

## INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY AND ITALIAN TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

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I am an Italian migrant living and working on Indigenous land in so-called Australia, and benefitting from a settler colonial system founded on dispossession, genocide, and racism. My decolonial focus is therefore not on Italy's imperialism and colonialism, or even on the complex memories and long-lasting consequences of such important histories. Rather the focus of my research and teaching is on the long, persisting and violent complicity of Italians, and especially Italian migrants, in settler colonialism and the violent denial of limited sovereignty to Indigenous people.

What are the implications of such a blunt and challenging, yet necessary acknowledgement?

In attempting to answer this question with some degree of honesty, I am guided by three simple principles that I have come to embrace through my study and reflections at the intersection of transcultural, decolonial and Indigenous methodologies. In turn, these principles shape my own approach to transcultural Italian studies.

Firstly, we must recognise and support Indigenous sovereignty, which includes, but is not limited to, their sovereign rights over lands, waters and skies. It is for each distinct First Nation to decide what sovereignty is and how it should be applied. While the settler colonial Nation-State's concession of limited "sovereignty" to Indigenous people, as defined and constrained by the settler colonisers through their legal systems, may have some positive effects, it is itself an apparent and paradoxical denial of Indigenous sovereignty.

This principle makes apparent the need to understand that Italians have migrated not just to settler colonial nations, but to specific First Nations. I see my contribution to the transcultural understanding of Italian migration as a preliminary and provisional contribution to

research on the history of Italian migration as (also) a history of diaspora settler colonialism, and as a history of violent migration to, and settlement in, First Nations.

Secondly, the immoral combination of settlers' guilt and hope is instrumental in recentring the moral privilege of whiteness in the exact moment in which white settlers declare their progressive, antiracist and decolonial beliefs (see Ricatti, 2016). It is not a proper decolonial process, one in which the settlers remain firmly at the centre of the moral, political and cultural discourse, even if such discourse is explicitly in support of Indigenous people. Guilt and hope should be replaced with silence. Listening to Indigenous people is much more effective and beneficial for decolonisation than any self-aggrandising declaration of moral and political intents.

This principle draws two essential methodological boundaries in my work. The first is the need to read, listen to, and cite Indigenous authors, artists, activists, and scholars, and to centre their perspectives, knowledges and theories in my own research and teaching about transculturation within Italian migrant communities. While many of my old publications fail this basic and essential duty, since 2019 I have tried to recognise the centrality of Indigenous voices in shaping my own work. Secondly, I make sure that my work is clearly situated within Italian migration and transcultural studies, that is, it does not attempt to occupy centre-stage within the decolonial scholarship, a stage that should be left to Indigenous voices. Instead, my contribution to research and teaching operates from a marginal discipline within the Anglocentric sphere (Italian Studies), to provide a limited but perhaps productive contribution towards decolonisation.

Lastly, a process of decolonisation requires an understanding of the complexity of settler colonial structure of powers and of their persistence and evolution over time. While there are many, different and contrasting theorisations of settler colonialism and racial capitalism, at a basic level this means that migrants who are not, at least initially, part of a dominant structure of settler colonial power, nevertheless can play an important role in both processes of colonisation and decolonisation.

This principle has informed my attempt to distinguish between those groups who are hegemonic within settler colonialism and its processes of racialisation (i.e., Anglo-Australians first and foremost, but also

other white migrant settlers, colonist, missionaries, etc.), and migrants whose alleged racial inferiority or ambiguity has come to play complex and ever-evolving, yet clearly distinct roles within settler colonial societies.

This distinction is fundamental when considering, in particular, the history of Southern Italian migrants in settler colonial countries. To argue, as some scholars have tried to do, that these migrants were not complicit in settler colonialism as they were also racialised and exploited, fails to recognise the importance that different degrees of racialisation and exploitation play within settler colonialism. It is my conviction that racial ambiguity has allowed settler colonial powers to enjoy and exploit a higher degree of political, economic and productive flexibility within evolving settler colonial and capitalist structures. In other words, the fact that Southern Italians (and other Mediterranean migrants) could be identified as white, almost white or almost black has allowed settler colonial nations to locate them at different intersections of race and class, depending on their needs in specific political, economic and productive systems.

On the other hand, the attempt by many Anglo-centric scholars of settler colonialism to equate racialised migrants to white settlers, is also extremely problematic, as it renders invisible the racism and exploitation these migrants have endured, but also their important contribution to antiracist and anticolonial struggles. Such contribution has been shaped not just by material and political conditions, but also by transcultural encounters, friendships and relationships with Indigenous people (see for instance Pallotta-Chiarolli & Ricatti, 2022).

If we are to recognise that “decolonisation is not a metaphor” (Tuck & Yang, 2012), and it is not a synonym of broader and at times unrelated struggles for social justice, our research and teaching in the field of transcultural Italian studies must recognise the specificity of settler colonialism, and the involvement of Italian migrants in it.

## References

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