

## *Prefatory Note*

As we were putting the finishing touches on this issue, the coronavirus disease unleashed destruction across Italy, and it has been cutting a swath across the United States as well. At press time, thousands of lives have been lost so far, and the calamity is not over yet.

The coronavirus knows no borders. Italy has become a cautionary tale for many countries that are struggling to respond to the pandemic as well as other countries whose leadership has not yet grasped the magnitude or the gravity of the situation.

Doctors and nurses everywhere have been serving selflessly, pushing past physical and emotional exhaustion to provide care for those who have fallen severely ill with this virus. In Lombardy, one of Italy's richest regions and the hardest hit by the virus, hospitals have been crushed by waves upon waves of patients. The speed of infection and the exponential progression of the pandemic has forced doctors to confront the ultimate bioethicist dilemma: who to allow to live and who to let die. At the same time, the crisis has created opportunities for solidarity across communities in new ways; for instance, the Italian Ethiopian community offering assistance to the local Red Cross in Milan.

Italians, quarantined in their homes, have made videos and recordings warning the world about the severity of the virus. Like Cassandra, who, according to the Greek myth, was cursed with the gift of true prophecy but never to be believed, Italians pleaded, lamented, supplicated, and beseeched, but to no avail. Each country would follow its own course.

The image of a borderless Italy thus seems to have materialized under our very eyes in the earliest weeks of 2020 as the attention of the whole world focused on the resilience of Italians. We find this auspicious for our long-term goal of consolidating a transnational and diasporic turn in Italian Studies. But what humbles us most is the realization that there may be no time in recent memory when the field of Italian Studies has had more to offer to the urgent present. Its necessity is palpable.

We can turn to Boccaccio, for instance, to help us understand the human response to the coronavirus. His *Decameron* speaks to us of a society of storytelling that the global quarantine has resuscitated overnight, be it in podcasts or streaming movies or videoconferencing. His description of the black plague—and the desire to escape from it—now registers viscerally with readers who are living through the COVID-19 pandemic. And with Boccaccio we may even ask how the merchant ethic he esteemed so much in his own time has been betrayed and all but destroyed by neoliberal forms of capitalism with their exclusive focus on profits over all else.

Likewise, the legacy of Michel Foucault's theory of *biopolitics* has found its most fertile philosophical ground in Italy rather than France, with Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito. In the wake of this pandemic, Agamben's and Esposito's meditations on the state of exception, on immunity and community, and, more generally, on the *political* borders of life (*bios* and *zoe*) have not only acquired the tone of prophecy, but also they promise to help us reimagine the world that will emerge from this global state of pandemic emergency. The inadequacy of all governments to confront the defense of *bios* on such a scale may make the profound distrust of the state, which was born of Italy's turbulent nation-making process in the nineteenth century and continues to permeate all strata of Italian society, a global feature as well as induce a thorough re-examination of the founding biopolitics of the nation state.

In the Italian case, this re-examination has already begun. For example, the recognition that its motto—*l'Italia è fatta; non ci resta che fare gl'italiani*—not only turned the theory of the nation state on its head by emphasizing the ex post facto “making” of Italians, but also inscribed

Italy's nation-making project within the biopolitics of empire and fascism. Beginning with both the conceit and the medicalization of the Southern Question in the discourses of criminal anthropology, the stage was set in Italy for the emergence of an "empire state," which, while having roots in the Risorgimento, stretches into the present across the *longue durée*. In the writings of prominent *meridionalisti*, the South was figured as a "gangrenous" or "necrotic" limb to be amputated; or, a land that had "atrophied" like a muscle; or, as comprised of a "Southern race" that was "feverish" and "convulsive." Such metaphors would soon be applied to Italian emigrants leaving for North and South America who were described as a "hemorrhage" needing to be stemmed. Today migrants from the global south are also being couched in a rhetoric of "contagion" and "contamination"—metaphors that directly connect migration to virality.

The pandemic has also become an occasion for Italians within the diaspora to increase their lines of communication with those who have stayed behind. Be it those connecting from the North to their families in the South, or from Buenos Aires or New York City back to Italy, the crisis has become an impetus to tighten ties of communication, mostly through WhatsApp and social media outlets. These are simply updated versions of how Italians in the diaspora used radio programs, telegrams, telephone calls, and newspaper announcements to help confirm their families were safe. Historically, these lines of communication also served to raise money for relief work after major Italian earthquakes such as the 1908 Messina and 1980 Irpinia quakes. Today cultural institutes, government entities, and Italian departments are leading social media campaigns around the hashtags of #WeAreItaly and #StandupforItaly, creating networks of global visibility and empathy for victims.

The cultural responses to the imposed quarantine suggest a dynamic reimagining of borders while affirming a shared sense of identity among people living in Italy; for instance, breaching confines aurally by singing and holding concerts from balconies across courtyards. These acts, along with the increased visibility of flying the Tricolore, evoke Italian pride and nationalism in the name of health and goodwill, a far cry from the reactionary politics that the flag more often symbolizes. At the same time, the creative infringements of the quarantine reinforce stereotypes of Italians as singers or emotionally demonstrative, and as such, have moved beyond the boundaries of Italy to inspire others. Italian identity as a model for survival has emerged in the United States case as well, suggesting the kinds of border-crossing within the diaspora present in our issue's theme.

In the United States, the daily reassurances and carefully worded straight talk to Americans from Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has led to what can be described as an Italian American cult following. Fauci, whose father owned a pharmacy in working-class Brooklyn, now has a linguine dish named after him at a Long Island restaurant and votive candles with his portrait. Additionally, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo in his daily missives to New York has repeatedly evoked his Italian American background, especially with his on-air conversations with his television personality brother, Chris Cuomo. Governor Cuomo evoked the trope of the Italian American Sunday dinner as a model for all Americans to be together even under such trying times. The ethnic identity of these public figures has repeatedly been raised to confirm their sense of community responsibility, integrity, grit, and simple generosity—the implication being that these traits of Italian American culture are key tools for our survival.

We will be digesting the impact of this virus and the reverberations of grief and trauma for years, and likely generations, to come. We will study the temporary and the permanent ways that the coronavirus will change Italian culture as well as the resiliency and the creative endeavors

that will undoubtedly emerge on the part those who identify as Italians. The coronavirus has brought a new meaning to borderless Italy, and to a greater extent, our borderless world. Let us not forget the countless lives lost to this virus that knows no borders.