

LOCATING ‘ITALIES’ IN THE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH LABORATORY

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At the beginning of each course I teach, I introduce myself as someone with both an ‘Italian’ and an ‘Italian American’ family: my mother’s family resides in the political space known as ‘Italy’ and my father’s family began their journey to the coal mines of Western Pennsylvania during the so-called ‘great wave’ of Italian immigration. I do this to begin a conversation with my students about the complex intersections between the *storie* we tell about our families and the *Storia* that we read about in history textbooks. I explain that, on one hand, my paternal grandfather and uncles were farmers and manual labourers, ‘birds of passage’ who arrived in this part of the United States of America through chain migrations that swept up families and indeed entire villages. On the other, both my father and mother were part of a subsequent wave of migration from Italy to the USA, one that was intimately connected to and yet historically distinct from those earlier dynamics of chain migration. My parents’ story allows me to tell my students about Fascism’s promise to fulfill the project of Italian unification; the militarised life led by people like my father under the Fascist regime and during World War II; my father’s participation in the Resistance; and finally the post-WWII wave of emigration from Italy (Ruberto & Sciorra, 2017) that brought my parents to the USA in the 1940s and 1950s. That my father had until then lived more than half of his life in Milan also allows me to talk about Italy’s history of uneven economic development, internal colonisation (Schneider, 1998), and labour migration. That my parents were Sicilians adds yet another layer to this complicated story (or is it a history?) of multi-dimensional belonging.

I also frequently tell my students that the dominant language of my childhood home was a Sicilian dialect, but that my parents explicitly

discouraged me from speaking it. I explain that I learned standard Italian at college, and that on my first day of Italian class the instructor vowed to rid me of my “terrible Southern accent”. This is a far cry from the more enlightened position of educators like Gaetano Cipolla (2021), who argues that our students’ heritage language knowledge can be an effective lever for retention and growth. While we’ve come a long way in the intervening 30 odd years, there is still much to do: decolonising Italian Studies is not only a matter of pushing back against colonial and colonising forces on the field. It also demands that we reflect on the ways that all power structures create inequities and radically limit access to a field and its production of new knowledge. It requires us to interrogate the reality of a nation-based project of identity and canon formation that has long held sway over what can and cannot be studied, taught, researched, read, and transmitted through our university curricula.

We in Italian Studies are not alone in thinking through these problems, but our field is uniquely situated to do so in productive and exciting ways. The “transnational turn” (Bond, 2014) together with the “postcolonial turn” (Ponzanesi, 2012) and a growing body of work in geocritical studies allow us to think not beyond the nation but alongside it, without being constrained by it. In so doing, we open our field to diasporic and other forms of mobility that have ‘made Italians’ in spaces that are situated beyond dominant frameworks of blood or soil. We can better appreciate the importance of cultural, linguistic, and other bonds that have shaped Italian belonging alongside notions of citizenship. And we can decenter the peninsular paradigm, which isn’t exactly or exclusively coterminous with the nation, and much less so with *italianità*.

What might it mean, in practical terms, to interrogate broader notions of Italian belonging in this way? In my current work I’m committed to a scholarly and curricular agenda that sees *italianità* as a flexibly- and diversely-centered rhizome whose components interact with each other in often tangled, often tessellated ways (Hom, 2019; Fiore, 2017). But cultivating the borderlessness (Fogu, Hom, & Ruberto, 2019) of a decentred field can be challenging, and the American university curriculum does not typically welcome ambiguities or flexibility. Over the last five years or so, I’ve sought to work beyond properly curricular structures to invent one- and two-

credit laboratory-like experiences that build on students’ previous classroom work with me. In this way, students who have completed courses like “Italies” or “Italian America on Screen” work with me in subsequent semesters in project-based teams. In weekly project meetings, these teams focus chiefly on research questions emerging from Pittsburgh’s Italian community (such as the history of the city’s Columbus monument). In a similar way, students from my Italian translation courses have also come together as teams of transcribers, translators, and curators of archival materials held at the Heinz History Center’s Italian American Collection. As part of our collaborative work, students gain competencies in project-appropriate digital platforms, typically Omeka or Scalar, for the curation of our research product. And through the generosity of private donors and our European Studies Center’s Title VI funding, these students all receive research stipends for their efforts.

Students working in this way on projects that connect Italian Studies and Italian Diaspora Studies have the freedom to explore projects in which they can draw on their own areas of expertise, such as curricular pathways they are pursuing as double-majors or certificate programs. In these laboratory-like groups, participants interact with other students who have studied Italian to various degrees, giving them all the opportunity to make practical use of whatever level of language proficiency they’ve attained. Whether we’re engaged in translation or in comparing English- and Italian-language news coverage of matters relevant to our research, it is precisely the dynamic interplay *between* the languages that generates moments of real meaning-making. In these laboratories the group can chip away at the boundaries between Italian and English language materials and lean in to practices of translanguaging — much as was true of many of the century-old archival documents and publications that are the objects of our work.

The laboratory model is not only productive in the collaborations that it fosters within a given semester or academic year; perhaps even more exciting is the promise for diachronic collaborative work, where each generation of student researchers is brought up to speed on the work of their predecessors, and then collectively decide in which directions they might best carry it forward. Is this, perhaps, the path to new rhythms of research and discovery untethered to a course, a language, a syllabus, a *semester*, but where the logic of the project —

the boundaries of which our students, themselves, have a hand in shaping — rules? The students currently participating in my multi-year “Columbus, Interrupted” project (Insana, 2022) have learned much from the undergraduate researchers that preceded them, and in turn learn to position their own work to facilitate the project’s continuation. With the laboratory as our model, they (we) thus gain interlocutors through time, and learn that the production of knowledge proceeds in its own time, not only in the rigid and constructed time of the academic semester.

If projects like these are to be a viable part of the post-secondary experience, a robust network of archival materials relating to the Italian experience is critical. They are the key to giving students an introduction to research; providing a community-facing service-learning experience that connects them to our city’s immigrant and ethnic communities; and creating a radically interdisciplinary point of entry into the field of Italian Studies. I have been lucky, in Pittsburgh, to collaborate with an exemplary institution that boasts a dedicated Italian American history collection with extensive documentary and photographic collections; a rich and varied material culture archive; and a dedicated curator/director. But how much richer would our work be if we could more easily and efficiently explore analogous resources in other locations, in the USA and beyond? I will conclude by making a pitch for the Italian Diaspora Archive Resource Map project, a collaborative initiative I have undertaken with Melissa E. Marinaro (Heinz History Center) and Nancy Caronia (West Virginia University). Our aim is to identify, organise, and raise the visibility of archival collections relating to the Italian experience in under-studied areas of the US. If you see yourselves in this mission, I urge you to elevate the archival collections in your own areas through undergraduate research that connects all of these ‘Italies’: the ones that we locate in the Italian national space; and the vast, complicated, and transnational ones that thrive beyond it.

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