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What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Italian American Studies – Now

In March 2014, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of the City University of New York (Queens College) organized a major international conference in Bellagio, *Transcending Borders, Bridging Gaps: Italian Americana, Diasporic Studies, and the University Curriculum* entirely funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. On that occasion, eighteen scholars met “in order to analyze the current status of the field of Italian-American studies in both Italy and the United States and to examine further the possibilities of what the future might hold” (Gardaphé, Tamburri vii). Even though, following a long neglect,¹ the field of Italian American Studies (or Italian/American Studies, as Anthony J. Tamburri proposed a few years ago)² had already dramatically expanded over the former couple of decades, the conference somehow marked a significant turn. The conference saw the contribution of eminent figures such as, beyond Tamburri himself, Fred L. Gardaphé, Robert Viscusi, Djelal Kadir, Joseph Sciorra, Mary Jo Bona, Paul Giordano, Peter Carravetta, Marina Camboni, Donatella Izzo, Giorgio Mariani and Maddalena Tirabassi; it also helped establish a much more structured and constant collaboration between the two sides of the Atlantic that somehow re-oriented the critical approaches (in all the sub-areas of the field and in their inter/trans-disciplinary connections) by (re)instating a distinctly (yet not monolithically reified) Italian view. This was of course also the effect of the paradigm shift that at the turn of the millennium has systematically redeployed the various fields of migration studies as more general and “globalized” diaspora studies, so that the stressed part of the (no longer) hyphenated adjective is now the first rather than the second.

In one of the essays of the Bellagio Conference proceedings, Marina Camboni reads Robert Viscusi’s *ellis island* (2011) precisely as a perfect instance of this redefinition of migrant/diasporic identities and of their representation, which is at the same time also what is happening today to

the field of Italian American studies itself. If Viscusi somehow frees the Italian American migrant from the fixed fate of a “total uprooting and a one way journey from the home of origin to the new home,” turning him/her into the embodiment of “an interrupted story” who is also “the connector of lands, language and cultures” (Camboni 62), this may positively be read as a meta-commentary on the future of the disciplines gathered under the label of Italian American studies. The latter, in fact, are deemed one way or another to transcend the traditional bi-directional tension between “Italy” and “the USA” that often entailed in the past a hypostatization and simplification of both signs,³ by relocating it within the complex network of interconnections linking on the one hand all the diasporic movements of people whose recent or remote roots are grounded in Italy, and on the other this larger Italian diaspora to all the other modern and postmodern experiences of migration that can legitimately be called diasporic.

Needless to say, this reappraisal of the object of Italian American studies most seriously calls for a re-semanticization and re-contextualization of whatever we talk about when we talk about diasporas, which may involve that planetary dimension (see Elias and Moraru) which has now become rather fashionable after the term “globalization” has acquired a fairly negative connotation. This shift, however, also requires the adoption of a renewed comparative stance that may help avoid the danger of homogenizing the most diverse migratory process by enclosing them into an undifferentiated global diasporic system of fluctuations – that necessity of a “comparative, transnational, and transoceanic critical exchange” Cristina Lombardi-Diop ties to “a postcolonial approach to Italian diaspora studies” (92), as long as this approach is self-consciously double-edged, and is able to clearly stage the contradictory position of “Italianness” in the crux of colonial policies and cultures where the Italians and their descendants may be either their (never really or totally) “passive” objects or their active subjects. As a matter of fact, the comparative/postcolonial perspective implies an even greater attention to the dimension of race that, albeit being present in almost every study on the Italian migration to the United States, has become central especially after Thomas Guglielmo’s *White on Arrival* and the collected essays edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno *Are Italians White?* (both books were published in 2003). As for the Italian side, a recent relevant contribution has been *Parlare di razza*, the book edited in 2012 by Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh and Anna Scacchi. And just as race

as a cultural construction is especially central in any analysis of the Italian American experience, so is national identity, as Peter Carravetta argues in *After Identity: Migration, Critique, Italian American Culture* (2017), where he states that the nation-state paradigm must be deconstructed when studying the Italian American migration (like any other migration), because it mainly is an ideological screen hiding the real post-national and trans-ethnic struggles of economic and technological power (which most Italian American contemporary literature engages by questioning, destructuring and hybridizing old-fashioned fictions of a stable ethnic identity).

In January 2018 the Calandra Institute hosted in New York City a second *Transcending Borders, Bridging Gaps* meeting. In this case, rather than a conference, what various scholars from the USA, Italy and also the UK met for was a three-day series of workshops on how to re-think the strategies needed to expand both the research methodologies and the pedagogical practices in the field of Italian American and/or Diaspora Studies, and to implement their presence in the university curricula. The final outcome of the meeting was the creation of an Italian American Collaborative whose aim is not only that of fostering and sustaining “an ever-widening collaboration among universities, organizations, groups, and individuals who are committed to Italian American Studies and the study of the Italian Diaspora as seen in its migrations,” but also to further explore the study of the “intersections of these transnational migrations with other diasporas” (from the “Mission Statement” of the Italian American Collaborative, drafted in February 2018). All this showed how the Calandra Institute has by now become a central point of reference and a driving force for an extremely diversified variety of initiatives, as it may easily be inferred by the mere list of events organized or sponsored in the month of September 2018 – about 40, more than one each day – and by the role of the Institute in promoting activities abroad like the Italian Diaspora Studies Summer Seminar held in June 2018 at the University of Rome Three (formerly hosted by the University of Calabria).

Just like the Bellagio event, the *Transcending Borders, Bridging Gaps 2.0* highlighted the new directions Italian American Studies are now taking, and the mere fact that such a realignment has occurred in the span of only four years attests the vitality and richness of the lines of research and of the cultural politics that the Italian American transnational collective enterprise bolstered by the Calandra Institute has managed to achieve. Besides further

exploring the global diasporic dimension of the Italian migrations to the USA and elsewhere in a comparative perspective, as witnessed by the three major international conferences on the *Diaspore Italiane – Italy in Movement* organized in less than a year and a half (in Melbourne in April 2018, in New York in November 2018, in Genova in June 2019),⁴ this reconfiguration aims at retrieving aspects and factors of the processes involving the Italian mobilities to the United States that have been hitherto underrated, if not utterly ignored. Some of the most recent publications in the field have indeed addressed issues that have come to the fore only in the last five years or so, and that have been investigated in the Calandra Institute meeting, such as the self-representation of Italian Americans as “whites” in public culture (Vellon), the cultural impact of Italian “ethnicity” in US consumer society (Cinotto, ed., *Making Italian America*), the interethnic dialogue and mutual influence between the Italian American and African American communities (Celenza, Gennari, and Pardini), Italian American food culture (Cinotto, *The Italian American Table*), the spreading of Italian vernacular music in the USA (Frasca), the material representations of the Italian Catholic culture in New York “vernacular sacred sites” (Sciorra xxiii), the Italian migrant women’s role in the American and global diasporas (Luconi and Varricchio) and their artistry in needlework (Sciorra and Giunta).

The most outstanding synthesis of these new trends is probably the two-volume anthology *New Italian Migrations to the United States* (2017), edited by Laura Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, which showcases essays on the Italian and US politics of migration after World War 2, new second-generation youth sub-culture, the role of Italian American politicians in Italian elections, the much more than virtual communities created by Italian American radios, the image of Italian women in US cinema, the “translation zone” where Italian popular musical genres are assimilated into the American musical landscape and Italian cuisine becomes Italian American. Particularly relevant is Tamburri’s essay at the end of the second volume that proposes to redefine the label “Italian writer,” so as not to make it applicable only to “Italy-born, -bred, and -residential” authors (Tamburri, “Afterword” 200), and to turn it instead into a much more flexible and multidirectional category – and thus including also non-“Italian” American writers who, like Jumpha Lahiri, now write in Italian, and possibly former immigrants to Italy who started to write in Italian and

later migrated to the United States, like the Algerian-born Amara Lakhous.⁵ If Ruberto and Sciorra’s anthology somehow sets the agenda for the future of Italian American and Italian Diaspora Studies, Maddalena Tirabassi and Alvise Del Pra’s *La meglio Italia* (2014) examines the 21st-century Italian migrations to assess their continuities and discontinuities with the past, in the context of rapidly changing geopolitical and ideological boundaries that are being torn down and redrawn under the pressure of economic crises and the new diasporas from Africa and the Middle East.

Witnessing to the gradual “empowering” of Italian American studies in the Italian academic world (and in public culture too)⁶ is the special issue *Riflessi di un’America italiana: Studi sulla cultura italoamericana negli Stati Uniti* of the journal of North-American Studies *Ácoma* (vol. 24, no. 13, Fall-Winter 2017), while the same journal had been severely criticized by Tamburri himself for not having included Italian American literature in a section on contemporary ethnic literatures in the USA published in its Spring-Summer 2006 issue no. 31 (see Tamburri, *Re-reading Italian Americana* 8).⁷ In the special 2017 issue, Donatella Izzo draws a precise picture, provided with a theoretically dense framework, of the state of the art in Italian American Studies, to which the present article only aspires to be a modest adjunct. Other important events that confirm the consolidation of the field in Italy are the creation, at the end of 2015, of the Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani (CISIA) at the University of Macerata, thanks to the efforts of Marina Camboni, now its Honorary President, and the strong inclination towards Italian-American matters of the Centro di Ricerca Interdipartimentale di Studi Americani (CRISA), founded in 2010 on Cristina Giorcelli’s initiative at the University of Rome Three, which in 2016 held a major international conference on *Re-Mapping Italian America* (the proceedings have been published by Bordighera Press). Both Centers, besides, conceptualize “Italian American” in a circum-Atlantic horizon, involving the whole American continent, in the wake of the long standing tradition of Italian “American Studies” inaugurated by the very first Dipartimento di Studi Americani in Italy (originally at the University of Rome La Sapienza, and then at the University of Rome Three) under the guidance of Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli – something that anticipated the current preoccupations for a non-imperialistic, non-US-centered vision of American Studies.

The contribution of the Italian angle of vision to this decentralization of

(Italian) American Studies can be detected in the two conferences organized by the CISIA in Macerata: *Democracies on the Move: Citizenships, Languages and Migrations across Italy, Europe, and the Americas* (May 2017) and *Nuove migrazioni, nuovi ritorni: Le diaspore italiane nelle Americhe dopo il 1945* (June 2018). The latter, besides presenting Ruberto and Sciorra's anthology, featured a number of contributions which crossed multiple boundaries, from the geographical ones between Italy and the Americas on one side and the various sub-spaces of the American continent (especially the USA and Argentina), to those between scholarly research, personal memoir and creative expression (literary and musical). Furthermore, the conference pointed out another feature of contemporary Italian diasporas, that is the growing importance placed on the use of Italian as a literary language (see Tamburri, *Un biculturalismo negato*) by both Italian migrants to America and former Italian American immigrants, or their descendants, who have come back to Italy and retrieved the *lingua madre* – not to mention the relatively small, yet strongly influential (given their academic role) number of Italian scholars who, like Paolo Valesio, have expatriated to America but keep writing poetry or fiction in Italian. Among them is also Ernesto Livorni, who took part in the *Nuove migrazioni, nuovi ritorni* conference, an eminent Italianist who teaches at the University of Wisconsin and publishes his poetry in Italian, where he often autobiographically meditates on the contemporary experience of the migrant/expat caught in an incessant back-and-forth motion (both physically and psychologically) between the two sides of the Atlantic.

This movement can be detected, analyzed and interpreted in the totality of its complex articulation only when the view from *this* side is added, and when not only the migrant subject is visibly present in the mobile landscape of Italian diasporas, but also the families and communities that, though staying at “home,” remain in touch across the ocean(s), thus building up a two-way exchange of experiences. And the “back” leg of the movement of all the people who did not permanently stay in America must also be better foregrounded, to make all its distinctive features come fully to light, in order to ascertain the ways in which the migrants who finally returned to Italy had to readjust to a vastly different country, which in its turn could discover how remote, in many cases, the experience of migration had actually been from the most popular images disseminated by dominant culture.

Last but not least, in this pretentious as well as crudely drawn agenda

of things to think and to do in the field of Italian American / Italian Diaspora Studies, is the investigation of the processes of reception of the Italian American material products and cultural expressions in Italy, and the re-orientation of Italian society toward the migrant communities in America they bring about. Through this reorientation of the critical gaze, the redefinition of the relationships between the individual subject and the different national and local allegiances his/her identity is transnationally built *across* in a never ending dialogue and/or struggle can become what we talk about when we talk about Italian American Studies – now.⁸

Notes

¹ If Italian American migrations to the US have gained the attention of historians, social scientists and anthropologists almost since the very beginning, with books such as Antonio Mangano's *Sons of Italy* (1917), Enrico C. Sartorio's *Social and Religious Life of Italians in America* (1918), and Philip M. Rose's *The Italian in America* (1922), only in 1974 the very first extensive study of Italian American literature was published, Rose Basile Green's *The Italian-American Novel*. And only in the 1990s a substantial corpus of volume-length literary studies finally appeared, with significant contributions from Italian scholars like Martino Marazzi and Francesco Durante.

² In the preface to the Bellagio conference proceedings we still see instead the much abhorred hyphen, whose substitution with the slash Tamburri already motivated in 1991 by claiming the need to cast “by the wayside any notion of universality or absoluteness with regard to the regulated use of the hyphen in adjectival phrases denoting national origin, ethnicity, race, or gender” (Tamburri, *To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate* 18) – while the slash should signal not the separation but the possibility of dynamically alternating between the two areas of identity, and therefore challenging their representativeness, as Giorgio Mariani states in his essay in the proceedings.

³ The two classic studies that at the end of last century deconstructed the dominant semiotics that up to then had forced Italian American identity into a binary dialectic of assimilation/irreducibility between the two hypostasized signs “Italian” and “American” are of course Fred L. Gardaphé's *Italian Signs, American Streets* (1996) and Anthony Julian Tamburri's *A Semiotic of Ethnicity* (1998).

⁴ The titles of the conferences making up this “Symposium on Three Continents” are *Living Transcultural Spaces, Transnationalism and Questions of identity* and *Between Immigration and Historical Amnesia*.

⁵ On contemporary “Italian” American literature, and more generally on the literature of the Italian diaspora, see also Fontanella, and Bonaffini and Perricone.

⁶ One major evidence can be the exhibition *L'Italia a Hollywood*, featured at the Museo

Salvatore Ferragamo in Florence (May 2018-March 2019), which showcases a rich and varied reconstruction not only of the contribution of Italian actors such as Rodolfo Valentino to the birth and development of early American cinema, but also of the intricate two-way dialogue between US movie industry and Italy as both a reservoir of settings and artistic suggestions (as in Henry King's *Romola*, shot in Florence in 1924) and the country which actually invented a commercial cinema that managed to combine popular success and aesthetic sophistication (as in the case of the very first "kolossal" in film history, *Cabiria*, directed in 1914 by Giovanni Pastrone with Gabriele D'Annunzio "epic/poetic" screenwriting and intertitles) and that powerfully influenced subsequent American cinema. The catalogue, edited by Stefania Ricci, is much more than a simple description of the materials displayed in the exhibition, and the essays by authors like Giuliana Muscio, Maddalena Tirabassi and John Paul Russo offer an in-depth analysis of the transnational social and cultural dynamics that shaped Italian-American relationships in the first decades of the twentieth century.

⁷ The first relevant 21st-century extended reconsideration of Italian American literature in an Italian journal may be found in the Forum *The Emerging Canon in Italian-American Literature*, ed. by John Paul Russo and Leonardo Buonomo in issue 21-22 of *RSA Journal* (2010-11).

⁸ As a further evidence of the vitality of the field in Italy, I came to know of the publication of two new books, the collection *Incontri italoamericani*, ed. by Michele Bottalico, and Giuliana Muscio's *Napoli/New York/Hollywood*, when this essay was already in its first proofs, and I did not even have the time to read them. To these I must add, from the US side, the equally new, and ponderously exhaustive (almost 40 essays), *Routledge History of Italian Americans*, ed. by William J. Connell and Stanislaw G. Pugliese.

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They talk about domestic abuse, stalking, rat poison, suicide, car accidents, surgeries, hospitals, knights, andâ€”how could we forget?â€”bees. When love is the topic, you never know what's going to come up next. So why isn't this story called "Knights and Bees"? Probably because the title comes from a line in the story itself, when Mel McGinnis introduces his example of true love, the story of an elderly couple who survive a car accident. He says: You see, this happened a few months ago, but it's still going on right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk Italian-Americans at their best, are very interesting people. They are fascinating because I am fascinated with a lot of things in America. At worst, they are very irritating. Their claim to being "Italian" is by blood and not much of anything else.Â Another thing: have you ever thought that some of us Italians might be slightly irritated by all those Americans who start talking to us using creole words we do not understand, or start explaining how things and people are in Italy, or requesting food we have never heard of? Or that people working in tourism and catering might be tired of receiving complaints due to misconceptions (a complaint could cost someoneâ€™s job)? Now we come to what Iâ€™ve learned from talking about America. You canâ€™t, really. I began writing this series of essays knowing it would be painful and costly, both reputationally and relationally. I knew Iâ€™d make more enemies than friends and that there was less than nothing to gain. Contrary to popular belief, I donâ€™t make any money, win any fans, or earn any plaudits for writing this stuff. So why did I do it? I didnâ€™t harbour any illusion that I could change things. But I did want to test for myself the hypothesis of just how broken America really is.