Padre (Elias, ‘the Father’).
of independent characters and their worldviews. The polyphonic novel, as described by Bakhtin (1984) in his essential study of Dostoevsky’s poetics, creates:

*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices […]*. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (pp. 6–7, emphasis in the original)

Bakhtin’s description of Dostoevsky’s work applies to Oltre Babilonia as well, as each one of the novel’s main characters express their point of view independently from both the voice of the author and the main narrator, Zuhra. This plurality of independent voices offers the reader a kaleidoscopic fan of interrelated, nonetheless independent and equally important, interpretations of transnational lives.

Oltre Babilonia is also a polyphonic novel on the linguistic level: besides standard Italian, we are presented with words and entire phrases in Arabic, French, Spanish, English, Portuguese, and the regional variety of Italian spoken in Rome, Romansco. The novel’s protagonists have, as we will see exemplified in Zuhra’s language use, many linguistic codes at their disposal: in order to communicate effectively both with others and with themselves, they introduce words and expressions from other languages or codes than the standard Italian. However, Zuhra’s way of expressing herself seems to be influenced not only by a desire to communicate effectively with others; it is also distinguished by her way of playing with and questioning her identity through language use, thus it opens up for the possibility of resisting stable and biased categories. My thesis is that Zuhra expresses her subjectivity through translingual practice, and the analysis of her language use will show how the novel’s polyphonic and heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) structure lets the protagonists engage with a sort of coming to voice, which, as lined out in bell hooks’ seminal work Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (hooks, 1989), is:

an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless – our beings defined and interpreted by others. (p. 12)

As the analysis will show, Zuhra’s translingual practice gives her the means for expressing subjectivity, and lets the protagonist speak for herself, from the position of the subject.
TRANSLANGUAGING AND HETEROGLOSSIA

During the past few decades, the notions of bilingualism and multilingualism have come under scrutiny and criticized for maintaining a static view on language in which the speaking subject’s linguistic resources are being considered separately in a hierarchic structure (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Garcia & Wei, 2013; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). As outlined by Jaworski (2014), numerous concepts and models describing the way speakers make use of different linguistic codes available to them have been developed. Important to the present analysis are the approaches which tend to “foreground speakers’ active role or agency in their multilingual practices and consider social meaning to be contingent on the multiple resources deployed in interaction” (Jaworski, 2014, p. 138, my emphasis). Those which treat language not as a static object, but rather as a process and as a resource for the speaking subject for translanguaging. Translingualism has been defined as writing or speaking in more than one language (e.g., Kellman, 2000), and translanguaging as the “ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system” (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401).3 In other words, translanguaging describes how “bilinguals have one linguistic repertoire from which they select features strategically to communicate effectively” (Garcia, 2012, p. 1, emphasis in original).

In Oltre Babilonia, the translingual practice is present through the use of code-switching. The study of code-switching has traditionally been focused on the mixing of codes in spontaneous oral language use, paying attention to both syntactic and semantic, as well as functional and pragmatic aspects of code-switching.4 Linguists such as Lipski (1982), Martin (2005), and Davies & Bentahila (2008) argue that literary code-switching might be a way for the multilingual author to emphasize their identity, and to represent alienation or dissimilarity from the majority. Davies & Bentahila (2008) add that literary code-switching “may also serve a poetic function, contributing to the aesthetic and rhetorical effects of discourse that is not spontaneous but carefully constructed” (p. 2). Gardner-Chloros & Weston (2015) also point out, among several other functions, that postcolonial authors in particular can use different linguistic codes in order to “get round the

3 A critique against these translingual approaches can be found in Canut (this book), and Canut & Guellouz (2018), who state that all language use is, by nature, heterogeneous.

4 Code-switching in literature is not a recent phenomenon, see e.g., Adams (2003) for a study on bilingualism in the Latin language and Callahan (2004) for an overview of studies of both early, modern and contemporary literary code-switching. For a description of discourse function categories in literary code-switching, see Callahan (2004); for a description of socio-pragmatic functions, see Montes-Alcalá (2012).
dilemma of either exclusively using the language of the former oppressor or using local languages” (p. 187). They also state that code-switching in literature, just like oral code-switching, exposes “underlying structures and intentions that may be less apparent in a monolingual text” (p. 189).

Theories of translingualism and literary code-switching often connect translingual practice to the exploration of identity and subjectivity. Canagarajah & Silberstein (2012) emphasize that language plays an important role in the construction of our different social identities, and that people of diasporic background use language to “negotiate the intra- and intergroup relationships they face” (p. 82). While Canagarajah and Silberstein focus on group identities, Harissi et al. (2012) focus their attention more closely on the production of subjectivity which, according to the three linguists, is “being made in the repeated acts of linguistic doings” (p. 527). In their 2012 study, they turn to the notion of performativity (Butler, 1990) in order to understand how people’s “doing of language creates new spaces of possible identification” (Harissi et al., 2012, p. 530). According to Harissi et al. (2012), parody and stylization are “important ways in which people try out, resist and change identity categorization” (p. 530), and the results from their study show that code-switching in oral language is a question of not only “fluid language practice, but rather the interplay of fixed and unfixed language elements, cultural identifications, and social relationships (p. 524). The relation between translingual practice and exploration of identity will be important in the following analysis of Zuhra’s language use, as her subjectivity, in my opinion, clearly comes to expression through translingual practice.

Another theoretical approach important to the present analysis is Benjamin Bailey’s take on code-switching as heteroglossia. In “Heteroglossia and Boundaries” (Bailey, 2007), he states that language represents and negotiates social reality and that to speak is “to engage in identity practices” (p. 257), defining the use of different linguistic features as social constructions (p. 260). Bailey finds the notion of code-switching to be restrictive, and he proposes instead to adopt the notion of heteroglossia developed by Bakhtin (1981). For Bakhtin, heteroglossia, or differentspeechness, describes the coexistence of different and sometimes conflicting ways of speaking within a language, a discourse, a novel or in a single utterance, and every word we speak is already tinged with previous meanings, intentions and contexts. Bakhtin (1981) claims that “[t]here are no ‘neutral’ words and forms” (p. 293), and further elaborates:

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5 Other functions mentioned by Gardner-Chloros & Weston (2015) are the differentiation between characters, mimetic representation of the community in which the literary text takes place, and comic effect.
language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. [...] Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. (p. 293)

Bailey (2007) adopts Bakhtin's use of heteroglossia when studying code-switching in a corpus of oral conversations, arguing that the notion of heteroglossia:

a) encompasses socially meaningful forms in both bilingual and monolingual talk; (b) it can account for the multiple meanings and readings of forms that are possible, depending on one's subject position; and (c) it can connect historical power hierarchies to the meanings and valences of particular forms in the here-and-now. (p. 267)

Considering the subject's use of different linguistic resources within the same discourse as heteroglossia allows us, thus, to give attention not only to the “details of surface form” (Bailey, 2007, p. 269), but also to language use’s inherent “historical social relations” (p. 269), which often imply a power relation between the different linguistic codes in use.

Though Bailey applies the theory of heteroglossia on studies of oral conversations, I will adopt his thoughts in my analysis of the coexistence of languages which is taking place in Igiaba Scego’s novel *Oltre Babilonia*. I find the notion of heteroglossia, as illustrated through Bailey’s study, to be a fruitful sociolinguistic approach to Scego’s novel, as it takes into account the intrinsic power relations in language use within both a plurilingual reality as well as in a so-called monolingual one. Thus, by analyzing Zuhra’s language use, I will consider what her translingual practice may reveal about the power relations between the language features in use and how this is related to the expression of subjectivity.6

6 Brioni (2015), in his study on minor Italian literature, states that Somali Italian literature is heteroglossic because “heteroglossia is implicitly related to the political nature of minor literature, as it mocks authoritative and official language” (p. 143). This is central to Somali Italian literature “as these works account for the multiplicity of social voices of marginalized subjects as well as their multiple languages. The heteroglossic nature of Somali Italian literature [...] shows that identity is based on a fragmented and composite language” (Brioni, 2015, p. 143). My approach to code-switching as heteroglossia thus complements Brioni’s study, as my study focuses on code-switching in Zuhra’s translingual practice as a means of expressing subjectivity in addition to the social aspects of her language use.
HETEROGLOSSIA AND TRANSLINGUAL IDENTITY IN OLTRE BABILONIA

In the approaches to translingualism described above, the presence of different linguistic codes in the subject’s speech is considered as one repertoire, and the speaking subject chooses from this repertoire in order to express themselves and to communicate efficiently in different contexts. Thus, the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate languages at the speaking subject’s disposal is not stable and clear-cut. Rather, the relationship between the subject’s linguistic resources, between the unmarked and the marked occurrences in either oral communication or written texts, keeps challenging the position and the status of the dominant language. Bailey’s (2007) heteroglossic take on code-switching reveals similar considerations on the co-existence of different discourses within the same speech. The choice of words introduced in the translingual subject’s speech might be then, as Harissi et al. (2012) suggest, the result of a performative act in which the speaking subject creates, plays with and redefines their identity and expresses subjectivity.

In the following sections, we will see how this translingual practice acts out in the young Zuhra Laamane’s speech in the novel Oltre Babilonia by Igiaba Scego.

ZUHRA LAAMANE: TRANSLINGUAL SUBJECTIVITY

Zuhra migrated from Somalia to Italy together with her mother between the ages of 12–14. In the novel’s prologue, we get to know her background: Zuhra’s father, whom she has never met, fled the Siad Barre regime in Somalia before she was born. For several years, while still in Somalia, she was sexually abused in school by an Italian man, a trauma from which she still suffers (she has suffered from bulimia, she experiences breakdowns when men come too close to her physically, and she has lost the ability to see the colors surrounding her).

The chapters told through Zuhra’s voice are rich with translingual moments. She speaks at least three languages or varieties of languages fluently: She masters both Italian as well as the regional dialect of Rome, the Romansco dialect, and she speaks English and Spanish. It becomes evident that she also knows some French and Portuguese in addition to already knowing some Arabic from her mother before attending an Arabic language course in Tunis. In the following, I will present a representative mapping of the most frequent cases of code-switches in the chapters narrated by Zuhra: the Romansco variety of Italian, Arabic, English and
What is the literary and ideological impact of the switching between linguistic resources performed by the novel’s first-person narrator, and in what way does the code-switching display Zuhra’s play with identity? And does the code-switching that Zuhra performs in some way express the power relations between the languages present in the novel?

Zuhra, who has lived almost all of her life in Rome, is shown in both direct speech and in her stream of consciousness, to have great familiarity with the Romansco dialect, even though some of the typical linguistic characteristics are missing. Code-switches with Romansco appear on both a phonetic and a lexical level, and, unlike most of the other languages and varieties inserted into the Italian text, Romansco is not embedded with either italics or in-text translations or explanations. This shows that the author assumes that the Italian audience fully understands the regional variant of Italian spoken in Rome. As we will see in the following, this is not the case for the other linguistic resources available to Zuhra. When the Arabic language is inserted into the text, almost exclusively in italics, the narrator immediately provides in-text translations and/or explanations – but only the first time the expression appears. This means, just like Brioni (2015) affirms, that the “readers are required to remember Somali words in order to understand the text fully” (p. 29). This also suggests, as stated by Pimentel (2018), that the recurrent in-text translations in Scego’s novel “inherently enrich the reader’s vocabulary, making him or her a participant in the learning process and in the construction of meaning” of which Zuhra participates (p. 76).

Already in the novel’s first pages, we encounter a taste of the language mix of which Oltre Babilonia consists: the first-person narrator Zuhra repeatedly uses the

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7 Many of the marked words and phrases are translated into the Italian language through in-text translations or explanations; many of them, but far from all, are embedded in italics.
8 For supplementary descriptions of the linguistic traits of the Romansco dialect, see D’Achille, 2012; D’Achille & Giovanardi, 2001.
9 The following examples are a few cases of the code-switches with Romansco from the novel: apheresis – ´sta roba (‘this thing’, p. 42), ´n giro (‘around’, p. 42), ´na creatura (‘a creature’, p. 130); apocope – Nun te prooccupa (‘don’t you worry’, p. 130), me la so’ messa? (‘I’ve put it on’, p. 235); singular definite masculine article il becomes er – der paradiso (‘the paradise’, p. 42); the change from i to e when protonic – che ce po fa’? (‘what can we do?’, p. 130); the weakening of the palatal lateral approximant – pija’ n giro (‘to fool’, p. 42); the monophthongizing of the diphthong uo – è proprio bono (‘it’s real good’, p. 130).
10 When it comes to lexical characteristics, we note the use of the typical Romansco expression mo instead of adesso – e mo’ che è ´sta TSS? (‘now, what is this TSS’, p. 22), mo’ è tardi (‘now it’s late’, p. 235) – and the expression aridaje (‘here we go’, p. 284).
11 The Romansco dialect is, in fact, quite similar to standard Italian.
Arabic expression “wallahi billahi” or just “wallahi”, also followed by “Io giuro” ‘I swear’ or “mi dovete credere’ ‘you have to believe me’ representing standard formulas in the Arabic tradition as well as contemporary ethnolect used by young people. The narrator insists on repeating the expression in a way that suggests that she tries to baffle the reader, to shake and unsettle them from a passive reading experience. The continued echoing of the expression wallahi billahi in Zuhra’s speech reflects, in my opinion, a playful translingual practice. The repeated phrases signal the protagonist’s mixed origins, linguistically as well as culturally, expressing both her religious and cultural background as well as her belonging to a community of adolescent language users (for discussions of wallah as a part of European urban multiethnolect, see Nortier & Dorleij, 2013; Svendsen & Røyneland, 2008).12

In most of the cases in Oltre Babilonia (Scego, 2008), the Arabic expressions are followed with a translation or an explanation like in the following examples: “Haram ossia impuro” (p. 37),13 “Sba el kir’, buongiorno ci dice la tipa” (p. 175),14 “Ana arabi, sono arabo” (p. 277),15 “Potevano essere della shurta, la polizia” (p. 337).16 On other occasions, the translations or explanations precede the marked word instead: “Il mio amore, il mio habibi” (p. 12),17 “Buon viaggio, safar Salama ya Zuhra” (p. 42),18 “stiamo tutte dello stesso pensionato, tutte e quattro nello stesso mabit” (p. 230),19 “Mai, abadan” (p. 235).20 These examples

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12 Svendsen & Røyneland (2008) find that multiethnolect is used as an act of identity, and state that “A language or code choice seems to be relevant to identity constructions in situations where the participants choose to use certain languages or linguistic traits when they could have chosen differently; situations where the choice is not primarily denotative, but motivated by its symbolic value at the linguistic market” (p. 66). In their study, the word wallah “stands out as the most frequent word in the UPUS / Oslo corpus. wallah seems to be a trans-Scandinavian word as well (cf. Bodén, 2007; Quist, 2000), and it is also documented in so called Street language (‘Straattaal’) in the Lombok area of Utrecht (Nortier, 2001; cf. Nortier, this volume)” (Svendsen & Røyneland, 2008, p. 64). According to the corpus analyzed by Svendsen & Røyneland “wallah has multiple functions. In conversation, it functions as an intensifier and emphaziser. Symbolically, it functions as a shibboleth; to describe adolescents who use a multiethnolect, or adolescents who try to use it; so-called ‘wallah-wannabees’. Moreover, it denotes adolescents with a migrant background” (p. 71).

13 “Haram, impure that is”.
14 “Sba el kir”, good morning the lass tells us”.
15 “Ana arabi, I’m Arabic”.
16 “They could be the shurta, the police”.
17 “My love, my habibi”.
18 “Safe travels, safar Salama ya Zuhra”.
19 “We are all in the same hostel, all four of us in the same mabit”.
20 “Never, abadan”.
show in-text translations which appear next to or very close to its Arabic equivalent; other examples are only indirectly explained to the reader, like in the following examples: “Suq” (p. 11), “in sha’ Allah” (p. 36), “Non m’importa se non fa le cinque preghiere […]. o il ramadan, la zaqat o il pellegrinaggio” (pp. 37–38), “Hijab” (p. 174), “Il mufo” (p. 402), “Si amano in cento modi in questo paese, in questa lingua. Hubb è solo la parola che si usa di più, quella che inse-gano anche a noi stranieri. Ma ci sono cento modi di amare […] cento modi di soffrire” (p. 404). Interestingly, the words ‘zaqat’ and ‘ramadan’ appear in the text neither with in-text translation/explanations nor italics, while words like hijab are marked with italics. Zuq ‘marketplace’ appears in the novel’s prologue and it may be that the missing translations and explanations support Pimentel’s (2018) idea of the author’s desire to make the reader a participant of Zuhra’s language learning process, but at the same time the missing translation baffles the reader from their comfortable monolingual reading position as previously suggested.

Other words, especially those related to the Arabic alphabet, are only mentioned by their name, or, in some cases, described from the point of view of a student of Arabic as a foreign language, reflecting Zuhra’s own position as a student: “ayn, la più bastarda delle lettere arabe” (Scего, 2008, p. 36), “Ha detto qualcosa di forte al tassista – era pieno di ‘ayn, la famigerata lettera araba che tutti gli studenti odiano. Ho intinuito anche qualche al, qualche bi, qualche ‘ala” (p. 132), “ricosono solo la lettera mim, che si legge come la M dell’italiano” (p. 405).

If it was not for the insisting repetition of the Arabic wallahi bilahi in the novel’s prologue, the occurrences of the Arabic language in the Italian text might have been seen as to simply reflect the language use of a foreign language student who inserts the foreign language just now and then in her discourse. However, embedded in the Arabic code-switching, there is, in my opinion, a critical postcolonial stance: by constantly inserting words from Arabic into the Italian text, Scего keeps reminding the Italian reader about Italy’s colonial past, which, until recent decades, has not been discussed critically in Italian society (e.g., Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2018).
2. Subjectivity through translingual practice in *Oltre Babilonia* by Igiaba Scego

At the narrative level, direct references to the colonial past are present almost exclusively in the chapters told by the father (Elias), but by linguistically insisting on the Arabic presence in Zuhra’s narration, the novel nonetheless echoes this colonial past as well as reminds its readers about contemporary Italy’s pluricultural and multilingual condition.

When it comes to the English insertions, we find words and expressions both with and without italics: “Last but not least” (Scego, 2008, p. 35), “sister” (p. 38), “Scusa sono coloured anch’io” (p. 131), “Uno, due, tre, repeat please” (p. 228), “Dammi un cinque e black power” (p. 231), “Sono omaggiata dai neri negri black aswad (saraceni e no) [...] sono omaggiata dai bianchi white men” (p. 334), “Un negro nigger saraceno come me” (p. 344). Among the examples of code-switches from the English language *without* italics, we find “Politically correct” (p. 35), “No comment” (p. 36), “Nella mia top five” (p. 38), “Stile campi di addestramento marines” (p. 40), “una vera black” (p. 41), and “Ora sono la big star della scena” (p. 339).

There seems to be no apparent connection between the English code-switches with or without italics: the word ‘black’, for instance, occurs in both ways, but *with* italics when it appears in a political and ideological context (in expressions like black power and black aswad). Why the expression *last but not least* is marked with italics, while *politically correct* is not, is more difficult to explain as they appear close to each other in the text and both appear within Zuhra’s stream of consciousness. Nevertheless, common to the use of italics regardless of language is that it signals the insertion of other linguistic codes within the text; this opens up for a...

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26 Italy was still a young nation (established in 1861) when the so-called Scramble for Africa (ca. 1875–1914) started. Through the use of military force as well as agreements and treaties with local leaders, Italy first obtained colonies in Eritrea and Somalia, then Libya and Ethiopia, establishing in 1936 the colony Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian East Africa consisting of Italian Somalia, Italian Eritrea and Ethiopia). Besides the colonies in Africa, Italy obtained territories in Albania, the Dodecanes Islands, and in Croatia. Italy lost all its colonies in 1947 except the United Nations Trust Territory of Somaliland, which remained under Italian administration until 1960.

Authors with origins from the former colonies have contributed to a great extent to the last two decades’ attention directed at Italy’s colonial past and to the contemporary postcolonial debate (e.g., Ali Farah, 2007; Ghermandi, 2007; Scego, 2005b, 2015, 2020; Wu Ming 2 & Mohamed, 2012).

27 “Excuse me, I am coloured as well”.
28 “One, two, three, repeat please”.
29 “Gimme five and *black power*”.
30 “I’m admired by black negroes *black aswad* (Saraceni or not) [...] I’m admired by white *white men*”.
31 “Marines training camp look”.
32 “A real black”.
33 Now, I’m the great star of the scene”. 
marked reading in terms of visual aesthetics as well as the attention given to the words and expressions during the reading process. The use of italics indicates a demarcation between the linguistic codes and their affiliated cultures present in the novel, but, at the same time, it renders visible the heteroglossic co-existence of codes in the Italian linguistic reality.

As previously stated, Zuhra also has very good knowledge of Spanish, having spent a year as an international exchange student there. Words and entire phrases in Spanish are inserted in both Zuhra’s own speech as well as in the reported direct speech of others: “Ai tempi non c’era la mucca pazza, no nada de vaca loca, nada di vita loca” (Scego, 2008, p. 18), “la terra della paella e della horchata de chufa” (p. 39), “Mi ripetono ossesivamente dei temi chiave – Eres clandestina. No eres italiana. Puta. Marica. Falsificatore de papeles […] Me ne fotto delle vostre scuse, entiendes, amigo?” (p. 40), “Claro que sí!” (p. 85), “Soy Luis, mi dice. Soy Cubano […] he oído que hablas español” (p. 176). As we can see, words and phrases in Spanish are inserted with italics, but without in-text translations or explanations, suggesting, as Brioni (2015, pp. 30–31) proposes, that the author expects that her readership understands Spanish because of the closeness between the two languages. We note, though, that one of the insertions in Spanish is followed by an in-text translation: “Ha fissato Mr. Kebab negli occhi senza paura, sin miedo” (Scego, 2008, p. 174), perhaps as an act of emphasizing the expression without fear.

Most of the Spanish insertions above might be recognizable for readers who do not know Italian or other Romance languages; they belong to colloquial speech, with the exceptions of words like ‘desaparecidos’. We also note that Spanish words and phrases are sometimes used as a stylistic device thus reflecting Davies & Bentahila’s (2008) discussion of literary code-switching as a poetic device, like when Zuhra plays with intertextual references alluding to Ricky Martin’s “Livin’ la vida loca” (Rosa & Child, 1998) when she talks about the mad cow disease in these terms: “no nada de vaca loca, nada di vita loca” (Scego, 2008, p. 18).

Based on these findings, I will now discuss how Zuhra’s translingual practice becomes a means to express her identity.

34 “In those days there was no cow madness, no nada de vaca loca, nada di vita loca”.
35 “the nation of paella and horchata de chufa”.
36 “They obsessively repeat keywords to me – Eres clandestina. No eres italiana. Puta. Marica. Falsificatore de papeles […] I don’t give a fuck about your excuses, entiendes, amigo?”.
37 “Fearlessly she looked straight into Mr. Kebab’s eyes, sin miedo”.
38 The expression desaparecidos refers to the many victims of the Dirty War during the Argentinean military regime.
IDENTITY PLAY THROUGH TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE

As mentioned previously, the young woman Zuhra searches for and simultaneously questions notions such as identity and belonging. This is noticeable already from the novel’s chapter titles: Oltre Babilonia has a nickname for its five protagonists, and Zuhra is called “the Negropolitana.” This neologism, Negropolitan, probably alludes to the concept of Afropolitan, though, changing the prefix afro to the pejorative negro/negra. Coined by the Nigerian/Ghanaian writer Tayie Selasi (2005) and the Cameroonian political philosopher Achille Mbembe (2007), the term Afropolitanism was originally meant to be a way to understanding the many modes of being African or of African descent in the world, and, according to Simon Gikandi (2011), “to be Afropolitan is to be connected to knowable African communities, languages and states. It is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity - to be of African and other worlds at the same time” (p. 9). Eze (2014) then shows how the conception of Afropolitanism gives those of African descent or belonging voice and agency:

Within the Afropolitan context, the colonized is no longer at the periphery. Nor is she to be understood exclusively as a victim. She now has a voice and, in her relation, she adopts a moral attitude that grants her and others in her world agency. Even while individuals of conceive themselves in Afropolitan, hyper-cultural paradigms, they are still rooted in geographical spaces, and are still ‘parts of’ a larger community through which they construct meanings. For Afropolitans, community is primary, but this community is polychromatic, polymorphic, diverse, and open. (p. 245)

When Zuhra then is pejoratively nicknamed Negropolitan instead of Afropolitan, the author might refer to different aspects of being black in contemporary Italy. She takes part of what Gikandi and Eze have called a polychromatic, polymorphic and hybrid Afropolitanism. However, what she sometimes experiences in everyday life is not to be seen as either Italian or Afropolitan, but rather as something foreign and different in the Italian society, as the weaker part of the hierarchic relation between Italy and the subjects of its former colonies. Zuhra herself exemplifies this, reflecting upon how she is wrongly mistaken for the cleaning lady at her workplace (Scego, 2008, pp. 234–235). To some customers, she – the black woman – cannot be the record shop assistant, she must be the cleaning lady.

As we have seen in the previous sections, Zuhra’s way of speaking is interwoven within a translilingual practice as she constantly inserts words and phrases from all the linguistic codes she is familiar with. However, I claim that the codes are used
with different purposes in mind. The Romanesco dialect is mostly used while speaking with friends, but, more interestingly, when it comes to the renegotiation of identity and the representation of subjectivity, Zuhra also uses Romanesco when recalling the acts of prejudices and racism done to her:

C’è da dire che alla Libla mi scambiano sempre per la donna delle pulizie. Ecco perché sono eterea. Nessuno chiede informazioni alla donna delle pulizie. Mai, abadan. È quasi come se non esistesse, la donna delle pulizie. L’equazione era nera uguale sguattera, mai nera uguale commessa. Almeno per certe persone. Ma che, nun ce vedete? (Scego, 2008, p. 234–235, my emphasis.).

Reporting an incident with the police during her stay in Spain when her identity and passport are questioned, Zuhra uses the Spanish language for the same purpose as she uses Romanesco in the previous quote. She repeats the insulting words the Spanish police officers offend her with, and she replies to them, in the reported narration of the incident, “Me ne fotto delle vostre scuse, entiendes, amigo?” (Scego, 2008, p. 40, emphasis in original). Concluding the retelling of the incident in Spanish, Zuhra claims her space within the linguistic community as well as her right to study in Spain as an Italian exchange student. Using the Romanesco dialect in the above context, Zuhra emphasizes her Italianness, and claims, through her translingual use, her belonging to the Italian community and linguistic landscape. Zuhra’s Blackness makes her both hyper-visible and invisible to some of her customers; they wrongly attribute her an identity, just like the Spanish police officers who incorrectly identify her as an illegal immigrant and a prostitute. By adopting her translingual resources, Zuhra herself makes visible and draws attention to these acts of racism. By doing this, translingual practice – in these cases using Romanesco and Spanish – becomes one of Zuhra’s most powerful signals of identity: the customers and the police officers might discriminate against her, but Zuhra chooses to display and critique their prejudices through her translingual identity, thus giving language use a central position in stating subjectivity. Language, as we have previously seen, becomes a means for Zuhra to express both belonging to and a critique of the monocultural and static understanding of Italianness. Zuhra’s, and the other narrators’ in Oltre Babilonia, frequent code-

39 “It must be said that at Libla they always mistake me for the cleaning lady. That’s why I’m ethereal. Nobody asks the cleaning lady for information. Never, abadan. It is almost as if she did not exist, the cleaning lady. The assumption was black equals cleaning-maid, never black equals bookstore sales girl. At least for some people. But what, can’t you see it?”

40 “I don’t give a fuck about your excuses, entiendes, amigo?”. 
switching breaks with the monolingual idea of the Italian linguistic situation, both in terms of dialectal varieties as well as the presence of non-Italian languages in the Italian society. By presenting this translingual image of contemporary Italy, the author creates with Oltre Babilonia and other texts (e.g., Scego, 2010, 2005a, 2005b) both a translingual readership as well as a narrative echo with which translingual subjects might identify. Consequently, she carries out what Bailey (2007) states about the use of non-prestige linguistic forms when he claims that they “can serve as a vehicle of resistance to disparaging discourses on language, race and identity from dominant groups in society and reproduce local solidarity” (p. 269).

Zuhra’s playful way of translanguaging comes forth also in passages of the novel in which she mixes the linguistic codes available to her, translating certain words and expressions into a series of playful, translingual equivalents: “Sono la stella fulgida, la estrella, the big star, the only big star, di questo romanzo che è la mia vita” (Scego, 2008, p. 335), and “Signore e signori è nata una stella […] una najma, una estrella, una star […] a big star, the only big star of this fucking world” (p. 342). The reader is presented with other examples of this playfulness close to the end of the novel: “Fine. Kaputt. The end” (p. 398) and “Che pace qui. Saalam, Shalom. Bella pace” (p. 404). These series of playful equivalents reflect the attention given to language use by Zuhra. By combining elements from different linguistic codes, she creates a heteroglossic play with meaning and identity. She juxtaposes a series of languages within her discourse, thus also linguistically reflecting her search for gender identity and belonging (see Skalle, 2019 for details). Zuhra insists both linguistically and discursively on being complex and manifold rather than unified and stable.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Oltre Babilonia (Scego, 2008) gives a representation of contemporary Italy’s translingual reality. The novel’s title itself refers metalinguistically to this linguistic landscape by alluding to the biblical myth of the tower of Babel. To go beyond Babylon in Scego’s novel becomes a translingual way of being in the world characterized by the heteroglossic co-existence of languages. Furthermore, the title expresses the linguistic landscape in which Italians from different cultural backgrounds navigate fluidly with their translingual resources, resources that might offer means to express identity and belonging as well as resistance to externally imposed prejudices.

Even though most of the theory on code-switching and translingualism has been developed in regard to oral language production, the analysis in this chapter shows that translingual practice is used in literature with similar results. As previ-
ously stated, to some linguists, the concepts of bilingualism and code-switching might give the impression that two or more linguistic codes exist separately within the speaking subject. The language practice in Oltre Babylonia shows, as studies of translingualism affirm, that language use where multiple varieties are present is not the switching between two or more codes, but rather a continuous movement within a single language repertoire. Thus, what characterizes Zuhra’s translingual practice is not her ability to change between linguistic codes in order to adjust her use according to her interlocutor. Rather, she uses her linguistic repertoire to both play with, resist, and challenge the notion of static and stable cultural identity, thus echoing what theories of multilingualism (e.g., Canagarajah & Silberstein, 2012; Harissi et al., 2012; Otsuji & Pennycook, 2012) claim about the relationship between language practice and identity. Zuhra emphasizes the fact that identity is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to one single expression, and in the novel, this is reflected even at its linguistic level. As we have seen in this analysis, Zuhra consciously uses her linguistic resources to express subjectivity and identity while confronting both biases and prejudice as well as searching for a sense of belonging to the linguistic community surrounding her.

As stated previously, Oltre Babylonia’s narrators represent a coming to voice (hooks, 1989). The novel’s representation of hooks’ (1989) resistance and rite of passage from being object to being a speaking subject (p. 12) is multifaceted: Firstly, the novel’s polyphonic structure gives space to a multitude of narrative voices, each one with their own consciousness and worldviews and never subjected to the author’s voice nor to Zuhra’s voice even though she is given a particular position in the novel. Hence, Oltre Babylonia offers Zuhra and the other narrators a space for self-assertion. On the novel’s narrative and thematical level, the young black woman, searching for identity and belonging and talking from the position of first-person narrative, is able to challenge preconceptions others might have of her, and to resist categories they put her into. Secondly, this coming to voice also occurs on a linguistic level: by adopting her translingual resources, Zuhra “engage[s] in self-transformation […] when one moves from being object to being subject” (hooks, 1989, p. 12). Zuhra’s translingual practice is heteroglossic in the Bakhtinian sense as it lets other discourses and voices reveal power structures between the linguistic varieties present in her speech and the cultures associated with them. Because of this, Zuhra’s language use reflects a playful and critical translingualism as it, in its heteroglossic way, incorporates other cultures, histories, political views and so forth. Thus, to Zuhra, language use becomes a unique space for playing with identity, resistance to prejudices, and demonstrating a sense of belonging as well as a means for expressing subjectivity.
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