

## (DE)COLONIAL MEMORY AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY: REASSESSING WHAT IS 'ITALIAN'<sup>1</sup>

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In a scene of Camillo Mastrocinque's 1961 comedy *Totò Truffa '62*, Totò's character, Antonio Peluffo, cons an American tourist into buying the Trevi Fountain. The scene can be read as an openly satirical send up of the most iconic episode in Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) and of the romanticised image of Italy it contributed to popularise. In an additional, ironic, twist, the victim of the eponymous 'truffa' is not just any American, but an Italian American looking to leave the United States and invest in 'un buon bisiniss'<sup>2</sup>. Among current debates on the future of Italian Studies and having recently moved to the United States, where I teach both Italian and Italian American cultures to groups that frequently include heritage students, I have come to think of that scene as an admonition against the temptation to keep 'selling' Italy, Italian culture and, by extension, Italian Studies as a largely fake, romanticised, reified set of stereotypical representations: a product to be peddled on the global market through a combination of glossy images of artistic monuments and Mediterranean beauty, accompanied by abundant helpings of fashion, food, and the occasional extra dose of equally romanticised organised crime. That temptation goes hand in hand with the pressure to 'perform' academic work as a form of soft diplomacy, promoting a recognisable but a-historical and exclusionary 'national brand' – while also hoping to fill chairs in our classrooms in the process. This kind of attitude is neither new nor specific to Italian Studies, but is rather an integral part of the methodological nationalism and ethnocentrism that remain a shared inheritance of Modern

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Mario Badagliacca for the permission to reproduce his work as part of this article.

<sup>2</sup> The sequence can be seen at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHEIkBaGh\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHEIkBaGh_Y) (last consulted 8 July, 2022).

Languages as a multi-disciplinary field. Yet in its soft, tourism-friendly incarnation, this nationalist imprint of our discipline is proving extremely resilient, as it is perfectly attuned to contemporary post-capitalist, neo-liberal constructions of both culture and education as marketable products and consumable goods.

Thanks to the desirable images it generates and promotes, this Italy-as-product paradigm is also highly effective in reinforcing homonormative representations of the nation, while simultaneously rendering diverse voices and forms of cultural production largely invisible or inaudible. Recent years have seen the emergence and establishment of a number of approaches that can provide alternative routes to the study of Italian cultures. A significant part of the push towards change has come from social transformations and from a growing proximity between research and activism, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement being the most prominent example of this. As a result, diversity has come to occupy a much more central position in the ongoing renewal of the Italian Studies curriculum. In this brief position paper, I want to approach the question of diversity and of its impact on educational practices through the intersecting notions of (in)visibility and (in)audibility. I will use two more images as 'provocations', relating them to my own teaching as well as to the ongoing process of learning from my students – a process for which I want to thank them here.

### **Regimes of Visibility: Who Is 'Italian'?**

In Spring 2021, in the middle of a global pandemic and in the aftermath of global protests catalysed by the BLM movement, I started teaching at a new institution, in a new country. My brief as Chair of Italian American and Italian Studies at Stony Brook University was to keep the two areas I teach neatly distinct: Italian Studies, taught in Italian and presenting aspects of Italian literature and culture to specialist students; and Italian American Studies, taught in English to students from across all years and disciplinary backgrounds. As I struggled with the limitations embedded in these criteria and the categories they took for granted – from notions of national language to images of geographic integrity; from cultural and political homogeneity to the assumed 'authenticity' of ethnic identities – I tried to devise ways to breach and

bridge those divides. One of the activities I proposed to my students was based on the 'Italy Is Out' photographic project produced by Mario Badagliacca as artist in residence for the 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages' project<sup>3</sup>. The photographs – a collection of portraits of members of the Italian diaspora based in the UK, USA, Argentina, Ethiopia and Tunisia – are the result of in-depth conversations between the photographer and his subjects, focusing on experiences of migration. Each portrait is accompanied by a triptych of 'migrant objects': personal belongings selected by the interviewees as mementos of their migratory experience. Students in the Italian American Studies course I was teaching online in Spring 2021 – approximately forty, from diverse backgrounds, including some who identify as Italian American, Hispanic, African American, Asian American – were shown a selection of images and told they all portrayed Italians living outside Italy. In small groups, they were then asked to imagine a story for each person. At the end, I promised to share the original captions, so we could compare the sitters' self-descriptions with the lives we had invented for them. In most cases, the identities created by the students were highly compatible with those in the original captions. Some photographs, however, baffled the groups dealing with them, starting with that of a young black woman sitting on her bed, accompanied by a copy of Vasco Pratolini's novel *Le ragazze di Sanfrediano* and by postcards of a highly recognisable Tuscan landscape and an equally obvious view of Florence (Figure 1).

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<sup>3</sup> 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Mobility, Identity and Translation in Modern Italian Cultures' (TML) was a three-year research project funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council's 'Translating Cultures' initiative. For more information, see the project's website: <https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/> (last consulted 8 July, 2022) and also Burdett and Polezzi (eds), 2020; Burdett, Polezzi and Spadaro (eds), 2020.

Badagliacca's photographs were included in the project's itinerant exhibition 'Beyond Borders: Transnational Italy / Oltre i confini: Italia transnazionale' and have now also been published in book format (Badagliacca with Duncan, 2021). For the Beyond Borders exhibition see <https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/media-collection/exhibition-beyond-borders-transnational-italy/>; 'Italy Is Out' can also be viewed online at <https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk/media-collection/exhibition-beyond-borders-transnational-italy/> (last consulted 8 July, 2022).



**Figure 1:** *Caption:* “Portrait: Sara Tesfai was born and grew up in Florence. After graduating in Economics, she moved to Cambridge where she has lived since 2014: ‘Italy, Florence, represents home for me, my culture and everything that is most familiar. At the same time, though, I don’t feel like I belong in only one place – rather, I’m surprised by the many places that make me feel at home. England is one of these. I myself am a balance of different cultures.’ Cambridge (UK) 2015.

*Objects:* (1) Vasco Pratolini, *Le ragazze di Sanfrediano*. The book is set in Florence where Sara was born and grew up; (2) and (3) postcards from Tuscany and Florence.

*Source:* Mario Badagliacca, with Derek Duncan, *Italy Is Out*, Liverpool, LUP, 2021:18-19; printed with permission by the author.

In spite of my instructions, the group examining this set of photographs described the woman as an African American student who spent time in Florence, falling in love with its history and its culture. Although the Tuscan references in the pictures were correctly identified, the 'Black' signifier dominated the interpretation, thereby erasing or displacing the other evidence. The perceived dissonance between 'Blackness' and 'Italianness' was powerful enough to make the story told in the portrait – a story of post-colonial Italian Blackness – invisible. I do not read this as a 'mistake' on the part of my students. Rather, what the invisibility or 'unthinkability' of Sara Tesfai as an Italian subject reveals is the inbuilt bias that continues to dominate the images of 'Italianità' emanating from Italy and from Italian Studies and the way these are presented to students as normative. When that normative representation is integrated within educational practice, it gets reflected back onto images of Italy and their desirability, even among groups which are otherwise sensitive to discourses about de-coloniality, antiracism and other resistant critical practices. Simply *presenting* images that are more inclusive in *representing* the diversity of Italian culture will not solve the problem: we need a more active stance if we want to avoid complicity with the myth of white Italy and with its racist, colonial history<sup>4</sup>.

### **Audibility: Whose Language Is It Anyway?**

Among the many images circulating on Twitter in the Summer of 2020 to document the BLM demonstrations taking place around the world, one showed a young black woman holding up a home-made sign that recited: "We learned your English, your Spanish, your French, your Dutch, your Italian. You learned our nothing. You called us stupid.

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<sup>4</sup> An important corollary of this conclusion speaks directly to notions, representations and narratives of Italian American ethnic identity and culture. Here, in a reciprocal propping up gesture, the myth of Italy's whiteness gets inscribed within the dynamics of United States racial politics, while the parallel myth of heroic migration is coupled with the foregrounding of tales of discrimination and minoritisation through negative stereotypes and representations, including assimilation or proximity to Black population. Both narratives place a high price/prize on Italian, Italian American and, ultimately, American whiteness, further reinforcing the regime of invisibility these impose on Italian Blackness. On these themes, see in particular, Jacobson 2006.

That's white privilege"<sup>5</sup>. In this slogan, the juxtaposition of Italian with other European languages more commonly associated with colonial empires denounces the racism of Italian normative whiteness as well as of Italy's disavowal not just of blackness but also of its own role in the history of colonialism. While effectively dismantling Italy's 'exceptionalism' with respect to colonial responsibility, this provocation explicitly raises the question of language and of audibility. At the same time, the image, with its central yet isolated black female figure, materialises in front of our eyes the intersection between the racialised body and language, asking how the availability or otherwise of *Italianità* echoes and reverberates in the inclusive or exclusive nature of the Italian idiom, its ownership, its availability.

This too is an important question for Italian Studies. Because language is often approached through instrumentalist, skills-centered arguments, whether at social or pedagogical level, we tend to forget (once again, in spite of all evidence) that no language exists as a self-contained homogeneous standard (Arnaut et al, 2016; Canagarajah, 2013), that multilingualism is common among individuals as well as communities (Canagarajah, 2020; Fortier, 2021; Gramling, 2016 & 2021), and that multiple forms of translation are constantly at play in inter- as well as intra-lingual forms of communication (Polezzi, 2022; Venuti, 2019). In the case of Italian, paradoxically, the double disavowal of Italy's colonial and diasporic history, including internal colonisation and migration, leads to a particularly strong association between the Italian language and the Italian nation. This resilient nexus silences internal diversity, from regional variants to linguistic minorities, while also rendering inaudible the Italian(s) spoken outside of Italy and, simultaneously, assimilating (but not equating) the speaking of (standard) Italian to citizenship<sup>6</sup>. When transferred outside the boundaries of Italy, this model of Italian language continues to

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<sup>5</sup> The image was posted by @MissTiaTaylor on 7 June, 2020, and captioned 'Rain or shine #BlackLivesMatter everywhere. #Blaclivesmatteritaly #blm'; it can be seen at: <https://twitter.com/MissTiaTaylor/status/1269659575093006337> (last consulted 8 July, 2022). I am grateful to Serena Bassi for pointing out this image and to Simone Brioni for tracking down its source on Twitter.

<sup>6</sup> Recent debates in Italian politics about 'Ius Culturae' and, in the latest variation, 'Ius Scholae', present frequent 'progressive' formulations of this argument, for instance when noting – with some surprise and open satisfaction – that the vast majority of children born in Italy to migrant parents think in Italian (Amato, 2022).

perform its exclusionary role. It does so by marking diasporic Italian subjects as 'deficient', often asking them to choose between identifying as speakers of 'inferior' forms of Italian or learners of Italian as a 'foreign language' (Totò's 'oriundo' victim actually speaks very good Italian, yet he is still the butt of the joke for not being quite good or quite authentic enough).

This gesture of exclusion is further multiplied when we ignore or actively silence the multilingualism of all students in our classrooms, often, once again, in the name of instrumentality. Target-language-only policies in language classrooms render linguistic diversity inaudible, echoing 'English-only' campaigns (Avineri et al, 2019), and reasserting monolingual and monocultural normativity while asking students to ignore personal experiences – to leave them at the door – rather than tapping into them as the skilled cultural and linguistic mediators they often are. That demand – leaving diversity at the door of our classrooms – is both psychologically damaging and politically dubious. It is also, ultimately, unsustainable for a discipline that is intent on (re)stating its relevance in increasingly diverse societies.

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