Italian Studies – Special Issue 2024

Growing Up Across the Borders: The Transnational Evolution of Italian Youth and the Nomadic Generation

Introduction

Portraying the Nomadic Spirit of a Transnational Coming of Age

Olga Campofreda, Francesco Chianese

By an unexpected and happy coincidence, we are writing this preface in Brighton, where the idea for this special issue of Italian Studies originated in 2018. During the interim conference of the Society for Italian Studies, we discovered that we shared common research interests with a few fellow scholars and together, over the past few years, we started an ongoing conversation which has led to this volume. Despite our different backgrounds and approaches to our research, we all focus on cultural representations of youth, coming of age and self-discovery from an Italian standpoint, whilst also recognising the need for new perspectives from which to study these questions. Youth as a liminal, transitional space is by definition an in-between existential status. We also agreed that seeking to analyse coming-of-age narratives as nationally isolated phenomena has become a limited perspective in a world in which the influence of foreign cultures has a key role in shaping new generations, and where cultural exchanges and experiences abroad have increasingly become part of the process of growing-up.

In the last few years, Italian TV series such as *Baby*,[1] *Summertime*[2] and *SKAM Italia*[3] have disseminated representations of Italian youth to an international audience, while the aftermath of the 'Ferrante effect' has resulted in a significant impact on the publication of Italian literature in translation[4]. At the same time, a new generation of Italian writers, screenwriters and film directors has emerged outside Italian borders, offering a completely different outlook on Italian literature and culture. Authors like Chiara Barzini (*Things that Happened before the Earthquake* 2017),[5] Livia

[1] *Baby*, dir. by Andrea De Sica, Anna Negri and Letizia Lamartire. Netflix, 2018-2020.
[2] *Summertime*, dir. by Francesco Lagi, Lorenzo Sportiello. Netflix, Cattleya, 2020-ongoing.
[3] *SKAM Italia*, dir. by Ludovico Bassegato. TIMvision, Netflix, Cross Productions, 2018-ongoing.
[4] The international success of Elena Ferrante's Napolitan novels (2011-2014) resulted in a wider recognition of Italian female authors in Italy and abroad. See Anna Momigliano, 'The Ferrante Effect: in Italy Women Writers are Ascendant', in *The New York Times* < https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/books/elena-ferrante-italy-women-writers.html> [accessed 2 April 2023].
[5] Chiara Barzini, *Things that Happened before the Earthquake* (New York: Doubleday, 2017), co-translated with Francesco Pacifico into Italian as *Terremoto* (Milan: Mondadori, 2018).

Franchini (*Shelf Life*, 2019)[6] and Thea Lenarduzzi (*Dandelions*, 2022)[7] first published their works in English, sometimes self-translating it into Italian as is the case with Barzini's novel (*Terremoto*, 2017).[8] Other writers, such as Claudia Durastanti (*La straniera*, 2019)[9] and Viola Di Grado (*Settanta acrilico trenta lana*, 2011)[10] first presented their transnational experience to an Italian audience and then have since become bestselling authors abroad after their work was translated by others. All these works express the nomadic restlessness of individuals who are questioning traditional gender roles and social stereotypes, whilst also exploring Italianness transnationally. We invited our contributors to explore this cultural phenomenon in the light of Rosi Braidotti's theory of the nomadic subject (2011)[11] and from a transnational perspective, as has previously been explored in Italian studies by Emma Bond (2014), Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi (2020), Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan (2022).[12]

When switching between different cultures, the nomadic subject abandons the idea of a privileged, primary language, as well as the constraints of a single, strongly defined cultural system; in so doing, the subject's notions of gender and social roles come into question as part of specific cultural traditions. In this regard, we can draw comparisons between this theory and the definition of cosmopolitanism given by Luke Sunderland, who argued that the cosmopolitan 'can be thought as a modern world citizen who can move easily between languages and cultures […] Free of national prejudices and limitations'.[13] Thus, in terms of universal human rights, 'the notion of cosmopolitanism connects to juridical and moral questions about world law and governance' and 'can usefully be related to feminism, to anti-racist and anti-slavery movements, and to minority rights'.[14] While this concept appears to be more directly connected to juridical issues, Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity broadens the horizon by also referring to cultural and social interactions. When it comes to understanding representations of Italian culture beyond national borders, a nomadic approach brings together more diverse elements, taking a position that does not necessarily agree with the dominant cultural models. Just as Braidotti's nomadic subject escapes the hegemony

[6] Livia Franchini, *Shelf Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2019).
[7] Thea Lenarduzzi, *Dandelions* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2022).
[8] Barzini, *Terremoto*.
[9] Claudia Durastanti, *La straniera* (Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 2019).
[10] Viola Di Grado, *Settanta acrilico trenta lana* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2011).
[11] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
[12] Emma Bond, 'Towards a Trans-national Turn in Italian Studies?', *Italian Studies*, 69.3 (2014), 415-24; Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi, eds. *Transnational Italian Studies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020); Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan, eds. *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook* (Liverpool: Liverpool Press 2022).
[13] Luke Sunderland, 'Cosmopolitanism', in *Transnational Modern Language*, pp. 69-76, p.1.
[14] Sunderland, 'Cosmopolitanism', p. 2.

of the dominant thought, the subjective nature of the transnational approach allows for the reconfiguring of non-aligned, and often marginalised, ways of embodying Italianness.

The concept of transnationalism has widely circulated in the vast continent of Italian studies in the last few years. In 2014, in the pages of this journal, Emma Bond invited scholars of the field to investigate the 'transnational turn in literary studies'.[15] Building upon Paul Jay's ground-breaking work, Bond underscored the need to bridge the gap between the national and the global, and to rethink the national narrative at the basis of the most established interpretation of Italian culture.[16] She invited scholars to consider a broader, more inclusive perspective, where Italianness can be explored in its diverse configurations across many different cultural contexts. Subsequently, Bond proposed the use of the transnational as a narrative methodology to approach national cultures as systems defined by a centre, alongside the multiple reconfigurations defined by their transnational circulation.[17] In the current issue, we explore coming-of-age narratives and the possible renegotiations of the topic across the diverse contexts where Italianness is challenged.

Charles Burdett, Nick Havely and Loredana Polezzi stated that Italy can be seen as 'a hyphenated, in-between space created by the multiple crossings that etch its geographical surfaces and cultural depths'.[18] Transnationalism, as a concept, involves mobility but does not necessarily imply a focus on migrations specifically as the movement of large groups of individuals and entire communities relocating outside the national borders of a nation-state.[19] While former research models were able to appropriately describe the more linear and consistent phenomena identified in the earliest emigration from Italy, transnationalism has identified a multiplicity of trajectories and experiences which often follow contradictory directions and unexpected exchanges, all of which provide precious insights into the ways Italian culture has been reconfigured locally through a variety of phenomena of mobility.[20] While reflecting on the topic, we also realized that Italian youth stands out specifically as being transnational and nomadic by definition, since a significant proportion of young Italians started to leave the country to look for better living conditions shortly after the foundation of Italy as a nation-state, from the 'great migration' period (1870-1924)

[15] Bond, 'Towards a Transnational Turn in Italian Studies?'
[16] See Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2010).
[17] Emma Bond, 'Stories', from Burns, Duncan, eds. *Transnational Modern Language*, pp. 279-288.
[18] Burdett, Nick Havely and Loredana Polezzi, 'The Transnational/Translational in Italian Studies', *Italian Studies*, 75.2 (2020), 223-236.
[19] Charles Burdett, Loredana Polezzi, and Barbara Spadaro. 'Introduction', in *Transcultural Italies: Mobility, Memory and Translation* (Liverpool: Liverpool Press, 2020).
[20] On the topic, also see Laura Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, 'Introduction: Real Italians, New Immigrants', *New Italian Migrations to the United States*, Vol. 1 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 1-32; and Claudio Fogu, Stephanie Hom Malia, Laura Ruberto, 'Introduction: Italia senza frontiere/Borderless Italy', *Californian Italian Studies*, 9.1 (2019), 1-12.

onwards. Considering the structural inadequacy of a country built as an 'emigrant nation',[21] generation after generation of young Italians have experienced their coming of age in Italian communities which have flourished abroad, creating new models and configurations of Italian youth culture, whilst within Italy, international models of youth culture were also circulating at the same time. For this reason, in the Italian case nomadism and transnationalism appear to be intimately connected, making the study of the representation of Italian youth even more crucial in the context of the Italian studies, as well as in the wider context of studies on transnationalism.

It is on this basis that this special issue of *Italian Studies* investigates Italian authors, screenwriters and directors on the move, focusing on the evolving nature of the coming-of-age story, a genre interlinked with society, which constantly needs to readjust to the subject in order to be able to represent contemporary stories of youth. We open the volume with articles on literature and proceed by widening the selection to graphic literature and cinema.

In the first contribution, 'Angelenos? What's that? Young Italians in the fiction of John Fante, Andrea De Carlo and Chiara Barzini in Los Angeles', Francesco Chianese explores the literary representations of Los Angeles provided by three authors embodying different cases of transnational Italian youth in different moments of the history of the United States. He focuses on how the representations of the city in John Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939),[22] Andrea De Carlo's *Treno di panna* (1983)[23] and Chiara Barzini's *Things that Happened before Earthquake* (2017)[24] contributed to broadening the representation of Italian youth abroad. At the same time, he discusses how the Italian experience has expanded the prism of literary interpretations of the city through its position within the dense stratification of ethnic communities and cultures which constitute the constantly evolving identity of Los Angeles. In the context of this special issue, the shift from Fante to De Carlo and Barzini also represents a gradual translingual evolution, from a monolingual English identity to a monolingual Italian one, and finally to a bilingual identity in which English and Italian coexist.

In the second article, 'Coming of Age through a Second Language: Exploring the 'Polyglot' as an Intersectional Subject in Durastanti's *La straniera* (2019), Olga Campofreda offers a close reading of Claudia Durastanti's memoir through the lenses of Braidotti's feminist theory. Setting Durastanti's work alongside that of a group of Millennial writers, such as Viola Di Grado, who settled outside of Italy while still using Italian as a preferred language for writing, Campofreda focuses on the representation of Durastanti's transnational coming-of-age narrative between

[21] Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
[22] John Fante, *Ask the Dust* (New York: Ecco, 2006 [1939]).
[23] Andrea De Carlo, *Treno di Panna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982).
[24] Barzini, *Earthquake*.

Brooklyn (the author's birthplace), Basilicata (where she moves after the parents' divorce) and London (where she settles with her partner). The subjectivity of the protagonist evolves while learning new languages (American English, Italian, the Southern dialect from Basilicata) and shifting between cultures, although the most relevant aspect of her experience is represented by the contact with sign language and her attempts to communicate with her deaf mother. As Campofreda argues, *La straniera* questions definitions of class, gender roles, nationality and disability, representing instead the development of a sense of subjectivity which is able to adapt to different identities, all of which are all simultaneously present, thereby perfectly adhering to the image of the Polyglot described by Braidotti.

The poetic representation of youth's traumatic experiences is at the centre of Claudia Dellacasa's contribution, 'Chandra Livia Candiani's Buddhism: Crossing Cultural and Species Boundaries to Become a Co-dividual', which focuses on the works of Chandra Livia Candiani (b. 1952), an Italian poet with Russian origins and profoundly influenced by Indian culture. Della Casa specifically addresses the influence of Theravada Buddhism on the elaboration of the author's childhood traumas, highlighting the construction of images aimed at questioning the separation between the self and alterities of different kinds. By analysing collections such as *La bambina pugile ovvero La precisione dell'amore* (2014),[25] *Fatti vivo* (2017),[26] and *Vista dalla luna* (2019),[27] Dellacasa offers an ecocritical interpretation of Candiani's work, pointing out how the poet denies any hierarchy of the self, typical of Western cultures, in order to embrace a condition of co-individuality with nature.

Our fourth contribution, 'Grown Up Boyz and Girlz. Italian Graphic Novelists' Trans-European Paths and Gendered Representation', expands our investigation into transnational and nomadic youth into the context of graphic novels. Nicoletta Mandolini's article brings back the focus on the Millennial generation by considering artists such as Nicoz Balboa and Alice Soca, both part of a diaspora that, since the beginning of the 2000s, led young italian graphic novel authors to emigrate to other European countries such as France and Germany. Mandolini explains the artists' need to settle abroad by addressing the precarity of their profession, as well as the will to internationalise their artistic profile, a situation that turns their nomadic existence into a non-fictional trope. In order to better understand the condition of 'geographical inbetweenness' as experienced by Balboa and Socal, Mandolini combines the tools of textual analysis with semi-structured interviews with the two authors. The result is the representation of a 'prolific movement

[25] Chandra Livia Candiani, *La bambina pugile ovvero La precisione dell'amore* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014).
[26] Chandra Livia Candiani, *Fatti vivo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017).
[27] Chandra Livia Candiani, *Vista dalla luna* (Milan: Salani, 2019).

of becoming' that 'positively re-signifies some aspects of the precarious condition of suspension between youth and adulthood that characterises contemporary life'.

From traditional and graphic literature to cinema, in '"Il disagio di stare al mondo": Coming of Age, Masculinity, and Maradona in Paolo Sorrentino's *È stata la mano di Dio*', Stefano Rossoni interprets the film as a sub-genre of the coming-of-age novel upon which to ground his analysis of Sorrentino's self portrait of his youth.[28] In Rossoni's argument, protagonist Fabietto's coming of age reveals the entanglement of the local, the national, and the transnational. The author focuses on the figure of Diego Armando Maradona as an example of transnational heroism and nomadism which informs the protagonist Fabietto's decision to leave, alongside his attraction for his aunt Patrizia, both of which are crucial to understanding Sorrentino's poetics of displacement and its gendered inflections.

Lastly, Maria Elena Alampi switches our focus from cultural representations of Italian youth to their audiences in '"I'd like to see an Italian film or TV series in which a girl moves abroad": Italian teen female audiences and nomadic experiences'. In her article, she points out that in Italy the young woman's journey abroad on screen has only recently started to be considered a crucial rite of passage in coming of age stories, while for the male figures, it has long been a cinematic given. Showing how Italian cinema and television have rarely depicted young women travelling outside Italy, Alampi proposes that there is a strong emerging interest amongst young women to travel and live abroad. Her ethnographic research is based on over 60 interviews she conducted with Italian girls aged between 14 and 18 from diverse regions of Italy. In exploring how teenage Italian female audiences respond to models of transnational Italian youth, Alampi investigates the extent to which Italian film and TV might address the nomadic desires of their audiences.

To conclude, we would like to emphasise that all the participants in this special issue represent transnational cases themselves, as they live abroad and travel from country to country to carry out their research and pursue their academic careers. In many ways, our work resonates with our own transnational and nomadic experience as Italian early career scholars. For this reason, we would like to thank the journal editors for accepting our challenge and, together with the reviewers, for helping us find the best way to present our project.

[28] *È stata la mano di dio*, dir. by Paolo Sorrentino. The Apartment, Fremantle, Netflix, Lucky Red, 2021.