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Thinking Transnationally: New Challenges in Italian Studies

Transnational Italian studies, edited by Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi, is part of the Transnational Modern Languages Series, whose main aim is to show how modern languages can, on an academic level as well as on a more practical one, benefit from a transnational approach able to challenge the generally predominant national model. Furthermore, the series demonstrates that a transnational perspective also constitutes at present the most appropriate lens through which to analyze and understand the changing world we are living in.

In the introduction, the editors clearly explain the reasons behind the volume but they also offer a lucid examination of how the field of Italian studies has developed. When the discipline was first introduced in British universities, the curriculum was focused on the study of the Italian language and literature. By adopting a national and homogeneous vision, reinforced by strict adherence to the dictates of the literary canon, Italian studies as an

academic field has contributed to affirming a national tradition predating the historical formation of the Italian nation. As with other modern language disciplines, Italian studies has been influenced by the development of cultural studies. However, this has not changed the idea that national cultures are separate and predominantly monolingual. Yet this viewpoint has become clearly inadequate to offer a thorough understanding of modern-day Italy. A national perspective which still follows the line of an established canon, although practically useful, has prevented the recognition of new voices, social phenomena, and intercultural intersections that can be profitably examined only through a broader framework. By presenting Italian studies as a homogeneous academic field, this model has also obscured its porosity and blocked the understanding of cultures that are always evolving. A transnational approach, instead, invites us to look at Italy as a plurilingual and multicultural space where we can observe dif-

ferent languages, such as regional dialects and minority languages, and multifarious experiences of mobility. This model makes looking beyond the national territory indispensable and challenges the importance of the nation-state as a unique category of inquiry. In this regard, what has been termed a “transnational turn”—that is, the shift from a national to a transnational model—represents a necessary attempt to deal with the complex challenges of modern Italy and the current world. Seen in this light, Italy constitutes an exceptionally stimulating laboratory and object of research. In fact, using Emma Bond’s words, to which many contributors of the volume refer, one may say that “the Italian case is, perhaps, at once peculiarly trans-national and trans-nationally peculiar: historically a space characterized by both internal and external transit and movement, Italy itself can be imagined as a hyphenated, in-between space created by the multiple crossings that etch its geographical surfaces and cultural depths.”[1]

This engaging book shows the fruitfulness of adopting this approach. It is divided into four parts: “Language,” “Spatiality,” “Temporality,” and “Subjectivity.” These are not intended as rigid divisions, but they identify the central topics each section is predominantly concerned about. The first focuses on the complexities of language, multilingualism, and translation as a critical instrument of cultural analysis. The second section includes contributions on experiences of places and the importance of belonging. The third addresses conceptions of temporality within cultures. Finally, the last section explores the significance of subjectivity and its intricate interdependence with alterity.

In the chapter that opens the first section, Loredana Polezzi offers readers a fascinating overview of the many roles of translation in different historical periods. By underlining its importance, Polezzi shows translation to be a fundamental interpretative key to analyzing cultural processes and understanding the complex Italian fabric. Asking what national products are translated and

what happens when they are exported, as Polezzi also highlights, makes political dynamics visible; it reveals how decisions about translation of particular texts often reflect specific purposes, and influence the way Italy perceives and narrates itself. Translation is also discussed in the following chapter, where Andrea Rizzi looks at fifteenth- and sixteenth-century translators as important cultural intermediaries who, by traveling throughout Europe, disseminated knowledge and exchanged ideas while, at the same time, promoting cultural interactions. Stefania Tufi’s essay foregrounds the Linguistic Landscape (LL) of Italian cities. The contemporary urban space becomes thus a perfect site for studying Italian multilingualism and addressing questions related to movements of people, citizenship, and national belonging. In the chapter that concludes the first section, Naomi Wells, drawing on her fieldwork with migrant communities at Centro Zonarelli in Bologna, offers an analysis of new migration patterns and forms of multilingualism. She also argues that a methodological approach that combines linguistic analysis with an ethnographic orientation is particularly apt for comprehending the multifaceted complexities of modern societies.

The second section is opened by Nathalie Hester’s essay, which offers two examples of the epic tradition in Baroque Italian travel literature: the *Viaggi* (1650–63) by Pietro della Valle and *L’America* (1650) by Girolamo Bartolomei. These two different texts illustrate the roles at a political, religious, and economic level that the Italian peninsula, which at the time was locally and regionally fragmented, played in European expansion. Clorinda Donato then offers an overview, from a transnational angle, of eighteenth-century Italy’s intellectual figures, who by moving across boundaries exposed and promoted their lifestyles. By highlighting the value of their collective work, Donato describes the prestige of Italy as a point of reference and center of cultural exchange. The third chapter looks at the role of Italian performers who, between 1880 and the beginning of the

twentieth century, emigrated from Italy to the United States. It reveals their impact on the American film industry, the significance of the interactions between the American and Italian cinematographic scenes. The chapter also highlights the special contribution of southern Italians to the consolidation of a stereotypical idea of Italianness for the American audience. Teresa Fiore's chapter illustrates how the transnational approach allows us to rethink Italian studies, bringing to the fore Italian history of mobility. Through an analysis of different cultural texts, Fiore also shows that a focus on aspects related to migration (both inward and outward) and colonialism is pivotal to deepening our understanding of Italy's past and present. Jennifer Burns's essay ends the section with an exploration of how migrants and members of minority groups identify the notion of home. Their mobility is reflected in the fact that home is seen not just as a physical space but as a continuing process that can be termed "homing." Burns analyzes the objects and the practices identified as "home" and explains how narratives of home and belonging can refer to private and public spaces, but also, for example, to digital communities.

In the opening chapter of the third section, David Bowie applies a transnational lens to examine premodern texts written before Italy became a nation. By focusing on works investigating the self, authored by Guittone D'Arezzo, Dante Alighieri, and Francesco Petrarca, Bowie shows how our notion of time and our understanding of temporalities determine the way we read cultures of the past. Moving to the sixteenth century, Eugenia Paulicelli discusses the importance of the language of fashion to the formation of national identity. By analyzing costume books, regarded as examples of visual culture, and Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, Paulicelli explains how fashion and ways of dressing can be used to understand both the local and global contexts. Subsequently, Donna Gabaccia examines the crucial role of translation in enabling migrants who, between 1880 and 1960,

moved from Sicily, and specifically the town of Sambuca, to the United States to be counted and tracked. In this respect translation is also a source of insight into the nation-building projects of these two nations as well as their conceptions of citizenship. In the latter part of this section, Charles Burdett explains why reflection on the Italian colonial past and the pervasive influence of its effects and consequences on our present is necessary if we are to think of Italy and its cultures transnationally. By analyzing works by writers such as Erminia Dell'Oro, Nicky Di Paolo, or Gabriella Ghermandi, Burdett's essay shows how texts on Italian expansionism and its aftermath bring to the fore the question of time, revealing the interlocking of past, present, and future. Turning to graphic novels, Barbara Spadaro examines how Italian comics foreground various forms of memory, language, and translation. She looks at Zerocalcare's *Kobane Calling* (2015) and Takoua Ben Mohamed's work, emphasizing how their comics can be considered as the result of different cultures and transnational movements. By combining visual and written elements, Spadaro also argues, comics enable multimodal processes and represent an effective tool to narrate the present world.

In the first chapter of the concluding section, Tristan Kay reflects on Dante's literary production, revealing that forms of multilingualism, translation, and mobility characterized the Italian culture of that time. In their chapter Fabio Camilletti and Alessandra Diazzi analyze the influence of Freud's understanding of subjectivity on Italian culture. They discuss the reception of psychoanalysis, a hybrid form of knowledge, which was imported from outside and crosses cultures and disciplines. In the essay that follows, Derek Duncan examines Daniele Gaglianone's 2013 film *La mia classe*, which describes the relationship between an Italian-language teacher and his students with a migrant background for whom Italian is not their first language. By examining the film, Duncan explains that human mobility cannot be adequately comprehended within national or linguistic bor-

ders. In her essay, Monica Jensen addresses the cultural memory of events that took place during the 2001 G8 Summit held in Genoa. By focusing on Christian Mirra's graphic novel *Quella notte alla Diaz* (2010), Carlo Bachschmidt's documentary *Black Block* (2011), and Daniele Vicari's film *Diaz —Don't Clean Up This Blood* (2012), she argues that the tragic impact of those events has been crucial in the formation of a transnational and transgenerational subjectivity. In the last chapter of the section, Serena Bassi offers an example of how a transnational approach can be usefully applied to queer studies. In particular she focuses on the Italian gay movement of the 1970s and on the impact of its creative and linguistic practices. These not only challenged the notion of a standard national language but also opposed heteronormativity.

As underlined by Teresa Fiore in her chapter, the long and complicated process that unified separate and different regional areas into one nation probably explains why in the discipline of Italian studies, as practiced abroad but also in Italy, the national model has been particularly tenacious and less capable of opening up to innovative approaches. However, the shift from a national to a transnational focus seems crucial in conceiving the future of Italian studies, in thinking how it can make sense of a world where increasing mobility is strongly counteracted by widespread nationalist ideologies. The Italian cultural and social contexts can be deeper and better explored by focusing on "those spaces pre-occupied by the cultures and politics of past mobility, and [on] the impact they have (had) on the present" (p. 163). Adopting a transnational viewpoint enables us to visualize Italian studies differently, bringing to the fore aspects and connections which are not immediately related to the idea we have of the Italian nation, culture, and language. Moreover, the transnational draws attention to new voices whose works are categorized as noncanonical and marginal, such as those by Italian migrant writers, in which we can see the coexistence of forms of multilingualism and self-translation. These hybrid texts ques-

tion the notion of national language and of a monolingual national culture.

In these crucial times Italian studies finds itself in, it is necessary to provide flexible but solid critical tools which can be applied to studying and comprehending dynamics and questions that cannot be examined within geographic and political borders. Among these instruments of critical analysis, as argued by Polezzi, we have to include translation. We are used to thinking of translation merely as a practical activity and of a translated text as a substitute for the original one. This conception implies a binary model and a correspondence between texts in the source and target languages. As a discipline that brings together mobility and languages, translation plays a central role in the first section of the volume, but it also emerges as extremely important in the collection as a whole. Readers are, for example, often reminded that many important Italian writers and intellectuals, such as Dante, Ugo Foscolo, and Cesare Pavese, normally spoke different languages and were expert translators.

The study of the transnational has usually been associated with colonial, postcolonial, and migration studies, areas that require consideration of broader geographical spaces and the interlocking of different temporalities. In this respect, Burdett elucidates that we can fully understand modern Italian culture only if we know how fascism developed. At the same time, in order to comprehend Italian fascism, we have to address the construction of the Italian Empire. Furthermore, the present Italian context cannot be thoroughly explained unless we analyze Italy's colonialism and its legacy. Thus, for example, a total grasp of phenomena such as the rise of far-right movements, the spread of racism, and anti-immigrant sentiments involves engaging with Italy's past and in particular the consequences of its colonial role.

Some chapters of the book show how the transnational also brings to the fore new ways of looking at the same things, taking into considera-

tion aspects which have often been neglected. Thus, it should not be regarded as a surprise that a transnational model is effectively used to examine periods and themes, such as the Italian premodern context, that some might consider completely unsuitable for this kind of analysis. In his chapter, devoted to Dante, Tristan Kay demonstrates that some critical strategies and methodological approaches related to the “transnational turn” can lead to suggestive and unexpected results even when we study a hypercanonical author. In fact, on the one hand, Dante is unanimously regarded as the father of the Italian language; his figure is so deeply connected with Italian history that his work has often been read according to nationalist ends. On the other hand, if we closely analyze the environment that surrounded him, we note how multicultural and plurilingual it was. In it the diglossic system composed of Latin and Italian vernacular was enriched by the use of Old French and Occitan. Although employed for different purposes, all these languages coexisted perfectly.

The analysis of Dante offered by Kay exemplifies what represents the most significant challenge faced by Italian studies and, more generally, the field of modern languages, that is, designing a framework that makes it possible to combine the national and the transnational, allowing the coexistence of a focus on the national with a transnational view. A transnational approach foregrounds the necessity of transcending a national framework but does not deny its significance and relevance. As stressed by the editors, it is in fact important to underline that national and transnational are not to be regarded as distinct because they “are not exclusive but exist in tension” (p. 14). Thinking transnationally requires looking beyond national boundaries and encourages us to take into consideration wider geographical areas. However, at the same time, a transnational analysis reveals to us that the global and the local are connected. More precisely, it emphasizes how global dynamics can be studied by focusing on a local dimension, drawing our attention to characteristics

that are intrinsic to places such as the Sicilian town Sambuca, Centro Zonarelli in Bologna, and the classroom environment respectively in the chapters by Donna Gabacca, Naomi Wells, and Derek Duncan.

As stated by Maria Corti while discussing orality, when we navigate a field that is broad and porous like an ocean, where it is extremely easy to get lost, we need to use the chosen perspective as a compass from which to observe our object of study. We also have to clearly establish the critical tools we will use in order to use them in an operational and effective way.[2] The multiple changes we are experiencing in the world today and in our lives make it necessary to rethink what Italian studies represents as an academic field. This excellent collection shows that, through a transnational lens allowing us to read the past and the present in more flexible and mobile ways, we are better equipped to grapple with the complexities of studying Italian cultures. This volume does not intend to propose an all-encompassing introduction to transnational Italian studies and we can note, for example, that digital humanities, an area of research that is developing and gaining broader importance, is not taken into examination. The real aim of the volume is to provide a series of critical strategies and operative methodologies to approach the field.

In this collection, students and teachers will find pedagogical suggestions and ideas that can be discussed and developed further in the classroom. All the chapters in fact offer concrete examples of how what we define as Italian studies can be rethought transnationally. Although expressly intended for a student readership, thanks to the wide range of explored themes and the depth of analysis, *Transnational Italian Studies* also offers valuable insights to any expert in the field.

Notes

- [1]. Emma Bond, “Towards a Trans-national Turn in Italian Studies?,” *Italian Studies* 69, no. 3 (2014): 415-24; 421.

[2]. Maria Corti, “Nozione e funzioni dell’oralità nel sistema letterario,” in *Oralità e scrittura nel sistema letterario, Atti del Convegno di Cagliari (14-16 aprile 1980)*, ed. Giovanna Cerina with Cristina Lavinio and Luisa Mulas (Rome: Bulzoni, 1982), 7.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

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