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# How Classifications Shape Asylum Seeker and Italian Interactions and Experiences in Siena, Italy

Erin Kitchens  
*College of William and Mary*

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How Classifications Shape Asylum Seeker and Italian Interactions and  
Experiences in Siena, Italy

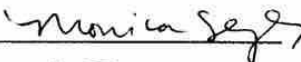
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in  
Anthropology from the college of William and Mary

By  
Erin Lee Kitchens

Accepted for High Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Prof. Wright   
Director

Prof. Weiss 

Prof. Seger 

Prof. Glasser 

Williamsburg, VA

April 23, 2019

To Grandma  
You're the apple of my eye

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## Introduction

As I stepped into the brisk January air outside of the Pisa airport I was struck with a sense of purpose. Even my 24-hour journey and complete lack of sleep could not dampen my curiosity about my new home for the next eight months. Unlike my other visits to Italy, this time I was here to be more than just a wide-eyed tourist. I had come to Siena to fully immerse myself in the Italian language and culture. It was my first-time seeing Italy through an anthropological lens.

For a short-lived period, I had thought I wanted to be an art history major. Two months in Florence after my freshman year of college taught me that while I love art, the analysis of it does not stir my emotions as it does my host sister from Siena. Italy has seen me grow from a wide-eyed middle schooler to a curious freshman trying to understand the Italian language. Then finally an academic junior determined to fully immerse myself in Italian language and discover the meaning of social phenomena that confused me.

I have always been drawn to Italy. But I couldn't reconcile the people who had taken me in and loved me unconditionally with those who at times I observed responding negatively to asylum seekers. This is a vast oversimplification of what this work aims to explain, but it was the question foremost in my mind when I landed in Italy for the spring semester of my junior year of college. Over the months my attention was drawn to specific events and questions that have formed the basis of this thesis.

I have been to Italy three times, and I have been to Ghana twice. In Italy I went mostly for vacations, to explore another culture. Ghana, I went with a student group at William and Mary that had a partnership with a local non-profit in the Volta region. We conducted

community based participatory research to help identify community needs, and how the community could best go about meeting those needs. I know and care for many people from both of these places and the tension between these two groups of people, which I was made aware of in my postcolonial literature class, inspired me to continue to ask questions about this topic. One thing led to another and I decided to conduct my senior honors thesis on interactions between locals and asylum seekers while abroad my junior year spring and summer.

Before even committing to being in Siena for my semester abroad, I knew that I wanted to work with asylum seekers in Italy. I found a particular program in Siena, which I will call MES, that emphasized full immersion Italian and community service learning, one component of which was volunteering in Italian language classes with asylum seekers. I knew that this was the program for me. It would allow me to get to know these individuals before I began my research.

Having previously studied abroad in Florence, what struck me most about Siena was its small, close-knit feel, which makes asylum seeker experiences in Siena especially complex. The historical city of Siena has not been changed since the middle ages when it lost the war to Florence (some Sieneese will tell you Siena won the war...this is not true). In 1298 the Bonsignori family went bankrupt and Florence became the center of banking in Europe.

Upon arrival I was placed with an Italian host family, the Manzanti family. They quite literally became my Italian family, inviting me for Sunday lunch with *nonnina*, taking me for strolls through the city, and always making sure that I was eating an excessive amount of food. They allowed me to have a familial base through which to explore the new country I was in, and

they were invaluable in my research and overall experience in Italy. By living with the same family for eight months I was increasingly exposed to the ways the Sieneese view asylum seekers, and to some extent how they viewed my own interactions with asylum seekers. Sometimes when we were walking along streets and saw someone who seemed to be a migrant asking for coins, I would hear them inhale sharply, air hissing through teeth. These everyday occurrences were mirrored in national discourses. Lega Nord, the northern separatist political party, changed its name to *La Lega* while I was in Siena. This allows the party to appeal to a broader audience interested in Italian nationalism. Their motto, "*Prima gli Italiani*" (first the Italians) is indicative of the anti-migrant rhetoric that the party embodies on a national level. Living with a host family allowed constant immersion in the Sieneese way of understanding these issues and viewing the world, as well as an environment in which I could ask the question "why?" which I did incessantly.

From January to May I was in classes with 15 other American college students. Some of us volunteered in the Italian language classes for asylum seekers. This allowed me to have five months of interaction with asylum seekers in Siena before I began to conduct research for my thesis. I believe to conduct effective, and ethical, ethnographic research you must have a strong rapport with your informants. Had I not been volunteering in the Italian language lessons before I began my research, it would have been presumptuous of me to insert myself into their lives. The lives of asylum seekers are stressful enough without adding a stranger who wants to study them. The extended timeline gave me greater insight into what life was like for the asylum seekers I interacted with. Additionally, I formed many friendships and by the time I began my research we had a mutual understanding and respect.

I have always loved teaching, and I genuinely enjoyed my time in the classroom with the asylum seekers. There was only one teacher of Italian for the majority of the year, and varying levels of Italian language that needed to be addressed. Some asylum seekers had been to university before they came to Italy, others had been through secondary school, and some had never attended school before and could not read even in their native language. Teaching each of these groups in one classroom was a tall order and Martina, the teacher, often sent me off to work with a small group. I valued these interactions with the asylum seekers; it gave us a chance to know each other on a personal level and fostered a sense of trust on both sides. I made sure to discuss my research with each individual, Italian and asylum seeker. Only after their informed consent did I begin to actively conduct ethnographic fieldwork over the summer. Additionally, I have changed all names of people and organizations in order to protect their anonymity. Through transparency and trust I had a productive relationship with my informants, and I hope they to me.

At the beginning of my summer research I already knew the asylum seekers and we were able to transition smoothly into my participation in every language class, as well as working in the office of the organization overseeing their asylum applications. In the office, I helped with home visits, other small tasks, and to organize activities to increase asylum seeker comfort in Siena. For example, we had a scavenger hunt through the city, and I helped obtain library cards if anyone wanted them. The days went forward in this way and by the end of the summer I had been in Siena for eight months, all the while living with the Manzanti family and working with asylum seekers.



One of the points of confusion for many is the varying titles that are attached to people who migrate, such as refugee or economic migrant. “Though these categories are distinguished by different symbolic and legal framings, they are often blurred, adding to the confusion regarding what is actually possible legally and practically” (Holmes 2016, 16). Throughout this work I will refer to the people with whom I worked as asylum seekers. Some people are more familiar with the term refugee. However, a refugee has legal status as someone who is fleeing from persecution, violence, or war in their home country. Meanwhile, asylum seekers are in the process of applying to get legal refugee status.

Some migrants have made the journey to Europe for economic reasons rather than those that legally define a refugee. These reasons for migrating are not valid according to the Italian government and Italians often attach a negative moral implication to the title “economic migrant”. This opinion is similar to the position of the United States government has on the U.S.-Mexico border. Holmes explains that

The logic behind this dichotomy states that refugees are afforded political and social rights in the host country because they were forced to migrate for political reasons. Conversely, migrants are not allowed these rights because they are understood to voluntarily choose to migrate for economic reasons. (Holmes et al 2013, 21)

Assumptions that migrants move voluntarily are often incorrect. In many cases they are “forced to migrate in order for themselves and their families to survive” (Holmes et al 2013, 21). The Italian government, like many countries in the European Union, states that unless you fit the legal description of a refugee you will be repatriated when you are processed at the border. Thus, migrants claim that they are fleeing from persecution or something else that would give them refugee status, whether true or not.

As we can see, the term refugee does not apply to all of the people in the asylum system waiting for verdicts. My informants themselves were a mix of people who migrated for economic and political reasons. The CAS organization treated them both as if they were refugees seeking asylum because that was the only way they would have a chance of getting documentation to stay in Italy. These are the reasons I use *asylum seeker* to define the people with whom I worked.

In order to understand the reasons behind the interactions of locals and asylum seekers, it is crucial to understand the asylum-seeking process in Italy. The majority of people I worked with were from West Africa, specifically, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Gambia, or Ghana.

Each individual has a unique journey that brings them to Italy. For my own research, I was more interested in what the asylum seeker experience is like in Italy, after they have crossed the border. It was not my right or my place to press my informants for details about their experiences traveling into Italy. The stories are often traumatic, as seen in “On the Run” (Williksen 2004), and I had no wish to force someone to tell me something that would harm them emotionally. In many cases after arriving in Italy, “Intensive care medicine was required for life-threatening conditions, notably burns, dehydration, suicide attempts, hypernatremia and rhabdomyolysis, pulmonary embolism and, recently, chemical pneumonia in people locked in the holds of boats” (Raffa et al 2017, 1060). Some of my informants did confide in me about their journey, but I made sure to let them initiate the conversation. In order to conduct ethical ethnographic research, one must respect those with whom you are working as complex people with their own stories of joy, pain, and loss.

The first aspect of the asylum-seeking process in Italy is often the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean is argued to be the world's deadliest border (Albahari 2015). Many people from sub-Saharan Africa who hope to migrate to Europe arrive in Libya as part of their journey. While these migrants know that Europe may not be the most welcoming, staying in Libya is not an option. It is a place of weak governance that allows for the trafficking, slavery, and smuggling that gets people across the sea. When I asked the Italian teacher Martina who she felt deserved to stay in Italy she said, "anyone who has come through Libya." Her opinion was shaped by her prolonged exposure to many asylum seekers as her students. I did not find this opinion widely shared among the rest of my acquaintances in Siena, however. Between 2000 and 2015, "at least 25,500 people are known to have died trying to reach Europe" (Albahari 2015, 5). And that number has only increased in the last four years. The UN Refugee Agency estimates that 2,275 people died crossing the Mediterranean in 2018, despite the fact that 2018 had the lowest levels of migration in the last five years (Schlein 2019).

Once a boat is intercepted by rescue ships from Italy, the individuals are brought to Hot Spots. This is where it is determined if people are there for economic reasons, or as refugees. By only entertaining the possibility of these two binary categories, the Italian State denies the fact that migration is a vastly different experience for many people. This strips migrants of agency over their own story and migratory experience. If the Italian state determines them to be economic migrants, they are repatriated. Although many people escape the hot spots and become clandestine. This means that they legally do not exist. They cannot find legal work and cannot travel. Many people choose this route without fully understanding the consequences, and then discover there is no way to turn back.

For those who stay within the Italian system and are able to convince people that they are refugees, the next step is a Temporary Reception Center (CAS) or the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR). A CAS organization is the first line of reception where asylum seekers are trying to figure out how to get documentation. The SPRAR is a place where asylum seekers that have already formalized their applications go when they have no way to support themselves (Associazione... sull'Immigrazione 2017). The organization that I worked with was a CAS. This is where asylum seekers are in limbo, applying for documentation to stay in the country. They are either allowed to stay for a set number of years or reapply until their documentation has been denied enough times and they are forced to return to their country of origin. Many become clandestine at this point as well.

CAS organizations serve as a liminal space where people are in social and political limbo, often for years before they receive documents or must leave. The CAS I worked with provided small apartments for six asylum seekers to share. They were given allowances for food and amenities based on their attendance in Italian lessons and their presence in the apartments every night. Not all CAS or SPRARs allowed for this level of autonomy. Some were hotels where roughly 300 people were confined and ate food prepared for them in the cafeteria.

While you are in the CAS system there are many rules. You cannot travel outside of the city without consent from the CAS office. You cannot earn over a certain amount of money or else the *accoglienza* (welcoming) system will kick you out. You should learn the Italian language, a critical skill for being tolerated as a resident in Italy. You must spend the night in your assigned house, and on and on. If you are lucky enough to get documentation to stay in

Italy and work for a few years, you have one month to find a new apartment and way to support yourself before you are kicked out of *accoglienza*.

Throughout my fieldwork I was struck by the different ways asylum seekers and the Sieneese understood their worlds and social interactions. Similar events would be understood in completely different ways. Frequently when the two groups met, someone from Siena viewed an asylum seeker as loud and rude, when to the asylum seeker they were trying to be actively friendly and engaging with the other person. When the Sieneese was aloof to these advances, the asylum seeker would then think that the Sieneese was being racist. These instances of misunderstanding are based on different ways of classifying the world.

For each group, social structures and membership in a community are approached through their own cultural perspectives. There were many times that the Sieneese viewed asylum seekers as outside of their community because of the ways people of Siena classified themselves. Reliance on categories to define groups and subgroups lends itself to a way of viewing outgroups and ingroups based on a binary system. The classification of people into groups and subgroups is enforced by unequal power dynamics between asylum seekers and the Sieneese. When understandings of what classifies someone as a member of an ingroup differ from asylum seeker to Sieneese, this creates a tension between the two ways of understanding the world. It is in these ruptures of pre assumed classification that conflict arises.

When working with the asylum seekers, I quickly learned that social discourse is primarily oral. Social histories are passed down orally and communication is done primarily through speaking. Growing up in the United States, and having spent much time in Italy, I

assumed that communication is largely written. This difference seems basic, but differences in the way that you receive, and process information, have a profound impact.

I made many posters for the Italian classes with asylum seekers, asking them to sign up if they were interested in learning about how to get a library card, or if they wanted to have a cooking competition. I was surprised when no one seemed to notice my offer. Later I was texting one of my informants over WhatsApp and he would send me back only voice messages. I realized that my way of communicating, based in writing, was different from the way my informants classified normal communication. From then on, I understood that if I wanted to get a message across to the group, I would either have to tell them in person, send them a voice message, or call them.

Ways of categorizing the world and how to process information in it, such as through spoken or written communication, differ greatly between asylum seekers and the Sieneese. I aim to critically examine how different constructed ways of cultural communication produce moments of miscommunication, which are then imbued with additional values such as race, gender, and language. The categorization of these values determines assumptions about the ways in which individuals view and interact with their definition of communities and the world.

Siena is a small town, and offers its own challenges for integration, thus the experiences of an asylum seeker in Siena can vary from one in Milan or Naples. If we understand the interactions and context at a specific location, the example can be compared with other experiences around Italy, or even the United States, to give a more complete picture of immigration today. It is also important to acknowledge the experiences of individuals. After all,

it is at the local level that individuals experience integration into new societies, or lack thereof. Unless ethnography is rooted in real people, its meaning will become too abstract to have solid implications for the real world. Anthropological theory is most effective when it is rooted in particular experiences in concrete places, it must “stay rather closer to the ground” (Geertz 1973, 24).

That said, Kapoor reminds us that, because “our representations cannot escape othering, it argues for us to be scrupulous in so doing, especially in the case of unequal power relationships” (2004, 18). In my case, this means that I must be aware of the ways in which my own presence and social background influence the ways I interpret the relationships between asylum seekers and Italians. Coming from a different cultural context from both of the groups I worked with means that the categories through which I view the world are not the same as the Sieneese or asylum seekers. This can be mitigated somewhat by my anthropological training. “The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys have given” (Geertz 1973, 30)

Additionally, I must be cognizant of the vastly different power dynamics between asylum seekers and Italians, and even myself in-between the two groups. One of my asylum seeker friends, Bamara, liked to greet me by saying, “Erin! American girl!” The idealization of American culture often led some asylum seekers to believe that I had power where I did not, power to take them with me to the United States for the American dream, or to bring back a new iPhone. By recognizing the differing power dynamics based on diverse experiences and backgrounds, I tried to mitigate them as much as possible. However, these power dynamics

were always present throughout my interactions with Italians and asylum seekers, and I have done my best to acknowledge and examine them when they appear.

The modern United States was a nation build upon immigration and settler colonialism. But in the currently charged political climate, the world as a whole has lost sight of immigration as a recurring human state of affairs. Instead, borders are policed, and trespassers criminalized. Migration, and integration of those migrants into new communities, is a pressing social, political, and academic question today.

I grew up in Beaverdam, Virginia. As one would imagine, it is a small section of rural Virginia where my house is encased in the woods with a river out back (yes, there are beavers). When winter comes, I can just barely see our neighbors' houses through the bare tree branches. I was lucky that my family placed a strong value on education. I spent most of my time reading, if I was not running around the backyard pretending to be a pony.

My family had the desire, and means, to travel often. I grew up exposed to many different ways of viewing the world, and was ingrained with the mantra, "Not bad. Just different." The interest in various ways of classifying the world instilled in me by my parents shaped me into a student drawn to Anthropology. I have a strong desire to know how people I did not grow up near understand and inhabit the world.

Many of the people where I grew up and who I know from school have very different opinions on contemporary migration than myself. Not everyone is able to travel as much as me, and if you are never exposed to other ways of viewing the world, your own way of classifying the world is never challenged. I do not consider people who have differing opinions on



migration, and many other topics, to be fundamentally incompatible. They have just been exposed to, and taught, different ways of interpreting the same situations. The only way to find a common ground in this age of polarization is to become educated about the reasons behind the opposing view. With this understanding, we may work together in order to use our knowledge for the betterment of society.

I write this ethnography not as a moral judgement of asylum seekers or the Sieneese. The friction produced by cultural differences between these two groups cannot be blamed solely on one side; rather, each group has complex reasons for their actions and opinions. The complex ways of categorizing individuals practiced by asylum seekers or the Sieneese reinforce certain racialized and xenophobic stereotypes. Understanding this allows for us to productively interrogate and deconstruct how these categories are made and therefore challenge them.

I was working with a group of about 36 asylum seekers throughout my time in Italy. They had their own hopes, dreams, and fears, as did their Italian counterparts. In “Stemming the Refugee Flows, Warehousing Refugee Souls,” Albahari ponders how anthropologists are able to bridge the gap between policy and the lives of those affected (2016, 1-2). By using ethnology to understand the reasons behind people’s opinions and actions, policy makers will have a better understanding of what kinds of policies will be most effective.

My goal throughout the course of this ethnography is to help people learn, in an accessible way, how the ways in which the Sieneese and asylum seekers understand belonging to a community based on the way they categorize the world. This basis of understanding fosters cultural (mis)communications that can serve as barriers to asylum seeker integration and

Sieneese acceptance of outsiders in Siena, Italy. This work demonstrates how ethnography offers a unique insight into complex subjects, because it keeps both individuals and broader contexts and concepts in a single framework. If we alienate the individual from our understanding of migration, we run the risk of forgetting the human consequences that policy and opinion have.

## **Section One: To Be Italian**

For the most part, literature on migration focuses on those who are doing the moving: where they are from, why they left, and how they affect the country they have migrated to. This is often focused on the legal aspects of migration. However, it is equally important to understand what context migrants are coming into, and “the national citizen making process as experienced by migrants and others” (Sanjek 2003, 315). There is a tension between the ways that Italian citizens and migrants categorize themselves and others. The othering that asylum seekers experience causes tension between the general assumption that people who immigrate want to eventually become citizens. Their simultaneous classification as the *other* that will never be part of the Italian community complicates their attempts to assimilate. The history of migration in Italy is key to understanding how Italians view immigrants today. This can be seen through understanding how Italians interact with internal migration/labor diaspora, mass emigration, regional allegiances, and colonization (315-36). These form the background for classifying how an Italian should behave, speak, worship, and look.

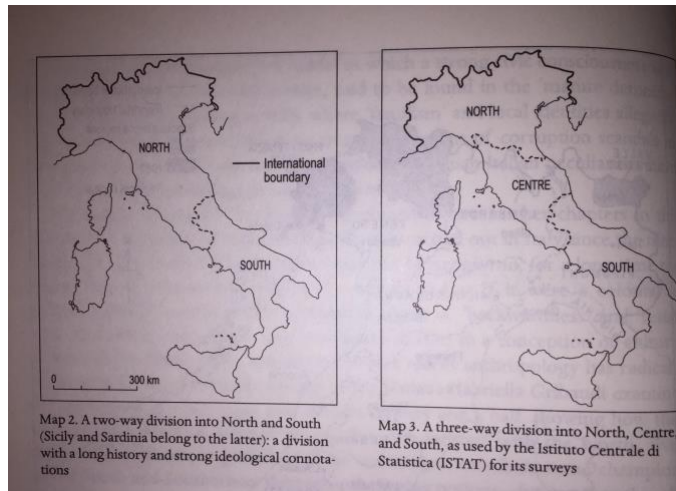
## **Orientalism in Italy**

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains that the orient is an idea that was made up by, and for, the Occident. “The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (Said 1994, 3). The way in which people view the *other* tells us a great deal about how they view themselves. In Italy, this takes place historically within the country, on the north south divide, as well as currently with the asylum seekers from many different, “non-western,” countries. In order to explain the specificity with which the Sieneese categorize themselves, I must first explain broader trends in the Italian classification of the self.

Italy itself has only been a unified country since 1861. Before unification, the Italian peninsula was made up of many varying regions and city states, each with its own culture and dialect. When traveling through Italy one is struck by the regionally different styles of architecture, food, and social practices. John Dickie argues that, “an Italian’s sense of geographical identity is more strongly based on a feeling of belonging to his or her town or village than it is on a sense of fellowship with other Italians” (Dickie 1996, 19-20). This is exhibited by the Italian word *Campanilismo*, meaning people do not look farther than their towns bell-tower (campello).

I saw campanilismo in Siena during my fieldwork. My host family made sure that I knew Tuscany was in the center of Italy, not the south. All you have to do is Google, “Italy, north south” and many pictures of a partitioned Italy pop up, such as the one below. The borders of where north, south, and center lie are defined differently based on which region of Italy you are from. When only defined by north-south, the center is often considered part of the north. The

south is perpetually left out and has been blamed by the north for many of the economic and social problems Italy has had to face.



(Forgacs and Lumley 1996, 16)

The north-south divide is extremely complex, and people can, and have, written entire books on the topic. For example, in *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy 1861-1911*, Aliza Wong discusses the historical and social conditions that gave rise to the north/south divide. The first section in the *Italian Cultural Studies an Introduction* by Forgacs and Lumley, *Geographies*, talks about regionalism in Italy. The fact that this is the first chapter in the book further emphasizes the importance of understanding how Italy views itself regionally as a necessary baseline before studying other Italian phenomena. While I cannot write everything about the phenomenon in this work, here I offer a basic account in order to describe the contexts into which asylum seekers arrive.

There are many terms that the north/central Italy uses disparagingly for the south, such as *terrone*. Upon unification, there was an inability to define what being part of an Italian nation meant. “The drawing of comparisons between Italy and other countries has been integral to the process of defining it as a nation” (Forgacs and Lumley 1996, 13). Additionally, they began to

reinforce their own identities by classifying racial and cultural others (Wong 2006, Ch1). The north tried to associate itself more with the rest of Europe but blamed their lack of progress on the “less civilized” and “anti-European” south. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian intellectual who gave rise to the *Southern Question* (Gramsci 1921-26) which details how the south is viewed as, “backward, the fault does not lie with the capitalist system or with any other historical cause , but with Nature, which has made the Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric” (Gramsci 1921-26, 444). Here we see how the north and south of Italy have been defining their own identity through the exclusion of the *other* (Platt 1999, 879), i.e. nesting orientalism, since before the unification in 1861 (Wong 2006).

Wong explains that the north often characterized their involvement in the south of Italy as a type of colonization (Wong 2006, 8). For example, the language employed against the south was the same that Italians used when attempting to colonize African countries like Ethiopia and Eritrea under fascism in the early 1900’s. The colonization of these countries was often validated by the need to reform Ethiopia and Eritrea to be more like “us.” Already having a history of othering between north and south Italy, it was easy to frame Italian colonies in the same us-vs-them manner. Through the colonization process, Italy classified African countries as the other. This has set the precedent for the ways Italians treat migrants from Africa and the Middle East today, as something fundamentally *other* than what classifies an Italian.

Until the 1980s the term immigrant in Italy referred to Southern Italians (Wong 2006, 152). When the north of Italy became increasingly industrialized with the economic boom of the 1950s, southern Italians migrated north in search of jobs. While technically from the same

nation, southern Italians had a dialect and culture that northerners found so different from their own that they were considered immigrants.

Migrants are then placed into this, “preexisting internal North/South narrative” (Platt 1999, 879), where they take up the place that the south used to occupy. This does not mean that discrimination between the north and south of Italy is not still present. It is just that this focus has been superseded by the new *other*, migrants flocking to Italy and Europe. The Italian identity has continued to be classified through the exclusion of the other. The, “discourse of the *West and the Rest* is alive and well in the modern world” (Hall 1992, 225).

Italy was never a homogenous country (due to so many different regional cultures and dialects), but now that migrants are coming from places outside of the Italian peninsula, Italian identity has been classified as more homogenous in opposition to new foreigners. The idea that, “multiculturalism [is] a pathological corruption of national identity” (Albahari, 2010, 82) can be seen through the rise in nationalist groups and right-wing political parties in Italy. They advocate for the expulsion of “invading” migrants. Playing on people's fear of Italian identity being changed by the addition of new types of people.

### **Categorization of Sieneese Identity**

Siena itself offers an even more complex context for asylum seekers to come into. It is a small town and, like many places in Italy, residents have lived in the city for generations. Thus, a large part of being classified as a Sieneese person is based on your ancestors being from Siena. Other people from different places in Italy like Milano or Palermo also have strong connections with their home city and their identity. After identifying as a Sieneese citizen, the next layer of

identity is that of being from Tuscany. Each region in Italy has its own identity. Tuscany is the birthplace of the standard Italian language and anyone from Tuscany will tell you about how Dante was from their region and used their dialect for *La Divina Comedia*.

After specific regions, Italian identity is then mapped onto the broader regions, i.e. North, South, and Center. Tuscany falls under the central region of Italy. This is mainly important when classifying themselves as not Southern Italians. Only after every other level of social grouping do the Sieneese generally categorize themselves as Italians. Arguably the sole most unifying thing about being Italian is *calcio* (soccer), which ironically has an increasing number of African players on the Italian national team. Evidently no one has a problem with them when they score a winning goal.

The Sieneese have another layer to how they categorize themselves that is not present in every Italian city. They have *le contrade*, which translates to “the neighborhoods” and is the plural form of *contrada*. The historical part of Siena is surrounded by a high brick wall, inside of which there are 17 *contrade* dividing the city. Each *contrada* has their own colors, animal mascot, historical trade, and society. The society is a piece of land in the territory of each *contrada* where members gather for dinners, meetings, or drinks. There are festivals thrown in the societies as well as activities for the children. In medieval times the *contrade* would fight each other over territory and perceived slights. To this day most *contrade* have arch-enemy *contrada* that they try to keep from winning the Palio at all cost.

The Palio is the single most important event in the Sieneese calendar and happens twice a year. It is where each *contrada* that is “running” has a horse with a jockey riding bareback in full *contrada* regalia. They then race three times around the piazza del campo (the main square

in Siena) while it is packed to bursting with people. The first horse to cross the finish line wins a banner called *il Palio*, which is painted to honor the Virgin Mary. Note that only the horse must cross the finish line for the *contrada* to win, the jockey can (and often does) fall off before the finish and the win will be valid. The winning *contrada* displays their Palio proudly within a special room in their own chapel. The importance of the Palio cannot be overstated in Sieneese society. At the end of the race grown men are crying, whether their *contrada* wins or loses, and it is understood and expected for men and women to break down into sobs or fits of screaming. At the end of the Palio I attended (our *contrada* won!) a large opening began to form around me in the crowd while people sprinted in a hundred different directions to their horses. A man began shouting at me to get back, and no sooner had I exited the circle than the men of two rival *contrada*'s began to have a 50-person brawl about a perceived injustice done to their horse in the race.

The lines that divide Siena by *contrada* are the most fundamental and defined way of organizing Sieneese society. The social base of the *contrada* is the lens through which Sieneese see the world and defines what it means to belong in Siena. These strong bonds to one's *contrada* and history in Siena are one of the reasons that many Sieneese are eager to stay in Siena. Many other places in Italy have felt the drain of people going to find better opportunities or employment in other parts of Europe or the United States. However, many Sieneese cannot imagine living anywhere else. This reinforces the fixed social structures that makes it difficult for asylum seekers, and indeed American students, to assimilate in Siena.



My host family is part of *Orso* (the bear *contrada*).<sup>1</sup> While you can attain special permission to join a *contrada* if you move into their territory later in life, *contrada* membership is mostly passed down by birthright. My host father, Giuseppe, told me the story about how upon Giulia's birth, a member of *Orso* was the first person to visit them in the hospital. The delegate carried a bouquet of flowers in the *Orso* colors, red and black, and the *bandiera* (scarf) that marked Giulia as a member of the society.

Italy is a historically Catholic society and Catholic rites of passage, such as baptism and the first communion, are still integral to Italian social life, even if attendance in churches is on the decline. In Siena you are baptized twice, once by the church, and once at the fountain of the *contrada*. This shows the immense importance of *contradas* in Siennese life. A semi-sacrilegious act, being baptized by something not based around Catholicism, is seen as a necessary rite of passage for children to become part of Siennese society. Asylum seekers and expats are excluded from this because they do not have the birthright to be accepted into the *contrade*. Thus, they are excluded from this foundational part of Siennese society.

These various layers with which the Siennese categorize their world and society beg the question, "what does it mean to belong in Siennese society?" In Siena, belonging often means that you have been born and raised in the same location. There is an emotional ownership to the location where your forefathers lived. In order to truly be a Siennese, you must be part of a *contrada*, preferably by birth. There is no current model for how people who move to Siena

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<sup>1</sup> I have changed the name of their *contrada*. It would be relatively easy to identify them because of the small sizes of the *contrade*.

from abroad should integrate, because it has not been done on the scale now demanded by the influx of asylum seekers. In the past a few families from other parts of Tuscany and Italy more widely would come to Siena, and with time and marriages to the Sieneese they became part of Sieneese society. Now however, people trying to assimilate are not from Italy, are not native speakers of Italian, are not the same race or ethnicity as people from Siena, and sometimes do not have the same religion as the Sieneese. By seeing these examples of how Siena categorizes “the other” it is easier to see what people in Siena form their identities around: being from Siena, speaking a Tuscan dialect of Italian, being ethnically Mediterranean, and being culturally Catholic.

Without models for integration, the process is painful and confusing. However, the “absence of a normative model of integration might enable a debate on uncharted modalities of national membership and coexistence” (Albahari 2010, 84), allowing the second generation of migrants to Italy, and their children, to define for themselves their cultural identity.

## **Xenophobia**

If you pick up an Italian newspaper or turn on a *telegiornale* you will be immediately confronted with some sort of story about migrants. Within, “state discourse the social problems of deindustrialization – housing, health care, the shadow economy, etc. – are deflected through *the immigrant problem*” (Platt 1999, 876). By distracting the Italian populous from other problems with immigration, the state and media are able to focus Italian frustrations on asylum seekers rather than themselves. Fear of those outside Westernized countries, cultivated by the media and government, is a factor that leads to people becoming xenophobic.

Contemporaneously, xenophobia has led to the classification of asylum seekers as not part of society. This is mapped onto the national discourse with the rise of nationalist views and politicians, like Matteo Salvini the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and his party *La Lega*.

One of the ways that this xenophobic ideology manifests itself is through the perceived difference between refugees and migrants. There is a common view, held through Italy, the United States, and Europe, that those who are refugees are deserving of asylum while migrants who come for economic reasons are not (Holmes et al 2016, 12-24). By focusing on individual risk behaviors “migrant workers are seen as deserving their fates, even untimely deaths, because they are understood to have chosen voluntarily to cross the border for their own economic gain” (Holmes et al 2013, 23). Similar to what Holmes documents on the US-Mexico border, the main factor that influences Italian opinion is the intent that they assume the individual had when migrating. The classification of people based on assumed intent does not allow for nuanced understanding of the constrained choices that motivate individuals to migrate. These assumptions then reinforce the categorization of migrants as undeserving of a place in the Siene community.

One day I asked my host mom Carla about how she felt about refugees coming to Italy. She pondered for a minute while stirring the risotto for *cena*. Then she looked at me and said, “if they are coming from war I understand. Places like Syria or Iraq where there is so much violence and people just want to save their families. Everyone deserves to have a safe place for their children.” The thing that made this type of migration understandable to Carla was the way that migrant family relationships shaped her perception of the intent behind their migration. As a mother of two, Carla understands the lengths to which one will go to protect one’s children.

The factor that I believe is the most influential is that refugees often come with their families, while migrants are primarily journeying alone or with friends. For Italian society the family has always been of utmost importance. Children often take care of their aging parents, and for the most part families, particularly in Siena, live within a walking distance from each other. My host family lived a five-minute walk away from both grandmothers, and four minutes away from Giuseppe's brother. If a refugee is motivated to migrate because they want to provide better opportunities for their children, the Sienese people respect that. And because they see the intent to do the best for your family in refugees, they are seen as less "foreign" than migrants, and thus subject to a slightly less xenophobic rhetoric.

By contrast, when I asked what she thought about migrants, Carla huffed as she spooned risotto onto my plate and answered quickly, "They are not fleeing from war or violence. They just want more money for themselves. It's selfish, we have unemployment here too you know!" The immediacy of this response is a testament to a general distrust of people motivated to migrate by money. Frustrated with their own political and economic issues, Italians do not understand why people would want to come to them in search of economic opportunity (in reality most asylum seekers do not want to be in Italy, rather Britain or France where they speak the language and there is more economic stability). Additionally, there is a lack of awareness of reasons why people may be forced into economic migration.

The tendency to accept certain reasons for migration and not others has a racial component as well. While Italy has a complex relationship with identifying its own internal race, the influx of new migrants from places like West Africa have forced them to reclassify what it means to be racially Italian. This tends toward othering blackness and its association with

Africa. By classifying the majority of migrants who come for economic reasons as African, and black, Carla rejects them from Siena's community, who she classifies as European, or white.

These distinctions are exacerbated when Sieneese see asylum seekers acting outside of what they view as proper Italianized comportment. Simona, the leader of the CAS organization I worked at, once told me exasperatedly, "some of them can't adapt, and Italians won't change." The reason behind why some Italians "won't change" is the threat that they feel to their own way of categorizing Sieneese identity when they come into contact with someone who is inhabiting their space, but has experiences and ways of classifying the world completely different from their own (such as verbal vs written communication explained in the introduction). The fear of corrosion of categories of Sieneese identity then reinforces the xenophobic narratives that the Sieneese use to keep those attempting to integrate at bay. This is not to say that Italians have total control over asylum seeker experiences in Siena. Asylum seekers themselves also have a dramatic impact on their own integration success based on their own presumptions about Italian culture. But that topic will be expanded upon in the next section.

I will now share a small vignette about one of my own experiences in the crosshairs between Sieneese and asylum seeker interactions that will illuminate many concepts tied to race and xenophobia.

I was on the way to go visit another *contrada's* festival with my host family and their German friends. By this point it was well established that any family activity would include me. I'd been calling Carla "*mafra*," which means dear mother, for six months now, and I was truly just another one of their daughters. One that got in occasional bickering matches with my sister Giulia over the amount of times a week my body could handle going out for a night on the town. One that helped Grandma make *cenci*, and happened to work with asylum seekers during the day. But we didn't talk about that much.

The evening air had finally cooled down from the hot July sun and my mom's high heels were tapping down the long stone streets. We were discussing the potential food options at the festival, a much beloved Italian conversation topic. Looking over I saw Salif, one of the asylum seekers that hadn't been to school in a while, walking down the other side of the street with his shopping bag. I waved at him enthusiastically.

"Caio Salif! Come stai? Cosa fai?"

"Bene, Bene, Grazie!"

He bobbed his head, smiling at my friendly inquiries into what he was up to. Then he looked over my shoulder and a cloud of nervous concern crossed his face. I looked back and saw that my host family and their friends had stopped a couple hundred feet away from us and were looking distrustingly at Salif and his dark complexion, while they waited on me to continue to the festival.

I managed to coax Salif into laughing about how he needed to come back to Italian lessons, then he hurried away with his shopping bag. He turned back to the apartment the CAS rented for him and five of the other men in the asylum-seeking process. All the while we were talking, I saw sidelong glances at the two of us from other Sieneese as they walked by. The small white girl from America and the small black man from Mali. People didn't seem happy with our pairing.

As I started walking back to my family, they stopped whispering to each other and began to look at me concerned, as if I would be upset in some way.

“Did you know that man?” the family friend asked in a hushed tone implying that Salif had confronted me in some way.

“Yes, he is a friend. I work with him at the Italian language school for asylum seekers,” I replied with a challenging look.

“Oh!” she said, her eyebrows shooting up in shock. “Okay then... shall we keep going to the festival?”

Everyone eagerly agreed and quickly picked up the pace to the *contrada*. While we walked away, *mafra* and the family friend raised their voices and began to talk enthusiastically of the food we were about to eat at *Nicchio*.

As if trying to outrun and drown out my interaction with Salif behind us.

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Throughout this vignette one is able to see complex social relations play out on a concentrated scale. While the scene allows us to examine race, gender, nationality, and xenophobia between asylum seekers and Italians, I will first address how perceived traits of my own identity added to the complexity of the encounter.

Having known Salif for 6 months by the time of this scene, he was well aware of my history. Often when I would enter the language classes one of the guys would smile and say, “Erin, American girl.” My American nationality, by no merit of my own, made many of the asylum seekers fond of me. The fact that I had also been to Ghana multiple times made them seem to relax around me, knowing, I hope, that I respected them as people not just as asylum seekers in a foreign country. While my nationality served to increase asylum seeker comfort with me, it also highlighted the unequal power dynamics in our relationship. My student visa documentation, as well as the fact that it was an economic possibility for me to study in Italy for

8 months, pulled more social weight than the position that the asylum seekers were in. They were at the mercy of the Italian *accoglienza* system for money and potential documentation. Understanding the power dynamics in which I was positioned allowed me to be more cognizant of how I interacted with my informants. I tried to minimize the unequal power dynamics where possible and understand how our experiences in Siena differed because of our varying positions.

Around the world, and West Africa is no exception, the United States is often viewed as the homeland for the “American Dream,” where anyone can be anything and be economically successful by working hard. To people in a state of constant political limbo, such as asylum seekers, this was particularly enticing. My classic American need to make people laugh and feel comfortable with me was well received in general by people who were constantly being cold-shouldered in Sieneese society. I also was not brought up knowing Italian, and many of my informants found it encouraging when I made mistakes in class and admitted that my grammar would never be perfect. The Italian language gave us a common struggle. Throughout the months working with the CAS organization I was asked many questions about why Italians did certain things or talked certain ways. I gladly tried the best I could to help asylum seekers understand the new context into which they had been placed. For the asylum seekers I worked with, including Salif, I was categorized based around how I was the American girl who was happy to see them and talk about their frustrations trying to integrate into Italian society.

To the Italians who watched my exchange with Salif I was the naïve American student talking to a strange migrant. Many Sieneese that I interacted with perceived Americans as well-meaning and friendly, but that they did not understand how the world works. The fact that I



was insistent on speaking in Italian and trying to fully immerse myself in the culture made me somewhat of a novelty. On many Friday nights out with Giulia I was excitedly introduced as “Erin the American who can also speak Italian.” After which there would inevitably be someone who said, “Wow America! Why are you learning Italian? You don’t need to.” Instances like this would remind me of the hierarchical power dynamics between the United States and Italy or West Africa, and the power my nationality gave me.

Another aspect at play in the vignette is gender. Many times, men who are migrants are associated with crime and virility. One day I came into the CAS office and Simona was ranting about an article in the newspaper talking about how if you have contact with migrants you might get syphilis. “This is ridiculous!! I have worked with them for years and nothing has ever happened to me!” she shouted at the defenseless barista. Hyper sexualization and hyper criminalization of black men by society leads to the classification by the Sieneese as *other than* the Sieneese model of community and this process is similar to what is seen in the United States (Rios 2006).

When my family saw me with Salif, the fact that I am a woman increased their concern about Salif’s potentially threatening characteristics as a black man. The classification of black men as dangerous obscured other aspects of his personality. When “several characteristics are collapsed into one simplified figure which stands for or represents the essence of the people; this is stereotyping” (Hall 1992, 215). The stereotype connected with black men in Siena completely negated Salif’s other qualities, such as his shy demeanor, the way he nodded with his whole body when excited about a question, or the fact that he had two bulging armfuls of groceries, which made the likelihood of him stealing my wallet and running away laughable.

As a member of a host family, they saw my exchange with Salif as if their daughter was talking to a strange man they didn't know but knew was not from Siena. My host family and their friends were confused because they saw members of two racial categories that they found oppositional interacting in a friendly manner. I had been adopted into a Sieneese family. I spoke Italian well. I was from the United States. I was white. In the instance of our meeting, all of those things opposed the classification of the foreigner who was outside of the traditional Sieneese social structure, who, while he spoke Italian well, was from a non-westernized country, and was also black.

The orientalist view that automatically categorized Salif as the *other* was called into question when I, "us," started chatting amicably with one of "them." Over the eight months I was with my Italian family, they got to know me so well I became another daughter. But when they saw me with Salif, that knowledge was called into question. Was their polished view of my quirky person accurate if I could act so unexpectedly warm in public with someone who did not fit their view of the "right person to associate with"? As we walked into *Nicchio* for the festival, I could feel them all wondering if I was really one of them at all.

## **Race**

One of the reasons that my host family reacted so strongly to my interaction with Salif was because of his blackness and the implications of that category in Sieneese, and Italian, society. Historically the south of Italy has been discriminated against by comparing them to Africans (Wong 2006). A racial slur used for the south of Italy is *terroni*. Meanwhile Africans

have been historically called *sottoterroni*. *Sotto* means under. The racial slur used for Africa therefore shows the categorization of Africa as physically under the South of Italy. Also highlighting the position of Africa with less power than the south on the hierarchy of societies perceived by the north/center of Italy. What then happens when people who are actually from Africa arrive on Italian shores? It is no longer possible to call the south *gli africani* as a slur since actual Africans are brought into Italian society. The need to introduce a new category and redefine the old southern classification is the jumble into which migrants enter Italy, a place where they are, “*stranieri* (foreigners) in a nation of internal *stranieri*” (Wong 2006, 154).

I often observed people in Siena collapse blackness onto illegality, much like being latinx has been collapsed onto documentation status in the United States. This begins in Libya, where the transition from Africa to Europe often takes place.

The motives and networks bringing people to Libya are deep-rooted and varied, more than any push and pull equation might account for. These motives are all equally obliterated by newcomers’ treatment as unauthorized migrants. Everyone becomes vulnerable once trapped in Libya. Everyone is illegal. (Albahari 2017, 524).

This connection of Libya and the central Mediterranean route with illegality combines with the Italian categorization of everyone crossing the Mediterranean as black and from an African country. As a result, there is a widely held gut reaction in Siena that if you see someone who is black, they are an voluntary migrant. The migrants are vilified for their perceived illegal classification and the Sieneese view them with distrust. Upon seeing my interaction with Salif my family made the assumption that Salif was in the country illegally based on the color of his skin.

Another example of this was when Agne, another asylum seeker I worked with, mentioned his experience in a caffè. He had gone in to buy an espresso and practice his Italian

skills, but before he could order a drink the bartender told him, “Get out. We don’t give away drinks for free.” Assumptions about Agne’s legality due to his blackness affected the way the bartender expected Agne to interact with money. The bartender did not consider that Agne could be in the asylum system working toward proper documentation, and with enough allowance money to buy an espresso. Instead, he treated his blackness as proof he was in the country illegally and trying to beg an espresso from the bar.

The orientalist way that the Sieneese bartender classified Agne is based on the characteristics that the Sieneese use to classify asylum seekers in Siena. Building on Said’s literature on orientalism, Hall explains that, “the world is first divided, symbolically, into good-bad, us-them, attractive-disgusting, civilized-uncivilized, the West-the Rest. all other, many differences between and within these two halves are collapsed, simplified- i.e. stereotype” (Hall 1992, 216). Agne’s blackness led the bartender to classify him as *other* than someone who belonged in the Sieneese community. In Siena, and many other parts of the world, when people see a black person, they collapse the many complex parts of their identity onto their race. This takes agency away from Agne defining his own identity and the way he inhabits Siena. Instead he is put into a box with defined limits, sitting on a street in Siena, but never allowed to step out of the box.

The homogenization of Africa is another factor that affects asylum seeker experiences in Siena. There is a tendency, not only in Siena but around the world, to classify Africa as one country, when in reality it is a large continent made up of many different countries and thousands of diverse cultures. Simona one day tried to explain to the women from Nigeria why people distrusted them by saying, “You are from Africa and you make people uncomfortable,

you are too black.” The girls thought it was very funny that their blackness could have an effect on their experiences with the locals. However, with the understanding that Italian identity is often classified in opposition to foreign peoples (especially those from Africa), focalization on race is another example of orientalism. Defining the Italian race is difficult, if not impossible, due to the complex history of racializing the north and south of Italy. However recently Italians have begun to define themselves based on their opposition to blackness.

One day in class Martina the teacher was making jokes and said, “*ma siete tutti africani!* But you are all Africans.” Kariem immediately stood up from his desk and shouted, “I am not African, I am a black Arab!” Kariem is from South Sudan, so he is black, but was also brought up speaking Arabic. This is an excellent example of the ways in which assumptions about race affect assumed identity. Martina, and many other Italians, tend to lump all black people into the category of “African.” However, this fails to realize the fundamental differences between cultures in Africa, because of the sole focalization on race as a unifying factor for asylum seekers. Race, black, and place of origin, Africa, are placed in the same category without thought for the way that culture divides them. Kariem on the other hand was very aware of the ways that cultural and linguistic differences changed how people were classified within South Sudan. As part of a minority group in Sudan, Kariem placed the most importance on the culturally Arabic side of his identity. He knew that many other countries in Africa had prejudices against him for this reason and thus he rejected being grouped together with them. His push against being homogenized by Italian, and other African, assumptions.

Throughout this section I have illustrated the ways in which Italian perceptions and categorization of individuals affected their views of others. Orientalist understandings of the Sienese identity is formed around a negation of being from the south, from abroad, or being black. These beliefs led to xenophobia that make it difficult for asylum seekers to integrate into the Sienese community. The increasing presence of the “other,” characterized by migrants, in Siena has made people hold their traditional identities more tightly and attempt to deepen categorical boundaries.

## **Section Two: To Be an Asylum Seeker**

The individuals who seek asylum in Siena all have unique experiences, both in the way that they interact with their current context, and in the journeys that brought them to this point. While conducting my research, I was focused on asylum seekers in Siena in the present. Their journey, while an important part of their personal identity, was not something that I felt I had the right to pry into. These frequently traumatic experiences were theirs to share when, and if, they wanted to.

The way in which asylum seekers categorize themselves as individuals in the Italian context shapes the way that they experience Siena. Additionally, the way in which a migrant identifies themselves in their country of origin will not be the same as how they identify themselves in Siena. Living in a foreign country, also in my own experiences, pushes people to hold more tightly to certain aspects of their identity, while also diminishing the importance of other aspects that may have been central in their country of origin.

For example, when abroad and speaking in English, my southern accent is stronger than when I am physically in rural Virginia. My accent increased in order to bring a bit of home to me. Not having heard people with my accent in eight months, I began to hold onto it as a way to connect myself to my concept of my identity from home. Conversely the part of my identity tied to being a hardworking, intelligent student was diminished. I had grown used to the emphasis by William and Mary students on intelligence, as it is colloquially put, “Nerds.” In Siena, however, this aspect of my personality was viewed as weird or obnoxious. Therefore, I held myself back from giving fun facts about the history or meaning of objects while in Siena. I limited, sometimes subconsciously, my emphasis of this aspect on my personhood in order to integrate more smoothly into Sienese culture. This phenomenon is also present in asylum seeker attempted integration.

There is a large amount of anthropological literature on migrants traveling into Europe and how they are treated in the initial stages of their attempted entrance into the asylum system (Albahari 2015, Carter 1977, and Williksen 2004). However, there is a lack of in-depth studies examining the ways that asylum seekers interact with the places they are put during the asylum-seeking process, in part because mass migration is relatively recent historically. I have focused on the experiences of the individuals with whom I interacted on a daily basis.

Similar to Italians, asylum seekers understand the world by categorizing it. However, many of their ways of classifying are different. When these two methods of viewing the world come into contact, they create tension and misunderstanding that can lead to conflict. In this section, I will be explaining how the ways asylum seekers categorize their context, and own identities, affect their relationships with each other and the Sienese.

## **Other People's Effect on Experiences**

In the previous section I gave an overview on how Italians classify identities and how it affects asylum seeker experiences in Siena. This section will explore the ways in which Italian, and previous migrants, categorize current asylum seekers identity which effects their experiences in Siena. The people migrating to Italy and the rest of Europe in the past 20 years are not the first people from Africa or the Middle East to migrate. Historical migration from these areas of the world started to take place in the 1970s and 1980s. This wave of migration was much smaller than the current one, and the majority of people were migrating for economic reasons. Additionally, many people came to Europe on planes instead of crossing the Mediterranean. This wave of migrants received less backlash from Italian citizens because of their small numbers and because the migrants, if planning to stay in Italy, were often determined to integrate into Italian culture.

This all changed in the 1990s when the first mass migration of people took place over the Mediterranean Sea. A boat arrived on the Italian shoreline from Algeria, which had just lost its government and political stability due to the fall of communism. "It was improbably crammed with ten tons of Cuban sugar and an estimated twenty thousand refugees" (Albahari et al 2015, 12). They just knew they had to get out of Algeria. When they arrived unannounced on the beach in the middle of the Italian vacation season no one knew what to do. This event set the precedence for fear of "invasion" by people coming over the Mediterranean outside of any Italian regulation or control, and changed the south of Italy into the "gateway to the west" (Albahari 2015, 12).



The Italian understanding of themselves and their assumptions about asylum seekers can also be applied to older migrants and more recent asylum seekers. An example of this is seen in the diversity of the Nigerian community in Italy. One day I was talking with Aretta, one of the Nigerian women I worked with, and began to ask how she practiced her religion in Italy. She then explained that there were several Nigerian churches, being Christian, around Siena and she attended one of them. Then she immediately followed up with, "It's one of the new Nigerian churches though. We can't go to the old one."

The next day at the bar near our school I asked Martina, the Italian teacher, what she thought this meant. She scooted closer to me and said in a hushed tone, "the old migrants do not like the new ones because they come from the *Napoli di Nigeria*." There are so many things to unpack in that sentence that I hardly know where to begin. Firstly, *Napoli* is the city of Naples in Italian. This city has been historically looked down on by the rest of Italy for being "simple" and "uneducated" in its southernness. This discrimination is then exacerbated by the fact that Naples is in *Campania*, one of the southern regions of Italy. Naples is one of the primary examples of orientalism in action from north and central Italy. By defining Naples as uneducated and simple, they diminish the Neapolitan identity by categorizing themselves as the opposite of these traits, i.e. intelligent and "cultured."

While the phrase "*Napoli di Nigeria*" gives much insight into the way that Martina, and many other Italians orientalize the south, it also shows the discrimination that the new migrants face from their old country. Many of the old migrants who have settled down in Italy and around Siena are from Nigeria. By saying that where the new asylum seekers from Nigeria

comes from is the *Napoli di Nigeria* we can see that their region is viewed as “uneducated” and “simple” by the rest of Nigeria, similar to Italian views of Naples. Connecting the two comments made by Martina and Aretta we are able to see that current migrants already have discrimination working against them back in their country of origin which does not dissipate when they arrive in Italy. This serves to dispel the myth that all migrants are alike culturally. Even with people from the same country, Nigeria, categorization as the *other* occurs and is transported from Nigeria to the migrant communities in other contexts like Siena.

This traditional demeaning view of new migrants by the old is exacerbated when the new asylum seekers begin to change the image of older migrants within the Italian community. In the past, while integration in Italy was by no means easy and without discrimination, it was more plausible for people to be able to integrate to their Italian context. With the increased fear that mass migration has brought, Italians have begun associating blackness with illegality, and increasingly categorize them as “the other.” This is very frustrating to older migrants who have raised families in Italy. They are angry at, and thus discriminate against, newer migrants because the distinctions between the old and new migrants for Italians is not easy to see. Now when an Italian sees a black family they do not know, many assume that they have recently come to Italy illegally. This is very frustrating for these families that have worked very hard to integrate into Italian society and have for the most part up until now been successful.

The frustration that Nigerians who migrated to Italy in the 1970s and 1980s feel is often expressed through their refusal to associate with, or help, more recent asylum seekers, who earlier migrants see as damaging their reputation. When Aretta says she is not welcome in the old Nigerian church, it is because she feels unwelcome due to the perception by earlier

migrants that their reputation is damaged by newer migrants – a perspective that is exacerbated by the media’s discourse around recent migrants that revolves around the dangers new migrants pose. Tensions are further reinforced by regional tensions within Nigeria, and even new migrants are hesitant to associate with people who they see as being from the “entitled” parts of Nigeria. The orientalist othering taking place between the two groups serves to keep them apart, rather than allow their shared experiences of migration into Italy bring them together in support of each other.

Another effect of the othering of asylum seekers by Italians is the tendency to diminish the humanity of asylum seekers. This starts with the undocumented status of the individuals. There are, “practical problems generated by the separation between documentary persons and other aspects of personhood that produce particular types of subjects” (Hull 2012, 260). Essentially, people have trouble separating people’s documentation status with their identity as people. Asylum seekers may be capable craftsmen or college educated, but because of their undocumented status these aspects of their identity are largely ignored. When you strip away many of the complex layers that form a person's identity, it is as if you are also stripping away aspects of their humanity.

When I was obtaining informed consent from all of my informants, I first asked all of the asylum seekers in the language class if they would be comfortable participating in my research. After I had received their consent, we moved on with the lesson, then Martina and myself had a *caffé* in the bar below the school. When I asked Martina if I could have her informed consent to be part of my research, she looked shocked. She asked, “But I thought you were studying the

guys?” Once I explained to her that my research was about the interactions *between* asylum seekers and locals she agreed to participate. It was clear, however, that she had never considered that she would be part of my research. When I asked Simona at the office the same question, I received a similar response: confusion that she would be included as she assumed that my research only focused on asylum seekers.

This indicates a tendency to conceive of asylum seekers more as objects of study than people with enough agency to make decisions for themselves. This objectification, though unintentional, adds to the categorization of asylum seekers as the other, something to be lent out to the next person to do research on, rather than people who have the right to decide for themselves if they wish to participate. We can see this in both people who work with asylum seekers, and to a greater degree the rest of society. The collapsing of documentation status onto the entirety of personhood makes it difficult to separate other personal qualities from legal status (Hull 2012, 252-262). This makes it easier to take advantage of them because they are seen as “less than” in comparison to other Italians. Below is an excerpt from my field notes that shows how the objectification of asylum seekers played out in daily life.

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I have continually put off writing about this day because every time I think about it I am furious. Yesterday in the language class, we were working on what to do when you go to a job interview. In the middle of our play acting and Maddalena came into the classroom. She is the other intern working at the CAS office, and for the last month she has been helping make CV's for the asylum seekers. In theory this is good but the other day she told me, “It's a great way to get information for my thesis. They tell me anything.” While I am not omniscient, I never saw her ask the asylum seekers she was helping for permission to use their data for her thesis. To

make matters worse Martina checked the CV's she made, and half of the information was misleading or completely incorrect.

Maddalena sat in the corner of the classroom and watched open mouthed as we continued on with the lesson. There was a small spat where Nasha kept hitting Stella with her shoe, and Maddalena looked like she had been given the juiciest piece of gossip ever. After class Martina, Maddalena, and I began to talk about what Maddalena was doing with the CV's. She began to tell Martina and myself how, "Some of them don't talk in the office, I want to discover why! Then I will find a way to extract (yes extract) their back stories, that I can use for my research. The girls are from Nigeria which is too complex for me, so I don't care about them in my research." At this point steam was coming out of Simona and I's ears. Maddalena was completely dismissing the value of the women, and treating the guys as objects that she could extract information from, not people whose agency should be respected.

Martina stormed downstairs and called Simona. In the midst of curses Martina yelled, "You cannot send people who they don't know to analyze them like this! It is unethical and there are new laws now. They are not animals!"

When I got home, I began venting about the unethical treatment of the asylum seekers to Giulia. She listened and said, "Ma è una stronza, but it's really smart what she is doing (proprio brillante). They don't know what's happening so it is easy to take advantage and get their information. It is smart because they cannot protect themselves"

That is what upset me the most. People can be kind and welcoming and at the same time see others as only objects to be manipulated. They strip them of their humanity. "They are only immigrants."

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In this excerpt we see how the objectification of asylum seekers can, and does, lead to ethical breaches that negate the value of asylum seekers as individuals. By classifying asylum seekers as other, it is easier to ignore their basic human rights because they are not part of the Sieneese community, continuing the self-reinforcing cycle.

## **Context's Effect on Identity Expression**

Being placed into a new context like Siena where asylum seekers were not born and raised has an effect on the way that asylum seekers express themselves and conceive of their social classification. In West Africa, where almost all the people I worked with were from, asylum seekers did not have to think about the ways in which they presented themselves to the world to the extent that they do in Siena. Their ability to navigate their country of origin's culture has been much more developed, by sheer quantity of time spent in that place.

One of the factors that they are being introduced to in Italy is the CAS and SPRAR system. While these systems allow for people to have food and shelter while they are waiting for decisions by the state on their documentation status, they also are constricting and paternalistic. In the CAS I worked with; asylum seekers had to sign a spreadsheet in the house every night to say that they slept in the house. If they did not do this or did not tell the office they would be gone for the night, the office would reprimand them. In order to get more allowance, they had to sign a sheet saying that they came to the Italian language classes. These are just a few of the ways in which the CAS had control over the asylum seekers' daily comings and goings. While many of these measures were necessary in order to give individuals the best chance at getting asylum, and to keep them safe, their surveillance also has a profound impact on the way that asylum seekers conceive of themselves and their place in Siena.

As far the CAS system, the Siena one was well run and as respectful as they could be to the asylum seekers while still doing their jobs. In the spring, the Siena CAS received five new asylum seekers from another CAS in Tuscany. It was in the middle of a forest so there was no outside contact. The CAS had to be shut down because of the horrible conditions the asylum

seekers were kept in. The hotel was rundown and dirty, and the people running it pocketed the money that was supposed to be going to programming to teach Italian and how to adapt to a new culture.

One day in class Martina asked me in an aside if the two guys I was working with had been from that CAS. I nodded slightly and Martina addressed Fred and George, men from Ghana and Nigeria, switching to English. "It is over now Fred. Those bad people have been arrested. You are here with us and you will never be treated like that again." Immediately Fred became silent and hunched his shoulders, folding in on himself as if to ward off the memories. Experiences at places like this CAS made Fred and George distrust the Italian system they were trying to succeed in. They no longer trusted the government's reasons for classifying them as asylum seekers. Their classification had allowed for the bad CAS to take advantage of them. Thus, their confidence in their ability to function in an Italian context was drastically decreased, which then affected their willingness to make connections with locals in Siena.

A fundamental distrust of the system began for all of the asylum seekers I worked with on their journey from their country of origin to being smuggled on boats from Libya into Italian waters. This distrust makes asylum seekers more likely to categorize Italians as an *other* which is unfamiliar and hostile and thus keep their distance. The lack of consistent contact between asylum seekers and Italians serves to deepen this distrust based on a lack of familiarity, deepening assumptions that divide the two groups.

Simply being in the liminal stage of asylum seeking also has a profound impact on the ways in which asylum seekers express their identity. Seeking asylum in Italy implies potentially

years of waiting in political and social limbo while the state processes your paperwork. Asylum seekers often go through multiple denials of asylum before either they receive documentation or are repatriated. During this time asylum seekers cannot travel, or earn too much money, or have any encounters with law enforcement. The liminality of the category of asylum seeking is manifested in the inability to take agency over your own life, and the state of being in between two identities, one side being the life they left and the journey they took, the other, coveted refugee status that will allow you to stay in Italy for two to five years before your documents must be renewed.

Lack of agency affects emotional health. On multiple home visits that I made to the houses of the asylum seekers, I saw men still in bed at noon because there was just simply nothing to fill their time other than sleep. To me this seemed to be like how psychologists describe disassociation. It was used in present circumstances as a coping mechanism for the traumatic experiences they had while coming to Italy and nostalgia for the people and place they left behind. As well as the culture shock Italy induced, on a linguistic and cultural level.

This is not to say that all asylum seekers were dissatisfied with their circumstances in Italy. My friend Omar from Gambia eagerly attended the Italian lessons and attempted to participate in daily Sieneese life. He too, however, grew frustrated at the lack of control he had over his own life because of his undocumented classification, and was frustrated by the resistance the Sieneese put up to his attempts to assimilate. One day after class he hung his head and said to me, "I just don't understand why they hate me." Hostility of the Sieneese towards migrants is keenly felt by the migrants themselves, adding to the emotional difficulty of learning their place in Italian categories, which determined how they would exist in an Italian context.



All of this tension is compounded by the fact that few, if any, asylum seekers actually want to be in Italy. No one knows Italian before arriving. Instead most know French or English because of Europe's colonial past in West Africa. The law is that the first country into which you arrive in Europe is the place where you have to apply for asylum. This disproportionately puts pressure on Mediterranean countries like Italy and Spain to process migrants because they are physically the closest points to the African countries people try to cross over from (Albahari 2017). Not only are Italians frustrated they have migrants, migrants are frustrated that they are forced to be in Italy. Faith, a woman from Nigeria, told me that as soon as she could she wanted to get out of Italy and go to England or Germany where they would speak English to her. The lack of desire for integration affects the way in which asylum seekers portrayed themselves to the Sieneese, as well as how they categorized themselves in Sieneese society.

### **Identity's Effect on Experiences**

Just as the context in which you are placed affects your identity, so too your identity affects the way you experience that same context. There are many ways in which my American upbringing influenced the ways I understood the Sieneese world around me. It took me until the second month to understand that people were not just staring at me as I passed them in the street. In rural Virginia, if you see someone pass by you smile at them, or maybe stop to have a chat if you are feeling friendly. Even if they are a complete stranger, there is still a baseline of interaction. In Siena, however, this is not the cultural norm. Unless you have had a relationship with someone for many months, people will not acknowledge you as they pass. Many of my attempted smiles were reflected by blank faces. Eventually, however, once you get to know

people in Italy, they will greet you like a dear cousin when you see each other. But this can only happen until after a personal relationship has been established. Therefore, an interaction that I had perceived as rude because of my small-town American upbringing turned out to just be a cultural norm that I did not yet understand.

These assumptions brought into new contexts based on personal history are even more pronounced when that individual is moving to a new place with a very different culture. These differences are manifested when a rupture in what two different people believe to be proper comportment results in conflict. At this point it is important to understand that these cultural assumptions and misunderstandings are also present within the asylum seeker community themselves.

As discussed in the last section Italy, and the west in general, has a tendency to homogenize Africa, when in reality it is an extremely diverse group of countries. Below is a vignette of a disagreement between two of the asylum seekers who were in my Italian language group, Adama being a roughly 23-year-old man from Burkina Faso, and Faith being a 30-year-old woman from Nigeria.

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It was a hot day, the sweltering air hung low over the Italian language school where from 2:00-4:00 I helped to teach Italian language classes to asylum seekers. By this point we had known each other for 5 months and Faith and Adama knew they would be coming with me to work on the activities set out for us by Martina. Faith had trouble speaking in Italian, while Adama, who was almost fluent, had trouble reading and writing. While these two learning needs should have been met by two different classes, the government did not give our CAS

enough funding to hire teachers for everyone. So, Faith and Adama were lumped together and sent off to the classroom down the hall, with me walking between them.

The heat combined with the start of Ramadan had put everyone on edge. I could feel the desire to be at home taking a nap emanating from them. We plopped down and began to work on the activities Martina had laid out for us. Faith, being from Nigeria, knew English and would ask me questions about the activities in English because she did not understand all of my Italian explanations. This annoyed Adama greatly because, being from Burkina Faso, he knew French, not English.

“Stop talking in English!” he said, “I can’t understand you! You are in Italy now, speak Italian.”

“Shut up *Abuà*” snorted Faith, annoyed at his continuous talking, and her inability to understand his rapid Italian.

“What does *Abuà* mean?” said Adama, uncertain if he was being insulted or not.

“It means you talk too much” said Faith in English, chuckling and looking down her nose at him.

While I have no idea if *Abuà* actually means that you talk too much, Adama still did not take this insult well and began to brood, glancing over at Faith with contempt. After another five minutes of their bickering, I managed to refocus the group on our worksheet, a riveting page about cleaning.

We were able to make some progress, but the two kept throwing jabs at each other every chance they got. Adama, usually very positive, was hit hard by the beginning of Ramadan and the fast did not help his humor. After another 20 minutes working with consistent jabs at each other, Faith began to get truly angry.

“In Nigeria he cannot talk to me like this!” she said to me in English.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I am older than him. He is just a *bambino*.”

Unfortunately, Adama recognized the word *bambino*, meaning baby, as being directed at him. Offended by the inference that he was infantile, Adama started to yell at Faith in Italian about how she could not talk to him in this way.

*“Sei solo una donna (you are just a woman)”* he shouted, “You cannot treat me like this!”

In an attempt to restore order, I asked Adama loudly how his fast for Ramadan was going. Evidently the wrong tactic.

“He is Muslim?!” Faith said in English, shocked.

“Yes, he is.”

Leaning forward and shaking her finger at Adama, Faith said in English, “All Muslims are no good”

“Not bad, just different,” I said, desperately trying to defuse the tension.

Faith made a loud clicking noise with her tongue that many of the other asylum seekers from West Africa used. Throughout the months I began to recognize it as the sound of disdain. At this point, Jol, a woman also from Nigeria, had joined our group and was trying to shrink away from the conflict by sitting herself directly beside me, on the opposite side of the table from Adama and Faith.

We turned the page to our next worksheet which happened to be about age and parenthood. Jol got excited and pulled out her phone to show me a picture of one of her children who was still in Nigeria. Faith also had a child in Nigeria, a four-year-old that lit up her face when she talked of him. I asked if she had a picture and she sunk down into her seat. “No, I have no pictures.” I could tell that Faith was deeply upset about separation from her child, so I tried to change the topic of conversation. Unfortunately, Adama picked this moment to say in Italian,

“You don’t have children!”

Incensed about her motherhood status being challenged, Faith began yelling in English, “I do have children! How would you know. You are nothing but a child. You cannot talk to me this way!”

“But you are too young!” yelled Adama in Italian.

“We are both in our thirties!” replied Faith in English.

“No, you aren’t. You are lying to me!” Adama retorted in Italian.

After a couple of minutes of Adama and Faith yelling at each other in English and Italian alternately, Jol interjected in Italian, showing a picture of a young woman on her phone to Adama. “Do you like her? She is pretty, no?” Adama was thrown off by this random change of topic. “Sure, she’s pretty,” he said in a non-committal sort of way.

“If you give me money, I can get you her number,” said Jol glancing at him from the side of her eye, gauging his reaction.

At this point Adama threw his hands up, said something that seemed like a curse in French, and stormed out of the room to the large classroom where the other asylum seekers were having class. When Jol, Faith, and I came to join them, Martina said, “What have you done to Erin? She is as red as a tomato.”

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In this vignette we see some of the differences within the asylum-seeking group in Siena. Also, note that this was a day in which for some reason everyone was in a bad mood. For the most part there was not this much conflict on a daily basis in the classes that I taught. When the different ways of classifying social hierarchy come into contact, the tension between the two models ruptures, causing conflict like the one seen above. While there were cultural conflicts, they were relatively minor and did not devolve into shouting like this lesson did.

While there is a strong pan-African identity within the asylum seeker community, the attempted homogenization of asylum seekers into *africani* completely disregards their diversity. In the fight between Adama and Faith, many different parts of their identities were in conflict and thus resulted in a shouting match. The most significant of these was the contrasting ways in which they viewed who was to be given seniority and the most respect in their relationship. When Adama was angered, he says, "You are just a woman. You cannot treat me this way!" Here we see that for Adama, gender is the most important factor when determining who will have the most seniority in the group. Being a man, he expected the women to accept his views and not challenge his authority. He also frequently tried to use this ideology on myself. But being the teacher in the classroom, among other things, gave me extra authority that my gender did not.

The assumption that men held more authority than women was fairly commonly held by the men I worked with. Martina talked with me about how being a woman affected her teaching style, saying she had to be firmer so that they would accept her authority. Once that relationship had been established, the asylum seekers accepted it and were respectful of her position in the class, aside from a few isolated incidents.

Another power dynamic at play was my own race. Adama, Faith, and Jol are all from West Africa and are all black. I, on the other hand, am a white American. While my gender did not give me the most authority in the classroom, for better or for worse my race did. When I was in Ghana, many times people would assume that I knew something because I was the resident white person. The connection with whiteness and knowledge has been imposed colonially on almost all of the countries in Africa. While this is utterly ridiculous, it did affect the

way in which my informants interacted with me. I was seen as a bridge between their culture and Italian culture. I could pass as part of the Italian ingroup, and thus had access to more information about how Italians thought about and classified the world. I tried to minimize this power dynamic whenever possible, but it was always present.

Unlike Adama, Faith viewed age as the most important factor determining seniority. Having Adama, who was ten years younger than her, not give her the respect that she thought she deserved frustrated her, eventually leading her to call him a *bambino*. By using his age as an insult, this further reinforces the fact that in her culture, age gave one more authority regardless of gender. Adama exacerbated the problem when he called her status as a mother into question. By telling her she was not old enough to have children, he was both invalidating her experience as a mother and reinforcing the fact that he did not think her age gave her authority over his own gender. His denial of her experience mimics the way in which Italian legal structures invalidate asylum seeker experiences, through their homogenization and categorization of asylum seekers, leaving them without control over their own personal histories.

Another factor that deepened the cultural divide between Adama and Faith was the topic of religion. All of the men that I worked with happened to be practicing Muslims while all of the women happened to be Christian. This is not representative of the asylum-seeking population in Italy as a whole, rather just an interesting divide that happened within my informants. For the most part, religion was not brought up. But it was always present, in the alarm that would sound on the men's phones whenever it was time for prayer, or in the large crosses that the women wore, and their discussions about the most recent church service.

However, within the group, not many questions were asked about religion. Quite simply, there were bigger fish to fry. But in the interaction between Adama and Faith, religion was brought up explicitly. When I brought up the fact that Adama was fasting for Ramadan, Faith understood the fasting. “We do that too,” she said. However, when she discovered Adama was Muslim, she scolded him, saying, “All Muslims are bad!” This opinion is indicative of the different experiences that she and Adama had with faith. Many evangelical Christians view all other religions as bad. Here Faith showed that her understanding of religion was based in this understanding. For her, faith was a way to define classifications of who was in your community. Being Muslim excluded Adama from her inner community. Adama seemed less concerned with differences of faith than the fact that a woman was scolding him.

Another misunderstood factor was when Jol offered to get Adama the number of a woman if he paid her money. For Adama, who scoffed, this was an insult to his ability to find a suitable girlfriend and did not take Jol seriously. However, I believe that Jol was actually trying to fulfill the role of matchmaker that older women in her traditional society filled. Being so far outside of her original culture, she was excited about the possibility someone would need her services for this important choice. Adama’s dismissal of this as ridiculous indicates his distance from the traditional culture Jol was used to. He had been traveling from country to country since he was a teenager and told me he was not interested in a wife, but “many women” at this point in his life. Jol reacted to this response with disappointment and withdrew from the conversation, but this cultural difference did not result in an all-out fight like with Faith.



The last aspect of differing classification of identities and communities, and how it leads to conflict in this vignette is that of language. Not only were we in an Italian class, but the women, Adama, and I all had different language backgrounds, and thus were open to moments of misunderstanding. The languages included the traditional language of their country of origin as well as that of the colonizing power within those countries, French for Burkina Faso and Adama, English for Faith and Nigeria. Inability to communicate in the only common language, Italian, exacerbated the perceived differences each group had about the other. Adama says, “You are in Italy, speak Italian!” in response to frustration that I would answer some of the girl’s questions in English. While Adama’s Italian skills were much better than Faith’s, English gave Faith easier access to me in the classroom, further complicating the power dynamic.

Adama was excited to be in Italy and wanted others to speak in a way that he could understand. He did not understand why some people did not want to use Italian, instead choosing English. He was disillusioned about Burkina Faso, telling me, “I have no country. I am from the places I have traveled through.” Thus, his desire for everyone to use Italian was partially so he could understand us, but also because he liked Italy and wanted to be admitted into the Italian community partially classified by language.

Faith, on the other hand, had told me many times that she did not want to be in Italy. She wanted to go somewhere, “where they speak English.” Faith considered English to be a “better” way of communicating than Italian, or the French Adama spoke. The tension from the perceived hierarchy of languages is also indicative of a larger global language hierarchy at stake. English is often thought to be one of the more advantageous languages. I was told many times

that I shouldn't be studying Italian because I already knew English. These power dynamics exacerbated the tensions between Adama and Faith. Larger pecking orders were at stake.

Italy was not where Faith wanted to end up when she had migrated. And she was frustrated about the discrimination she felt in Siena, and the people's refusal to speak English with her. While many people in Siena do speak English, I have found that they did not want to speak it with foreigners, especially if they thought you were a migrant. They thought that if you were trying to seek asylum you should speak their language. Faith's resistance against learning Italian was due in part to her frustration with her position in society as an asylum seeker. She also tended to idealize Nigeria now that she was out of it (she changed her hair green and white for Nigerian Independence Day, the colors of the flag). Many other asylum seekers did this, choosing to set aside the negative aspects that forced them to migrate in order to hold onto something familiar, making their country of origin seem like the best place when they talked about it. They miss the relative ease with which they were able to understand social structures. With time, Faith did begin to like Italian and seemed to be adjusting better to Siennese life. This was in conjunction with her coming to terms with the fact that Italy was now the place she was living, not Nigeria.

In this section I have discussed the different ways that classification as part of a specific community is experienced by asylum seekers. The experience is a combination of ways in which previous immigrants affect the experience of new asylum seekers, how their own cultural background affects the way in which they interact with the Italian world, and how being in Siena affects how they express themselves. Through understanding how all of these factors interact

we can better understand the reasons why asylum seekers respond to certain situations in Siena.

In *Navigating the African Diaspora: The Anthropology of Invisibility*, Wiley writes about the tension of invisibility and hypervisibility that migrants are placed into in Italian society (Wiley 2013, 412). Asylum seekers in Siena are ignored by society at large in an effort to deny the reality of their place in Italian social life. However, “debates about immigration in Europe also makes them hyper visible as ‘problems’ and ‘outsiders” (Wiley 2013, 412). This juxtaposition adds another layer of complexity onto the asylum seeker experience in Italy. This serves to highlight the liminal state that applying for asylum entails and further emphasizing their classification as the other.

## **Conclusion**

Integration for asylum seekers has recently become more complex. Right-wing groups are gaining power in the government and in popular opinion. I was talking to Martina last month and she shared her concern. “*Il governo chiuderà quasi tutti i centri*- the government will close almost all of the CAS’s.”

Additionally, distrust of migrants has decreased the amount of money that donors are willing to give to keep the *accoglienza* system functioning. When I went to the regional meeting of the organization that runs the CAS I worked in, they were concerned about a lack of funding. People shifted uncomfortably in their seats when the graphs for donors was shown on the board. While working in the CAS is a source of income, it is also a topic that the employees are

passionate about. When I interviewed Sofia, one of the Siena CAS workers, I asked who she thought should be allowed to stay in Italy. She looked me dead in the eyes and slowly said, “Whoever wants to.”

Outlook for migrants in Italy is not entirely bleak, however, “nativism exists, as do daily practices to defy it” (Albahari 2015, 2). The second generation has begun to grow up in Italy. Parents born abroad have children in Italy who speak Italian fluently, who graduate from Italian high schools and universities and have begun to permeate the working world. The suspension of second-generation identity between two cultures is a complex place to navigate belonging. *Pecore Nere* is a book written by second generation women who grew up in Italy. It is full of questions about what it means to be Italian and Somali (like one of the authors, Igiaba Scego), how to navigate race in Italy, and what it means to be both Italian and Muslim (Capitani 2005).

Many Italians see the multiculturalism that migrants bring as corrupting the Italian identity (Albahari 2010). However, the second generation of migrants have begun to challenge the conceptions of homogeneity that have categorized Italy in opposition to migrants. In schools, full of children with parents from Italy and abroad, young minds are changing. There are many migrants who live in inclusive coexistence in their Italian communities (Albahari 2010).

Diverse countries of origin, race, and language often make it difficult for asylum seekers to overcome the barriers to integration. However, the fact that there is no set model for integration also allows for new migrants and Italians to define integration. This must be facilitated by a debate defining what national membership and coexistence will look like. A

reclassification of what it means to be Italian and a migrant must be had in order for both groups to navigate the reality that they are both placed in while inhabiting the same space.

Siena itself is a small town that offers many obstacles to integration. The way the Sieneese classify the world is often in conflict with the asylum seekers that I worked with. Only through cross-cultural communication and education can progress be made in the relationship between the two groups. When each understands the reasons behind the way the *other* classifies the world, and thus acts, empathetic coexistence is possible.

If, however, the government and Italian populace, continue to try and stop migration and reject migrants, the result will be devastating. In response to the attempt to decrease opportunities for people to seek asylum in Italy, Horowitz says, “The law risks pushing migrants into the shadows and the criminal underworld by denying them legal status as well as healthcare and social services” (Horowitz 2019). There are no easy answers to the migrations happening over the Mediterranean. However, a dialogue is essential in order to find a way forward.

I will leave you to reflect on a vignette that illustrates the systematic challenges that asylum seekers, and people of color, have to contend with both in Siena, Italy and the United States of America.

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My heart began to beat faster as I neared the end of the line. Would he look at me and immediately know that I was bending the law? Not having set foot in the United States for the last eight months, I suddenly had the overwhelming fear that I would not be allowed to enter it. Blocked from my home even though it was 500 feet away.

When I went to the Italian embassy in Philadelphia the year before, I was informed by a man behind thick polyurethane that my student visa would expire six days before I re-entered the country. He glanced at me, taking in my features, a small middle-class white woman who is often mistaken for a teenager. Seeming to dismiss me as a harmless individual, he stated, “You could either change your flight to be within the 90-day travel limit, or you could accept the fact that they will pull you out of line when you try to re-enter the country.”

I chose the gamble. What were they going to do if they found out? Deport me back to my own country which I was trying to enter? At the time it seemed almost laughable. A ridiculous rule that due to my race and American passport I could easily surmount.

Re-entering the country in August I had a very different opinion. I had spent the last 8 months working closely with asylum seekers in Italy. These people were left in limbo by the Italian state for up to three years. Having arrived in Italy with no documentation, they were then forced to apply, and apply again, for a *permesso di soggiorno*, the permit to stay in the country. Meanwhile they lived in political and social limbo, clearly separated from the Italian population because of their race, and additionally attempting to navigate a Western culture for the first time. I became friends with these people and listened to the constant worry their lack of documentation gave them. When I mentioned that I was from the USA one girl said in awe, “Wow, you can go anywhere.” Without permission to even change cities, asylum seekers are stuck in one place with nothing to do but wait for their documents to come. The ease with which I received my own *permesso di soggiorno* was highlighted by the contrasting experience of my informants. Some people in my program didn’t even bother to go pick up their official document cards because it was “too far to walk.” When I showed my card to the asylum seekers, they held it in their hands as if it was made of gold, whispering in hushed voices, “So this is a *permesso di soggiorno*.”

Having been trusted with so many worries about documentation during my fieldwork, I became increasingly aware of my own arrogance on the subject. I had assumed that my documents would be accepted because I have never in my life, as an American citizen, had to

worry about such things. My whiteness had given me an increased security blanket, as I was not one of the “target groups” to look out for.

I had gotten through Italian customs without a hiccup. The man barely looked at me, not even bothering to check the dates on my visa. He just saw a demure white female face and waved me through. To my left a man dressed in West African garb had been standing at his window for three minutes as the officer went over his visa with a fine-tooth comb.

United States customs are notoriously difficult to get through, and as I waited in line I began to sweat. I saw a black man in a business suit being examined two rows down from my own line. The officer kept asking him brusque questions about his stay in the US which the man answered respectfully. I had to wait in line for another five minutes and all the while the man was being questioned at the window, with his African passport thoroughly examined. I began to become nervous. If this man, who very likely had all of his documents in order, was being questioned so long, what would happen when I showed up with my expired visa?

“Next” droned the border officer. I stepped up to the window trying to keep a pleasant innocent smile on my face. Deepening my southern accent, I asked,

“How’re ya doin this evenin?”

“Well, thank you” he smiled. “It’s been a long day and I’m ready to be done”

“I’d bet! Here is my passport”

The officer opened my passport and flipped through to glance at my visa. He then smiled up at me:

“How long have you been in Italy?”

“Eight months”

“Wow that is a long time, what were you doing there?!”

“I was studying abroad and then conducting research for my school”

“Did you enjoy yourself?” he asked amicably.

“It was absolutely wonderful!” I said enthusiastically.

“What did you bring back?”

“Oh, ya know a lot of stuff”

This phrase, which had I not been a small white woman with a slightly naïve face, would have caused for much more intense questioning, only gave him a small pause. Instead, my flippant tone only made him chuckle and ask,

“What kind of stuff?”

After I listed off all of the souvenirs that I had bought while in Italy, the officer smiled at me gently and said, “Welcome back home” before he waved me through. As I looked back to my left, the black man at the window was still being questioned as he ran his hands over his head.

That moment, like nothing else impressed, upon me the systematic prejudices and injustices that people and asylum seekers of color have to deal with in order to move through society. I, who should have been justly detained, was able to slip through the law because of the privilege of my skin color and country of origin. After seeing the emotional torture that asylum seekers in Italy are put through on a daily basis, the prejudices against them and the nations desire to keep them out of society regardless of their innocence, I was infuriated at the inequalities shown by the fact that I could just waltz into a country having broken the law. While those who were trying with all their might to follow the law to preserve their future, have to jump through so many ridiculous hoops in order to barely keep their toe in Europe.



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