

(It)aliens on the fence

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The philosophy of practice does not aim at the peaceful resolution of existing contradictions in history and society but is rather the very theory of these contradictions.

(Antonio Gramsci)

I am a legal alien, a former nonimmigrant worker who recently became a permanent resident. I am an Italian Italianist in the United States, a place where I never took a class for credit. The only place, at the same time, where I have ever taught any class: where I have been in a position to award college credits in exchange for papers. Which is to say that I am offering this position paper from the position of one who never wrote a graded paper in the country where he grades papers. I was never really a student here, I was never really a teacher there. Luckily, however, I have been a scholar on both sides of this trans-Atlantic state of statelessness—rather typical, with some variations, among those who read this journal, and to whom this article is addressed. Therefore, my fellow amphibian aliens and allies, I am here to propose that we update the other two supposed main components of our job as Italianists (pedagogy and service, to the discipline and our programs) so that they reflect the most exciting advancements of our scholarship.¹ And that, in doing so, we reclaim and fully inhabit our condition of amphibian (It)alien-ness.

Amphibology: Let's radicalize the middle ground

I add 'amphibian' here because I wish to invite our community to crowd the fence that I sit upon, and from which I look at our profession. Many of us, in different ways, already experience Italian Studies as the bridge that Rodomonte is gatekeeping in Canto 35 of the *Orlando Furioso*: a (battle)field that is neither on land nor in water, and that requires “un cavalliero, / ch'a far battaglia usato, come lontra, / in acqua e in terra fosse” (p. 915: 34). Such an expectation for ambidextrous fencing skills, for the duality-on-the-fence that Ariosto, through Fiordiligi, finds in Bradamante (a maiden *and* a knight, a mother *and* a paladin, in love with a Saracen *and* in the service of Christianity) is reflected in most of our personal stories—not only in our training as academics between at least two

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languages, traditions, and education systems, but also in our trajectory, as people, between at least two places. Some of us are Italian-American, a kind of in-between-ness (is it about ethnicity? genealogy, maybe geography? could it be, like a cheeky Italianist once suggested, even about *geology*?)² that has no equivalent in other US-based higher-education projects that appear to revolve around a nation, a people, and/or a language of Europe and its colonies. Most of us work between two media, or two eras (or, like me, two specific centuries); sometimes two separate departments. And, of course, we are all bi-lingual, bi-cultural, often bi-national.

The fact that I am also bi-sexual helps me look at this intersectional bi-ness from the vantage point of what bisexual theory articulates as the “epistemology of the fence”:³ a way of knowing related to the queering paradigms of Sedgwick’s (1990) foundational *Epistemology of the Closet*, but predicated on a different revealing metaphor, able to acknowledge the binary structures through which we are socialized (trained) to experience the world *and*, at the same time, able to authorize us not to pick one side between the opposing options that such structures produce. A way to ride, rather than blur, divides. A way of queering queer theory.⁴ In other words, bisexual theory turns the “middle ground” (that Horatian sweet spot for which Ariosto stoically strived, as a humanist and a human)⁵ into an “epistemic portal” (Alexander and Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2012: 2). By crossing such a portal—or better, by standing on the threshold that it opens and, therefore, simultaneously demarcates—bisexual activists “*expose and politicize* the middle ground; emphasis in original” to use Lani Ka’ahumanu’s (1993) words. They “radicalize” it, as Maria Pramaggiore described Mia du Plessis’ essay on “unthinking queer theory,”⁶ informing an epistemology that has the potential to re-frame other forms of politicized non-neutral in-betweenness in terms of race, ethnicity, class, citizenship, and gender. Passing, or transiting, doesn’t have to mean moving *from* one essential identity *to* another, nor does it imply that identity should come *out* of a fictitious concealment. The amphibian “*lontra*” to which Ariosto compares Bradamante rhymes, in the same octave, with two identical words that mean two different things, “*incontra*,” whose Latin roots produced a similar semantic binary in English too (‘encounter’ on the one hand, and ‘counter,’ or also ‘contrary,’ on the other). The same homophonic pair rhymes with “*lontra*” in Dante as well (p. 915: 36), and can be disassembled into a tercet of prepositions (*in, con, tra*) that aptly describe the position that I am trying to conjure: in, with, between.⁷

In this position paper, I am going to propose three pedagogical ideas inspired by these three prepositions that, combined like the parts that compose a hippogriff, suggest, I believe, a transnational approach to Italian Studies as a field on the fence. These three ideas are rooted in my own practice as a teacher, which in turn is rooted in the amphibian position that I described at the beginning, and where I invite all my fellow (It)aliens. I am going to start with the apparently less relational of my grammatical talismans: the most positional preposition, “in.”

In: Let’s pretend we are here

As a visiting student at New York University, I received training to teach as a language instructor. I then received more pedagogical training at Princeton University (as a

postdoc), in the Prison Teaching Initiative (as a volunteer), and at Bryn Mawr College and Yale University (as a faculty member). However, these later inductions and workshops were, of course, either very general and abstract or very practical, organizational: never addressed specifically to me and my subject. In fact, most of the problems and strategies that they presented were related to scenarios that seldom apply to Italian Studies. They did not offer, so to speak, a ‘field-specific’ training. By which I mean to say that only as a graduate student, and only for the purpose of teaching Italian as a language, was I specifically instructed about what it means to be an Italophone Italianist in an Anglo-American classroom.⁸ I believe that this is rather typical in our profession. Not only because the language classroom tends to be, in general, one of the most codified and up to date spaces of pedagogical practice, as well as the only space where programs in Italian Studies (or ‘French and Italian,’ ‘Romance Literatures,’ ‘Medieval and Modern Languages,’ and so on) let graduate students work autonomously as teachers; but also because it is traditionally perceived as the quintessential site of recruitment and retention of potential majors. It is in the language classroom, ultimately, that both teachers and students inaugurate their belonging to Italian Studies.

In the language classroom one establishes, either as a student or a teacher, the specific mythology that informs our field of studies, and that then applies to advanced courses—up to the graduate level. The main element of such a mythology, within any current pedagogy inspired by the excellent tools and guidelines made available by organizations such as ACTFL, is the paradigm of authenticity. In New York, as a graduate student, I was trained to retrieve and mobilize authentic material for my Italian classes (i.e. linguistic objects produced by native speakers for native speakers), to model and foster authentic communication patterns and speech structures, and to devise activities, role-games, and homework that would make my students interact with authentic problems, tasks, and goals to be addressed through the use of the ‘target language.’ In order to summon authenticity, I was taught to think of my classroom as an interruption of the cultural context in which it was physically situated: to imagine, in other words, that I was welcoming students in an Italian bubble of sorts. I was taught, for instance, to pronounce their names the way I would pronounce them if I didn’t speak English (if not to directly change them into Italian equivalents), to limit interactions in English to office hours and emails, to fill the room with images, music, and videos that one could encounter on Italian media or in Italian universities. I was taught, in sum, to pretend that, during that daily hour in that classroom, we were in Italy.

As I said, I believe that this paradigm tends to affect pedagogy in Italian Studies beyond language acquisition, applying to advanced and graduate classes as well. Most of the literary, historical, and cultural topics that we teach cannot rely on our students’ background knowledge, and we tend to present them as exotic, imported, indeed authentic elements of an ‘elsewhere’ towards which the learner, starting from a position and context of inauthenticity, should foster sentiments of longing and aspiration—destined to be resolved in the catharsis of re-encountering the same elements, through ‘study abroad’ experiences, in the place where they actually reside. Such a perspective, indeed very conducive to language acquisition, was completely reversed in my subsequent training. Outside of the field, in inhomogeneous cohorts of early career

Humanities teachers, I was invited to do the opposite: to try and make my classes relevant and related to the context in which I teach them. I was taught to mobilize my students' positions and backgrounds, to start from what they know and experienced personally, to devise syllabi by thinking of what is relevant to them as Americans or immigrants to North America: as college students in America. I learned how to make use of local resources, situated on campus (libraries, collections, colleagues, but also physical spaces, their histories and symbologies) as well as in the surrounding communities (institutions, monuments, architectures, food, people, traditions). I was trained to position my classroom in its context: to make it permeable to the world around it.

What does it mean to sit on the fence that divides these two approaches to pedagogy? As a language instructor, and later as a language coordinator, I have seen and tried out successful teaching ideas that pierced the 'Italian bubble' fantasy without abjuring a 'pedagogy of authenticity.' If anything, finding Italian material in (and around) an American campus fruitfully problematizes the concept of authenticity itself, showing students that some of their spelling mistakes were actually crystalized, through time, in the lived Italian of migrant communities, or allowing them to have a first encounter with the spectrum of regional varieties that challenge the supposed purity of standard Italian. In urban settings on the East Coast, for instance, it is not hard to show students that words, sentences, and even articulate texts and creative products entirely conceived in Italian are available outside of the classroom and beyond its bouquet of carefully selected material. They are in restaurants of course, but also in museum brochures, on HBO, at the international branches of mostly Italophone companies, in local publications targeted to migrants and expats, in electoral propaganda destined to *italiani all'estero* voters, and so on. Carson Grubb, one of the students of my very first class, 10 years ago, noticed that, at night, the music aired throughout Penn Station is often in Italian (it's true! to this day! I don't know why!), and, using the app Shazam, completed a task on such a surprising playlist, which turned out to be composed mostly of indie songs, often presented at the Sanremo festival in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Beyond the language classroom (inherently more experimental and up to date, as I mentioned), I would like to offer two examples of how I tried to critically inhabit the middle ground between pretending to be elsewhere and rooting pedagogy in the physical site where it takes place. Both examples come from the most traditional advanced course that I was tasked to teach at Bryn Mawr College: a cross-listed undergraduate seminar, conducted in English with an Italian section for concentrators, about the city of Rome, from the Renaissance to the 20th century. I was invited to add this class to the curriculum not only because I work on both early and late modernity, but also, maybe foremost, because I am, myself, from Rome, where I was born and raised and where I went to college. I was invited to summon the sentiments of longing and aspiration that I mentioned afore: to make use of my own authenticity as a native. At the same time, Bryn Mawr College strongly incentivized 'hands-on' pedagogy, as well as the use of campus resources and those of the city of Philadelphia, through programs aptly named 'praxis' and 'Tri-Co Philly.' Rather than choosing between these two pulls, I tried to sit on the fence between them.

In the middle of the semester, after a week devoted to reading scholarship about relics, spolia, and souvenirs in Rome, I organized a class trip to downtown Philadelphia. I am

Handout for class visit to Philadelphia, ITAL B308

2. Rodin Museum

Auguste Rodin was probably the world's most famous artist in the passage between the 19th and the 20th century. This is the second largest collection of his works after the one in Paris, where he worked and lived. Michelangelo is his most crucial ideal ancestor, and Dante's Inferno is his inspiration for most of the figures in this exhibition, which were meant to compose a sculptural portal representing a fresco of damned souls. While looking at these objects, please think of Michelangelo's unfinished statues (like the one on the right on this page) and of what you know about the last judgement in the Sistine Chapel.



With your partner, choose one particular object and spend 10-15 minutes discussing it in relation with infernal routes that we encountered (Cellini's demons, the lanzichenecchi of the sack of Rome, Petrarca's ghosts) with Michelangelo's style and iconography (both statues and fresco), and with other forms of public art (fountains, fascist monuments, neofascist monuments). Where are these statues supposed to be? Is the museum their "natural" environment?

3. Franklin Memorial



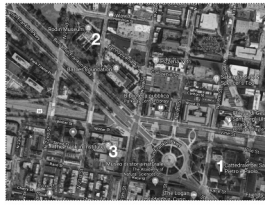
We are visiting the Franklin Memorial because it is modeled after the Roman Pantheon, which we discussed a few times but never studied directly. The Pantheon is an emblematic example of how the meaning and function of an object can change dramatically throughout many centuries of progressive cultural, political, and religious shifts. However, there are also strong elements of permanence in its history: it remained invariably a place of transcendence, veneration, monumentalization.

This time walk with your partner and discuss while moving: can you guess when this room was made and why?

Feel free to use your smartphone to look for a few informations on the Pantheon itself, or for pictures of it, but please don't look up informations about the Franklin Memorial: use the Memorial itself to guess.

What does Benjamin Franklin have to do with Rome and with a place like the Pantheon? What is a Memorial, and how does it work? How are we experiencing it? How did we get here, and how does the experience of reaching this place interact with its function and meaning? Who else is here?

Handout for class visit to Philadelphia, ITAL B308



The Parkway that we are exploring today was envisioned at the beginning of the 20th century along the lines of what is known as American 'urban renewal' and the 'city beautiful movement'. While it functionally provides relief to traffic, it is meant to exhibit the artistic and architectural beauty of Philadelphia. It is now the site of large manifestations and concerts, and a touristic artery. When we walk on it, let's think of Roman projects of renewal (the EUR, the Vittoriano, Bernini's Piazza Navona, etc.) and about what is 'new again' around us.

1. Saints Peter and Paul Basilica

This Catholic Basilica, built in the second half of the 19th century, is modeled after a Baroque church in Rome: the Basilica dei Santi Ambrogio e Carlo al Corso (in the photo here at the bottom right of the page).

From what you know about the Baroque and what you know about 19th century aesthetics, how does this palimpsest of two ages work out in this architectural object?

How does the basilica interact with its surroundings?

How are you interacting with the basilica, from the moment we left the Love square to the one in which we entered the church? What are we looking for in this corner of Philadelphia as participants in a seminar on Rome?

What changes from the exterior to the interior of this place? What do the materials, the images, the visual narratives, and the architectural elements tell us about 19th century Philadelphia Catholics and their rapport with Rome? Do you think the 'original' Roman baroque church that inspired this church is similar inside?

Cathedral Basilica OF SAINTS PETER & PAUL

From cathedralphila.org

In 1844 when Roman Catholics were a minority in Philadelphia and the "know-nothing" riots did not provide a hospitable environment for building a grand new edifice, the property where the Cathedral Basilica stands was purchased. Before an official visit to Rome to report that there were 100,000 Catholics in a population of one million, sixty churches, fifty priests, and twenty six seminarians in the Philadelphia Diocese, the Rev. John Neumann wrote a letter to the clergy announcing his plan for building a cathedral at the corner of Race and 14th Streets.



Figure 1. Handout for class visit to Philadelphia, ITAL B308 (Rome as Palimpsests), Spring 2019.

reproducing here (Figure 1) the two-page handout that I made to guide my students' work throughout the three adjacent sites of our visit: the Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral, the Rodin Museum, and the Franklin Memorial. I chose these quintessentially American landmarks, deeply integrated in the cityscape and culture of Philadelphia, because they intentionally echo Roman counterparts that we were studying in class: the Cathedral is faithfully modeled after the Baroque church of Santi Ambrogio e Carlo al Corso, the sculptures in the Museum were deeply inspired by Michelangelo and Dante, and the Memorial is a replica of the interior of the Pantheon.

Using these available, local places as a pedagogical tool authorized my group to think of Rome not as an inaccessible elsewhere where they could aspire to pass as locals (or at least informed tourists) through humanistic training, but rather as an integral part of their present cultural landscape: an inimitable idea, on the fence between past and present, remoteness and presence, that one can truly know only through imitations (of imitations, of imitations). An amphibian stratigraphy, an It(alien) palimpsest. This learning experience paved the way for the final exercise that determined a significant portion of the grade. With the help of Dr Carrie Robbins, curator of Special Collections, I invited students to consult the catalogue of Bryn Mawr's archives using 'Rome' as a keyword. In class, we workshopped a range of objects available on campus, selecting a set of materials that were donated by alumnae who had visited the city in the 19th and 20th centuries: postcards, albums, scrapbooks, letters, and memorabilia. Each student selected an object and worked directly on it, interrogating its history and meaning. Under my supervision, the group organized, advertised, and conducted a symposium to present the result of such independent research, inviting peers and faculty from a number of programs and

departments who could be interested—but also alums, and members of the administration. The event, titled *O Roma o Mawrtyr: Conjuring Vestigia from Special Collections*, was as much about Rome as it was about Bryn Mawr. I am reproducing here the program (Figure 2). In a second iteration of the same course, held during Covid restrictions, a different group of students performed the same work (this time under the title *Roaming Roma: Lost and Found*) by gathering in a large room, at a safe distance from each other, and streaming their talks remotely: the result is uploaded at the following link: <http://giammei.com/ROAM>. In both cases, they did not have to renounce the paradigm of authenticity, their relationship with authentic elements of Italian culture and history, while strongly situating their learning in the non-Italian context where it took place.⁹

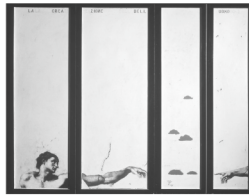
Con: Let's share discipline(s)

Maybe the most impactful training that I received as a teacher was conducted by formerly incarcerated students and volunteer activists of the Prison Teaching Initiative, which offers AA (and now BA) degree programs to students in youth correctional facilities. My teaching philosophy was profoundly informed by the ideas that such an intergenerational learning community had to develop, through years of collective experimentation, to make the prison classroom pedagogically inhabitable.¹⁰ Transitioning to the second of my three prepositions, “con,” I would like to briefly share two practices that I learned from that training, and then adopted to make my classes more transnational—more on the fence—both in terms of design and content. The first is called ‘class covenant’ and, in a position paper not too different from this one (but addressed to the field of 19th-century American Studies), Prof. Monica Huerta (2019) used my syllabi to reflect on it.

A class covenant is a device to establish rules of cohabitation for a learning community. Students and teachers write it collectively during the first week of classes by voicing their wishes and expectations, what they value and welcome, what worked (or didn't) in previous learning experiences, and what they would like to try. It is a foundational act of community building, predicated on transparency, negotiation, radical listening, and the sharing of authority. In order for it to be, at the same time, authentic and rooted in the specific context where it is written, this list of practices and auspices needs to be open to a wide range of items, from the most concrete to the most conceptual: matters that pertain to both of the meanings of the word ‘discipline’ (conduct and subject, behavioral rules and axioms of the field of instruction).¹¹

This practice made me discover that certain structures are conducive to learning for some groups (e.g. welcoming food or electronic devices in class, or starting each meeting with a student presentation to then transition to my lecturing, or prepared activities, through collective discussion) but can prove inaccessible or undesirable for other groups. It also helped me know, from the very beginning, which structural learning goals of mine were already within the horizon of expectations of my specific group of students (e.g. modeling scholarly conversations, or using language skills to tackle complex literary texts, or spending more time with images than with texts) and which

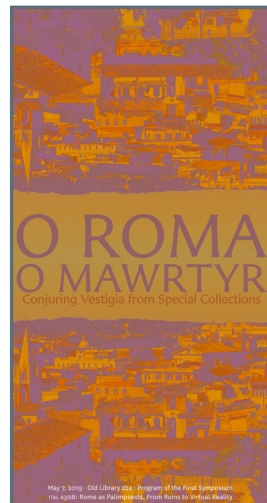
PROGRAM	
1:00	Introduction and Remarks <i>Alessandro Giannini</i>
1:20	Panel 1: Mary Elizabeth Garrett's Vistas <i>Elana Kates - Hallie Novak</i>
1:50	Coffee Break
2:00	Panel 2: Delphine and Hazel Fitz Darby, W. J. Long, and their Snapshots <i>Carley Pazzi - Sindi Kaskavici - Brittany Peña - Peter Kurtz</i>
3:00	Question Time and Refreshments
3:20	Panel 3: Elizabeth and Albert Barker's collection of postcards <i>Rachel Brodie - Olive Guerra</i>
3:50	Coffee Break
4:00	Panel 4: The Italian Album <i>Rachel Kline - Camilla Duluc</i>
4:30	Question Time and Conclusion



This Symposium was possible thanks to the generous collaboration of Dr. Carrie Robbins and the Special Collections department at Carleby Library. Participants would like to thank immaculate Langer, who contributed to the pedagogy of the seminar as a student observer, and Professors Dale Kinney and Jeff Cohen, who taught them about Spolia and Maps. The Departments of History of Art, Growth and Structure of Cities, and Museum Studies cross listed the course and supported extracurricular activities. The Department of Italian and Italian Studies conceived and promoted the seminar, taught this year for the first time.



BRYNMAWR.EDU/ITALIAN



ITALIAN AND ITALIAN STUDIES
Presents
O ROMA O MAWRTYR
Conjuring Vestigia from Special Collections

This Symposium concludes the seminar "Rome as Palimpsest: From Ruins to Virtual Reality." Courses on Rome have been taught at Bryn Mawr since the very beginning in many disciplines: Classics and Archaeology of course, but also History and Art History, Cities, International Studies, and Italian. Bryn Mawr students fell in love with the Eternal City, and spent Rome before and after graduation bringing back various relics, souvenirs, and spolia to prove that they were there and to remember their experience—something very similar to what the topography of the texts that we read in class did, from Petrarca and Bernardo Cellini to the main character in the videogame Assassin's Creed. After many weeks of reading, writing, and debating, we wanted to make such an interdisciplinary palimpsest of memories visible by investigating objects that alumni who visited Rome donated to the College in the past century. All the objects presented in these talks come from the department of Special Collections at Carleby Library. Most of them have rarely, if at all, been researched. The stories that these photos, postcards, albums, and mementos tell is blurred, confusing, full of missing links. We present the result of our digging into the archaeological memory of Bryn Mawr College as a work in progress that, we hope, will shed some light on a forgotten treasure and inspire more research.

SPEAKERS



RACHEL BRODIE

Major in Italian Language, Minor in Latin
Favorite quote from the course:
"Rome, she would be: You would find me in (ancient Rome) employed as a vestal virgin, guarding sacred writers."

CAMILA DULUC

Major in Italian and Italian Studies
Favorite anecdote from the course:
"Rome in class was truly ironic."
"That one time during my work with Alessandro's lab was to sing 'Sotto' Cielo de Roma. He would be: It is the temple of Venus because it was accidentally called in the temple of Venus and Venus that made it to times more Italian."

OLIVE GUERRA

Major in Fine Arts and Growth and Structure of Cities
Favorite anecdote from the course:
"When I incorporated the home-cooked meal that we had while brainstorming for the final trip to Rome."
In Rome, they would be: vampire in the cripta del Capovotri

SINDI KASKAVICI

Major in Political Science and (probably) Italian and Italian Studies
Favorite anecdote from the course:
"Take an authentic trip to old Rome by playing Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood. That's all we did (smiley)."
In Rome, she would be: the Mouth of Truth (Bocca della Verità)

ELANA KATES

Major in History of Art and First Arts
Favorite quote from the course:
"I might as I consider the bird is very."
In Rome, she would be: a painter in villaorghese (in vato)

RACHEL KLINE

Major in History of Art / Anthropology, Minor in Italian and Italian Studies
Favorite anecdote from the course:
"One of the first 10 weeks when we were talking about Peter's 'Not Pious' calendar he got it home."
In Rome, she would be: would be: a person from the last judgement because I have an opinion about everything.

PETER KURTZ

Major in Comparative Studies, Minor in Italian and Italian Studies
Favorite anecdote from the course:
"Rachel like was giving Alessandro credit, and was part of the group encouraging her to be the 'bottom' 'servant' she did. She had from Roman guards up a building, and also from the person at a building in the end. 'Soil that's special'."
In Rome, she would be: would be: a person from the last judgement because I have an opinion about everything.

HALLIE NOVAK

Major in French
Favorite anecdote from the course:
"After Professor Giannini asked on which boards of pasta to buy and which to avoid."
In Rome, she would be: a fresh plate of pasta in Campo del Fiori, the taste of nostalgia.

CARLEY PAZZI

Major in Biology, Minor in Italian and Italian Studies
Favorite anecdote from the course:
"one of the 10 questions."
In Rome, she would be: giraffe (zanna, cioccolato e fragole). Because life without giraffe is life not fully real.

BRITTANY PEÑA

Major in International Studies, Minor in Italian and Italian Studies
Favorite anecdote from the course:
"During my break, Alessandro came in dressed in the shoes of an arts-and-crafts robot (remembered and then proceeded to become while being the 'special' trait."
In Rome, she would be: it is a supply because I'm warm and comforting.

Figure 2. Program for the student symposium O Roma O Mawrtyr, Spring 2019.

I needed to reconsider, adjust, or present more persuasively. But most of all, writing class covenants *con/*with my students, as an integral part of syllabi that truly become 'ours,' makes me able to inscribe both my and their identities in the very DNA, so to speak, of each course. As I said from the beginning, I have never truly been in the position of my own students. While they need my guidance to become conversant in my field of expertise and my language, I need theirs to enter the American university classroom. Sharing an official space in the syllabus to spell out what is expected and what is

preferable, without taking anything for granted, makes classes inherently translational rather than transactional, freeing me from the unnecessary burden of trying to pass as a native of my students' national system of education—and them from that of trying to conform to the vestiges of structures through which I was educated elsewhere. The fence between a replica of an Italian class, taught in an Italian university, and an American class in Italian, filled with supposedly Italian content and/or language, can be a surprisingly hospitable place: a curated, intentional, welcoming margin.

The other principle of prison teaching that I try to import in my pedagogical practice as much as I can is that of team teaching. Team teaching is absolutely necessary, from a strictly material and organizational point of view, to conduct a course in a correctional facility as volunteers: the commute, the many rules and rituals of security checking, the escorted walk to the classroom, the wait, and the repetition of each of these passages on the way out, make each meeting singularly time consuming. The unavailability of resources that are taken for granted in most other contexts of higher education makes class preparation, assessment, and mentoring even more time consuming. However, what changed my perspective on sharing a course with other instructors is the fact that, in a context where it is a necessity rather than a privilege, co-teaching tends to arrange encounters among competences, interests, and levels of experience that would not otherwise have a chance to meet.

As the only non-native Anglophone among the instructors of an “introduction to literary analysis” class in prison, for instance, I was in a unique position to guide the many students that needed to develop writing skills as bilingual learners, and I was able to include a few cantos from Dante in a cluster of readings about home and exile. But I could have never helped them effectively, like my co-teachers from the department of English did, with the ‘5 paragraph essay’ traditional format, or intuitively juxtapose a story by Jamaica Kincaid to the *Divine Comedy*.

When, as a faculty member, I had the chance to design co-taught classes, I tried to replicate what I learned through team teaching in the prison classroom: that diversity, rather than consonance, among teachers, can be a surprisingly generative asset for students. The first time I was assigned a teaching assistant at Bryn Mawr, to help with a larger than usual seminar on the avant-garde (from Futurism to postmodernism), I had the opportunity to select a graduate student in early modern art history, Dr Justinne Lake-Jedzniak, who devised unexpected, brilliant activities on the compositional balances and familiar features of apparently abstract and untraditional paintings. And the first time I was able to offer a fully co-conducted seminar, I did so with Prof. Ava Shirazi, a colleague from the Classics department at Haverford College.

We designed a Bi-College course called “Creating Classics” in which we read Greek tragedies and watched Pier Paolo Pasolini’s cinematic adaptations of them, shot in locations as diverse as Italy, Uganda, Tanzania, Siria, and Turkey. I didn’t read ancient Greek, Prof. Shirazi didn’t speak Italian, we both worked on reception theory and translation studies but with radically different corpora and archives. We invited our students (only half of whom were majors in either Classics or Italian Studies) to be inspired by Pasolini’s approach to classical theatre, and to produce weekly exercises of creative translation and adaptation, which we then collected at the following link: <https://www.>

creating-classics.com/translations21.¹² As teachers from different personal and academic backgrounds we modeled the same encounter that we were teaching about, negotiating different disciplinary goals and customs.

Tra: Let's not decide

To conclude, I am going to reflect for a moment on the role of *tra*/between in the pedagogy of transnational Italian Studies in which I am positioning myself as a legal alien on the fence. No preposition, of course, is more amphibian than “tra.” The main reason why I moved to the United States to teach Italian Studies—and I am sure I am not alone—is that interdisciplinary, comparative, and indeed transnational approaches to the disciplines are more encouraged here. But over the years, trying to design and offer classes that were at the same time true to my field of studies and relevant for students with different interests and backgrounds, I realized more and more that the intrinsic in-between-ness of our profession can be boldly expanded and radicalized. What bisexual theory and Ariosto’s amphibology taught me is that, in sum, a pedagogy of indecision, ambivalence, bi-ness, “tra” two different and simultaneous options, might be exactly what we need to ditch the ethno-nationalist roots of our discipline without abolishing it.

There is no need to decide, to use a common terminology in Italian Studies departments, between ‘language’ and ‘content.’ Not only language courses, even at the beginning level, can and should contemplate learning goals that we often reserve to more advanced classes, but cross-listed seminars, even when offered in English, can include a language acquisition path of writing and reading in Italian. In order to make them count, administratively, as an integral part of the curriculum I have often offered such seminars with an extra hour of discussion in Italian for majors and concentrators. On some occasions, students who did not know Italian at all asked to take part in these meetings, and this led me to design pedagogical activities that I would have never imagined otherwise. For instance I had a non-Italophone student, Meenakshi Thirumurti, listen to the conversation and, at the end, guess, in English, what were the main points and ideas that emerged from it, re-narrating the class to her Italophone peers. This developed listening skills and familiarization that then led Thirumurti to excel when she took Italian, and eventually major in Italian Studies. This semester, trying the same approach at Yale University, I mobilized the network of shared languages among my students by asking the Italophone ones to serve as interpreters for their non-Italophone peers. This remained initially between English and Italian, but then started involving French and German thanks to the multilingual skills of a brilliant major, Hannah Landau, and my own ability to speak French. While still centering the Italian language, my Italian hours became progressively translingual: a place to contemplate ‘foreignness’ as a shared, relational paradigm beyond any transitional duality.

There is no need to decide, as I mentioned while discussing co-teaching, between different disciplines either. Besides judicious and courageous practices of cross-listing and interdisciplinary training, even within a relatively homogenous set of case studies and themes pertaining to Italian history and culture one can actively seek a position *tra*. I try to do it in all of my syllabi, and especially in a class that I designed as a postdoc

and then offered everywhere I taught so far: Black Queer Jewish Italy. In this course I sit on the fence between early modernity and the 20th century to survey some of the most studied nodes of our field (from courtly culture, chivalric epic, and the genre of the treatise to the avant-garde, fascism, and the postwar ‘boom’) only through works of literature, art, and scholarship by or about Black, queer, and Jewish people. Sara Copia Sulam’s proto-feminist writings from the Baroque ghetto of Venice become a gateway to understand the Harlem Renaissance and the transhistorical vagaries of the word ‘ghetto’; Alessandro de’ Medici’s portraits and self-fashioning in ducal Florence mirror themselves in the 1960s mythologization of him in African-American magazines and encyclopedias; Michelangelo’s sonnets and letters to Tommaso de’ Cavalieri echo in Giorgio Bassani’s novels and in the film *Call Me By Your Name*.

Instead of immersing them in Italian Studies, or inviting them to leave their position to look at the Humanities from a (more or less familiar) elsewhere, a transnational pedagogy of *in-con-tra* places students at a crossroads, and does not expect them to opt for one of the paths that intersect there. It is the same crossroads where most of us It(alien)s, I believe, took residence: a place of simultaneity and permanent translation where diverse problems, perspectives, topics, and idioms encounter: *si in-con-tra-no*. Is there a more transferable and generative skill than that of being good stewards of porous, permeable, inhabitable boundaries?

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Notes

1. By which I mean, mostly, the transnational turn of which this cluster is an expression: a combination of de-colonizing, queering, translational, and migrant approaches to our field that crystalized in recent highly visible scholarly initiatives such as Burdett and Polezzi (2020); and the Transnational Italian Studies working group co-founded by Serena Bassi and Giulia Riccò—see <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/tis/>.
2. I am referring to the dissociation of Italian and Caucasian ethnicities proposed, by provocatively mobilizing the tectonics of Eurasian geology, in Matteo (2004).
3. See the two editors’ introductions, both titled “BI-ntroduction, epistemologies of the fence,” in Hall and Pramaggiore (1996).
4. I am using a formula proposed to disrupt the hetero-homosexual binary that dominates queer readings of bisexual representations in cultural artifacts in Erickson-Schroth and Mitchel (2012).
5. Of the many instances in which Ariosto advocated for *aurea mediocritas* and the virtuousness of seeking the middle path, let me quote the warning with which he closed his epitaph for

Raphael: “*Hospes, abi, monitus medicria quaerere, quando / stare diu summis invida Fata negant*” (Ariosto, 2018: 108–109).

6. In the aforementioned “BI-ntroduction” (Hall and Pramaggiore, 1996: 3). Du Plessis (1996: 19–54).
7. I insist on this virtual tercet of Dantesque and Ariostean prepositions in the methodological introduction to my forthcoming book, *Ariosto in the Machine Age*, which is scheduled to be published by the University of Toronto Press in January 2024.
8. In theorizing my migrant and bilingual position intersectionally with my bisexual identity, here and elsewhere, I am indebted to Nathanson’s work on bi-pedagogy, which mobilizes Gloria Anzadua’s concept of the mestiza and radicalizes interdisciplinarity. See Nathanson (2009).
9. A similar experiment in pedagogy, made more complex (but also, somehow, more fruitful) by the sudden restriction of the 2020 pandemic, led to the realization of this virtual gallery: <https://www.remote-gallery.com>.
10. On the initiative, see <https://prisonteaching.org>. For an example of the organizational work conducted within the organization, and the deep pedagogical thinking behind it, see Benetollo (2021).
11. Real examples from my own class covenants over the years include “Silence is fine. There is no need to repeat someone else’s ideas in class discussions, and it is better to build on them” and “The spontaneity of our class discussions is valuable. There is no expectation of originality and polished profundity: most comments will be imprecise and need help to be clarified, sometimes things will be repeated. The goal is not to perform but to understand, to think comparatively on our feet and together.” Most of my syllabi, including class covenants, are available at <http://giammei.com/courses>.
12. Along with their finals, available at <https://www.creating-classics.com/spring-2021>.

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