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Disciplining Narratives and Damaged Identities in Rossana Campo's *Lezioni di arabo*

Sole Anatrone

In the fall of 2001, Oriana Fallaci published an article in *Corriere della sera* in response to the violence of September 11th. A week later the same paper featured a response from Dacia Maraini. This encounter is noteworthy because it represents an unusual moment in the history of Italian women writers. These two women, Fallaci and Maraini, however loved or hated, are among the most internationally famous female writers in Italy, both of them well known for their literary works as well as for their dedication to the women's movement. In her article, "La rabbia e l'orgoglio" ("The Rage and the Pride"), Fallaci responds to the violence in New York with a linguistic and racist violence of her own, promoting segregation between two worlds she describes as finite and distinct. "Se crolla l'America," she warns, "crolla l'Europa, crolla l'Occidente" ("If America falls, Europe will fall, the West will fall"), thus setting the stage for the rise of the menacing Other of the West: "l'Islam."¹ Maraini responds, shocked by Fallaci's xenophobia. "Ogni essere umano," Maraini explains:

fa parte di un sistema di conoscenze e di opinioni più o meno sfortunato, più o meno vincente, ma sempre degno di vivere dignitosamente nel rispetto altrui. C'è stato un periodo in cui la civiltà africana contava più di Roma e di Atene. Per non parlare dell'Islam.

(Every human being is part of a system of knowledge and opinions, more or less fortunate, more or less powerful, but always deserving of a dignified life and the respect of others. There was a time when African culture counted more than Rome or Athens. Not to mention Islam.)²

Thus condemning the hate and antagonism that pervade Fallaci's piece, Maraini proposes tolerance and compassion according to a logic of "separate but equal" cultures, in the process maintaining the "us and them" / "West and Islam" dichotomy that structures Fallaci's fears. By situating Rossana Campo's *Lezioni di arabo* (*Arabic Lessons*, 2010) in the context of this debate I am also calling attention to the ways in which American events, in particular the violence of 9/11, gave rise to a new global strain of Islamophobia. I point to the exchange between Maraini and Fallaci so that it may serve as a backdrop for a discussion of safe versus suspect identities in the writing of another prominent Italian woman author.

The attention to gender and politics that has marked the language and content of Fallaci's and Maraini's work for decades finds clear echoes in Campo's writing. All three have been praised and condemned for their bold descriptions of women's sexuality and corporeality. A few

¹ Oriana Fallaci, "La rabbia e l'orgoglio," *Corriere della sera*, September 29, 2001. All translations are my own.

² Dacia Maraini, "Ma il dolore non ha una bandiera," *Corriere della sera*, October 5, 2001.

well-known examples from an extensive list are: Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (*Letter to an Unborn Child*, 1976), in which a woman describes her physical, emotional and psychological experience of pregnancy and abortion; Maraini's *Donna in guerra* (*Woman at War*, 1975), one of the first Italian texts to narrate a woman's experience of menstruation and masturbation; and Campo's *In principio erano le mutande* (*In the Beginning, There Was Underwear*, 1992), which garnered attention for its depiction of women discussing and critiquing the sexual abilities of their male partners. All of these texts enter the political stage by breaking silences that traditionally surround female sexuality, underscoring the ways that silence constitutes an implicit condemnation of women's sexual desire and thus works to secure their status as subordinates to men. *Lezioni di arabo* renews this legacy of politically engaged literature by Italian women, at the same time interrogating the limits and expectations of gendered political deliberation.

If we approach *Lezioni di arabo* from the backdrop of the 2001 debate, a line of inquiry about racially charged and culturally suspect identities comes to the fore that may otherwise be overshadowed by the narrative of erotic critique for which Campo is best known.³ This is not to say that the debate has remained unchanged. The global political climate shifted significantly between the time of the publication of Fallaci and Maraini's pieces and the arrival of Campo's text, just eight years later. Fallaci and Maraini wrote editorial pieces for the newspaper at a time when paranoia and imposed nationalism dominated all public speech—even Maraini praised Bush's good leadership in her piece. Writing a novel in 2008, Campo met with a very different set of expectations. It is thanks to these differences—of genre and historical climate—that Campo is able to engage with and reflect on the complexities of a multicultural Europe without being obligated—as perhaps her predecessors were—to put forth an unwavering agenda of one kind or another (Fallaci's vote for violent segregation, or Maraini's demand for tolerance). Campo's text offers neither praise nor condemnation of multicultural living; instead it describes a world in which multiculturalism is a condition—not a question—and one which must be thought in conjunction with gender and sexuality.

The story is set in a Paris presented almost entirely by way of racial and ethnic descriptors: “[S]ulla destra ci sono gli arabi, le loro moschee, le loro drogherie e gli hammam, a sinistra ci sono gli ebrei con le sinagoghe, le pasticcerie i caffè” (“[O]n the right are the Arabs,

³ A quick look at the popular responses to Campo's novel gives an idea of how, for many readers, the erotic narrative overshadowed everything else at the time of its publication. On the website *QLibri Network*, user “Pelizzari” writes: “L'autrice ha uno stile diretto, forte, violento, deliberatamente e gratuitamente volgare. Senza nessun valore aggiunto a una storia che non sta proprio in piedi. Scrive che entrare nell'intimità delle persone è un terreno minato. Forse vuole dare l'idea di riuscire a entrarci, lei, in questo mondo privato, per svelarne gli angoli più bui e nascosti, rimanendo indenne e forse volendo anche molto stupire. Invece stende pagine che sono cascate di violenta volgarità” (The author's style is direct, strong, violent, and deliberately and gratuitously vulgar. None of this adds any value to a story that just does not hold up. She writes that entering into the intimacy between people is entering into a minefield. Maybe she wants to give the impression that she was able to enter this private world, able to shed light on the darkest and most hidden corners, without getting hurt but also wanting to shock. But instead she offers pages that are nothing other than violent vulgarity). (<http://www.qlibri.it/narrativa-italiana/romanzi/lezioni-di-arabo>; February 7, 2012). On the blog “Sulla mia scrivania,” Paola Borracino writes, “Soggetto buono per un porno, ottimo per un film erotico vietato ai minori. Veramente.” (Good topic for a porn, excellent for an erotic film forbidden to minors. Truly.) (<http://sullamiascrivania.blogspot.com/2010/09/lezioni-di-arabo.html>; September 5, 2010). And in even briefer terms, “Anna” writes on the IBS comment page, “il libro peggiore che io abbia mai letto, solo una descrizione di rapporti sessuali e nulla di più” (the worst book I have ever read, just a description on sexual relations and nothing more). (<http://www.ibs.it/code/9788807702228/campo-rossana/lezioni-arabo.html>; October 6, 2010). These selectively chosen responses represent a, or persistent, though by no means exclusive, tendency to reduce Campo's text to an erotic narrative deprived of all meaning and artistry.

their mosques, the pharmacies and the hammam, on the left are the Jews and the synagogues, the pastry shops, the cafes”).⁴ One street is Arab, another Chinese; the parks are full of African women tending white children; the restaurants are Algerian. It is in one of these Algerian restaurants that the story begins. Betti, an Italian living alone in Paris without friends or family, works in an Algerian restaurant where she meets Suleiman. Suleiman is Algerian, raised in France but made to feel foreign because of his stereotypically Arab-Muslim appearance. Although I am emphasizing national and cultural differences here, what is especially interesting and provocative about Campo’s text is, as I will explain, her refusal to divorce these identity markers from those of gender and sexuality. A productive way to engage with this approach to identity is through intersectionality theory. Developed by North American feminists of color, intersectionality theory arose in response to a racism within American feminism that dismissed difference with silence. In particular, intersectionality theory was developed to call attention to the convergences of race, class and gender as mutually constitutive systems of oppression that come to bear on and cannot be divorced from a subject’s concept of herself.⁵ Campo’s text plays on the challenges of conveying this complexity, emphasizing the ways in which dominant regimes of control and social order continue to reduce subjects to single categories.

In this text the effects of race and gender on experience and, more specifically, the process of making sense of experience, are described in terms of communication—each character’s ability or inability to communicate is directly linked to how well or how poorly he or she adheres to the expectations of his race and her gender, or, said another way, to how appropriately one is able to narrate oneself. In making this claim, I am invoking Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*, in which she theorizes the demand that we give an account of ourselves to others in order to justify not just our actions, but our way of being, and how the failure to satisfy this demand, to give a coherent and final account, can result in painful political and social consequences.⁶ Butler’s focus is on the limits, possibilities and ethics of self-knowledge for a subject that is theorized in relation to the social, a subject that is opaque to itself and needs an Other in order to recognize itself. At the core of this theory is the question of what ethical obligations we have towards one other, and how those ethical contracts are predicated on narrative transparency. Also relevant for my discussion is Adriana Cavarero’s *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (*Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*), which is, as the title suggests, a theorization of the relational dimension of self-narrativization.⁷ Cavarero stresses the ways in which we come to know ourselves through others and, focusing specifically on women and their historical subordination to men, she posits self-narration as a political act. The practice of beginning with oneself is explicitly intentional, an intervention in the political process of advocating for women by articulating *as* women. In other words, Butler, drawing on Michel Foucault, highlights the potential dangers that inhere in forcing subjects to place themselves into ideologically informed discursive regimes; Cavarero, exploring that same process from a different angle, identifies the radical potential for creating new discursive regimes. I do not invoke the work of Cavarero and Butler to engage in a discussion of recognition, of whether or not Betti or Suleiman *know themselves* or recognize themselves, but rather as a platform from

⁴ Rossana Campo, *Lezioni di arabo* (Milan: Canguri, 2010), 19.

⁵ For a detailed explanation and history of the theory of intersectionality see Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995).

⁶ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: filosofia della narrazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997). Published in English as *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000).

which to consider how communication, as a mode of accountability—understood as both narrating and taking responsibility for oneself—is a disciplining exercise.

In a strikingly multicultural Paris, Betti and Suleiman are both loners—a status that is politically suspect for him because of racial stereotypes, and that is sexually suspect for her because of gender stereotypes. Suleiman is continually called upon to justify his existence—to explain why he, in the name of all Arabs, wears a beard, does not eat pork, oppresses women and hates America. Though he is offended and angered by the disrespect and the implicit violence of these questions, he is able, again and again, to answer, to engage and discuss. His struggle is with a pervasive racism that allows his body to be read as needing better, more eloquent justification than others in order for it to be passable, acceptable, or legible as safe (and not deviant). Suleiman, ultimately, does not oppose that normativizing force that impels him to explain himself and to map his subject position onto a predetermined plain; his self-narrativizing comes from an impulse of self-preservation. He is read as “threat” until and unless he offers a counter-narrative. Betti, on the other hand, stands in tentative opposition to this normativizing, self-protective impulse.

Betti repeatedly fails in her attempts at communication, at narrating herself and making herself easily legible to others. As a child she is an outcast: she draws by herself instead of playing with others and her peers shun her because of her solitary behavior, thus starting a cycle of externally and internally imposed exile. The only daughter of divorced parents, young Betti spends her afternoons alone. She rarely speaks with her parents who, though they continually encourage her to find friends, nevertheless neglect her themselves, neglecting even to teach Betti about her body, so that she nearly dies of fright when she begins menstruating. It is her older “boyfriend” who relieves her anxieties and explains that her body is changing. This so-called boyfriend, Ennio, is another symbol of Betti’s social exile. Ennio, a thirty-year-old married man, seduces the eleven-year-old Betti because, as he tells her repeatedly, she is not like other girls. Because of this difference she must also keep quiet and never tell anyone about their relationship. This conflation of silence with difference from other women comes at a critical juncture in Betti’s life. As a grown woman she frequently thinks back on her time with Ennio with renewed sexual longing and with a contingent feeling of difference, of living in social as well as national exile.

This relationship marks Betti as negatively different in three significant ways: first, as young girl, it sets her apart from her peers who are not yet thinking about sex; as an adult, the erotic pleasure Betti derives from the memories of this illicit relationship signals her deviance from norms of female sexuality, in particular her failure to feel ashamed of this experience. I will return to this point shortly, but first I want to stress that what persists, from childhood to adulthood, and what in paradoxical ways reinforces Betti’s status as a social exile, is silence. Betti’s relationship with Ennio is one of sexual submission and silence. When she meets Suleiman, Betti is reminded of Ennio because of the sexual submission and silence that characterize their first encounters. Initially the two have almost nothing to say to one another, and on their first date Suleiman forces Betti to submit to anal sex without first asking her consent. Because the text offers no descriptions of Suleiman other than his race and his outsider status before giving us this scene of sexual aggression, he cannot but serve to conjure stereotypical, even mythical images of a racialized bogeyman; that he almost immediately breaks with this image helps illustrate just how ideologically imbued the stereotype is, and the power it has to map its narrative onto subjects and scenes, effectively erasing the specificity of context. Speaking of such stereotypes, Jasbir Puar, and Amit Rai trace a genealogy of the abnormal and

the monstrous through Foucault, explaining that the sexual deviant and the monster-terrorist have become aligned in the post- 9/11 period through “the deployment of gendered bodies, the regulation of proper desire, the manipulation of domestic spaces, and the taxonomy of sexual acts such as sodomy.”⁸ As the story progresses and Suleiman reveals more about himself, he becomes increasingly distanced from the figure of the Arab bogeyman; but he must continue to defend that distance, to atone, as it were, for his initial, apparent proximity to that stereotype of danger and deviance. By marking the start of Betti and Suleiman’s relationship with this scene of anal rape, the text signals the intersection of these discourses of racial and sexual otherness.

As they become more involved, Betti begins to break her own silence by giving voice to her sexual desires. While this development may at first seem liberating and progressive, I want to suggest that it is also a sign of Betti’s “domestication.” The logic of appropriate integration that informs the text demands a narrative outcome in which Betti must relinquish the silence and solitude that have always been hers, in exchange for communication, family and sociability (*legibility*), which are powerful tools of control and surveillance in an increasingly complex, multicultural, multiethnic society. This corrective, disciplining force is at work throughout the text but is unremarked upon, evident only in the silence and unease that characterize Betti and Suleiman’s first encounters:

Mi dice che si chiama Suleiman e mi fa un piccolo sorriso. Trovarmelo così vicino di colpo mi rende confusa, sono a disagio...Lui fa un altro sorriso timido e a questo punto non abbiamo più niente da dirci, non sboccia alcuna curiosità da parte di nessuno dei due.⁹

(He says his name is Suleiman and gives me a little smile. Finding him suddenly so close confuses me and makes me uncomfortable...He gives me another timid smile and at this point we have nothing left to say to one another, neither one of us expresses any curiosity.)

By beginning and ending their first meeting with accounts of what is or is not being said, Campo produces a subtle conflation of silence and unease, *as though* the two were related. In my view, however, Betti’s sense of discomfort is a product of Suleiman’s closeness (“Trovarmelo così vicino ... sono a disagio”), and not of their lack of dialogue.

Their second and third encounters are equally awkward. Instead of intimate dialogue between two lovers, the narrative is cluttered with Betti’s hyper-attention to the racial and ethnic identities of the people and places around them:

⁸ Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War On Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 72, no. 3 (2002): 116.

⁹ Campo, *Lezioni*, 14.

Ci incontriamo all'uscita del metrò Couronnes, lo vedo arrivare in mezzo a una folla di arabi con la djellaba, africani coi loro boubou, qualche cinese e un paio di ebrei col cappello nero e la camicia bianca.¹⁰

(We meet at the exit of the Couronnes metro, I see him arrive in the middle of a crowd of Arabs wearing djellabas, African with boubous, some Chinese and a few Jews with black hats and white shirts.)

These details are offered without further remark, as though this were the only way of making sense of and reading the world; in the context of a novel whose very title foregrounds issues of racial and linguistic difference, Betti's observations underscore the pervasiveness of uncritical, seemingly automatic appearance-based assumptions of race and identity. The essentialist discourses about race that come through in these descriptions set the stage for the more explicit racism Suleiman is confronted with while also revealing a thread of unconscious racism in Betti's thinking. In fact, Betti's first descriptions of Suleiman take a similar tone, focusing on his "occhi scurissimi da arabo" ("very dark Arab eyes").¹¹ These racializing descriptions are couched in metaphors of animal aggression, comparing him to a starving beast—"come un animale affamato" ("like a hungry animal")¹²—thus suggesting a connection between the solitary Arab man and the lone wolf: the "lupo randagio."

For centuries Paris has been the international metropolis par excellence; a destination for political and artistic exiles, it has figured, in the Western imaginary, as the place where difference is erased. Making Paris the backdrop for this scene of racial hyper-vigilance, Campo seems to speak to Gabriele Marranci's point that Islamophobia, in Europe, is about a fear of multiculturalism, where the Muslim man stands in for all the negative consequences of difference.¹³ It is important to bear in mind, when discussing the power of racist and similar phobias of the Other, that the circulating currency is the image of a single, invented figure; it is a solitary actor that is captured in the snapshot that comprises a stereotype. Historical Muslim men are, therefore not the subjects of this new, post-9/11 brand of Islamo-focused racism, though they are its objects. Maraini reminds Fallaci that not all Muslims are bad: "Non sono gli islamici in generale a fare l'eccidio, come non sono gli italiani in generale a buttare la bomba alla Banca dell'Agricoltura" ("Not all Muslims commit mass murder, just as not all Italians bomb the Agricultural Bank").¹⁴ Maraini's point is that the violent acts of some must not be used to make generalizations about an entire population. While this seems to come from a place of understanding and compassion, the underlying logic is that the loner is suspect by virtue of his difference from the rest; in Maraini's logic, the "Muslims [who] commit mass murder" are set apart from the majority of Muslims, they are the unusual ones, the bad seeds, the different and other of Muslim society, even though these "Others" may work together as terrorists, they are

¹⁰ Ibid., 18. See also 23, 29 and 31.

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Marranci explains that "Europe fears that, in a real multicultural environment, Islam might transform what Europe is today (or maybe what it wants to be in the future)." Gabriele Marranci, "Multiculturalism, Islam and the Clash of Civilizations Theory: Rethinking Islamophobia," *Culture and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2004): 106. Giuseppe Sciortino offers a compelling analysis of the rise of Islamophobia in the Italian context through a reading of Fallaci's article and Giovanni Sartori's response to it in "Islamofobia all'italiana," *Polis* 1 (2002): 103-26.

¹⁴ Maraini, "Ma il dolore non ha una bandiera."

read as similar only in their difference from the norm. As Puar and Rai explain in their seminal essay “Monster, Terrorist, Fag,” in the discourses of Islamophobia and radical Western nationalism that were reenergized after 9/11, implications of difference transformed the Arab man into a (potential) terrorist and a psychologically “damaged” individual.¹⁵ This is the logic that allows Maraini to claim that not all Muslims are bad, just the lone man who is, for some reason, unable to behave and think like his fellow Muslims. To return to Puar and Rai, what is at stake, according to this psychologizing logic, is “the failure of the normal(ized) psyche. Indeed, an implicit but foundational supposition structures this entire discourse: the very notion of the normal psyche, which is in fact part of the West’s own heterosexual family romance—a narrative space that relies on the normalized, even if perverse, domestic space of desire supposedly common in the West.”¹⁶ By putting the myth of heterodomestic normalcy in dialogue with the looming image of the Muslim bogeyman, Puar and Rai get at a tension that is at the heart of this text. Suleiman, othered by these denigrating discourses of difference, is not always able to resist their pernicious logic. The pervasiveness of these racist ideologies is such that Suleiman has, in some way, internalized some of the thinking that sees difference as negative. Although clearly rooted in the U.S. context, Puar and Rai’s thinking helps us see the ways in which, in Campo’s novel, the racism Suleiman faces is shaped by the attacks on America and, as a consequence, is significantly different from the racisms and the Islamophobia that have historically colored Franco-Algerian tensions. This is not to suggest that those tensions and those types of bigoted thinking no longer exist; instead, I am arguing that this text highlights a new, Americanized brand of Islamophobia that acts in addition to pre-existing narratives of inclusion and exclusion in Europe.

In a moment of confession, Suleiman admits to Betti that he has worried about not fitting in, about never being able to adapt:

Io un giorno ci ho pensato davvero a morire, sai, mi sentivo completamente fuori posto qui, mi mancava il paese, la mia famiglia, mi mancava tutto, anche l’aria che respiravo laggiù, non c’era niente da fare, non volevo tornare a vivere in Algeria. Così avevo la sensazione che non c’era un posto per me in questo mondo, che avevo sbagliato tutto, ero un fallimento vivente, con le ragazze, lo studio, il lavoro. Avevo già bruciato la mia vita e non sapevo nemmeno io in che modo. Ero intrappolato in questi pensieri, ero come fermo bloccato. Non c’era posto per me nel mondo.¹⁷

(Once I did really think about dying, you know, I felt completely out of place here, I missed my country, my family, I missed everything, even the air I breathed

¹⁵ Islamophobia is by no means “new” to Europe. Islam has, in many ways, been the object of discrimination and phobia since the end of World War II, whereas the U.S. was focused on the “threat” of Communism. September 11th (and the violent rhetoric of Western nationalism exemplified by Fallaci’s article) brought Europe and the U.S. together—led by the U.S.—in Islamophobia, though of course there were differences. For a thoughtful analysis of the history and transformation of Islamophobia in Europe, see Matti Bunzl, “Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some Thoughts on the New Europe,” *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 4 (2005): 499-508; Andre Gingrich, “Anthropological Analyses of Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism in Europe,” *American Ethnologist* 32 (2005): 513-15; and Marranci, “Multiculturalism, Islam and the Clash of Civilizations Theory.”

¹⁶ Puar and Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag,” 123.

¹⁷ Campo, *Lezioni*. 20-21.

there, there was nothing for me to do, I didn't want to go back to Algeria. So I had the feeling that there was nowhere in the world for me, that I had messed up everything, I was a living failure, with girls, with my studies, with work. I had already wasted my life and I didn't even know how. I was caught in these thoughts, as though blocked at a standstill. There was not a place for me in the world.)

His monologue is not substantially different from the existentialist rant that so many young male protagonists have voiced throughout literature; Suleiman questions his purpose in life and curses his own ineptitude in love, work and intellectual success. By deploying the topos of the young man's existential rant in the context of a narrative that highlights racial difference, the text reveals the ways racialized normativizing forces work to dissuade the (white) man who is the subject of those norms from his feeling of difference while simultaneously reinforcing the sense of unalterable failure the other (not-white) man feels about his difference. What makes Suleiman's existential monologue significant to this discussion is precisely that it comes from an Arab man; his existential crisis is bolstered by the pervasive discourse of Islamophobia rather than being countered by the narratives of belonging and self-worth. In a world imbued with racism and xenophobia, the implications are that the Arab man is always alone, always out of place; he does not even know how to treat women and cannot adapt anywhere—in the West or at home, “non c'è posto nel mondo.” Unlike the lament of the immigrant who longs for his homeland, Suleiman's speech is without longing, there is no idealized place of return, only a sense of failed integration: “avevo sbagliato tutto, ero un fallimento vivente.”

The crisis of the young, white, Judeo-Christian man is coded as a rite of passage (think, for instance, of Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov or Salinger's Holden Caulfield), a moment of self-reflection that concludes with the rejection of youthful dreams and the reassuring realization that he has a purpose and place. For the Arab man in many Western narratives, there can be no such realization. The pervasive narrative (in the Western world) tells us that it is because of Arab man's unadaptability that he is angry and threatening: “They hate our freedoms [...] They stand against us” and want to destroy our way of life, was George W. Bush's explanation of 9/11 that echoed around the globe.¹⁸ As Marranci writes, “after September 11th, the myth of a Europe founded on Judeo-Christian values has been reinforced by marking the differences between Islam and the West rather than trying to undermine them.”¹⁹ But even as Suleiman's monologue calls up these myths, it serves to illustrate how independent they are of cultural specificity: this Arab-Muslim man is no more or less an outcast than any other young man living his moment of existential crisis; the difference is that his anxiety can be mapped onto political tensions and transnational aggressions. Put another way, Suleiman's sense of otherness finds a certain validation in the pervasive narratives of Islamophobia that name the Arab man as different and monstrous. He works against these representations by continuously offering up his self-narrative; whether as an explanation of his difference, or, as in the case of the monologue above, as an unintentional echo of other anxious souls, Suleiman's insistent self-narrativization places him in dialogue with and in relation to other subjects who can access those same discursive registers. Betti, on other hand, is continually marked by a lack of dialogue.

¹⁸ George W. Bush, “President Bush Addresses the Nation,” *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2001.

¹⁹ Marranci, “Rethinking Islamophobia,” 106.

The silence that surrounds Betti is coded as negative because it brings to light a suspicion of solitude that is profoundly ingrained in Italian culture. The threat of being made to live as an exile or outcast is as pervasive as it is unspoken. By framing Betti and Suleiman's relationship with memories of her relationship with Ennio, the text emphasizes how profoundly connected Betti is to her Italian roots. She understands herself and her subject position entirely in terms of her cultural heritage, positioning herself within the confines of an Italian narrative of cultural identity. In this sense, then, I argue she understands herself as an *extracomunitaria*, whose outsider status in France hinges on her inability to communicate and is compounded by her national exile and her relationship with a racially othered man. The term "extracomunitario"—once offered as a politically correct, socially acceptable way of talking about non-nationals living in Italy—in fact describes a worldview in which you are either within or without "la comunità": the same "noi e loro" dynamic I have identified at the core of the Fallaci-Maraini debate. As Kossi A. Komla-Ebri explains in an analysis of the power of the word "extracomunitario" in the Italian cultural imaginary, "[l]a cosa più irritante in questa 'parolaccia' è che ci definisce in 'forma negativa.' Piuttosto che chiamarci per quello che siamo cioè 'cittadini,' essa ci circonda per quello che 'non siamo'" ("The most irritating thing about that 'bad word' is that it defines us in 'negative' terms. Instead of calling us what we are, which is 'citizens,' this word defines what we 'are not'").²⁰ Presumably used to describe people who are nationally different, in actual practice "extracomunitario" refers to those who do not act or look properly Italian; a judgment most often based on physical and linguistic traits.²¹ As a child and then a young woman in Italy, Betti looks and speaks "properly" Italian, but she self-identifies as being outside the community—outside the norm—because of her divorced parents, her relationship with Ennio and, above all, her inability to recognize herself in available narratives of identification. Betti's failure to participate in the community of talkative, sexually appropriate (restrained) Italian women is exaggerated by her move to Paris—the literary locus par excellence of sexual outcasts from around the world.²² Though she lives in Paris as an adult, she continues to understand her subject position in relation to the Italian context so that Paris marks her exile rather than signaling her participation in a new community with different terms of normalcy and propriety. In other words, through Betti, the themes of communication and narration are closely related to conditions of isolation and exile.

Betti repeatedly claims she is incapable of communicating or expressing herself in an easy and open manner, a skill she believes she *should* have. This flaw weighs on her even as a young girl: "A quattordici anni," she recalls,

²⁰ Kossi A. Komla-Ebri, "Il colore delle parole," in *Il mondo in classe*, ed. Lorenzo Luatti (Arezzo: UCODEP, 2006), 55.

²¹ By and large this term is directed at people who can be read (racially and linguistically) as non-Western, but the logic of exclusion that prompts such categorization does not stop to discern whether a black woman in Florence is on holiday from the U.S. or emigrated from Ethiopia years before. The effect of the label is to identify difference and mark it as negative.

²² Over the last two centuries Paris has figured both literally and literarily as a site of refuge for writers and artists seeking a dimension of sexual freedom not permitted elsewhere or, at least, enhanced by a fantasy of a sexually permissive Paris. For depictions of Paris as site of refuge for exiles and locus of sexual freedom see, for instance, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, (New York: Dial Press, 1956); Pier Vittorio Tondelli's *Camere separate*, (Milan: Bompiani, 1989); Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Blue Ribbon books, 1928); or Suzanne Rodriguez's biography of Natalie Clifford Barney (*Wild Heart: A Life : Natalie Clifford Barney's Journey from Victorian America to Belle Epoque Paris*. New York: Ecco, 2002).

“di parole non ne conosco, non è che non ne so, a volte certe parole me le rigiro dentro la testa, le sento, le ascolto e mi restano impresse per tanto tempo. Ma al momento che devono uscire fuori, attraversare la bocca e dirigersi verso il mondo, è come se si perdono per strada.”²³

(At fourteen I know some words, it isn't that I don't. Sometimes I turn them over in my mind, I hear them, I listen to them and they stick with me for a long time. But at the moment they are supposed to come out, cross my mouth and direct themselves towards the world, it's as though they get lost along the way.)

Her father, on the other hand, is held up as the perfect example of the Italian man *because* of his loquacity: “[L]ui ha sempre avuto la cazzata pronta da sparare, è sempre stato forte a parlare a raffica e tenersi le conversazioni [...] con gli amici, coi parenti, con mia madre” (“He always had a joke ready, he was always good at rattling on and holding conversations [...] with friends, relatives, my mother”).²⁴ Talkative and social, her father is the model of the non-threatening, trustworthy Italian—at least until his divorce, at which point he is left alone, in the silence of his shabby apartment, unable to talk or even joke with his sullen and disappointed teenage daughter. His silence and isolation are his punishment for breaking the family and threatening social order. Through the example of the father we can see how, for Betti, communication is not just a way of expressing oneself to others, but also a way of fitting in, a way of being one of many, rather than a loner, a suspect, a threat.²⁵

In this sense, Suleiman is more successful than Betti at integrating and adapting his behavior. When a nosey Italian neighbor comes by Betti's apartment, ostensibly to borrow coffee but obviously to interrogate her new Arab boyfriend about all things Muslim, Suleiman responds patiently and courteously. In fact, he handles the situation so tactfully that Betti is forced to consider her own response: “Penso per un secondo,” she says, “come risponderai io a domande simili, come tendenza credo che manderei subito a fare in culo diretto chi mi facesse queste domande. Invece il vecchio Suleiman tiene duro, non si scompone” (“I think for a second about how I would respond to similar questions. Out of habit I think I would immediately tell whoever asked me these questions to fuck off. Instead ol' Suleiman holds his ground, he doesn't lose his cool”).²⁶ Part of the reason Suleiman is able to stay so calm is that he can distinguish between the condemnation of the stereotype and his judgment of himself. “[D]opo l'11 settembre,” Suleiman reflects, “è successo qualcosa, è saltato il tappo, per quello che riguarda gli arabi. Adesso chiunque si sente autorizzato a fare domande, a fare il poliziotto [...] Ma non lo capisci,” he explains to Betti, “qui noi siamo francesi sui documenti e basta, per il resto, siamo arabi. Per i francesi io e i miei fratelli resteremo sempre degli arabi” (“After September 11th something

²³ Campo, *Lezioni*, 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁵ As a young girl Betti is a threat to Ennio and his wife; she is accused of ruining their marriage and, later, she is indirectly held responsible for his death because he is shot while running away with her rather than staying home with his wife. This image of the sexual single woman as a threat to the safety of men and calm and order of society is a well-worn one that finds roots in the dangerous seductive and dangerous of ancient mythology (the Sirens, Salome and Jezebel, for instance, are iconic examples of the effect of this ancient narrative that translates women's sexuality into threat and makes it appear as though it were isolated to these rare and unique figures, rather than being true of all women).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

happened, the cork popped, as far as the Arabs are concerned. Now everyone feels authorized to ask questions, to play the cop [...] But you don't understand, here we are only French on paper, everything else about us is Arab. For the French my brothers and I will always be Arabs").²⁷ Although offended and hurt by the bigotry that positions him as an exile in his own community, Suleiman is able to recognize it as a stereotype, as the manifestation of certain paranoias and the articulation of certain norms of appearance and behavior. Suleiman fights against the Islamophobia that makes every Arab man into that damaged monster-terrorist; he fights against this by trying to make himself legible, by re-narrating himself.²⁸ Betti's response, on the other hand, reveals the vast differences in how these two make sense of their social isolation, their loner status.²⁹

In response to the neighbor's interrogation of Suleiman and his subsequent discussion of race, Betti launches into a narration of her first sexual experiences: "[M]i ricordi il mio primo amante" ("[Y]ou remind me of my first lover"), she tells Suleiman, and begins to recount her time with Ennio.³⁰ It is my contention that Betti's sudden confession (deeply uncharacteristic for this private woman) is only possible because of a profound misunderstanding. In other words, I am suggesting that Betti interprets Suleiman's dignity in the face of persecution as a sign of his disregard for social norms, as a sign of acceptance free of judgment. She realizes she is mistaken when he responds: "Sei troppo sincera, tu, non è bene che una donna dica tutte le sue cose intime." ("You're too honest, it isn't right for a woman to tell all of her intimate stories").³¹ Her openness, he points out, cannot be compared with his own because her gender demands discretion.

Suleiman's reprimand gives voice to an anxiety about female sexuality that finds echoes in all cultures. Betti thinks she recognizes in Suleiman the pain of being socially ostracized, but she is rejected by him. Suleiman's struggles are the result of his appearance and he is able to read them not as symptoms of his own transgressions but as markers of difference beyond his control. Betti's transgressions, on the other hand, are coded as individual, moral failures: as a young girl she allowed herself to be seduced by an older, married man, and now—as an adult—rather than being ashamed of her past, she is aroused by memories of that time. Though directly dependent on the particularity of her gendered, sexed body, Betti's non-normative sexual history marks her as negatively different from other women. Her articulation of her history—of her pleasure and desire—further condemns her as a woman unable to properly control her body, and deny or repent for her expression of desire.

In a conflation of national and gender identity, Suleiman rejects Betti's newfound openness in politically and racially charged terms: "[L]o sapevo che era una fregatura andare con un'italiana...dovevo rimettermi con un'araba" ("I knew it was a mistake to go with an Italian...I

²⁷ Ibid., 80-81.

²⁸ In this way Suleiman is performing a strategy of self-preservation similar to the one that Puar and Rai discuss in their reading of the Sikh community in the U.S., who produce "Talking Points" as a way of educating the public about the differences between the "good" Sikh turbans and the "bad" terrorist turbans. Puar and Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag."

²⁹ I am insisting on the term "loner" because, as I noted earlier in my discussion of Maraini's essay, the logic that sees the non-conformist subject as "Other" also insists on the uniqueness of that difference. In other words, despite the fact that Betti and Suleiman have each other, their difference from the behaviors, appearances and norms that govern the majority make it so that they are cast in the role of "loner," where alone means, at its base value, different and thus negative.

³⁰ Campo, *Lezioni*, 81.

³¹ Ibid., 82.

should've gotten back with an Arab girl").³² And then again: "[I]o non ti seguo, parli come una francese" ("I don't understand you, you talk like a French girl").³³ Throughout the novel this type of conflation of language and identity serves to signal moments of tension, as when Betti says to Suleiman after he forces her to have anal sex: "Io no, gli dico, io non voglio questo, sei un gran figlio di puttana. Glielo dico in italiano, nella mia lingua" ("I don't, I tell him, I don't want this, you're a real son of a bitch. I say it to him in Italian, in my language").³⁴ This ownership of Italian identity—extremely unusual for Betti—is reserved for moments of battle and antagonism. Her cultural heritage informs her outlook and her sense of self, but rarely do we see her acknowledge that influence much less take pride in it. As suggested by the title, *Lezioni di arabo*, language is a central concern throughout the text, but the function of language is not always the same. Sometimes, as in Betti's angry defense of her body, the choice of one language over another is meant to indicate difference and establish distance. At other times attention to language is meant to offend, as a conflation of race, character and linguistic expression, such as Suleiman's condemnation of Betti for sounding French—a euphemism here for sexually explicit.

Although it is set in Paris, there is little attention to French in the narrative.³⁵ There is, instead, attention to those moments when Betti chooses to speak Italian to Suleiman (when she defends herself and her body) and, of course, to her decision to take Arabic lessons. She explains that these lessons are meant to bring the two of them closer together: "Ho detto a Suleiman che ho iniziato a prendere lezioni di arabo all'Institut du monde arabe, voglio imparare la sua lingua, almeno un po'" ("I told Suleiman that I started taking Arabic lessons at the Institute for the Arab World; I want to learn his language, at least a little bit").³⁶ Suleiman, however, does not take such a sentimental view of things. He responds, instead, by launching into a discussion of race relations between Arab people and Western people. "Lo sai perché voi occidentali finite sempre per ridurre l'altro a uno stereotipo?" he asks, and then goes on to answer his own question, becoming increasingly agitated as he speaks:

Così potete continuare a non pensare, potete evitare di andare fino in fondo nelle questioni vere [...] [V]oi credete di avere democrazia? Quanti sono gli italiani o i francesi che erano contrari alla guerra in Iraq? E ai massacri dei palestinesi? La maggioranza, forse. Però? [...] Nessuno ha chiesto il vostro parere, vi hanno

³² Ibid., 88.

³³ Ibid., 89.

³⁴ Ibid., 26.

³⁵ By setting this story of migration and difference in France, Campo invites a comparison between the expectations of tolerance invoked by each national context. The Italian has historically been the other of Europe, emigrating to France and Germany, along with people from North Africa and Eastern Europe, for work and political asylum. Italy has only recently become a destination for immigrants. Perhaps because of these differences Italy has not been "expected" to know how to negotiate difference as well as France. In this way, the dysfunctional multiculturalism of Campo's Paris setting helps to work against hierarchies of progress-as-tolerance that place France above Italy and which mark Italy as "not yet" multiculturally tolerant but sure to follow in the footsteps of its neighbors. In other words, the persistence of discrimination in Paris, where it is not narratively expected or legally tolerated, has the effect of simultaneously "forgiving" Italian racism (or making it seem "less bad") and also painting a bleak picture of the possibilities for tolerance and the harmonious coexistence of difference. For a more focused discussion of histories of migration and discrimination in and between European countries, see Christopher Bail, "The Configuration of Symbolic Boundaries against Immigrants in Europe," *American Sociological Review* 73 (2008): 37-59.

³⁶ Campo, *Lezioni*, 53.

ignorato e ce l'hanno messo in culo a noi, come sempre [...] Vi siete lasciati imbrogliare, anche voi, gli arabi non sono tutti terroristi, Osama bin Laden non parla a nome mio o a nome di tutti gli arabi.³⁷

(You know why you Westerners always end up reducing the other to a stereotype? So that you can continue not to think, you can avoid getting to the bottom of the real questions [...] [Y]ou think you have democracy? How many Italians or French people were against the war in Iraq? And the massacres of the Palestinians? The majority perhaps. And yet? [...] No one asked your opinion, they ignored you and they screwed us, like always [...] You let yourselves be tricked, you too, Arabs are not all terrorists, Osama bin Laden doesn't speak in my name or in the name of all Arabs.)

The anger and frustration of Suleiman's outburst are the flip side of the calm and poise that allow him to treat Betti's bigoted neighbor with such generosity. Like Maraini, however, Suleiman does not imagine a world undivided. Staying steadfastly within a logic of "noi e voi," he describes the patience and intentionality Arab people must constantly exhibit in thinking about and dealing with Western people. Betti, on the other hand, occupies a space between: not between a Western world and an Arab world, but between a world divided and a world undefined. Her relationship to Italy and Italian culture is strained at best; she is estranged from her family and her nation of birth and speaks Italian only in moments of anger and self-defense. She lives in a multicultural city, works in an Algerian restaurant and dates an Arab man. She is, to borrow Martin Manalansan's theory of queer immigrant identity, a "messy subject," spilling out of the conceptual containers used to make sense of social organization by inhabiting multiple, unspecific subject positions so that her very "messiness" marks her queerness.³⁸

As the novel draws to a close Betti's boss is dismayed to find that she fails to embody her national stereotype religiously as well: "E non credi nemmeno nel tuo Dio, il Dio dei Cattolici? Gli italiani sono cattolici!" he exclaims ("Don't you even believe in your God, in the Catholic God? Italians are Catholic!").³⁹ She responds thoughtfully and at length:

Ti dico in cosa credo, Hassan, io credo nello sforzo di chi cerca di diventare un essere umano. Di chi prova a superare l'egoismo e il razzismo istintivi, quella tendenza di merda che abbiamo tutti a ridurre l'altro a uno stereotipo, a incollare un'etichetta su qualcuno in base alle nostre paure: il terrorista islamico, il sionista, il negro, l'arabo, il matto, il povero, lo zingaro [...] Credo che questa è l'origine di tutti i guai, delle guerre dello sfruttamento, di tutte le stronzate che ci sono nel

³⁷ Ibid., 55-6.

³⁸ I borrow the notion of queer "messiness" from Martin Manalansan's talk, "Queer Dwellings: Migrancy, Precarity, and Fabulosity" (presented at the Feminist Theory Workshop at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, March 22-23, 2013). Manalansan used "messiness" to describe queer interactions with identity restrictors, like the census form, which presume shared understandings and experiences of subject-defining terms like "household," or "kinship."

³⁹ Campo, *Lezioni*, 104.

mondo, nasce tutto da qui, negare a una persona la sua umanità, e ridurla a uno stereotipo.⁴⁰

(I'll tell you what I believe in, Hassan, I believe in the effort of whoever tries to live as a human being. Of whoever tries to overcome instinctive egotism and racism, those shitty tendencies we all have to reduce the other to a stereotype, to glue a label on someone based on our own fears: the Muslim terrorist, the Zionist, the negro, the Arab, the crazy person, the poor man, the gypsy[...] I believe that this is the root of all our problems, of the wars of exploitation, of all the crap in the world, it all comes from this, denying a person her humanity, and reducing her to a stereotype.)

What is remarkable about Betti's response is not so much *what* she says, but that she says anything at all. As I discussed earlier, Betti's life up to this point has been characterized by her silence; she has always been a solitary and taciturn woman. Now, as the novel concludes, Betti has a steady boyfriend and has learned to engage in conversation and share her thoughts with others; she is responding to what Puar and Rai refer to as the call to enact her own normalization.⁴¹ When her boss remarks on how talkative she now is, saying, "Oulalà sei una filosofa, tu" ("Oh, so you're a philosopher, you are"), she responds by mentioning Suleiman: "[M]i ha chiesto di andare a trovare la sua famiglia" ("[H]e asked me to go meet his family").⁴² By associating her sudden ease of expression with her newly forming and impending domesticity, Betti is signaling the convergence of disciplining forces with which she must contend.

Ostracized and made to feel different because of her non-normative experience of sexuality and desire, Betti is also punished precisely for her condition as exile. Her solitariness—stemming from an inability to tell anyone about her experience and her pleasure with Ennio—makes her suspect; thus she is doubly condemned as different, alone and therefore suspect. Her relationship with Suleiman acts as a disciplining experience in which she learns the terms of acceptance: talk about this, not about that, don't be alone, be with a man, be part of a family. In the end, however, Betti is hesitant. She refuses to take Suleiman to meet her family in Italy and is unsure if she wants to meet his. This minimal dissent is indicative, I am suggesting, of a desire to resist being coopted, an effort to keep a narrative of the self from being translated and formatted to fit norms of narrative and social acceptability.

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⁴² Campo, *Lezioni*, 104.

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