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# **Orality and Written Culture in Italian Migrant Literature: The Oral Narrative of Yousif Jaralla**

Kombola T. Ramadhani Mussa

Leverhulme Early Career Fellow - School of Modern Languages and Translation,  
Cardiff University – Cardiff (UK)

Email: [ramadhanimussak@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:ramadhanimussak@cardiff.ac.uk)

# Orality and Written Culture in Italian Migrant Literature: The Oral Narrative of Yousif Jaralla

## ABSTRACT

This article provides a novel account of the nature and significance of 'orality' in the writings of Italian 'migrant writers'. It includes an in-depth analysis of 'I fiumi d'altrove', a text and performance by the Iraqi-born storyteller Yousif Jaralla, whose work has so far received scant critical attention. My aim is to investigate the role of orality as an integral part of migrant authors' work within, and as part of, the broader Italian cultural panorama. From a theoretical viewpoint the discussion takes as its starting point the idea of an oral-literary continuum in order to challenge the perception of orality as an inferior and unsophisticated form of storytelling. I challenge this perception by revealing the literary sophistication of Jaralla's tale 'I fiumi d'altrove' through an analysis of the formal patterns it exhibits. Thus, I propose a new formal and aesthetic approach to texts by migrant writers based on the explicit foregrounding of orality.

**KEYWORDS:** Italian Migrant Literature; Oral-literary continuum; Formal and aesthetic analysis; Storytelling; Yousif Jaralla; Narrative theatre.

This article examines the nature and significance of 'orality' in the writings of Italian 'migrant writers', discussing, specifically, the case of 'I fiumi d'altrove', a short tale written and performed by the Iraqi-born storyteller Yousif Jaralla and published in 2002 in the collection *Parole di sabbia*. As I will argue, the tale offers an exciting case study for the investigation of the interaction between oral and written form.<sup>1</sup> From

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<sup>1</sup>Yousif Jaralla, 'I fiumi di altrove', in *Parole di sabbia*, ed. by Francesco Argento, Alberto Melandri, and Paolo Trabucco (S. Eustachio di Mercato S. Severino: Il Grappolo, 2002), pp. 36-45.

a theoretical viewpoint, the analysis takes as its starting point the idea of an oral-literary continuum, as theorized by Goody, Portelli and Sundmark, to explore the ways in which migrant writing contributes to the aesthetics of Italian literature.<sup>2</sup> I argue that the notion of an oral-literary continuum, drawing attention to techniques and elements generally used to study oral narratives, is an effective tool to examine written texts that are characterized by the recurring presence of specific oral features such as repetitions, analogies or rhythmic sequences. My aim is to show that this notion, which implies the possibility of moving freely from one channel of communication to the other (from writing to different forms of oral performance), provides an important framework for the analysis of Jaralla's work (and, potentially, that of other authors and performers). Through my examination, I intend to offer a new formal and aesthetic approach to migrant writers' work and reaffirm the need to treat migrant narratives as literary rather than sociological texts.

The focus on orality is particularly significant on at least two counts. Firstly, I show that one cannot fully appreciate the literary, aesthetic character of the work of many migrant writers (and Jaralla, in particular) without considering the characteristics of oral discourse and focussing on the recurrent presence in their texts of techniques and strategies of oral delivery. Secondly, I argue that orality is a useful framework to highlight the notable innovative contribution to Italian literature made by Italian migrant writers. The oral dimension of these writings is evidenced by their close connections to theatre and performance, as well as to Italian dialects, which are themselves predominantly spoken languages. These

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<sup>2</sup>See Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Björn Sundmark, *Alice's Adventures in the Oral-Literary Continuum* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1999); Alessandro Portelli, *The Text and the Voice. Writing, Speaking, and Democracy in American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

aspects of the oral-literary continuum clearly emerge in my analysis of the work of Yousif Jaralla, whose work has so far not received the attention it deserves. Jaralla occupies a very unusual position among migrant writers because he normally refuses to publish his work; his writings and notes represent a basic script for his oral performances, during which he often improvises, relying on audience participation.<sup>3</sup> In his performances Jaralla tries to weave a narrative space, an area where distinct narrative traditions, sounds and rhythms contribute to the telling of a story. These hybrid performances become a symbolic place of encounter, where different cultures and languages try to coexist, refusing to fall into any hierarchical order. Whilst Jaralla considers himself primarily or exclusively a performer and a storyteller, in this article I explicitly focus on his writings and, in particular, the tale 'I fiumi di altrove'.

In order to define better the parameters of my analysis it is important to emphasize that both the terms 'migrant writers' and 'orality' require critical examination. The label Italian migrant literature was first used by Armando Gnisci to refer to novels and short stories written in Italian since the 1980s by immigrant writers originating from former Italian colonies and other countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb and the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> At first these were often hybrid

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<sup>3</sup>I interviewed Jaralla on the 29/05/2010 at Castello Malaspina in Fosdinovo (Massa-Carrara), where he presented his theatrical show 'Il cuore in una barca di carta'. During the interview he told me that he agreed to send two of his texts to the editors of the collection *Parole di sabbia* after he was contacted by one of them. Although initially Jaralla stated that these texts were not intended for publication, he eventually agreed to see 'I fiumi di altrove' and 'Gli amici del Narciso' included in the collection.

<sup>4</sup>I will alternatively use the label 'Italian Migrant Literature' and 'Italophone Literature' because, in spite of the limits intrinsic to such labels, often refused by the artists to whom they refer, they seem to underline some of the main issues, especially social and linguistic, related to the topic. On the debate about terminology see for example: Graziella Parati, 'Italophone voices', *Studi d'italianistica nell'Africa australe/Italian Studies in Southern Africa*, 8.2 (1995), 1-15; Armando Gnisci, *Creolizzare l'Europa. Letteratura e migrazione* (Rome: Meltemi, 2003), *Nuovo Planetario Italiano: geografia e antologia della letteratura della migrazione in Italia e in Europa*, ed. by Armando Gnisci (Troina: Città Aperta, 2006); *Leggere il testo e il mondo. Vent'anni di scritture della migrazione in Italia*, ed. by Fulvio Pezzarossa and Ilaria Rossini (Bologna: Clueb, 2011); Chiara Mengozzi, *Narrazioni contese. Vent'anni*

texts which migrant authors wrote in collaboration with Italian native speakers. The latter were usually themselves writers or journalists, whose names then appeared on the book covers, sometimes ahead of the migrant writer's own name.<sup>5</sup> A few decades on, migrant literature now appears destined to become a stable and enriching component of Italian culture, as aptly noted by Marie Orton and Graziella Parati who, in their introduction to *Multicultural Literature in Contemporary Italy*, state: 'No more a passing *phenomenon*: migrant literature in Italy is here to stay, and it closely dialogues with both an *Italian cultural tradition* and influences contemporary cultural hybridization'.<sup>6</sup> In order to understand fully the complexities of the mutually enriching dialogue between mainstream and migrant Italian literature, however, one must approach the latter *as literature*, that is with a literary rather than a purely sociological eye.<sup>7</sup> Migrant literary texts can be put in effective critical dialogue with other elements of the Italian literary system by developing textual analyses based on close readings and by embracing a model of 'mobility', described by Loredana Polezzi as a 'rete di spostamenti, relazioni, appartenenze e riferimenti (rimandanti anche, ma non solo, a canoni e modelli letterari)' which

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*di scritture italiane della migrazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2013); Jennifer Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries: Figures in Italian Migration Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

<sup>5</sup>These texts include: *Chiamatemi Ali* written by Mohamed Bouchane with Carla De Girolamo and Daniele Miccione (Milan: Leonardo, 1990), *Immigrato* written by Salah Methani with Mario Fortunato (Rome: Theoria, 1990), *Io, venditore di elefanti* written by Pap Kouma with Oreste Pivetta (Milan: Garzanti, 1990), and *Volevo diventare bianca* written by Nasser Chohra with Alessandra Atti di Sarro (Rome: Edizioni E/O, 1993). The presence of a 'linguistic expert' introduces a controversial debate about authorship. See Jennifer Burns, 'Frontiere nel testo: autori, collaborazioni e mediazioni nella scrittura italo-fona della migrazione', in *Borderlines. Migrazioni e identità nel novecento*, ed. by Jennifer Burns and Loredana Polezzi (Isernia: Cosmo Iannone editore, 2003), pp. 203–12.

<sup>6</sup>Marie Orton and Graziella Parati 'Introduction', in *Multicultural Literature in Contemporary Italy*, ed. by Marie Orton and Graziella Parati (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), pp. 11–27 (p. 12). My italics.

<sup>7</sup>It is probably worth noting that, for example, in 1995 Mario Fortunato, journalist and co-author with Salah Methani of the novel *Immigrato*, defined the first works by Italian migrant authors as examples of 'pre-literature', claiming that their value up to that point had been only sociological. See Adriana Polveroni, 'L'immigrato racconta in italiano. Intervista con Mario Fortunato', *L'Unità*, 26 April 1995.

permits one to regain 'una dimensione microtestuale dello studio della letteratura su scala transnazionale'.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on this approach, I argue that examining the oral features of migrant authors' written texts can help us to understand better the literary and aesthetic quality of their work. I begin my analysis by addressing the debate on orality, looking at the relationship between orality and writing as a continuum. I then move on to offer some representative examples of Italian migrant authors' work to show orality's importance and the many functions it plays in migrant narratives. Subsequently, I introduce Jaralla's work as a storyteller, drawing a comparison with Italian narrative theatre and focusing on the role of writing in the author's composing process. This leads to a close reading of one of his two published tales, 'I fiumi di altrove', where I examine specific textual elements that represent clear traces of what Maria Corti defined as 'una specie di grammatica dell'esecuzione'.<sup>9</sup> I argue that the analysis of these oral features is necessary not just to comprehend fully Jaralla's method of composition but also to evaluate the aesthetic value of his work.

### **Orality and Writing**

The relationship between orality and literature is complex. Firstly, while scholars such as Walter J. Ong have stressed the fundamental opposition of orality and literacy, others, such as Ruth Finnegan, have refused to see the oral and the literary

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<sup>8</sup>Loredana Polezzi, 'La mobilità come modello: ripensando i margini della scrittura italiana', *Studi (e testi) italiani*, 22 (2008), 115-28 (pp. 117 and 118).

<sup>9</sup>Maria Corti, *Per una enciclopedia della comunicazione letteraria* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997), p. 79. On the importance of a close reading of Italian migrant writers' texts see Ugo Fracassa, 'Critica e/o retorica. Il discorso sulla letteratura migrante in Italia', in *Leggere il testo e il mondo. Vent'anni di scritture della migrazione in Italia*, pp. 169-82.



(rather than literacy) as entirely antagonistic dimensions.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, although in order to study the relationship between orality and writing these must be viewed as distinct categories, they are not in themselves homogeneous. More specifically, we can note that different societies confer on orality and writing not only different functions and meanings but also different levels of prestige. In his volume *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, Goody specifies that thinking in terms of a dichotomous relationship between orality and literacy can lead to an evident prejudice, since it sets up oral cultures as being both less contaminated and less advanced than written cultures. Instead, he suggests that we should conceive of cultures as occupying some 'intermediary position' on a continuum between orality and writing. He supports his view noting that it is not possible to draw a clear distinction between orality and writing.<sup>11</sup> Sundmark, who believes in the existence of an 'oral-literary continuum', describes the interdependence between the oral and the literary by pointing out that:

A basic premise is that the oral and literary media are not mutually exclusive. Tales are performed in an oral-literary continuum, neither entirely literary nor exclusively oral. Any speech act can be reported, recorded and written however incompletely; conversely, there is a sense of voice even in the most literary of texts.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982); Ruth Finnegan, 'How Oral is Oral Literature?', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 37.1 (1974), 52-64. On the notion of an oral-literary continuum see also: *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literature*, ed. by Deborah Tannen (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Co, 1982); *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, ed. by Slavica Rankovic, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010).

<sup>11</sup>Goody, p. XII.

<sup>12</sup>Sundmark, p. 199.



The notion of an oral-literary continuum, when applied to written texts, not only underscores the strong and continuous relationship between writing and orality but also reveals that they interact in different ways. In this article I define a written text as 'oral' when, first, the narrative voice directly addresses the reader trying figuratively to transcend the barrier of the page and, second, it includes specific narrative and linguistic choices aimed at simulating the spoken interaction by employing a 'stile semplice'. This expression, as Enrico Testa observes, describes a narrative prose where the use of a middle style and of spoken or informal language aims to reproduce the naturalness of oral communication.<sup>13</sup>

As noted by Marina Spunta and Michael Caesar, the Italian cultural context of the last few decades has witnessed an increased interest 'in the traditions and practises of orality, their relations with literacy (however defined) and the written culture, and the methodological and theoretical problems raised by the juxtaposition of "orality and literacy" or "oral and written"'.<sup>14</sup> This 'reawakening' has drawn the attention of critics to the centrality of orality in the works of Italian contemporary writers such as Gianni Celati, Francesca Duranti, Antonio Tabucchi and Alessandro Baricco. In their respective writings, orality has a different impact and it is used for a range of different purposes – from anti-literary effects and the use of a 'lower' spoken Italian in Celati, to the frequent rendition of dialogue in Duranti, the presence of reported speech in Tabucchi, or the importance of rhythm and storytelling in Baricco.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Enrico Testa, *Lo stile semplice* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup>Michael Caesar and Marina Spunta 'Introduction', in *Orality and Literacy in Modern Italian Culture*, ed. by Michael Caesar and Marina Spunta (London: Legenda, 2006), pp. 1-4 (p. 1).

<sup>15</sup>See Marina Spunta's analysis of the use of orality by these authors in *Voicing the Word. Writing Orality in Contemporary Italian Fiction* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004).

## Orality in Migrant Writers' Literature

Unsurprisingly, orality is an important dimension in the texts produced by migrant authors writing in Italian. This is a conscious choice, as evidenced by the examples I will discuss in this section. By creating a 'literature that looks more like oral literature than written literature', many migrant authors not only emphasise the importance of their own oral tradition and of storytelling but use orality as a bridge between two cultures and old and new belongings.<sup>16</sup> Literature with oral features is especially effective at hybridizing traditions because of its dialogic ability to address the reader directly through the use of a narrative voice. In addition, when such literature is performed, as is the case with Jaralla's, its bridging power is strengthened by the direct contact with and involvement of the audience. Orality is often explicitly mentioned in interviews with migrant authors and in works by critics discussing this kind of literature. For example, Ron Kubati (originally from Albania) and Jarmila Ockayová (from Slovakia), in interviews with Davide Bregola, highlight the significance of their respective country of origin's oral folklore as a source of inspiration.<sup>17</sup> The importance of orality in migrant literature also clearly emerges in an essay by Bregola, 'America latina in Italia', devoted to writers of Latin American origins. Writing about the Brazilian author Christiana De Caldas Brito, Bregola emphasizes how listening is crucial to her writing because her stories

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<sup>16</sup>Fred L. Gardaphé, 'From Oral Tradition to Written Word: Toward an Ethnographically Based Literary Criticism', in *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana*, ed. by Anthony Julian Tamburri, Paolo A. Giordano, and Fred L. Gardaphé, 2nd edn (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1990), pp. 286-98 (p. 288).

<sup>17</sup>Davide Bregola, *Da qui verso casa* (Rome: Kùmà - Lettere migranti, 2002). On the importance of orality when discussing Migrant writers' work see also Kombola Ramadhani Mussa, 'Forme dell'oralità nella narrativa dei *migrant writers* italiani', in *Leggere il testo e il mondo. Vent'anni di scritture della migrazione in Italia*, pp. 231-46.

showcase the importance of oral tradition. Many of Brito's accounts are based on childhood memories of popular quatrains she heard in Brazil.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of orality is reflected in a number of elements that characterise Italian migrant authors' works. These include: the presence of a narrator in the story; the repetition of proverbs; rituals of greeting; and descriptions of assemblies. This reliance on techniques that are characteristic of oral delivery is often self-conscious, as witnessed, for instance, by Kossi Komla-Ebri's adoption of the term *oralitura*, which combines 'oralità' and 'scrittura', in relation to his texts.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Tahar Lamri often uses the expression 'letteratura orale' to refer to his own work. Lamri's collection *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* contains seventeen tales linked by a framing narrative composed by the emails between two characters, the Italian Elena Romagnoli and the Algerian writer and translator, Tayeb.<sup>20</sup> That framing narrative becomes the place where the protagonists reflect on literature and writing. In one of their email exchanges, Elena observes to Tayeb:

Vorrei anche dirti che la lettura dei tuoi racconti suscita in me molte domande e se non ti dispiace vorrei farti una domanda: i tuoi testi sono narrazioni che si ispirano alla trasmissione orale delle storie e del sapere, cosa accade al testo in questo passaggio?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Davide Bregola. 'America latina in Italia', in *Nuovo Planetario Italiano: geografia e antologia della letteratura della migrazione in Italia e in Europa*, pp. 353-82.

<sup>19</sup>Velio Abati and Walter Lorenzoni 'Kossi Komla-Ebri: Intervista', *Il gabellino*, 9 February 2006, <<http://www.ilgabellino.eu/ilgabellino/article/view/391/371>> [accessed 28 April 2020]. For an exploration of the meanings associated with the term 'ora(li)tura', see: Claude Hagège, *L'homme de paroles*, (Paris: Fayard, 1985); Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, 'Storytelling and the great narration of global communication', *Annali della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere*, 3rd serie, 14 (2000), 44-61.

<sup>20</sup>Emails can be considered as a form of new orality which merge oral and literary elements. See for example: Naomi S. Baron, 'Letters by phone or speech by other means: the linguistics of email', *Language and Communication*, 18.2 (1998), 133-70.

<sup>21</sup>Tahar Lamri, *I sessanta nomi dell'amore* (Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna: Fara Editore, 2006), p. 89.

Significantly, the location of this email in the collection precedes 'Il pellegrinaggio della voce', one of Tahar Lamri's most famous tales, where he clearly celebrates the significance of orality, focussing on the power of words and the art of storytelling. In the tale, as Graziella Parati has observed, 'the emphasis is [...] on the language of orality and its translation into a written text', where Arabic, Italian standard and different Italian dialects (Mantovano, Romagnolo and Veneto) coexist.<sup>22</sup>

In the 2007 novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* by the Italian-Ethiopian writer and performer Gabriella Ghermandi, the author foregrounds the significance of the relationship between orality and writing, the importance of orality, the role played by writing in the narrated story and, consequently, the possibility of occupying different positions along the oral-literary continuum. Mahlet, the young protagonist, promises one of her elder relatives, Yacob, that she will become a *cantora*, the equivalent of the Western African *griot*, by collecting oral stories from those who experienced Italian colonization and fought against it. She will subsequently write them down in the language of the colonizer continuing the work first started by Yacob. The entire novel is based on oral discourse but, as perspicaciously observed by Portelli:

[...] la scrittura di Gabriella Ghermandi non cerca tanto di riprodurre il suono della voce (e comunque, la lingua è un'altra), quanto di farci sempre ricordare che la narrazione orale è sempre dialogica, presuppone sempre un rapporto. Nessuno racconta se non c'è

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<sup>22</sup>Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy. The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 61. Like Lamri, Amara Lakhous, in his novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* (Rome: Edizioni E/O, 2006), develops a polyphonic narrative by combining standard Italian, different Italian dialects and oral Arabic elements. See Rita Wilson, 'Mediating the clash of cultures through translingual narrative', in *Words, Images and Performances in Translation*, ed. by Rita Wilson and Brigid Maher (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), pp. 45-62. For a parallel between Lamri and Lakhous see also: Lorenzo Mari and Polina Shvanyukova, 'Linguistic Encounters Now and Then: Amara Lakhous and Tahar Lamri Engage in the Debate on (Dis)United Italy', *Carte Italiane*, 2.8 (2012), 115-39.

qualcuno che sta a sentire, sia pure in silenzio; nell'oralità l'orecchio è necessario quanto la bocca.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of building a dialogic relationship clearly emerges at the end of the book, where Mahlet directly addresses the reader:

Poi un giorno il Vecchio Yacob mi chiamò nella sua stanza, e gli feci una promessa. Un giuramento solenne davanti alla sua Madonna dell'icona. *Ed è per questo che oggi vi racconto la sua storia. Che poi è anche la mia. Ma pure la vostra.*<sup>24</sup>

In order to fulfil her promise – becoming a *cantora* who will be able, through writing, to keep alive the memory of a forgotten and sometimes unknown past – Mahlet has to rediscover her capacity to listen. Thanks to this skill she will be able to narrate all the stories she has collected, occupying an intermediary position, between a history that is 'sua' and one that is 'vostra'. The use of different possessive pronouns evokes the creation of an ideal community composed of Yacob, all the other narrators met by the protagonist, and the Italian readers. Within this community Mahlet will eventually find and accept her role.<sup>25</sup> The final address to the readers illustrates the same strong relationship with the audience that Ghermandi tries to create during

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<sup>23</sup>Alessandro Portelli, 'Regina di fiori e di perle: Gabriella Ghermandi' (2008) <<http://alessandroportelli.blogspot.com/2008/05/regina-di-fiori-e-di-perle-gabriella.html>> [accessed 30 April 2020]. On the importance of orality and voice in Gabriella Ghermandi's work see also: Gregoria Manzin, 'Colonizing the Novel: Voice and Choralities in Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle*', *Spunti e Ricerche*, 26 (2011), 108–25; Giovanna Sansalvadore, 'The uses of "orality" in an Italian post-colonial text: Gabriella Ghermandi's *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* (2007)', *English Academy Review*, 33.2 (2016), 17–28.

<sup>24</sup>Gabriella Ghermandi, *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007), p. 251. My italics.

<sup>25</sup>The art of orality, the importance of storytelling, and a specific attention to vocalicity are intrinsic literature features also used by other Italian postcolonial writers, such as Cristina Ubah Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego. On the work of Ali Farah and Scego, see Claire Lavagnino, *Women's Voices in Italian Postcolonial Literature from the Horn of Africa*, Doctoral dissertation, UCLA, 2013, <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1bm0v5tv>> [accessed 30 April 2020].

her performance readings, where she alternates words and music, often singing Amharic songs.<sup>26</sup> The performances by Ghermandi, Jaralla and other migrant authors merge different and distant languages and traditions with Italian. In doing so, they reveal how orality also foregrounds the processes of translation involved in their work. Writing about the multilingual productions of Teatro delle Albe, one of the most prominent multi-ethnic theatre companies based in Italy, Cristina Marinetti warns us that:

Translation, in this sense, is understood – in the direction of much contemporary culturally-oriented translation studies – less as a communicative act aimed at transferring texts or conveying ideas than as a ‘fundamentally hybridizing instance’, which is at once linguistic, cultural, aesthetic and political.<sup>27</sup>

Migrant performing bodies ‘actualise stories with a voice, accent, skin’,<sup>28</sup> but to escape the risk of ‘relegating indigenous performance to the realm of folklore’,<sup>29</sup> Marinetti also argues, we must focus on how performance ‘plays with rather than effaces linguistic and ethnic diversity’.<sup>30</sup> For a migrant artist, performing on stage, especially using a language which is not his/her own mother tongue, represents a continuous challenge since he/she often has to deal with issues related to authorship, power as well as the right to perform. Theatrical performances,

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<sup>26</sup>According to Eugenia Mazza, Ghermandi started to do performance readings after seeing a Jaralla’s performance. See: Eugenia Mazza, ‘Gabriella Ghermandi e Yousif Latif Laralla, alla ricerca di uno spazio letterario tra scrittura e oralità’, *El-Ghibli, rivista online di letteratura della migrazione*, 2.8 (2005) <[http://archivio.el-ghibli.org/index.php%3Fid=2&issue=02\\_08&sezione=4&testo=3.html](http://archivio.el-ghibli.org/index.php%3Fid=2&issue=02_08&sezione=4&testo=3.html)> [accessed 28 April 2020].

<sup>27</sup>Cristina Marinetti, ‘Theatre as a “translation zone”: multilingualism, identity and the performing body in the work of Teatro delle Albe’, *The Translator*, 24.2 (2018), 128-46 (p. 129).

<sup>28</sup>Emma Cox, *Theatre and Migration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>29</sup>Christian Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Postcolonial Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 169.

<sup>30</sup>Marinetti, p. 132. See also Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2013).

however, also represent an opportunity to innovate, not just by combining different languages but also gestures and music. These elements are equally significant and they all contribute to the structure and meaning of the narration. They are among the means by which the performance dialogically engages with the audience.

### **Jaralla as a Storyteller**

Yousif Jaralla was born in Iraq but he subsequently moved to Palermo, a city where he feels he belongs.<sup>31</sup> Sicily is particularly important for Jaralla's creativity. There he began to perform his oral narratives often collaborating with Sicilian artists and musicians. In his narratives, Jaralla blends middle eastern traditions with Sicilian ones. In many Arabic countries, as in Africa, the act of storytelling remains still very popular. Jaralla underlines the acquired habit of telling and listening to stories, explaining how in his tradition of origin even a simple question can initiate the creation of a story. His personal understanding of narration is also informed by the Sufi tradition, a religious movement born around the eleventh century, which is considered the most esoteric and mystic dimension of Islam. As a Sufi, when he dances, whirling around, in his performances, the Iraqi narrator creates a narrative space which he calls the space of *elsewhere* and a space for feelings.<sup>32</sup>

The tradition of storytelling also seems to characterize Sicily. It was here that Calvino found the largest number of fables for his collection *Fiabe Italiane*, and we can also note that Sicilian culture is one of the few in the West to maintain and to perform the tradition of the *Cunto*.<sup>33</sup> The term is used, in Sicilian dialect, to refer

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<sup>31</sup>From my interview with Jaralla.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>'Il viaggio di Calvino attraversa tutta l'Italia: da Venezia, dove lo avevamo lasciato, scende e percorre a velocità variabili le regioni centromeridionali. Fa la sosta più lunga in Sicilia, dalla fiaba 147 alla fiaba 190'. Mario Lavagetto, 'Prefazione', in Italo Calvino, *Fiabe italiane raccolte dalla*



both to the story being narrated and to the way the *cuntista*, the performer, sits. When I interviewed him, Jaralla, who had the opportunity to work with the famous Sicilian artist Mimmo Cuticchio, defined *Cunto* as one of the greatest forms of musical narrative, where words, music and gesture become one.<sup>34</sup> The *Cunto* represents for Jaralla an important source of inspiration. It can be observed, for example, that during his oral performances Jaralla sometimes breaks words down into syllables. He pronounces these one by one, he slows down the rhythm and he plays with accented syllables and sounds in the manner of a Sicilian *Cunto*. These features are particularly relevant to my discussion of 'I fiumi di altrove'. The tale has a clear musical nature, as the rhythm guides the narration. Simultaneously the narration suggests the rhythm, and the music helps us to enter more easily into the story's narrative space.

Jaralla often reiterates that he is not a writer but a storyteller. In his opinion 'le parole, una volta sul palcoscenico [...] acquisteranno un'altra veste e germoglieranno colori che sulla carta sono assenti'.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, in his composing process, writing often plays an important role and he describes the boundary between writing and storytelling as fluid: 'Nel mio archivio personale ho 200 racconti e se mi chiedessi quando sono stati scritti non te lo saprei dire, non so come siano nati'.<sup>36</sup> Whilst the oral performance remains both the starting point and the ultimate goal of Jaralla's work, his writing mainly performs the function of recording and retaining. With reference to this use of writing, Albert B. Lord in *The Singer of Tales* states:

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*tradizione popolare durante gli ultimi cento anni e trascritte in lingua dai vari dialetti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), p. XXV.

<sup>34</sup>From my interview with Jaralla.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

the use of writing in setting down oral texts does not per se have any effect on the oral tradition. It is a means of recording. The texts thus obtained are in a sense special; they are not those of normal performance, yet they are purely oral, and at their best they are finer than those of normal performance.<sup>37</sup>

Lord also explains that ‘such a text might be called “autograph oral” because the singer’, or in this case the performer ‘would follow his usual oral style’.<sup>38</sup> Jaralla’s written texts do indeed maintain their performative character and are instrumental in furthering an understanding of his narrative style. They are not to be considered as a written rendition of an oral text but as the starting point and an intrinsic part of the Iraqi storyteller’s process of composition. Furthermore, the analysis of the frequent use of different oral features in Jaralla’s work allows us to better understand the multifaceted and flexible nature of orality and the importance of its interaction with literacy.

To explore the relation between orality and writing in the Iraqi storyteller’s work, it is helpful to consider it alongside the recent phenomenon of the ‘teatro di narrazione’. A comparison with this genre – which in Italy begun to gain popularity in the late 1990s and has in Marco Paolini and Ascanio Celestini two of its most representative exponents – not only allows us to look at Jaralla’s work within an Italian context but also draws attention to some of its most relevant aspects. In particular, following Gerardo Guccini’s analysis, there are three key elements that

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<sup>37</sup>Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 128.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

the Iraqi storyteller and the 'narr-attori', a neologism coined by Pietro Nosari,<sup>39</sup> have in common: the centrality of the narrated story, underlined by the position of the narrator on the stage; the importance of the interaction with the audience; and the composing process.<sup>40</sup>

One of the most innovative aspects of *teatro di narrazione* is its capacity to re-establish the importance of the storyteller and, more generally of the art of storytelling. As in Brecht's epic theatre, the so-called 'narr-attori' aim to embody their narratives: they occupy the centre stage and bring each scene into existence around them. Jaralla, like other *narr-attori*, represents on stage a character based on his personal experiences. The frequent use of the first person singular and of autobiographical elements is a narrative device through which the narrator suggests his personal involvement in the narrated story and tries to gain the trust of the spectators, who are invited to recognise him as a reliable witness.<sup>41</sup> Yet Jaralla also believes that the success of a performance depends entirely on the effectiveness of the story being told. In his perspective, a story creates itself and is 'autonomous [...] from the will of [...] the one who narrates it'.<sup>42</sup> With respect to the centrality of the story the narrator plays a secondary role: he or she is just the 'one who knows the story, and knows how to tell it faithfully'.<sup>43</sup> Throughout his performances, Jaralla sits on a chair, a positioning on the stage taken from Iraqi and Syrian storytellers but also used by many *narr-attori*. The few gestures he makes are completely

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<sup>39</sup>Pier Giorgio Nosari, 'I sentieri dei raccontatori di storie: ipotesi per una mappa del teatro di narrazione', *Prove di drammaturgia*, 10.1 (2004), 11-14.

<sup>40</sup>See Gerardo Guccini, 'Le poetiche del "teatro narrazione" fra "scrittura oralizzante" e oralità-chesi-fa-testo', in *Orality and Literacy in Modern Italian Culture*, pp. 32-49.

<sup>41</sup>'I fiumi di altrove', for instance, is mainly narrated in the first person and the narrator's name is Yousif.

<sup>42</sup>Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman (London-New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 141.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

spontaneous. They are intended to attract the attention of the audience or, when he shares the stage with other artists, to communicate with them. Another element which helps to 'enfaticizzare il valore "evocativo" della parola detta e concentrare su di essa l'attenzione del pubblico' is the choice of where to perform.<sup>44</sup> Narrative performances often take place in non-traditional theatres. These are unconventional places where it is easier to create an intimate relationship with the audience. As the actors of the Bologna-based company 'Teatro delle Ariette' state:

Questa singolare esperienza nasce dalla necessità e dal desiderio di portare il teatro incontro agli uomini, nei luoghi della vita, della quotidianità, dove le persone si incontrano intimamente e si conoscono. Abbiamo fatto spettacoli nei posti più strani: salotti, fienili, cucine, tavernette, portici e mansarde.<sup>45</sup>

Jaralla's production notes, in which the essential requirements for the performance are listed, are very simple and suggest a rather minimal scene: a sound system, two vocal microphones, a drum, an LED lamp. As pointed out by Richard Schechner: 'an empty theatre space is liminal, open to all kinds of possibilities: a space that by means of performing could become anywhere'.<sup>46</sup> Such a space also emphasizes the importance of the story and the ability of the performer to narrate it, maximizing the audience's participation and its openness to listening.

In order to make possible the interaction between an oral performer and an audience, as well as an author and a reader, they all have to engage in contributing

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<sup>44</sup>Simone Soriani, 'Dario Fo, il teatro di narrazione, la nuova performance epica. Per una genealogia di un "quasi genere"', *Forum Italicum*, 39.2 (2005), 620-48 (p. 623).

<sup>45</sup>Franco Del Moro, *L'arte della narrazione. Un manuale e un monologo per il teatro di narrazione* (Murazzano: Ellin Sela, 2003), p. 15.

<sup>46</sup>Schechner, p. 67.

and participating actively in the development of the narration. The agreement that binds storyteller and listeners is based on sharing an *epos* (as reflected both in narrative form and its content), an *ethos* (which is a set of shared norms and values), a *telos* (which is a collective aim) and finally a *logos* (which is the common language of communication used by members of a society).<sup>47</sup> The term *logos*, as conceived here, also refers to elements of non-verbal language that contribute to the creation of a narrative world (such as gestures, music, songs, visual language, or even silence). Through these elements the storyteller can direct the attention of the audience which, in turn, can demonstrate its creative involvement, for instance, with silence or applause.

Both an oral performance and a written text require that the audience or the reader engage in the narrative relationship. However, the written text, in the absence of the author, demands a 'more [explicit] interpretative effort' on the part of the reader.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, in written texts which can be defined as oral, the author often directly addresses the readers, not just to orient and stimulate their attention but to invite them to feel part of the narrated story. The centrality of the narrated story and the interaction with the audience help us to understand the kind of oral performance brought to the stage by Jaralla and the *narr-attori*. There is also a third key element which connects them: namely, the composing process. It is to this that I now turn in my analysis of 'I fiumi di altrove', focusing primarily on the oral dimension of writing.

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<sup>47</sup>See Carlo Tullio-Altan, *Gli italiani in Europa: profilo storico comparato delle identità nazionali europee* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1999); Davide Pinardi and Pietro De Angelis, *Il mondo narrativo. Come costruire e come presentare l'ambiente e i personaggi di una storia* (Turin: Lindau, 2008); Federico Faloppa and Irene Zagrebelsky, 'Dare voce agli invisibili. Il teatro di Beppe Rosso', *The Italianist*, 30 (2010), 415-35.

<sup>48</sup>Sundmark, p. 189.

### **'I fiumi di altrove': A 'Voiced Text'**

As a 'voiced text', that is a written text initially composed only as a help for oral performance, Jaralla's tale 'I fiumi di altrove' is an interesting case for the exploration of the continuum between orality and writing.<sup>49</sup> In particular, in the remainder of this article, I will explore how some of the techniques commonly employed to examine oral narratives can be effectively deployed when analysing written texts that are voiced. I also rely on the notion of a voiced text to underscore the relevance of the art of storytelling and the power of the voice in Jaralla's tale. Both themes are symbolized by the figure of the narrator's grandmother, an old storyteller who loses her voice.

In 'I fiumi di altrove' the narrator is looking for an ideal object to be included in an exhibition organized by some of his friends on the subject of the loo ('il cesso').<sup>50</sup> This search leads the narrator to think about his grandmother and then about a short hospital stay he underwent to treat an abscess. Each story is connected to the others thanks to thematic and phonic cross-references. Yousif, the narrating character, voices his intention to participate in the exhibition, building a small sand hill that is pushed toward a toilet by a fan, while blood drops mysteriously appear on the ground. 'Cesso', 'sabbia' and 'sangue' are the key words of the text. The first is the unusual place where the I-narrator starts to play with memories; the sand recalls the desert, Baghdad (the city of his childhood), and his grandmother; while blood represents all the victims of war. The choice of a term such as 'cesso', which belongs to a low register, is motivated by phonic and semantic factors. Firstly, the

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<sup>49</sup>On the use of this definition, see John Miles Foley, 'Verbal Market place and the Oral-Literate Continuum', in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum*, pp. 17-37 (pp. 20-21).

<sup>50</sup>We can here note that the title of Jaralla's tale may also evoke Giuseppe Ungaretti's famous poem, 'I fiumi'.

author dwells on specific words that rhyme with 'cesso' (processo, sesso, etc.). Secondly, the word evokes a dirty and ugly place that is at the same time private and secluded. The story itself emerges from the search for a topic for the installation, resulting in the use, for artistic purposes, of an object that has a very definite utilitarian function. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that 'idea' is one of the most recurrent words in the story. The author simulates a dialogue with himself in front of the reader/public, trying to define his project. In order to explain the difficulties encountered in his search, the protagonist first explains his conception of art: 'Ti piace parlare di mistica, non fai altro che cercare il punto di equilibrio tra arte come rappresentazione del mondo e misticismo come interpretazione del mistero' (p. 38). Subsequently, he also remarks: 'L'arte è un'illusione, no? Realizzare mondi improbabili?' (p. 39).

Trying to find a way to use creatively an object that seems to leave no room for the imagination, in the opening part of the story, the narrator continuously repeats: 'Ah! un'idea, ma il cesso anche dipinto rimane un cesso' (p. 38). Through word associations, playing with the term and incessantly repeating it, the narrator will find a way to annex 'il cesso' to the 'dominio del non funzionale',<sup>51</sup> and he will try to create a personal image by drawing attention to the metaphorical meanings that the object acquires for him:

Comunque non era male, mettere una collinetta di sabbia che un ventilatore spinge verso un cesso turco. La tempesta in un cesso. No, evoca tempesta nel deserto, la guerra del Golfo. La guerra... il sangue... Sangue... Sangue. Non è a caso la guerra del Golfo. Utilizzala nel fare l'installazione. E allora così: il cesso turco, le sabbie spostate dal

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<sup>51</sup>Francesco Orlando, *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura. Rovine, reliquie, rarità, robaccia, luoghi inabitati e tesori nascosti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), p. 13.



ventilatore, e man mano che si sposta la sabbia, si vedono delle chiazze rosse. Omicidio occultato dal deserto. (p. 40)

In an oral performance, repetitions are an indispensable instrument to facilitate the audience's reception and to support the narrator's memory. Jaralla, who always writes with the moment of the performance in mind, presents in his written texts a rich and complex system of iterations. Repetitions, as becomes evident in the way in which the narrator works with the word 'cesso', concern phonemes, whole words but also meaning effects.

In 'I fiumi di altrove', Jaralla often puts words that rhyme side by side on the page, creating a sort of chain, in which 'una breve sequenza di fonemi [...] costituisce il filo rosso che lega gli oggetti dello strano elenco'.<sup>52</sup> Placed one after the other, words that rhyme with 'cesso' give rise to a flowing effect that, in the intentions of the author, reproduces 'the diffusion of sound': 'Cesso sesso processo, processo...' (p. 39). The words are all connected and the author focuses on each one of them, in turn, in order to find the right idea for his project. The word 'sesso', for example, suggests to the narrator the idea of an orgy and, by association, he thinks of a traffic gridlock: 'Un ingorgo che assomiglia a un'orgia' (p. 39). Fixed, recurrent adjectives are also commonly used in oral narratives. In Jaralla's tale, for instance, the adjective 'strano' frequently recurs and is used to refer to the madness of the narrator's grandmother as well as to situations that are difficult to explain or are unexpected.

Furthermore, the narrator often develops his narrative by relying on the effects produced by analogies and variations. In particular, one of the ideas that seem to

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<sup>52</sup>Cirillo Francesco, 'Notarella gaddiana. Il sogno del brigadiere', in *Attraverso il sogno. Dal tema alla narrazione*, ed. by Elena Porciani (Soveria Mannelli: Iride, 2004), pp. 243-57 (p. 248).

structure 'I fiumi di altrove' is the contrast between something usual and customary and the arrival of something unexpected. This 'something' is, precisely, 'strano' since it breaks or stops a habit. For example, the narrator's grandmother is described as having an ordinary day, drinking tea, as usual, with her daughter, when a whirlwind arrives unexpectedly. The event is underlined by the following expressions: 'All'improvviso'; 'come una mano veloce'; 'qualcosa di straordinario', 'qualcosa di strano' (p. 36).

The presence of the narrator's grandmother in the narrative frame contributes to enhancing the significance of the text. Her metaphorical significance is so relevant, in fact, that she can be considered the central figure of the story. Jaralla does not merely portray her as a storyteller ('La nonna era la nostra Walt Disney. [...] Portava un po' di tutto: galline agnellini riso grano lana stoffe e tante storie fantastiche per addormentarci', p. 43) but also recreates the environment in which her story takes place, with particular attention to its soundscape. At the beginning of the tale the narrator mentions his grandmother's voice which, almost hidden by the 'fracasso di quel vento' (p. 36), remains indistinct. We don't know if she is singing or screaming: we can only hear her laments. The woman will later lose the use of her mouth, her tongue and – above all – her voice. 'Una voce significa questo: c'è una persona viva, gola, torace, sentimenti, che spinge nell'aria questa voce diversa da tutte le altre voci', Calvino wrote, and the loss of the grandmother's voice becomes all the more significant in Jaralla's tale because it affects a storyteller.<sup>53</sup> The narrator describes what happens to her as a case of possession: the whirlwind, after the appearance of which she will never talk again, is the manifestation of a god whose

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<sup>53</sup>Italo Calvino, 'Un re in ascolto', in *Sotto il sole giaguaro* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), pp. 51-77. See Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 30.

own voice is represented as the sound of the wind. The power of this entity's voice – which is only audible to the old woman and orders her to remain silent – contributes to highlight the oral dimension of the tale.

The analysis of 'I fiumi di altrove' shows how Jaralla, often starting from a precise word, develops his story through repetitions, analogies, cross reference and imagistic associations while emphasizing the materiality of words as sounds and the importance of musicality in his mode of composition. The entire tale, especially the character of the grandmother, can thus be seen as a celebration of the importance of the oral discourse and of the voice.

### **Musicality in Jaralla's Writing.**

Distinguish between orality and writing, the Italian writer Gianni Celati explains that he writes focusing on the musicality of language, and tries to recreate on the page 'quell'insieme di scarti, accelerazioni e ritardi rispetto alla scrittura che si attuano nella lettura ad alta voce'.<sup>54</sup> Celati aims to produce written texts whilst Jaralla, as we have seen, uses writing as an instrument of recording and a form of rehearsal. In spite of their undeniable differences, however, both artists attempt to create a space for the voice within the text. Both also draw inspiration from jazz performances. Celati, referring to his first works, revealed that one of his main purposes was to allow that 'le avventure finissero da sole come si fa nel Jazz'.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Jaralla mentions jazz when describing his performances. He states: 'come in un gioco jazzistico si tenta di sviluppare e portar in modo ottimale un canovaccio

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<sup>54</sup>Celati is included by Rimondi among those authors who can be defined as 'jazzisticamente orientati'. Giorgio Rimondi, *La scrittura sincopata. Jazz e letteratura nel Novecento italiano* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 115.

<sup>55</sup>Rimondi, p. 116.

che richiede un ambiente protetto e un pubblico capace di un ascolto'.<sup>56</sup> Like a jazz musician, the storyteller follows a general script on which he improvises, in response to the audience's reactions. In Jaralla's written texts we also find 'the gaps, the false starts, the repetitions, the illogical parts' that are largely present in the work of writers who aim to reproduce oral discourse patterns.<sup>57</sup> These elements highlight how the lexical and morphological patterns of his writing are based on a musical imaginary. Jaralla's way of playing with words conveys on the page sounds that recreate an underground musical rhythm.

Jaralla usually opens his performances by playing an instrument or singing. Sometimes the prelude to the narration consists of sounds or vocalisms that, with their evocative and contextualizing value, function as emotional support to the narration. They are used by the narrator to enter the space of the story and start the narration; through them, we could say that Jaralla introduces 'the frame [...] where voice is going to be deployed'.<sup>58</sup> Thus, we can hypothesize that the many musical elements at the beginning of 'I fiumi di altrove' are similarly intended to create the right narrative atmosphere and to establish a relation with the reader. In the incipit of 'I fiumi di altrove', for instance, Jaralla draws the reader's attention to the presence of wind: 'Io comincerei così, con il soffio di vento che attraversa le steppe dei miei nonni' (p. 36). In the text there are also specific stage directions, precise instructions through which Jaralla indicates the suspension of the stream of words to make room for music, songs or silence. The use of a smaller font and the presence of a space on the page, before and after these directions – music, music and songs,

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<sup>56</sup>From the author's website <<https://yousifjaralla.blogspot.com>> [accessed 25 April 2020].

<sup>57</sup>Paul Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, trans. by Kathy Murphy-Judy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), p. 99.

<sup>58</sup>Zumthor, p. 131.

music and songs from the Quran, silence – separate them from the body of the story. The fact that no music or lyrics are specified suggests that the instructions have the function of personal notes: they are memos for the performance on stage. They are used by Jaralla to signal the transition from one story to another or, within the same story, to stress a climax in the narration, as well as an intensification of the narrative pace. An example of the first kind of usage occurs after the end of the story about the madness of the narrator's grandmother. Here, the word 'Musica' indicates the transition to another story, specifically to the search for an idea for the exhibition. The scenario changes too and we are no longer in the windy steppes where his grandmother had lived. The narrator then implies that he has told his audience the story of his grandmother's madness in an unusual place, 'tra tanti cessi', thus introducing the word that can be considered the leitmotiv of this part of the narrative:

E la nonna non parlò più per il resto dei suoi giorni sulla terra.

Musica

Mi dispiace, mi dispiace davvero parlare di mia nonna tra tanti cessi [...]. (p. 37)

Elsewhere, after the narrator agrees to participate in the exhibition organized by his friends, the direction 'Musica' marks the start of the work in progress leading to the choice of the subject to be presented. Here the direction signals an intensification of the narrative pace:

Oramai è tardi per fare tutti questi ragionamenti, sei coinvolto in questa mostra, devi trovare un'idea per un'installazione con un cesso, un'idea cercala.

Musica

Cominci dal nome cesso, cesso...' (p.38)

Furthermore, it has to be noted that Jaralla also includes 'silence' among his stage directions. *Pace* Portelli's claim that a written text can describe silence but cannot 'reproduce it [... because] there is no SILENCE in it', Jaralla indicates specific moments in which he feels the need to pause the narration.<sup>59</sup> In Jaralla's performances as well as in his writing, music, songs and silence are all instrumental to obtaining a deeper emotional impact and a better understanding of narrative meanings.

### **Circular Structure**

Circular structures represent a way to conclude the narrative process by taking the audience back to where the tale started. In the oral performance they help the storyteller to remember the story and they also have a musical value which is instrumental to creating the rhythmical pace of the narration. In his work, Jaralla often uses a circular structure, in a manner that at times may even seem mechanical. At the end of each text, the author generally repeats the words used or the scene described at the beginning. 'I fiumi di altrove' can be described as a framing narrative, which begins and ends with the story about the madness of the narrator's

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<sup>59</sup>Portelli, *The Text and the Voice*, pp. 111-12.

grandmother. As mentioned before, the tale opens evoking the voice of the old storyteller:

È come un ramo appigliato ad un mantello, la voce di mia nonna nascosta nel fracasso di quel vento che cantava, o forse gridava, non so, ma comunque sembrava un lamento.

Musica e canto

Tanti anni fa, mia nonna impazzì, in un pomeriggio di maggio (p. 36)

The narration eventually ends with:

Silenzio

Mesi dopo, in un pomeriggio di maggio la nonna impazzì. (p. 45)

The words used by Adriana Cavarero to describe some aspects of Karen Blixen's work can help us to understand some of the implications of Jaralla's choice of a circular structure. In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* Cavarero writes:

Karen Blixen recounts a story that she was told as a child. A man, who lived by a pond, was awakened one night by a great noise. He went out into the night and headed for the pond, but in the darkness, running up and down, back and forth, guided only by the noise, he stumbled and fell repeatedly. At last, he found a leak in the dike, from which water and fish were escaping. He set to work plugging the leak and only when he



finished went back to bed. The next morning, looking out of the window, he saw with surprise that his footprints had traced the figure of a stork on the ground.<sup>60</sup>

Cavarero explains how the man, in spite of unforeseen events and sudden detours, did not forget the reason behind his night activities. He only stopped once he had achieved his aim. The following day he noticed that his footprints had traced a figure, that 'a design results from his journey – one that has the unity of a figure'. The significance of the tale, concludes the philosopher 'lies precisely in the figural *unity* of the design, and in this simple "resulting", which does not follow from any projected plan'.<sup>61</sup> A narrative structure which closes by deploying some of the elements introduced at the beginning evokes 'the figural *unity* of the design' – a unity that is only revealed at the end. Only at the end, in fact, it is possible to piece together all the fragments of the story and to understand the diversions and digressions of the narration. In the canonical three-act dramatic structure, the story moves from an initial order, to an intermediate disorder and finally arrives at a new, final order that implies a complete change. In a circular narrative, on the other hand, the initial and the final order coincide, and the real change consists of the acquisition of a new perspective through which things are seen. Jaralla's preference for this type of structure is also related to Sufism. The Sufi turns on himself and during his circular motion he is ideally somewhere else, in an imaginary place that the narrator seeks to recreate through his stories. After this dance, called 'Sama' or 'Sema' in Turkish,

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<sup>60</sup>It is also worth noting that the choice of the stork is not accidental, but reminds the role of the narrator, in particular a female narrator: 'The stork – protagonist of a folklore, which, in the West, has no boundaries – brings babies and narrates them fables. [...] The stork does not "make," but rather brings, transports and hands down. She is a narrator not an author. Like Karen Blixen, she is a *storyteller*: she tells stories.' Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1.

he returns to the real world with the new awareness that everything is just what it is.<sup>62</sup>

Circular structures, as well as repetitions and analogies, are narrative devices used by the narrator to develop the story. The presence of these elements, which usually characterize oral compositions, is instrumental to and also relies upon highlighting the importance of rhythmic patterns and a text's musicality. Such close attention to the musical rhythm of the narration suggests that voice is not placed in opposition to writing, but instead plays a pivotal role in its development. As Cavarero identifies, 'the opposition between voice and writing, which comes to the fore in studies on orality, is thus dissolved into a soundtrack, written in words, where vocal rhythms decide the movement of the text'.<sup>63</sup> By motivating not just the choice of words but also the whole circular construction of Jaralla's tale, musical elements and rhythmic patterns have an impact on the general meaning of the narrative. They represent a distinctive feature of Jaralla's style and indicate that his mode of composition is essentially aural.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have investigated the relationship between orality and writing in the work of Yousif Jaralla, a narrator and performer who usually refuses to publish his works and treats his writings solely as notes for his oral performances. However, as we have seen, writing represents an important phase of Jaralla's production, supporting the notion of an oral-literary continuum. The written versions of his

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<sup>62</sup>'Prima di compiere il viaggio credevo che le montagne fossero montagne e i mari fossero mari; durante il viaggio scoprii che le montagne non sono montagne e i mari non sono mari; ed ora che sono giunto so che le montagne sono montagne, e i mari sono mari'. Dhu alNun alMisri quoted in Gabriel Mandel, *La saggezza dei sufi. Jalâl al Dîn Rûmî e altri maestri* (Milan: Rusconi, 1999), p. 59.

<sup>63</sup>Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, p. 141.

performances, when these are available, allow us to glimpse at his creative process. The analysis of 'I fiumi di altrove' uncovers what Gerardo Guccini defines as 'il motore segreto' of the narrative,<sup>64</sup> that is the process by which Jaralla tests on the written page the effectiveness of his narration and the orchestration of his chosen words.<sup>65</sup> In order to develop a more complete picture of the author's production, further research would be required, following Jaralla's method of work through its successive stages, dwelling on performance, and comparing written and performed texts. This would also allow us to move from the analysis of the texts to an appreciation of the physical encounter between an author and his/her audience. Nevertheless, the approach adopted here, focusing on the oral qualities of Jaralla's writing, already reveals how the notion of an oral-literary continuum is crucial in order to achieve a better understanding of the complex role played by orality and, more specifically, by the inherent relationship between orality and writing in Jaralla's method. The resulting critical analysis of the work of Yousif Jaralla highlights features and elements that characterize the style of the Iraqi storyteller, confirming its close links to orality and oral traditions of storytelling. Concentrating on the formal patterns exhibited by Jaralla's tale also challenges the perception of orality as an inferior and unsophisticated form of storytelling. In particular, two aspects can be considered distinctive of his work: his conception of himself as a storyteller who delivers oral narratives; and the stylistic elements which he employs to impress a musical rhythm to his written text.

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<sup>64</sup>Guccini, 'Le poetiche del "teatro narrazione" fra "scrittura oralizzante" e oralità-che-si-fa-testo', p. 39.

<sup>65</sup>See: Gerardo Guccini, 'Introduzione: poetiche e percorsi del teatro di narrazione', in *La bottega dei narratori: storie, laboratori e metodi*, ed. by Gerardo Guccini (Rome: Dino Audino, 2005), pp. 11-35 (p. 29).

My analysis has demonstrated that, for a thorough understanding of Jaralla and, potentially, of other migrant writers who adopt similar techniques, we need to pay attention to the recurrent presence in their texts of techniques and elements characteristic of oral delivery. These elements are often employed by migrant authors to establish a dialogue with their Italian readers. They can only function as effective literary devices, however, if we recognise oral discourse, precisely, as part of an oral-literary continuum. The centrality of the narrator and of the art of storytelling can thus also lead us to discover references and connections which position these writers within the panorama of Italian literature. In their works they look at the traditions of storytelling in their countries of origin, such as, for example, the Sufi tradition (in Jaralla), the figure of the *cantora* (in Ghermandi), or the Somali fable and folklore (in Scego and Ali Farah).<sup>66</sup> At the same time, they borrow from and refer to Italian culture and traditions. As we have seen, for instance, Jaralla's work shows points of contact with the Sicilian *Cunto* and can be examined through a comparison with the *teatro di narrazione*.

The close reading of Jaralla's work has shown the complexity of his creative process, illustrating how writing and orality, printed text and performance, but also Italian (or Sicilian) and other traditions are brought together creatively and imaginatively. When it is present, as indeed it is in many texts by migrant authors, orality should definitely be understood as a literary device. If read in this way, it also becomes an ideal interpretative tool to illuminate the stylistic and linguistic elements that are a distinctive feature of many migrant writers' work and also the dialogic dimension which is a fundamental aspect of this literature.

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<sup>66</sup>See Francesco Argento, Alberto Melandri, and Paolo Trabucco, 'Parole di sabbia', in *Parole di sabbia*, pp. 7-11.