

'LASTING LESSONS ABOUT DIFFERENCE': DIVERSITY, DECOLONISATION AND ITALIAN STUDIES

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What follows is written in the shadow of Sole Anatrone and Julia Heim's observation about the syllabus of CUNY's Italian literature survey course and the point that the list, "made up exclusively of straight White men" (2021:5) could have come from any North American university.

The undergraduate curriculum of Italian Studies (at least in the United Kingdom) is very different from what it was some thirty years ago. Whereas I completed my undergraduate degree without reading a single text by a woman author, it's hard to imagine a 2022 UK-based graduate in Italian having that same impoverished intellectual experience. Grounded in feminist thinking and practice of earlier decades, this much needed gender diversification of the syllabus certainly changed the look of the Italian Studies programme and mirrored more closely the predominantly female profile of our students. The progressive addition of female authors to the undergraduate syllabus raises potentially discomfiting questions about how thorough and lasting such shifts are. What has syllabus change actually accomplished? In what ways has the inclusion of texts by female authors (to stick with this example just for now) mattered? How many texts did it take to instantiate a critical and pedagogical tipping point and change the methodological biases of cultural study in Italian? Or has this inclusion paradoxically reinforced non-inclusive pedagogical practices which leave unchecked privileges of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, neuro-normativity? In sum, what does the visibility of one gender difference occlude, make possible, or leave unsayable?

For me, the current and very urgent debate around diversity and decolonisation in (but surely not only in) Italian Studies is haunted by

the historical experience of women's writing as a disciplinary intervention and by the waning of the feminist methodological energy which made it so necessary in the first place. Now that debate on the curriculum has extended to encompass other forms of cultural difference, marginalisation, and under-representation, how can those most actively engaged in this work ensure that curricular change in the present has the desired durative effect?

In the presentation I gave at the on-line 'Diversity, Decolonization and Italian Studies' seminar series in 2021, I made the following points which I still think are fundamental to moving forward the debate on diversity and decolonisation in order to transform critical and pedagogical practice in Modern Languages. These points are in part expressive of increased human mobility in recent decades and the consequent linguistic and cultural reconfigurations which they have effected. These reconfigurations have re-mapped the landscape of language study.

- (1) Start from the positionality of the researcher/teacher/student to develop a critical understanding of, what we call now, Italian culture as the outcome of situated knowledges. Italy is afforded the value of case study only, not a secure object of knowledge. Positionality is not an abstraction. It is geo-politically emplaced as well as striated by multiple differences, optics, and histories. They all matter and give form to how knowledge is produced. Linguistic and cultural study needs to be the self-reflexive investigation of how what counts as knowledge comes into being, and how knowledges (in their unequal plurality) accrue value. The monolingual nation no longer has normative status. Language study is the exploration of proximate difference and cultural intimacy, not of a distant elsewhere and distanced alterity. Its work of critical self-reflection is akin to Audre Lorde's meditation on the self: "I have always known that I learn my most lasting lessons about difference by closely attending the ways in which differences inside me lie down together" (2017:116).
- (2) Refuse the methodological nationalism of an 'area studies' model of Modern Languages and its project of naturalising language, culture and territory, a project which also encompasses colonised/

emigrant territories as extensions of a nation of origin. The historical ethno-nationalist bias of language study naturalises and reinforces, with different degrees of complicity to be sure, borders of identity and practices of belonging. Languages and cultures are porous and permeable. Replacing ethno-nationalist models of language and cultural study with transnational and transversal epistemologies encourages, to reprise my previous point, a more nuanced understanding of positionality and subjectivity, and their role in knowledge production.

- (3) Temper the immediate desire to decolonise Italian culture and take the time to colonise it. What I mean here is that not enough work has yet been done to illuminate in capillary detail the extent to which Italian culture (and again Italy has value as case study only) as a diverse assemblage of practices, ideologies, and semiotic systems is bound by normative, exclusive kinetic energies. Stuart Hall's point about the temporality of undoing the imperious processes of colonisation is essential here: "My first sense of the world derived from my location as a colonized subject and much of my life can be understood as unlearning the norms in which I had been born and brought up. This long process of disidentification has shaped my life" (2017:3). The addition to a syllabus of one or more texts by writers of colour for example does not in itself 'unlearn the norms'.

So how do we engage this long process of decolonisation? There is ample evidence of individual colleagues, and sometimes departments, developing and pursuing a creative and politically coherent decolonising agenda. There is even more evidence, we have to concede, of resistance or indifference. For me, the place of women's writing in our discipline ghosts our current discussion (and here 'our' is used as a minoritising possessive) if no female-authored text appears on a literature survey at a major university. In light of this, the key to a longer-lasting transformation of the discipline is not innovation at the level of individual courses (albeit welcome in itself), but rather a complete re-conceptualisation and re-invention of degree programmes in languages and cultures.

Not least we need to ask fundamental questions about which languages and cultures matter enough to be taught in order to determine properly, and then fulfil, the 'long process' of decolonising. We need to ask (however counterintuitive or unpalatable, we may find this thought) if the 'decolonisation' of Italian at the level of curriculum is, from a more wide-ranging and radical perspective, a ruse to maintain, through sleight of hand, the un-decolonised hegemony of Eurocentric thinking and practice in our anglophone institutions. I wonder too if these are questions which current members of the profession at all career levels, too invested in the status quo, are unable to answer effectively as we are necessarily unequal to the methodological revolution required. These questions can perhaps as yet only be mooted on behalf of teachers and students of languages and cultures yet to come.

References

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