



Anno 36, 2021 / Fascicolo 1 / p. 113-115 - www.rivista-incontri.nl - <http://doi.org/10.18352/inc11011>
© The author(s) - Content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License -
Publisher: Werkgroep Italië Studies, supported by openjournals.nl

Tracing Italianness Trans-disciplinary Reflections on Transcultural Italies

Review of: Charles Burdett, Loredana Polezzi and Barbara Spadaro (eds.), *Transcultural Italies. Mobility, Memory and Translation*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2020, 368 p., ISBN: 9781789622553, £95.00; ebook: 9781789622706, £95.00.

Rachelle Gloudemans

Transcultural Italies. Mobility, Memory, and Translation, edited by Charles Burdett, Loredana Polezzi and Barbara Spadaro, collects a range of original examples of that ‘unique relationship between Italian culture and the transnational’ (p. 4) Emma Bond described in a seminal essay of 2014.¹ The volume, published in the Transnational Italian Cultures series at Liverpool University Press, finds its roots in the Transnational Modern Languages project (TML), from which it borrows its aim to ‘broaden the frame in which we think of Italian cultures’ (p.9) and, hence, to expand disciplinary and methodological approaches to the analysis of Italian cultural mobility. In order to frame their move towards a trans-disciplinary investigation of the transnational, Burdett, Polezzi and Spadaro suggest looking beyond migration phenomena and ‘traditional’ migration studies as a privileged perspective on the mobility of Italian cultures. Rather, they argue that we must trace notions of Italianness through a reading of ‘micro-processes of cultural translation, self-manifestation and acts of transmission and memory mediation’ (p. 2). As such, the contributors - most of whom are based in Anglophone institutions - engage with a broad cultural studies approach in order to investigate a variety of visual, material, written and oral representations of Italianness in a truly global context.

The volume consists of thirteen chapters, divided into three parts. The first part, ‘Traces’, examines the current and historical presence of Italian communities in diverse national and cultural contexts. Two threads seem to connect the articles in this part: first, the authors all comment on the tensions between national narratives of Italian identity - in particular those propagated by the Fascist regime - and the narratives of self-identification formulated by Italian communities abroad; second, each article underlines the recurrence of a negotiation between the permanent remains of transnational Italian presence and the sense of ‘loss’ as the material reality of the communities seems to fade. In the first chapter, Jennifer Burns studies the leftover traces of Italian presence in London’s Clerkenwell (‘Little Italy’), through a reading of the area’s urban space and architectural features. These features refer to a micro-narrative of past Italian community life, while also testifying to ‘the folding of the Italian cultural history of the area into the new and future-facing architectural

¹ E. Bond, ‘Towards a Trans-national Turn in Italian Studies?’, *Italian Studies*, 69, 3 (2014), 415-424.

fabric' (p. 34). Naomi Wells's essay analyses urban space through extensive interviews with third-generation, Italo-Chilean individuals who recollect narratives of Italianness in the port town of Valparaíso (Chile). The author pays particular attention to language in order to address the way national symbols of Italian identity have become meaningful in local, everyday spaces and practices. Valerie McGuire's contribution examines present-day discourses on multiculturalism that are used to promote tourist destination Rhodes, as examples of the selective memory of Italian colonial rule - a selectiveness also discussed in Charles Burdett's chapter on the nostalgic narratives of Italian life in East Africa, recollected in the journal *Mai Tacli*.

The second part, 'Art, Objects, Artefacts', focuses on the transmission, reception and display of Italian identities through cultural objects. Three out of four chapters in this section specifically reflect on initiatives that were undertaken as part of the broader TML project. In the first chapter, Derek Duncan discusses a series of language pedagogy projects, conducted at two secondary schools in Edinburgh, which aimed at establishing an exchange between the TML research project and the practices of secondary education. Duncan expands on the creative understanding of the transnational that emerged from these projects - which were inspired by the life and works of British-Italian artist Eduardo Paolozzi - and reads their results as everyday examples of Appadurai's 'vernacular globalization' and Bal's 'migratory aesthetics'. The essay by Margaret Hills de Zárate starts with a meticulous methodological outline of the ethnographic approach to the 'social lives' of objects, before discussing the 'Object Workshops' held by the author as part of the TML project. During these workshops, Argentinian participants of Italian descent were encouraged to explore the role of objects in the transmission of transgenerational narratives of Italian identity. In the following chapter, art curators Viviana Gravano and Giulia Grechi shed light on the theoretical framework that informed the TML exhibition *Beyond Borders: Transnational Italy*, hosted by the British School in Rome in 2016. They demonstrate, in particular, how the exhibition space became a 'narrative habitat' where visitors were urged to participate in the act of connecting and projecting diverse narratives of Italianness. In this part of the volume, Eliana Maestri's detailed analysis of the artworks of second-generation Italian-Australian migrant Jon Cattapan stands out. Combining translation studies with Lefebvre's notion of spatiality, the author reads Cattapan's multimodal cityscapes as 'thick translations', which exemplify a diasporic narrative of Italianness that does not linger 'in-between places', but rather 'inhabits multiple places [...] and translates multiple spaces at the same time' (p. 205).

A reflection on the nature and expression of experiences of migration also informs the essays contained in the last part, 'Mobilities of Memory'. This section opens with a chapter by Barbara Spadaro, who departs from the micro-history of Giannetto Paggi - a Jewish teacher from Tuscany who opened the first Italian school in Tripoli (1876) - to explore 'travelling memories' of Italianness and Jewishness. In conversation with individuals who carry memories of Paggi's story, Spadaro reflects on the intersubjective nature of memory in an appealing storytelling style. In doing so, the author does not refrain from scrutinising her own presumptions as a researcher, so as to illustrate how 'the disruption and negotiation of narratives illuminates the constant mobility of memory' (p. 243). Equally appealing is Ilaria Vanni's close reading of gardening as a memorial and translational place-making practice. The author shows how Italian migrant gardens in Australia, with their creative mix of 'misplaced' plants, become 'micro contact-zones where knowledge and practices are remixed and translated in a new environment' (p. 255). The fact that such contact-zones are not pre-established in transcultural contexts is demonstrated by Chiara Giuliani, whose chapter analyses literary representations of economic exchanges between Italy and China. The examined texts show that, even though the global economic order has put

the two cultures in a new relationship of proximity, negative stereotypes and recurring narratives of cultural difference continue to feed into a disregard for Chinese culture; this has resulted in a reluctance to grant Chinese communities in Italy access to narratives of hybridised belonging. The last two chapters return to translation as a methodological tool to address questions of memory in migratory contexts. Centralising the sensory dimensions of memory and translation, Rita Wilson somewhat mechanically applies a geocritical approach to the analysis of 'translational city spaces' in works that belong to the canon of Italian migration literature. In the final chapter, Loredana Polezzi reformulates the relation between migration, memory and translation by moving towards a theory that conceives of translation as a 'trace' and 'co-presence', rather than as a form of erasure. In this way, the author convincingly argues, 'an ethics of translation returns us to the thick weave of languages and narratives that make up our daily life' (p. 325). To illustrate this move, Polezzi analyses the visual self-narratives of three women artists who belong to the Italian diaspora: Luci Callipari-Marcuzzo, Filomena Coppola and B. Amore, whose artwork adorns the cover of the volume.

The individual contributions all present well-articulated and precise methodological reflections on the interpretation and interconnection of the three central concepts of the volume - mobility, memory and translation - thus clarifying and adjusting the framework proposed in the introduction. However, in the somewhat verbose opening section, the curators broaden the already far-reaching concepts and - in doing so - at times overcomplicate the volume's aims, scope and structure. Moreover, the initial emphasis on shifting the focus from 'migration' to 'mobility' seems to artificially bypass the recent exchanges between migration studies and cultural studies, and it obscures the recognisable relation between the traces of Italianness discussed in the volume and the experiences and interpretations of migration from which they derive. Nonetheless, the volume as a whole proposes a meaningful diversification of the methods, objects and localities generally studied within the field. As such, the volume offers an expansion of the 'Transnational Turn' that integrates and illustrates some of the recently proposed 'key directions' in Italian Cultural Studies.²

Rachelle Gloudemans

KU Leuven Brussels Campus - Faculty of Arts
Warmoesberg 26
1000 Brussels (Belgium)
rachelle.gloudemans@kuleuven.be

² R. Glynn, C. Keen & G. Pieri (eds.), *Italian Studies. Special Issue: Key Directions in Italian Studies*, 75, 2 (2020), pp. 121-255.