

FROM ITALY TO THE UNITED STATES: REFLECTIONS ON A FULBRIGHT TEACHING AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCE IN PITTSBURGH

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ABSTRACT

I was a Distinguished Italian Fulbright Chair at the University of Pittsburgh. A key purpose of the Fulbright Program is to serve as a cultural ambassador to one's own country. I shaped my syllabus to dispel stereotypes about 'Italianness' and to enable my students to critique different types of discourse about 'Otherness' through a multimodal approach. In turn, my students modified my perspective on American values and the US way of living.

Keywords: multimodal misrepresentation • Italianness • cross-fertilization



PRELUDE TO A FULBRIGHT JOURNEY

The unexpected circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic not only resulted in a dramatic loss of human life worldwide but also brought far-reaching repercussions in many aspects of people's lives. Coincidentally, my interest in a Fulbright Scholarship was sparked precisely in the wake of the stresses and strains of the restrictions imposed by Covid-19 lockdowns. I have been teaching English Linguistics and Translation at the University of Naples Federico II, Italy for more than twenty years, and during the pandemic confinement measures, I missed interpersonal relations enormously. I have always found my daily interactions with my students stimulating and thought-provoking, but online teaching platforms only allowed minimal community connection and commitment.

Therefore, my need to experience something enlivening and new led me to apply for the 2021-2022 Fulbright Visiting Scholar Grant. Though highly motivated, I was aware that the Fulbright selection process is extremely competitive. I was not particularly confident about being chosen. My concerns primarily derived from my being a professor of (English) linguistics, a discipline that is remarkably well-researched and represented by eminent scholars, particularly in the US. Although my research is internationally focused, I kept questioning myself, 'Could my investigations and publications be of any interest to American college students?'

Much to my joy, the answer was YES! The discipline(s) requested from the universities offering the grant included Italian studies with a preference for interdisciplinarity (e.g., cultural studies, gender studies, media studies, European studies, Mediterranean studies). My course outline was evidently appealing because, apart from linguistics, it also covered many of the above-mentioned fields in the humanities, and utilized various interdisciplinary approaches (including Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis – with a major focus on the appraisal framework – and (audiovisual) Translation Studies). Since acting as a cultural ambassador of one's own country is a key purpose of the Fulbright Program, I shaped my proposed syllabus as a way to dispel some stereotypes and misconceptions about 'Italianicity', i.e. the condensed essence of everything that could be associated with Italy and/or being Italian. On October 19, 2021, I received my final appointment as the Distinguished Italian Fulbright Chair at the University of Pittsburgh for the following spring semester. This was the official beginning of an unforgettable period of my life.

ARRIVAL IN PITTSBURGH

I opted for the University of Pittsburgh, located in the center of Pittsburgh, in its historic Oakland neighborhood. I felt (and was proven right, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic restrictions) that the urban environment could provide me with more chances to enjoy a vibrant city. Not only is Pittsburgh rich in history and socio-cultural events, with a renowned arts and theater culture, but it also proudly ranks among the top places to live, work, and visit in the US. Yet, before I could fully enjoy my Fulbright experience, there were some slightly troubling phases, partly due to Covid. Although I have always been supported by the Italian and US Fulbright Commissions, the application process involved months of preparation and many bureaucratic steps. Providing future Visiting Professors with more information about accommodation and life in Pittsburgh could be useful and prevent them from having to cope with practical / bureaucratic issues, like, for instance, getting connection to electricity, or opening a current account.

Nonetheless, at first, the main drawbacks of my experience all related to Covid measures, which were still in place when I arrived in Pittsburgh on January 1, 2022. Though I was only informed about the decision after arriving, in late December 2021, the Provost of Pittsburgh announced classes would be taught remotely for the first two and a half weeks of the semester. Consequently, January was the hardest month in terms of integration because of remote teaching, accompanied by frequent snowstorms and very low temperatures. This meant that I hardly had the chance to get to know people in person. My social life was exclusively 'virtual'. I met my students through screens and had short meetings with colleagues online. However, this initial period of home confinement was really self-motivating on a personal level. Throughout my life, I have had the privilege of traveling around the world. I

already visited the US several times, but always as a tourist. This time, I had to live without the protective cocoon my family, and the rest of my support network, usually offer me. That said, it was only at the end of January, when in-person classes resumed and in-situ activities slowly began to take place again, that my journey through the American ethos really started. I joined the intellectual and social life of the university and the wider Pittsburgh community, historically known as a melting pot of cultures and lifestyles. I met a lot of fascinating people from many different countries and with various educational backgrounds. I learned first-hand about the mix of people who live in Pittsburgh and had uplifting conversations and exchanges of view with them. Once fully immersed in the language and culture for months, I gradually learned how to adjust to my new daily scenario until I felt like an ‘insider’ and totally settled into American life, which also meant eating the American way, moving up my meal time (in Southern Italy we have dinner and lunch much later), enjoying dressing more casually and even feigning an American accent. My Easter trip to Washington, D.C. enabled me to enjoy and gain a deep understanding of many American customs and habits. Thanks to a local friend’s invitation, my Easter Sunday was celebrated in the real American way: painting eggs and eating pineapple-glazed ham. Despite being middle-aged, I felt like a new ‘me’ was born. In most cases, my perspectives on the US way of living were modified and reshaped, but at the same time, I reconsidered and reconnected with my Italian life and my roots.

In turn, over the course of the semester, I introduced my friends and colleagues to my home country’s values, customs, and way of living, which always aroused great interest and curiosity. Pittsburgh and the University of Pittsburgh have a long history with Italy and Italians, and it is estimated to be the fifth-largest Italian American enclave. Not surprisingly, the Italian language has been taught at the University of Pittsburgh since the 1840s. Nowadays, the Italian division of the Department of French and Italian (FRIT) at the university is a very active hub of Italian culture, whose dynamic student-run Italian club was founded in 1914. Whenever possible, I always participated in the wide variety of events about contemporary Italian society offered throughout the semester, such as the annual contemporary Italian film festival. I also joined forces with my Italian colleagues to provide a fun and engaging environment for those interested in the Italian language or culture to continue to develop their passion outside of a classroom setting. This included the meetings on Thursdays at Tavola Italiana, an Italian conversation club that provided conversation sessions and opportunities to learn Italian customs and traditions.

UNDERSTANDING ITALIANICITY

My course, '(Mis)-representing Italianicity overseas', introduced six interrelated thematic modules – Representing Italy overseas; Enacting Italianicity; EATaly; The 'Italy and the mafia' equation; Translating Italy; and Advertising Italy – as different examples of (mis)representations of Italian identity. Hosted by FRIT, it was open to any undergraduate student in the School of Arts and Sciences and, therefore, was taught exclusively in English. My course aimed to enable students to examine the complexity of the Italian identity and how such a multifaceted identity is (re)shaped by/through the media and via the medium of English. The course intended to explore the implicit and intricate socio-cultural dimensions of the notion of Italianicity, to analyse the role of (multimodal) texts in building an Italian identity and an individual or collective image of being Italian abroad (i.e. what is considered to be peculiarly Italian or proper to Italians in language, character, customs, culture, civilization) and to investigate if/how the idea of Italianicity has evolved. I aimed to unveil many nation-based stereotypes where Italians are often misrepresented through anachronistic behavioral models, such as an ethnocentric sense of family, a fixation on food, theatricality of gestures, and, as recent surveys still confirm, having mob ties.

By drawing mainly on a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach, students were provided with the necessary theoretical and practical tools to examine how the complex notions of identity and Italianicity are re-mediated through inter/intra-textual references in a process of re-semiotization that frequently produces comic, grotesque, paradoxical, and even derogatory effects, such as the still recurring picture of the typical Italian as the pasta-eating peasant or the foul-mouthed mobster. Considering the realms of both linguistics and cultural studies, my class focused on the various (mis)representations, expressions, practices, as well as artifacts and cultural spaces that constitute the vibrant socio-semiotic landscape of Italianicity at the intersection of the Italian and North American lingua-cultural frameworks. Italian ethnic identities' complex issues were in fact investigated also from a cross-cultural perspective in juxtaposition with the American one(s) as conveyed mainly via advertising, films, myths and festivals, websites and new technologies, culture-bound terms, migrating words, and food. A range of semantic, syntactic, discursive, and visual devices utilized to depict Italy was considered as the possible unifying referent of diverse physical and anthropic environments and as a metonymic embodiment of various social and lingua-cultural paradigm shifts. Students, for instance, examined how Italianicity in Elena Ferrante's 'My Brilliant Friend' is represented and then perceived by US audience, compared some Italian and American pizza brands and their advertising campaigns, and juxtaposed Italian and English translations of some literary texts. All students' investigations served as excellent sources of analysis for different cultural values and helped to dispel widespread

misconceptions and uncomplimentary pattern of stereotyping. Students were encouraged to ponder derogatory reshapings of an otherwise rich and multifaceted cultural heritage, turned into trite stereotypes and sub-cultural norms.

My ultimate goals were to qualify my students for further investigation and multimodal communication research but also, more importantly, to enable them to critique different types of discourse about various kinds of ‘Otherness’ (whether it relates to ethnicity, gender, minorities, and so on), both from a linguistic and visual point of view in order to reveal hidden and taken-for-granted social and cultural trends.

This approach stimulated constant comparisons between American and Italian narratives and representations and thought-provoking intercultural exchanges with my students, who always seemed very interested in the course and demonstrated a high level of intellectual curiosity, as was confirmed by their final outputs, which were all very satisfactory.

Through my collaborative and interactive classes, I learned a lot, particularly about how young people in the US view and value Italian and American socio-historical scenarios. My teaching experience was revealing and provided me with new didactic insights, which are being positively trialed by my current students at the University of Naples Federico II. For instance, after long discussions with my colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh, I embraced some of their teaching techniques, such as more varied grading procedures and evaluation methods. I found that these could be more closely integrated into classroom activities, allowing for much more engagement and learning through assessment rather than simply having a final exam at the end of the course.

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Notably, materials, and references from my lectures and classes have also been ‘exploited’ (and still are) by other colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh, which will hopefully lead to future collaborative projects with colleagues from the Italian Department in terms of joint research, in particular focused on Translation and Film Studies.

I was mainly interested in advocating the value of interdisciplinary education and promoting (under)graduate student exchanges. FRIT already offers summer and semester-long programs (the former in Sicily and Florence and the latter in Florence and Perugia), but both the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Federico II intend ‘to dialogue’ about the possibility of including also Naples among the exchange programs, although this implies having to solve various bureaucratic and financial/organizational problems. Unfortunately, higher education institutions in both countries are often grappling with budget cuts, so recruitment efforts at fee-paying international

students are often targeted. Nonetheless, adequate financial support to undergraduates/graduate students for a semester or year-long study abroad program in either the United States or Italy is vital. Additionally, due to legal differences, administrators are not always equipped to handle issues such as students' full recognition for the study abroad academic achievements, or obtaining visas, so blending bureaucratic and adhoc tools and programmes would be first needed. Yet, I have great hopes that in a near future all these issues will be successfully coped with, in the pursuit of cross-fertilization and cultural exchanges, activities that are at the core of the Fulbright Program.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

As a Fulbrighter, I was invited to participate in the many activities (lectures, panel discussions, conferences) organized by the University of Pittsburgh. Among the major initiatives and events I took part in during my stay, I particularly appreciated the lecture given by Theresa May MP at the Pittsburgh Speakers Series, a series of lectures annually delivered at Heinz Hall by prominent national and global speakers. Mrs. May, having served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during the notorious Brexit referendum, offered exclusive insights about that historic moment, and being present at her talk made me feel like I had witnessed a piece of 'history' in person.

Another event that was particularly worthy of note in terms of intercultural dialogue/exchange was the Faculty Honors Convocation, a solemn ceremony that annually celebrates faculty members who have distinguished themselves through teaching, research, and public service. The ceremony not only made me feel proud of being (albeit temporarily) part of the University of Pittsburgh's academic community, but also offered me the chance to (finally) meet the Provost and many other colleagues with whom I discussed my research, syllabus, and teaching experiences.

Serving as an Italian Fulbright Scholar in the US was a fulfilling experience, providing unforgettable emotional moments and great fun, and it will have an enduring impact on both my academic career and my private life. Moreover, it gave me a unique opportunity to represent my home country in a flagship intercultural program and somehow (re)shaped my mindset as a fully-fledged scholar. I will always feel greatly honored by my Fulbright grant, and as a proud member of the worldwide Fulbright community and a convinced Fulfred – that is, a member of a network established in 2021 by Fulbrighters from the University of Naples Federico II who aim at disseminating Fulbright research and projects – I will always commit myself to promote any Fulbright experience.

NOTES

1. Learn more about Pittsburgh: In 2017, Pittsburgh ranked as the 7th best US city for an active lifestyle, and in 2022 it positioned 4th on the Most Liveable Cities List in the US. For more, see <https://www.visitpittsburgh.com/media/press-kit/pittsburgh-accolades/>
2. For more information about the University of Pittsburgh, see <http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/esc>
3. More details about Pittsburgh Speakers Series at <https://www.pittsburghspeakers.org/>



Prof. Cavaliere outside the Cathedral of Learning,
University of Pittsburgh

BIOGRAPHY

Flavia Cavaliere is Associate Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Naples Federico II, Italy. She has been awarded Full Professorship and was Italian Fulbright Distinguished Scholar at Pittsburgh University, PA, for Spring Semester 2022. She has been a Visiting Professor at the University of East Anglia (2018) and University of Düsseldorf (2011) and lectured extensively at many other European universities. Her research interests include (audiovisual) translation studies, multimodal critical discourse analysis, language and media, and multilingualism. She has authored around 80 works (papers in international journals and volumes, and books, published by global publishers) and worked on several international interdisciplinary research projects. Email: fcavaliere@unina.it
