

‘Transnational Italian Cultures’: Editing as method

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The issue editors invited contributors to this section on methodologies to reflect critically on the benefits and drawbacks of using a transnational approach to Italian cultures, and to assess whether the multiple and diverse applications of this approach have changed the field of Italian Studies more broadly. In order to offer some response to these questions, and to propose ways forward for work in this field during the decade to come, I want to focus here on my role as co-editor of the book series ‘Transnational Italian Cultures.’ ‘Transnational Italian Cultures’ was a joint initiative that my colleague Derek Duncan and I first proposed to Liverpool University Press in the summer of 2014. Looking back at the initial proposal that we sent to the press, I am struck by two things. The first is how we defined the scope of our inquiry as operating within “the burgeoning field of postcolonial, global and transnational Italian studies.” The second is our stated aim to “*bring together* the outstanding work which is now being done in this area, and *by bringing it together*, set a new agenda for academic research on what constitutes Italian culture today” (emphasis mine). I am interested in the first statement because of how broadly we initially defined our “field” of inquiry, as spanning the intersecting spheres of postcolonial, global, and transnational studies, and I will return periodically to the still-shifting nature of how we set the boundaries of Transnational Italian Studies throughout this short piece. The second statement, however, is what I want to focus on: the importance of the act of “bringing together” the individual works in question in terms of providing a tailored space for their publication, but also in terms of what assembling a group of particular works means for the development of the wider field itself.

In the paragraphs to come, I will thus seek to explore and offer some answers to the following questions through an analysis of the volumes we have published in the series to date. Why is it important to carve out a specific space of assemblage, such as an edited series, in order for a field of study to stretch, enfold, and develop? What can we learn by looking at the volumes in this particular series as constituent components of a community space? Can the sort of editorial work that Derek and I have carried out for the series be

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conceived of as methodological in and of itself? What do we, as editors and academics, exclude both knowingly and unknowingly by designating such a space that operates under our own criteria? In other words, does “bringing together” sometimes, or even often, mean cordoning off, or leaving out? How can we continue to be self-reflective about these inclusions and exclusions that we necessarily enact as editors? And how can we ensure that we are being sufficiently dynamic about the intellectual boundaries of the series in order to reflect the continual changes that are naturally occurring in such a fast-growing field?

To date, the series numbers seven books. The first, Rhiannon N Welch’s (2016) *Vital Subjects*, inaugurated the series on its publication in April 2016. The launch was marked by a roundtable on “Why Transnational Italian Cultures?” featuring the author, series editors, and the managing director of the press at the Society for Italian Studies’ Themed Conference at Trinity College, Dublin that same month.¹ A second volume, Barbara Spackman’s (2017) *Accidental Orientalists*, followed the year after. Although we aimed to publish around a volume a year, various intersecting factors meant that we did not issue a new volume in the series until 2020, but that year, three books were published in quick succession: Michele Monserrati’s (2020) *Searching for Japan*, Charles Burdett et al.’s (2020) *Transcultural Italies* (the first, and to date only, edited volume in the series), and Valerie McGuire’s (2020) *Italy’s Sea*. The year 2022 saw the publication of Goffredo Polizzi’s (2022) *Reimagining the Italian South*, and Giovanna Faleschini Lerner’s (2022) *Screening Hospitality*.² In preparing this piece, I re-read each of these volumes in order to try and identify what they achieved not only as individual works, but as parts of a composite whole, and to see whether, in looking at them together, the current contours and future potentialities of our initially defined field of “postcolonial, global, and transnational Italian studies” would be brought into sharper focus for me. I will first detail some initial thoughts on how the series content can inform and respond to questions around the current state of Transnational Italian Studies, and then broaden out to reflect on the implications of providing a curated editorial space to showcase new work in this growing field. In conclusion, I will detail some of the ways that we see the series evolving and changing over the next decade—the sorts of directions and scholarly concerns that we want to see included in future books we publish—and will reflect on how we, as editors, can attempt to keep pace with the theoretical and methodological advances taking place in the field.

As I looked back over the books in the series whilst drafting this piece, I was particularly interested in how each author used the ‘transnational’ as both the descriptor of a field of study and as a methodological indicator. I was also looking to identify any ways in which they engaged with each other’s work and built on critical and theoretical devices used in previous volumes. Applying a transnational approach to Italian Studies has become a fairly mainstream practice since the groundbreaking work of the major AHRC-funded project “Transnationalizing Modern Languages” here in the UK (2014–2016) and the foundation of the Transnational Italian Studies Working Group in the US by Serena Bassi and Giulia Riccò in 2019.³ It is now not uncommon to see jobs specifically asking for expertise in teaching or researching Transnational Italian Studies; Bryn Mawr College has re-named its Italian department the “Transnational Italian

Studies” department, and UC Santa Barbara offers a Transnational Italian Studies major.⁴ Yet the adoption of the term “transnational” to designate a space for the study of Italian which seeks to evade “ethnocentric, national and nationalist rhetoric,” thus “de-centering peninsular Italian culture” and committing to an “explicit decolonization of our field,” has raised questions about the ability of what some scholars see as a “depoliticized” label to make material change in the ways many of its practitioners may hope to see.⁵ Alongside the question of the politics of terminology, what are the risks for Transnational Italian Studies in occupying the mainstream rather than the margins, in becoming central rather than de-centered? What role can the transnational play as a mode of critical inquiry when Italian Studies itself seems to be in the process of being transnationalized?

Silvia Contarini’s (2019) book *Scrivere al tempo della globalizzazione* asks robust questions about the value and definition of the related field of migration literature in Italian; questions that we might also reflect on in relation to the mainstreaming of Transnational Italian Studies. She notes that:

una certa insoddisfazione si è fatta strada progressivamente, a livello teorico e a livello critico, sia perché, malgrado la loro proliferazione, gli studi sulla letteratura si sono fatti ripetitivi, sia perché d’altro canto la produzione letteraria si è fatta più scarsa e meno originale. L’impressione attuale è quella di una impasse. (Contarini, 2019: 10)

As well as an excess of critical attention to a field that she sees as overburdened by an excess of theoretical inquiry that its primary corpus cannot sustain, Contarini places partial blame for the impasse on the very act of defining migration literature as a field, thus “tenendola in disparte” (Contarini, 2019: 29), separate from the broader field of Italian literature. She also notes that much of the work on migration literature in Italian takes place outside Italy, carried out by scholars in “dipartimenti di italianistica all’estero, o studiosi giovani e non incardinati” (Contarini, 2019: 29). By placing Transnational Italian Studies at the center of our current conception of Italian Studies as a field, we have perhaps avoided the pitfalls of segregation that Contarini laments for the corpus of migration literature. But it is certainly true that Transnational Italian Studies is also practiced predominantly outside of Italy: the decentering logic that it seeks to enact in scholarship has thus decentered the nation in both practical and geographic terms. Indeed, the vast majority of the authors we have published in the Transnational Italian Cultures series to date work in the US and in the UK. The books we publish are written in English. Within the context of Transnational Italian Studies that we have nurtured in the series, we may well ask, with Contarini (2019: 12): “Dove si situa l’Italia? Dove ci situiamo quando parliamo? Dove mi situo quando parlo?”

Yet if we look at the content of the books included in the ‘Transnational Italian Cultures’ series to date, it is notable how a transnational perspective is engaged as a way for authors to broaden out the scope of Italian Studies through placing Italy within a wider, global context, rather than subtracting it from the scholarly equation. The transnational is most often used to articulate Italy’s own relations with other intersecting geographical spheres, such as Europe, the Mediterranean, and various iterations of the South: Spackman (2017: 1), for example, talks of Italy “as a dominated fraction of

the dominant world, and hence as Europe's internal other." The specificities of Italy's relations with Europe and the Mediterranean mean that it can forge networks elsewhere (the Far East, the Middle East, North and East Africa) in different ways than other European nations have historically been able to do. Italy's position as "peripheral," as one of the most southern in Europe and as part of a Mediterranean network, its status as a newer nation than many of its European neighbors and competitors, all mean it can function as a laboratory for forming alternative cross-border relations. As Monserrati (2020: 4) notes in his study of Italian Japanese networks of influence, the "process of forming the Italian nation-state overlapped with the creation of transnational imagined communities" in order to produce "co-national types of identities, which unsettle national borders and offset cultural demarcations between the 'native' and the 'foreigner'." McGuire transposes this focus on transnational modes of self-imagination and identity onto a territorial framework that explains the complex rationale behind Italy's annexation of the Dodecanese islands. Making these islands "Italian" undergirded discourses around Mediterraneanism and bolstered the "fantasy that the Italian state would achieve its full potential as a nation-state once it achieved an empire in the Mediterranean" (McGuire, 2020: 4).

The concept of Italy as a nation is thus predicated on multiple sets of transnational relations elsewhere, but also on different modes of territorial expansion. This paradoxical display of nationalism, which depended on the annexation and inclusion of ethnically and linguistically diverse communities into the nation-space, demands a "transnational, transimperial framework" of analysis (McGuire, 2020: 9). The transnational label also operates in both geographical and temporal terms, and when these coincided after Unification, they had knock-on effects on the development of a racial discourse that continues to affect Italy both at home and abroad. This is because temporally speaking, Italy has a specific narrative that sets it aside from other European nations. As Welch (2016: 13) says, "the temporal and rhetorical proximity of its (belated) 'birth' as a modern capitalist nation-state, the apex of positivist and formulations of biological race, and the height of Europe's so-called scramble for Africa" all coalesce into a specific set of anxieties around bodies, race, gender, and sexuality. Polizzi (2022: 7) identifies these anxieties as forming the narrow basis of current constructions of Italianness, but also argues that specific anxieties around race, gender, and sexuality "contributed to the process of the invention of the South." Understanding the intersection between biopolitics and the nation-building project through a new transnational lens allows us to "open up to different and less linear sets of relationships" that Polizzi (2022: 8) sees embodied today in relations between Southerners and new migrant arrivals to Italy. Faleschini Lerner (2022: 11) advances the discourse on biopolitics and the (trans)nation further still to consider the immunitarian logic deployed during the Covid-19 crisis, and how in such crises of mobility, "new definitions of nation, belonging, and citizenship emerge."

The nub of Italian transnationalism thus seems to pivot on the question of the nation itself, and the ways in which the nation is always in question: the after-effects of Italy's (belated) formation are understood to have led to subsequent "itineraries of Italian disunity" (Welch, 2016: 22). Italian unification seems somehow to have solidified a national fragmentation that is embodied in the breaching of state borders through subsequent

waves of mobility: emigration, settler colonialism, travel, occupation, and inward migration. Italy, both as a country and as an expression of its associated cultures, is unable to be contained by its own territorial borders, even when those borders shift multiple times to accommodate different articulations of the nation-state. It is precisely the “weak,” “porous and riven” nature of Italian national identity following unification (Spackman, 2017: 4, 1) which allows it to operate in labile and fluid configurations and that opens it up to avenues of transnational analysis. And in addition to this, it is the convergence of discourses around emigration, colonialism, and the Southern Question that undergirds much of the intellectual work on transnationalism encapsulated by many of the books in the ‘Transnational Italian Cultures’ series to date (especially McGuire (2020) and Polizzi (2022)).

The series also emphasizes that as much as nationalist discourse, representation, and rhetoric were and continue to be deployed in order to shape notions of Italian identity, culture, and nationhood, so those same tools can be used to trace alternative itineraries of nation-building and imaginings of identity formation (McGuire, 2020; Welch, 2016). Burdett et al. (2020: 20) examine these questions in narrative mode, showing “the interdependency of national and transnational, global and local, individual and community, and their impact on how we experience and narrate our lives.” The editors of *Transcultural Italies* thus see (cultural) mobility as distinct from physical migration, but as equally expressive of the transnational as a mode of mediation, dialogue, porosity, and translation that is “reactivated in the narratives of subjects whose material, affective and emotional trajectories transcend national boundaries” (Burdett et al., 2020: 4). Individuals make sense of their own dwelling place between the national and the transnational, and engage specific methodologies of storytelling to negotiate the space available for free play between the two.

Indeed, in my own work trying to decipher and articulate ways of using the transnational as a tool of methodological analysis, I too have often zoned in on acts of play, collage, and assemblage as ways to evidence practices of “construction by addition and association that lie at the heart of the transnational” (Bond, 2022: 280). It is this bricolage, as expressed through acts of selection, juxtaposition, and re-assemblage, which I think also speaks to the idea of editing work as a transnational methodology, and that allows me to conceive of our editing of the ‘Transnational Italian Cultures’ series as the “linking up of a series of particularities” that will allow “for the creation of *new* meaning from existing parts” (Bond, 2022: 281; emphasis in original). Each book in the series functions as a standalone volume, of course, but our ambition is that as a composite whole, they each “gain meaning from their interplay” with the others (Bond, 2022: 288), forming supplementary patterns that illuminate and reinforce their individual points of transnational analysis. This is, perhaps, where the transnational also manages to enact a productive shift of perspective away from the vexed question of the parameters and limits of “migration literature” identified by Contarini. Engaging the “trans” as a “dimensione” allows national literatures and cultures greater latitude to operate in “uno spazio mondializzato” (Contarini, 2019: 62), and allows critics to adopt interpretative grids that benefit from the interplay between postcolonial, global, and transnational studies, much like those that Derek and I initially used to define the field of study covered by the ‘Transnational Italian Cultures’ book series.

The Transnational Italian Studies working group established by Serena Bassi and Giulia Riccò has shown how crucial it is for a developing field to share spaces for open and informal dialogue through reading and commenting on each other's work (and that of others), producing short blog posts that showcase emerging research, and organizing conference sessions and other participatory events. Our hope is that the 'Transnational Italian Cultures' book series offers a supplementary community space which encourages the discussion and dissemination of ideas in our field. As we move towards the 10-year anniversary of our proposing 'Transnational Italian Cultures' to Liverpool University Press, Derek and I have sought to make some changes to how we describe the scope and aims of the series. We have drafted a new description of the series which appears on the webpage, and which underscores how we wish to see it develop over the years to come. We now emphasize the specifically interdisciplinary possibilities we see in work in the field of Transnational Italian Studies, and how we think engaging transnational methodologies can add new insight into emerging areas in the humanities (such as the environmental humanities, medical humanities, creative humanities, digital humanities, and so on). These new intersecting, interdisciplinary fields are where we think modes of transnational inquiry can now be engaged most productively. As editors, our focus now needs to home in on ways to make sure the transnational is a sustainable mode of inquiry in the broader field of Italian Studies, and not just a short-lived academic trend. A capacious framework that articulates the historical, social, and cultural foundations of Italian transnationalism already exists. Looking forward, we hope to ensure that the 'Transnational Italian Cultures' series continues to provide a forum for scholars and researchers to build on that framework in order to analyze a new and diverse range of contemporary and future phenomena.

Notes

1. It is also worth noting that the SIS Themed conference held at the University of Reading four years earlier was on the topic of "Transnational Italy: National Identity and the World Atlas." For further details, see: <http://italianstudies.org.uk/conferences-events/sis-conferences/> (accessed 22 August 2022).
2. For full details of all the titles published in the Transnational Italian Cultures series, see: <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/series/series-12596/> (accessed 22 August 2022).
3. See: <https://www.transnationalmodernlanguages.ac.uk> and <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/tis/> (both accessed 29 August 2022).
4. See: <https://www.frit.ucsb.edu/italian/major/transnational-italian> (accessed 22 August 2022).
5. I take these phrases from the description of the "Transnational Italian Studies" department at Bryn Mawr. See: <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/academic-information/departments-programs/transnational-italian-studies> (accessed 22 August 2022).

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