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# "We Never Thought It Would Be Like This": Refugees' Experiences in Sicily

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## "We Never Thought It Would Be Like This": Refugees' Experiences in Sicily

### **Abstract**

The arrival of refugees by boat to Sicily is not, perhaps, significant in numbers, but from a humanitarian point of view it is a crisis in the truest sense of the word. Refugees that arrive in port cities are more susceptible to trafficking due to their extra vulnerability and impaired emotional and physical states. The three main preoccupations refugees are: the arduous and often deadly journey, their treatment upon arrival, and rebuilding their lives in a society that does not want them. They often wonder if what they encounter in Sicily is in some ways worse than the place they left. These refugees are both from refugee camps and refugee centers where I spent time and engaged the, predominantly men, in small conversation(s) that led to in-depth interviewing. These poems represent the journey not as a choice, but a destiny of sorts. Poetic inquiry allows me to represent my data in a variety of ways, and to avoid trying to say everything all at once in any one particular piece. These poems show the refugees' social, mental and physical battles upon arrival. My intention is to pluck them from the masses and let their humanity and their particular experiences shine forth.

### **Keywords**

Sicily, Refugees, Poetic Inquiry

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## **“We Never Thought It Would Be Like This”: Refugees’ Experiences in Sicily**

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*The arrival of refugees by boat to Sicily is not, perhaps, significant in numbers, but from a humanitarian point of view it is a crisis in the truest sense of the word. Refugees that arrive in port cities are more susceptible to trafficking due to their extra vulnerability and impaired emotional and physical states. The three main preoccupations refugees are: the arduous and often deadly journey, their treatment upon arrival, and rebuilding their lives in a society that does not want them. They often wonder if what they encounter in Sicily is in some ways worse than the place they left. These refugees are both from refugee camps and refugee centers where I spent time and engaged the, predominantly men, in small conversation(s) that led to in-depth interviewing. These poems represent the journey not as a choice, but a destiny of sorts. Poetic inquiry allows me to represent my data in a variety of ways, and to avoid trying to say everything all at once in any one particular piece. These poems show the refugees’ social, mental and physical battles upon arrival. My intention is to pluck them from the masses and let their humanity and their particular experiences shine forth.*

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The work that I am now doing in Sicily is a very natural outgrowth of a world that I have been observing since I was a very small child. I have always been rather hyper aware of my identity as an Italian-American. I was born and raised in a town in which most Italians and Italian-Americans came from the same town in Italy. My family was no exception. My neighborhood was predominantly Italian as was the parish that my family belonged to and the parochial school that I and my siblings attended. My mother frequently distinguished between “us” and “them”---Americans, who were rarely willing (or able) to claim a distinct cultural “identity.”

I grew up hearing about the hardships of Italian immigrants, most specifically, the discrimination they faced upon arrival in the United States. I heard how they became ashamed of their language and were both proud and bewildered when they raised children who learned to speak English (American) but who they, sadly, could not understand. I was aware of how this shame stopped many from teaching their children the language. Anecdotally, few Italian-Americans can claim to speak the Italian language, or even a poor dialect! I saw so many immigrants proud to be American only to turn angry and bitter when they were not seen or accepted as actually being American. There are myriad reasons for this, which goes well beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that during the period of time when Italian immigrants were coming in droves to the United States, assimilation was the rule of the day. No one was celebrating difference. One was expected to melt within the pot, until we all acted in unison, with our thoughts, but more importantly our *allegiances* aligned.

My parochial grade school in the late sixties and early seventies had many Italian immigrant children, many of which often reported to class for the first time the very day after their arrival. They were often shy, confused and bullied, at least at first. I was quiet and patient and was often tasked to help them learn to read. They were often shamed in class and ostracized by teachers who seemed to loathe their presence. This caused a strange split in me. I identified

as Italian-American. But these were *real* Italians. And they were being mocked by authority figures. I internalized the difference and began to feel a growing shame, but an even stronger indignation.

I have experienced the discrimination of my culture. I have heard the names, been called the names and I have had my intellectual heritage questioned. That there is not Italian-American intellectual tradition continues to dog those of us who are Italian-American. This rankles, of course, simply because it is not true.

I cannot remember a time when I was not acutely aware of the immigrants' presence in my school, in my family, in my town, in my parish. It has been a preoccupation of mine forever. *Why do they come? Why do they stay?*

This curiosity has cross-pollinated, in the other direction, exponentially. Italy, which has previously been a country of *emigration*, is now, most decidedly, a country of *immigration*. In unprecedented and steady numbers, both immigrants and refugees are leaving their countries due to not only war, direct threats to their lives, sexual persecution and other reasons, but sometimes, simply for economic reasons. Due to the Dublin Regulation, at least as it applies to refugees, they can only apply for refugee status in the country in which they arrive. This controversial law often means that, because of the route often taken through the Mediterranean, Italy is the first landing point.

Many refugees do not want to be in Sicily. They find themselves struggling, in just about any way that a person can struggle bodily, mentally and spiritually, in a country that does not want them, thanks, in large part, to the Berlusconi government who fanned the flames of hatred and fear of the immigrant and refugee (especially those from Africa) in a climate of rampant unemployment in many regions of the country. His "*human tsunami*" rhetoric, had been, and continues to be a very real perception by many (but not all) Italians, who have been made to feel under siege. I believe that the representation of refugees lives is valuable to those who are in the position to both change and influence policies toward both refugees and immigrants that will help them to be accepted into society by focusing on them as real people with hopes and dreams and thus negating the fear, suspicion and hatred with which they are, more often than not, received.

### **Framework and Methodology**

My framework is a direct outgrowth of my own experiences in identifying so strongly with a non-dominant, immigrant population. The influx of immigrants and refugees to Italy is radically changing the demographic in that country which has a very high unemployment rate coupled with a very, very low birth rate. My interest began as a question of "who is Italian?" This is much in the same way that I used to think about "who is American," most especially when I used to see how hard working, tax paying Italian immigrants wanted to desperately (and deservedly) be accepted as Americans. While observing and spending time with immigrants and refugees in Sicily, and hearing their stories of discrimination, struggle and often hopelessness, I was interested in why they came--what were the circumstances surrounding the gargantuan undertaking of leaving your home under dangerous and often life-threatening conditions, to a wholly uncertain future. Then, of course, why do they stay?

My methodology began with an auto-ethnographic approach, as I made parallels between the experiences of Italians coming to American with, mainly Africans, going to Italy. This was not a perfect parallel of course, but it was a starting point for me, and perhaps shows my "desire lines"---the direction my thinking had been going into all along. This approach helped me, but I knew that it would not end there. I understood that what I sought (and still seek) to understand, began with myself and the sense of my "otherness," but would, of course, not end there.

I am an inveterate and assiduous journal keeper and have been since childhood. Being shy and an introvert to boot, I was almost always on the outside of things, looking in, observing. I tended to see things that others might miss, caught on to perceptions of things that others might miss. Then, my cultural identity plunged into chaos as I realized the difference between being Italian-American and an Italian from Italy. Since then, many years ago, I have interrogated my own preoccupation and sense of identity, a practice that has helped me immeasurably in understanding the immigrant and refugee in Italy.

My research began as a series of conversations (interviews) with immigrants in Sicily that I then turned into profiles that I then mined and studied for emerging, recurring and predominant patterns and themes. At no point was I seeking some sort of objectivity of experience. The strength of the interview was in the subjective experience of each research participant. Denzin (2003) writes, "The interview elicits interpretations of the world, for it is, itself, an interpretation." He goes on to assert that the interview "stands in an interpretive relationship to the world it creates." Paying special attention to the "... spaces, and sites where stories that cross and re-cross borders and boundaries of illness, race, class, gender, religion and ethnicity are told (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). This was a helpful stance for me to think about.

It began with interviews with immigrants from Greece, then Romania, Holland, Croatia, Spain, etc. (Arcadia University Internal Review Board - IRB - granted approval of this research in 2013.) The main emerging pattern was that those who I interviewed were "white" and thus their experiences of being an immigrant in Italy were largely of their own choices, often strategic and well-planned ones. In addition, they were more like migrants, traveling back and forth between Italy and their home country. Several of them found my earnestness amusing. One asked, "Don't Americans travel from state to state?" I understood what she was getting at. I did not find what I was looking for.

Gaining entry to the refugee community is fraught with any number of ethical pitfalls as they are a vulnerable population, and to be sure, my tread was light. I was lucky to have a mentor who is a cultural mediator on the ground as well as other connections that I had made over time that provided me an entrée into the refugee world. My approach is a gentle one, believing as I do in conversation rather interrogation. This approach often worked, as I was able to interview a wide variety of refugees from African, almost exclusively male.

I had prepared a series of formal questions that I asked that provided the ideal gateway into what would quickly turn into conversation. This resulted in a sort of "snowball sampling"--for as I would speak to one refugee, others would attempt to enter the conversation. I was careful to give everyone time to speak. I spoke little and listened hard. Much of the conversation was fraught with exasperation and anger over current conditions, including the racism they continuously encountered both in and out of the refugee camps. I both recorded the conversations and made notes. I followed (and continue to follow) a core group of men who have, over a period of three years, been sharing their stories. One prevailing theme is that they are not the men now that they were then---that life and circumstance have intervened and things did not turn out the way they intended.

I began to fret over how I would present my research. Auto-ethnography began the process, but it would not and could not take me to the next phase, the phase I did not have a name for, but knew I wanted to get to, nonetheless. When I began to code my data, I would also scribble notes on a pad of paper next to me. Short poems first then longer ones revealed my preoccupations about the data I was working with in a very organic way. Poetry is my habit.

## Poetic Inquiry

Thanks to sociologists such as Laurel Richardson, Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner, Sandra Faulkner and countless others, I had a new view of qualitative research that fully encompassed my research values and outlook. Further, a branch of “arts-based research”, poetic inquiry, seemed to be the perfect way of presenting my research.

Sandra Faulkner (2009) asserts that she uses poetry in her work to “...mirror slippery identity negotiation processes, to question traditional representations of marginalized identities, to approximate living, and add to the marginalized groups through the use of poetry as data analysis and representation. “ This resonated deeply with me as my goals and feelings of using poetry for representation were similar, if not identical. Form followed function.

I continue to be interested in presenting my research in ways that are easily relatable, understood and accessible. I was not interested in presenting my research in a jargon-filled and sterile way, able only to be interpreted by the chosen few. I believe that using poetic inquiry helps to, as Laurel Richardson (1994) has stated “concretize emotions, feelings and moods—the most private kind of feelings—so as to create experience itself to another person.”

If no writing is innocent and writing is an activism, then the representation of my data using poetic inquiry is my activism. Denzin and Giardina (2009) ask “What is the role of critical qualitative research in a historical present when the need for social justice has never been greater?” If, as Denzin further asserts “This is a historical present that cries out for emancipatory visions, for visions that inspire transformative inquiries and for inquiries that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression,” then willingly throw my hat into the ring and accept the challenge. In the process, I learn quite a bit about myself: that I am reflexive by nature, and that to bringing an open heart to the work at hand, is not a liability, but, rather a necessity. Below are three poems emerging from this research:

### Suleiman

Can someone please tell me the meaning of  
*accoglienza*<sup>1</sup> and *integrazione*<sup>2</sup>  
for the *immigrato*<sup>3</sup>?

Just send me back on the street  
For the sake of Allah. My mother  
would hold her head in her hands  
all the day if she knew of  
my life like this.

They tell me to leave the center  
And stuff 500 Euro in my pocket  
But that money cannot buy me the  
only thing that I want:  
a job.

My cap is the only  
Roof over my head,  
Even *IT* has a job.

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<sup>1</sup> Welcoming; reception

<sup>2</sup> Integration

<sup>3</sup> Immigrant

Outside I do not know  
If the heat is worse  
Than the cold.

The same polizia stops me  
Every day at the water pump.  
Every day I show him my same  
ID card. Every day he examines  
my old plastic container.

Every day I swallow more pride  
Like a disfigured gourd in my throat  
Every day the people in this town  
Begrudge me some water  
To wet my tongue.

Every day, the *polizia*<sup>4</sup>  
says to me “move it along.”  
Sometimes, he calls me  
“brother.”

### **Shereef**

When the boat arrived  
my body was pulled to the shore  
Squinting eyes looked into my face  
I blinked back at them.

‘This one is alive,’ they said  
As if I was not there  
Like a fish, still on the hook.

If I could breathe and walk  
They left me and went on to the next person.  
In Afghanistan, they shot a hole in my chest  
But missed my heart, who, in turn, missed the  
Lack of attention. Hearts are fickle that way.  
They should have taken all of me.

Because I will not talk  
Because they think I cannot remember  
Who I am or where I may have come from  
They do not speak to me.

I am on a stretcher, transported  
As if I am a box of summer vegetables  
Only once, I hear someone say

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<sup>4</sup> Police

“*attento, attento*<sup>5</sup>.”

I have never lain on sheets  
So white, the floor so shiny.  
A woman with a serious look  
on her face brings me  
food on a tray.

I want to know her name. But really  
If I could find my voice, I would try  
to smile, to tilt my head, and call her  
‘*mother*’ just so that I would never  
lose the sound of it.

### **Hussain**

At the time we were the  
First refugees to be officially  
Recognized, but they forgot  
Our laurel wreathes.

Now what? They told me  
Here is your *permesso di soggiorno*<sup>6</sup>  
And I looked around me at  
Faces with no smiles  
Tired before I even began.

I quickly realized the only  
Difference between this place  
And Libya was that there was  
No war with guns.

I had discrimination in Libya  
But soon I was dreaming in  
That old nostalgic way of returning  
And living my Libyan experience again.  
Here, on the streets, they look at me  
And look away. Sometimes  
I look away first.

Fifteen days on the water  
And the silence of two broken engines  
Nearly made me lose my mind. The only  
Sound was of a Ghanian woman,  
Wrapped in the cloth of her country  
Moaning with a baby in her belly.

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<sup>5</sup> Careful, careful

<sup>6</sup> Residence permit in Italy



I could only stare. We were all so helpless.  
 I had wet cigarette in my pocket  
 And not a single match to light it with.

### Conclusion

In the early days of collecting my data, I worried about how I would present my research. While I have immersed myself in perhaps hundreds of academic articles about the (mostly) geopolitical aspects of migrants and refugees, what I read relegated the lives of refugees themselves to footnote status, forever in the realm of the theoretical and no real indication of who these nameless, faceless people on the move really are. I collected data for a considerable amount of time before I knew what, exactly, I would do with it. I felt strongly that what I was doing had the potential to make a difference. Discovering the work of sociologist Laurel Richardson was a watershed moment for me. Laurel Richardson's call to present our work in evocative ways for greater meaning resonated in a way that I cannot quite describe. I felt as though, in research presented through poetry, that I had found my real home.

I have sought, most assiduously, to represent the lives of refugees in Sicily in the most truthful and evocative of ways. I have aimed to dispel the many stereotypes of the refugee that are instrumental in the continuous victimization and scapegoating of this very vulnerable population. Through poetry I am able to represent the lives of refugees in ways that are more apt to be read and understood, more "consumable" and influence those who are in the position to influence policy changes as well as create an awareness of refugees in general. The connection between research and poetry is one that comes naturally to me. It is the most truthful way that I can present my research: with emotion, with sensory details and with a focus on the aesthetic. It is for me, both research and activism.

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