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## Healing the Scars of Forced Migration: An Italian-American Story

There's an expression for wishing someone "good luck" in Italian – *in bocca al lupo* – that literally translates to "in the mouth of the wolf." I imagine my grandfather's friends saying this to him as he left his Sicilian village, Grotte, in 1938. The expression would have certainly been fitting for the 17-year-old; the intimidating journey looming before him must have felt like staring down the jaws of a predator. He traveled to America several years after his father and two older brothers, who had saved money and made the necessary arrangements to bring the rest of the family over. Grandpa was not particularly eager to leave Sicily, but his mother and siblings were going with or without him; the decision he faced was between family and homeland. He first went to Naples, where he was awe-struck by the endless rows of ships in port. He had never been to a city before, even to nearby Agrigento to see its famed Greek temples. Yet he had already survived extreme poverty and hunger when he boarded his ship, the SS Roma (where he felt every seasickness-inspiring roll of the ocean, and where he likely spent his eighteenth birthday), so he had endured harder things than the long voyage to New York. He arrived in the United States with one suitcase and the remnants of a handmade guitar that was crushed along the way. He had no real job prospects, no education to speak of, and initially no English skills whatsoever. Unlike the stereotypical American immigrant story, my grandfather also had no false expectations; he was not in pursuit of the American Dream as much as he was fleeing from famine and fascism. As a boy, he had hunted pigeons and foraged stray fruit to supply his family with dinner. As young men, he and his brothers figured they would rather risk dying for the Americans than for Benito Mussolini.

Grandpa quickly joined family members in Metro Detroit, where he first delivered ice and coal and later set up a shoe repair shop. He met

and married my grandmother, had three children, and bought the modest house in a post-war, cookie-cutter suburb where my widowed grandmother still lives. (The bathroom has carnation pink tiles and even a pink toilet; my grandmother thought this was the prettiest bathroom she had ever seen.) When the kids got older and a two-bedroom house was not big enough, my grandfather finished the attic so the boys could move upstairs. It was sweltering in the summertime without air conditioning, but the cool Michigan basement was a good retreat for playing board games, reading, and perhaps sleeping on a couch during springtime tornado warnings or August heat waves. Photos from my mother's middle-class childhood are almost startling in their American-ness, as if they were drawn out of a Norman Rockwell painting or clipped from a Coca-Cola advertisement. From the outside, at least, only a few charming traces of "otherness" remained – eating pasta instead of turkey at Thanksgiving, or keeping a small altar to the Virgin Mary in the house. You would have to really squint to see the scars left by forced migration, which my grandfather tried so desperately to hide.

I doubt that my grandfather spent much time thinking about the adoption of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) after the war ended, but he certainly held firm opinions about equality and dignity. He remained deeply saddened about what he viewed as the forced abandonment of his homeland, even after he became a naturalized American citizen in 1957. He never felt completely at ease in his new country; he said that the people, much like the Michigan weather, were often too cold for him. In the early days, people told him that Italians were not "Whites" and that "wops"<sup>1</sup> were stealing jobs from the "real" Americans. Strangers threw bricks at my great-grandmother while screaming racial slurs. People heard my grandfather's accent and charged him higher prices. ("Just because I talk with an accent, that doesn't mean I think with one," he often said.) Nervous about his job prospects and his family's safety, my grandfather changed his name from Giuseppe to Joe, nicknaming my grandmother Lucia "Joanne" and only speaking English with his three children. As time went by, he talked muscle cars, danced to Frank Sinatra, and ate at the Olive Garden. He became the (Italian) American that others expected him to be. Yet even as he outwardly assimilated into American society, he quietly shared Sicilian words and bittersweet stories of "home" with his

grandchildren – including his eldest granddaughter, affectionately called *strega* by his wife. (It was only years later, during a college Italian course, that I realized my childhood nickname was *witch*).

I was sitting in a café in Siracusa, Sicily, in 2016 – almost 80 years after my grandfather arrived in the United States – when I overheard a couple discussing *il problema con i profughi* (“the problem with refugees”) as they cast sidelong glances at a group of young African men walking past. My back stiffened at the disdainful tone of their hushed voices, my brain translating their conversation even as I wished I could ignore it. The previous year, more than one million people made the voyage across the Mediterranean Sea and toward the European Union – but an estimated 3,735 people drowned in the process (see Clayton and Holland). In 2018, 141,500 refugees and migrants arrived in EU countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece, and Cyprus via three Mediterranean routes, with an additional estimated 2,277 people dead – mostly along the route from North Africa to Italy (see “Refugee and Migrant Arrivals to Europe in 2018”). Those who survive the voyage face pervasive racism and anti-refugee sentiments, as well as challenges such as unemployment, poverty, precarious legal status, limited educational opportunities, and inadequate resources to secure shelter and health care (especially related to mental health). Yet despite these risks, thousands of would-be asylum seekers continue taking their chances, paying human smugglers and traffickers to help facilitate their treks from war-torn countries such as Syria and Iraq, as well as impoverished nations throughout West and Sub-Saharan Africa. Some of those desperate people may eventually end up resettled to third countries, including the United States. (My current hometown of Saint Louis, Missouri, is a hub of refugee resettlement.) The young men who had passed my table in Siracusa – the ones who represented a “problem” for some casual onlookers – had likely survived thirst and starvation, armed conflict, and/or physical, mental, and sexual abuse (see “Harmful Borders”). Situated in Sicily, where so many Italians had left because of war and crushing poverty, I realized that I could not possibly understand the forces that drove these men from their homes – but my grandfather, and so many other Italians and Italian Americans, might understand more than they readily admit.

By this time, of course, my family's situation has changed dramatically – and so had the way Americans thought about Italians, the hyphenated sort or otherwise. I had earned a PhD and just received tenure as a university professor, while my younger brother held a graduate degree from an Ivy League institution. We were well educated, financially secure, and politically privileged – and no one ever questioned whether we were “real” Americans. Already benefited by *jus soli* citizenship laws that provided us with legal nationality simply because we were born on US soil – the winners of what Ayelet Shachar calls “the birthright lottery” – we both also became Italian citizens in 2004, thanks to nationality laws providing hereditary, birthright citizenship. I felt welcomed in Italy (even though locals could easily peg me as foreign-born thanks to my accent and frustrating inability to master Italian verb conjugation); I also felt protected by my dual nationalities, in Italy and around the world. What's more, my olive complexion certainly counted as “White,” particularly when contrasted to the dark skin of recent migrants arriving from Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. My family's migration story had reached the point where we could once again be publicly proud of our heritage, rather than fearfully hiding it away. Indeed, my generation of Italian Americans now signs up for Italian language classes and hires private tutors; wades through piles of paperwork in hopes of securing Italian citizenship; and even mails our saliva samples – yes, we put our spit in envelopes – so that ancestry companies can locate our long-lost *cugini* (cousins) via the Internet.

The current situation of Italian Americans within broader US society stands in sharp contrast to the America my grandfather arrived in during the late 1930s, and it is certainly worlds away from what immigrants faced in the late 1800s and early twentieth century. Italians were racialized as the “Chinese of Europe” during political conversations about exclusion policies aimed at certain nationalities, for instance. In 1909 Detroit, an Italian-American editor wrote that “Italians are maltreated, mocked, scorned, disdained, and abused in every way. The inferiority of the Italians is believed to be almost that of the Asiatics” (Roediger 46), while a leading German-language newspaper in Chicago hoped that Chinese exclusion would be a model for immigration laws against Italians. In the American South, Italians who showed “friendly, first name familiarity” with Black<sup>2</sup>

Americans or “learned Jim Crow tardily” had their businesses destroyed (for instance, for serving Black customers in Mississippi) or were lynched for fraternizing with Black neighbors<sup>3</sup> (as was the case in Louisiana in 1896, when so many Black community members showed up to mourn that local Whites worried about interracial revenge). Indeed, in certain regions of the Jim Crow South, Italians “occupied a racial middle ground within the otherwise unforgiving, binary caste system of white-over-black. Politically Italians were white enough for naturalization and for the ballot, but socially they represented a problem population at best” (Roediger 96).

Southern Italians fared worse in this racial hierarchy that rewarded perceived Whiteness; the idea that Europe “ends at Naples” and “all the rest belongs to Africa” dates back to at least 1806 (Roediger 112). Booker T. Washington remarked after visiting Italy: “The Negro is not the man farthest down. The condition of the coloured farmer in the most backward parts of the Southern States in America, even where he has the least education and the least encouragement, is incomparably better than the condition and opportunities of the agricultural population in Sicily” (Ferraro xv). After Italian unification (*Risorgimento*) established the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 and eventually moved the capital to Rome in 1871, government policies that benefited northern Italians – including new tax structures, army draft laws, tariff systems to promote industrialization, and public works programs – led to a failed Socialist rebellion in 1892-94 (*Fasci siciliani*) and mass emigration. Eighty percent of Italian immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century were from the South, called the *Mezzogiorno* (see Ferraro xiv-xv, 75). Asked in 1972 why Sicilians had left for America, the mayor of Racalmuto – the neighboring town to my grandfather’s village – replied: “You want to know why people left? Hunger, that’s why... They were dying of hunger” (79). Racial divisions between northern and southern Italians endured in United States, among census takers and immigration officers as well as within immigrant communities themselves. In 1901, a northern Italian living in “The Hill” neighborhood of Saint Louis bragged that his neighborhood had remained White, while “them little black fellows” (Sicilians) lived downtown; other Saint Louisans from northern Italy emphasized that they did not come from the South, and were therefore of lighter complexion and advanced

intelligence (Roediger 113-114). (This helps explain, in my own family history, why my Sicilian grandfather and Milanese grandmother felt the need to elope to Ohio rather than attempting a family wedding in Detroit.)

Most Italian immigrants – including my own grandfather – quickly realized that Americanization went hand-in-hand with “becoming” White. Those who arrived between 1840 and 1924, in particular, entered a political space where race was the “prevailing idiom for discussing citizenship and the relative merits of a given people” (Jacobson 8-9). Indeed, “the legal equation of whiteness with fitness for citizenship shaped the process by which race was made in the United States” (Roediger 62). The Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act) was “founded upon a racial logic borrowed from biology and eugenics” (Jacobson 8; see also Ngai), for instance, setting quotas on the number of immigrants from certain countries while funding a general ban on non-White immigrants – primarily southern Europeans, and especially Italians. In this environment, Italians realized – if they did not consider themselves White before arriving in the United States – that there were “clear advantages” of being White as quickly as possible (Roediger 119). Italians were initially assigned to racial categories that excluded them from full-fledged US citizenship; they were racialized because they were “unruly” and “not one of us” (Sheth 9). Much like the Irish, they slowly “became” White and entered the mainstream workforce, thus functioning outside of segregated markets. This transition meant that immigrants “were citizens of a democratic republic, with the right to elect and be elected, to be tried by a jury of their peers, to live wherever they could afford, and to spend, without racially imposed restrictions, whatever money they managed to acquire” (Ignatiev 3). This ability to become White – a process that non-European immigrants could not emulate – was an important asset for eventually pursuing the American Dream.<sup>4</sup> “It was their *whiteness*, not any kind of New World magnanimity, that opened the Golden Door” (Jacobson 8).

For those who remained in Italy, their country was one of emigration for generations. That trend has reversed in recent decades, however; it now has one of the highest volumes of migrants in Europe. This presents a difficult challenge for Italians, whose country does not have a modern history of immigration or multiculturalism despite official assurances

that the State respects cultural diversity. Italy's most visible minority group, the Roma, continues to face pervasive discrimination even though most Romani qualify for Italian citizenship. (Indeed, the situation is so troubling that Nando Sigona categorizes the experiences of the Roma in Italy as "everyday statelessness.") Far-right Italian minister Matteo Salvini saw a jump in his approval ratings after vowing to expel thousands of Roma from state territory in June 2018 (see Kirchgaessner), for instance, while the United Nations calls the Roma one of Europe's "most excluded groups" ("United Nations Regional Working Group on Roma" n. pag.) and warns of pervasive human rights abuses. The State's treatment of the Roma shows its "avowed commitment to guaranteeing all ethnic groups equal treatment failed to champion the presence of this vulnerable minority and its unique culture" (Armillei 137). At the same time, the government treats immigration as a socioeconomic "emergency" rather than considering its cultural and economic advantages; migrants are expected to assimilate and conform to the dominant Italian culture. "Interculturalism is still predominantly theoretical in character and not supported officially, in the sense of being incorporated into the nation's history," writes Riccardo Armillei. "Furthermore, a major issue in Italy has been the absence of a coherent social inclusion policy across the board. The prevailing trend is merely to devise policies that promote a balance between the preservation of national identity and a vague idea of social integration" (137).

Images of my grandfather watch over me as I write this essay. He is a 17-year-old with a stern, forward-looking stare on his application for an immigration visa, which was filed at the American Consulate in Naples. He was thin and poor, but he still had his hair slicked back and wore a suit jacket and tie. He has a half-smile on his face for the photo affixed to his "Declaration of Intention" form, filed with the US Department of Labor in Detroit in 1940 to signal his intent to become an American citizen. On his petition for naturalization in 1957, he declared that he had never been a member of the Communist party and signed his name in English – Joseph, not Giuseppe. Under his signature, scrawled in my grandfather's handwriting, are the words "I can go to work." I am struck by his measured, careful dignity in this paperwork; he is desperate, but his eyes are sharp

and his chin is up. I remember him as a homebody, not the adventuring sort – yet he somehow mustered up the courage to leave everything behind and start anew in a country where he was misunderstood, disliked, and almost entirely on his own. At that time, on the eve of World War II, my grandfather's most valuable “possession” was his ability to move.

During the peak of Italian immigration, newcomers enjoyed “mobility citizenship” that not only allowed them to be mobile (that is, to cross borders legally), but also to stay – and to become naturalized citizens with time: “This distinction is associated with the well-entrenched differentiation between the visitor and the immigrant. The first primarily relates to short-term mobility, whereas the latter relates to long-term stays and rights of residence” (Mau 340). Fears about the threatened “ideal” of US homogeneity led to increasingly restrictive migration policies, however. In 1917, the government implemented a literacy test for immigrants over 16 years old that required basic reading comprehension in any language, as well as increased arrival taxes and gave immigration officials more discretion in deciding whom to exclude. These measures eventually led to the Immigration Act of 1924, which provided visas to only two percent of the total number of people from each nationality in the United States (as of the 1890 national census) and completely excluded immigrants from Asia (see “The Immigration Act of 1924”). My grandfather and his relatives maneuvered around restrictions imposed by the 1924 Act, thankfully. (My grandfather's visa application suggests that my great-grandfather Antonio had acquired naturalized US citizenship years earlier, thus allowing Grandpa and other relatives into America as “nonquota” immigrants.) Mobility for Italians was therefore still possible by that point, but it had been significantly reduced since the turn of the century. The global depression of the 1930s and the outbreak of World War II curtailed immigration even further, yet the postwar creation of the United Nations and its 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention) led to new legal provisions for asylum seekers and refugees throughout the international system. (Notably, the Convention protects people who have a “well-founded fear of being persecuted” in their home country – usually associated with armed conflict and specific forms of discriminatory violence. It provides little cover for migrants fleeing severe



poverty, however. While Syrians fleeing to Greece can easily claim refugee status under the Convention, the masses of African migrants arriving on Italy's shores are far less likely to successfully claim asylum.)

Frequently (and unfairly)<sup>5</sup> characterized as financial burdens to their new communities, migrants' futures are increasingly affected by market forces – rather than norms related to human rights – and their contributions are devalued. In her work on neoliberalism, Aihwa Ong argues that the elements commonly associated with citizenship – rights, entitlements, territoriality, and nation – “are becoming disarticulated and rearticulated with forces set in motion by market forces” (Ong 6). People who possess human capital or expertise are highly valued in the global economy, making them more mobile. They can exercise “citizenship-like claims” in locations around the world, claiming entitlements and benefits outside the state of their legal nationality, while others who lack these competencies are devalued and subject to exclusion (7). Elizabeth F. Cohen illustrates this dynamic in her work on “immigrant time,” which analyzes the inequalities of US naturalization policies. For much of US history, continuous time-in-residence plus good moral character and civic knowledge eventually equaled naturalization. Yet increasingly, this equation no longer applies; those who lack human capital and expertise find that their time-in-residence is valued as politically valueless. “Because time and work and other variables are proxies for demonstrating people’s capacities for citizenship, the denial of citizenship expresses the belief that these individuals are *incapable* of citizenship,” Cohen writes (Cohen, “The Political Economy of Immigrant Time” 349). Indeed, she views delayed naturalization as a sort of theft of political time; the devaluation of such time “is a structural obstacle to equality” that not only devalues a person’s actual life and lifespan, but also serves as a “thoroughgoing means to disenfranchise someone” and “imposes hierarchy and exclusion upon people who ought to be considered equal members” (Cohen, *The Political Value of Time* 5, 142-43). Undocumented immigrants may spend extremely long periods in residence within the United States (the most striking example is of the “Dreamers,” or people who were brought to the US illegally as children and grew up in the country) but may never achieve naturalization. Cohen writes that this “non-recognition” yields “permanent disadvantage” (147).

While the process of “coming to America” has changed significantly since my grandfather and his fellow *italiani* immigrated, it remains surprisingly similar in various ways. Medical “fitness” remains a prerequisite for entry, for instance, thus making physical and mental health key indicators of one’s worthiness of political membership and legal status. During the peak of immigration, steerage passengers were herded into compartments at Ellis Island’s “Registry Room,” then brought into “Judgement Hall” for medical inspections. Conditions such as trachoma, “sickness of the eye,” could lead to deportation; about 50 percent of people were set aside for further examinations to determine whether conditions were serious enough to deny entry. Chalk marks on migrants’ clothing signified back problems (“B”), hernias (“K”), lameness (“L”) and suspected mental deficiencies (“X”), among other things. Fear of family separation was so strong that Ellis Island became known to Italian immigrants as “The Island of Tears” (Mangione and Morreale 111-12). Officers with the United States Public Health Service (PHS) often interpreted their job broadly; in their eyes, the goal was to prevent “the entrance of undesirable people” unworthy of citizenship; by 1903, the PHS had created two major categories: “Class A” loathsome or dangerous contagious diseases (including “insanity” and epilepsy), and “Class B” conditions that would make someone “likely to become a public charge” (Bateman-House and Fairchild n. pag). Today, medical clearance is still a basic requirement for immigrants seeking visas, lawful permanent residency (green cards), and eventually naturalized citizenship. Immigrant visa applicants must complete a medical examination by an authorized physician before their visa interview, for example. Although waivers are available in some cases, medical exams identify and often exclude people with communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, those with physical or mental disorders that may cause harm to themselves or others, people with histories of drug abuse and addiction, and those without required vaccinations (see “Medical Examination”). Medical clearance continues to play a central role immigration procedures into the United States, frequently marking those with physical or mental illnesses unfit for entry and citizenship – sometimes forcing families to make difficult decisions about where to go and who to leave behind in the process.

Armed conflict, terrorism, and ongoing fears of foreigners as enemies of the State also continue to color perceptions of worthiness for citizenship.

For those like my grandfather, whose migration story occurred after laws such as the 1924 Immigration Act stemmed the flow of Italians to the US, the journey was complicated by a hostile political climate that meant limited opportunities to secure passage and visas. Italians who settled on US soil were viewed as national security threats with the rise of Mussolini and the outbreak of World War II. While the incarceration of Japanese Americans with Executive Order 9066 is remembered as a dark chapter in American history, few recall that EO 9066 also led to the compulsory relocation of more than 10,000 Italian Americans (naturalized citizens living in Californian coastal communities) and restricted the movement of more than 600,000 Italian citizens nationwide (see Taylor, Brooke). (People of Italian descent were not placed *en masse* in detention campus like Japanese Americans were. However, Italian citizens deemed “potentially dangerous enemy aliens” could, and were, detained by the FBI and other US law enforcement; see National Archives.) Security fears play a prevalent role in US migration policies today, as well. In 2017, US President Donald Trump ordered a travel ban (which was upheld by the Supreme Court in June 2018) that indefinitely suspended the issuance of immigrant and nonimmigrant visas to people from Muslim-majority countries – Libya, Iran, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, as well as North Korea and Venezuela. More than 135 million people fell under that ban; while exceptions can be granted, evidence suggests that only a small fraction of applicants successfully gain waivers (see Gladstone and Sugiyama). Trump and other immigration foes also point toward the US-Mexico border as a source of gang violence and criminal activity. Indeed, Trump’s campaign platform included the promise to build a border wall and he repeatedly equated Mexicans with rapists during speeches. The Trump administration continues to insist that refugees and many immigrants represent threats to national security, while undocumented migration causes rising crime rates. (Existing scholarship suggests otherwise, however. For instance, a slew of recent research shows that undocumented immigrants do not drive up violent or nonviolent crime rates; in fact, they tend to engage in far less criminal activity than legal immigrants or US-born citizens; see Burnett.)

Many of these concerns are mirrored in Italy, where an influx of migrants tests Italian norms of hospitality and welcome. Migration to Europe is

constructed (by both the media and politicians) as a “crisis” that threatens State security, legitimizing an erosion of refugee protection and asylum-seeking rights (see Colombo). In response, Italy and other European states increasingly (and controversially) seek to close and tightly control borders. An agreement between Italy and Libya, for instance, tasked the Libyans with preventing migration across the Mediterranean. By partnering with Libyan militias, critics contend that Italy is basically “paying smugglers to act as coastguards or redirecting development aid to corrupt African regimes in return for trapping Africans on the move” (Howden n. pag). Salvini, the populist League leader, constructed an electoral campaign promising to expel masses of migrants; the fact that this was impractical and illegal did not stop him from obtaining 17 percent of the vote in 2018 elections (in the 2019 European elections, the League doubled this percentage). Before his nomination as Minister of the Interior, he said: “Italy and Sicily can’t be the refugee camp of Europe. Our house will be our priority” (Perrier 26). Trump echoed similar sentiments in the United States shortly thereafter. These tensions came to a head in the summer of 2018, when hundreds of migrants on several humanitarian ships were blocked from Italian ports. The ordeal began with the *Aquarius* – a search-and-rescue vessel operated by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, or Doctors Without Borders) and European NGO SOS Méditerranée – when it was turned away from Italy on June 10. Its 629 migrants (including 123 unaccompanied minors and seven pregnant women) were at the center of a Mediterranean standoff until Spain’s government finally offered its port in Valencia. Salvini, who had complained that other European states did not take adequate responsibility for accepting asylum seekers and migrants, declared victory – while others viewed the event (and indeed, the similar situations to follow that summer) a “symptom of a sick Europe” (Baker n. pag.). Meanwhile, the hashtag #chiudiamoiporti (#closetheports) became popular amongst Salvini’s supporters on social media.

Migration was a frequent topic of conversation in my Italian course for foreigners at the University of Milan (Università degli Studi di Milano, otherwise known as La Statale) during the spring of 2018. We were a diverse group; a few American English speakers, like me, along with migrants from Eastern Europe and Russia, the Middle East, and West

Africa. Always a good classroom learner, I struggled in this particular course. It was hard to hear in the large, crowded room, and I had a difficult time understanding spoken Italian through such a wide range of accents. The professor's teaching style was Italian but my brain had been hardwired to the American system, so I became frustrated with the way the lessons hopped from topic-to-topic. I could not find my (expensive) textbook at any of the local bookstores, and I had fallen behind in my homework by the time it finally arrived via Amazon. These challenges exasperated me; I left the classroom feeling (as I told my loved ones on Skype) like a total idiot. These frustrations and my busy schedule led me – a valedictorian, Dean's List student, PhD recipient, Fulbright Scholar, and tenured professor – to quit my B2-level Italian class in a pouty huff. Honestly, it is easy to quit when you have little on the line aside from your own pride and personal interest; quitting is perhaps humbling, but not particularly difficult. That is not the case for those desperate to achieve the minimum proficiency required by the Italian state for citizenship, or for those who need enough Italian to get a low-paying job to survive. (Similarly, that is not the case for resettled refugees in the United States who need English to support themselves after their initial government funds run out shortly – often 90 days – after arrival. Nor for the immigrants, legal and undocumented, who rely on English for work, education, and even the most basic of social integration).

Language proficiency often plays a pivotal role in the social integration of immigrants and refugees. Just as my grandfather struggled to learn English quickly so that he could work in the United States, newcomers to both the US and Italy realize that language skills are necessary for basic survival. (Indeed, the Italian government's National Integration Plan stresses: "Learning of the Italian language represents a right *but also a duty*, since it constitutes an essential prerequisite for a concrete path towards social integration, fundamental for the interaction with the local community, for access to the labour market and public services"; "National Integration Plan" 23.) In Italy, language courses and vocational training are often provided in asylum reception centers organized within the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati, or SPRAR). Created by Law No 189/2002 and comprised of a network of organizations, SPRAR's

core identity focuses on “integrated reception” interventions that stress “socioeconomic inclusion and integration” (“SPRAR” n. pag.). Similarly, in the United States English instruction is frequently provided by non-profit agencies or local community colleges. In Saint Louis, for instance, the International Institute offers language classes, while the Immigrant & Refugee Women’s Program teaches refugee women basic English and practical living skills in their own homes (thus also reducing isolation and building social networks). Yet despite best intentions, there are frequently shortages of qualified language instructors, overcrowded classes, and course schedules that don’t accommodate student schedules. Resettled refugees living in Central New York State note in research interviews that older students often give up their seats in language classes to make space for younger relatives, which helps the family earn overall income but also serves to isolate older family members. Language courses also tend to focus on lower-level language acquisition, to the frustration of migrants hoping to achieve higher education (see Kingston and Stam).

Debates about integration – including criticisms that newcomers do not learn the language quickly enough or leave the cultural enclaves of refugee communities – usually fail to account for the serious, long-lasting effects of forced migration. Asylum seekers and refugees often face challenges associated with the horrors they left behind, for instance, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and physical consequences of war. Some had little formal education because of severe poverty or armed conflict back home, while others had their studies interrupted by violence. Asylum seekers and refugees also tend to have fewer support networks and survival strategies in place, compared to economic immigrants; there is no time for planning and strategizing when you have to leave in a hurry. Yet expectations in both the US and Italy stress self-sufficiency after arrival, with little attention paid to the unique challenges stemming from forced migration. In Italy, an emphasis on “tough but effective” self-help and empowerment means that forced migrants receive minimal support and, as a result, experience greater difficulties than any other group in finding a job – any job – that will cover their basic living expenses (see Ortensi). For families who do “make it,” ongoing structural inequities continue to negatively impact migrants and their families. It is notable that students of

foreign origin are regularly directed toward vocational school tracks within the Italian school system, rather than encouraged by their teachers to pursue a university education. Such biases serve to segregate migrant children into the lower tracks of the Italian system (see Bonizzoni, Romito, and Cavallo). In the United States, the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” perspective on work ethic leaves limited space for anything perceived as “welfare” or special assistance for migrants. (Opponents to immigration and refugee resettlement use this to their advantage, creating social media memes falsely purporting that “illegal” refugees receive almost \$4,000 per month from the US government while the average Social Security payment is less than half of that sum. Similar memes attack the Resettlement Assistance Program in Canada.) Even in cases such as US higher education, where global student populations have become the norm, the specific challenges associated with forced displacement are rarely addressed. In a recent research interview, a resettled refugee student studying in the US told me: “Even at university, they put ‘international students’ in the same box as ‘refugee students.’ They aren’t the same thing. [Immigrant students] might have an accent, but they understand [English and course materials] more, they have different experiences.”

It is important to stress that accepting refugees and other migrants into our communities is not entirely a humanitarian, altruistic act. In Italy, advocates argue that because small towns and farms are being abandoned as the population shrinks and young people move to urban centers, a network of small “welcome” communities could benefit citizens and migrants alike. Angelo Moretti writes that welfare systems are unsustainable, but that a system of welcome could be the answer – if Italians recognized the potential contributions of migrants, while simultaneously encouraging newcomers to give small towns a chance. (He contends that migrants look to big cities because that is how Europe is represented to them: “the images of Europe they receive via the Internet are ones of London, Paris, Rome, Milan, Oslo, Madrid, Berlin, Monaco, Brussels. All of Europe comes synthesized on postcards of ten cities”; Moretti 19.) Hints at such cooperation have appeared in emergencies – for instance, when an October 2015 storm devastated a refugee community and prompted a burst of media attention and grassroots organizing in Italy. (That emergency

led to a larger project of welcome organized by the non-profit Catholic agency Caritas, identified on social media with #FamigliaCARITAS, in May 2016; see Giorgione 111.) In the United States, cities such as Saint Louis, Missouri, have benefited immensely from infusions of resettled refugees. During the 1990s, thousands of Bosnian Muslims fleeing civil war were resettled in Saint Louis' struggling, poor areas – and are credited with breathing new life into entire communities, including the Bevo Mill neighborhood. “We were losing population and people more than almost any city in America before the Bosnians came,” explains Saint Louis Mayor Francis Slay. “They’ve helped us revitalize this city”; indeed, mayors from many “Rust Belt” American cities have decried Trump’s efforts to curtail migration: “in St. Louis and the rest of the region’s dilapidated, post-industrial cities, [Trump’s anti-immigrant message] is anathema. Immigrants represent rebirth: they’ve stabilized neighborhoods, cushioned city coffers and, in the process, supported credit ratings and bond sales” (Jamrisko and Bloomberg n. pag.).

Despite the positive impacts of migration on some host communities, misinformation and stereotypes continue to stymie positive solution-seeking and integration. At the height of the Aquarius crisis during the summer of 2018, for instance, five myths were prevalent throughout Europe – thus shaping policy decisions and public opinion: the beliefs that the crisis is over, that we cannot separate refugees from economic migrants, that telling “human stories” is enough to change minds, that the crisis threatens European values, and that history is repeating itself and there is nothing to do about it (see Trilling). These myths reflect not only the tendencies for the media to essentialize complex stories and for viewers to lose interest in ongoing humanitarian issues, but also highlight how perceived threats to economic and cultural dominance lead to gross disregard for human rights norms. Frequently, prevalent narratives about migration fuel our perceptions of who “ought” to claim asylum and who is “worthy” of protection. In her study of refugee centers in Sicily, for example, Noemi Casati highlights how “deservingness” for aid is socially constructed. Refugees’ gratitude and trust as expressions of moral recognition, clothing and attitudes toward work as ways to place oneself on a “scale of suffering,” and reliance on welfare as a sign of laziness and



immorality were all identified as vital themes in relationships between newcomers and citizens. Casati writes that “people’s grids of evaluation are much more complex than simple oppositions between white and black, local and foreigner, citizen and refugee. Embedded ‘everyday categorisations’ are constructed and negotiated on both sides in each interaction” (Casati 805). In the United States, constructions of deservingness help explain why Mexican and Central American migrants are often viewed as undocumented immigrants instead of legitimate asylum seekers – even for those fleeing persecution stemming from vast government corruption and gang violence in their countries of origin. (Indeed, Human Rights Watch and other advocacy groups argue that the United States government turns away asylum seekers at the Mexican border – thus denying them their legal right to claim asylum; see Garcia Bochenek.)

Perhaps the most interesting (and frustrating) forms of anti-migrant sentiment come from people who were once newcomers themselves, or are the children or grandchildren of migrants. Indeed, immigrant communities often reflect a “last one through the door” mentality that simultaneously celebrates their contributions to the host country while attempting to prevent new groups from joining the polity. These discussions often focus on legality, stressing that newcomers should “come here legally” even if the legal avenues for migration that benefited their own families have been closed or seriously constrained. (In my family, my uncle defends his support for Trump’s restrictive migration policies by arguing that newcomers will “steal American jobs.” This argument, of course, was the same one used to discriminate against his father, grandfather, and uncles decades ago.) In the United States, Thomas J. Ferraro argues that Italian Americans in the outer belts of inner cities (such as Metro Detroit, where my family lives) began to feel abandoned by the 1970s. In old Italian neighborhoods, growing desperation led many Italian Americans to latch on to “the combination of territorial pride *and* white righteousness at work in certain strands of the new ethnic consciousness” (Ferraro 164). Again, perceptions of deservingness stress the positive impacts of migrants who arrived before – but often leave little space for those attempting the voyage today. This happens to a lesser-but-still-notable degree in Italy, where the country’s first Black senator – Toni Iwobi, an immigrant from Nigeria – campaigned

under the League party slogan “stop the invasion.” (He shared election success with party colleague Attilio Fontana, who was elected governor of Lombardy in March 2018 and who argues that an influx of migrants will wipe out “our white race.”) Iwobi contends that his election proves that his party is not against “legal” migration, but instead seek policies that “bring peace and order to the nation” (Giuffrida n. pag.). League party goals include making it easier to deport migrants, refusing to accept the undocumented arriving on humanitarian rescue ships, and developing EU-wide aid projects in countries of origin to stop people from migrating.

My first visit to Grotte was prompted by my grandfather’s struggle with Alzheimer’s disease, which had robbed him of short-term memory but had mercifully left him with joyful memories of Sicily. During the summer of 2004 (the same summer I was granted my Italian citizenship), I took the overnight ferry from Naples to Palermo, then the train to Agrigento, and then an even slower train to Grotte. I wandered into City Hall asking about my grandfather’s birthplace and suddenly acquired a town full of cousins. People fed me in their homes, took me to the beach, brought me to concerts – someone even gave me a tour of the countryside on the back of a police motorcycle. In a town where almost everyone had either my grandfather’s last name or my great-grandmother’s maiden name, the assumption was that we were all related *somehow*. It was a homecoming I did not expect, but will be forever grateful for. I sought out photos of sites my grandfather would remember from his childhood, since his memory was too far gone to process new information; I snapped photographs of the caves outside of town (*grotte* means “caves” in Italian), of the staircase used for the cross procession on Good Friday, of the town’s historic central piazza. Back in Michigan, I sat with Grandpa in his living room – his expression a little dreamy, not quite sure who exactly I was – and handed him the pile of photos. Recognition dawned on his face and he began excitedly naming the places in the photographs, telling stories as if he had been there only yesterday. He cried, I cried – everybody cried. And I felt such an immense relief that after all those years, through the fog of Alzheimer’s and before death came for him, he had the chance to return home.

My grandfather’s enduring love for his hometown – and the connection

to Italy he passed down to his granddaughter – is a powerful reminder that migration is not an easy undertaking. It comes with consequences, good and bad, and represents the loss of home as much as the gaining of a new one. Perhaps by telling these stories from our own families, and by recognizing the complicated and sometimes ugly histories from countries such as the United States and Italy, we can begin to re-humanize migrants in our political discussions. Just as skin color or national origin do not determine who is a “legitimate” claimant of asylum, neither does the “achievement” of arriving somewhere first. I exist as an American citizen because my great-grandfather Antonio found a way around a discriminatory system in order to grant my grandfather nonquota immigrant status; so many more Americans only “made it in” because their ancestors arrived before the State enacted rules to stop them. And in Italy, where far too many citizens vehemently protest the integration of refugees, the suffering of war and poverty still resides within living memory. Those shared human experiences ought to reaffirm our commitment to human rights norms, including the right to asylum, and give us the courage to fight against exclusionary rhetoric. Because the scars of forced migration still show in my own family, I recognize that the newcomers – those arriving on boats, walking across deserts, sitting in detention, crying as they are separated from their children – share an experience that my grandfather would have partly understood. The privileges in my own life are a direct result of the struggles he endured – and with that privilege, I advocate for the rights of migrants who seek human security and dignity. I hope that others will reflect upon their own migration stories and find the strength to declare, clearly and with determination: *Benvenuto*. Welcome.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An ethnic slur directed against Italians, the origins of “wop” remain unclear. Alan Dundes associates this term with migration in the 1920s. Italians who had entered the US illegally and who were awaiting deportation had their documents labeled “WOP” by US officials, which stood for “Without Papers” (Dundes 192). Recently, after New York Governor Andrew Cuomo associated his Italian-American family with the term, Ben Zimmer recalled in *The Atlantic* how etymological research has long demonstrated that “wop” actually comes from a southern Italian dialectal word, *guappo* or *guappu*, meaning “dandy” or “swaggerer.” Regardless of its origins, the term “wop” – much like the racial slurs “dago” and “white nigger” – were used to verbally attack Italians and Italian Americans and mark them as separate, and inferior to, “white” (Anglo) Americans (Zimmer n. pag.).

<sup>2</sup> The terms *Black* and *African American* are often used interchangeably but stem from different historical perspectives. For the purposes of this essay, I have opted to use the term *Black* (except when other terms are used in direct quotes) because it is the identifier embraced by activists within the “Black Lives Matter” movement. (I capitalize *Black* and *White* unless they are un-capitalized within direct quotes; again, both styles are widely used.) I acknowledge the power and value of the term *African American*, however, and I regret the inadequacies of language in this instance.

<sup>3</sup> This observation is certainly not meant to equate violence against Italian Americans with the suffering experienced by Black Americans. As noted by Roediger, “no European immigrant group suffered anything like the terror that afflicted people of color” (Roediger 106).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, Italian Americans still face stereotypes; *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* portray us in the public imagination as mafia gangsters (see Messina), while TV shows such as *Jersey Shore* have hardly done us any favors. (In 2010, my elderly grandmother demanded that I explain “what in the heck” a Snooki was.) Yet the harm stemming from these stereotypes cannot be equated with the suffering caused by racism against Black Americans and other people of color. Despite the discrimination outlined in this essay, Italian Americans have nevertheless benefited from White privilege; their ability to “become” White has helped secure their political, economic, and social privileges within US society.

<sup>5</sup> In 2017, for instance, Trump administration officials rejected a study by the Department of Health and Human Services that found refugees brought in \$63 billion more in government revenues over the past decade than they cost. Such data contrasted claims from the White House, which emphasized the “financial burden” narrative and sought to reduce the number of refugees allowed into the country (see Davis and Sengupta).

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