

## AAIS 2022 Virtual Conference Report (12-15 May 2022)

The virtual segment of the 2022 American Association for Italian Studies Conference was held via Zoom from May 12-15, 2022, preceding by a couple of weeks its in-person counterpart in Bologna. The virtual Conference consisted of 41 panels, with speakers from many different countries, such as Brazil, Italy, Australia, the United States, and Canada, to name a few. While the first day featured only the Conference Opener and of the first Executive Council Conference Series, the remaining three were divided into two sets of parallel sessions in the mornings and three in the afternoon. Mirroring the variety of speakers, the panels covered in depth a wide array of topics within Italian Studies, such as, Italian comics on cowboys, Renaissance Venice, imagination in writings of the Italian Renaissance, textual and visual narratives by second-generation authors, Emilio Villa's writings in relation to Brazil, contemporary philology, forms of impotentiality in literature, new perspectives on Ugo Foscolo's work, and Italy's colonial and fascist Empire. Further, several sessions were divided into multiple panels that similarly engaged in different themes, such as the intersection between material culture and Italian collective identity, soundscapes in Italian literature and culture, the historical contextualization of literary works, a new analysis of Giacomo Leopardi's *Operette Morali*, and Dante Alighieri's work analyzed through a global perspective.

The Conference panels were also accompanied by a series of roundtables. For instance, one focused on transnational shifts of Italian cultural adaptations, while another analyzed Antonio Gramsci's method in a modern context. A third roundtable centered on Italian women writers from the 16th to the 19th Century who authored chivalric and epic poems, historical fiction or moral treatises disrupting gender expectations, and another roundtable tackled the *narrazione interattiva* through new poetics, pedagogies, and audiences. Each roundtable featured six or more speakers (including the session participants and the organizers), which allowed for a lively and wide-ranging discussion on the topics.

Further, the virtual iteration of the Conference offered online workshops to its participants. For instance, on the second day, a Digital Lab event, titled "Opera Aperta: theoretical and methodological approaches to digital art and literature" and organized by Valeria Federici (University of Maryland), took place. The workshop was created to familiarize participants with digital social reading practices and to learn to implement them in the classroom. In particular, the Digital Lab focused on the use of the app Betwyll, which relies on the TwLetteratura method to comment on Italian and English projects, such as Social Reading Hugs Europe, *Cosima* by Grazia Deledda, and *Lettere d'una viaggiatrice* by Matilde Serao. The fourth day of the Conference featured the two-part workshop "Interrogating the 'transnational turn' in Italian Studies", with Serena Bassi, Claudio Fogu, Stephanie Malia Hom, and Giulia Riccò as curators and speakers. It aimed to analyze the 'transnational turn' through a vision of mobility, contextualize the term within the field, and provide a platform to scholars to discuss their own work.

On the first day of the Conference, the opening remarks were given by the current AAIS president, Ellen Nerenberg, who offered a brief overview of the Conference schedule and introduced the Executive Council Conference Series, which was inaugurated during this year's online segment. The Series is part of a variety of plans that were created after the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion survey, whose aim was to increase the demographic diversity within AAIS and the general field of Italian Studies, build partnerships, diversify the Conference program and structure, create moments of community alongside the academic side of the event, and foster an inclusive and diverse environment. Amongst the various survey suggestions was one to designate an Executive Council-sponsored series of guaranteed panels in the annual Conference to tackle the intersecting issues of race, diversity, and inclusion. The aim of the Series was to provide an intersectional framework, while expanding on and connecting research currently underway across a multitude of fields.

The inaugural Conference Series, whose title this year was “Broadening Perspectives, Intersections, Italies,” officially opened the virtual segment. It was curated by Michela Ardizzoni, Shelleen Maisha Greene, and Angelica Pesarini. Greene opened the floor to the other speakers by contextualizing the organizing process and decisions (by reading a statement that opened each of the events of the Series). Ardizzoni, Greene and Pesarini planned for the panels to “address major critical interventions within Italian studies,” in particular by focusing on race, diaspora, migration, and colonialism. The curators invited scholars who sought to “expand the parameters of Italian Studies for well over two decades,” both through their academic work and activism. The Series followed the ‘postcolonial turn’ within the field, which promoted engagement with Italy’s colonial past, “its histories of emigration and immigration, and discourses of race and nation.” Greene further highlighted how the Series did not act in a vacuum, but accompanied other initiatives in Italian Studies, such as the Canadian Association for Italian Studies conference on Black Italy, the Calandra Institute for Italian-American Studies “Diversity in Italian Studies” conference and subsequent volume, the Italia virtual salon series at the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, the Diversity and Decolonization series organized by Simone Brioni, Marie Orton, Graziella Parati, and Gaoheng Zhang, as well as an array of ground-breaking volumes. The aim of the Series was to participate in this paradigm, in order to continue transforming the field.

The Series’ aim to diversify the Conference program was not only enacted by its overall content (as it focused on diaspora, race, and colonial legacies within Italian Studies) but also by its structure, as there was a different Series panel during each day of the Conference. Indeed, the Series was divided into four thought-provoking sub-panels, which benefited from the presence of both academic and non-academic speakers. For instance, the first sub-panel, entitled *Italy and Somalia: Legacies*, featured Simone Brioni, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, and writer Cristina Ali Farah. Brioni explored his auto-ethnography project, which started with a series of photographs of a relative who took part in Italy’s colonial battles, while Lombardi-Diop analyzed Italy’s relationship to its colonial past today. Farah talked about her own novels, as well as her own personal experiences. Vetri Nathan, Gaoheng Zhang, and content creator Momoka Banana spoke at the second panel of the Series, *Diaspora and Social Media*. The latter talked about the process of becoming a content creator and exploring her Chinese-Italian identity through social media, Nathan analyzed how the diaspora is represented by Italian politicians (such as Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni) on the internet, and Zhang investigated the representation on Instagram of the Chinese Buddhist temple Pu Hua Si in Prato, the best-known of its kind in Italy.

On the third day of the Conference, Melanie Masterton Sherazi, Jessica Harris, and Silvana Patriarca took part in the *The African American Experience in Postwar Italy* panel. Masterton Sherazi explored the life of the African American writer William Demby in Rome after the second World War. Harris analysed the depiction of African American women on the Italian screen, as well as in the U.S. reality tv show *To Rome For Love*, while Patriarca connected post-war Italy and the African American Experience. The final panel, entitled *Mediterranean Genealogies*, featured Camilla Hawthorne, Roberta Morosini, and Claudio Fogu closed the series on the last day of the Conference. Hawthorne presented the Black Mediterranean as a space that can decenter the Atlantic as the single place for Black Diaspora, while Fogu analyzed the Mediterranean as a space for “double vision,” one that oscillates between the concepts of Empire and syncretic liquidity. To conclude the panel, Morosini spoke about the Mediterranean-centric vision of Europe of Medieval writers.

Overall, Ardizzoni, Greene, and Pesarini successfully highlighted the important research that is being conducted on the matters of race, diaspora, and Italian colonialism, by centering perspectives that are often overlooked in a predominantly white field. They curated a heterogeneous and remarkable Series that was timely and essential, and that will hopefully provide a long-lasting impact in forthcoming Italian Studies scholarship. Further, the Series not only succeeded in its diversifying and inquiring purposes, but it also constituted the *fil rouge* of the whole virtual segment. In this way, the Series provided unity and a moment of shared reflection amongst

the various scholars, which is often missing during conferences with parallel sessions. Indeed, it also underlined trends within the field that resonated in other panels.

For instance, the “Broadening Perspectives, Intersections, Italies” series embraced a stride towards openness beyond Italy’s national borders that was also present in the two panels of the series *Comparative Italian Studies?* They both focused on contextualizing Italy within global discourses, by engaging with modernist idealism (Michael Subialka), finding traces of Giacomo Leopardi in James Joyce’s works (Marika Strano), analyzing Sicilian authors in the context of an Arab-Italian imaginary (Salvatore Pappalardo), or investigating science fiction and detective fiction (Robert A. Rushing). The second panel of the series further analyzed carceral institutions (Ramsey McGlazer), Italian ghettos as a varied site of analysis (Saskia Ziolkowski, Duke University), and translation through Actor-Network-Theory (Emma Bond). A similarly expansive attitude was embraced by the series *Narrating Bodies, Spaces, and Margins in Contemporary Italy*, organized by Giuliano Migliori and Alessia Martini, which focused inward, in order to open beyond Italy and toward multiculturalism.

Moreover, the Executive Council Conference Series fostered a gendered perspective that was matched by a series of panels, such as *Feminist Pedagogy, Feminist Activism, Feminist Scholarship* (sponsored by the Women’s Studies Caucus), *Screening and Narrating Maternal Choices in Contemporary Italian and Transnational Contexts I/II*, and the roundtable *Italian Feminist Thought: Today and Tomorrow*. The panels *Screening and Narrating Maternal Choices* featured Laura Lazzari, Antonella Valoroso, Maria Elena D’Amelio, Giulia Po DeLisle, Claudia Karagoz, and Victoria Tomasulo. The speakers’ focus on women’s choices in relation to pregnancy and motherhood felt especially powerful in relation to the current U.S. context especially regarding the right to abortion. *Italian Feminist Thought: Today and Tomorrow*, chaired by Juliet Guzzetta, engaged with important topics, such as the lack of experiences of women from the Global South in Italian Marxist Feminism (Loredana Di Martino), the depiction of rape in the male-dominated context of cinema (Bernadette Luciano), and the feminist re-appropriation of the noir and pulp genres (Barbara Martelli). The panels put women’s experiences front and center, and sometimes tried to go beyond the representation of white women only (even if the experiences predominantly related to those of cisgender women).

The next steps regarding both the Executive Council Conference Series and the Conference in general ideally should be geared towards an intersectional inclusion of both queer and disability studies, in order to provide a platform that goes beyond a single axis of focus. While the virtual Series panels addressed several important issues within the field, they lacked intersections with queer and disability studies, not as a comment in passing, but as a central and key practice. The same observation can be applied in a similar vein to the general virtual Conference structure. On the matter of queer Italian studies, a notable exception is Elisabetta Sanino-D’Amanda’s presentation of the documentary *Porpora* (2021) on trans activist Porpora Marcasciano, which was screened also at the in-person segment in Bologna. For the moment, it does not seem fair to demand that the Series could have covered every aspect of Italian Studies, especially in the face of the important work the organizers have already carried through this year. This year’s Series stands as a good practice case and this report only hopes that those missing perspectives will be implemented in future Series. Similarly, while the in-person conference in Bologna presented two events sponsored by the Queer Studies Caucus and a two-session panel on lesbianism, future Conferences will hopefully bring to the forefront both queer and disability studies scholars and themes.

Overall, the 2022 American Association for Italian Studies Conference embodies the richness of the Italian Studies field, and it fostered its desire to move beyond the Italian national borders and a more traditional form of scholarship. Furthermore, it underlined the centrality of both gender studies and Black Italy today and the key role they should play in future scholarship. This year’s Executive Council Conference Series was without a doubt the highlight of the virtual segment and it will hopefully pave the way for more thought-provoking Series that will contribute to the diversity of the field.

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