

American Association of Italian Studies 2022 Conference Report
Bologna, Italy

“We are back!” The phrase most definitely sums up the general feeling of the in-person segment of the 2022 AAIS conference held from May 29 through June 1st in Bologna. It will probably come as no surprise to readers that I express first and foremost the emotion and enthusiasm felt during the opening night aperitivo at DAMSLab. After so many years of sharing only virtual spaces, this in-person event felt special and, despite the rain and unexpected cold that greeted us that first day, there was a buzz, a vibrancy among those who mingled over a drink and a snack. The festivities were punctuated by the warm remarks from AAIS president Ellen Nerenberg who took a few moments to both acknowledge the excitement of the day, and to individually thank those who helped to make it happen; the rest of the evening was spent mingling, awkwardly reading people’s name tags, recognizing friends despite new hairstyles, and enjoying sharing space with old and new colleagues. At the end of the night, though, one thing seemed clear: we were back, but we were also changed, and so, it would seem in the days that followed, had Italian Studies. These changes were felt in the panels, in the scholarship, and in the overall structure and feel of the conference, and it is these changes specifically that I will speak to in this report.

The breadth of research fields and interests were evidenced in the diverse documentary screenings that closed the first three evenings and ranged from lyrical *Tempo di viaggio* (1983), to road trip documentary *Porpora* (2022), about trans activist Porpora Marcasciano, to *Logos Zanzotto* (2021) about late 20th-century poet Andrea Zanzotto. And even just a brief scroll through the *Whova* daily agenda demonstrates how dramatically the panels varied in scope, from new approaches to medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern works, to contemporary media trends, and investigations centering on decoloniality, and transnational and transgender studies; there were a number of themed panels that spanned across multiple sessions, marking the popularity of certain areas of study (*Italian Precursors of Science Fiction Literature* had several panels, as did *Identity Space and Place in Contemporary Italian Literature*, and *Thinking Italian Plants*, for example).

But more than just multiple-session panels, there was a clear thematic overlap in many of the sessions despite their different titles—we need only look at the number of panels focused on women (with titles including *Ugly, Unpleasant, and Strange: The 21st Century Woman*, *Evil Women*, *Women and the Arts*, and *Italian Feminist Through*), or the not uncommon focus on Pasolini, who, this year was discussed over three panels: *Can Pasolini be a Thinker for the 21st Century?*, *Pasolini: Searching for a Language*, and *Against Pasolini*. The highlighting of the cultural icon and his works this year in this space was very much in keeping with the pulse of the city and its history, as Bologna recognized 100 years of its native son with a concurrent exhibit *Folgorazioni figurative*. In addition to specific people and subjects, character tropes also seemed to be of interest, as labels from “martyrs” to “traitors” to “vampires” to “rebels” to the very clearly categorical *Sibyls*, *Sirens*, *Crazies and Crones* panels, all asked listeners to consider representation, cultural positionality, and language, in ways that subtly speak to the epistemology of identity as created by/through dialectical social frames. There were other methodologically focused trends that were geared toward providing pathways for seemingly disparate ideas, people, or artifacts to be put in conversation. In this way we saw one theme extend across multiple eras (i.e., *Martyrs from the Risorgimento to Cinema*) and multiple themes being considered concurrently through clear intersectional approaches (such as *Race, Belonging, Pedagogy and Transatlantic Women’s Archives Interdisciplinary Perspectives Across Media and Literature*). Such intrapanel dialogue evidences a desire to build connection, that one might speculate may have something to do with the collective isolation of the past couple years.

It would be impossible to give a comprehensive report about the details of the in-person conference and each individual panel; the plethora of panels and the consequently inevitable

concurrent scheduling preclude this, so I will limit myself in the space that follows to sharing some of the knowledge I garnered from the panels I attended, which focused on my own areas of interest: media studies, queer and feminist studies, and pedagogy.

Cinema, television, and media studies panels were not lacking, with some well-known names ushering us back to these shared spaces of collective intellectual engagement. Millicent Marcus organized the multi-session *Italian Film in the Present Tense: Case Studies and Current Trends* panel series title, and I was able to attend the second session held on Wednesday June 1st. Marcus' ebullience is incredibly contagious, and her excitement drove the discussions despite the nostalgic tone she brought to her elaboration of technomachia and the interplay between analogue and digital images on the Italian screen. At the session I attended featuring Marcus ("Technomachia: How the Battle between Analogue and Digital Images Plays Out on the Screens of Italian Film") Fabiana Cecchini ("Riace, 'Un paese di Calabria:' an Italian 'Città Futura?") and Giovanna Faleschini Lerner ("Le sorelle Macaluso and the [Queer] Spaces of Memory") there was a clear theme of temporality, as the interplay between the archive, notions of legacy, and artifacts of history work together rather than against contemporary spaces, and issues.

Discussions of temporality, or rather, of the archive, of a rejection of presentism, and investigations into the past's presence within and through the present, were had in several of the other media panels I attended. Luca Barra's roundtable *Come mappare la storia delle televisioni locali italiane (1976-1990)* highlighted the recent project ATLAS (Atlante delle Televisioni Locali), and its particularly innovative approach to understanding the (often overlooked) history of Italian local television. The members of the roundtable each spoke of a different local network and discussed the difficulties and discoveries made possible by compiling information about production and distribution, performing oral histories, and searching through local archives. So here too, much like the panel I spoke of earlier, we have an important interplay between the past and the present, where contemporary practices rely on and seek to look differently at what has come before.

The other two media panels, *Contemporary Italian Film and Media Performers (F-Actor)* organized by Francesco Pitassio, and *Contemporary Acting and Stardom* put together by Catherine O'Rawe and Dana Renga, focused specifically on media actors. The discussions were primarily about trends and countertrends of their pathways to fame, and of casting practices more generally. Interestingly, special focus in both panels was given to the relationship between audience and industry, which feels like a nod to both the changes in industry practices and our own approach to these media, as our focus shifts past cultural artifacts, the art of production, and audience impact and reception, toward a deeper understanding of the slippery boundaries that demarcate producer, consumer, production, and product.

While it would be rash to offer a claim about the state of Italian media studies based on these panels, there is one thread that ties the intellectual substance of these presentations with many of the other papers I was able to hear, namely the tendency to approach topics and cultural artifacts with an expository frame rather than an analytic one. It seems many scholars have spent their pandemic intellectual brain spaces *indagando*, and this was the perfect first space to share what each one of us has discovered, or become interested in. Both the *Pedagogical Sociological Experiences Open Call Session*, and the *Street Art in Italy* panel seem to confirm this trend. Listeners at the panel on pedagogy and learning communities learned about the ways textbook design can be geared toward students in the digital age; how film, specifically Sorrentino's *È stata la mano di Dio*, was used in L2 classrooms; and about the inner social workings of community-based cultural exchange groups. These informative talks provide fodder for thinking through learning spaces, learning communities, and the materials we use, and this kind of practical exposition of "how people are learning" seems like a possible pathway toward a free exchange of pedagogical tools and ideas. Perhaps the one exception to this expository trend was the paper "Dallas in Prizzi?: American Street Art in Sicily

between Cultural Imperialism and Urban Renewal” presented by Davida Gavioli and Paola Gemme. Gavioli and Gemme ended their elaboration of this “cultural exchange” by exposing the inherent ethnocentrism at the root of the project. While their analysis pushes past a presentation of the street art project and thus strays from the expository trend I have attempted to evidence here, it does keep with other broad thematic currents, namely the understanding of cultural specificity and positionality in and through its relationship to the “other,” or perhaps, more fittingly, the deep-seeded problems inherent to understandings of identity that are based on these frameworks.

As I mentioned earlier, many panels seemed to work passed the dialectic dynamic of self/other through a kind of border-crossing, using trans notions and embodiments to call into question the stable frameworks that had previously been used to conceive of Italianness, Italian people, and Italian traditions, practices, and artifacts. *TransItalies*, the two-part panel Sole Anatrone and I organized is no exception to this trend; the talks on our panels, including our own collaborative paper, worked through notions of translation, transnationality, transgender bodies and experiences, and transfeminist activism. Within these transnesses, authenticity, authorship and identity were called into question and reframed through a critical assessment of the linguistic and cultural constructs that seek to fix them. The fluid movement inherent in these trans practices shows us a bridge, a bridge that challenges dichotomous meaning. For Italian Studies, understanding this bridge as a new frame through which to see and study literature, culture, and experience, has allowed scholars to both rethink what has already been studied, and incorporate other subjects and disciplines into Italianist scholarship in a way that feels both expansionist and infrastructuralist.¹ These are shifts that are changing the Italian studies landscape, and are clear not just in panels, like ours, or the AAIS sponsored *Interrogating the Transnational Turn in 'Italian Studies'* workshop—curated by Serena Bassi, Claudio Fogu, Stephanie Malia Hom, and Giulia Riccò—both of which explicitly name a kind of mobility and instability. Panels like *Comparative Italian Studies?* and *Global Dante* both equally create disciplinary change from the inside out. In her welcoming remarks, Ellen Nerenberg spoke precisely of this shift. Speaking of the AAIS sponsored conference programming, such as the keynote speakers and the four sessions of the Executive Council Conference Series, she noted: “our intention was to contextualize Italian cultural production outside of Italy as well, framing it within an extranational context.”² The borders of Italian Studies are shifting, or perhaps the focus itself is becoming less funneled, and the discipline has begun exploring the ways in which Italian and Italian studies intersect, merge, or inhabit spaces of in-between, spaces that also belong to other studies. This trend is not suddenly upon us, or existent exclusively within the confines of the AAIS conference, it is felt and lived within our departments at home as well. We need only look at Bryn Mawr College’s 2021 decision to change their department’s name to “Transnational Italian Studies,” stating very clearly that this name reflects a shift toward a decolonialist approach to the field. The conversations that I had at the Presidential Aperitivo held at Caffè Zanarini also confirm this felt disciplinary shift, as discussions of our specific schools and programs acknowledged a move away from language instruction and toward cultural and political frames of a post-national Italianness. Dennis Looney, one of the conference’s two keynote speakers, was also present at the aperitivo event and circled the group with handouts and materials that discussed the ways that studies within our disciplines equip us with transferable skills that might be used in alt-academic pursuits. The feeling coming from all these directions was, and continues to be, that Italian Studies must look

¹ I use “infrastructuralist” in the way that Lauren Berlant intended. They note: ““I am interested in the build. I am interested in how we build out difference from within the world we are living in ... trying to build out infrastructures for collective life that refuse the one we are living.” in *The Unfinished Business of Cruel Optimism*. Lynch Lecture, November 19, 2020. (Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, University of Toronto, Canada).

² Ellen Nerenberg, “Welcome Speech,” AAIS (DamsLab Bologna, 29 May 2022). *Translation Mine*.

beyond, must understand itself as bigger than itself, and this conference is in many ways a step in making this shift a reality.

Expansion, however, often comes with retraction, disciplinary pushback, or simply critique from those for whom Italian Studies means a prioritization of geo-political based identities and canonical texts. Rebecca Falkoff's intervention at the conference, "Etiology of a First Book," directly referenced these kinds of disciplinary clashes. She was forthright in her discussion about having not gotten tenure after the publication of her first book, *Possessed*³—a book that explores the economies and psychologies of hoarding—speculating "it was hard not to wonder whether the book, or I—as a scholar or as a person—was deemed to be not Italian enough."⁴ Using an often self-reflexive analysis, Falkoff elaborated on the scholarly pathways she takes in her book, explaining the cultural logics of the practice, its relationship to capitalism, romanticized notions of the hoarder figure, etc. Falkoff weaves Italians and Italian theories throughout this intellectual journey, showing the interdisciplinarity of her subject, and the not-so-hidden Italianness within. While her paper questioned the logics of those who refused to push beyond their ideas of the discipline, her ultimate call to action was and is to sustain and expand community within whatever it is we consider Italian Studies.

Notions of inclusivity are at the forefront of these disciplinary shifts. Sandra Ponzanesi's keynote address "Migrant Figurations: New Questions for Italian Postcolonial Studies" in many ways provided clear pathways for how to think about and insert POC voices into discussions of Italian sociality. Ponzanesi provided listeners an archive of mediatic materials by and about POC, second generation, and migrant bodies and experiences, from documentaries, to television shows, to podcasts, and helped listeners understand the digital as a space parallel and concurrent to terrestrial notions of belonging.

The discussion about the use of the term "postcolonial" rather than "decolonial" brought up an important linguistic and methodological distinction that seems emblematic of the ways expansion begets both change and resistance. Inclusivity is about recognizing more bodies and more voices that have always existed but have been rendered invisible by the canons that still serve as the benchmark of legitimacy within the field. I have written at length in this space about the ways that the trends of the conference denote new approaches to old topics, a moment of exposition instead of analysis, and new interdisciplinary conversations that bring together various texts and subjects. I have discussed the push to expand the boundaries of the field in ways that, we might argue, are a sign of a more inclusive Italianistica; but this inclusivity should not and cannot be considered a trendy topic on whose bandwagon we may choose to jump on or off when the moment feels right.

I take these final moments to make space for an acknowledgment of these changes, and a call for continued reflection and action. This inclusivity must lead to systemic changes in our scholarship but also in our approaches to discussions of our scholarship-in-progress, and how we structure events to share our work and our knowledge. As we go forward and we speak about inclusivity, we must mean the prioritization of black and brown subjectivities, we must mean making concerted decisions to provide childcare and lactation rooms, we must mean providing ADA approved spaces and transportation, we must mean instilling a practice of providing people an opportunity to share pronouns, and we must mean making the platforms and spaces accessible to all ages and abilities present. Our shared spaces influence and inform our collective scholarship. AAIS and Italian Studies are changing, and we must continue to be that change.

³ Rebecca Falkoff, *Possessed* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

⁴ Rebecca Falkoff, "Etiology of a First Book," AAIS (S. Giov. in Monte Bologna, 31 May 2022).

AAIS 2022--Heim

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