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Looking Sideways to Italy in Contemporary World Literature

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This article sketches a history of how the concept of Italy has travelled worldwide to become a mobile cultural symbol in order to show how, as a signifier, "Italy" has also become increasingly detached from any national parameters of territory. It employs a lateral method of "looking sideways" at literary representations of Italy from "outside" the national canon to show how they can put pressure on what (and where) Italian culture now resides. Analyzing three contemporary works of world literature partially set in Italy (Daša Drndić's *Trieste*, Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, and Pajtim Statovci's *Crossing*), it suggests that we might consider broadening out the canon of transnational Italian literature to include works neither written by Italians nor written in Italian, but that offer sideways insight into Italian history and culture from elsewhere.

KEYWORDS sideways, transnational, world literature, Daša Drndić, Rachel Kushner, Pajtim Statovci

Our much-loved local record store was an early casualty of the first Covid-19 lockdown of 2020 in Scotland. So when it reopened under a new name and in a different location later that summer, we were thrilled and went to visit as soon as we could. As I sat with my toddler daughter clambering over my lap and pulling vinyl records out from every rack while my partner browsed, one album cover caught my eye. Entitled *Sideways to New Italy* (Figure 1) by the band Rolling Blackouts Coastal Fever, it had a faded 1970s aesthetic, with an image of white pillars that could have been part of a veranda, behind peach-coloured roses on a bright blue background. I took a photo of the cover with my phone and thought little more of it that day. But the title and the image kept returning to my mind. When I began to research the album, I was struck by the references in the album's description to a

> town in regional Australia that serves as a living relic to how immigrants brought a *sense of home to an alien place*, to the familiar Mediterranean statues that dot the frontlawns of the Melbourne suburbs where the band members live [...] (T)he inspiration for the record came from the attempts people make at *crafting utopia in their backyard*.

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FIGURE 1.
Rolling Blackouts C.F. "Sideways to New Italy."

I then read interviews with members of Rolling Blackouts Coastal Fever, learning that the drummer, Marcel Tussie, is from near the titular village of New Italy, in northern New South Wales, and two other members of the band have Italian heritage which they see echoed in the built environment of their home district of Brunswick.

This may seem something of a digression, and yet I want to dwell on the story of New Italy for a little longer. As the first Italian settlement in Australia, New Italy was developed by a group of Venetian immigrants in the early 1880s, on the densely forested land of the Bundjalung people. Those immigrants had originally thought that they had left northern Italy to found a new agricultural colony in New Ireland (now part of Papua New Guinea), but the scheme they had agreed to turned out to have been a scam. Arranged by the Marquis de Rays, it promised each prospective traveler twenty hectares of land with a four-roomed house – and transportation – for the price of 1,800 gold francs. If these new "settlers" did not have this sum of money, they would be forced "to lend" their services as indentured agricultural labourers for the duration of five years in exchange for their passage and land. Despite some resistance from the new Italian government, nearly 300 men, women, and children left the Veneto for Barcelona, where they set sail on the steamer *India* on 9th July 1880. Due to poor conditions on the ship, nearly fifty of them did not survive the four-month journey trip to New Ireland; those who did found nothing remotely resembling the promised colony upon their arrival. Though the projected destination was New South Wales, harsh weather conditions and a lack of provisions on board

would force the ship to dock in New Caledonia. The Italians refused to stay on what was essentially a French penal colony, and finally were transported to Sydney in April 1881 (see Clifford 1889).

It was then at the discretion of the local New South Wales government to decide how to handle this group of 197 Italian immigrants. Although the colonial secretary urged the migrants to disband and integrate into existing communities across the state, the Italians preferred to remain all together and ultimately prospered off of a single forty-acre piece of land – which had hitherto been considered too poor to cultivate – originally purchased by one of their number (see Dewhirst 2016). They grew grapes, citrus, fruits and vegetables, mulberries for silk, tobacco, and sugar cane; the colony briefly thrived. However, after the First World War its population began to dwindle and by the 1950s, the settlement fell into disrepair. Though today nothing is left of New Italy except for a Museum, interest in the site remains high – a memorial was raised in 1961, with a Museum and Park opened to the public in the 1990s as a monument to the founding families of the town. The Museum building was the old Italian pavilion of the 1988 World Expo in Brisbane, a monumental celebration of the Australian Bicentenary, thus partaking in a kind of double colonial feedback loop. In its memorialisation, New Italy participates in the historic discourse around the concept of nation-making abroad, not least through its alignment with the countless Little Italy districts spread worldwide and the historic notion of a community of Italians living globally "beyond imperial control and territorial jurisdiction, held together by ties of culture, communication, ethnicity and nationality" (Choate 2008, 2; see also Gabaccia 2006).

What fascinates me most about this story is that it offers a powerful example of how the idea of Italy has travelled worldwide to become a mobile cultural symbol, and that it shows how "Italy," as a signifier, has become effectively detached from its original national parameters of territory. I want to propose that "looking sideways" at a place from elsewhere can at once make it new, and bring to it an additional sense of being at home. This lateral action shows how the concept of Italy can be accessed and reproduced in different ways and by different people worldwide, and how these interventions from a global sphere can put pressure on standard definitions of what (and where) Italian culture lies.[1] The initial making and continuous re-fashioning of New Italy as a memorial construct is a participatory project that involves actors from diverse vectors in a vast transnational network, and reflects the input of multiple others across different times and spaces. In this article, I will analyse three novels of world literature set partially in Italy to ask Galt's and Schoonover's question: "what do (they) do with Italy, and what does Italy allow (them) to say that another setting would not?" (2019, 65).

A considerable amount of work has already been done in the fields of transnational and postcolonial Italian studies which have expanded the canon of "Italian" culture in crucially important ways. By engaging with the "sideways" lens proposed by the Rolling Blackouts' album title, I will reflect further on

where we draw the confines of transnational Italian studies, and gesture toward new locations in which we can explore reading literature and nationality in a horizontal fashion. The novels I examine offer sideways glimpses into "anarchic" moments when the homogeneity of Italian national identity and culture have been put under extreme pressure (the world wars of the twentieth century, the anti-capitalist civil unrest of the late 1960s/1970s, and the migratory influx in the 1990s/2000s), and in so doing, offer methodological insight into how to disrupt the idea of *national* literature in new and generative ways. The sideways movement of my own analysis is important: I will work with Kathryn Bond Stockton's notion of "horizontalizing" in order to examine how elements of Italian cultural reality have been absorbed and reflected back from elsewhere, but also to explore how the synchronous play between narrative fiction and national history is represented within texts (2009, 9). Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih employ a similar horizontal lens in their rejection of vertical framing of minority against majority cultures, which provokes a realisation that sometimes "we forget to look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent" (2005, 1), thus perhaps missing "transversal movements of culture" (2005, 8). A sideways optic avoids the necessity of looking "upward" (toward macro-patterns formed by global media and multinational corporations), or "down" (toward the rooted practices of the local and quotidian), and instead looks at others in trans- (or post-) national contact zones and engages with them in managing meaning across distances, although perhaps with different interests at stake, and operating under other constraints (Hannerz 1998,109).

My analysis will focus on Daša Drndić's *Trieste* (*Sonnenschien*, 2007), translated from the Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać in 2012; Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2014); and Pajtim Statovci's *Crossing* (*Tiranen sydän*, 2016), translated from the Finnish by David Hackston in 2019.[2] As we will see, these three novels call any stable portrayal of (Italian) identity into question, thematizing their own status as both inside and outside any national canon of cultural identification. Each novel deals with this question not just in terms of content, but also by materially demonstrating an instability of national association precisely through the mode of their narrative construction, as I will proceed to show.

The Flamethrowers begins with the story of Pietro Valera, a fictionalized Italian industrialist patriarch, who is born and raised in Alexandria, develops his rubber business in Brazil, and runs commerce out of Switzerland. His son, Sandro, the romantic partner of the first-person protagonist, lives in New York and pretends to be Romanian, mispronouncing the names of dishes in Italian restaurants on purpose. Rather than put on a false Italian accent, he assimilates an exaggerated American accent in his mispronunciation, an accent "that sounded like John Wayne" (Kushner 2014, 101). Sandro's cultural stereotyping of America feeds into his covert performance of as an Italian living abroad, in which "his Italianness seemed merely a way to be a unique New Yorker, as if he

were more that, a New York artist with a faint accent, than he was Italian" (Kushner 2014, 109).

The identity of the protagonist, Reno, on the other hand, is situated by the (nick)name given to her by Sandro within the specific, rooted location of her birth: the Nevada city nicknamed "the biggest little city in the world," thus providing a stark contrast to the uprooted, mobile Valera family. In locating her in a fixed spot, Sandro and his friend Ronnie require her to use her origin "in any interesting manner," to "form a concept that had rigour" (Kushner 2014, 110). It is revealing that her response to this sense of American "emplacedness" seems to allow her to assimilate more seamlessly with the Italian people she meets – the bikers she encounters as a student in Florence, the Valera motorcycle team in Nevada, and the revolutionary groups she joins in Rome – than the native Italian Sandro.

At the same time, her critical distance enables her to connect her own emotional experiences with those of "others" (i.e. Italians): in the demonstrations in Rome, she fuses her sadness over her break-up with Sandro with the angry chants of the women protestors: "I took their rage and negotiated myself into its fabric" (Kushner 2014, 279). Similarly, in Florence she meets Italians who "weren't all that different from the people I'd grown up with in Reno" (Kushner 2014, 115); she relates her cousins in Nevada to the Valera groundskeeper who will take her to Rome (Kushner 2014, 263), while the smell of gasoline she inhales from the explosions of Molotov cocktails and Moka bombs in Piazza del Popolo recalls her memory of "Reno kids" (Kushner 2014, 283). Yet she herself refutes any association between the past and present *experiences* with gasoline in the two places – a refusal tinged with regret for her cousins who are home in Nevada. As De Loughry writes: "Reno's sadness is for the lack of political ignition in Scott and Andy's petro-urban upbringing. Cut off from the sinews linking Nevada and Rome, they are unable to imagine the alternate uses and abuses of gasoline beyond summer chores" (2020, 184).

However, in a linking paragraph, she herself recasts these connections through reflecting on her own transient artistic practice: the film recording she made of balloons at the start of the protest march, which was subsequently lost in running battles with police, transports her back to Reno as she replays the possibility for making associations across time and space.

> The sight of them, floating, took me to a park in Reno when I was small. [...] Someone had given us each a balloon. We counted down and then let go of our balloons. [...] I remembered watching them fade, smaller and smaller, lone voyagers on floating journeys, the sky their ocean, with the ocean's depth and immensity. (Kushner 2014, 284)

It is Reno who always gravitates back to living in New York's Little Italy, who participates in indirect meaning-making through her own anarchic connections ("riding the vast unknown sea with those untethered balloons", Kushner 2014, 284), and who thus seems to embody – more than any other character in the

novel – what we might call a de-nationalised "Spirit of Italy."[3] In her connective creative practice, Reno also mirrors the author's own philosophy of writing in *The Flamethrowers*, "merging different fields I sensed were connected, but not in overt ways [...] My whole trajectory as a novelist is maybe about finding the form and through line of a constructed world that can hold in it what I really think about ... everything". (Kunzru 2013) This is a sideways connectivity that is tentative, non-dogmatic, and aesthetic in focus. It allows Kushner to combine a fascination with the ideologically opposite Italian movements of Futurism and *Autonomia* within *The Flamethrowers* as two different optics on the multifaceted, interlinked questions of speed and resistance, culture and counter-culture. At the same time, it allows for the plot of *The Flamethrowers* to develop in tandem with movements greater than the (Italian) nation: labour struggles against capitalist industrialisation, fascism, protest movements, and the international art world scene, while retaining an intricate knowledge of particular elements of twentieth-century Italian history. These are questions of scale as well as of time.

At first glance, Kushner seems to embrace the role of novelist as cultural mediator, bringing her knowledge of Italian culture and history to an international readership through the medium of English. However, what happens when her work is translated back into Italian? Most reviews of *I lanciafiamme* take the Italian setting of the novel as a local positive, assuming it will guarantee interest among an Italian readership. Only one reviewer, the acclaimed Sicilian novelist Nadia Terranova, picks up on a temporal misstep in the novel: Kushner places the wrong prime minister (Aldo Moro instead of Antonio Segni) at the inauguration of the *autostrada del sole*, confusing the date of the start of works in 1956 with its end in 1964 (Terranova 2014). Do the novel's global ambitions mean that, as Terranova suggests, it lacks "authenticity"? Or is the point precisely this, to enact a shift away from any fetishization of local or national concerns in order to place the fixity of those categories into permanent doubt?

Conventional misinterpretations of Italian culture are held up for interrogation at several points in the novel, and most extensively in a section voiced by Reno's friend Giddle in New York on the eve of Reno's departure for Como.

> She said I should consider colouring my sandy-blond hair red, that Italian women hennaed their hair. Nothing else was fashionable there but dyed red hair. Dyed hair and palazzo pants, she said. We have to get you some palazzo pants. [...] At some point she mentioned she'd never actually been to Italy. "But I can imagine it," she said. "A place where old women scrub stone steps with a stiff brush and a bucket of soapy water. Where someone is always scrubbing stone steps, a widow in mourning clothes. No one does that in America. Scrubs steps. Wears mourning clothes. (Kushner 2014, 210)

Reno faces parallel misconceptions in Italy about the US: Luigi enjoys telling her about the "real West," despite having never been and only knowing it through photography and film (Kushner 2014, 221). Revealingly, Giddle's clichéd vision of Italy is reflected in Sandro's own reflections on his childhood there, describing

"longings and boredom he knew to be Italian and Catholic […] Women sweeping the sacristy steps with sorghum brooms" (Kushner 2014, 364).There is an attention here to processes of cultural translation (and mistranslation) between the characters which is mirrored in the translation between the English and Italian versions: palazzo pants in the original text become "pantaloni a zampa d'elefante" in Valenti's translation. It certainly is not crucial in terms of meaning-making, but this is a different type of trouser: are we seeing the translator "correct" Giddle's cultural mistake, adjusting it toward a more truthful statement for 1970s Italy? Other adjustments in the translation seem to perform different operations: Reno's spaghetti Bolognese (Kushner 2014, 271) becomes spaghetti al ragù in possibly the only comprehensible way it could be phrased in Italian (Kushner 2016a, 394), and the translation of "my cousins Andy and Scott" (Kushner 2014, 263) as "mio cugino Andy Scott" (Kushner 2016a, 382) seems to be nothing more than a simple error. Less clear is why Valenti translates Sandro's "light accent, barely Italian" (Kushner 2014, 6) as a "vago accento, *evidentemente* italiano" (Kushner 2016a, 15, my emphasis). Lateral adjustments to meaning that occur through various processes of translation thus evidence the potential for mistranslation in the cultural (and linguistic) spheres.

Indeed, the novel's concern with meaning-making processes is reflected in multiple descriptions of microcosms of artificial worlds that remain malleable to their makers. In *Flamethrowers*, Sandro's father gifts him a set of paper dolls modelled after his own World War I assault unit, the Arditi (Kushner 2014, 358), which Sandro enjoys manipulating and controlling within the safe space of his own play. The garden at Sandro's mother's house on Lake Como is littered with classical statues, ruins, and urns in a comical attempt at inserting the family into a faux, Roman-inspired cultural heritage lineage (Kushner 2014, 220). Sandro himself comments on the irony of Neorealist cinema, which went outside to film "reality," while the bombed ruins of Cinecittà sheltered displaced children living in the film studios, "using huge props from costume epics about ancient Rome as makeshift furniture" (Kushner 2014, 356). In this constructed universe, national and family heritage can be dismantled and re-appropriated to make whatever meaning the subject desires. Kushner's aim here perhaps is to suggest that *anything* can be made into literature by anyone – or, in fact, that anything can already *be* literature.

In her foreword to a new translated edition of Nanni Balestrini's *Vogliamo tutto* (*We Want Everything*), Kushner quotes Umberto Eco in saying that Balestrini's story existed *as literature* before its existence as a book because it partakes in a process of refraction, rather than introspection. This refraction indicates a stretching outward that enhances the desire to generate additional meaning through literature rather than utilizing it as a simple mode of extracting meaning. Kushner, however, cannot help but insert her own literary meaning into the Introduction here, stating: "(a)nd yet I'd like to think that Balestrini skiing down into Chamonix, his scarf flapping, whether told or not, is literature, too." (2016b, xix) Of course, this literary picture of him has been told (now) –

through the character of Gianni in *The Flamethrowers*. And so while explicit intertexts in the novel include the 1975 film *Anna*, directed by Alberto Grifi and Massimo Sarchielli (Kushner 2014, 273), and contemporary works by Nanni Balestrini (indeed Balestrini is used as inspiration for the character of Gianni in his escape to France via the skiing slopes of Chamonix), Kushner literally inserts the character of Reno back into these stories in *The Flamethrowers*, suturing national frames of reference together to create a new context for meaning. It seems that instead of trying to extract meaning from a situation in order to comment on it, Kushner intends to insert meaning *into* it through modes of cultural and historical collage. This process, aimed at widening, rather than narrowing, the reader's understanding of a phenomenon is similar to the extended narrative treatment of the brutality protestors in Genova suffered at the hands of police during the 2001 G8 summit in Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015). McCarthy's novel is concerned with mapping global networks of signification and connectivity flows through writing, but it also proposes the literary text itself as only one point in an "unpredictable network of unfolding interpretations around a text", and literature itself as an "improper space", a "no-man's-land" (McCarthy, Corby and Callus, 2015). A cultural no-man's-land that is outside national confines, and which – we might wonder – could thus be claimed by anyone?

Trieste functions as a documentary lament for the horrors of the Nazi occupation of the North-Eastern corner of Italy and the border regions of Croatia and Slovenia, the Adriatisches Küstenland – a sort of territorial no-man's land of its own. It is told through the microhistory of one woman's fight to reconnect with her son, who was stolen from her in Gorizia and reassigned to an Austrian family through the Nazi Lebensborn programme. Drndić's writing about the area surrounding Gorizia utilizes multiple languages to describe the same thing, serving as a testament to shifting reality of border zones and the malleability of national identities, shaped and rebuilt by the comings and goings of empires and wars. Gorizia is Italian, but it is also Gorica, Görz and Gurize, depending on who you ask. The protagonist, Haya Tedeschi, "doesn't know what Gorizia is now though she has been here nearly sixty years." (Drndić 2012, 8) Hers is an unremarkable family history for the place in question: Haya can trace three generations back to the same place of origin, and she does not consider her origins to be "mixed" in terms of race and nationality. Yet, though the physical location of Gorizia is stable, the national *place* where her grandparents and parents belonged shifts and changes – from the Habsburg Monarchy when Gorizia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to Italy, to Nazi Germany, and back to occupying the border faultline between Italy and Slovenia as it does today.

Her family speak German, Italian, and Slovenian, and when the First World War erupts, her grandparents take their children and flee south, away from the fighting. They are headed for Italy: "in the direction of Latisana, Udine, Padua, someone says. Bruno has no idea where. He is not familiar with Italy." (Drndić 2012, 25). Similarly, during the Second World War when Jewish residents face

violence and deportation in Northern Italy, the family relocate further south to Naples and then to (Italian occupied) Albania, where – through the paradox of cultural occupation – they re-discover Italy.

> Vlorë has many names which are differently spelt and pronounced, more names than Gorizia [...] Ada's vegetable pastries, lambs from Karaburun, cold yoghurt before leaving for school, where, as in Naples, there hang portraits of Vittorio Emanuele and Mussolini, harapash, toasts with Falanghina. Vlorë, like a pocket-sized Naples. An Italian school, Italian neighbours, Italian chocolate. (Drndić 2012, 57)

After their circuitous trip back to Italy through Montenegro, Hungary, and Austria, Haya's family find themselves among the refugees in Milan in 1944. Her sister, Nora, writes that she cannot understand this "because the people around them are Italians, although there are plenty of Germans too – so how can they be refugees? [...] Nora no longer knows who is 'them' and who is 'us', she writes, because in Albania at first they weren't refugees, then overnight they are" (Drndić 2012, 121).

This malleability of national status is later reflected in the devastating rearrangement of national identities through the Lebensborn programme – a "Germanization" (Drndić 2012, 297) of stolen Polish, Yugoslav, and Italian children, which nonetheless mirrors the previous homogenizing difference of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where the same food products were distributed across the many Habsburg lands but given slightly different names in each:

> (I)n Hungary the Julius Meinl chain of shops is called Meinl Gyula, while Jules Verne becomes Verne Gyula; Knödel become knedliky in Czech; the Wiener Schnitzel is called bečka in Croatian and in Italian, cotoletta Milanese. Distant centres [...] become intimate and dear in the provinces as soon as they are ever so slightly Italianized, Croaticized, Magyarized, Bohemianized, die grosse glückliche Familie, oh, happy days. (Drndić 2012, 37)

Names matter: as Fascism tightens its grip on Italy, imported good disappear, and as the MINCULPOP spawns "new dictionaries, orthographies" (Drndić 2012, 47), foreign phrases and words are banned. As Drndić stated in an interview:

> I am obsessed with names. In the last two or three books of mine I have lists of names because I think that is the only identity that is important and that is left to us. Which history, which country, which hometown, which language, I don't think those are important identities. (Apostu 2017)

National identity, to Drndić, is revealed to be a dangerous thing, a "heavy burden [...] (a) wretched and perilous load [...] clusters of elusive, invisible and oh so infectious containers of putrescence" (Drndić 2012, 47-48), leading to a foreclosing of perspective and a tightening of horizons. The only thing that counts is names: as the book repeats over and over, "behind every name is a story."

This is a sentiment echoed by Nobel prize-winning Polish author Olga Tokarczuk, who has stated that her own grandmother similarly changed citizenship three times over the course of her life while always living in the same place (Franklin 2019). This fundamental instability of place is temporally inflected and affects other means we have of articulating identity: history, culture, and language. Crucially, in Drndić's work, tropes of hybridity and instability are transposed to the narrative sphere not only in the mixing of fact and fiction into the genre of the "documentary novel," but also in the endless shuffling and rearranging that Haya performs with her "letters, photographs, postcards, newspaper clippings, magazines" (Drndić 2012, 2).

> She writes out notes, arranges them, rearranges them, as if shuffling a pack of cards. I could play solitaire with these notes, she says, which, in a sense, she does. [...] (O)ver the year she supplements her collection, slips into it little oddities, terse news items which after two, three, four decades she digs out and peruses, as if grabbing at dry dandelion fluff, as if catching eiderdown in a warm wind. (Drndić 2012, 237)

Haya's archived evidence, which she has accumulated in a large red basket, allows her to try to piece together how her own history fits within the wider narrative of world History, and in so doing, to try to help her track down her missing son. In my view, Haya's perpetual processes of accumulation, annotation and categorization - her sorting and re-sorting of such documents - speaks to a material sense of intervening in the national order of the canon to call into question its scope and its parameters.

Drndić sews together quotes from Ungaretti's poetic experience of the Isonzo river (which appear in the original Italian in the English translation of *Trieste*) with a rollcall of referenced writers from Trieste and Gorizia (Scipio Slataper, Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba, to name but a few), where both the individual scraps and their composite stitching cohesively tell a larger story arranged by the vast patchwork of Triestine cultural history. These writers do not appear as passing references, nor as bystander characters, but rather their texts are woven into Drndic's own writing. Haya's father, Florian Tedeschi himself repeats Slataper's famous opening "vorrei dirvi" (in Italian, again) to evoke his frustration at his racially motivated downturn from businessman to waiter; her mother Ada's conversations with Saba paraphrase his best-known poems: "*Umberto says, Trieste is a pungent and melancholy city, the strangest city, Umberto says, a city of boyish adolescence and rude charm, so he says*" (Drndić 2012, 136). I am fascinated by what these references would mean to a non-Italian reader. What would someone without access to Italian (language or culture) make of Haya being described as "in gamba" (Drndić 2012, 116)? Would they catch the reference to the *Scorciatoie* (Saba's 1963 collection of short prose writings) in the character Saba's warning about taking shortcuts (Drndić 2012, 199)? Would the long interventional focus on *Un altro mare*, Claudio Magris's text that Haya's student Roberto Piazza sends to her as a passive accusation against her silence about

Trieste's past (and the Risiera di San Sabba camp in particular) in school, seem too far removed from their sphere of reference? Would *Trieste* still resonate within an intertextual world that Italian readers would identify as made up of books such as Elsa Morante's *La storia*, Renzo Rosso's *Viaggio nel cuore della Germania*, and Claudio Magris's *Non luogo a procedere*? Or is each reader free to locate it within their own "no-man's-land" of reference? I raise these questions because I am interested in what texts, such as *Trieste* and *The Flamethrowers*, suggest or demand that we must know as readers, and what is implied or assumed for different readerships of the same text. What can we learn about cultural assumptions by thinking through this issue, assumptions that have to do with access to (and therefore also the ability to access modes of production of) national cultural canons?

Pajtim Statovci's 2016 novel *Crossing*, translated from Finnish into English in 2019, and into Italian in 2020, repeats this explicitly self-conscious deconstruction of a national literary paradigm on a thematic level. It is an exercise in responding to a state of non-belonging and shame and to modes of exclusion generated by national narratives, which, traditionally speaking, work to "produce national identities by way of a social symbolic order" (Pease 1992, 3). The first-person protagonist is a twenty-two-year-old Albanian migrant who assumes different identities as s/he crosses borders, thus confounding any fixity of narrative – national or otherwise. Subjectivity here is performed in response to the designs of the imagination where the protagonist insists on the ability to invent and reinvent their name, nationality, and personal history as they pleases. This malleability and insistence that any form of fixed construction is nothing but a game also extends to gender identity throughout the novel - the migratory "crossings" of the novel's title more broadly extend across national and gender boundaries. "Nobody has to remain the person they were born; we can put ourselves together like a jigsaw." (Statovci 2019, 6) At various points the protagonist self-describes as Italian, Turkish, French, German or Greek, but never Albanian (Statovci 2019, 4). This may reflect Statovci's own response to his reception as a writer: he is variously classed as a Finnish writer, a Finnish-Kosovan writer, an Albanian writer, a Balkan writer, or a post-Soviet writer, depending on the location of the reviewer writing and their stakes in the matter. His weariness with national classifications of his own work mirrors the weariness with national confines within the novel and the restrictions they impose on an individual's life pathways and aspirations.

The novel opens in Rome, in 1998. After surviving a tumultuous decade in Albania's history – from the fall of the post-Hoxha regime in 1991 and to the collapse of multiple fraudulent pyramid schemes and widespread social and political unrest in 1997 - the protagonist, Bujar, successfully makes the short but dangerous sea-crossing from Albania to Italy with his best friend, Agim, yet this is where his "success" ends. As a migrant, he is invisible to the local community, and the continual shame of his migrant status makes him desperate to erase any trace of his own presence in Italy, to the point where he scrubs "stains of urine

and excrement from around the toilet bowl in cafes and restaurants so that nobody using the toilet after me might think I'd left such a mess" (Statovci 2019, 8). He experiences Italy as a void, and feels a total alienation from the city and its inhabitants: the cobble stones "plague his feet" and appear to be trying to bite him; the whole city to him "seems like one enormous barrack" (Statovci 2019, 9; 11). Within this void, however, he begins a creative process of re-imagining the sights of Rome: the Pantheon "looks like the hunched figure of an old Albanian man"; Castel Sant'Angelo like a mouldy orange (Statovci 2019, 9; 12). His own self-erasure within the Roman landscape here leads to the act of its (literary) reclamation as his own, mirroring again the generative possibilities of outward refraction rather than introspection.

Yet, building the narrative of the self is a fraught business within the novel. Following the protagonist's failed suicide attempt in Rome, the narrative moves to Berlin, and Bujar and Agim's narratives begin to intertwine in a way that makes it difficult for the reader to grasp who tells whose story when. When the narrator enrolls in a creative writing class, it is a chance for him to experiment with telling new stories about his own history, and he writes an autobiographical tale about himself as a Bosnian woman called Ariana. When a sexual encounter reveals this story to be a construction, he is assaulted but decides not to go to the police: "I'd have to justify myself, explain myself, spell out the fact that I'm under no obligation to reveal my gender to anybody, that what people think they know about me isn't my responsibility but their own construction, their own assumption." (Statovci 2019, 107).

In Finland, he meets a transgender woman called Tanja, a student of theology at the University of Helsinki. Almost immediately he starts experimenting with her story – he finds himself wandering into a lecture hall at the University, "and for the next hour and a half I just sit and write in my notebook whenever the other students do, scattered sentences in different languages, names I have used and places I have visited, and I imagine I too am a student of theology and prepare myself to give my new name if someone asks for it. *Tanja*." (Statovci 2019, 202). Assuming Tanja's identity helps him achieve a level of success in a reality contest, and allows Statovci to poke fun at such "genuine" soul-searching narratives present within our own age of social media.

Statovci's deconstruction of our societal need to hear emotionally coherent stories in order to feel empathy with others plays out through the plotline that will allow Bujar to gain asylum seeker status. In crafting this narrative thread, Statovci builds connections with other writers who have exposed the shortcomings of legal systems that need certain life narratives in order to provide refuge, such as the works of Dinaw Mengestu and Valeria Luiselli. Mengestu's protagonist in *How to Read the Air*, Jonas, has what Carolyn Kellogg has called an "inclination to revision" (2010). Working in a refugee centre in Manhattan, Jonas reinforces and embellishes immigrants' stories in order to provide the narratives that the system "needs" to hear. Similarly, in *Tell Me How It Ends*, it is Luiselli's task to take the words of the Central American children she meets in a

volunteer centre, words that are "always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order" (2017, 7), and to interpret and translate them into an acceptable plotline. What Statovci does is transpose this onto our understanding of narrative itself, and thereby place into question any fixity around our understandings of self-representation through traditionally understood markers of identity. "Statovci controls and edits the version – or versions – of his protagonist's story, and so emphasises the processes of selection, omission, and accentuation involved in all narratives of identity." (Råback 2020) In so doing, Statovci makes literature into a testing ground for our own preconceptions, not least about the national confines of literature itself.

Does Italy work particularly well as a backdrop to this kind of transnational or even postnational literary framing? Put differently, is this unstable construction of the nation, and of national culture and belonging, particularly intense in the discourse around Italy? It certainly has a long history: Mark Choate shows in *Emigrant Nation* how the departure of around thirteen million Italians between the years of 1880 and 1915 created a "capillary network tying Italy in an intimate way to other societies across the world" (2008, 1). Italy, already a "nebulous construction" at the point of its formation, was further muddled by mass emigration, colonial expansion and the persistent growth of Italian-speaking territories lying outside of the peninsula (Choate 2008, 57). Choate's conclusion is that the location of "Italy," having been thus transformed into a new "global nation" by the combined processes of emigration and colonial expansion, could, in fact, be *anywhere* (2008, 219; p. 58). Nonetheless, the discourse around global Italy during the time period examined by Choate is still tied to the importance of language, and the encouragement and development of a shared cultural identity through family, religious and culinary ties, wherever Italians were in the world.

Focusing on Italian American communities in particular, Pasquale Verdicchio has also explored how the concept of Italian culture abroad could be expanded further beyond the confines of the Italian language and the focus on production by "great" Italian writers (1997, 93). He rejects defining labels such as *italianità* or *italofonia* – terming them "null and void", the "empty vocabulary of nationalist ideals" (1997, 95). More recently, Derek Duncan has shifted attention to Italy's contemporary transnational, post-migration society, arguing that patterns of global migration "have made the conventional fusion of national territory and language untenable" (2019, 3). Building on previous work by Donna Gabaccia (2000), Duncan speaks of a "diffused Italian vernacular culture whose articulations are felt through the global diaspora" (2019, 11). Placing emphasis on communities of Italian cultural practice and production, Duncan traces the "haptic ripples enabled by unpredictable modes of cultural contact," privileging a "kinetic connectivity that prized Italian culture from the peninsula and a securely identifiable claim to ownership" (2019, 18). Italian culture, as it spread through the world, can now, in Duncan's formulation, be accessed, modified, and made "homely" by anyone.

In temporal terms, a horizontal viewpoint also takes into account the notion of delay that has characterised so many accounts of Italian national history, and offers suggestions for how to cherish processes of "gradual growth" and "slow unfolding" instead of only privileging signs of relentless vertical progress forward. In comparison to other European nations, Italy is often described as having been "late" to unify, slowed down culturally and economically by a "backward" South, and delayed in joining the "scramble for Africa." Shelleen Greene gives an account of how these critical assumptions intersect with the feeling that Italy's greatness was already "in the past," to be located in the times of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance (2012, 3-4). In *Trieste*, time stands still as Haya waits for news of her son, reflected in the stopped station clock after it was shot by Nazi soldiers. Space itself has turned into time: "Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit" (Drndić 2012, 288). In the final pages of *The Flamethrowers*, Sandro also waits – this time for his connection back to Italy after the murder of his brother Roberto by the Red Brigades. He sits in the aptly named Trans World Terminal and ruminates on the timing of the Italian nation as being out of synch: "it was late, it was early, it was before and after its own time. Italy was always missing its rendezvous with itself" (Kushner 2014, 362). Yet, scholars of Mediterranean studies have re-characterized Italy's slowness as a societal value, "una forma di vita che custodisce delle esperienze che, con la velocizzazione crescente della vita, scompaiono" (Cassano and Fogu 2010, 2). What has sometimes been termed an Italian "untimely"[4] can therefore be seen as making space for: "what spreads sideways – or sideways and backwards – more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time" (Stockton 2009, 4).

Stockton's poetics of sideways thus offers multiple inroads to challenge the scope of what we have, to date, considered to belong as part of a system of Italian literature or culture. In current configurations of our field, transnational literary production usually refers to cultural artefacts produced by emigrant or second generation Italians abroad, by migrant or second generation Italians in Italy, or work produced by Italians in Italy that deals with themes or content that falls under a transnational label. We can put additional pressure on the contours of this canon if we consider including books that have neither been written by Italians, nor are written in Italian, but that shed sideways insight into Italian history and culture from elsewhere: books such as *The Flamethrowers*, *Trieste*, and *Crossing*. These are books which are in dialogue with Italian literature and culture, are translated into Italian, read, and reviewed in Italy, but which would not be considered usual objects of study for scholars of Italian. By placing my readings of these texts which lie outside the Italian canon "by its side," I aim to perform a horizontalizing shift in optics (Stockton 2009, 9). This is a sideways accretion, in which reading opens up to consider a wider "textual spread before us," which in turn allows us "tremendous 'latitude' for how we arrange our fictions in our heads, going back and forth between them and among them, whether or not anyone 'lets' us, in any official sense" (Stockton 2009, 51–52).

In my analysis, this process of transversal meaning-making is to be located both within the space of world literature, occupied by such novels as *The*

Flamethrowers, *Trieste*, and *Crossing*, and – crucially – in the space that expands when we read them together. I am building here on ideas from David Damrosch (2018) and Wai Chee Dimock (2001) that shift critical focus to the practices of reading as a way to collapse space and time into the contemporary experience of the text. As Dimock says: "Stretching across hundreds of years and thousands of miles (the now) is temporally and spatially wayward" (2001, 175). It is important to hold both time and space in suspension in our reading practice: extending Stockton's notion of temporal horizontalizing to toward a spatial imaginary.

> (W)e need to stop assuming a one-to-one correspondence between the geographic origins of a text and its evolving radius of literary action. We need to stop thinking of national literatures as the linguistic equivalents of territorial maps. The nation-state is not all, when it comes to the extended life of literary objects, the inscriptional power of the state is not complete. (Dimock 2001, 175)

I have sought to argue here that the reception and reproduction of Italianicity worldwide demands critical attention in relation to multiple modes of cultural production and consumption across the globe. The work that we are engaged in as scholars of transnational Italian studies should lead us toward considering a much wider field of primary material: material that gestures toward a sense of horizontal kinship with a world or even planetary corpus. The latitude offered by a sideways lens of analysis provides an energetic forcefield for such work to be challenged by authors and readers alike. Kushner has spoken of how she feels that "truth cracks open in the places where things do not cohere" (Arnold 2013). Yet, in the end, as Bruno Baar, Haya's grandfather, says in *Trieste*: "A story is a story. It can be anyone's" (Drndić 2012, 23).

Notes

1 In a similar fashion, Galt and Schoonover use the term "Italianicity" to signal "discursive constructions of Italy, circulating both within and outside the nation" (2019, 64 note 1).

2 In drafting this article, I also read these works "sideways" in their Italian translations (Drndić 2016; Kushner 2016; Statovci 2020). All three Italian translations are from the original languages.

3 Here I am making reference to the name of the specially designed Valera motorbike that Reno is given to ride in speed trials in Nevada in *The Flamethrowers*.

4 See Galt and Schoonover 2019 and Bond 2018, 15. In this second reference, the notion of 'untimely' is borrowed from Elizabeth Grosz (2004).

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