



The Italian American Studies Network is Born

a conversation with Anthony J. Tamburri (April 02, 2014)



The terrain of Italian/American studies is extremely fertile and yet very much uncultivated, both in the Italy and the U.S. So a group of scholars from the two countries met in Bellagio, to discuss how to transcend borders and bridge gaps. Read the interview with Dean Anthony Julian Tamburri.

From March 3 to March 7 a group of 18 people convened from the US and Italy to the [Rockefeller Center in Bellagio](#) [2], on Lake Como, for a closed-door meeting.

Organized by [Anthony Tamburri](#) [3] and [Fred Gardaphè](#) [4] of the [John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of CUNY](#) [5], the 4-day workshop was entitled “Transcending Borders, Bridging Gaps” and was open to a selected number of professors and scholars in humanities and social sciences, migration and diaspora studies, American immigrant history, society and politics.



Held up in a monastery-like atmosphere they engaged in long, detailed brainstorming on the status of Italian-American Studies in the U.S. and Italian universities. The group examined the current situation of diasporic studies in general and of “Italian Americana” in particular, and discussed possible avenues for collaboration.

At the heart of the meeting was the common recognition of the importance to study Italian diasporic experiences, of which Italian-American experience—past and present—is such a substantial part, as well as the realization that such study is intimately related not only to the study of Italian historical emigration, but also of the current immigration to Italy.

The Italian delegation presented what they do and how they perceived their work in relation to the larger field of American Studies. The American delegation illustrated the accomplishments and shortcomings of Italian-American studies in the U.S. Participants then divided into small working groups and created an outline for what they see as the needs for developing Italian-American Studies programs.

They came up with many ideas about how to work with the existing academic structures in both countries and develop Italian American studies by establishing agreements and partnership through internationalization initiatives. They also examined possibilities to create Summer schools and Master’s programs in Italian-American Studies, the organization of bilateral conferences and the launching of joint research projects and publications on the topic. Finally, they established the Italian-American Studies Network, a tool to exchange and disseminate their ideas, discuss future initiatives, and coordinate common efforts.

We met with Anthony Tamburri, Dean of the Calandra Institute and primary organizer of the event, on his return from Bellagio and asked him to comment on what he calls a “historic event.”

How did the idea of meeting with Italian professors of American Studies originate? In examining the reception and study of Italian Americans in Italy two things became patently clear: First, The number of people who did so was small indeed; Second, Many of those who profess to engage American Studies do so without taking into consideration the history and culture of Italian Americans. I have used on two occasions the example of the American Studies journal in Italy, *Àcoma*, which commissioned a special issue on ethnic literature in the US, and not one writer of Italian origin was mentioned: not John Ciardi, not Don DeLillo, and not John Fante. It was, for all practical purposes, a “politically correct” issue. And how ironic I find it, to have a seemingly “politically correct” issue of a journal in a country where elected officials can spout out racial epithets with no consequences. The basic goal of the meeting was two-fold: (a) to engage a group of Americanists in Italy on the subject matter of Italian/American culture and history; (b) to create a dialog that will last beyond the meeting, thus building a network of intellectual exchange. From this consequential grid of Italian and American professors, we should be able to build an eventual trait d’union that will result in a consistent and rigorous conversation and collaboration between the two groups on both sides of the ocean.

Italian/American Studies has a strange existence. In the US it seems to dwell more in Italian Studies whereas in Italy it lives mostly with American Studies.

This is true to some extent, though we have found it to inhabit both spaces in the United States. At Queens College, for example, Italian/American Studies at the graduate level can be part of one of two programs: it can be a secondary field within the MA in Italian; it can also be the primary concentration for the MA in Liberal Studies. As an undergraduate program, Italian/American Studies exists as a minor at both Queens College and Brooklyn College, and it is a major at Lehman College. What is significant here is that Italian/American Studies needs to be available at the graduate level if we are to see true progress within the US as far as Italian Americana becoming part of a national discourse. To date, therefore, there is still much work to do. For example, the bouquet of four graduate courses at Queens College is, to a certain degree, historical. It is the first time that such courses in the US have been formalized at the post-BA level. Even in places where I have taught before (Purdue University and Florida Atlantic University), where students have done their Ph.D. in Italian/American Studies, the courses were usually taught through general topics courses or special topics courses. We need to insist on Italian/American Studies being included in both Italian and



American Studies programs. But I am not yet convinced that Italian Studies here in the United States is ready for Italian Americana; and I say that as a Professor of Italian Studies by formation and career. I believe that most of our programs are still very much steeped in a historico-philological tradition that does not count for transgressing geo-cultural borders. In some ways, the jury is still out, which, of course, leads room for *Spes ultima dea*.

How did the workshop turn out, in your opinion? You spoke in terms of an “historical event”. What did you mean by that?

It is historical in that, for the first time, eight Italian professors of American Studies and ten American professors of Italian/American and Italian Studies met for the first time for three and one-half days in order to discuss the future of Italian/American Studies in both countries. As we moved forward, we realized that there is much more in common than we had thought. We also realized that we are all very much on the same page as far as wanting to see the field blossom in both countries. Our meeting coincides with three editorial events of historic proportion. Fordham University Press will release two books this spring — one an anthology of poets of the Italian diaspora, who write in Italian; the other, a translation of Francesco Durante’s *Italoamericana*, an anthology of Italian writing in the United States during the first part of the twentieth century. Finally, the Italian journal *Studi italiani* will include a section entitled “*oltreconfine*” dedicated to Italian writing outside Italy. The results of our meeting will clearly form those ideas and strategies to move forward and develop programs — symposia, conferences, and university courses — that will benefit from the above-mentioned publications. All of this, in turn, will form the basis for Italian/American Studies as part of the university curricula in both Italy and the United States.

What’s next after Bellagio?

The follow-up to Bellagio is, first, to develop further the Italian/American Studies Network that was born on Lake Como. We have already offered courses at the University for Foreigners in Perugia, the University of Calabria, and the University of Palermo. We have also decided to work with Professor Donatella Izzo to develop a curriculum at the Istituto Orientale di Napoli as well as with the University of Naples 2. The terrain is extremely fertile and yet very much uncultivated. The eighteen of us who met in Bellagio will form the basis for an ever-growing group of professors and scholars on both sides of the ocean. We envision this network to grow further as we move forward with some of the results of our work in Italy. We especially look forward to a growing number of younger scholars who can will now feel both encouraged and empowered to engage in a very important and yet much ignored field within the hallowed halls of the University. Bellagio has already changed all of that.

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