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Introduction to Vol. 11, Issue 1
Italy and the Epistemes of Contagion: Touch, Contact, Distance

"Living and Breathing Reconfigurings of the World," or Thinking in the Time of COVID

Cristiana Giordano and Rhiannon Noel Welch

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.
>
> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.
>
> Arundati Roy

Crisis, Contagion, and Care

Contagion has perhaps never before preoccupied all corners of the world, all at once, as it has for the past two years and counting. The "virus that knows no borders" has erected palpable ones around all manner of human activity in the name of stopping the spread of COVID-19: from the oft-photographed shower curtain hugs or at-the-window visits between elderly people and their loved ones at the outset of the pandemic, to "shutdowns" that confined the privileged classes to their home offices and computer screens (Fogu, Hom, Ruberto 2019, 3). At the same time, ostensibly prophylactic border closures from countries where the outbreak raged have "mix[ed] up medical and political quarantines" and revealed the ambivalent boundaries between politics and science (Ticktin 2020). The death drive that has long haunted neoliberal governance has come starkly to the fore: people deemed essential to the economy have been revealed to be disposable, forced to choose between life and livelihood. Indeed, for communities of color the world over, *livelihood* has become a tragic oxymoron, insofar as protecting "a means of securing the necessities of life," as the *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines it, entails accepting elevated levels of risk to one's health. The languages of health and well-being have shuttled back and forth between biological bodies and economic ones, as the so-called health of the economy requires the sacrifice of human life, its exposure to viral contact and contagion.

Yet for all of the boundaries and fissures it has brought into stark relief–from centuries of systemic racism and the brutality of border regimes, to economic inequality, distinctions between "essential" and "non-essential" work, between self and other–the very nature of a *pandemic* has reminded us of our shared vulnerability, creating an opening that in early 2020 made the waters

of Venice translucent again, returned the carbon-choked streets of Milan to pedestrians and bicycles, and crystalized inspired calls to "remake the world" (Taylor 2021).[1] We have witnessed how social movements, like viral videos or contaminated air, are contagious, as tens of millions of people took to the streets in cities and towns across the globe in 2020 to protest the murder by police of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the countless other Black people they came to represent. In Italy, serious reservations were raised about the blind spots of these movements, given the apparent grievability of *American* Black life, which contrasted bitterly with the relative silence of the Italian public after the deaths of people such as Soumaila Sacko, Mohamed Ben Ali (known as Bayfall), and Idy Diene, to name just a few recent instances of racist violence against members of the Black diaspora in Italy (Pesarini and Hawthorne 2020). It seemed that care was more readily extended to Black lives across the Atlantic than to Black people residing in Italy. Part of this carelessness, this lack of or only very partial offering of care, may well stem from the fact that we are living in a global social order in which, as members of The Care Collective put it in a manifesto published in the pandemic's first year, "We have, for a very long time, been rendered less capable of caring for people even in our most intimate spheres, while being energetically encouraged to restrict our care for strangers and distant others" (2020, 4). They continue, "the spaces left for attending to difference or indeed developing more expansive forms of care have been rapidly diminishing" (4-5). Care work–"familial care, the hands-on care that workers carry out in care homes and hospitals and that teachers do in schools, and the everyday services provided by other workers," has long been devalued as "women's work," and rendered precarious and woefully underpaid by today's neoliberal order; it is also overwhelmingly carried out by women already marginalized by racism, immigration and/or other social status–in Italy as in the US. The pandemic has made this work more essential, and its systemic devaluation more striking, than ever before. "What, we now ask," wrote The Care Collective, "would happen if we were to begin instead to put care at the very center of life?" (5)

In addition to the fault line emerging over care toward Black lives in Italy, a similar rift has appeared in a debate among two prominent psychoanalysts and public intellectuals there. Massimo Recalcati has argued that the borders between self and other imposed by the pandemic are very different from the ones put in place by identitary sovranism. Pandemic borders create relationality, Recalcati has suggested, reminding us of our deep intersubjectivity, and demonstrating that freedom can only be achieved through solidarity with strangers and a renewed civic engagement with our neighbors. Skeptical of Recalcati's prediction that a "new brotherhood" would emerge from isolation and physical distance, Daniela Scotto di Fasano has argued that the fear of contagion pushed people to purchase weapons, crowd trains to escape the city, and storm supermarkets to secure toilet paper and canned goods, all to the detriment of

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[1] This is the title of Astra Taylor's 2021 book. Her opening chapter reflects on the etymology of 'conspiracy,' which derives partially from the Latin *conspirare,* literally "to breathe together." She draws a line of connection between the airborne respiratory illness COVID-19, according to which "we touch by breathing the same air"; the air pollution caused by wildfires in the western US; and the words "I can't breathe," which George Floyd repeated as he lay dying at the hands of convicted murderer Derek Chauvin, and which were an uncanny echo of Eric Garner's callously unheeded last words in 2014. Her conclusion bears noting: "We are all living amid the wreckage of a long, ongoing, and intentional sabotage of progressive collective action: a profit-driven health-care system ill prepared to cope with a pandemic, runaway climate change threatening the future, a bigoted and broken criminal justice system, a misinformation-addled (and conspiracy-promoting) corporate media sphere, and an economy in which the majority of people can barely keep their heads above water. Our inability to truly conspire is why so many people are struggling to breathe today" (Taylor 2).

others. This dark side of the isolation imposed by national decrees and international guidelines would not necessarily lead to a renewed sense of community, but, according to Scotto di Fasano, it would reignite our archaic aggressiveness and cannibalistic instinct to preserve ourselves at the expense of others. The fear and sense of powerlessness before an invisible "enemy" reminds us of our shared vulnerability. The lesson from psychoanalysis, argues Scotto di Fasano, should be to tolerate–to live *with*–such fear without resorting to war. Whether we think of *contagion* in terms of public health, social movements, or civic versus individual responsibility, it appears clear that the larger discursive field it inhabits, that of *crisis*, produces its own limits, foregrounding some questions while foreclosing others.

This volume of *California Italian Studies* is dedicated to *Italy and the Epistemes of Contagion: Touch, Contact, Distance*. With one of the highest death rates in the world, and an ill-prepared healthcare system, Italy was the first European country to impose a nationwide lockdown in early March, 2020. Long before it became ground zero for the coronavirus in the West (only to be clamorously eclipsed by the UK and US), the thought of contagion had persistently inspired cultural production in Italy. From Boccaccio to Tiepolo and Manzoni, to Agamben, Cimatti, and Esposito, Italian art and philosophy have long pondered the contours, colors, and textures of contagion, and its paradoxical status as both a condition of and a threat to the human community.

Roberto Esposito once incisively argued that German philosopher Elias Canetti's formulation of "a perverse short circuit between touch (*tatto*), contact (*contatto*) and contagion (*contagio*)" lies at the heart of European modernity. For Esposito, "The risk of contamination immediately liquidates contact, relationality, and being in common" (59). Similarly, Walter Benjamin related his seminal discussion of the parallel relationship between the rise of fascism and the aestheticization of war, and the loss of aura to the growing gap between "haptic" or "tactile" appropriation and the dominance of detached, strategic vision in modern politics (Benjamin 1968). Thinking from the perspective of quantum physics, Karen Barad stretches the concept of touch between self and other to the inhuman, questioning the idea of the self-bounded human as intersubjectively related to "equally human" others. The inhuman is "that which commonly gets associated with humanity's inhumanity as a lack of compassion." Barad elaborates: "what we must face in thinking responsibility and justice is the existence of the inhuman as threaded through and lived through us, as enabling us, and every being/becoming, to reach out to the insensible otherness that we might otherwise never touch." For Barad, touch also shapes theories and thinking: "Theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world's patternings and murmurings. [...] Theories are not mere metaphysical pronouncements on the world from some presumed position of exteriority. Theories are living and breathing reconfigurings of the world" (Barad 2012, 206). In this light, both the act of thinking and the experience of contagion appear grounded in forms of touch and blurred divides between human/non-human, self/other, material/immaterial, and visible/invisible.

As a crisis narrative (Roitman 2014), *contagion* makes visible a cluster of other, deep, ongoing crises. Indeed, in Italy, it is no coincidence that the discursive field most often traversed by contagion *before* the explosion of COVID was the so-called "migration crisis." In this context, *contagion* has been used both metaphorically (the foreigner who crosses into the borders of Western liberal democracies, threatening its core values and contaminating the ostensible purity of racialized national identity), and literally (the other as the carrier of new and old diseases, threatening the host country's public health). And, while still in the midst of the COVID-19

pandemic, the war in Ukraine has suddenly occupied center stage in the global crisis discourse, pushing the pandemic to the background of public debates and media attention. This war, too, is framed by political figures and the media through metaphors of contagion, creating speculation about a possible World War III, and fears over the collapse of NATO and the European Union. In the imperial West today, contagion thus begins to resemble something like an *episteme*–the condition of possibility for thought, knowledge, or at the very least, cultural production, whether acknowledged or implicit.

The Time of Crisis

How did contagion come to occupy the crisis discourse of our contemporary moment? What features or logics do *contagion* and *crisis* have in common? To begin, we might consider the etymology of crisis, whose root contains links to sickness and the medical body. "Crisis" derives from the ancient Greek *krinô*, which means to choose, to separate, to cut, pointing to the need to make a final judgment, a definite decision. Historically, it played an important role in the fields of law, theology, and medicine. Beginning in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, its medical connotation prevailed. Crisis came to mean the turning point of a disease—not the disease itself—or a life-threatening event that required immediate intervention and a radical shift in treatment. While crisis once signified a moment of sudden change that, for its gravity, called for immediate action (Koselleck 2002), it has, over time, come to signify a condition of ongoing struggle and enduring turmoil. Examples of the latter are both the "migration crisis," which has figured as a central discourse in Europe for several decades, and the current pandemic, which is entering its third year as a public health "emergency." Perhaps revealing its etymological links to the diseased body, it seems as if the category of crisis itself has a contagious potential, encroaching on different kinds of events and experiences that can be translated into other categories of knowledge such as the *extra-ordinary* and the *exceptional*. Crisis thus has a viral quality of its own, in as much as it thrives upon and generates plausible explanations for sudden death and loss, threat and fear, selecting what counts as worth noticing and discarding what is not.

There is something paradoxical about the durational quality of crisis. For Lauren Berlant, "the *genre of crisis* can distort something structural and ongoing […] into something that *seems* shocking and exceptional" (7). Similarly, Janet Roitman has written about crisis as a *mode of narration*, and has compelled us to ask if the concept of enduring, ongoing, seemingly eternal crisis is not itself an oxymoron (2014). Derived from the exceptional event, crisis was not initially used to describe the *longue durée* of a chronic condition. And yet, in the context of the ongoing "refugee crisis" in the Mediterranean and Europe, the routinization and bureaucratization of humanitarian interventions have produced a sense of chronicity. Similarly, the management of the pandemic is punctuated by decrees, rules, practices of hygiene and distancing, and forms of biometric control that get turned on and off depending on the tracking in numbers of infections, hospitalizations, deaths, and vaccination rates. Procedures of public health –or of rescue in the case of migrations–performed under the umbrella of a recurring state of exception (Agamben 1998) regularly translate the immediacy of the emergency into the long duration of a persistent condition.

If these tempos of crisis governmentality are characterized by a tension between the urgency of emergency and a certain chronicity, we might ask whether there is anything unique about the temporality of this pandemic, vis-à-vis crises past. Unlike pandemics in recent memory (for

instance, HIV/AIDS), the very name of the virus–COVID 19–carries within it a temporal marker, the year in which it was detected and named in Wuhan, China. This marker, "19," also harbors an ominous time lag or delay: those crucial few months when "the West" seemed to believe it would be spared from the highly transmissible virus. It wasn't until late February/early March of 2020 that Italy and other western nation-states began to realize what epidemiologists likely knew from the start: that the virus would neither recognize nor respect chronological or political boundaries. 2019's virus would soon come to dominate 2020, 2021, 2022…

For over two years and counting, much of the world has been enveloped in the dilated, stretched, seemingly eternally recurrent or *chronic* temporality of the pandemic. For those not sickened by the virus or attending to the sick, COVID has brought about a temporary though extended (and then repeatedly deferred) reprieve from a hyper-accelerated global present, which has a tendency to feel like a world catapulting toward planetary collapse. Two sets of images come to mind to capture this juxtaposition: the "10,000 Days" montage from the 2019 HBO series *Years and Years*, which condenses several disastrous global decades into several minutes, alongside, this time, a figure for temporal arrest drawn from the global press–the *Ever Given* container ship, which blocked the Suez Canal for several days in 2021 and brought the world's attention to the fragility of the ecologically disastrous global supply chain, its vulnerability to interruption and stasis. In this pause that has disrupted so many of our familiar patterns, habits, and flows, some have found an opening, or what writer Arundati Roy (2020) calls "a portal"–a chance to make the world anew. "And even while the virus proliferates," she asks, "who could not be thrilled by the swell of birdsong in cities, peacocks dancing at traffic crossings and the silence in the skies?" From felicitous promises of climate repair brought about by this pause, to the potential it presented for racial justice: several commentators remarked that it was precisely *because* of the slowed tempo of daily life under the pandemic, the interruption of our quotidian rhythms brought on by the virus, that global protests against racist injustice grew to an unprecedented scale (in the US, where this journal is based, they constituted the largest mass demonstrations in history); decelerated and endlessly deferred pandemic time has been full of possibility, too.

Related to how the pandemic has reconfigured time, or at the very least our experiences of it, is a question that runs through each of the essays contained in this special issue about the degrees of closeness between apparently discrete forms of knowledge (novels, poetry, philosophy, painting, human and more-than-human, etc.), categories (shame/*pudore*; genius/insanity; individual/community), historical periods (ancient, medieval, early modern, modern, contemporary, yesterday, tomorrow), conventional disciplines and fields (anthropology, art history, critical theory, history, literary analysis, psychiatry, politics) and our engagements with them today. Rather than dwelling on the distance between them, the insights and reflections contained in these pages reveal instead their profound interrelation. Words, images, matter, and relations that we may consider chronologically, culturally, or disciplinarily distant reach out and touch one another, and us, differentially, depending upon our position(s) in our troubled present. Though their center of gravity is undoubtedly Italy, their reach is not confined by the strictures of national boundaries; connections abound to larger currents, such as transnational feminisms, ecological/environmental action, and global migrations.

Notes on Structure

Consonant with the dual temporalities inscribed in *crisis,* we have structured this volume as a means of reflecting on, simultaneously, the here and now and the *longue durée.* To this end, in addition to article-length essays that look back to works from the *Trecento* through the 1960's, we gathered contributions that speak more immediately from the present: the interview with Lala Hu on the experiences of *sinoitaliani* at the outset of the pandemic; the "Notes from the Field" section, which contains reflections from anthropologists doing fieldwork in Italy during the pandemic (dell'Oca, Blais-Mcpherson), along with a contribution by philosopher Luisa Bonesio; and Giovanna Parmigiani's ethnographic work on neo-animist conceptions of care among pagan communities in Salento will all draw readers into the immediacy of the pandemic's impact in Italy. Essays on works by Boccaccio (Muyo, Rosado), Alessandro Manzoni (Trigg), Giovanni Antonelli and Enrico Morselli (Rozenblatt), Annie Vivanti (Albaum), Primo Levi (Miglianti), and Amelia Rosselli (Dani) reflect instead on the distant and not-so-distant past from the perspective of our pandemic present, shedding new light on familiar and less familiar works from across the Italian tradition, while critically questioning some of the presuppositions of both theoretical and literary canonicity along the way.

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