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Collaging Cultures: Curating Italian Studies

Which is which? Where is *here*? (Homi Bhabha)

Consider what might be gained if the powerful claims of soil, roots, and territory could be set aside (Paul Gilroy)

How is proximity experienced today? (Okwui Enwezor)

In a contribution to a wide-ranging discussion on the current state of comparative literature, Doris Sommer proposes a period of what she calls 'Study Abroad at home' for students of world literature, where they would spend time living with migrant communities in their local areas. The aim, Sommer writes, would be to offer an experience of intercultural cohabitation to equip them "to engage as readers in today's world" and to actualize the promise of becoming the "global citizens" often touted as the happy outcome of university programs. Interestingly, Sommer envisions the intercultural encounter as leading to better or more culturally expansive and genealogically inventive practices of reading, implicitly reinforcing the value of humanistic study as students learn to 'think and feel beyond their inherited frameworks' (2015). Although in this instance she is addressing directly the discipline of comparative literature, her remarks have profound implications for departments of modern languages, whose study abroad programs have conventionally allowed students to travel to sometimes quite distant places to deepen their knowledge of the language and culture they study through closer acquaintance *in situ*. The distance travelled in many respects has occupied a structural or ideological role as well as a pragmatic obstacle within modern languages, underlining the belief in a clear separation between distinct cultures. Traditionally, the discipline has worked on a spatial model.¹ Yet in "today's world" such a clear-cut division of languages and cultures is palpably untenable. In Scotland, from where I am writing, Polish, for example, is the second most widely-spoken language, and Spanish, which now

challenges French in the UK as the language mostly widely taught in schools, is regularly heard in the streets. It is a local language. The fact of transnational mobility and settlement highlighted by Sommer poses challenges both to the menu of languages traditionally taught in the education system, and to the firm advocacy of monolingual cultural identity on which our disciplines are historically based. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's point that "national-language departments rarely question the metonymical relationship between language and nation" (2005, 3) is now being reinforced by the overwhelming burden of evidence that people and the languages they speak are no longer in the places that this model of inquiry had imagined.

The questions I want to explore revolve around a concern about what it means to research and teach in Italian Studies at a moment when language, culture, and territory no longer securely align in terms of the national, and where borders and boundaries of all sorts are regularly crossed but also virulently maintained.² What value and purpose does it have to choose to study what looks like a singular national culture, and further to cleave to that choice despite the movements of people, things, and ideas that no longer make the fusion of language and territory such a convincing category of analysis? Is the work carried out in modern languages now damaged by the discipline's adherence to a project of national normativity? Any response to these questions demands the invention of new relations with the purported object of study, and for now, at least, I would argue, these relations need to be prioritized over the object itself. What follows is primarily a reflection on how to imagine a new relationality.

Modern languages is not the only area of humanistic inquiry under pressure to rethink its formative attachment to the nation. Contemporary curatorial museum and exhibition practice offer a particularly inspiring as well as pragmatic response to the shared creative challenge of reimagining "inherited frameworks." Like modern languages, curatorial practice has been closely linked to nation building and the consolidation of particular, habitually teleological national narratives. The demographic and intellectual energies brought about through the long processes of political and intellectual decolonization have led curators to revise what is put on display, and to devise alternative optics to ensure that knowledge production is

questioned rather than simply delivered. No longer about preserving a singular and seamless national past, contemporary curatorial practice creates openings onto multiple temporalities, actively engaging both curator and spectator in technologies of critical interpretation. The anthropologist James Clifford has summarized the outcomes of this model in terms remarkably similar to those used by Sommer:

Contemporary curatorial work, in the excessive times of decolonization and globalization, by engaging with discrepant temporalities not resisting or smoothing over their inescapable friction, has the potential to open up common-sense, received histories. It does so under serious constraints –a push and pull of institutional forces and ideological legacies that cannot be evaded. (2012, 70)

Drawing on the term's Latin etymology, Clifford argues for an ethics of "care" in curating to help its object "thrive" by working through "active relations of reciprocity and dialogue, not administration and tutelage" (73). "Administration and tutelage" arguably have been determining strategies in how the discipline of modern languages has managed national cultures. Conversely, the need for reciprocity and dialogue has never been more urgent than it is now, in light of the effects that contemporary human mobility exercises over spatial relations. Okwui Enwezor writes about "the terrible nearness of distant places" caused by the demographics of colonialism, postcolonialism, and global displacement and considers their destabilizing effects on familiar curatorial choices and strategies. For Enwezor, the "postcolonial world today is a world of proximities. It is a world of nearness, not an elsewhere" (2002, 44). These proximities challenge geopolitical normativity by raising discomfiting questions about pre-existing investments in spatial and temporal hierarchies that conventional modes of cultural organization such as those that prevail in modern languages have depended on and reinforced. Enwezor's interrogation of the ideological work of exhibition spaces or cultural initiatives that can be interpreted as statements of exclusive national cultures is directly relevant to how and what we teach in our own strategic "curating" of national culture and heritage. While it is undoubtedly the case that what we teach in modern languages has changed significantly in recent years, even the most virulent anti-canonical turn

runs the risk of reinforcing the hegemonic disciplinary paradigm if it instates only superficially novel definitional parameters in the long shadow of the nation.

My suggestion in this essay is that we might usefully think in tandem with curatorial practice to develop critical strategies for creatively revising our reliance on the national frame and respond to the pressures to adopt a less exclusionary, more variegated set of methodological practices and theoretical premises. These practices and premises should be grounded in the “nearness” that both Sommer and Enwezor invoke. The title of this essay is therefore an invitation to curate anew our disciplinary field, in which “Italy” remains for now, but possibly permanently, “under erasure.” Derrida’s well-known concept, widely influential also as an artistic practice, highlights quite literally the labor of grappling with the anachronism of “inherited frameworks” even as we perceive their resilience.³ How then might we do Italian Studies differently by welcoming its erasure while remaining alert to its stubborn capacity to endure?⁴

I want to broach these questions by first looking at some important reconfigurations of modern Italian history, culture, and identity from within the discipline that map out the convergent and divergent coordinates of what has become an ongoing conversation around Italy, its history, and sense of identity. Yet, as I indicated above, what strikes me as more urgent now is to afford privilege to, and reflect critically on, the material locatedness of the teacher/researcher/student (and these roles should not be kept as distinct identity categories) in order to establish a sharper sense of relationality with this reconfigured paradigm of national culture. The place of the teacher/researcher/student and its configuration need to be made to matter in this newly expansive geopolitical and historical map of the object called “Italy.” Sommer’s proposal to “study abroad at home” will function (albeit retrospectively) as the starting point for critical and pragmatic reflection on my own biographical, affective, and critical relation to Italy, which I will discuss in order to argue for a more dilated understanding of Italian culture detached from the singularity of peninsular origin, ethnic inflection, and linguistic particularity. This project demands the simultaneous and equal recognition that the place (home) from which I, or any researcher, speak is always already culturally complex, comprising material with no sure provenance.⁵ I will contend that the self-reflective study of

Italy from within this drift (*dérive*) away from cultural mononationalism should be seen as our discipline's most potent contribution to scholarship and beyond.⁶ Such study moves us resolutely away from a spatially delimited or 'area studies'⁷ model of inquiry dependent on national specificity and the accumulation of knowledge of a pre-determined object and toward the kind of positionality intimated by Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation*, which recognizes an indefinite multiplicity of knowledges and temporalities, a rhizomatic constellation at odds with claims to 'rootedness' and origin. Language difference is symptomatic here. "The root," Glissant writes, "is monolingual. ... Relation ... is spoken multilingually" (1997, 15, 19).

Postcolonial and Trans-national Differences

The place of Italy in Italian Studies and the disposition of Italy as a geopolitical entity have been acutely tested in recent years. Until fairly recently, scholars would rightly note that Italian national culture and identity competed with regional or even highly localized formations. This field of tension could be apprehended as antagonistic and exclusive or as complementary and additive, but, however it was experienced and viewed, the territory of Italy itself provided a fungible container for a heterogeneously singular identity and culture. A very different ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity has become palpable as a result of migration to Italy from countries with which Italy has no direct historical connection, but which has evoked repressed histories of colonialism and emigration. Yet numerous other factors, such as the ongoing financial and political crisis, a tense relationship with the EU, and contemporary emigration from Italy further complicate and blur the boundaries of the national paradigm. To claim Italy as an object of study now requires a shift in methodology and the articulation of a set of theoretical coordinates capable of analyzing forensically this connected global framework and the detail of its implications, paying due attention to the identification and recovery of whatever lies beyond national normativity.

It is certainly the case that from within the culturally inflected version of Italian Studies most familiar to me, this work has been underway for some time. An expanded sense of Italy in spatial as well as historical terms has been explored through a series of critical prisms that engage these issues in what seem similar but not identical ways. Postcolonialism, transnationalism, and diaspora and their associated theoretical narratives reconfigure familiar iterations of Italy and Italian identity. The 2014 “Cultural Studies” issue of the UK-based journal *Italian Studies* published side-by-side two essays highly pertinent to this discussion: Emma Bond’s “Towards a Trans-national Turn in Italian Studies?” and Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo’s “The Italian Postcolonial: A Manifesto.”⁸ The essays’ titles immediately highlight some of the significant differences between the pieces, which nevertheless remain, in my view, two of the boldest and most succinct statements of critical purpose to have emerged from within our discipline.⁹ Bond’s exploratory title question offers one point of contrast with Lombardi-Diop and Romeo’s more defiantly charged “manifesto.” Of deeper interest is their adoption of two critically contiguous terms: the “Trans-national” and the “Postcolonial.”¹⁰ The hyphenated adjective and nominalization of a word more common in its adjectival form intimate the importance of language itself as the site of productive expression and contestation, and indeed the authors of both essays reflect critically on their choices. For Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, the “postcolonial” demands a recognition of Italy’s altered ethnoscape in the wake of migration and provides a mechanism through which to open up the conflicts and complexities of Italy’s colonial and emigrant pasts. The goal of the “Manifesto” is to build ‘an intellectual and theoretical framework that can engender a debate on what constitutes the postcolonial condition of contemporary Italy’ (425). Its authors put forward a robust case for expanding the frame of Italian Studies in order to revise and transform not just the discipline but *italianità* itself:

We believe that an engaged scholarship ought to aim at redefining the very notion of *italianità* by taking into account Italy’s diasporic scattering and the dissemination of its political, social, and cultural models within but also beyond its national borders at different historical moments: in particular ...

during the epochal mass emigrations to the Americas, North Africa and later Northern Europe, the colonization of Africa, and the internal migrations from the South to the North. (2014, 429)

Italy's postcoloniality flexes through time and space, and Lombardi-Diop and Romeo make a convincing and powerful case for how it also conjugates national formations of gender and race in the peninsula and beyond. However expansive in its scope and articulation, the "postcolonial" nevertheless functions as a declination of "Italian" through which the nation is changed, but arguably retains a formative intelligibility. Here the postcolonial remains a project of national renewal.

Bond uses the concept of the trans-national primarily as an "interpretive lens" (413) and moves in a different direction. Her focus on history and geography, on time and space echoes the position of Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, but is differently inflected. History is "palimpsestic," and Italy's "peripheral status within Europe" pulls it towards other "relations of proximity" (417). Her detailed case study showing how the category of "global" or "world" functions as a euphemism for "non-national" in literary studies in Italy illuminates a disavowal of the contingent relationality on which the hyphenated trans-national insists:

For the hyphen ensures a dialogue between the local and the global, engaging with relations of proximity and privileging points of reference and connections between here and there, whilst bearing in mind that temporal and spatial points of reference might well be multiple but are always connected to a present site of subjectivity (422)

Like Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, Bond indicts as she aims to transform the disciplinary concerns of Italian Studies, yet ultimately her goal is not to force a revision of *italianità*, but rather to deploy the specificities of the Italian case to add nuance to interdisciplinary understandings of what the trans-national as a category of analysis allows. Interestingly, she refers to Igiaba Scego's autobiographical novel *La mia casa è dove sono* to illustrate her point. Scego's substantial body of work addresses pretty much all of the postcolonial concerns identified by Lombardi-Diop

and Romeo as well, and in itself testifies to the productive overlap between the two critical frameworks. From a postcolonial perspective, Scego's work is a capillary dissection of contemporary cultural diversity within Italy, but Bond's theoretical framework leads it towards a different set of outcomes. Her primary emphasis on the kinetic or the energy associated with movement allows her to read Scego interstitially as she traces "superimposed cartographies of interactive belonging where places intersect through memory and imagination in order to form poles of meaning within a mixed and flexible trans-national identity" (424). This perception might usefully be read in counterpoint to Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, who describe their project as "fostering a notion of national identity and culture rooted in transnationalism and dis-homogeneity" (428). While both positions seem congruent, they diverge over the nation's enduring place as cultural container. The parallel yet contrasting axes of primary signification that structure each argument very tellingly instantiate the twisting effect or torsion inherent in what might tentatively be called post-national Italian Studies.

The hyphen in 'dis-homogeneity' does prompt consideration of the diversity of potentially discordant voices within the nation and of what Bond calls "a present site of subjectivity" (422). Sandra Ponzanesi and Goffredo Polizzi (2016) identify a strong and varied contribution (from Vico to Cassano through Gramsci) to postcolonial theory from the peninsula. Not usually seen from this perspective, Primo Levi's reflections on the limits of the human and the camp have been influential on Paul Gilroy's work, underlining the proximity of anti-Semitism to other forms of racist thought and practice. Indeed, the fascist journal *La difesa della razza*, published between 1938 and 1943 in the wake of the introduction of the Race Laws, was unequivocal in insisting on their alignment.¹¹ A nuanced sense of positionality is integral to the body of thought emerging from the Italian South as a place from which postcolonial critique might be articulated as a productive modality of subaltern knowledge indebted to Gramsci but also to Spivak and other South Asian theorists. In the work of critics such as Iain Chambers and Franco Cassano, the "southern point of view" is, however, not determined or exhausted by nationality, biography, or an essentialized notion of place. Cassano insists that his work is not driven by any identitarian affiliation, but by "una riflessione sul lato d'ombra di ogni

identità” (2005, v). The South, as Chambers affirms elsewhere, is a “mobile place holder,” or a “critical intention” (2017, 28).¹² Not to be identified with a single geopolitical place, the “South” is the space from where the legacy of Western colonialism unravels, becoming, in Walter Mignolo’s formulation “a locus of enunciation where different ways of knowing and collective expressions mingle” (2012, 5). This locus is generative of what he calls “border thinking” and “border epistemologies” that refer to subaltern knowledge produced by colonialism and to its ongoing effects. To think from the border is not to re-think the nation but to think despite it.¹³

In counterpoint to the critical loquaciousness of the itinerant South, Ponzanesi and Polizzi suggest, in what I see as a disquieting move, that descendants of Italian emigrants possess an “émigré mentality” that disbars them from “southern” thinking. In contrast to the cognitive flexibility generated by location, the essentialist or embodied perspective of inherited identity inhibits thinking beyond and from borders. This defensive legacy of Italian colonialism is seen in expressions of xenophobia and unsympathetic responses to lives lost in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean to Lampedusa.¹⁴ This implicit invocation of the functionality of blood ties intersects with current Italian citizenship legislation based on *ius sanguinis* that gives priority to emigrants’ descendants. Lombardi Diop and Romeo offer a loaded account of this phenomenon and its human effects, clearly intimating that culturally and indeed biologically (for *meticciato* is in fact invoked), these returning citizens are simply not Italian enough:

These return migrants are citizens from a legal standpoint; however, Italians often fail to perceive the difference between them and illegal immigrants, mainly because of their diasporic history of intermarriage with individuals from their communities of origin, their lack of familiarity with the host culture, and their (often) poor knowledge of the Italian language, which creates in them a sense of disillusionment and alienation. This phenomenon complicates the very notion of citizenship, exposing the contradictions and incongruousness inherent in the principle of *jus sanguinis* that regulates its attribution, showing how everyday practices are as relevant in creating a

sense of (non) belonging as are legal principles. (2014, 429)

They see this blood-borne fracture as inherent to “diasporic *italianità*” (2015, 431), an enduring symptom of the “global nation.” Here the burden of the argument shifts from a recognition of the transversal, kinetic qualities of space to the biopolitics of “inherited frameworks.” Mignolo’s work is again helpful here. He coins the term “cultural semiosis” as a mechanism through which to apprehend the complexity of contact perceptible in the realm of material cultural practice. Mignolo focuses on material culture to obviate the possible invocation of blood ties and the assumption of their consequent heuristic effects (as evinced by the idea of “émigré mentality”). “Cultural semiosis” allows for the perception and critical inhabitation of drift (*dérive*). It can be used as a flexible conceptual tool for understanding Italian cultural presence as a phenomenon not restricted either to national territory or to people deemed to originate from the peninsula and their descendants (2012, 14-16).

Mignolo’s concept is in fact congruent with the ways in which Donna Gabaccia frames diasporic identity and cultural practice. She contrasts a strong nationalistic model of identity with a more muted, proletarian expression. Referring to the *italianità* of the descendants of Italian migrants, she reflects that “where it has persisted at all, [it] resides in the humble details of everyday life, not in the glories of any nation or its state” (2000, 177). Conceding the possible, even likely, historical fading of a sense of connectedness to Italy, something which not enough historians of emigration are willing to admit, her more important move is to locate the residual presence of *italianità* in quotidian, vernacular practices. These vernacular practices are more varied and more material in their expression than the static Italian high, primarily literary, culture traditionally “curated” by departments of Italian Studies.¹⁵

[FIGURE 1] Architecture and the built environment, music, political interventions, food cultures and culinary practices, gender styles and embodiments, and artisanal practices are all possible elements of a diffused Italian vernacular culture whose articulations are felt through the global diaspora. Given the simple fact that so many Italians moved to so many destinations, the haptic ripple of their global presence created multiple zones of cultural contact. This contact, I would suggest, produced “tactile epistemologies” or ways of knowing generated by embodied proximity

rather than distant abstraction.¹⁶ So just as Gilroy consistently and powerfully asserts the challenge of transnational Black cultural production to “the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (1993, 19), tracing how Black vernacular expression has spread outside the Black community and changed because of that, my parallel contention is that Italian culture cannot remain, conceptually or practically, a matter of inheritance. The haptic encounter with Italian vernacular culture both precedes and exceeds the border-bound logics of ethnic nationalism. For the remainder of this essay, I want to distend the delimiting purchase of “Italian” as cultural signifier of territorialized, ethnic, and linguistic belonging by thinking it through the history of Italian migration to Scotland, a migration not numerically large but of significant import locally.¹⁷ My project is to begin a work of highly localized cultural semiosis that attempts to curate a “present site of subjectivity” and an ongoing inquiry into cultural artifacts known as Italian.¹⁸

Haptic Connections and Relations of Proximity

My core question here is: how can Italian Studies continue to operate in what looks increasingly less like a national culture? As Sommer argues, we can start usefully by reflecting critically on where we speak from, on home and its divergent component parts. The inherent diversity of home (and by extension of that self who inhabits it) can be interrogated as loci of border thinking in order to avoid the often-unintentional reiteration of the logic of national normativity. The aim of a critical focus on home is to initiate the identification and investigation of what in a different but related context, Homi Bhabha has called “new cultural genealogies” that can be glimpsed in “the art of global diaspora” (2006, 34). Sommer’s “home” is striated with the productive ambivalence inherent in Bhabha’s concept of the postcolonial “unhomely,” where the “recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions” (1994, 9). Yet for Bhabha, whose work is all about haunting, living in the “unhomely world” may offer the chance for the affirmation of the kind of social solidarity whose absence commentators on the Italian postcolonial condition lament.¹⁹ Such living offers the option of curatorial critique.

In order to push this a bit further, I will consider on what it means for me to take home (as a case study) as the site of thinking the border or boundaries of Italian Studies. Through mapping a set of connections or relations with Italy that gesture toward a generative deterritorialization and dispossession of cultural legacy and sense of belonging, I aim to sever the accepted pedagogical link between national territory, language, and identity. My retention of what looks like a national cultural signifier might be read as an instance of Cassano's "lato d'ombra di ogni identità." I do not claim cultural ownership of these connections, but merely propose that their contours sit along *one* possible diacritical (Italian) border.

The methodological bias of my teaching has recently changed to become more self-conscious of the location from which I speak and from where my students approach their study of Italian language and culture. The diverse student population of St Andrews, where I currently work, is drawn from all over the UK, continental Europe, North America, and East Asia, so it is unusual to stand in front of an ethnically or nationally homogenous group. A minority of the students will be of Italian descent, but with differing relations to Italy. Occasionally we teach Italian Erasmus students, but mostly we are foreign. Historically, this diversity was only ever acknowledged as a sort of curiosity, or evidence of the institution's international pulling power. Increasingly, I find it essential to recognize this diversity as a productively complicating factor in how the degree program constitutes its object. "We" come to "Italy" from different perspectives and generate different knowledges about it. Some of this knowledge is grounded in collective, even stereotypically familiar ideas about Italy, while some of it may accrue from a set of quite personal circumstances. This diversity is further complicated by the fact that we look at Italy from an historical and arguably elite institution in a very small town on Scotland's east coast that is the crucible of our own diversity. This space constitutes our "locus of enunciation" and is also a space of haptic encounter with Italian diasporic culture. It is the site of our privileged yet marginal "border thinking" about "Italy."

The proposition to study Italy from this particular home requires some interrogation of the now long-standing Italian cultural presence in Scotland in order to interpret the conditions of its visibility, its relation to Italy as its perceived determining origin, and the transformative direction of cultural practices. The

location of my own initial contact with Italy is the post-industrial city of Dundee. I was born to Scottish parents and attended a Protestant school there where (unusually, as will be implied later) I first studied the Italian language. Situated just some fifteen miles from the University of St Andrews, Dundee's urban landscape bears a strikingly Italian imprint. In the nineteenth century, the barons of Dundee's thriving jute industry built elaborate Italianate mills as expressions of their wealth and power. Some of these structures still mark the skyline. Cox's Stack is a massive chimney constructed in the style of a campanile, while the bell tower of the Baxter Brothers Mill is modeled on that of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice.²⁰ **[Figure 2]** Such statements of industrial power brought Dundee's citizens into mediated contact with Italian culture in quite a different sense to their contemporaneous human encounter with Italians who came to live in Scotland at roughly the same period.

Italian migration to the UK and to Scotland accelerated in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Early migrants were primarily male employed as *figurinai*, musicians, and *terrazzo* workers. However, it was through the establishment of very successful family catering businesses that Italians made their mark. In statistical terms, Scotland and the UK attracted relatively few Italians compared to other destinations in Europe and elsewhere, yet their presence was noticeable. Italian cafés, shops, and fish and chip shops were an important element of life in Scottish towns from the late nineteenth century onwards. **[Figure 3]**²¹ Apart from ice cream, the products they sold were not Italian in origin but reflected existing local tastes. Their long opening hours added to their popularity. Terri Colpi notes that these cafés and shops were important and complex sites of social aggregation. The cafés did not sell alcohol so were seen as respectable places for women and children to socialize outside the home (anticipating Sommer's plan for study abroad). The shops were vital meeting points for members of the Italian community itself, and there were also separate businesses catering primarily to their needs (1991, 80-85). Colpi writes that "[a]part from the Italian Church in London they were the most ethically and culturally Italian places to gather" (83), and quotes an evocative description from *Adam's Breed*, Radclyffe Hall's novel of 1926 set in London's Soho, which indicates a familiarity with these "Italian" spaces not restricted to the Italian community itself.

All these business premises were “contact zones” of encounter notable for their transformative effects on everyone who was touched by them (this would include those people who protested against their late opening hours and Sunday trading). Colpi’s reference to St Peter’s Italian Church in Clerkenwell, London as a quintessentially Italian space is an allusion to the fact that most Roman Catholic churches in the UK were the sites of complex cultural negotiation involving quite different and sometimes antagonistic instances of belief and practice. She reflects that “[f]rom the point of view of the Italian migrant in this country [the UK] the English Catholic Church is not an institution with which he or she readily identifies” (233). On the other hand, Italian priests or missionaries often fulfilled the roles of translators or cultural mediators, particularly for new arrivals. Yet in Scotland, these priests and missionaries were not welcomed by the indigenous hierarchy keen to “calvinise Catholicism” as a response to Presbyterian hostility and sectarianism. The incorporation of Italians in Scotland into this “calvinised” version of Catholicism has, for Colpi, had catastrophic effects: “They have certainly lost all touch with the cultural aspect of Italian Catholicism, and as a consequence have lost contact with much of the Italian culture and language” (241). The church has functioned, then, by this account, as a mechanism of cultural erasure. **[Figure 4]**

Enwezor’s international renown as a curator depends on his highly visible association with major productions such as Documenta 11 (2002) and the Venice Biennale (2015). Yet the import and value of his theoretical interventions are scalable at multiple levels. This is, I would, precisely the point. In partial response to Enwezor, I have now taught a couple of courses which I begin by asking students to take photographs that somehow capture the Italian presence in Scotland as a starting point for considerations of mobility and settlement, whether diasporic, transnational, or postcolonial.²² I upload the images onto our Virtual Learning Environment, and we look at the album in class and keep it as a point of reference throughout the duration of the course. Students are able to add images, and interpretations of the images may change as the course progresses so that it is not a static or closed resource. In that sense, it remains “uncurated.” Unsurprisingly, many of the photographs are of traditional cafes and shops, or of more recently established higher-end Italian restaurants. Many of the earlier establishments had

adopted a distinct decorative style familiar to most people living in Scotland, and their ice cream is the stuff of childhood memory, pre-dating by some way the more recent global branding of a not at all identical product.²³ The Italian names of their owners became familiar landmarks in Scotland's linguistic landscape, especially before the Second World War, when perceptions of Italians, many of whom were classified as "enemy aliens," changed. This linguistic landscape is still present. In St Andrews itself, Jannetta's ice cream parlor, established in 1908 and very much a local institution, is an immediate point of reference. A sign-writer's misspelling of Jannetta is a small but resonant example of happenstance now become local myth, and also of how language itself is a medium through which culture is "unrooted" through quotidian practice. Scottish students in class often noted that the orthographic revision of names is a feature of how the names of Italian establishments are pronounced locally. To insist that names such as Castelvecchi in Paisley and Giulianotti in Stonehaven are mispronounced when compared to a putative Italian auratic original recalls Benjamin's observation on the cognitive dissonance between written and spoken language: "The division between signifying written language and intoxicating spoken language opens up a gulf in the solid massif of verbal meaning and forces that gaze into the depths of language" (201).

[Figure 5] Here the transformative dynamics of cultural translation are rendered palpable, yet do not lend themselves to easy interpretation in the absence of a secure national referent. A similar dynamic emerges with the discovery that Mary, the daughter of Jannetta's original owner, was one of the first women to study medicine at St Andrews, graduating with great distinction in the 1940s. This early example of success tests hegemonic accounts of the uniformity of Italians' exclusion from higher education and the liberal professions (Colpi 1991, 193). It also opens up a hiatus in the conventional accounts of the role and status of Italian migrant women: a very local "intricate invasion" in Bhabha's evocative rendering. (1994, 9)

The Jannetta family appear in the *Censimento* conducted in Scotland in the 1930s by Italy's fascist government as part of its own project of transnational mapping. The census has recently been analyzed by Terri Colpi, who uses the basic anagraphic information the survey contains to trace the complex global movements of Scotland's Italian population. Domenico Pacitti, for example, resident in Glasgow

in the 1930s, was born in Moscow in 1878 and was living in St Petersburg with his Italian wife and four children when he fled at the time of the Revolution in 1917. Other families had similar links with North and South America as well as Europe. Colpi writes of the “dynamic nature” of the early emigrants, reflecting that “[m]any of the Italians who reached Scotland in the period 1875-1939 had global migration profiles and were part of a bigger picture - the international Italian diaspora” (2015, 20). This mobility across the diaspora returned unexpectedly in class. When students presented their photographs, I asked them to explain briefly what had motivated their choice. The stories behind two ostensibly very different photos (one of an Italian housemate, the other of a bottle of Moretti beer and some prosciutto) revealed that the families of a Scots Italian student and an Italian American student came from villages only a few kilometers apart on the Lazio-Campania border.

What emerged very forcefully from this very simple exercise was a strong sense of transnational and unpredictable kinetic connectivity that prized Italian culture from the peninsula and a securely identifiable claim to ownership. Some students who had taken pictures of menus in Italian restaurants had been struck by the humor of their “inauthenticity.” The offer to “doggy box” food for customers was perceived as addressing the town’s significant North American student population, while the grammatical error in “panini’s” interestingly prompted a discussion on questions of language as a site of cultural deformation. Both examples allowed students to say something about how cultural translation as a mode of cultural transformation operates. Two almost identical pictures of a restaurant called Little Italy, characterized by its red and white checked tablecloths and straw-covered Chianti bottles had very different back stories – one to do with the academic study of Italian migration to Scotland and the other recalling a family meal. The recollection of the meal led to a conversation about how the restaurant’s kitsch and outdated décor, articulating a kind of hyper-*italianità*, were at odds with the portion size of the pasta dishes, which were far larger than would be served as *primi* in restaurants in Italy. Yet rather than bemoaning the establishment’s lack of authenticity, we used this instance of cultural semiosis to consider critically what happens when culture moves, and how an understanding of the processes of this movement allows much more to be said about global mobility and the contact zone

than the lament for lost authenticity ever could. Yet perhaps the most resonant example of the locatedness of our work was an image of the building in which we have class, which one student contributed to represent the material means through which he accessed Italian culture.

Alberto Paolozzi's name also appears in the census. His son Eduardo, born in Edinburgh in 1924, went on to become a major artist and sculptor in the second half of the twentieth century. Alberto ran the kind of Italian retail premises already described, which his son recalls evocatively in an essay about his childhood in Edinburgh and the summers he spent in Italy at fascist holiday camps. His father admired Mussolini and had a map of Abyssinia on the wall at home (Spencer: 2000, 47-49). Alberto died in the sinking of the *Arandora Star* in July 1940, when the requisitioned cruise ship carrying a large contingent of Italian, Austrian, and German men to Canada was torpedoed by a German submarine. The men had been arrested as enemy aliens after Italy entered the Second World War in June. The arrests were accompanied by rioting in Glasgow and Edinburgh, during which Italian premises were ransacked and looted. For decades the memories of both the deaths and the anti-Italian riots, which also had a sectarian dimension, were erased from public memory.²⁴ A memorial to those who lost their lives on board was inaugurated at St Andrews Cathedral in Glasgow only in 2011. The transportation of some Italians to British colonies twists again the story of the migrant passage. Their proximity to other "alien" nationals also creates a modality of enforced belonging, which cannot be explicated solely through reference to a singular national model of identity.

The repressed memory of the *Arandora Star* has become a point of traumatic identification for members of the historic Italian community in Scotland,²⁵ yet even the Scots Italian students I have been teaching were wholly unaware of it and of the level of anti-Italian feeling that persisted after the War. After learning that many Italian businesses, and indeed many Italians, changed names to camouflage their ethnicity, one student texted a Scots Italian friend suspecting (correctly, as it happens) that this might explain her friend's English surname. This kind of haptic encounter reveals the "palimpsestic layerings" or "cultural semiosis" of the transnational contact zone. The revelation of anti-Italian or anti-Catholic sentiment drew all the students into a previously unconsidered aspect of transnational

relationality and toward a history of racism and sectarian aggression in Scotland from which we felt none too distant. The haptic encounter also invokes feelings of diffidence, hostility, and resentment, and such feelings need to be recognized as part of the transformative drift of Italian culture on the move. What did it mean for Scottish Presbyterians to live alongside Italian Catholics, socialize in their cafes, and buy provisions in their shops even on Sundays? Italian Studies, I would suggest, might usefully begin to address this kind of question.²⁶ The multiform haptic encounter is how cultural connections are experienced, and touching allows a more generous elaboration and appreciation of the kinetic aspect of mobility and settlement. For Giuliana Bruno, the haptic is characterized by the “reciprocal condition” (2007, 254): as we touch we are also touched. The haptic suspends claims of cultural possession; therefore in this instance everything I will perversely persist in calling “Italian” doesn’t belong to people classified or identified as Italian, or indeed of their descendants. It is the common, mobile property of a temporally and geographically expansive contact zone.

The Scots Italian Eduardo Paolozzi worked in such a diverse range of media that he resists categorization. **[Figure 6]** Speaking in 1973 about his early collages, where he combined diverse material culled from the popular cultural sources he found in his father’s shop, he said: “The thing was to find a kind of connection between those found images and one’s actual experience, to make them into an icon, or a totem, that added up to a different kind of symbol” (Spencer, 223). Paolozzi’s understanding of collage has been expressed in similar but more politicized terms by Rancière, who acknowledges the productive interstitial gap between art and what Gabaccia calls “the humble details of everyday life”:

Collage ... is the principle of a “third” aesthetic politics ... it mixes the strangeness of the aesthetic experience with the becoming-life of art and the becoming-art of ordinary life. Collage can be carried out as a pure encounter of heterogeneities, testifying wholesale to the incompatibility of two worlds ... Conversely, collage can be seen as evidence of the hidden link between two apparently opposed worlds ... In this case, its no longer the

heterogeneity of the two worlds that should nourish a sense of the intolerable but, on the contrary, the making evident of the causal connection that links one to the other. (2006, 84)

Collage in these terms stages both connectedness and dissonance, and the collage effect of our album framed readings of texts such as Ann Marie Di Mambro's play *Tally's Blood*, Melania Marcuzzo's novel *Vita*, Carmine Abate's short story collection *Il muro dei muri*, Jessie Kesson's novella *Another Time Another Place*, Francesco Rosi's *I magliari* (1959) and Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1935). This list could go on and is obviously for sample illustration only, creating a network of multilingual relationality putatively captured through a non-normative version of Italian culture endowed with startling kinetic velocity and range.

It is in terms of the revision and creation of new forms of connectedness that curatorial practice is most helpful. Maura Rellly argues that it is precisely this quality that "presents art as if it were a polysemic site of contradictory positions and contested practices." Drawing on Roland Barthes' work, she posits the value of a "writerly" approach to curating, through which the "viewer" or "reader" becomes an engaged participant in the construction of meanings (2018, 30-31). For me, this exemplifies the point of our class album, which afforded the students and indeed me agency in piecing together a corpus of primary material from which to begin a study of Italy grounded in a self-consciously produced sense of relationality. The provisional constellations of meaning that curating offers allow a glimpse into the trans-national purchase of a cultural mobility whose value does not reside in performances of national authenticity or abstraction, but rather in the power to transform social and cultural relations.

In themselves the haptic encounters I have begun to curate do not constitute a body of knowledge; nor is the form of this inquiry a methodology in any rigorous sense: the class album is a tactic in what is a very "minor transnational" incursion. These encounters form at best a heterogenous collage of material and affects across time and space with no fixed point of origin nor outcome. The photographs with which the classes started, and the sense of relationality they instigated, provided the theoretical scaffolding for students to occupy the interrogative conceptual space of

trans-national analysis. They are, contemporaneously, expressive and constitutive of a “present site of subjectivity” (Bond: 2014, 422). I would suggest that my students and I began the process of becoming exactly the kind of readers Sommer had in mind, released (albeit temporarily and provisionally) from the burden of “inherited frameworks.” **[Figure 7]** The “unhomely” is not rooted, but becomes perceptible in proximity’s curated drift. If Italian Studies as a discipline is to re-place Italy (still and always under erasure) in “today’s world” (Sommer, 2015) it is not enough to fill the same monocultural container with different contents, the net effect of which would be to re-enforce the nation through producing a better version of it. More inviting is Enwezor’s injunction to engage as curators with the experimental cultural counter-models produced by “those placed on the margins of the enjoyment of full global participation.” His suggestion that by doing so we might “compose a collage of reality from the fragments of collapsing space” (2002, 45) is a reminder of the creative and political opportunities that a reconfiguration of the spatial model might allow.

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¹ For a discussion of the development of modern languages as a disciplinary area in different national contexts, see Smith and McLelland (2018).

² This essay is a contribution to a collective project funded by the UK government, [Transnationalizing Modern Languages](#) (2014-2017). See Burdett (2018) for a succinct overview of the context in which the project was funded and its implications for modern languages in terms of research and pedagogical practice.

³ In the introduction to her English translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak underscores the productive ambivalence of "under erasure" as a signifying practice: "to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.) (1997, xiv). Her introduction has been highly influential in promoting the practice as a deconstructive critical option.

⁴ The risks of this revision include loss, or even a model of de-facement. It may indeed be necessary to read Italian (or any national) culture in the shadow of De Man's suggestion (1994) about the tentative status of autobiography as either genre or category in which the alignment of history and aesthetics is read as a "figuration" or "figure of reading."

⁵ Mieke Bal (2007) unpacks Art History's investment in "provenance" as a measure of authenticity and hence value. As she demonstrates, this strategy has profound implications for any work carried out in the light of contemporary practices of migration.

⁶ "Drift" here is inflected by Debord's notion of *dérive* but particularly the interpretation offered by Émilie Renard in a multivoiced theoretical essay in the exhibition catalogue for "Intense Proximity," curated by Enwezor in Paris in 2012: "I interpret the *dérive* as a means of displacement by transitions, by shifts within discourse. So, I imagine the causal approach of someone who drifts, drawing in tow the traces of his own psychogeography ... This conversation attempts to expand the discursive network within a space that is at once shared and personal, on which as observer-participant I find a few distinguishing characteristics ... My desire to escape the order of dialectical reason ... demands that this discourse follow the combinations and dislocations of indecisive thought" (Enwezor et al. 2012, 51-52).

⁷ Maura Reilly uses the phrase “area studies” to refer to exhibitions curated to highlight the work a particular under-represented identity category (race, sexuality, gender), pointing out the limitations of such categorization but also the potential benefits (2018, 25-29).

⁸ In addition to the two essays mentioned, the issue also contains work on Italian Occitans, Welsh Italians, Italians in the Congo, and the use of Blackface in Italian cinema (as well as other related topics). This range offers clear evidence of the vibrancy of research in what is a broad and expanding field.

⁹ There is no room to reference the very comprehensive bibliography now available on these topics. I list the following only to give some sense of the variety and range: Bond (2018), Choate (2008), Fiore (2017), Giuliani (2019), Labanca (2007), Lombardi-Diop and Giuliani (2013), Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2012), Romeo (2018), Spackman (2017), Welch (2016).

¹⁰ It needs to be stressed that to a large extent a common lexis is deployed in both articles and in this field of study more broadly. Indeed, in an earlier piece, Lombardi Diop and Romeo write: “the postcolonial perspective emphasizes a transnational spatial continuity, in that it reinforces the idea of diasporic communities in Europe and around the world which share the common experience of colonization” (2012, 3). For me, this alignment is very productive in underlining the proximity of the three key terms, while making intelligible how they operate over different axes of signification.

¹¹ Anti-Semitism in Italy has not always found a place in postcolonial critique. For an important corrective, see Bassi (2011).

¹² Chambers points to “rural poverty” more generally as a marker of the “South, and pertinently for my argument cites Scotland as one of its locations (2017, 28).

¹³ As a modern linguist, Mignolo pays particular attention to language and the modalities of movement between languages as constitutive of knowledge. This makes his work of critical interest to our discipline in “today’s world” (See especially 2012, 217-49).

¹⁴ There is a lot to be said about the rhetorical overdetermination of Lampedusa in current debates around migration to Italy. For a wide-ranging and acute analysis of this, see Colombini (2018).

¹⁵ All but one of the images in this essay were produced by the students who followed my Honours module 'Emigrant Nation' in 2018. As this was a collective effort, images are not individually credited. I would like to thank Finlay Dick, Madeleine Evison, Alex Millar, Grace Reid and Caitlin Speirs for the ongoing quality of their commitment and enthusiasm as well as for their pictures and stories.

¹⁶ The idea of the haptic I work with here clearly has echoes of Laura Marks's "haptic viscosity," applied to intercultural cinema and its engagement with materiality and cultural memory. She argues that the "haptic" erodes the distance associated with more conventional regimes of seeing and knowledge production (1999).

¹⁷ Although Italian migration to the UK has been culturally very significant, its moderate numerical dimensions mean that it is barely merits a mention let alone individual analysis in Bevilacqua et al.'s otherwise comprehensive volume (2009).

¹⁸ A recent article by Jennifer Burns on transnational Italian literature clarifies and reinforces my own methodology with its emphasis on quotidian practice rather than identity across national cultural formations. She writes that her "focus is not on concepts of identity nor identity politics, but rather on everyday practices of awareness, enactment, and expression of self, asking not who are the subjects constructed in transnational stories but what do they do and how do they live an experience of subjectivity which speaks to plural models, values, and locations" (2018, 1). She goes onto make explicit the value of the "transnational" in challenging "directly the methodological nationalism which often sticks to research in literary and cultural studies" (3).

¹⁹ Sommer's ongoing project "Cultural Agents" explicitly combines creativity and civic action: <https://www.culturalagents.org/>.

²⁰ Both of these structures are mentioned by Pearson (2016), who observes the pervasive presence of an Italianate architectural style in British industrial building of the period, but doesn't draw any critical inference from this.

²¹ The retirement of Giulio Dora and the closure of the chip shop in June 2018 was covered in the local press. Describing the closure of the "iconic" chip shop as the "end of an era," coverage reflected a wave of nostalgia and affection for what was considered a local institution. *Evening Telegraph*, June 23 2018.

²² "Capture" is intended to provide an echo of Rey Chow's work and her dissection of the unpredictable energies of "captivation" before a work of art. Germane to my argument is also her notion of "entanglement" as a measure for identifying difficult proximities, or "the fuzzing-up of conventional classificatory categories due to the collapse of neatly maintained epistemic borders" (2012, 10). In essence, this is what my project is about.

²³ The type of Italian ice cream most commonly made was a version of what I later came to know as *fior di latte*, and was quite different in taste and texture from other ice cream available.

²⁴ Wendy Ugolini emphasizes the sectarian dimension of the disturbances, which have been underplayed by other historians. See Ugolini (2011, esp. 118-143).

²⁵ In her recent memoir, Anne Pia whose grandfather drowned on the *Arandora Star* gives an astonishing account of the delayed temporality of trauma in the wake of the sinking, which registered in her totally unexpectedly many years after the event at a screening of the film *Titanic* (2017, 38-39). Both Colpi (1991) and Ugolini (2011) explore the sinking and its subsequent effects. See Balestracci's bilingual volume (2008) for a full account.

²⁶ This is not simply a presentist venture. David Wallace's work is an outstanding instance of the transformative effect of the postcolonial gaze on conventional understandings of spatial and temporal relations during the Middle Ages (2004, 2016).