

Key Directions in Italian Studies

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The four quarterly numbers of *Italian Studies* that will be published in 2020 mark the seventy-fifth issue of the journal. To mark the occasion, the Senior Editors decided to commission a set of collaboratively produced articles for a Special Issue dedicated to ‘Key Directions in Italian Studies’. For Volume 75 of the journal, the moment seemed right to invite colleagues to join us for an examination of areas of research that we view as representative of the state of the art in 2020 of Italian Studies as a discipline and key to its future development. We sought to identify several broad thematic areas that are currently particularly productive across the arc of research fields and methods that the journal addresses, seeking to open dialogues between our contributors and our readers that could produce a long view and broad spread of discussion relating to the selected research areas. An important consideration was to identify topics that were not confined by traditional chronological divides but could put researchers in the early period into contact with researchers in the modern period, for the purposes of producing collaboratively written articles addressing their shared areas of expertise, and offering fruitful reflections for readers active in the many and diverse fields that make up contemporary Italian Studies as a discipline or set of disciplinary and methodological concerns.

Each of the articles in this Special Issue is the result of collaborative dialogue between two or three scholars, who were invited to shape their response to the argument proposed in the way that seemed most fruitful to the writing team. They were asked to reflect, of course, on what they felt to be the particular contribution made by Italian Studies

to the specified area. We also invited them to review their topics both as evolving from a tradition of scholarly work, long-standing or more recent in nature, and as offering scope for important future developments. Thus, the selected topics have already contributed to varying degrees to a reshaping or reorienting of Italian Studies as a discipline, and to the way that different methodologies or theoretical frameworks are seen as pertinent to Italian Studies research as it is currently developing. Co-writing holds a special significance: it is in itself a mode of academic writing that has moved from the margins to the mainstream of research in our journal which, over the past few years, has seen an increasing number of co-written articles and collaborations (in the shape of clusters of short essays, roundtable discussions, and mini-Special Issues); such developments reflect new modes of engagement between scholars and a desire to stretch disciplinary expertise.

The identification of topics for our Special Issue was inevitably challenging, and readers will no doubt be surprised by both the exclusions and the inclusions in the chosen titles and article contents. Beginning with a large set of possible themes in our initial discussions about the Special Issue, we attempted to identify categories that would permit a range of methods, theories and concerns to be articulated. Some themes were identified on the basis of their long-standing and continuing prominence within almost all departments and centres concerned with Italian Studies; other titles were formulated so as to let our contributors accommodate more established approaches or areas of scholarship alongside newly emerging ones within a broadly conceived remit. Several of our themes have provided opportunities for reflection on the way that scholarly *practice* is evolving in the contemporary world, especially with the increasing incorporation of digital tools and resources into scholarship, and the development of new collaborations between scholarly and non-scholarly communities in the production and dissemination of research beyond those who make it their professional occupation.

The Issue consists of eight articles. Daragh O'Connell and Beatrice Sica, in their article on 'Literary Cultures in/and Italian Studies', consider how contemporary Italian Studies scholarship is situated in relation to the long-standing dominance of literary culture as a major disciplinary concern, and the persistence of traditionally conceived canons, questions, and methods. The authors discuss how the scope of literary research has expanded in recent years and become more enmeshed with sociological, political, and ideological enquiry. They review how previous definitions of literary cultures and practices

have been refreshed with new theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches, and through transnational dialogues and collaborative modes of research.

Jennifer Burns and Catherine Keen, in 'Italian Mobilities', explore how the emergence of a diverse range of methodological and thematic concerns relates to Italy's position as a crossing-point along global axes of encounter, which turns research in Italian Studies into a particularly productive site for the analysis of the intersection between geographical, cultural, social, political, and economic experiences of movement in both space and time. The article explores the concept of mobility in Italian Studies by focusing on three key intersecting angles: geographies, histories, and stories. It investigates how a focus on mobility enriches the study of the traces left on the language, history and cultural forms of the peninsula and islands of the modern Italian Republic by the multiple inward and outward flows of mobilities that have characterized the country's history.

Questions of mobility and travel also pervade the discussion of 'Italian Material Cultures' by Rhiannon Daniels, Anne O'Connor, and Katherine Tycz. This essay explores the location of material cultures research within the discipline of Italian Studies and the role played by material objects – from Venetian glass and Renaissance masterpieces to pizza, Vespas and Alessi homeware – in the construction of *italianità*. A survey of critical concerns and historical perspectives on the intersections between Italian Studies and Material Culture Studies is followed by three new case studies of material culture in action. By encompassing a wide temporal base and diverse forms of materiality (paper, ceramic, stone), the case studies illustrate how material culture and its study can transcend traditionally inscribed geographical and chronological boundaries, inviting more transnational and transtemporal approaches to the study of Italian culture.

In 'Corporealities in Italian Studies', Derek Duncan and Heather Webb bring a chronological approach to bear on Italian Studies research on the body, illustrating the different shape that discourses of corporeality have taken within the discipline. The first section explores how critical frameworks relating to embodiment, performativity and simulation enable us to expand premodern Italian studies beyond the limited patriarchal canon and better understand 'performances' of the Passion by late medieval and early modern women religious as a form of co-suffering that foregrounds embodiment as discourse and as a substitute for silenced female voices. This is followed by a detailed reflection of how new understandings of biopolitics and its technologies, mass demographic

mobility, and contemporary discourses on race and gender have impacted on modern and contemporary Italian studies, effecting a shift away from binary modes of categorization and critical understandings of the body as productive of alternative forms of knowledge, in favour of a more complex understanding of the symbolic figuration of the Italian body as an object of national concern.

Whilst material cultures and corporealities remind us of the fundamental imbrication between artefacts, objects, ideas and human interactions, we now live in a world that relies increasingly on digital technologies, which often seem to distance us from material and corporeal realities. Guyda Armstrong and Emanuela Patti in their essay on 'Italian Studies and the Digital' reflect on the history and futures of the 'digital' — that is, what might be termed 'digital humanities' and 'digital cultures' — in relation to Italian Studies. They provide an overview of some of the major achievements and trends in the field and show how Italian Studies has engaged with the technological and epistemological developments of the digital age in terms of theories, methods, and approaches.

The widespread use of digital technologies in our daily lives in the 1990s coincided with a number of 'turns'; the most debated being the 'visual turn' that arguably had a major impact on the opening up of the traditional disciplinary divide between art and architectural history and literary and cultural studies. In 'Italian Visual Cultures', Giorgia Alù, Catherine O'Rawe and Giuliana Pieri review how 'Visual Culture Studies' has emerged since the 1990s as a productively unstable cluster of research concerns and practices, extending beyond the sectorial bounds of traditional visually-oriented disciplines such as art history or architecture. The two areas of screen studies and photography are explored as case studies that demonstrate how Visual Cultures approaches have expanded research horizons and enhanced teaching and outreach practice in Italian Studies. The article highlights aspects of visual production that have been variously dominant or marginalised in Italian Studies to date and explores how the new, interdisciplinary field fosters interconnections and exchanges, opens up discussion of the complexity of cultural production and media, and is enriched by engagement with visual, textual and media theory.

In their analysis of 'The Transnational/Translational in Italian Studies', Charles Burdett, Nick Havelly, and Loredana Polezzi ask us to consider what it means to think translationally and transnationally in the context of Italian studies. The three authors explore the 'transnational' and 'translational' by focusing on issues of methodology and

shifts in objects of analysis and present the translation/reception of Dante as a particularly apposite case study in the complex interplay between the two concepts. The relational link between the national and the transnational is explored in ways that challenge antithetical or mutually exclusive perspectives, shoring up their 'contrapuntal' tension. By observing the interplay between the nation and the transnational/translational, this article explores the negotiation of identity and diversity which is at the core of all forms of cultural production and exchange.

The relational nature of these exchanges and the complex processes of meaning making are also at the core of the last article in this Special Issue, aptly entitled 'Italian Studies Beyond the Academy'. Lisa Sampson and Daniela Treveri Gennari consider how, over the course of the last decade, considerable emphasis has been placed by public funding bodies on the need to demonstrate the impact of academic research across all subject areas. The article explores the significance of the impact agenda in Italian Studies, primarily in the UK (with reference to the census of impact case studies included in REF2014) but also in Italy and the US. The article draws some conclusions on best practice, points to new ideas regarding dissemination and impact beyond the academic community, and identifies upcoming challenges which modern languages in general, and Italian Studies in particular, may be facing in the near future.

It is testament to the dynamic quality of Italian Studies as a discipline that several other fields proposed as possible article topics at the commissioning stage had to be discarded for various reasons: we felt, for instance, that medical humanities, posthumanism, ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, though rewardingly addressed within Italian Studies research, have yet to become firmly established as consistent sub-fields that could engage the kind of diachronic, collaborative retrospection and forward projection that we wished the Special Issue to address. Research with a strongly historical emphasis, specialist work in linguistics, or research with a leading emphasis on music or art history, are also areas represented in numerous departments of Italian Studies but where scholarship is primarily diffused via more specialist publications, and these areas have been accordingly left aside from this Special Issue.

The articles present research highlights within the different fields addressed, especially as regards research from the first two decades of our new century. Their authors also review areas, approaches or emphases that have been neglected to date, and that

could be profitably investigated in more detail and moved from margin to mainstream within developing scholarly conversations. Each of the essays offers reflections on possible future directions for research within the specified areas and speculates where those engagements may take the discipline in the decades to come. Such speculation is always an exhilarating but risky business. Trends that in the year 2020 have engaged our attention will inevitably develop in ways that we cannot predict; new publications, new practices, and the pressures of both external and internal forces on institutions and on cultures reshape our concerns unexpectedly.

A reminder of the role of contingency and unpredictability in scholarship could be prompted simply by reflection on the hinterland to this Special Issue's commissioning. A seventy-fifth volume is an achievement to celebrate. Yet this year is not the seventy-fifth anniversary of *Italian Studies* as a journal, the first issue of which was published in 1937 and was initially published on a two-yearly cycle, suspended between 1939 and 1946 for the duration of World War II. Accordingly, a three-quarter-centenary essay was published in volume 67, in 2012, marking a significant birthday and celebrating, especially, the scholarship that had been published over about the first fifty years of the journal's existence. As David Robey explained in his authoritative account of the evolution of *Italian Studies* up to 1974, the journal has provided an important witness to the emergence of Italian Studies as a recognizable discipline in the universities of the UK and Ireland that its original remit aimed to represent, as a major branch of the activities of their Society for Italian Studies.¹ From its origins, the journal has been in dialogue with studies in *Italianistica* within Italy, and then as now, scholars have frequently moved between Italy, the UK, and Ireland, producing exchanges and collaborations and refreshing modes of research through the dialogues that result. Anglophone Italian Studies has also expanded and evolved significantly over the past eight decades, and the contributors to our essays are based

¹ David Robey, 'Italian Studies: The First Half', *Italian Studies*, 67.2 (2012), 287-99; the rationale for focusing on the period 1937 to 1974, and more closely on the postwar years, is reviewed on pp. 287-88. See also the very brief notice on the 'scope and purpose' of the journal in its opening number, defined as 'the general furtherance, by publication or recording, of literary and scholarly work in the Italian field': The Editors, 'Italian Studies', *Italian Studies* 1.1 (1937-38), 48. Founded in 1938, the Society for Italian Studies's postwar statement in the journal outlined its aim of promoting 'the serious study of Italian literature, language, history and the arts, and to strengthen cultural ties with Italy'. This was first published in *Italian Studies*, 3.3-4 (1947), 225.

across not only the Society's two nations and in Italy, but in the United States and Australia too. Many hold dual or multiple citizenships, and have spent portions of their careers in the places already mentioned, and in the USA, Canada, or other European countries; in Italian Studies, as in so many academic disciplines, peripatetic careers are now the norm. The work of scholars based in African and Asian universities is discussed in several of the essays that follow, and exchanges with these communities look set to rise in the future. Italian Studies as a field remains therefore in constant evolution, across and between multiple locations. The numerical discrepancies between the series of volumes published as *Italian Studies* and the foundation date of the scholarly Society it represents remind us that intellectual enquiry does not proceed along smooth and predictable lines. That is its reward. This Issue appears with the number 75 on its spine, but in the eighty-third year since the journal's foundation, and we hope that the articles collected here will give rise to fruitful discussions both on the pages of future issues across coming decades, and in other exchanges between their readers – perhaps through provocations, problems, omissions, and incompletions, as well as through what the editors and authors, collaboratively, have in the end included in the articles that follow as a record of some of our key concerns in 2020.