

SÃO PAULO/SAN PAOLO: NOTES ON A TRANSNATIONAL APPROACH TO ITALIAN STUDIES

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Why Brazil? I have heard this question countless times. Some simply assume I must be Brazilian. Others suspect the existence of an Italian great-grandparent who moved to Brazil during what historian Mark Choate (2008:2) has called “the largest emigration from any country in recorded world history”. Neither one, however, reflects the true reasons for why I decided to base my research on the construction of a racialised Italian identity in Brazil.

My entry into the academic world of Italian Studies was mediated by my previously cultivated interest in Portuguese and Brazilian Studies. That is, I arrived at Italy through Brazil. My approach to Italian Studies, then, starts not so much from what we can broadly define as its centre, that is Italy, but from the so-called periphery of what Arturo Escobar (2013:43) calls “the modern colonial world system”.

Yet, more so than a geographical space, or an object to be known, Brazil becomes, very much in line with the framework proposed by the modernity/coloniality school, an epistemic perspective from which we can re-evaluate and re-imagine what counts as Italian and, consequently, as Italian Studies. According to Walter D. Mignolo (2013: 306) “the decolonial shift is a project of delinking”. I propose that we need to switch how one produces knowledge about Italy. One should not take for granted Italy’s status as a stable, uncontested signifier of meaning. Instead, ‘Italy’ should be understood as a dynamic, multivalent, and fluid ‘sign’ (Bassi & Riccò, 2021) whose meaning takes shape at the crossroads of transnational phenomena like migration, colonialism, and translation.

Turning to the Italian experience in Brazil allows us to see the different political and aesthetic valences of ‘Italy’ beyond the confines

of the nation-state. My current work traces how São Paulo, which has the largest concentration of people of Italian descent outside of Italy, became the locus of a 'whitening' project that conflated *italianità* with Europeaness and modernity. This 'New World Italian' identity, as I call it, stood in sharp contrast to the prevailing discourse in Europe, which cast Italians as racially ambiguous and economically backward. In my research São Paulo functions, from both a quantitative and qualitative standpoint, as a privileged transnational Italian space whence we can perceive the construction of Italian whiteness and the incorporation of Italians into a colonial project that anticipates and overlaps with Italian fascism and imperialism. And it was precisely my own beguiling encounters with the lingering contours of this New World Italian identity in contemporary São Paulo that led me to conceive of this project.

During my first trip to São Paulo in 2014, the cab driver who picked me up from the airport quickly detected my Italian accent. He immediately proceeded to tell me about his Italian family lineage and then asked about mine. After a couple of days in the city, I quickly understood that interactions such as the one with the cab driver would accompany me throughout my stay in the city. I realised that there existed in São Paulo a palpable pride in all things Italian, a quasi-obsession with declaring oneself part of some long lost Italian diasporic network. What is more, I noticed how also *paulistanos* who had no familial claim to that heritage touted it and proudly identified with it.

Demographic reasons might in part explain São Paulo's Italian fever. According to Brazilian sociologist Lucia Lippi Oliveira (2006), just shy of 1.5 million Italians arrived in Brazil between 1884 and 1939. Of all these immigrants, more than half went to the city of São Paulo. If we look at the numbers in São Paulo, Italians constituted the most populous group: 34% of the total arrivals in the city. When we consider how this data articulates with the modernisation of São Paulo — whose population nearly doubled between 1893 and 1900 — perhaps we can begin to understand that obsession with all things Italian that animated much of my everyday interactions in São Paulo.

Yet, without discounting this sociological and historical data, I came to realise that the racialised discourse that accompanied the arrival of Italians in Brazil also played an important role in defining the pride with which Brazilian people who have never set foot in Italy self-identified

as Italian. After all, Italians exist as unquestionably white in the Brazilian racial imaginary¹.

As historian George Reid Andrews (1991) noted, the massive importation of Italians that private societies and public institutions later promoted had two major functions: first, it served to flood the Brazilian free-market with cheap labour (and as a result crushed any negotiating power that recently emancipated slaves might have had) and second, it allowed for the repopulation of the country with allegedly superior Europeans, thereby whitening the Brazilian people.

While Brazil also welcomed large numbers of immigrants from Germany, these people posed a problem for the fledgling state's whitening project because of their tendency toward endogamy. Italians, on the other hand, commonly married outside of their group, a practice that won them a more favoured place in the country's racial and ethnic imaginary – turning conventional narratives about northern and southern Europeans on their heads.

Paradoxically, then, Italians' newfound honorific status as “white” and the attendant privileges thereof depended largely on their willingness to mix with and absorb the local populace. Italian bodies became the vectors through which Brazilian racial theorists and policy makers, who belonged to the landowning and slaveholding caste, carried out a white supremacist project that dramatically changed the racial make-up of Brazil. Their whiteness, as well as their Italianness, not only dispersed but became constitutive of the new archetypal Brazilian, embodied by the cab driver I had met upon my arrival in São Paulo.

And yet, while still implying racial superiority, the Italian identity that takes shape in Brazil diverged drastically from the one endorsed by the liberal, fascist, and even democratic Italian national project. It is an Italian identity that emerges from a national reality that had to contend

¹ According to historian Barbara Weinstein, the term *imigrante* [immigrant] had a racial genealogy already embedded. It was “implicitly equated with ‘white’ people of European descent.” (Weinstein, 2016:35). While the discourse of São Paulo's regional exceptionalism – the topic of Weinstein's book – excluded Afro-Brazilian and any African genealogy that might have had to do with the alleged greatness of the modernity and progress of São Paulo, it did encompass the immigrants that contributed to São Paulo's economic growth.

with the existence of multiple races and that idolised racial mixing at the expense of Black bodies.

Invoking one's Italian identity in São Paulo, just like the cab driver did, has little to do with the geo-political reality known as Italy. It instead refers to a possible valence of the sign 'Italy' one that, even in its most conservative and racist iteration, implies plurality, multiplicity, and diversity. However, in order to envision such an 'Italy', one has to be willing to embrace what Escobar (2013:43) termed "an epistemic change of perspective". A transnational approach to Italian Studies, then, offers one avenue toward decolonising the discipline insofar as it de-centers Italy altogether as the favoured locus of political enunciation and destabilises notions of 'Italian' ethnic, racial, and national identity.

References

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