

Introduction: Transcultural Exchanges and Encounters in Italy

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This special issue explores sites of contact, connection and exchange in modern Italy. These can be understood as open sites of interaction and juxtaposition, where people and ideas from across the globe come and go. They are sites shaped by important trajectories of trade or distinctive histories of colonialism, imperialism, or globalisation. When encounters occur in contexts of asymmetrical relations of power – colonisation, modern warfare, even gender relations – any exchange or contact also entails confrontation. In the uneven exchanges that result, language can be used to create or manipulate perceptions that are formed when worlds collide. Yet modern diasporas also have the potential to connect cultures and lead to collaboration and renewal, through the establishment of wider-ranging networks and positive forms of exchange.

This volume contributes to the study of migratory encounters and exchanges from the particular angle of transcultural scholarship. The notion of transculturality is drawn from the work of Wolfgang Welsch (1999), who observes that ‘cultural conditions today are largely characterised by mixes and permeations’, a ‘passing through’ of traditional cultural boundaries (197). Contemporary cultures are marked by differentiation and complexity, combined with increased technological interconnection, and at the same time hybridisation. In examining instances of Italian transcultural contact and connection and their representations, the contributors to this special issue seek to illuminate current debates around identity (politics), ideology, globalisation and superdiversity, memory and history, imagined communities, and individual bodies. Their articles explore writing, language, visual arts, music and intercultural communication as spaces for experimentation and play, protest and witnessing, for trying out new identities and giving voice to identities ignored or threatened. Whether looking at Italy’s fascination and negotiation with otherness and the foreign from an historical perspective, or exploring the role of new voices and genres in the context of Italy’s place in today’s globalised world, the contributions all explore transcultural exchange as an opportunity for creativity, critique, revitalisation and reflection.

The collection explores the diversity that comes from the ‘transcultural permeations’ (Welsch 1999, 203) present in Italy today. It aims to stimulate reflections upon the nature of research and to engage with the ongoing reshaping and expanding of the field of Italian Studies in the twenty-first century. Part of the originality of this selection of articles is that it showcases the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary interest in the notion of Transcultural Italy. The wide mix of disciplinary approaches represented here – anthropology and ethnography; history; film, literary, culture and discourse studies – attests to this diversity. The topic of Italian transcultural/transnational exchanges

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is one with which people are grappling in various areas within the broader field of Italian Studies and each contributor approaches it from the perspective of their particular discipline. The authors included in this special issue represent several major geographical areas – Australia, the United Kingdom and Italy – and their approaches include case studies as well as theoretical and methodological reflections. The collection complements and builds on recent publications (e.g. Bond 2014; Bartoloni and Ricatti, 2017) and the debates held at recent scholarly conferences (e.g. the 2016 SIS Conference ‘Turning Points: Cultures of Transition, Transformation and Transmission in Italy’; the 2017 ACIS Conference ‘*Scontri e Incontri: The Dynamics of Italian Transcultural Exchanges*’; the 2018–2019 ‘*Diaspore Italiane – Italy in Movement*’ conference series).

The collection opens with a jointly authored article by Georgia Wall and Naomi Wells, who reflect on methodologies for transcultural research and engagement. They explore practical, ethical, and epistemological issues arising when carrying out and disseminating research in contexts of Italian migration. They advocate greater reflexivity by researchers on their own geographic and historical location, arguing that this would allow better understanding of sites of contact, exchange and confrontation in relation to contemporary Italy. They address how their own personal backgrounds within nationally-defined Italian Studies structures raise questions of power, privilege and voice, and how these could be brought into productive critical dialogue with the research participants to find new ways of studying and writing culture.

In an exploration of conflicting voices in transnational social debates, Beatrice Spallaccia investigates the discursive dynamics of Italian responses to international calls for reform on questions of sexual identity and gender inclusivity in schools. These responses have been dominated by the term *ideologia del gender*. Her research reveals the extensive adoption of this term by reactionary anti-gender groups across Europe. She suggests that a transcultural approach might counteract the anti-gender backlash.

Further investigating identities that fall outside the mainstream, Goffredo Polizzi focuses on ideologies of homonationalism in the representation of southern and migrant characters in Emma Dante’s 2013 film *Via Castellana Bandiera*. This case study analyses how the simultaneous articulation of queerness and southernness is a way to queer the traditional marginalisation of the South and simultaneously make visible different axes of subjectivity (gender, sexuality, race), thus helping to diversify contemporary Italian cinema studies.

Brigid Maher provides an historical perspective on popular culture and the appeal of foreignness and cultural diversity, through her examination of a number of foreign-set crime novels published in Fascist Italy. Drawing on extensive textual and archival research, she concludes that novelists’ use of these settings afforded them the chance to critique the regime, introduce elements of cultural variety and exoticism, and engage in metafictional play leading to important processes of genre innovation.

Through her reading of the work of Tunisian-born, Rome-based graphic journalist Takoua Ben Mohamed, Barbara Spadaro presents a case study on comics as a medium of transcultural exchange and production of memory. She illustrates how these graphic narratives visualise individual and collective histories of migration and translation, and call into question mainstream notions of homogeneity and canonicity of Italian cultural production in the twenty-first century.

A further perspective on multimodal cultural production is offered by Susanna Scarparo and Mathias Stevenson. In their co-authored article focusing on transnational forms of contemporary popular music performed in Sardinia, they analyse the role language, music and images play in giving voice to marginal communities and in decolonising traditional hegemonies. They conclude that these transcultural musical genres offer Sardinians a way to express individual and collective agency in a locally generated form.

In the final contribution of the collection, Rita Wilson examines the relationship between the literary practices of contemporary multilingual writers and literary citizenship. Taking as a case study the self-conscious linguistic transformations of Francesca Marciano and Jhumpa Lahiri, she finds that these authors' work is representative of the multilingual and transcultural reality of contemporary Italian literature. She argues that their creative practices instantiate broader issues connected with the definition, categorisation and consequent evaluation of literary canons and literary citizenship.

For all the variety in their objects of study, what unites the articles that follow – whether they explore cultural products or day-to-day practices – is that they point to prevalent social realities, challenges and configurations. The changing patterns of late twentieth-century transnational migration flows have entailed the movement of people from increasingly varied national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. The variable nature of migration flows has contributed to the development of multiple forms of social and cultural differentiation in urban societies. Scholars and practitioners need, together, to raise the profile of the complexity of forms of communication which take place, authentically and spontaneously, in our superdiverse societies. The challenge for researchers is identifying the analytical tools and approaches that will enable them to dismantle rigid conceptualisations of monocultural national identities that act as barriers to social cohesion. A transcultural approach recognises the benefits of looking beyond the boundaries of national entities to the formation of something new and larger. By rethinking our position as researchers and devising more participatory ways of engaging with communities, scholars of transcultural Italy can contribute to a body of scholarship that attempts to go beyond stereotypical 'cultural differences' and investigates models and practices aimed at improving mutual understanding. It is to be hoped that such approaches may also serve as an antidote to current tendencies to take defensive, fear-based positions in the face of cultural difference or social change.

Notes on contributors

Rita Wilson is Professor in Translation Studies in the School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University, Interim Director of the Monash Intercultural Lab and Co-Director of the Monash-Warwick Migration, Identity and Translation Research Network. Her research sits at the interface of translation, intercultural and migrant cultural studies. She has longstanding research interests in Italian contemporary literature and transcultural narrative practices. Most recently, she has published on identity and culture in migratory contexts, on practices of self-translation and on narratives of mobility and place-making. With Loredana Polezzi, she is co-editor of *The Translator*.

Brigid Maher is the author of *Recreation and Style: Translating Humorous Literature in Italian and English* (John Benjamins, 2011). She has published a number of academic articles, and co-edited books and special issues, on topics in literary translation and contemporary Italian literature and culture. She has a particular interest in the translation, circulation and reception of crime fiction. Her translations into English of novels by Milena Agus, Nicola Lagioia, Salvatore Striano and Massimo Donati have been published in Australia and internationally.

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