



# New Student Reading Project

## Fall 2014

### Student Essay Winners

Veronica Dickson	Radhika Ghosalkar
Becky Higgins	Christina Hogan
Martha Ormanoski	Jeanette Petti
Rachel Scott	Meredith Thompson
Emily Zhang	Daniel Zimmerman



*Foreigner*—Quote two passages referring to “foreigners” from the testimony of Benedetta Esposito, Johan Van Marten, or Sandro Dandini. According to the passages you’ve quoted, what is a foreigner? In the novel as a whole, who would you say is not a foreigner?

## Veronica Dickson

Although Amara Lakhous’s novel *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* depicts the lives of twelve typical Italian citizens, we come to learn that Romans aren’t born, they’re made. Written as a series of monologues, the novel gives rise to many questions concerning the legitimacy and status of an immigrant in a foreign country. Every character seems to have a very staunch opinion regarding foreigners and with each position we come to learn a little bit more of their personality.

Benedetta Esposito has worked as a concierge in an apartment building in the Piazza Vittorio for forty years, yet she has never identified with her Roman countrymen. She insists on flaunting her Neapolitan heritage and reminding everyone of the distinction between Northerners like “them” and Southerners like her. Benedetta is a self-imposed foreigner. Where most people aim to assimilate into their community, Benedetta never felt comfortable and decided the easiest way to distance herself was to evoke a sense of superiority and piety over the tenants of her building. However, Benedetta herself is a very racist woman and finds it amusing to harass all the immigrants who live in her building. “[That blonde kid] is a foreigner from head to toe—he’s an idiot and he’s crazy!” (Lakhous, 34) spat Benedetta when Johan Van Marten, a young Swedish filmmaker walked by. Once he failed to reach her standards of what an Italian should behave and look like, she immediately insulted and discredited him. According to Benedetta, most foreigners led a miserable existence in their native country and as Italian residents are polluting her streets by practicing and celebrating their cultures. The Chinese community is stealing and eating cats and dogs off the streets. The so-called “Albanian” in the building is used to living “outside or in tents, eating with his hands and traveling on donkeys and camels.” (Lakhous, 38) Yet ironically Benedetta does everything in her power to convince the tenants of the building she will never concede and adopt a Roman way of being. She speaks a different language, supports a different political party and dreams of an Italy where the South has more prominent standing. Surprisingly though, the only person who Benedetta seems to feel kindly towards is Amedeo, a suspect for murder. He is a long-standing empathetic character who relates to all tenants and makes each character feel like they’re being listened to. But Amedeo is Algerian. Granted, most of the characters hadn’t realized this, yet once the police chief revealed to them the truth about his nationality few deemed it important enough to mar their memory of him. Benedetta doesn’t even believe he is a foreigner because she thought so highly of him.

Alternatively, Sandro Dandini is Roman to the core and only respects people who feel as strongly about his native city as he does. A simple cafe owner, Sandro perfected the art of people watching long ago and loves commenting on their different ethnicities and quirks. “The Chinese, pronounce the letter *l* in place of *r* as in “Good Morning olange juice”. The Egyptians say *b* instead of *p*” (Lakhous, 92) Sandro mused as he watched his customers stroll by the Piazza. Unlike Bendetta however he doesn’t fault them for their differences. Although he has a clear bias towards anyone who has adopted his Roman culture, Sandro accepts that customers mean business regardless of their nationality. Ironically, the only people Dandini seems to have a problem with are Neapolitans, once again reminding the reader between the stark cleavage between the Italians living in Italy. When Sandro meets Amedeo he is immediately charmed by his vast knowledge of Roman geography and history. In fact, Sandro was in need of Amedeos help when a tourist asked the cafe owner for directions. But what brought him over the edge were the three C’s of his coffee order: *cornetto* (an Italian pastry), *cappuccino*, and *Corriere della Sera*. Only a typical Roman would know to order this, and as a result Amedeo is taken under Sandro Dandini’s wing.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Yet, who is deemed a Roman? Can a young Swede with a residency card claim to be a Roman? Is a Neapolitan woman who has lived there nearly half a decade Roman? Or is a Roman someone who truly values the culture in its entirety despite their nationality or documentation? In this way, Lakhous answers the question- what makes up a foreigner. A foreigner is someone who isn’t comfortable living in their own skin. Someone who feels it is fundamentally wrong for them to reside there and would do everything they can to leave the place in question. Italian born Bendetta and Sandro both represent the two pillars of Italy- the North and the South, and each found themselves quavering in the shadow of a confident, sympathetic man like Amedeo who took his adopted city in stride and vowed to make it his own.

#### Source Material

Lakhous Amara. “*Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*”. Europa Editions: 2008

Veronica Dickson is nineteen and has lived in Scarsdale, Westchester county for the past three years. At Cornell she is studying Industrial and Labor Relations and couldn't be happier!

*Pizza*—Describe the use of pizza and other descriptions of food in the first chapter, “The Truth According to Parviz Mansoor Samadi.” How does Parviz’s description of food reflect his feelings about his experience as an immigrant in Rome?

## Radhika Ghosalkar

In the kitchen of his supposedly Italian friend Amedeo’s Roman apartment, an Iranian man distanced from tribe and country recovers his sense of cultural and personal identity as he prepares traditional dishes from his homeland. Amara Lakhous’s *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* centers its first chapter on a character study of this aspiring restaurant cook, Parviz Mansoor Samadi. Parviz’s account of his continuing struggle to adjust to Italian life is furthered by a motif of one of the most primal ties to both self and family: food. In particular, Parviz’s abhorrence of Italy’s emblematic pizza and the comfort he finds in his native cuisine serve to emphasize his loss of control and hope for the future.

Throughout the public spaces of Rome, pizza functions as a continual reminder to Parviz of his inability -and to an extent, unwillingness- to assimilate with local customs. Parviz describes the nausea he experiences after witnessing “an Italian girl devouring a pizza as big as an umbrella” (Lakhous, 1) on the metro. The simile highlights the dramatic, animated fashion in which Romans celebrate their food and by extension, their cultural mores. This quintessentially “Italian” experience of zealously consuming pizza and the manner in which it sickens Parviz shows that his ensuing assertion that his hatred for pizza does not color his opinion of Italians is simply false as the two are inseparable. Once Lakhous establishes Parviz as an individual disgruntled by his fish-out-of-water experience, he employs pizza as a vehicle to illustrate his disenchantment with his role in Italian society. For example, when Parviz is fired from a job as a dishwasher in Piazza Navona, he attributes it to the owner’s knowledge of his dislike for pizza, claiming that “freedom of taste, expression, and religion” are essentially dead in the country. This hypothesis directly contradicts his later revelation that he views the kitchen “like a ship” (Lakhous, 21) of which he must be “in command” (Lakhous, 21). The incongruity between these two claims proves that Parviz does not accept the manner in which he is ordered around Italian restaurants or disregarded at Italian police stations and instead, chooses to vilify the pizza which he views as a symbol of Italy’s perplexing ways and his resulting loss of the “command” which he so craves.

The one environment in which Parviz is observed as being “comfortable” (Lakhous, 19) is Amedeo’s kitchen which he compares to “a mosque” (Lakhous, 19) or “a sanctuary” (Lakhous, 19) where he can escape into a “Sufi trance” (Lakhous, 19). The

diction describing the kitchen where Parviz cooks Iranian specialties characterizes the room as a site of escape, enabling him to emotionally travel to his hometown of Shiraz. Shiraz is where Parviz had it all- “family, house, restaurant, money” (Lakhous, 19) and most importantly, confidence. As evidenced by Parviz’s assurance that Amedeo is not a murderer because he knows Amedeo the way “[he] know[s] the taste of Chianti and *gormeh sabzi*” (Lakhous, 23), the memories of Iran induced by the aromas of Iranian cooking provide Parviz with the very sense of sureness in the world, his own abilities, and the future that he and so many immigrants lose as they navigate a new, unfamiliar culture.

By focusing much of the beginning of his book on the relationship between Parviz and food, Lakhous effectively captures the age-old struggle confronted by immigrants between integration and preservation of ethnic and individual identity. This fraught relationship proves that Parviz’s attempt to reconcile these two conflicting forces is fundamentally impossible.

#### Source Material

Lakhous, Amara. *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. New York: 2008.

Radhika Ghosalkar is a biology major in the College of Arts and Sciences. She is originally from Princeton, NJ.

**Racist**—Quote two witnesses/characters who refer to racists: “I’m not a racist,” “you’re a racist,” “he’s not a racist.” What do these quotes show you about the idea of race for these characters, and in this novel?

## Becky Higgins

In Amara Lakhous’ novel, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, characters wrestle with and question their own identities as well as their perceptions of those around them in the wake of the disappearance of Amedeo and the murder of the Gladiator. All agree that Amedeo is a true Italian; his knowledge of the culture, language and history of Rome is often more than that of the Italians themselves. Upon learning from investigators that he is, in fact, an immigrant to the country, several characters are forced to come to terms with the stereotypes they hold towards immigrants but refuse to believe that they are racist.

Benedetta Esposito Neapolitan, the concierge of the apartment building, refuses to believe that Amedeo is a foreigner on account of the way he talks and treats her. As the person responsible for the care and maintenance of the building, when the building is defaced, Benedetta blames the immigrants who live there and believe they disrespect her. She explains that “Amedeo is the only one in this building who out of respect for me doesn’t use the elevator because he [understands] the problems it causes for me every time it breaks” (Lakhous, 35); she believes that he must be a true Italian and therefore a gentleman. Benedetta’s racism towards foreigners stems from the large amount of unemployment in Italy and her own job. She believes it is unfair that she, “an old Italian woman, ill,” has to work hard while foreigners such as Maria Cristina Gonzales, a “chubby young immigrant is the picture of health” (Lakhous, 38). Benedetta is offended that citizens born in Italy are unable to get work or are only able to procure jobs that require hard labor while immigrants are able to find work. She views immigrants as “desperate types” who will “be throwing [Italians] out of [their] own country” (Lakhous, 38). Augmenting her racism is the fact that the tenants in her building deface the elevator in the building and that she must then take care of. Thus, foreigners are a scapegoat for her frustration with her occupation. There is truth in her statistics: that while immigrants are increasing in Italy new jobs are not being created; still, her hate is misguided.

Another tenant in the building where Amedeo lives, Antonio Marini, also stereotypes the immigrants in his building but considers himself “not a racist” (Lakhous, 76). Antonio, a professor from Northern Italy, is frustrated by the lack of order and drive of the people of Rome. He views them as “lazy” (Lakhous, 77) and is disgusted by “their chatter, their underdevelopment, [and] gossip” (Lakhous 76). As a history professor, he

seems concerned with how Rome will look in the future. He warns against groups such as the Greens who “stop the train of development and technology,” (Lakhous, 79) and curses immigrants and Southerners for not finding employment. The broken and misused elevator in the building where he lives only furthers his stereotyping of Southerners and foreigners as lazy. Antonio’s racism derives from his inability to understand a way of life that does not revolve around constant occupation. He does not understand or accept the fact that unemployment for Italians and foreigners plagues the country and that not everyone wants to pursue academics, as he did.

Lakhous’ novel thus explores the connection between an increase in unemployment coinciding with an increase in immigration and racism. The older generations of Italians in the novel seem reluctant to allow foreigners into their country and to accept them as part of their nation. Thus several characters in his novel insist that they are “not racist” and are only telling the “truth” but are using stereotypes to address their concerns rather than accept Italy’s changing demographics.

#### Source Material

Lakhous, Amara. *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. New York: 2008.

Becky Higgins is a first year student in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

*The Thousand and One Nights*—Consider Stefania Massaro’s and Amedeo’s references to the story of Sheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights* (106 and 131). How does Sheherazade’s story compare to Amedeo’s? What happens to Amedeo at the end of his own *Thousand and One Nights* story?

## Christina Hogan

In his novel, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, Lakhous references the famous Arabic work, *One Thousand and One Nights*, in order to draw similarities between the work’s fabled author, Scheherazade, and Lakhous’ own main character, Amedeo. In the same way Scheherazade attempts to avoid death, Amedeo attempts to avoid his past. However, Amedeo is unsuccessful in his attempts to escape his fear, and looks to Scheherazade’s story for guidance.

According to the Arabic legend, Scheherazade fears that her husband, the sultan Shahryar, will kill her when she wakes up, as he has killed all of his previous wives after just one night of marriage. In order to prevent her death, she begins to tell her husband a mesmerizing story each night. However, she cleverly stops her story at a cliffhanger each night so that her husband will keep her alive until the next evening, curious to hear the conclusion to the story. Each night she finishes the story of the previous night and begins to tell a new story, again stopping with an unfinished plot. She continues this for one thousand and one nights, ensuring her survival with her ability to story-tell (Fassler, screen 3).

The story of Ahmed Salim, or Amedeo, is similar to Scheherazade’s in that both characters are constantly in fear, and are constantly avoiding this fear. Amedeo works hard to blend in as an Italian in order to maintain distance from his worst horror: his past, namely, the murder of his fiancé, Bagia. Despite having spent the majority of his life in Algeria, Amedeo sheds his past and fully adopts the Italian culture, even allowing others to call him Amedeo. He diligently studies the Italian language to the point of fluency in order to feel like a native Italian. He quotes Emil Cioran, saying, “We inhabit not a country but a language” (Lakhous, 110). Amedeo reasons that using this logic, he no longer needs to consider himself Algerian, and can therefore avoid his haunting memories.

Furthermore, whenever asked about his origins, Amedeo simply replies that he is from “the south” (76), and refuses to clarify any further. It becomes clear that Amedeo is not only afraid of his past and the memories it holds, but is actively trying to forget it. He

lives for the present and for the future only, focusing on his new life in order to continue fleeing from his true history.

Both Amedeo and Scheherazade weave a tapestry of stories in order to save themselves. Scheherazade from her husband, and Amedeo from his potentially destructive memories. Where Scheherazade leaves cliffhangers in her stories every night to ensure her survival to the morning, Amedeo creates for himself a new life that forbids his past from returning to his mind. Stefania, Amedeo's Italian wife, explains how similar Amedeo's own life is to the life of the famous Arab, when she notes, "It's like the stories of Scheherazade, which never end, but are always beginning" (106). Always keeping busy, making friends, and maintaining secrecy about his history, Amedeo attempts to push his fear far from his mind.

Yet the crucial difference between the two stories is that Scheherazade has the ability to overcome her struggle, whereas Amedeo cannot. Scheherazade eliminates the possibility of her husband murdering her through her clever stories, but Amedeo can never completely forget the violent murder of Bagia, as is demonstrated through his nightly "wailing".

However, in an ironic conclusion to his story, Amedeo is finally able to forget his past when he gets in a car accident while crossing a street. Amedeo is left unconscious in a hospital, with the diagnosis that such severe brain trauma will cause him to lose his memory. After praying to Scheherazade in one of his nightly wails, "Teach me, Scheherazade, how to defeat the Shahryar that is inside me. My memory is Shahryar" (131), he receives the answer he had wanted, and will never remember of the death of Bagia. Amedeo's and Scheherazade's stories conclude with each continuing to avoid his or her fear: Scheherazade through her clever story-telling and Amedeo through his loss of memory.

#### Source Material

Fassler, Joe. "The Humanist Message Hidden Amid the Violence of One Thousand and One Nights." *The Atlantic*. June 25 2013. August 21 2014.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/06/the-humanist-message-hidden-amid-the-violence-of-i-one-thousand-and-one-nights-i/277210/>

Lakhous, Amara. *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. New York: 2008.

Christina Hogan is from Chappaqua, New York, which is a small town in Westchester County. She is majoring in Psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences and is considering a minor in Cognitive Science or Spanish. She loves reading and writing and is looking forward to taking more writing classes while at Cornell.

*Truth*—Quote three significant passages in the novel that focus on “the truth.” What does “the truth” mean in these passages? What does the novel tell you about “the truth”?

## Martha Ormanoski

### **Is it better to live burdened by the truth or to live contently in oblivion?**

It seems as if knowing the truth would be a good thing. Being able to decipher between what is real and what is spurious should be accompanied by relief, comfort, and exaltation. However, for the various characters in Amara Lakhous’ *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, the exact opposite appeared to be true. In fact, having to deal with the enigmatic quality of truth proved to be onerous and unbearable for this ethnically diverse group. Whether it was learning how to cope with the traumatic memories of their pasts or struggling to adjust to the reality of their presents, they longed to understand the complex nature of the truth. Ultimately, the twelve idiosyncratic perspectives in Lakhous’ enlightening novel prove that the truth has the ability to perplex, deceive, and burden anyone who is forced to live with it.

While reading this cosmopolitan murder mystery, it was very evident that many of the fictitious characters struggled to comprehend the enigmatic nature of the truth. Their minds were continually plagued with seemingly simplistic, straightforward questions, but no matter how hard they tried, they were unable to find concrete answers to their queries. For instance, many questions ran through Amedeo’s head after he witnessed Parviz sew up his mouth in a steadfast attempt to prove that he was an innocent refugee, not a savage immigrant. Amedeo stated, “I ask as loud as I can ... who possesses the truth? Rather, what is the truth? Is the truth spoken with words?” (Lakhous, 30). In these dark moments of confusion, pain, and wailing Amedeo desperately longed to find mental and emotional consolation; he believed that if he had answers to these fundamental questions he would be able to better justify the unpleasant events of his life. However, what Amedeo, and many others, failed to realize was that the nature of the truth was not something that could be explicitly defined. In other words, Amara Lakhous’ *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* reveals that truth is a complex notion that is understood by few but pondered by many.

Lakhous did not only characterize truth as incomprehensible, but also as deceptive. In the Second Wail, Amedeo cited the following quote from Leonardo Sciascia’s *The Day of the Owl*: “[t]he truth is at the bottom of a well: look into a well and you see the sun or the moon; but throw yourself down and there is neither sun nor moon, there is the truth” (Lakhous, 45). This metaphorical statement profoundly illustrates the

dual nature of the truth. Initially, it is intriguing and mystifying, just like the warm sun or a full moon. Its appealing facade causes one to believe that if he or she knew the truth, a bright future devoid of all personal and societal struggles would emerge. However, the irony is that truth is deception at its finest. Lakhous' characters learned that often times obtaining the truth meant sacrificing their sanity and serenity. For example, Amedeo's incessant wailing, Elisabetta Fabiani's murderous vengeance, and Maria Cristina Gonzalez's multiple abortions prove that the truth has the ability to envelop people in darkness and to launch them into states of depression. It can adversely change their views of the world, and once people acquire it, they often times regret abandoning their previously content states of oblivion. Plainly speaking, *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* illustrates the idea that truth is a temptation that should be avoided.

Ultimately, Lakhous' novel supports the conclusion that the truth does more harm than good. In fact, the burden that accompanied the truth was so unbearable that Amedeo referred to it as "a chain that [made him a slave]" (Lakhous, 77). By this he meant that instead of obtaining the freedom that he initially expected, the "bloodstained" memories of his traumatic past imprisoned him (Lakhous, 43). According to him, the truth was a "pointless," poisonous aspect of his daily life that was slowly consuming him (Lakhous, 44). He was unable to alleviate his pain, and as a result, his view of the truth as pernicious intensified throughout the novel, as shown by this bold assertion: "[t]he truth is bitter, like medicine ... it can cause death. Truth doesn't wound ... The truth kills" (Lakhous, 130). After reading this, it became obvious that Amedeo desperately wanted to escape reality. His struggle to live life knowing that his beloved fiancée, Bagia, was brutally killed caused him so much distress that he felt like he was "alone at the origins of truth" (Lakhous, 130). In the end, his agony and fervent animosity towards reality prove that Lakhous sought to highlight the oppressive, noxious side of the truth.

Generally, the truth is something that is cherished and glorified. However, Amara Lakhous' insightful, thought-provoking novel, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, challenges this conventional perspective by revealing the adverse role of truth in modern society. The endless confusion, sorrow, and wailing that were associated with veracity made the readers wonder if truthfulness should be classified as one of the great evils of the world, along with the prejudice, racism, and crime depicted in the novel. Overall, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* caused people to ponder the following question: is it better to live burdened by the truth or to live contently in oblivion?

## Source Material

Lakhous, Amara. *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. New York: Europa Editions, 2008. Print.

Martha Ormanoski was born and raised in Rochester, NY. She is a student in the College of Engineering studying Chemical Engineering.

*Wolf*—Find the references to the “wolf” in the testimony of Antonio Marini and the Sixth Wail that follows. Why does the wolf appear, and what feelings does the reference to the wolf create, in this section and in the novel generally?

## Jeanette Petti

Ancient Roman legend states that Romulus and Remus, the twin founders of Rome, were orphaned by their mother as infants and set aimlessly afloat down the Tiber River. When the twins reached the shore, they were found by a female wolf who suckled them as if they were her own cubs (Garcia). Ergo, the notion of being suckled by a she-wolf takes on the modern meaning of being infused with Roman culture. This cultural immersion and acceptance is what many of the characters in Amara Lakhous’ novel *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* seek. The subject of the novel, Amedeo, has successfully integrated himself into the culture of the most ethnically diverse section of Rome, the Piazza Vittorio. Throughout the novel, Amedeo describes his trials and triumphs of integration in sections referred to as “wails” which are analogous to the wolf’s characteristic animal sound: the howl. These lupine howls acquire two diametrically opposed meanings: that of Amedeo’s acquiescence of his connection with the she-wolf and that of his empathy for those who lack such a benign connection.

According to the testimonies of many of the novel’s other protagonists, Amedeo is seemingly the quintessence of a Roman. Despite Amedeo’s actual North African descent, most of the protagonists believe that he is not an immigrant because “he has learned so well the she-wolf’s language and can pronounce her howls without an accent” (Mazzoni, 164). Likewise, a taxi driver is prompted to tell Amedeo that he has been suckled by the wolf when he is able to quickly give efficient directions. In Amedeo’s own words, he knows Rome as if he had been “born here and never left” (Lakhous, 101). As such, the wolf’s milk is now Amedeo’s sustenance. According to Amedeo, “Italian is my daily milk” (Lakhous, 109). Rome – its language, its culture, its people – breathes life into Amedeo much like the she-wolf breathes life into Romulus and Remus. Evidently, Amedeo has learned to suckle the wolf without being bitten but others, as Amedeo attests, are not so fortuitous.

Despite Amedeo’s adoration of and reliance upon the she-wolf and her milk, not all share such a sentiment. Antonio Marini, one of the protagonists who testifies in the novel, does not trust the wolf nor her children because “they are wild animals” and do not possess the refined sophistication of the true Roman (Lakhous, 76). Amedeo has also witnessed firsthand the melancholy of those who have been not suckled but rather bitten by the wolf. He comments on the “alienated immigrants” who have been rejected by the

she-wolf and, instead of clinging to her breasts, cling to their bottles of beer and wine. While these immigrants feel the pain of the she-wolf's bite, namely the cold intolerance and xenophobia of the Italians, Amedeo joyously howls at being the she-wolf's cub – a child of Rome.

Through the milk of the she-wolf, Amedeo has found his cultural identity; he is a North African by blood but a Roman by choice. Much like the she-wolf adopted the "illegitimate sons" Romulus and Remus, Rome has adopted Amedeo (Mazzoni, 165). The twins, as the origin of their blood is unknown, are paradoxical – both "native and alien, Roman and foreign" (Mazzoni, 165). Such a paradox exists within Amedeo and all the other inhabitants of Rome; for it is not blood that signifies a Roman but rather the she-wolf's milk. The milk of the she-wolf unites the Roman people and its consumption is a choice. Unlike blood, or genealogical origin, milk can be selected. Thus, an immigrant in *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* is one who has been bitten by the wolf and is unable to drink from her breasts. Through his sad wails, Amedeo sympathizes with those who have yet to learn the ways of the wolf but, as a lupine speaker, he howls with joy at the power of the wolf's milk to quench his cultural quest. According to linguistics professor and author Cristina Mazzoni, "If this she-wolf milk must be an allegory, then what she represents is language itself – and one does not have to be born into it: anyone can learn it."

#### Source Material

Garcia, Brittany. "Romulus and Remus." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. 04 Oct. 2013. 19 Aug. 2014. <[http://www.ancient.eu/Romulus\\_and\\_Remus/](http://www.ancient.eu/Romulus_and_Remus/)>.

Lakhous, Amara. *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. New York: 2008.

Mazzoni, Cristina. *She-Wolf: The Story of a Roman Icon*. New York: 2010.

Jeanette Petti is currently studying architecture in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning. She is from Rochester, New York where she previously attended Fairport High School. In her free time, she enjoys playing sports and spending time with her family.

*Dog*—Describe Elisabetta Fabiani's attitude towards and plans for Valentino. How does the dog connect the characters with and separate them from one another? Why is the dog an important being in this novel?

Rachael Scott

**Dogs Astray: The symbolism of dogs in Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio**

Throughout *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, dogs are seen in a variety of different perspectives. Parvis declares that dogs are protectors of the household or flock. In contrast, Elisabetta Fabiani is attached to her dog Valentino with such ardor that Parvis thinks he is like a “child or husband.” In fact, Elisabetta imagines a utopian society where dogs provide humans with an infinite number of free services. She spends much of her time teaching Valentino tricks so that he can become a film star. She even petitions for dogs to be given many basic human rights. Throughout the novel, images of dogs and immigrants are increasingly conflated in order to show the dehumanization and alienation of the characters face.

The tenants of Piazza Vittorio often identify themselves with stray dogs. When Parvis is thrown out of the bureaucratic offices of Rome, he says that “When I went to the city offices by myself I’d lose control at the drop of a hat and start shouting, and they’d throw me out every time like a mangy dog.” (Lakhous, 21) This strand is picked up by Peruvian immigrant Maria Cristina who often goes to the train station to find company and solace. She says of her experience there, “As the time passes we are transformed into stray dogs.” (Lakhous, 66) Lorenzo also identifies himself with the stray dog saying, “I’m a stray dog and I have no master.” (Lakhous, 87) The images of stray dogs convey the characters relationships to others and the isolation they carry.

Valentino parallels the other characters. “Barking is the only language he has to express his joy, his sadness, his rage and other emotions. We mustn’t force him to be silent.” (Lakhous, 56) This quote seems to allude to the physical silencing Parvis suffers in the first chapter. Or it could even be descriptive of the way Amedeo wails to facilitate emotion. Amedeo even refers to Valentino’s barking as “happy wailing” underscoring the similarity of their behaviors. Although Valentino is only a dog, he shares the same stigma that Lorenzo has for peeing in the elevator. This action is socially forbidden by the characters of Piazza Vittorio, yet Elisabetta argues that this should be a right of her dog, as a channel for him to express his emotion.

Elisabetta is most passionate in her fight against racism of her dog. She argues for the end of discrimination to dogs, by the private industry, the right of dogs to own property, sexuality, and equal housing. Ironically, her speech in the chapter before seems to both argue against and simultaneously promote the rights of immigrants. Although she resists the idea of immigrants receiving the right to work, housing, and healthcare, many of those she promotes in her argument against racism for dogs. Her argument often directly compares immigrants and dogs. For example, she says, "I heard in the paper that an immigrant gardener raped an old woman.... Have you ever heard of a dog who raped its owner?" (Lakhous, 59) In some ways this direct comparison seems to be muddling the entities of dogs and immigrants.

The image of the dog in *A Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* is a way to show the disparity between immigrants citizens in Rome. The constant interchanging of the images of dogs with immigrants points out the dehumanization and discrimination they face. In the novel, the dog itself is a symbol of the dispossessed. It shows people separated from their homelands, languages, cultures, and families. It shows the rights they have been denied because of this. Valentino is a way to elucidate the degrading way many of the residents of Piazza Vittorio have been treated.

#### Source Material

Lakhous, Amara. *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. New York: 2008.

Rachael Scott is from Sharpsburg, GA and is studying Industrial and Labor Relations and English. She loves reading, scanning meter, hiking and fall weather.

*Elevator*—Describe three different activities that go on in the elevator in the Piazza Vittorio, according to the witness/characters. Why is the elevator the center of attention in this novel?

## Meredith Thompson

### From the Perspective of the Elevator

All day, every day, people push my buttons. Up and down. Up and down. The things I've seen and heard are unimaginable.

Elisabetta Fabiani's dog pees on my floor, and she barely blinks. I heard that the Chinese took her dog to cook it up. However, I know the truth that that miserable Manfredini stole it for the dog fights. He peed on my floor too—that piece of filth. I never liked him, but I should not speak ill of him now that he is dead. Ask me anything that goes on in my building, and I will have the answer because I am omniscient.

The worst night of my existence was surely the night Manfredini was slaughtered on my floor. To watch but not be able to prevent or intercept such an occurrence. To be able to do nothing but hold him tightly in my grasp while Death took over his body.

On a more peaceful note, the Iranian, Parviz, meditates within my four walls. Between floors he closes his eyes and breathes deeply. He maintains that he does not use me because he is lazy; rather, I remind him of his life, in that "[I'm] full of breakdowns. Now you're up, now you're down. [Parviz] was up...in Paradise...in Shiraz, living happily with [his] wife and children, and now [he's] down...in Hell, suffering from homesickness" (Lakhous, 16-17). Everyone suspects he is going crazy—feeling pigeons and drinking enough Chianti for the entire building's residents—but he is just in pain, poor man.

Luckily they finally banned Maria Cristina Gonzalez from using me. I'm sorry, but since she is upwards of three hundred pounds, the stairs are not a bad option just for the exercise alone—never mind the fact that I would break again if I tried to hold that much weight.

Amedeo is the only one who has any respect for me. He opts to take the stairs and avoid the whole mess. Personally, I just think he doesn't want to hear Benedetta Esposito complain any more than he needs to. Oh, how she complains! I often overhear her conversations with Amedeo—her accusations against Parviz ("The Albanian," to her), and her acceptance of every rumor she hears as the truth. Not only does she believe the

rumors, but she also perpetuates each nasty word, spreading it throughout the building unto the ears of each of the residents. It was a shame that Amedeo's reputation was tarnished by everyone believing that he was the murderer due to his disappearance (when, in fact, he was in a bad accident) and the fact that he is a foreigner. I agree with Mario the Neapolitan's exclamation that "[they're] all foreigners in this city!" (Lakhous, 16).

Indulge me in a moment of narcissism: I am the center of attention, after all. I act to unify the people that live in my building. I am the only aspect of their lives that remains unaffected by their various conflicting worldviews. Whether the resident is from Rome, Iran, or Pakistan, they view my functionality the same. When trapped inside an elevator, it is a disarming situation due to its mutuality, in that both parties inside the elevator are forced to either suffer the sting of an awkward silence, or make conversation with each other. Either way, it is still my duty as an elevator to put people in this situation, and just maybe get a dialogue started between cultures that are as distinctly different and dividing as the borders between them. I am the only common link in the lives of residents who are so consumed by their own worlds that they cannot realize the world beyond them that we all share.

I am allowed no discrimination. It is not as if I can refuse to open my doors to those whose beliefs or customs are "ugly" only because I disagree with them. Echoing Parviz's sentiment, "My hatred for pizza is beyond compare, but that doesn't mean that I hate everyone who eats it. I'd like things to be clear right from the start: I don't hate the Italians," I cannot understand why we judge people for their race (Lakhous, 13). Why must the two always be linked? Why cannot something at the surface level be left there? Is there always a deeper meaning? Then again, I *am* just an elevator.

#### Source Material

Lakhous, Amara. *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. New York: Europa Editions, 2008. Print.

Meredith Thompson is from Barrington, Rhode Island. She is currently studying Biological Sciences; however, she is also exploring her other interests, such as business and mathematics.

*Wolf*—Find the references to the “wolf” in the testimony of Antonio Marini and the Sixth Wail that follows. Why does the wolf appear, and what feelings does the reference to the wolf create, in this section and in the novel generally?

Emily Zhang

### Wolfish Tendencies

Childhood antagonists like the big, bad wolf in “The Little Red Riding Hood” or “The Three Little Pigs” have turned wolves into a symbol of destruction and as a force to be feared. However, the recent trend in young adult literature has taken a radically different route, claiming werewolf protagonists and supporting roles, such as Jacob Black in *Twilight* or Remus Lupin in *Harry Potter*—positive role models. Amara Lakhous takes the middle ground in *Clash of Civilizations over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*: the wolf symbolizes neither high moral ground nor low moral stature, instead representing conflict itself, both external and internal.

In Antonio Marini’s testimony and the Sixth Wail, the wolf represents the external conflict between North Italy and South Italy. Antonio, who is from Milan in the north, vehemently opposes the lackadaisical attitude of the south, claiming the south “[takes] advantage of the sweat of others” and that the “people of the north work...and the south [uses] this wealth to set up criminal organizations,” which is why he “never [trusts] the children of the wolf, because they’re wild animals” (*Clash*, 76). Amedeo takes the exact opposite view and claims the south “[deserves] the credit for the industrial rebirth of north” because southern workers moved north to work after the war (*Clash*, 81). Therefore, it’s possible to understand the author’s motivation behind making Antonio mention the children of the wolf. The founding of ancient Rome is premised entirely upon conflict: the myth that Romulus and Remus fought over the location of Rome and that Romulus killed his brother over Remus’ mockery of his wall (Garcia). The mention of the symbol of Rome therefore ties the wolf not only to the conflict based in ancient Rome but to the more modern disagreement of wherein the responsibility lies for the economic failure of the south: with the north, whose system of handouts failed and fueled resentment among the northerners for the south’s dependency, or with the south, whose mismanagement of welfare only spawned more corruption (Bohlen). Lakhous never sides with either Antonio or Amedeo, simply providing the two different viewpoints without bias, thus the mention of the wolf sows a mixture of confusion and discord in the reader’s mind as she attempts to sort out whose point of view she believes.

Throughout the rest of the novel, the wolf symbolizes Amedeo's internal struggle between his love for Rome and homesickness for his homeland, Algeria. At first, he claims that the cure for the "ulcer in his memory" is wailing like a wolf, but half a year later, he begins to question whether he is "a raven that wants to imitate a dove" (*Clash*, 109, 118). Like an ulcer festering, his ability to pretend he desires a peaceful existence deteriorates over time, and he ultimately seeks the sense of freedom so closely associated with the raven (Russell). Despite his claim that he "[wails] with joy, immense joy" unlike the other "alienated immigrants," he admits the contrary statement that he's still "needy for the odor of [his] loved ones" (*Clash*, 118, 119). He still pines for his old home. The reader sees his internal conflict intensify one month later when he dreams of "wolves surrounding [him] on all sides" and his blood on the ground, knowing "there is no room for neutrality" (*Clash*, 122, 123). The wolf that has always represented love and nourishment for Amedeo has suddenly transformed into a symbol of his inability to pick either his past or his present—at the same time that he is fleeing the memory of Bagia, he refuses to let the wound close heal by telling his wife about his nightmares. His opinion that truth must never be accompanied by a period reflects this attitude, as he believes there are no absolutes, thus denying himself the ability to commit to Rome or Algeria. And in the final wail, his words mirror those of Antonio's: "[he] is a wild animal who can't abandon its primal nature," not only elucidating his final failure to choose but ultimately bringing the symbol of the wolf full circle (*Clash*, 130).

In many ways, Amedeo is both a native and a foreigner to Rome. He brings with him the strong desire to learn everything he possibly can about the eternal city, yet he ultimately leaves behind in Algeria the most important item: his heart. If we look beyond his story to the book itself, noting that "it reads both like a love letter to Rome, and a scathing indictment of it" due to the multiple narrators and take into account the fact that Amara Lakhous' background is very similar to that of Amedeo's (*Words Without Borders*), perhaps it would not be a stretch to say the internal and external conflicts found throughout the book are products of his daily life, representing his own struggles with his identity.

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Emily Zhang is from Plano, Texas, and went to The Hockaday School during my high school years. She is in the college of engineering and is considering majoring in either CS or ECE.

*Truth*—Quote three significant passages in the novel that focus on “the truth.” What does “the truth” mean in these passages? What does the novel tell you about “the truth”?

## Daniel Zimmerman

### **Identity of Truth in *Clash of Civilization Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio***

The characters of Amara Lakhous’s *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* provide a wealth of personal opinions and stories that each contribute to the novel’s main thematic element of answering ‘what is truth? and ‘how should truth be part of my life?’ Lakhous reveals his characters’ lives to the reader in a way that ultimately forces the reader to question whether truth is a constant and whether truth strengthens or inhibits a person’s emotional growth.

In describing his view of the murder case, the novel’s detective, Mauro, comments “The truth is like a coin: it has two faces. The first always completes the second.” (Lakhous, 124) Most directly, the line refers to how the Gladiator’s murder can be observed from two different collections of evidence and analysis, though to the novel as a whole it also refers to how understanding the truth is based on a character’s perspective. Early in the novel, Parviz, explains how he “feed[s] the pigeons with food provided by the city” (25), while from Amedeo’s wail we learn that the food is a birth-control measure to reduce the pigeon population. To this, Amedeo comments “Sometimes its best not to know the truth.” (31) Parviz only knows his face of the truth—that he is feeding the pigeons—and is unaware of the distressing but equally correct view of the truth. These double sided truths are employed in the novel, most prominently with the murder trial, but also in smaller issues such as Johan and how he and the world differ on the full meaning of “gentile” or Abdallah and his only partial understanding of Amedeo’s predicament. Lakhous questions the reader’s certainty on which side of these stories is *real* and if a truth can have a simple unarguable answer. This matter is only further complicated through Stefiana’s opening questions “Who is the real Amedeo? I must say, that’s a strange question. There isn’t a real Amedeo and a fake Amedeo? There is only one Amedeo. (102) Unlike the detective, Stefiana focuses on how truth is constant and whole. Lakhous leaves the reader with no definite conclusion on whether truth changes based on necessity and perspective.

In a similar way, Amedeo’s outlook on wailing illustrate another of Lakhous’ central themes in the novel. In his wail after Abdallah’s story, Amedeo writes “There are two types of wailing one for grief and one for happiness. Many of the alienated immigrants ... never stop wailing sadly, because the wolf’s bite is painful.” (119). He

juxtaposes this statement further on when saying “I, on the other hand, wail with joy, immense joy. I suckle on the wolf [and] ... I adore the wolf, I can’t do without her milk.” (119) Through this metaphor wherein the wolf serves as truth, Amedeo lays out Lakhous’ two opposing ideas of truth: truth hampers future growth with remorse and sadness, and truth is nourishment and essential for future growth and happiness. The first of these themes is duly pressed on the reader in the opening quote from Tahar Djaout’s *The Invention of the Desert* that reads “Happy people have either age nor memory, they have no need of the past.” (11) This take on truth is notable in how it diverges some of the novel’s non-Catholic characters such as Iqbal and Abdallah. Both Islamic faith in the Koran which reads “clothe not the truth with falsehood, and hide not the truth when ye know it,” (*The Koran*, The Cow 3.17) and that of Christianity which in the Gospels reads “know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (*King James Version*, John 8.32) The truth set out in the novel strongly contradicts the former main-stream ideas, and instead gives and invitation to embrace the concept that the truth sometimes can provide nothing more than anguish and misery. For Parviz, truth reminds him that he’s estranged from his family and a foreigner, while departing from the truth with a bottle of Chianti and Iranian cooking makes him “forget reality and ... imagine that [he’s] returned to [his] kitchen in Shiraz.” (Lakhous, 19) For Elisabetta, truth is knowing that her son has left her, while immersing herself in the fantasy life of her dog, Valentino, brings some meaning to her otherwise lonely existence. Presenting truth as a hindrance amongst his characters, Lakhous forces the reader to question whether truth is a virtue that leads to eventual happiness and enlightenment or whether it impairs individuals’ growth and well-being.

#### Source Material

Lakhous, Amara. *Clash of Civilizations Over An Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. New York: Europa Editions, 2008. Print.

*King James Version*. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Project Gutenberg. Online.

*The Koran*. Trans. J.M. Rodwell. Project Gutenberg. Online.

Daniel Zimmerman was born and raised in Austin, TX. He is currently studying Civil Engineering and hope to additionally sign on as either an English or Medieval Studies minor. He enjoys creative writing, journalism, and watching soccer.