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Editor's Introduction, CIS 14.2

Jon R. Snyder

Art history, intellectual history, literary history, sociology of culture, archival studies and narrative fiction in translation: these are the principal discursive fields represented in *California Italian Studies* 14.2. The journal thus remains true to its original mission of fostering a fundamentally interdisciplinary and international approach to Italian Studies. As of this writing (October 2025), *CIS* has had over 970,000 site visits and 274,000 downloads since its inception and will cross the threshold of one million total site visits by January 2026.

CIS is hosted in cyberspace by the University of California's Escholarship platform, and I wish to thank the staff for their assistance throughout the process of publishing this journal. As always, thanks are due to the consortium of institutions that generously support the journal and its mission: University of California, Berkeley—Department of Italian Studies; University of California, Los Angeles—Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies; University of California, Santa Barbara—Dean of the Division of the Humanities and Fine Arts; University of California, San Diego—Dean of the Humanities; University of California, Davis—Department of French and Italian; University of California, Irvine—Dean of the Humanities; University of California, Riverside; University of California, Santa Cruz; Stanford University—Department of French and Italian; University of Southern California—Department of French and Italian; Chapman University; Scripps College; Occidental College; and California State University, Long Beach—Graziadio Center for Italian Studies. Special thanks are due to Mr. Steven Zipperstein for his generous donation in support of Italian studies, as well as to Samantha Oglesby and Gabby Reyna for managing the journal's accounts at the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center of UC Santa Barbara. Finally, *California Italian Studies* would not come into being every year without the selfless and tireless labors of Joseph Tumolo, our managing editor, to whom I personally owe a special debt of thanks.

This open-theme issue celebrates the centenary of two important figures in European and Italian culture in the second half of the twentieth century. Both Mario Merz and Michel de Certeau were born in 1925; in their youth both were involved in Resistance activities during World War Two; but from that point on, their respective paths to prominence diverged radically.¹ Merz's work as an artist was to place him among the leading members of the influential *Arte Povera* movement of the 1960s in Italy, while Certeau emerged as a pathbreaking figure in the post-May 1968 international intellectual scene, freely crisscrossing disciplinary fields such as psychoanalysis, semiotics, anthropology, theology, literature and history as no one likely ever has. In this issue Diana Napoli looks at Certeau's key role in the development of (above all) semiotics in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, especially at the annual summer International Center for Semiotics and Linguistics in Urbino. Denis Viva's essay instead analyzes a single renowned artwork from the late 1960s by Merz, namely his second (and perhaps best-known) "igloo," whose title was taken from an anonymous slogan painted on the walls of the Sorbonne by a student during the May 1968 uprising. Through a happy coincidence, Viva devotes part of his essay on Merz and *Arte Povera* to

¹ Certeau told me once, during a long journey by car (I was the driver: he was blind in one eye as the result of a tragic automobile accident in which his mother was killed), that as a teenager he had carried messages for the French Resistance between towns in his native Savoy during the war. I have no reason to doubt the veracity of his account, which dovetails with his lifelong commitment to progressive politics. Merz, on the other hand, was arrested and imprisoned in 1945 for his involvement with the anti-Fascist Resistance, in this case the *Giustizia e libertà* movement.

a discussion of the text that first brought Certeau to public attention, *La Prise de parole* (*The Capture of Speech*), which offered one of the first and best in-depth interpretations in France of the complex events of May 1968. Both Merz's igloo *Objet cache-toi* and Certeau's penetrating study of the student/worker revolt thus center on the same epochal moment in Paris. It seems fair to say that the French capital city is where the respective paths of Merz and Certeau once again converged; and now, in 2025, the two once again come together in the pages of *California Italian Studies* 14.2.

Elsewhere in this issue readers will find a "Note from the Field" by a younger Italian literary scholar, Germana Dragonieri. Her study—indebted to the innovative work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu—focuses on contemporary poetry in the 1970s on the peninsula, particularly as reflected in the production and publication of collections of poetic texts by multiple writers. If, in hindsight, the 1970s now appear to us to have been a crucial turning point in many ways in Italy, Dragonieri's essay charts some of the tectonic shifts of the era in terms of the politics and culture of the anthology.

This issue also contains two "Documents." The first of these is an attempt to catalogue the materials bequeathed by the controversial Italian actor-author Carmelo Bene to his foundation upon his death. Although—scandalously—the archive was subsequently broken up and the collections dispersed, Petrucci provides an invaluable partial catalog of Carmelo Bene's *lascito* as a guide to future researchers.

The second and final document included here is my translation of the complete 1884 text of Matilde Serao's *Il ventre di Napoli* (*The Gut of Naples*). An annotated translation was partially published in *California Italian Studies* 3.1 (2012); the English-language text published in *CIS* 14.2 has now been fully revised and contains all the missing chapters and prefatory matter. Serao's brief book, which she modestly describes as "the unfinished work of a reporter, not of a writer," was composed in reaction to the 1884 cholera outbreak in Naples. The causes of cholera, as well as its prevention and treatment, were poorly understood at the time: but it was clear even in the midst of the contagion that the urban poor of the old or lower city constituted the majority of the disease's victims. A fatal mixture of ignorance, superstition, crushing poverty, unsanitary housing and institutional indifference allowed an epidemic to tear through the defenseless populace for months. Since the first partial translation into English of *Il ventre di Napoli* appeared in these pages over a decade ago, the world has experienced a pandemic that abruptly extinguished millions of lives. Today controversy about the causes, the prevention, and treatment of COVID-19 continues unabated, often intersecting with ignorance, superstition, demagoguery, and economic inequality. Serao's book is not only an invaluable snapshot of a now-vanished way of life, but a warning to future generations ("may it serve as a reminder and a plea"). In hindsight—a luxury that the author did not have in 1884—not only were the tragic events in late nineteenth-century Naples far from the exception in the course of Western history: as we have so recently witnessed, without great changes to the current order of things that same history threatens to repeat itself even now.

My term as editor-in-chief *ad interim* ends with *CIS* 14.1–2. In extending my warmest best wishes to the incoming editor-in-chief, Professor Michael Subialka (University of California, Davis), I at last take my leave of the journal that I cofounded early in the twenty-first century, knowing that it is in good hands in this troubled time for researchers in the human sciences.

Although Italian studies is not a large field within the panorama of the human sciences, *California Italian Studies* is nevertheless "too small to hold the whole truth," as Serao poignantly remarks in the "Farewell" to the readers of her book. Whatever the future may bring, this journal will do everything possible, in the words of her unforgettable *Il ventre di Napoli*, "to plead with

those who can, and to remind those who should: do not abandon” the study of Italy, now or in the years to come.