

FOR A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF GENUINE COMMITMENT TO ALL STUDENTS IN ITALIAN STUDIES

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The path that led me to see the urgency to diversify and decolonise Italian Studies started a long way from Italy. A white Italian citizen, unquestioned in my legitimacy as Italian language instructor, it took me a journey across the ocean to the United States, where I have now been living for 18 years, to encounter ideas and people who prompted a desire to understand, firstly, the racial context here; secondly, my role in reproducing or challenging racialised hierarchies; and, eventually, to interrogate my cultural upbringing, shaped by the history of race in my country of origin (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013). I learned that while challenging monolingualism has the potential to open minds towards a more diverse set of experiences, in circumstances where culture is presented superficially and essentialistically language students may retain stereotypes and prejudices; the potential is often left unexpressed due to issues of access, representation, and pedagogy in language classrooms (Kubota et al., 2003). Acknowledging my specific, privileged position and the perennially unfinished nature of my self-examination, I would like to share my experience on how what I am learning is impacting my pedagogy.

Unquestioned instruction that relies on established models inevitably leaves unchallenged patterns of exclusion, marginalisation, and oppression. The claims to decolonise the field cannot be supported by merely diversifying the materials if practitioners do not also question whether the ways of engaging, ways of learning, and ways of demonstrating learning in the classroom are reflective of a paradigm of white supremacy, intended as

[...] a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Ansley, 1989:1024)

I refer specifically to axiomatic prevalence of centering white Western¹ experience in Italian courses²; unfair expectations about pre-existing knowledge and skills that prevent underprivileged students from succeeding, while seeing unsatisfactory results as a reflection of their inadequacies rather than as a failure of our teaching; perpetuation of obstacles to participation based on power and ability; inflexible classroom practices regardless of the working, family, financial, medical, and mental situations students experience³; vertical classroom environments that do not value the epistemologies present in the classroom (Moll et al., 1992); a sanitised approach to cultural content that strives for consensus, rather than embracing controversy and fluid discussions rooted in the desire to understand, which is never conclusive; viewing learning achievements as strictly individual merits, normed and ranked against each other⁴, rather than honouring the collaborative and collective nature of learning⁵; presenting the instructor as rule enforcer, rather than constructing a classroom climate of collective accountability where everyone is responsible for creating a genuine space for belonging.

¹ And, by extension, male centered, middle class, cis-heteronormative, able-bodied, Christian.

² For example: assuming that familiarity with and love for Italian cuisine, however we define it, is universal.

³ English Department colleague Anne Fernald recently reminded me that every time we ask all students to do exactly the same thing we inevitably expose inequalities; flexibility is necessary to equitably address diversity in the classroom (for example, by offering multiple ways to approach or fulfill the same task or goal). This is a foundational principle of the Universal Design for Learning, <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>.

⁴ On equitable assessment, see for example Blum & Kohn (2020), Feldman (2019), Inoue (2015).

⁵ I recommend Rufus Burnett's interview on the Twice Over Podcast (D'Agustino & Fernald 2021).

These exclusionary ways of teaching must be questioned. We have to be aware of and intentional about the values that we foster in our classroom spaces. It is helpful to move beyond the field of Second Language Acquisition to learn from the seminal work of pedagogues who imagined and advocated for pedagogies of liberation, freedom, hope, and justice (bell hooks, 2017; Freire et al., 2020). What would these pedagogies look like in the context of language teaching (Anya, 2021; Kubota, 2021; Norton & Toohey, 2017; Von Esch, 2020) and, specifically, Italian Studies? I have been exploring this question by engaging with students and colleagues across language studies.

After a few years spent learning about race in predominantly white reading groups, I had a moment of realisation at the 2019 Calandra Institute's conference on Diversity in Italian Studies. I met colleagues who face identity-based marginalisation within the field at large and, often, ostracism in the classroom, whose brilliance, generosity, and willingness to engage — despite the marginalisation they endure — prompted in me an urgency to act. That urgency became a commitment in summer 2020, when some of us founded a values-focused community of practice, the *Cosmopolitan Italies Collective*. The collective recently established a relationship with the pioneer group *Diversity, Decolonization and the German Curriculum (DDGC)* and colleagues from *Diversity, Decolonization and the French Curriculum (DDFC)*. I follow parallel initiatives, such as the important work of colleagues in *Transnational Italian Studies*, as well as the diversity-focused events of various committees born within professional organisations.

Thanks to an institutional grant⁶, the collaboration with my colleagues Andrew Clark, Sarah Grey, Joshua Jordan, and Patricia Romero in my own Department of Modern Languages and Literatures led us to facilitate a credit-bearing seminar for undergraduate students from various language programs⁷, prioritising minoritised students in our recruiting efforts. The students were tasked to prepare a report with

⁶ Specifically, a Teaching Race Across the Curriculum (TRAC) grant offered by the Office of the Chief Diversity Officer.

⁷ Participant students include Catalina Castillo-Lozano, Elizabeth Carrillo, Maniza Khondker, Yan Lin, Jenny Nguyen, Melanie Paquiyauri, Pauline Przywara, Olivia Tafs, Peter Wolff, and Sandy Zheng.

suggestions to improve the curriculum and pedagogy. The seminar strove to embody the principles of engaged pedagogy, with students bringing their own life (and linguistic) experiences in the classroom, largely self-regulating and having significant agency in decision-making. In this sense, the seminar became a laboratory to experiment with pedagogy. Participants studied and discussed work on inclusivity and anti-racism in language learning, observed classes, examined textbooks, spoke to language coordinators, and received funding to organise round tables with invited speakers (they decided to explore two themes, *race and music* and *linguistic, colonialism, and race*) and to sponsor an anti-racist workshop for language instructors led by Dr. Krishnauna Hines-Gaither. At the end of the semester, the students submitted a report that offered well-supported, compelling, and comprehensive interventions to improve the language programs. Starting with a critique of a sample of our textbooks followed by a summary of the take-aways from the round tables, the students proceeded to expose which characteristics distinguished an anti-racist educator from a racially evasive one. They affirmed the shaping of social identity via language study as a key to an expanded worldview — a multilingualism that fully manifests its humanising potential. They identified practical suggestions that pertained to syllabi changes, identity-focused classroom activities, anonymous conversation spaces, active student reflection on learning, and the classroom environment. They articulated some requests directly to the faculty: humanise students, prioritising their holistic well-being; attend anti-racism training; acknowledge that white supremacist culture can manifest in classroom interactions between professors and students. We need to respond to these calls. As a first step, we turned their recommendations into a survey that functions both as a tool to collect anonymous data from faculty on current practices and as a checklist for instructors and language coordinators to envision change. We also secured another grant for a seminar in the fall of 2022 to continue this initiative: students will advance the project while starting a public archive of the work done.

The seminar is just an example of how language studies can act toward change. Engaged, critical, liberation pedagogies help us see how racial and social justice can be affirmed in the classroom. As teachers of Italian who are committed to this work, we need to ask ourselves

how those pedagogies translate to the specific context of our field. We need to ask ourselves how we draw the lines that define something as Italian, and question the fixity of those lines, blur them. Do our actions and pedagogies authenticate our words when we tell all students that they belong in the Italian classroom? Are we conscious of what we mean when we say 'we', or 'you', or 'they' when we speak in the classroom? Does the classroom explode and expand static and monolithic views of Italianness? Can instructors of Italian envision a space devoid of essentialisation and self-promotion, that finds the significance of studying Italian in the multifaceted perspectives Italian Studies offers and in multilingualism? How transformative can it be to approach the study of culture from a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, perspective/angle and to stress diversity within the cultures of Italy, and conceptualise culture as dynamic, situated, and discursively constructed within a system of power? (Kubota 2003, 2004). We can recast *italianità* as a question and a quest, approach its study by engaging with perspectives from multiple borders and margins, and, in this way, find a renewed meaning for Italian Studies in understanding realities near and distant for each of us.

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