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AMERICAN STUDIES *AS* ITALIAN THEORY

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1. WHAT IS AN AMERICANIST?

The phrase "Italian Theory" has emerged in recent years as a result of the influence of a cluster of Italian philosophers outside of their country of origin. This influence has given rise to a number of international conferences, the first of which took place in September 2010 at Cornell University, and to high-profile international publications, including two volumes of *Diacritics*.[1] In 2014 there was an international symposium in Paris, where participants wondered whether an "Italian Theory" really exists, and whose proceedings have been published in a volume called *Differenze Italiane* (2015). Moments of research outside Italy were followed by a conference in Naples (Institute of Philosophical Studies and Istituto di Scienze Umane), an international symposium at the University of Salerno (October 2015), and by a seminar in Pisa (Scuola Normale Superiore, January 2016). These events have culminated in the constitution of a new research Network on Italian Thought and European Philosophies (Workiteph) in March 2016. The Network's manifesto speaks of events that have "outlined the contours of a paradigm."[2] The kind of "Italian Theory" I will

1. The conference held at Cornell September 24–25, 2010 was titled "Commonalities: Theorizing the Common in Contemporary Italian Thought." See *Diacritics*, vol. 39, no. 3 2009 and vol. 39, no. 4 2009, the double special issue on Contemporary Italian Thought introduced by Timothy Campbell.
2. "Documento Fondativo del Laboratorio su 'il pensiero italiano e le filosofie europee'–WORKITEPH" (Founding Document of the Network on Italian

be addressing here is a radical tradition of thought, whose more conservative dimensions are not within the scope of this paper.

Certainly one of the interesting traits of the new wave of critical thought called "Italian Theory" is that its name comes from the outside. On more than one occasion philosopher Roberto Esposito has offered the narrative of its emergence. In *Pensiero Vivente* (2010) he traces its beginning to the success of living Italian authors among American scholars in American Universities (3), a phenomenon that closely recalls the rise of French Theory and, before French Theory, of the earlier critical theory of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. In a more recent essay, "German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought" (2015), Esposito sees Italian Theory as part of that movement of deterritorialization which has propelled European philosophy, since its decline in the 1930s and 1940s, outside its boundaries, in the attempt "to reinvent itself along other trajectories" (105).

As Esposito notes, deterritorialization resulted in the broadening of a particular philosophy. His narrative begins with the enforced geographical displacement of German philosophy, which corresponded to its intellectual redirection as critical theory, and remarks on the differences between this first wave and the second great displacement of French Theory. He writes:

> Unlike the German diaspora, French Theory did not ensue from traumatic events and it was, therefore, devoid of any tragic resonance; but like the German diaspora, geographical displacement resulted in a contamination and in a circulation of ideas that took on the traits of a veritable hegemony in a number of disciplines, from literary criticism to gender studies and postcolonial studies. ("German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought" 106)

The name "French Theory" actually testifies to the force of deterritorialization since, as Esposito reminds his readers, once it crossed the Atlantic, the thought of Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault, "became quite other as decontextualized fragments of their thought amalgamated in a new discourse called 'theory'" (106). Italian Theory continues this movement but, in Esposito's view, when

thought and European philosophies), Università di Bari, March 10, 2016. For the text, see the network's website: http://workiteph.com/english/.

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compared to the preceding waves, it adds a different emphasis: "The 'outside' that propels Italian Thought (the formula preferred by Esposito, and we shall see later why) is neither the social dimension of German Philosophy nor the textual dimension of French Theory, but the constitutively conflicting space of political practice" ("German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought" 107). Esposito's hypothesis is that Italian Theory bridges the old gap between theory and practice with a different "mood of affirmation" (*tonalità dell'affermazione* 110). To be sure, since its recent inception, Italian Theory has been synonymous with affirmative thought yet, by Esposito's own admission "affirmative" remains a problematic term, meaning many different things.[3] From his point of view, "affirmative" is meant to refer to a philosophy of immanence, which, extending well beyond Italian philosophy, is comprised of thinkers like Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Deleuze, all united in the shared effort to think "not in a reactive but in an active, productive, affirmative way" ("German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought" 110).

Even from these summary remarks it is possible to see that Italian Theory meets us with two interesting but problematic traits: its strange name and, strictly related to its name, its affirmative character. The strangeness of the name lies of course in the adjective "Italian." One of the founding fathers of "weak thought," Pier Aldo Rovatti, in a firm rejoinder to Antonio Negri's "The Italian Difference," has expressed concerns for the "emphasis on national character" (Rovatti 26–27). Others would agree with Rovatti,[4] particularly since we are talking about a wave of theory that gathers momentum when the critical debate in the Humanities is steadily shifting away from the national and toward a wider planetary dimension (see Elias & Moraru). In light of this general-

3. For some of the meanings, see Negri,Malandrini, and Perniola.

4. Similar reservations are voiced by Lorenzo Chiesa in one of his critical introductions to Italian theory. On the occasion of my presentation of an earlier draft of this essay at the IASA Rome Symposium in the Spring of 2016, the same point was made by Carlo Martinez, who acted as my respondent, and Giorgio Mariani, who organized the Symposium and invited me to present. "International American Studies and the Question of World Literature," a Symposium of the International American Studies Association (IASA), "Sapienza" University of Rome, 14–15 April 2016.

ized change, any return to the national character sounds, at best, anachronistic; it suggests a retrogade motion.

In the past, Italian thought more generally has not been foreign to such intimations. As Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano point out in their introduction to *The Italian Difference* (2009), first Guy Debord, in *Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle* (1988), and later Michael Hardt, in his introduction to *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (1996), link Italian thought to the "advantage of backwardness" (3): for these authors, the image of an Italy lagging behind modernization and postmodernization processes actually corresponds to a capacity for extreme experiments in resistance (*operaismo* and *autonomia organizzata*). While the label remains a source of concern, it should be kept in mind that "Italian Theory" is a name given within an Anglophone context (Italian Theory is called by its English name even in Italy). Thus it would be useful to understand the phrase from a slightly different angle, not only as a historical variation of transatlanticism but, as such, also as a more fundamental form of interpellation regarding something that exits in the eye of the Other. From this perspective, Italian Theory becomes much more than, to use Srinivas Aravamudan's phrase, "the return of anachronism." It raises the question of exactly what, in its paradoxical backwardness, appeals to the Other, that is to say, to all those who recognize and name an "Italian" theory.

We might also consider the clichés at work within the phrase. Even though it is lamentable of course, the ugly work of clichés always counts: if "French Theory" may have projected intellectual sophistication, "Italian Theory" can retain a certain ethnic flavor. One of the points of the label "Italian Theory" is to invite implicitly the comparison with "French Theory," which it follows. It would seem that, in the comparison, "Italian Theory" can only claim a strained, almost working class, vulnerable grasp of the concept. As Deleuze and Guattari once (surprisingly) suggested, Italy, like Spain, is "capable of a powerful development of concettism, that is to say, of that Catholic compromise of concept and figure which had great aesthetic value but which masked philosophy, diverted it toward a rhetoric and prevented a full possession of the concept" (103). Because of its imagined contiguity

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with ethnicity and with a weaker possession of thought, "Italian Theory" can wield an uncomfortable power if brought before American literature and culture: its ethnic ring and its assumed philosophical secondariness can potentially recall and mirror old scars in the body of a currently decentered, would-be post-ethnic and post-racial America.

Apart from its potential for memory work, the fact remains that an "Italian Theory" first became visible and was named in the US, later irradiating in another parts of the world. It would not seem unreasonable therefore to propose that the origins of this wave of theory invite the question of how it addresses American Studies. For example: Might it rightfully belong to the Americanist's domain of inquiry? If so, what impact might it have on the identity of the Americanist? What is an Americanist?

2. METHOD

The existence of Italian Theory therefore questions the boundaries of American Studies, a field that in recent decades has spent its best energies redrawing its own intellectual order. The reconfiguration has not been isolated; it has concerned other fields of knowledge as well. But it seems significant that while, for example, in the case the New Modernist Studies the redrawing of boundaries has meant a planetary expansion of the concept of modernism and a multiplication of modernities and modernist latitudes in time and place (Friedman), the reconfiguration of American Studies instead seems inexorably bound to a trajectory of dissolution. With its internationalization, "America" has transformed into the term of a knowledge constructed globally, from points of view other than national that remain decidedly non-American (see Edwards & Gaonkar), and the traditional territorial idea of America has been replaced with a much more fragmented image. In this play of refractions and reflections, it is as if the object of study vanished in the distance, further away from the observer, like a distant mark in the horizon, engaging the imagination with the notion of residue, debris, detritus. (It reminds me a little of Italian photography when Susan Sontag looked at it: she found that the image of Italy that she had in mind became less decodable and more confining, a set of thin, material

marks "not meant to be sauntered through […] an abstraction. To be seen as an image. To be seen from the air […]" [222]).

The process may be said to have begun with what Donald Pease calls "a generalized crisis in […] the field-Imaginary," by which he means "the prelinguistic identification of the field practitioner with the field's assumptions, principles, and beliefs" (Pease 118). America was understood as a unitary narrative rooted in its geographical boundaries. When disidentification with this narrative set it, it became a new critical productive force. The New Americanists Project driven by Donald Pease in the late 1980s and early 1990s questioned two deeply linked notions: the mastery implied in the idea of a subject of knowledge (the field's practitioner) and the extent to which this mastery meant the control to be exerted over the boundaries of a field of knowledge. Disidentification installed the work of the negative within the field. The Americanist, much like the critical theorist in the footsteps of Adorno, found it vital to criticize a "thinking that tolerates nothing outside it" (Adorno qtd. in Giles, *Virtual* 261).

This element of conflict represented only the beginning of a wider, relentless forward movement of American Studies toward the outside that continues in the present. Djelal Kadir hopes that the exit from its geographical boundaries will transform American Studies into "an international interdisciplinary field of inquiry" (Kadir "America and Its Studies" 11). What I find fascinating is that this movement outside affords the mind the image of a confluence of American Studies and critical thought, both involved in a simultaneous movement of deterritorialization that pushes them outside their established boundaries. The two areas of knowledge appear closer than ever, sharing a certain inclination for heterogeneity. What they appear to have in common is the recursive problem of imposing intellectual order on an incongruent mass of materials.

I understand critical thought as that theoretical activity which, in the twentieth century, led to the renewal of European philosophies with figures like Adorno, who favored a philosophy (critical theory) oriented toward social change. As we have seen, Roberto Esposito construes Italian Theory as the third phase of critical thought, as the vantage point from which European philosophical reflection, far from being insular and hegemonic,

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can retrospectively be grasped as an onward series of geographical exits that amount to so many intellectual transformations. For Esposito, Italian Theory belongs in this historical continuum but, at the same time, it exceeds it, naming a different kind of thought linked to a structure of latency. Elsewhere, I observed that in *Pensiero Vivente* (2010), the story of Italian Theory begins with a blank, with a time of stasis and non-action. Italian Theory points to a philosophical-critical body that has remained inoperative and takes on transnational resonance belatedly, when it can be understood as particularly attuned to the "dynamics of globalization and immaterial production of the postmodern" (*Pensiero Vivente* 5). Beginning with a blank at the beginning, Italian Theory never really begins. We find it already mixed with other waves of thought, according to a logic of contamination that often subtends the formation of new ideas. Italian Theory, then, sounds like another name for the problem of the new. Esposito himself argues that it prefigures the awakening of "innovative paradigms" *(Pensiero Vivente* 4–5). Interestingly, as the question of the emergence of the new, Italian Theory might be advantageously grasped in its colloquy with American Studies.

The colloquy has barely begun to be uncovered,[5] and thrusts into relief what Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman, reviving an expression of Gene Wise, call "paradigm dramas," the phrase referring to the drama attending the symbolic act itself. This drama is at the core of Esposito's narrative of Italian Theory, which illustrates how new ideas do not define themselves against something. Certain ideas, Esposito stresses, reach us from an uncertain elsewhere: they make sense, are given credit, and become valuable at a particular time. What seems new in certain conceptual horizons comes, in fact, from strands of thought that were already at work elsewhere, and take on "thematic stability" and the necessary conceptual force only in the new register beyond the original conceptual horizon (*Pensiero Vivente* 3, 5). Esposito is seeking to move

5. In his last book, *Da Fuori* (2016), Esposito devotes a section to discussing Italian thought in a transatlantic context, weaving connections between Italian Theory's emphasis on the plane of immanence and the rejection of hierarchies and the representation of American space from Tocqueville on (*Da Fuori* 51–63).

beyond an enduring and confining dialectical model, and Italian Theory, which becomes the proof that ideas arise because they circulate, is made possible exactly by such a diasporic logic.

While it may be that, as Esposito argues, this diasporic logic is always inherent in the emergence of meaningful concepts across deep time, the impure circulation that he describes closely recalls the logic of *méconnaissance*. *Méconnaissance* informs us that the act of understanding thrives on an element of misunderstanding. We understand because we recognize something in misrecognizing it. That the act of recognition hinges on misrecognition amounts to a lot more than a subjective failure in the field practitioner; it constitutes the very condition of illumination. If, as Lacan affirmed, there is no speech without a reply,[6] it is also true that a speech act is, somehow, always a call for recognition, even in the absence of another (Tarizzo 43). The fundamentally divided condition of the linguistic subject and the dialogic nature of language imply identities and ideas formed through speech and recognized in the act of naming; but insofar as they are formed in and through speech, they are also constantly misrecognized. Insofar as the act of grasping something is grounded in something that becomes available for recognition, something will come forward, appear and become meaningful (i. e. conceptually accessible) *in* something else, *as* a familiar unfamiliar.

The standard example of *méconnaissance* is the Mirror Stage. The child's jubilant moment of self-apprehension is simultaneously a moment of misapprehension, when, from body-in-fragments lacking any motor coordination, the child recognizes himself in the idealized, unified mirror image over which he is the master. Here, however, I would like to dwell on a lesser known example from an autobiographical fragment by Aby Warburg. Like the Mirror Stage text by Lacan, Warburg's fragment (1922) deals with the force of images, but it is perhaps more relevant to my argument since the child's seduction by overpowering images is explicitly made to prefigure the adult's capacity for putting intellectual order in chaos.

6. In "Function and field of speech and language," Lacan writes: "there is no speech without a reply, even if it is met only with silence, provided that it has an auditor: this is the heart of its [language's] function in analysis"(Écrits 40).

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Remembering the time when he fell ill with typhus, Warburg writes:

> From that time my mind still retains the images created by the fever with such clarity. They well up, as if they had just been impressed in my memory this very moment, combined with olfactory sensations which, since that time, have caused me to suffer from an unpleasant overexcitation of the olfactory organs. I remember exactly the odor of the toy gun that I used to hold as a child, the soup bowl and the soup it contained, even the texture and the odor of the wool that our old governess used for her knitting (the reason why today I still have a marked aversion for certain shades of yellow).[7]

The most beautiful moment of the fragment comes when Warburg relays his vision of a small coach or carriage:

> At the time of the fever-induced delirium, I also had visions of a small horse-drawn carriage moving forward on the window sill, a memory derived, I later realized, from an illustration in a book by Balzac which, as a child, I always sought to touch without, however, understanding the written text. (Binswanger & Warburg 154)

The prelinguistic force of certain images imposes itself even before the child can read and understand. To this prelinguistic force Warburg traces the adult's capacity for new intellectual paradigms, for founding acts of order, suggesting that the discipline he created as an adult researcher, iconology, originates precisely in the visual memories, particularly in the anxiety evoked by the visual chaos. Tellingly, Warburg speaks of "the tragic infantile attempt of the thinking man" (Binswanger & Warburg 54).

The child in Warburg's fragment begins to think of the events around him in terms of an uncontrollable, material power that makes itself felt through "the illogical supremacy of colors, odors and sounds" (154). He thus outlines a fatal weave of environment and intellect: "The fever-induced delirium isolates and emphasizes the memory image, which is suddenly brought before us in its unbounded singular power" (Binswanger & Warburg 154).

7. All translations from Warburg in the body of this essay are mine. Warburg suffered from depression and symptoms of schizophrenia, and was hospitalized in Ludwig Binswanger's neurological clinic in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland in 1921. He was cured and released from Binswanger's clinic in 1924. The fragment I am drawing on was written during his stay at the clinic.

The image triumphs in a face to face that is decontextualized from the rest of the environment. Later on, speaking about his feverish state, Warburg explicitly refers to the "effect of an environment," indicating the demonic force or illogical sovereignty (colors, odors, sounds) that has him in its grip. Clearly, the power of images is no personal concoction of the feverish child, but concerns his place in the social community, and, what is worse, it prefigures the suffocating, irreparable conjoining of intellect, social community, and national character.

The link between the uncontrollable force of certain images and the question of social belonging becomes clear as the fragment progresses and Warburg relates how he tried to counter the illogical force of the image with real life and integration in "a normal community ready to act and impose order on chaos" (Binswanger & Warburg 154). He goes on to relate his vicissitudes in public schools, his necessity to change communities and adjust to new groups of peers, his experience of being brutally beaten on his fingers with an iron ruler by an anti-Semite theologian, and other violent rites of the community's excluding inclusion.

Warburg dwells on the enigmatic link between the pressure of the social environment and the subjective agony of symbolic activity. The fragment marvelously stages intellectual creativity as the alternation of the child's retreat to his cocoon, which is emphasized by his illness and delirium, and the pressure of belonging, which is associated with the discomfort and outright violence at school, the sovereign symbol of the much wider *dispositif* of the national psyche. The word "environment," then, suggests a nuanced complex, and the work of the fragment is to show the child's attempt to become unmoored from it, reflecting his, as well as our own, unease at that kind of belonging. Warburg mentions his struggle to become included in an "already ordered mass," a torment that was ended by Dr. Cohen's intervention and the child's withdrawal from school. What I wish to remark on is the connection that the fragment establishes between the pressure (from the outside) of a mechanism of excluding inclusion and the agony of the symbolic act, with its promise of conceptual invention. The point of the Warburg fragment is that intellectual work issues from the pressure of the communal

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mechanism, and, even though we may try to become unmoored from national versions of excluding inclusion, these remain always residual to language.

3. PARADIGM DRAMAS: THE PRODUCTION OF SPECTRAL ORIGINS

I have dwelled on Warburg at length because his fragment bears on the necessary "paradigm dramas" attending the act of imposing order on chaos, especially when the act determines the foundation of a field. It is to this founding scene that Donald Pease returns in an influential account of American Studies, "Futures," to which I now turn. Co-authored with Robyn Wiegman, and introducing the volume *The Futures of American Studies* (2002), "Futures" rereads Gene Wise's classical account, "Paradigm Dramas" (1979), with a mixture of admiration and rejection. Pease and Wiegman scrutinize, through Wise, Perry Miller's urge to impose order on chaos and thus organize intellectually a disparate heterogeneity in his classic *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956) (Pease & Wiegman 6). As Pease and Wiegman remark, the founder's act resulted in an academic field organized around a "substantive consensus on the nature of American experience and a methodological consensus on how to study that experience" (6). While they acknowledge the results (an American mind expressed in certain leading thinkers and in recurrent themes like puritanism, transcendentalism, etc.), they are more interested in the breaks from the original paradigm: the first break in the mid-1960s, when the ordered materials appeared to enforce the dominant culture, the second break in the 1970s, when the critique from social movements outside the field resulted in a proliferation within the field (African American Studies, Latino Studies, Asian American Studies, Native American studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Women' s Studies). While Gene Wise saw these breaks as the onset of a decline, Pease and Wiegman judge them positively.

They focus particularly on the second break, in the 1970s, because that is when the question of an "outside" began to emerge. The territorial imaginary of earlier scholars came under attack by subcultures that pressed like so many forces "unable to become present in the field's available representations" (Pease & Wiegman 20). The central question at the time was not the field's

openness to other disciplines. In the post-World War II years, American Studies had, in fact, encroached on other disciplines, and, from the beginning, it had depended on the hospitality of others, engaging other fields in an exchange in which the lexicon of friendship overlapped with that of economy, suggesting giving and taking, debt and guilt. Wise, for example, was concerned about American Studies being a "parasite field," living off the ideas of others. The real question, instead, was the vitality of the discipline. Pease and Wiegman reconsider the anxiety about the field's lack of an inner unity to deploy its affirmative potential. Turning away from the discourse of crisis, they conceive the discipline as a "hybridized borderland," a conceptual zone where "the emergent inhabits the residual," whose focal point is the recognition of "the unsayable" within the cognitive parameters of the discipline (Pease & Wiegman 21). As, in Pease and Wiegman's narrative, American Studies becomes unmoored from the territorial imaginary, much like Cultural Studies, it wants to speak, "especially when something awkward and difficult need [s] to be said"; it wants to be about "opening up a discursive space from the outside" (Hebdige).

To other scholars, the outside of the New Americanists Project did not seem outside enough. Since the publication of the New Americanist Manifesto in *boundary 2* (1990), the question had been whether the project really did entail a change in American Studies. For Djelal Kadir the field remained too territorial, too "American": "taken in as naturally and as inexorably American" ("America and Its Studies" 20). For Kadir, its "hybrid borderlands" and "variegated American identities" still "implicate the subject in a specular identification with ideological state apparatuses" ("America and Its Studies" 20). He proposed a different version of the Americanist who, in his reorientation, is a scholar who "seeks an exogenous assessment of America."[8]

Kadir was not wrong to perceive an illusionary object, "securely interred," within a field which appeared to be haunted by a "spectral

8. "[W]e have an obligation," Kadir writes, "to value diverse recognition above the tautological misrecognition of identity formations, whether in literature or in other forms of discourse, as we remain fully alert to national hubris" (Kadir, "America and Its Studies" 22).

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soliloquy" ("America and Its Studies" 20). He perceived, in other words, the melancholy incorporation of something and, in this perception, he echoed the concerns of Janice Radway. In her landmark Presidential Address to the American Studies Association (1998), "What's in a Name?," Radway had spoken of "the ghostly presence of a fantasmatic, intensely longed-for unitary American culture" (51). She put the question mark next to the name "American" to free an increasing number of field practitioners from such spectral returns. To this end, she also advocated "new ways of thinking the relationship between geography, culture, identity" (51), encouraging a shift in the meaning of "American" from national signifier to critical and theoretical signifier of "new work" and "intricate interdependencies" (53). For Radway, the necessity for the shift at the time was dictated by "the problem of US imperialism" in the post-Cold War period (51). After Radway, Lisa Lowe has taken up the problem more explicitly, and, as Pease and Wiegman point out commenting on her contribution, "The International within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique," she has argued that the future of American Studies "involves reckoning with the imperialist history that has led some members of the association to be ashamed of the name" (24). The "spectral soliloquy" and the "ghostly" returns do not therefore exclusively concern a mythical, intensely longed-for unitary American culture; they are also linked, in almost unspeakable ways, to shame as a key factor in the critical practice within the field. As suggested by Lowe, shame is the deep content of American Studies. It not only runs through the field but claims a primary place in the formation of the Americanist. This results in an ambivalent sense of belonging to the field that is at the same time a sense of exclusion or self-exclusion. As Elspeth Probyn writes, "Most experiences of shame make you want to disappear, to hide away and to cover yourself" (329). The Americanist must affirm his or her object of study at the same time that he or she wants to hide away from it.

From this perspective, the New Americanists Project is an important way out of the shaming ritual, that is to say, out of the mechanism of excluding inclusion at the center of the field. Viewed as a hybrid borderland, "America" becomes a zone of inquiry

that hosts within itself the potential of critical thought. Theory, like a pebble thrown in the water (I am thinking of Emerson's image in "Circles"), impacts on the broadening circles of American Studies, locally and globally. When, therefore, with the New Americanists Project, Donald Pease affirms American Studies as a hybrid conceptual zone, when he bridges the gap between American Studies and critical theory in their shared resistance to the concept and emphasizes the unsayable, these are important ways of interrupting shame and its role in the negotiation of the identity of the Americanist. The translation of the outside (the unsayable), promises to emancipate the field practitioner's critical act from the shame that is lodged in it, releasing the critical act for the open horizon of the intellectual event.

4. RECIPROCAL HEALING

When he introduced the elements of conflict and disidentification, Donald Pease was trying to alter the libidinal economy of the field. This work continues in a recent contribution, "Gramsci/Agamben: Re-configurations of American Literary Studies," where Pease emphasizes the theoretical origins of the New Americanists Project and responds to the earlier criticism of his melancholy incorporation of an illusionary, unified idea of America by acknowledging a special connection with Italian Theory. He writes that he could not have imagined the New Americanists Project without a cluster of thinkers that have come to be associated with Italian Theory, a field from which he took his chief theoretical claims. He focuses particularly on the role of Antonio Gramsci and Giorgio Agamben. Gramsci, he explains, enabled him to insert the element of division, conflict and disidentification within the field through readings that "released the repressed relationship" between literary interpretation and "the needs and aspirations of oppressed groups" (115). The reference to Gramsci, therefore, enables Pease to redraw the profile of the Americanist in closer proximity to the critical theorist, who must continuously face the negative, that which remains unassimilated to the concepts of the discipline, and to propose that the Americanist act as a conduit "for the return of figures and materials previously excluded from the field" (117). But, aware that even this reparative project

might be exposed to the risk of a "reinscription of the nationalist project" (Kadir, "America and Its Studies" 19), Pease addresses the criticism lingering from the past by appealing to the work of Giorgio Agamben: "Agamben's analyses of the interdependence of the state's sovereignty and the construction of an ongoing state of exception opened my eyes to a way out of the cycle through which the state has refunctioned social movements' demands for 'freedom' and 'rights' as justifications of the state's sovereignty" (117). He concludes with the image of a confluence of American Studies and Italian Theory, affirming their common interest in the nexus of life and power. The shared question, he writes is: "How can we articulate the relations between life and power according to individual or collective needs?" (120).

Pease links Agamben's emblematic (and now rather popular) *dispositif* of excluding inclusion and American Studies in an interesting relation of reciprocity; there seems to be something in the *dispositif* of excluding inclusion that not only drives the work of Agamben and other Italian theorists, but also resonates with the situation of the Americanist, who must reckon with an element of shame, not so much with regard to America or even US imperialism, but with regard to what he or she conceives of as a lapse in the "true" American ideal. To quote Probyn, "shame, left unspoken, solidifies as a layer of intensity that never seems to go away" (47). It is as if Italian Theory could help to name, in other theoretical terms, the hidden and buried work of shame. For the Americanist, the recognition of Agamben's mechanism at a silent level seems the precondition for being a field practitioner. It may be characteristic of Pease to circle back to the destructive element of the American imaginary, but he gravitates toward the affirmative/destructive symbiosis in a way that is quite reminiscent of how I am characterizing Italian Theory here.

But it is when we consider the larger context of Agamben's popular mechanism of inclusion/exclusion that perhaps we begin to see better the relation of reciprocity that I am proposing. Agamben's mechanism of excluding inclusion (*sacertà*) was the stepping stone for a larger project to which Italian Theory is associated. Despite their remarkable differences, the authors that have come to represent Italian Theory have in common the exodus

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from the dialectical model, which deconstruction, despite its accent on difference, was not able to complete. Also called by Agamben the "bipolar machine" (qtd. in Chiesa and Ruda 163), the dialectical model defines an identity always through its opposite (alterity) and empties the particular in the universal. En route outside this model, Italian Theory encounters the force of an alternative view of modernity, which is understood, in the words of Laura Bazzicalupo, as "a conceptual apparatus, as a set of artificial procedures aimed at protecting life by denying life" (Bazzicalupo *Biopolitica* 115). Apart from raising questions about the ways we have been thinking about creativity, identity, and action, this other modernity foregrounds the nexus of life and power. It takes as its privileged object of study the repression of life, with a special interest in experimental modes of resistance that consist neither in the assumption of the symbolic identities that we are forced to be nor in disobedience. Agamben celebrates Melville's Bartleby, an American negative hero, precisely as the example of a different mode of resistance, a state of suspension between the force of the symbolic order (with the identities that it imposes on us) and disobedience (the affirmation of life that exceeds life if only through the potentiality not to). Along this route we encounter the affirmative power which is said to constitute the "Italian difference." As already mentioned, the meaning of "affirmative" is much more complex and problematic than it can be discussed here.[9] Nevertheless, it would be helpful to point out that, within the strictly philosophical debate, the term "affirmative" suggests a new ontology, one that, as Laura Bazzicalupo writes, shifts the focus from "resistance (conceptualized in the negative) to creativity (affirmative quality of creating, recreating and transforming situations, and being actively involved in the process)" so that "life and the living become matter that resists and creates new forms of life" (Bazzicalupo, *Biopolitica* 92). Outside the strictly philosophical debate, this affirmative quality may be grasped in terms of a wel-

9. If this affirmative quality is connected to the exit from the polarities of the dialectical model, it becomes highly problematic if the radical exodus from the dialectical model assumes an occlusion of the symbolic order altogether, a fact which makes a *tabula rasa* of the linguistic turn and denies the imaginary dimension of subjectivity.

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comed distance from melancholia as the privileged environment of critical thought. It is this distance from melancholia that can help us to further illuminate the connection with American Studies.

Roberto Esposito's narrative of Italian Theory, discussed in the earlier part of this paper, would not be complete without the question of oppressive origins. As we have seen, Esposito presents Italian Theory as a latent body of thought that becomes meaningful only belatedly. One of the key features of this thought is a different relation to the origin. In general, says Esposito, what has made possible the production of the new (*nuovo sapere*) in European philosophy is "the notion of a threshold—whether anthropological, epistemological, institutional—which offers shelter from an origin that cannot be dominated (intellectually ordered) by and through reason but instead threatens reason" (*Pensiero* 24). The origin that preoccupies Esposito echoes the illogical sovereignty of Warburg's fragment. It is a "magmatic pre-reflexive substance," at times identified with "a human dimension too close to the animal dimension," at other times with "the imaginative language of myth and magic" (*Pensiero* 24), which is construed as the origin, lost in time, from which aggression flows and from whose spectral returns the thinker defends himself/herself, seeking a new beginning.

Contrary to this inclination, Italian Thought, by which phrase Esposito means that up until now inoperative thought, which the name "Italian Theory" helps uncover, has a different relation to the origin (*Pensiero* 25). The origin is coeval with the present but in a latent way (*in maniera latente*) that allows for the "re-activation of the origin as energetic resource, instead of suffering the origin as a spectral return" (*Pensiero* 25). Italian Theory names therefore a re-orientation of thought, away from the subjection to the spectral returns of an archaic aggression and toward a critical labor that weakens the destructive element and reorients it in a diasporic sense (in the sense of productive repetition) so that it might be felt as heterogeneous, affirmative potential.[10]

10. Insofar as Esposito's rejection of oppressive origins denotes an anxiety of confinement, it is comparable to the anxiety of which Kuan-Hsing Chen speaks in *Asia as Method* (2010). Addressing the possibility of an inter-Asian dialogue, Chen sees as its principal obstacle the state of "being constantly

When Italian Theory is perceived as an affirmative direction away from melancholia, we can begin to see why Donald Pease claims its role in the reconfiguration of American Studies. "Italian Theory" indicates a different environment of thought, one in which the production of the new no longer depends on the "erasure of the origin" (*Pensiero* 24). Pease indicates the biopolitical theme, the nexus of life and power, which is already there in Gramsci (*Americanismo e Fordismo*) and is later reactivated by Foucault, as the common terrain of the two disciplines. It would be helpful, however, to understand the biopolitical less as a theme or specific content and more as a figure of what Esposito would call a different "tonality," or even a certain way of moving or advancing (*movenza*) (*Da Fuori* 116).[11]

At the confluence of the two fields, Italian Theory's work with aggressive origins resonates with (and supports) the Americanist's work with shame as a buried assumption of the field, offering some relief not only from the melancholia of the inhibiting spectral returns of founding acts, but more importantly, I would argue, from the melancholia of "securely interred" symbolic acts, that is to say, of the interred potential of intellectual invention (new paradigm dramas?). If shame were not also a powerful productive force, one would perceive the relation between the two disciplines as one of reciprocal healing. At the confluence of the two fields, too, the broadening of America no longer seems just a matter of content, borders, and themes, but a question of theoretical turns.

CONCLUSION ("WILDERNESS")

Describing the transnational turn in American Studies, Paul Giles employs the notion of deterritorialization, taken from Deleuze

anxious over the question of the West." His aim in promoting Asia as method is "to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and world-view, so that our anxiety over the West can be diluted, and productive critical work can move on" (223). The departure from a traditional European thought outlined by Esposito similarly seems in the service of a dilution of anxiety and of the onward movement of productive critical work.

11. I explore the full import of this metaphor in an essay in progress temporarily titled "From the Culture Industry to Italian Theory: The Search for an Affirmative Critical Thought."

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(Giles, *Global*).[12] As we have seen earlier on, Esposito has recourse to the same notion when discussing Italian Theory as a product of the movement and displacements of European philosophies. These displacements may be seen as interdependent because they belong in a much more global conceptual shift, within the lexicon of contemporary modernity, from need to desire. For political philosopher Laura Bazzicalupo the shift spans the *longue durée* from the late 19th century to the present, and she compellingly explains it in terms of the passage from classical economy (Smith, Ricardo, Marx), which was not yet a form of government, to the anarchic autonomy of economic phenomena which, in late modernity, have come to shape people's lives (Bazzicalupo, "Economia" 26). She writes:

> Life manifests as movement, singular, concrete motivation directed toward its own satisfaction. [...] The inner direction of the movement is one and only one: it is interest, *desire.* Its pursuit by each and every living being constitutes the ontological premise of any economic work. Scarcity and lack no longer inhere to the world out there, but become constitutive of subjects: it is hunger, hunger for eudaimonia. This desire—the same libidinal principle at work in Foucault's notion of subjection, or in Freud's notion of psyche, as well as in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—is the new empirical dimension of bios. The dimension of life is the mechanism of drives in movement toward self-realization, eudaimonia [...]. ("Economia" 27)

Late modernity is a landscape of "subjective vectors, guided by instrumental logic" (27), and society "a spontaneous intersection" of "flows of desires," an interweaving of "immanent powers" (27). Bazzicalupo paints a scenario that captures all the force of the life

12. In his introduction to *The Global Remapping of American Literature*, Giles resorts to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "deterritorialization" to give "historical specificity" to the matrix of trasnationalism. Noting that Deleuze and Guattari were the first to broach the idea of deterritorialization "to describe how flows of desire traverse the boundaries of distinct, separate territories," Giles draws on the following quote: "The decoding of flows and the deterritorialization of the socius thus constitutes the most characteristic and the most important tendency of capitalism. It continually draws near to its limit, which is a genuinely schizophrenic limit [...] Capitalism, through its process of production, produces an awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy or charge, against which it brings all its vast powers of repression to bear." (*Anti-Oedipus* qtd. in Giles, *Global* 20).

and power nexus: "There is neither empathy nor co-existence, because they are not necessary, they are not functional [...] these affects might be an end to the pursuit of an aim but always with an economic logic. There is no common aim: the only measure of value is individual subjectivity, always different, always anarchic [...]" (27). If, at first, the encounter with Italian Theory may be disorienting and destabilizing, it is because, at least in part, it responds to the "wilderness" of contemporary modernity with the urgency of a redefinition of life.

Such a redefinition remains controversial, but the urgency can be heard in the emphasis on the "impersonal," a way of understanding life as a virtual spark, as "a kind of preindividual or transindividual biological substance, in which even the human body loses its contours" (Lisciani Petrini 45). Esposito turned toward the impersonal in *Terza Persona* (2007). In that book, the abstract term was highly suggestive of an outpost of thought, of a place at the latter's furthest limit. It promised a true plurality, a human condition never experienced before, a way of being human that is no longer defined by and through alterity (especially alterity in relation to the animal dimension) (*Terza Persona* 140). Some, like Enrica Lisciani Petrini, expressed concern for the impersonal's evocation of archaic or primitive social orders implicit in a scenario dominated by the biological physical datum and for the cultural *tabula rasa* implicit in the notion of mere life. While I share Lisciani Petrini's concern, I also find Esposito's destabilizing signifier interesting as a way of affirming the exit from the melancholia of spectral origins. His "impersonal" remarks on the exit with a gesture that is just as literary in its echo of provocative avant-garde aesthetics as it is philosophical. The figure of the impersonal raises the question of thinking itself, of its proper environment and disciplinary belonging.

When Donald Pease opens to the horizon of Italian Theory, when Djelal Kadir envisions an American Studies without its name, as an "international field of interdisciplinary inquiry," when Paul Giles finds that "America," the cultural icon, and the Americanist are caught in a play of gazes and become reflections, unstable "virtual subjects whose sense of identity emerges in various forms of paradoxical displacement and nostalgic misremembrance"

(Giles, *Virtual* 21)– all these interdependent moments of deterritorialization include "America" in the much wider "wilderness" of modernity, a fact that is going to change the ways we conceive of our associations, of our journals, and of ourselves in our attachment to an ever more elusive object of study.

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