

HOW THE 'ANXIETY OF ITALIAN AUTHENTICITY' OBSTRUCTS DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION (DEI) PRACTICES IN ITALIAN STUDIES

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Pursuing Italian Studies for many low-income, first-generation Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) interested students feels like an unattainable college experience. Completing my doctorate in Italian Studies at a historically white institution like Brown University was both a rigorous and demoralising undertaking. Having to constantly explain to Italian fellow Ph.D. students and professors for the umpteenth time why I did not pursue a doctorate degree in Latin American Studies or answering the variously inflected 'How did you get into Italian?' is a common micro-aggression that we BIPOC folks in Italian Studies know too well. It gives the false impression that the field is exclusively by Italians for Italians.

In the Chronicle of Higher Education, Deborah Parker (2018), a professor of Italian at the University of Virginia, who specialises in Italian visual and print cultures of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, describes how it feels to be an Asian-Canadian faculty member in Italian, a field in which there are very few BIPOC folks, and how greater diversification offers a way forward. According to Parker: "Many Italian programs strive for 'authenticity' by favouring native Italians. The persistence of this practice fosters the widely voiced opinion that 'Italians hire Italians'." I concur with Parker's observation on Italian programs seeking 'authenticity' as I too have witnessed it and echo Catherine Adoyo's (a General Faculty in the French department at George Washington University) poignant online response to Parker's article on Race and Foreign Language. Adoyo remarks:

This is so real. I have developed the sense that one of the greatest shortcomings in 'Languages and Literature' scholarship, especially in Italian, is in defining such disciplines according to national boundaries and the attendant identity politics. I have seen countless iterations of the 'how Italian are you?' litmus test frame many an interaction by establishing an undeclared pecking order of priority of authority, with peninsular Italians holding pride of place, their American descendants readily leveraging their ancestral bonafides to be heard, others of European descent claiming authorizing proximity, and then the rest. Reading this article makes me wonder honestly whether Africans even have a place at this table.

I wonder what it would take for BIPOC folks to have a welcoming and affirming spot at the table? I ask this because my research interests in Italian Migrant Culture and Afro-Italian women writers were initially undervalued and scrutinised unfairly during my graduate career. My writing style was criticised for lacking depth and clarity, yet I never received the attention and time from my advisor that other students in my program received. Frankly, I was rarely offered concrete feedback on how to improve my writing and consequently had to change advisors halfway through my program. Did my lack of 'Italian authenticity' position me as a less-valued student to advise and mentor? Did my Italian pronunciation, inflected with a Spanish accent, mean I would not teach Italian Studies successfully? Did my effort to learn and teach in a third language show any signs of my dedication and commitment to the field? Did my lack of skills or knowledge overcome my strengths? However, if it was my shortcomings, how could I reconcile that the other two fellow Ph.D. students of colour in my program, a Black woman from Chicago and an international Chinese male student, did not fare well. After two years, one left the program, and the other returned to China soon after completing his degree. I secured a position as an Adjunct Faculty at Rhode Island College with a promise of a tenure track position that never came to fruition due to institutional red tape. I mention all this not to point fingers but to make visible patterns that might be contributing to making BIPOC students and educators feel unwelcomed, excluded, and unsupported in Italian Studies.

My experience in graduate school left me with more questions than answers. However, it made salient the need to unpack race in Italian Studies instruction and diversify Italian Studies educators and learners. After hearing Parker's 2019 keynote speech on Diversity in Italian Studies, I learned that only five racialised minorities currently hold tenure track positions in Italian Studies across the United States. The dismal number signals deep inequity practices deeply embedded within the discipline that merit close attention.

The absence of BIPOC learners and educators in Italian Studies mirrors the exclusion of immigrants and children of immigrants in Italy. In an interview, the Roman-born author Igiaba Scego speaks to this matter and sarcastically discloses how Italians usually compliment her on her Italian, thinking she is an 'extracomunitaria', a demeaning word used by Italian speakers to identify a person who is not part of the European Union. The assumption that she is an 'extracomunitaria' is based on her phenotype, not on questions of upbringing, provenance, or how she identifies herself. In her case, she was born and raised in Italy, yet she is perceived as an outsider. I also felt like an 'extracomunitaria' in Italian Studies. My B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in Italian were not enough to be recognised as an Italian scholar.

According to (Italian Studies | Data USA, 2020) most bachelor degrees are awarded to white students. However, we (faculty, deans, administrators, activists, artists, and educators) cannot ignore the demographic shift sweeping through university campuses across the United States. Immigrants and children of immigrants are becoming an ever-larger share of students across our campuses. Research (National Center for Education Statistics (ED); American Institutes for Research (AIR), 2018) shows that in postsecondary institutions students of colour comprise approximately 42% of college enrollment. With this changing student body comes the responsibility of institutions to change, grow, and adapt to adequately meet the needs of their new constituents. This demographic change presents a niche field such as Italian Studies with an opportunity to meet the moment with innovation and exemplary leadership that can help diversify the field.

While diversity in Italian Studies can refer to the representation of individuals of a different race, gender, ethnic, national, linguistic, sexual, and social class identities, I have elected to focus on racial diversity, equity, and inclusion. When I think of diversity, equity, and

inclusion, I think of equitable, meaningful representation and participation. As Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy explain

[...] there is a difference between saying that everyone has a seat at the table versus saying that everyone has a seat, a voice, opportunity, and enough time to speak. Thus, any discussion of diversity must include considerations of power, agency, and equity that all are implicated in meaningful representation and participation.

(Fosslien & Duffy, cited in Anya & Randolph, 2019)

While many institutions pride themselves on diversity and inclusive practices, the everyday reality for BIPOC stakeholders is relentless, unyielding, and a constant reminder that academia is not a place designed for us to thrive. What is packaged as an empowering experience comes at the high cost of systematically chipping away our self-esteem and creativity. Instead of leaving academia empowered, we are left traumatised and insecure.

After learning more about the experiences of BIPOC students in historically white institutions and the lack of research that acknowledges and validates their experiences and perspectives, I have realised that I am not alone. The under-representation of BIPOC faculty in Italian Studies signals that BIPOC students are turning to white faculty mentors, a situation similar to what sociologist Marisela Martinez-Cola (2020) identifies in her article *Collectors, Nightlights, and Allies, Oh My! White Mentors in the Academy*. In her auto-ethnographic study rooted in the counter-narrative tradition of Critical Race Theory — a legal theory of race in the USA —, Martinez-Cola found in her literature review that most of the literature regarding mentoring discusses its definitions and best practices but does not completely capture how students of colour perceive their white mentors. She found that most of the literature on the subject is rooted in a deficit model, describing these students as lacking some skills or knowledge rather than emphasising their strengths and focusing on structural inequalities. It fails to challenge white mentors who either 'tokenise' or lack the skill set and intercultural competence to understand the needs and perspectives of their mentees. I am a strong

advocate for more research on the experiences of BIPOC folks in Italian Studies, where their voices, perspectives, and incidents are centered.

My upcoming Photovoice Research Project for the 2022-2023 academic year builds on Martinez-Cola's findings and from a desire to understand and capture the experiences of Latino/a, Afro-Latino/a, Latinx, and Hispanic students and their perceptions of their white mentors at historically white institutions. The main research question is: How do first-generation students identifying as Hispanic, Latino/a, Afro-Latino/a, and Latinx experience their white mentors in Italian Studies?

To instill the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in the classroom, I have regularly tasked my beginning Italian students with creating an educational children's book for ages five to six that illustrates the various concepts they have learned throughout the semester. I ask them to write about a topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion that is important to them and educational to a young child. They reflect on diversity, equity, and inclusive practices that make every child feel seen, understood, and valued regardless of race, gender, background, ability, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or creed. Their narrative, personal anecdote, or experiential piece must follow the same pattern as fiction. It must include the three main elements: exposition, or background information, followed by complication, the events of the narrative, and the resolution. Writing this children's book in Italian gives students some emotional distance to discuss, reflect, and find resolutions to inequitable practices in our society.

Representation matters in Italian Studies, and it goes beyond ticking demographic boxes. To guarantee equity and meaningful participation in language learning of faculty and students from BIPOC backgrounds, we must be willing to openly address race and racism in the ways in which Italian language and culture have been taught. We must be ready to make changes to the Italian curriculum and be intentional about the instructional materials and practices we use in our classroom. This includes unpacking how the anxiety of Italian authenticity obstructs DEI practices in Italian Studies. More BIPOC meaningful representation and participation within the professoriate will attract a broader demographic among students and stimulate innovative transnational research inquiries. This condition is crucial for the field's development and intellectual thriving.

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