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Foreword

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Abstract

This section brings together a number of essays in the fields of cultural, social, literary and language/linguistics theories currently in progress within and outside Australia, which are variously informed by its cultural, historical, and geographical background. Ranging from second-language teaching, translation, singing and performance, social policy-oriented design workshops, feminist ecocriticism, and Italy-Australia cultural (dis)similarities the contributions focus on the idea of space – in a metaphorical, psychological, and geographical sense – to question research contexts and aims.

Keywords: inner and outer space(s), Italian-Australian (dis)similarities, performance, teaching, translation

I have but vague memories of Marie-Christine Hubert's lectures in Australian literature at the University of Florence in the early 2000s. Back then, her classes consisted of a small group of Italian students and of foreign students enrolled to exchange programs. They represented an opportunity to be challenged into learning about histories, cultures, and languages that we all welcomed as a major leap from the conventions of 'English Literature' we were being accustomed to as undergraduates. For me, those classes also represented a first encounter with embodied diversity inside the university: Hubert, who was on a wheelchair, and her enrapturing stories were tasked with bearing students' trifling discomfort at finding the "proper way" to deal with a disabled body occupying the teaching space of the classroom. This was one of many learning environments where institutional discussions of "safe space(s)" were simply not being raised, and where decolonising the curriculum of English studies, even before our eyes as students, was at best devalued.

The important work carried out by Hubert, with her approach to the literatures and cultures of Australia at University of Florence had had its own momentum more than a decade previously, when she co-organised with Gaetano

Prampolini the international conference, “An Antipodean Connection: Australian Writers, Artists and Travellers in Tuscany” (1989)¹. On reflection, such work unmistakably addressed the abovementioned and other kinds of silences and (mis)representations, in a time when higher educational institutions in Italy, in particular, and in the EU more generally were to pass the test for interdisciplinarity with refashioned curricula to help future generations of workers navigate the international(ised) labour market – in what was a key step towards the marketisation of higher education (HE) (Molesworth, Scullion, Nixon eds 2011). The lost opportunities witnessed with regard to HE institutions of the third millennium are not just for individuals who frequent university spaces as students, researchers, and teachers, but for society as a whole. As Wendy Brown tellingly puts it in her analysis of the neoliberalisation of the academy in the U.S., they speak of the failure to create and to maintain the conditions for the growth of “an educated and engaged citizen[ship]” (2015, 183), oppressed under the capitalisation of personal, public/political, professional, and educational spheres.

This section of *LEA* gathers contributions on the work carried out in and across the two countries. Its publication is made to coincide with a research fellowship I was awarded, co-funded by the Department of Languages, Literatures and Intercultural Studies (Florence) and the Faculty of Arts, Monash University (Melbourne), with Monash University Prato Centre figuring as intermediary between the two institutional country contexts². Contributors were asked to bring their distinctive cultural, social, literary and language/linguistics perspectives about today’s Australia. Taken together, the essays express our longing for transnational experiences that involve teaching, research, and experimentation with new media in challenging and inspiring ways. Yet, I believe they also emerge as ways to make sense of our different positionings inside academia; thereby, making the notion of space – in a metaphorical, psychological, and a material sense – central for research contexts and their aims.

Census data for 2011 revealed that Italian is the second most commonly spoken foreign language in Australia (1.4 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). In recent years, international experiences and study abroad programs have become key priorities for Australian HE institutions (Green *et al.* 2015). In particular, the latter can be said to exist at a critical juncture: between reconciling intercultural exchanges and/as personal enrichment through the acknowledgment and awareness of difference or, conversely, promoting a “tourism of sorts”, where the foundational stratifications which students live

¹ Gaetano Prampolini took up the teaching of Australian literature at University of Florence after Hubert’s retirement.

² “Classed, Raced, and Gendered Narratives in AU mobility students: The case of Italy” (Chief Investigator: Beatrice Trefalt, Faculty of Arts, Monash University; co-Supervisor: Fiorenzo Fantaccini, Department of Languages, Literatures and Intercultural Studies, University of Florence).

with on a daily basis are not made to link with the cultural gaps in the home and in the host country, at the intimate, emotional, and psychological level. In their discussion of a Skype-mediated approach to second language (L2) teaching and learning, Giovanna Carloni and Brian Zuccala propose a different take on “internationalisation” and share their development, coordination, and assessment of a project blending the visual and digital learning. In addition to rethinking the “exchange” component of language learning as cross-cultural, cross-country activity, their project makes a timely case for university students as active participants, through open discussions about the sense they made of this experience via on-going questionnaire methodologies. Rita Wilson and Eliana Maestri look at language in/and translation within the context of singing and performing as the shaping of a cross-cultural approach to multiculturalism in Australia of today. For the women involved in Italian Australian folk choirs they researched, the “multi-” is understood to encompass encounters between different traditions, while also making space for shared understandings, personal and collective memories, feelings, and embodiments. Allison Edwards and Hannah Korsmeyer were invited as representatives of the MADA XYX Lab, an experience developed at Monash Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture “to produce knowledge about how space and design shape the causes, consequences and approaches to understanding, controlling and preventing gender inequity in Australia” (XYX Lab)³. The essay records a design-thinking workshop aimed to facilitate “inward” and “outward” communication for youth and minorities, and it makes a significant addition to the growing research field of arts-design-based methods in the social sciences, where practices of (social) inclusivity and agencies are performed and explored. Still within a perspective that understands gender as critical area of investigation, specifically in its relation to sexuality, race, and the human/non-human dualism is my article on queer ecology, feminist ecocriticism, and Mununjali author Ellen van Neerven. In reading together a short-story by van Neerven’s acclaimed collection, *Heat and Light* (2014) and the current debate on feminist ecocriticism, my aim is to develop a self-reflective account of what Jacqui Alexander has cogently defined as the pedagogic mandate of learning, that is, “the imperative of making the world in which we live intelligible to ourselves and to each other – in other words, teaching ourselves” (2005, 6). Closing the series are Roberta Trapè’s piece on the crossing between Italy and Australia as a space of possibility where past memories and new futures are being played out, on both a metaphorical and on a material level at work in Simon West’s 2015 collection of poetry, *The Ladder*. As discussed by Trapè, time is the minimum denominator in West’s complex understanding of a self- developed in the “in-between” space of two converging settings, which

³ In addition to Edwards and Korsmeyer, the Lab consists of Nicole Kalms (Director), Gene Bawden, Pamela Salen, and Gill Matthewson.

is the space where past and present are juxtaposed, growingly within his overall attempt to incorporate elements from both countries and cultures. Simon West's unpublished poems, which were generously provided by the leading Australian poet and translated for this occasion by poet and translator Tomaso Kemeny are telling of his nuanced sense of the materiality of places, spaces, and objects, which characterizes his more recent poetry in particular.

It was startling, during and after reading the different essays against one another, to realise that there is a profound common thread running deep inside them. Whether this is expressed in their authorship, their subject matters, and/or in the kinds of relations they try to envisage within and without their fields, this desire is primarily a striving towards knowledge as shared practices of meaning-making, of embracing one's need to make sense of their own (academic and nonacademic) locations. The essays gathered here may thus function as experiential narratives, and as such, they refuse being final(ised), categorisable, digestible within disciplinary frameworks that would fix their aims/scopes. My wish is to see them grow to inhabit the space of each one of their authors' sense of their singularity and of the teaching and learning practices they want to (re)shape.

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