In Search of Welcome: Tracing Hospitality in the Sicilian Borderlands

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by

Margaret Neil
St. Edmund Hall

Abstract

Based on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in western Sicily, this thesis reconsiders the classical anthropological theme of hospitality. Sicily is an island marked by emigration and a sense of political and economic marginalisation, manifested in locals' anxieties for their futures. Over the past thirty years, Sicily has also emerged as a place of first arrival for people crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe. The island has become part of the spectacle of the EU border in which professed state-level hospitality is unmatched in practice, or else enables the violent and exclusionary business of bordering to occur. Often, this mismatch between what is professed and what occurs in grounded form leads people to feel a sense of the surreal or an emptiness of meaning.

My work shows that other forms of what I call 'grounded hospitality' emerged precisely in the gap between professed state hospitality and the social realities of the Sicilian borderlands. Where people felt that state bordering forces took control away from them, grounded hospitality emerged as a way to take back control. For many who felt marginalised – whether elite Sicilians in Palermo, undocumented migrants living in informal encampments, or underpaid reception workers in the state centres – welcoming others through hospitality emerged as a means of trying to exert control over one's self and one's home in such a way that permitted both connection and autonomy, and restored meaning.

In this thesis, I argue that hospitality is characterised by a tension between welcome and control. Hospitality could not fully upend state structures or social hierarchies, and often played into them. Studying hospitality in Sicily can nonetheless teach us about how people living in borderlands make meaning out of the arrival and presence of 'others' in a way that stands at a remove from state-based understandings of hospitality.

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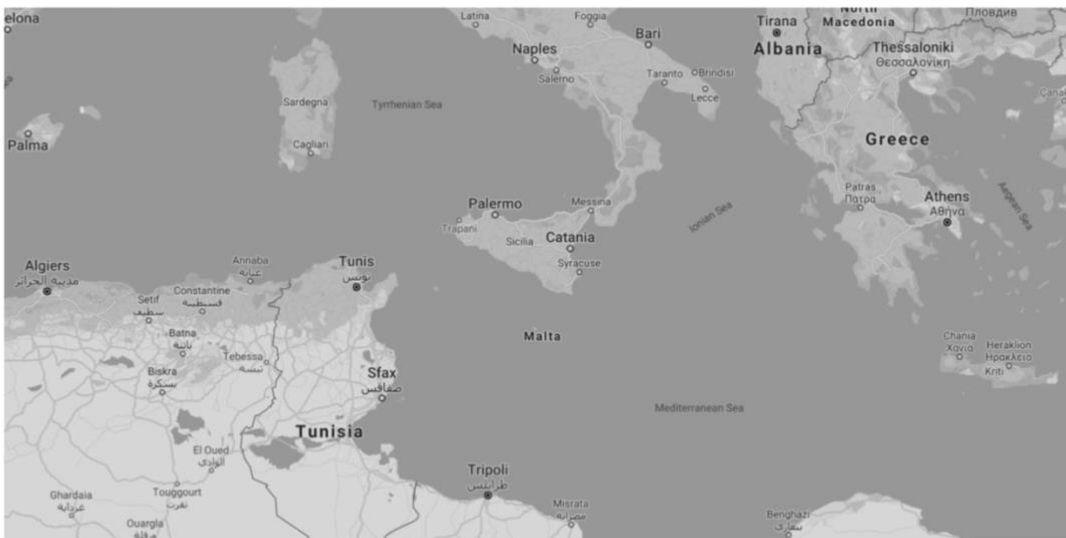

Map: Sicily in the Central Mediterranean

Introduction

Encountering Hospitality

On the chilly but blue-skyed morning of March 19, 2022, a crowd in the town of Capaci – twenty minutes west of Sicily's capital, Palermo – gathered around a new public painting of Saint Joseph. The portrait was to be unveiled today, the saint's feast day. I had been invited to attend by the artist himself, a man named Igor Scalisi Palminteri, whom I had met while conducting fieldwork in Palermo. Igor had become a prolific 'public painter', as he called himself, distinguishing his work from that of muralists or graffiti artists. His portraits of saints in everyday garb could be found across the island.

Joseph is the patron saint of orphans and the poor. He is celebrated across Sicily and southern Italy on March 19th, the Italian Father's Day, with elaborate rituals and food traditions. Some people that I spoke with in Sicily claimed the feast day dated back to pre-Classical times. They pointed to the fact that the festival took place at the beginning of spring. In some towns, people made bread sculptures in the shapes of natural elements – the sun, flowers, cornucopias, ladders and various fruits and vegetables alongside Christian iconography like lambs representing the *agnus dei,* or a staff representing Joseph. There was a permeating sense that this ritual connected present-day Sicilians with their ancient, pagan forebears who had celebrated the ritual to welcome the regeneration brought on by spring.

At the very least, this was a rite that everyone in town had childhood memories of. Because of the lockdowns following the Covid-19 pandemic, townspeople had feared that the ritual would stop. This was one reason why the city council had been eager to commission the portrait: it

was an event to look forward to, a new image that drew on longstanding traditions that were embedded in the hearts and minds of the townspeople.

It had taken several days for the artist and his helpers to complete the portrait. Now this new, larger-than-life Saint Joseph gazed out from the side of a renovated building, overlooking the town's main piazza. The crowd beneath the portrait swelled, waiting for Igor to make his speech for the formal unveiling at eleven o'clock. The atmosphere was jolly: festive music played, and small children gathered to get their faces painted. Long tables were set up for the communal noon meal of Capaci's traditional *minestra* – a simple soup of beans and spaghetti. A strong smell of smoke wafted up from the open fires being stoked to prepare the soup.

As eleven came and went, and we were still waiting for Igor, I began chatting to a group of three elderly ladies. They were perfumed and elegantly dressed for the occasion, their hair dyed and coiffed, with scarves and jewellery dressing up lightweight puffer coats. They nodded enthusiastically when I said I was an anthropologist and replied, 'you're doing the right thing, writing things down'. Encouraged, I asked them what they thought of the portrait. Immediately, though I hadn't mentioned the topic, they began to discuss migration.

One lady explained to me: the man in the portrait 'has a wide nose, dark traits … he has traits that we think of as foreign [*extracomunitari*]. That's what we think of when we see these traits'. Another stated, 'Saint Joseph is the father of everyone, without distinguishing, on principle'. The third lady added, 'These migrants come, and in terms of hospitality [*ospitalità*], he is also their father.'

Figure 1 The San Giuseppe Painting by Igor Scalisi Palminteri, Capaci (photo by author)

The women then launched into admiration of the painting's formal merits. There was some controversy in town, because Igor had painted the saint wearing a casual floral shirt – sans white beard or saintly robes, like in the replicas of traditional paintings that hung in gold frames on the outer wall of the town hall, across the piazza, for the day. For some, this aesthetic choice provoked anxiety: they felt the festival was changing too much, becoming unrecognizable, even ending, as they knew it. These women, though, were fans. One said, 'The lily – it looks like you can just reach out and grab it, thanks to the shadow he painted.' The second added, 'Yes, people come to take photos… in time, this will become something, a part of our heritage.' The third said, 'he has put our town [*paese*] on the map'.

Such remarks were noteworthy to me, because Capaci already *was* 'on the map' – if for a notorious reason. Along the A20 highway that separated upper and lower Capaci, about one kilometre from where we stood, tourists coming to and from Palermo's airport frequently stopped to snap photos and selfies next to a tall obelisk, that stood in the middle of a small rest area. The obelisk was a public monument, dedicated to the memory of the Antimafia judge, Giovanni Falcone, who had been killed by a car bomb in 1992. Falcone had been one of the most important Antimafia judges, whose interviews with former Mafiosi helped Italian law enforcement and the public to understand, for the first time, the inner workings of the Sicilian Mafia, Cosa Nostra which had helped the state respond to Cosa Nostra's violence and power.

Because of Falcone's murder on this stretch of highway, technically within the town's jurisdiction, in Italy 'Capaci' was part of a phrase – *la strage di Capaci,* the killing of Capaci – that was shorthand for a particularly violent and anti-state era of the Mafia. The obelisk had become so well-known that my Google Maps app even suggested it to me as a stop.

So, it was not that the city was not on the map, or in the history books. Rather, it was that Igor's painting seemed to open a more felicitous chapter of possibility for the city. If the mayor of Capaci had his way, the painting would become a different source of attraction, a reason for visitors to come into the town's centre, instead of simply stopping on the side of the A20 highway. Aesthetics was a central theme, in public and everyday discussions. It was as though beauty might have the power to heal, and regenerate, those parts of Sicily that had been wounded by the stigma and violence of chapters of its history, of which the Mafia was only one, if perhaps the darkest, bit. In a somewhat unexpected way, migration seemed to offer a positive twist to an ongoing plot.

Having answered several of my questions, the ladies that I had been speaking with wanted to ask about me. I responded in turn to their questions: I was American; my grandfather had been Sicilian and had emigrated, first to Canada, and then to the US, in the 1950s. One of the women nodded, understanding, and told me she too had left Sicily for years and lived in Venezuela. She had liked Venezuela, she said, because Venezuelans were warm and friendly like Sicilians, so she had felt at home.

We would have continued talking, but Igor took the microphone, so we turned towards him instead as he began: 'All of us, we can each be a saint', and continued:

> 'The question that will be asked, for months and months, is, who is this guy? [Sicilian: *ma cu è chisto?*]. The face, it's not clear, is it Arab, from North Africa, or is it instead Sicilian? […]
>
> I like that there is this ambiguity, because you can't tell if he is eating the *minestra*, and so he is being hosted, or if he is rather offering the *minestra,* and thus hosting. As you can see, these two things, often, somehow, also overlap. They might not be easily distinguished. Sometimes, we need hosting, and sometimes we must host. Sometimes it's us who pass from one *paese* [country or town] to another: our elders are a people of migrants, they went to the USA, to Argentina, and needed to be welcomed (*accolti*).'

At this point in the speech, one of the women tapped me and whispered, loudly, 'that's like your grandfather! It's a wheel, a cycle!'

Igor continued:

> 'Today, probably, we are more fortunate. We are the ones who must host. Each of us does it in their own way. But fundamentally, what I like is that this Saint Joseph has come down from his niche, and he is a common person, one of us, and here, with his dreamer's gaze, he trusts us to sit here at the table. He is there, and then there are all the other imaginary places. What I invite you to do today, with this painting, is to all come and sit at the same table. Thank you.'

After Igor had finished his speech, the councilwoman who had organised the mural took the microphone. She thanked Igor, and then asked the crowd, 'the mission of art is this – to shake our certainties. The question is: today, who are the saints?'

This scene from Capaci highlights how interconnected the themes of hospitality, migration and the state were in the minds of people across Sicily. They emerged from simple discussions about a piece of public art.

Puzzling Hospitality

This thesis is a study of hospitality, related to the terms *accoglienza* and *ospitalità* in Italian. It was conducted in the borderlands of the European Union, in western Sicily. Through insights gleaned from fifteen months of ethnographic research, it offers a reconsideration of a classical anthropological theme that has also become a framing device in contemporary theorising about the relationship between sovereign states and their immigrants (Agier 2021; Benhabib 2006; DeBono 2019; Derrida 2000; Katz 2023; Rosello 2001; Rozakou 2012). I re-examine this central discursive and theoretical concept by focusing on how actors imagine, discuss, and practice hospitality on the ground.

My study of hospitality takes place across five sites that are produced by contemporary state bordering efforts. But I also contextualise these border sites within pre-existing dynamics in Sicily that also relate to the state. Sicily, located at Europe's geographic outer edge, is also on the EU's list of its least developed regions.[1] As a southern Italian region, it has been considered as the nation-state's primary 'other' (Triandafyllidou 1999). Anxieties over the island's future, over its modernity, and over its Europeanness remain prevalent in everyday conversation, in media articles, and in public discourse. Such anxieties can result in ambivalent attitudes towards the *stato,* the Italian state: an entity embodied in local officials and bureaucrats, but also abstracted, traced back to 'Rome'. In part, this is because the state is often denoted by its absence in Sicily: missing infrastructure, services, and forms of justice, that people expect to be there but are not.[2]

Sicily is also a point of first arrival for hundreds of thousands of migrants[3] who have survived the trip across the Mediterranean. According to the law of the sea, any rescued person should be taken to the nearest available open port. Sicily's location in the central Mediterranean, and its size, means that many of these ports are on its shores, or those of the small islands under its jurisdiction (Lampedusa, Pantelleria, or Marettimo).

As a result of these arrivals, Sicily is a place where we can see the elements of the EU border

[1] The EU's list of 'less developed regions' comprises those with a GDP per capita under 75% of the EU average (European Commission n.d.a). The EU has promised billions of euros to Sicily as part of its 'Cohesion Plan' whose 'funding is concentrated on less developed European countries and regions in order to help them to catch up and to reduce the economic, social and territorial disparities that still exist within the EU' (European Commission n.d.b).

[2] See Giustino Fortunato (1926) for a historic analysis of this relationship.

[3] I use the term 'migrant' to refer to people who have crossed into Italy via any of several informal transnational routes. Often, Sicily is not a permanent home. I am aware that this term can reinforce methodological nationalism and the distinction between an 'us' and a 'them' (Anderson 2019). However, I do not know another term that adequately addresses this heterogeneous group of people, who share the commonalities that: they do not have EU citizenships, may go in and out of documented and legal status, have undergone a major migratory journey, and often see mobility as a central driving force in their lives.

assemblage: police and humanitarian actors, ready at ports to bring would-be asylum-seekers to nearby hotspots and police stations equipped with fingerprinting technologies, and then onwards to detention and reception centres (Cuttitta 2015). Some will escape or be kicked out, and often end up living in the self-settlements of Italy's 'agricultural archipelago' (Peano 2021) – a sign that the country's agri-business and its border regime are a connected part of a system (Calavita 2005; Rigo and Dines 2015). This includes oft-mismanaged reception centres. The point is to let people in, but under precarious legal status that ensures the existence of a just-in-time labour force (Campesi 2014, 2015, 2018b, 2020; De Genova 2002; Mahmud 2024). It also includes an ever-changing legal and bureaucratic landscape for obtaining documents that has effects on migrants who must survive in a hostile, exploitative, and transitory context (Anderson 2010; Lo Cascio and Perrotta 2019; D'Angelo 2019; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Palillo 2022; Welch and Schuster 2005).

Sicily is part of the EU's 'humanitarian border' (Walters 2010): a place where it is possible to witness what Ruben Andersson has called the 'enmeshment' of humanitarian and securitarian practice, where the former often seems to serve as a 'justification on psychological, moral, legal, political, and even financial levels' for the deaths, violence, confinement, and labour exploitation produced by the latter (2017: 72). In such instances, across its various forms, the state becomes present – and absent – in new ways.

These are some of the characteristics that I am speaking about when I refer to Sicily as a 'borderland' (Agier 2016; Anzaldúa 1987). Like other borderlands, Sicily has often been considered peripheral from the point of view of the nation-state order: as decades of scholarship on the 'Southern Question' have detailed, Sicily has been painted as 'backwards', 'African' and 'not-quite European' (Davis 1996; Derobertis 2012; Dickie 1997; Fogu 2020; Pescosolido

2017; Schneider 1998). It also marks a place where some of the nation-state's central questions of belonging, identity, and exclusion are lived out in daily life, and which have resurfaced thanks to recent arrivals of newcomers on Sicilian shores (Balibar 2003; Chambers 2008).

Borderlands, writes Michael Agier, are contradictory places, where, on the one hand, the harshness of bordering 'does not facilitate contact' (2016: 5), and yet also where 'people learn the ways of the world and of other people' (2016: 9). These interactions – or lack thereof – are often conditioned by the state, whose policies, authorities, and structures affect the material and social conditions upon arrival, in reception, and afterwards.

In borderlands, scholars have viewed hospitality as existing on one or the other side of a seemingly contradictory binary: as working either in favour of state policing or working specifically to dismantle borders. On the one side, scholars have critiqued hospitality – along the lines of charity, philanthropy or humanitarianism – as being part of the moral language and 'humanitarian logic' (Fassin 2012) that upholds the state's system of care-and-control that often enables borders (DeBono 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Rozakou 2012; de Spuches and Mercatanti 2023; Walters 2006). Other scholars have analysed hospitality as being key, rather, to the *contestation* of this system. Such scholars have called it a 'decolonial' (Cazzato 2016) and 'feminist' (Hamington 2010). Scholars have also noted the ways it may be used on the ground by people who see it as a quintessentially 'Mediterranean' practice.[4] What is crucial to these analyses are the observations that, first, hospitality can be used at different scales. Indeed, it has been used as a scholarly or conceptual lens for meta-analysis, but is also an emic term with significant rooted, place-bound meaning. Classical studies of hospitality that I reference

[4] These scholars, including Naor Ben-Yehoyada (2016), Michael Herzfeld (1987), Antonio Sorge (2016) or Andrew Shryock (2012) do not argue for 'Mediterranean hospitality' in normative or moral terms, but analyse the ways it is used emically in processes of region formation, to 'speak back' to Europeans, or as part of identity-making beyond or outside of belonging to the nation-state.

throughout this thesis in fact typically rooted it within the domestic space of the house, whereas more recently scholars have studied its use as a metaphor. Second, hospitality is part of a moral language and interpersonal practice seen as being capable of *collapsing* borders between people rather than *necessarily* reinforcing power structures.

From such divergent analyses, normative arguments have emerged. Some scholars and activists call for 'more hospitality'. Others have argued that, given its flexibility, hospitality should be regarded as an empty vessel that can be filled with whatever meaning its wielders would like and so it can become a manipulative tool favouring those who already hold power (Candea and Da Col 2012; Rosello 2001). These scholars argue that activists and social analysts should be dispelled of the assumption that hospitality is either an ethical goal or a helpful analytical lens through which to understand contemporary migration in a sovereign state system.

This thesis builds on these debates while seeking to add new insight. At the sites that I observed, hospitality took different, changing forms. It could be found amongst ordinary people and elites, amongst Sicilians and migrants. Actors did employ hospitality as an explicit contestation of state policy; other times hospitality reproduced bordering logics. Hospitality had different audiences, and it could be performative, manipulative, or duplicitous. Across these modes, what I am calling 'grounded hospitality' often emerged as a means of contending in daily life with the broader uncertainties pertaining to both life and meaning making in borderlands. These were produced by a sense of crisis due, in part, to Italian/EU bordering effects.

In this thesis I focus on the ways grounded forms of hospitality were related to the state, yet often sought to stand at a remove from statist notions of hospitality. The state seemed to use hospitality as what we might call a dead metaphor that served cynical purposes. By contrast,

as the unveiling of Igor's artwork in Capaci illustrates, on the ground many people seemed genuinely *excited* about hospitality. In such cases, hospitality was about welcome, certainly. It was often described as a religiously-derived sense of ethical duty or altruism. It also contained the idea that the arrival of newcomers seemed a harbinger of good fortune.[5] Grounded hospitality was often imbued with meanings that helped people to make sense of their own selves and societies – their identities, ethical codes, sense of home and ideas about their collective future. Sometimes, people even tried to create spaces or futures beyond the nation-state imaginary.

Considering the different ways hospitality has appeared in scholarship and life, the **research questions** animating this thesis are: first, in what forms did hospitality show up in Sicily? I knew hospitality could be, variously, practiced, rhetorical, or symbolic. Together they illustrated how hospitality could take on different shapes that would need to be considered. I was particularly interested in where grounded hospitality could be differentiated from state hospitality, and in what might emerge from a juxtaposition of these types of hospitality.

This led to my second question: what was hospitality *doing?* I was interested in what its effects were, in a concrete sense, for both Sicilians and migrants. How did hospitality help people in each category? Considering that it could also be rhetorical or figurative, I was interested in what meanings people attached to it, even in cases where the immediate consequences of a gesture of reciprocity might not be immediately obvious, considering that 'uses of reciprocity

[5] The idea of foreigners portending good fortune is in line with the principle of *theoxenia or theoxeny* that characterises Biblical traditions and Classical myths. A composite of 'theo' for divinity and 'xenia' for stranger, this concept describes an overlap between strangers and gods. It refers to characters in stories and myths who appear to be beggars, outcasts, or other forms of lowly outsiders, but are in fact gods in disguise. Typically, these gods are 'testing' humans, by seeing if they will be offered *hospitality*. For the humans who provide this hospitality, the gods reward them with divine gifts. The paradigmatic example of these stories is that of Sarah, wife of Abraham, whom God rewarded with a child after she welcomed a lowly stranger into her home (see Kearns 2016). For a different approach that shares some similarities see Georg Simmel's Essay, 'The Stranger' (1971 [1908]).

to signal something other than itself are ethnographically far from uncommon' (Herzfeld 1987).

Finally, the principal question I was looking to answer was: what do grounded examples of *accoglienza* or *ospitalità* in Sicily tell us about hospitality more broadly, especially in borderlands? Many borderlands like Sicily exist at both the edges and interstices of nation-states (Agier 2016). Such areas may be characterised by exclusion and welcome, or by broader anxieties about emigration, economic uncertainty, or an engrained sense of marginality. In Sicily, hospitality emerged as a way of thinking about both self and other that was a response to EU bordering, but also often aimed to operate outside of the state: of its bureaucracies, its police, the authorities, its logics.[6] A follow-up question threaded throughout is: to what extent was this really, practically, possible?

As I show, hospitality was about reciprocity, to the extent that it was about non-monetary forms of exchange, or of 'gift-giving' activities that were meant to create social bonds (Lévi-Strauss 1944, 1982; Mauss 2016). These could be strategic, useful forms of hospitality, especially where state welfare fell short, or even excluded people. But hospitality also often indicated something about how people living in borderlands deal with, and make meaning out of, the arrival of outsiders to their homes in contemporary times – in a way that moves beyond the strict practice or rhetoric of hospitality even if this is the emic concept that people are articulating. Indeed hospitality – whether practiced by Sicilians or by migrants – was often part of a host's negotiating their own sense of self, their survival and belonging in Italy and Europe,

[6] Sometimes hospitality suggested what Dace Dzenovska and Nicholas De Genova called a 'desire for the political': a mode through which to critique hegemonic ideas and look for alternative imaginaries through which to envision a different future. For some individuals, the presence of migrants in Sicily helped to re-transform Sicily into a site through which to 'criticize forms of dispossession' and establish 'practices of resistance and political openings, such as hope' (2018: 24). Yet people did not always know *how* to do this. Other times, as I show, they inadvertently played into state systems.

and their economic futures. Often, this manifested in a stated desire for transformation, one that individuals often attached to the notion of hospitality, and of welcoming newcomers. This desire for transformation fluctuated: it could at times appear self-congratulatory and was ultimately conservative, about maintaining a status quo; at other times, individuals clearly sought political or personal change and turned to welcoming others in order to find alternatives to the status quo (whether or not change was practically possible).

This analysis of hospitality emerges partly out of conceptual and semantic distinctions. I have chosen to call 'grounded hospitality' that which is different from 'state hospitality'. My arguments about hospitality emerge through both implicit and explicit comparisons of the ways individuals use this concept as compared to scholars' understandings of how the state uses hospitality, or of how interlocuters feel the state employs notions of hospitality. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that these two categories do overlap in my ethnographic context.

Furthermore, in discussing hospitality, I refer to two Italian terms *ospitalità* and *accoglienza.* These two related terms were used, sometimes interchangeably, to discuss a variety of implied notions, including welcome, reciprocity, generosity, warmth, duty, identity, and even social change. There was a slight pattern of difference in social and state usages that distinguished these two terms. *Ospitalità* was more typically to be found in formal or ceremonial settings, particularly in which the speaker or author might be appealing to a higher moral order, including of spiritual, religious, or otherwise ideal nature. This term, for instance, is the one used in Italy's early immigration law, the Turco-Napolitano Law, in a paragraph that sets out the duties of Italy as a host nation towards its guests. Abstracted to the level of the state or to an appeal to religious teachings, *ospitalità* was a word that related to social codes of conduct

that might refer to traditional social behaviours and organisation.

Alongside *ospitalità, accoglienza* emerged in my fieldwork as a colloquial and malleable word. From the Latin *collitere,* to pick up, *accoglienza* recalls Catholic social ideals of taking care of society's weakest, and it appeals to ideal notions of welcome. In its adjectival form, *accogliente,* the word was typically associated to Sicilian nature or identity. I heard a version of the phrase *'siamo un popolo accogliente'* (we [Sicilians] are a welcoming, warm, or hospitable people) so often that it became hackneyed. Nonetheless, in this usage, *accoglienza* was still doing something: it denoted a people who embraced outsiders with warm, open arms. This characteristic was thus often used as a mode of distinguishing Sicilians from other Italians or vaguely 'northern' peoples and frequently touted as one of the most attractive, pro-social qualities of Sicilians.

Accoglienza's identitarian valence, meanwhile, was often separated from its use in official reception centres. These centres were called *centri di accoglienza* in official and colloquial terminology, but because, as interlocuters frequently discussed, there was nothing welcoming about them, they could accurately be translated not as 'welcome centres' but as 'reception centres'. Still, in the latter translation, a frequent slippage that occurs strategically in Italian is lost: in referring to '*accoglienza* centres', politicians, reception workers or others could strategically play with idealistic notions of welcome (linked to both *accoglienza* and *ospitalità*), suggesting that a generous service was being conducted for the 'guests' inside as part of broader nationalistic rhetoric.

Though a distinction can be made between the terms, *ospitalità* and *accoglienza* were part of a shared semantic field that often referred to similar dynamics, ideals, and slippages. Both, for

instance, involved the interaction of a host and guest. The painter of Capaci, Igor, referred to both *ospitalità* and *accoglienza* in his speech praising practices of welcoming and hosting strangers, outsiders, and migrants by giving them a seat at the table – an image that conjures traditional notions of hospitality, rooted in feasts and commensality. This shared semantic field ushers in analytical similarities – especially central are the tensions between openness and closedness, and between welcome and control towards others – that explain why I, like other scholars before me, bring both these terms into the broader etic analytic category of 'hospitality' (Derrida and De Bono, for instance, similarly refer to both of these emic terms in their work on hospitality; in Derrida's case it is the French *hospitalité* and *accueil*).

At the same time, understanding the semantic centrality of *accoglienza* helps push classical ideas about hospitality and introduce ideas about change and self into analysis. The idea of 'grounded hospitality' incorporates analysis of *accoglienza,* and thus encompasses notions of change, and of an expansive understanding of welcome that allows me to relate the practices and imaginaries that I saw to an assertion of autonomy and desire for transformation. In the ways interlocuters used *accoglienza* and *ospitalità* often interchangeably*,* the terms implied an openness towards an 'other': welcome was the precursor to an encounter with 'otherness' that, through this initial openness, opened the symbolic possibility for the 'self' to be changed.

Origins: Emigration and the State in a European Periphery

I first began thinking about hospitality – *accoglienza* and *ospitalità* – in 2016. I was living in Sicily on a Fulbright to study how the arrival of migrants was being interpreted in light of historical emigration from the island. Indeed, Sicily can be described as marked by migration of a different kind: that of people leaving.

Across the island, museums and statues exist to commemorate generations of emigrants. Emigrating brings opportunities and emigrants are often celebrated for their feats. But the widespread phenomenon is also often mourned as being part of a fate that people do not necessarily have control over. Family, roots, the sea, the *territorio* are left behind, and the feeling of loss can be overwhelming, even for those who feel they are escaping from a place that was holding them back. Emigration is also part of a sense that many hold that Sicily has become peripheral to the global economy, and to the present chapter of world history. It is sometimes related to a nostalgia for an earlier time in history when the island was at the centre of human civilization (embodied in the ruins of Greek temples and Arab-Norman architecture).

Sicilians had been emigrating since at least the Unification of Italy in 1861, with certain inland towns experiencing a year-on-year decrease of between 30% and 70%. One government report estimated that upwards of a million people would leave Sicily by 2050 (ISTAT 2020), leading to what a local newspaper described as dire socio-economic consequences for the public health and economic life-chances of those who remain (Antudo 2019).

Most of this emigration was, and remains, related to economic factors. Initially many people who left fled to the Americas, to other parts of Europe, or to Italian colonies, as a way to escape desperate poverty. Since the 1970s at least, economic emigration has been due also to changes in agrarian and industrial sectors. Many jobs that once existed – ship building, working in the mines, farming, or working in car factories – have moved away from Sicily or disappeared. Transformations in education and the economy meant that emigration was also, as the Calabrian anthropologist Vito Teti (2022) put it, simply the thing to do, if you were southern Italian and wanted to pursue aspiration: in spatiotemporal terms, the feeling was that the future lay elsewhere (see e.g. Carling and Åkesson 2009; Dzenovska and De Genova 2018).

Many people also left to escape the wide-ranging effects of the Mafia. In conversations during fieldwork, members of older generations discussed how people left because they were worried for their physical well-being, especially when friends, relatives or colleagues were killed for having stood up to Cosa Nostra. Members of younger generations spoke rather of the difficulties in getting ahead without connections, or their fear of facing attacks to their reputation should they become 'successful'.

Emigration, its causes, and its consequences, are both symptomatic and symbolic of what we can refer to as a feeling of peripheralization in and of Sicily.[7] Sicilians often point to this sidelining as beginning with the birth of the Italian nation. In Sicily, people on both the right and left of the political spectrum will often specifically lament the Risorgimento (Giuseppe Garibaldi's conquest of Sicily that marked the beginning of the process of the unification of Italy as a nation-state in 1860-61).[8] These remarks have become cliché and part of reactionary politics. But they also reflect a permeating sense that the birth of the Italian nation-state marks a turning point in Sicily's fate.

Some of these popular views are echoed in scholarly analysis. Economists and political theorists have interpreted the birth of the nation-state as having created the country's 'economic

[7] For some social analysts, the advent of modernity was marked by a power shift from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, and the Industrial Revolution privileging the northwestern countries of England, France and Germany. These geopolitical shifts are the possible cause for the 'death' of this region (see Ben-Yehoyada, Cabot, and Silverstein 2020; Braudel 1972 [1966]). In the European context, I am speaking of Sicily as one of those places that is '*in* Europe, geopolitically speaking, but "not-quite" European if viewed in relation to "Europe" as a normative trope' (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018; see also Chakrabarty 2000). These 'not-quite' European places 'are usually included in Europe as a broadly conceived geopolitical space, but … are deemed to fail in various ways in relation to the normative trope of "Europe" as a measurement of "civilization," or moral, political or economic conduct' (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018:24).

[8] A more complete historical analysis would be more intricate. The idea, for instance, that Sicily's future would have been drastically different had it remained under the control of the Bourbons as part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, is disputed and politically controversial. Often, such remarks convey nostalgia for a different time – one of Sicilian glory.

dualism': the idea that the southern half of the peninsula severely trails its northern counterpart on development metrics like GDP per capita, literacy, or access to healthcare (Pescosolido 2017, 2019). For Antonio Gramsci it was the intentional actions of the new state that 'plunged the southern regions and the islands into a terrifying commercial crisis' to 'reinforce the industry which could give the country a real independence' and whose effects on the country's 'economic dualism' can be felt to this day (1971: 67).

Scholars have also analysed the ways in which policy was accompanied by discourses that 'othered' southern Italians. John Davis summarized this phenomenon, called the 'Southern Question', as involving 'well-worn stereotypes that equate the South with forms of social and economic backwardness, delinquency, organised crime, and political corruption' (1996).[9] In her 1998 Edited Volume, *Orientalism in One Country,* Jane Schneider conceived of such representations of the Italian South as akin to Edward Said's 'Orientalism'. She argued that the region was constructed as 'southern' and racialized negatively as 'African' or 'Arab' through an accretion of representations against which northern Italy, and Italy as a nation-state, could become 'European' (see Dickie 1997; Fogu 2020). This created an imagined internal border within Italy, in which everything south of Rome was considered 'other': a land of Mediterranean 'in-betweenness' that was seen as being as much African or Arab, as European.

This background helps to place the ethnographic phenomena of this thesis within a longer process of euro-modernity and nation-state formation. At the regional scale, it provides context in which to better understand some of the factors affecting how Sicilians see the Italian state, and why it is easy to defer responsibilities for certain failings onto the state. These attitudes

[9] Guido Pescosolido (2017; 2019) has rightfully pointed out that these stereotypes are not only negative. Yet, recalling Said (2003 [1978]) it is also obvious that the inclusion of positive stereotypes does not necessarily mean that fetishising or 'othering' logics of differentiation are not also at play.

predate the arrival of new migrants yet have bearing on how hospitality emerges in this borderland landscape.

Speaking in general terms, it is possible to note ambivalences in attitudes towards the state. On the one hand, the Italian state is a key provider of employment. There is also the expectation that it should provide the means and access to welfare, justice and infrastructure. One view holds that in Sicily, as part of economic and social 'development', the Italian state should offer the primary counter to the Mafia (La Spina 2005). The discourse of *legalità* emerged in the 1990s; one aim amongst its proponents was to develop a respect for the law and the state (and their embodiment in the form of magistrates, police officers, and lawyers) in a territory where it was often assumed that many did not have such respect. Defined as a 'positive relationship to the law' (Rakopoulos 2017) *legalità* was taught in schools and touted by prominent public figures. A central assumption of proponents of *legalità* is that respect for state laws could bring about the longed-for development of southern Italian regions like Sicily (as obeyance to *legalità* would mean that the Mafia, and what many interlocuters called 'mafia mentality', would be eradicated).

On the other hand, Sicilians often spoke of the *abbandono* (abandonment, neglect) on the part of the state. Through what has been called a 'cultural explanation', Sicilians did often blame themselves for perceived dysfunction, reproducing discourses of the Southern Question as explanations to audiences that included themselves and foreigners.[10] But overwhelmingly, my interlocuters deferred the responsibility for missing infrastructure, inadequate services, and corruption back to the state – or rather, to its absence and dysfunction. Common explanations

[10] The phrase 'cultural explanation' stems from Giuseppe Pitrè, who viewed the Mafia as rooted in Sicilian psychology. I am using the idea more broadly here, because in my fieldwork interlocuters extended a 'cultural explanation' beyond the Mafia, to all of what they understood to be Sicily's woes.

were that infrastructure projects in Sicily were not completed because half-way through, state actors at the national level would decide to re-allocate funds up north, where their investments would be paid off. A series of national scandals also re-shaped peoples' understandings of the relationship between the Mafia and the state. As one interlocuter put it to me, the Mafia wasn't in Sicily anymore, it was in Rome. Rather than understanding the Mafia and the state as separate, many felt rather that the two were interconnected.[11]

For some of my interlocuters, patience with the state had waned. If the state couldn't help to save Sicily, if in fact it was part of the problem, then who or what could? Many Sicilians looked to outside possibilities – the EU, big multinationals, tourism, and *smartworking* [12] – as powerful forces that might swoop in, like a *deus ex machina,* to provide new paths forward for the island that could serve as an antidote to emigration, to a sluggish economy, and to the effects of austerity policies (Carney 2021). After all, if you placed the current moment in the broader Sicilian history, Italy was merely the latest (and certainly not the best) in a long line of foreign conquerors: Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Bourbons, Americans. Who might be next?

In the eyes of some at least, migrants – though the lowliest of foreigners – also fit into this narrative (Mackay 2021). For some, the arrival of migrants on Sicilian shores was an 'invasion' that animated populist rhetoric on the right. But for others, the figure of 'the migrant' was held up as a portent of new life, and perhaps of a change in fortune (Nail 2015). This narrative too existed, and hospitality – which was capacious enough to express both openness to a stranger

[11] In this analysis of *legalità* and of the relationship between the Italian state and the Mafia, I am taking an emic perspective to try and illustrate to the reader different existing ideas about the relationship between these two entities, and how those ideas have been mobilised. Laying it out in these terms is important to understand how, later, this would come to bear on the lives of migrants. However, I am aware that scholars have long discussed the State and the Mafia as an *intreccio,* a braid (Blok 1988 [1974]; Schneider and Schneider 2003) even seeing the birth of the Mafia as being linked to the early Italian State's efforts to 'define and manage deviance' (Sorge forthcoming; cf. Benigno 2018).
[12] The Italian term for digital work from home.

and a host's own at-homeness – was one means of articulating the story.

Arrivals: Migration, Hostility, and Norms of Europeanness

By the mid 2010s, Sicily had become a highly-mediatised port of first entry for hundreds of thousands of people who sought to reach Europe. They had crossed the Mediterranean after lengthy, perilous journeys, coming from places as distinct and far from each other as Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Syria.

My conversations with migrants in Sicily's capital city of Palermo and in reception centres in the hinterlands made clear that Sicily could be harsh, uncertain, and full of dead ends. In 2016, many migrants I spoke with just wanted to keep going. Sicily had provided few of the opportunities, particularly economic, that they had made their journeys for. Rather like many Sicilians I had heard from, people expected life to get better once they got further into Europe. Most of these interlocuters talked to me about France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and the UK – the same countries that Sicilians also sometimes spoke to me about wistfully. By 2021, many more of the non-Europeans seemed to want to stay in Sicily. This was an opinion formed by people who had seen how difficult it was to live without papers in other parts of Italy relative to Sicily. Others had experienced firsthand the Dublin Regulation: they had been sent back to Italy after having crossed into another country.[13]

In 2016 and 2017, and then again when I conducted fieldwork for this research in 2021 and 2022, the idea of hospitality was everywhere. It existed as a kind of David to the Goliath of

[13] Lilith Mahmud offers a helpful overview of the Dublin Regulation, defining it as 'a treaty that controls asylum policies across Europe (including those of both EU member states and non-EU signatories, such as Switzerland and Norway)' which states that 'any refugee apprehended in a European country other than their first port of entry must be sent back for processing to that first country' (2024: 30).

what was an otherwise hostile landscape for migrants in borderlands like Sicily, as in Europe at large. Much of this hostility towards migrants had to do with the policies and laws enacted by the state at the national level, which manifested itself with specific presences and absences, just as it did in Sicilians' perceptions of the state's policies and laws towards them.

Mare Nostrum, Italy's EU-funded search-and-rescue (SAR) mission in the Mediterranean had concluded years prior. It was replaced first by Frontex operations, and then by the so-called Libyan coastguard, tasked with 'rescuing' sea-crossers and bringing them back to Libya where human rights abuses were well-documented. Angela Merkel's short-lived *Wilkommenskultur* likewise gave way in these years to anti-immigration politics which, in Italy as across the EU, ran anti-immigrant campaigns and delivered on promises to crack down on so-called 'illegal immigration'. In Italy, first under Matteo Salvini, head of the *Lega* party, and then under current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Sicilian ports were closed, SAR NGOs criminalised, and key forms of subsidiary protection dispensed with. The Mediterranean, which you can see from almost anywhere in Sicily, had become known as a graveyard (Corso 2023; De Genova 2016)

Like other European peripheries, over the course of the 21st century, Sicily was tasked with becoming part of the EU's securitised border, part of a broader process of 'EU-ropeanization' in which certain places began to 'work for' the EU (Bialasiewicz 2016). The idea of 'Fortress Europe' relied on hard external borders to preserve internal freedom of movement. Sicily thus became home to infrastructure and bureaucracy that identified, fingerprinted, detained, and deported migrants. Buildings left abandoned by emigration, death, or neglect were transformed to become hotspots, reception centres, and unnamed 'black hole' centres where representatives of other European nations come to pick up migrants in the name of 'burden-sharing'. In Sicily, you could witness the care-and-control apparatus and spectacle of the EU's 'humanitarian

border': Frontex and European Asylum Support Office (EASO) personnel working alongside humanitarians from Save the Children or the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), and the media there to capture it all (Andersson 2014; Cabot 2019; N. De Genova 2013; Pallister-Wilkins 2015).

In this context, state hospitality – a concept present, for instance, in the naming of Italy's reception system as the *sistema dell'accoglienza* – was outsourced to European borderlands such as Sicily. These were places which already had a reputation of failing to uphold political and economic norms of Europeanness and were easily blamed in such terms if things went wrong. Indeed, places like Sicily became associated with messy, negligent, and criminal practices of migration governance. Among others, Borderline Sicilia, a grassroots NGO I volunteered for, has attested to poor reception standards, lack of monitoring or enforcement of laws, and high rates of homelessness among migrants and asylum-seekers in Sicily (cf. Borderline 2017; Doctors Without Borders 2015; Human Rights Watch 2013). In Sicily as across Italy, it is known that various criminal actors have a hand in the reception system. One boss was caught on tape as saying, 'Do you have any idea how much we can make off immigrants? Drug trafficking makes less' (Di Cesare and Pasciuti 2015). Yet they are only the most notorious of the various actors profiting off the industry of migration that has emerged over the past thirty years (cf. Andersson 2013). For migrants, official state reception in Sicily, as across Italy, could be incredibly hostile, violent, and a bridge to labour exploitation.[14] *Accoglienza* at the state level has been referred to as a '*business',* which in Italian relates to something ethically corrupt, and critiques are often made of the '*professionisti dell'accoglienza'* – those who have made themselves into 'professionals of welcome' thus

[14] In *Hirsi* (Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy 2009), *Abubeker* (Abubeker v. Austria and Italy 2013), *Halimi* (Halimi v. Austria and Italy 2013), *Hussein* (Hussein v. Netherlands & Italy 2010), *Tarakhel* (Tarakhel v. Switzerland & Italy 2014), *Khlaifia* (Khlaifia v. Italy 2012), the European Court of Human Rights ruled that reception conditions in Italy were so poor that EU countries could not 'Dublin' migrants, or they would violate non-refoulement.

benefitting from others' plight.

Sicily's role in bordering in many ways reinforced some of those elements which had animated discourses and political structures of its peripherality, even as it also made the island central to questions of belonging and identity in Europe. And it was within this layered context that the theme of hospitality also emerged as clearly present and palpable – if often in ways that stood at a remove from the job of state hospitality passed on to Sicilian actors by Italy and the EU.

Statistically speaking, grounded *accoglienza* actors and proponents were perhaps in the minority. Still, they were often visible, and importantly, came from all kinds of political and demographic backgrounds: they were municipal officials, religious and lay aid workers, people from Antimafia organizations, small business owners, politically-motivated activists, local townspeople, and even migrants themselves. While not universal, hospitality cut across scales and identities. And importantly, hospitality as I encountered it could feel alive, resonant, strategic, and purposeful.

Hospitality took forms that – while sometimes clearly articulated in opposition to state or supra-state entities in the form of 'Italy' or 'Europe' – often felt more practically like a means of taking welcome into one's own hands in a way that marked a difference from the state and its professional business of welcome. This was often a necessity: for some groups and individuals, it felt like if they didn't do it, who would? A sense of the absence of the state – in the form of rights or access to welfare and justice, as well the violence and dysfunction of the reception, detention, and bureaucratic systems – formed the consistent backdrop. It was also in juxtaposing certain imaginaries of what people thought the state *should* do, versus how it seemed to *actually* operate, that people took to fantasising about the possibilities that emerged

from the arrivals of newcomers.

Migration was also envisioned by some as a phenomenon that might allow people in Sicily to transcend the ways the state operated, the ways, by definition, it separated, excluded, and confined people, whether migrant and Sicilian. It related to a view that the state was behind many of Sicily's ills (or at least not capable of making things better). Certainly, it related to the view that the state had a hand in the plights of migrants: that it was often an oppressor, or that it created uncertain, unjust, and meaningfully void situations that could make life in Sicily unbearable. Though it was not always consciously expressed as such, in practice hospitality thus also often seemed to be about trying to find spaces to operate outside the reach of the state and the dynamics produced by borders.

Hospitality and Hostility

My analysis of hospitality in the Sicilian borderlands arrives at a time when the concept has come to be seen as supporting state bordering efforts. DeBono, writing from ethnographic observations made in Sicilian and Maltese reception centres, has written that 'hospitality terminology is the dominant discourse in asylum and immigration in Europe, not only in official statements and law but also in social analysis' (2019) and yet the 'system itself is not constructed to be hospitable or to allow acts of hospitality by others' (2019: 341).

A key part of the problem is that, as Mireille Rosello has written, 'the reality of hospitality is often incompatible with the norms of hospitality' (2001: 7). Hospitality, as Michael Herzfeld (1987, 2012) noted, 'scales': it is both an ordinary practice and a concept wielded by nation-states. As in William Walters' idea of 'domopolitics' (2004), the idea of hospitality can be seen in language that has become so familiar to us that it can resemble a dead metaphor, as in the

term, 'host nation'. Other times, we think we know what we are talking about when we speak of hospitality, but often this flexibility means that hospitality is an 'empty, plastic signifier' that 'provides an opportunity for groups seeking power, dominance, and hegemony over societies' (DeBono 2019: 345). For DeBono, hospitality language 'appears to uphold a system that prioritises state interests over those of migrants, a system that is driven by exclusion and control, rather than cosmopolitan ideas of tolerance or acceptance' (344).

DeBono's work, like that of Katerina Rozakou (2012) and others conducted in the context of the 'humanitarian border', builds Foucauldian-derived ideas about biopower, and knowledge or language production. It aligns with earlier work on hospitality that characterised the concept as something not to be trusted: as Janus-faced, with adjectives like 'ambiguous', 'enigmatic', 'ambivalent' (Pitt-Rivers 1968, 1977; Rosello 2001). We see this double-edged understanding of hospitality clearly in Derrida's theorising (cf. Derrida 2000; 2002; 2007; Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). In the 1990s, Derrida observed that as the French state was passing increasingly repressive immigration laws, it was also maintaining a rhetoric of France as the birthplace of Enlightenment values, of human rights and *hospitalité.* This seemed like a paradox at best: proposing welcome while closing borders.

Instead, drawing on Emile Benvéniste's (1969) and Julian Pitt-Rivers' (1968) previous observations on the linguistic roots of hospitality in Latin opposites: *hostis,* meaning enemy, and *hospes,* meaning guest, Derrida coined the neologism *hostipitality* to describe the aporia of hospitality. A host, Derrida argued, will be welcoming only insofar as the guest remains a good guest. Strangers, Julian Pitt-Rivers (1968) had previously noted, are unknown and thus inherently pose a risk, because a host does not know if they are friend or foe. A guest poses a potential threat of becoming a bad guest (i.e. of overstaying their welcome, of usurping the

host's role as master of his own home). Welcome, Derrida argued, is always conditional, since unconditional hospitality would mean that the host cedes their position of control over the house to a guest – thus dissolving hospitality. *Hostipitality* describes how, for the host to maintain their status as host, hospitality will inevitably turn hostile.

After reading Derrida, and the rich political and ethnographic literature that he built on, and that which followed in his wake, it is difficult to approach hospitality with anything other than utter mistrust (ironic though this is, as Derrida's thinking also laid foundations for the contemporary 'city of solidarity' movement). In this light, claims to feminist, Mediterranean, or decolonial hospitality smack of glib attempts to promote a 'common humanity' that too easily gloss over the ways hierarchies exist in daily life – the ways having documents or not, being a certain race, gender, class or identity, affect our experiences of being in the world. Earlier ethnographies of hospitality also show that even at its most personal, hospitality involves hierarchical relations – someone is the host and someone is the guest, someone is at home and someone is not. Often, hospitality's inner dynamics reinforce borders rather than dismantle them (cf. Rosello 2001).

Without doing away with such critical analysis, in this thesis I also wish to prod at some of the implications of these conclusions. They have become like accepted truths about hospitality, and, I argue, constrain it as something to be analysed in order to then criticise for its internal contradictions or hypocrisies. I also do not wish to take the opposite, idealistic view of hospitality that political thinkers working in a Kantian tradition have (cf. Kant 1991 [1725]). I do not believe that hospitality necessarily offers a (better) alternative to a rights-based system (cf. Chatty 2017). This is thus not meant to be a study of the good or the ethical (Robbins 2013). But I am interested in building on earlier anthropological thinking around reciprocity, the gift,

and imaginings of hospitality across scales, to understand what we can learn about hospitality themes from a contemporary borderland.

This is because in Sicily, I saw hospitality not only as a dead metaphor or cynically used by the state, but also as operative and alive. It was wielded in both practiced and imaginative ways that could be coopted and hypocritical, *and* also often seemed to genuinely mean something to people or to *do* something in their lives and work. It was used in different ways that related to the fact of Sicily being a borderland with a particular relationship to the Italian state. But this did not mean that hospitality was always reproducing statist interests, or that this was its only effect. On the contrary, often the hospitality as it was wielded by grounded actors stood at a remove from the state and from its official hospitality – or tried to.

This witnessing has informed my inductive approach to analysis, as I describe in detail in my methodology chapter. Because this thesis is a study of hospitality, and hospitality takes many forms, I conducted a form of multi-sited ethnography that followed the concept as it appeared in various ways. This study also spanned different scales: hospitality could be found in institutional reception, in government rhetoric, in the work of a social enterprise, and in individuals' daily lives. I was inspired in my research design by George Marcus' (1995) theorising of multi-sited ethnography and the methods that emerged from his work, which provided for an enlarged field-site, connected not so much through spatial boundedness but also through a shared semantic field.

What connects these sites is also that they are places that have been produced by state policy and its enactment as bordering sites (produced in both a positivist sense of cause-and-effect and in the Foucauldian sense).[15] This makes them suitable locations in which to understand

[15] I am referring to the ways Michel Foucault (1969, 1975, 1976) argued that institutions and discourses 'produce' truths about people that render them subjects that can become governable. This is also related to Nicholas De

hospitality in the context of the EU border, while distinguishing grounded hospitality from state hospitality. My five empirical chapters take place across three sites that mark different bordering spots: the port city of Palermo where people first land; the official reception centres scattered across Palermo and Trapani provinces; and the informal self-settlements where people work in agriculture, often after having escaped, or been evicted from, the reception centres. These sites make clear how examples of grounded hospitality are marked by state presence (and strategic absence) yet also form attempts at a distinct approach to welcome.

Reconsidering Hospitality

In this thesis, I argue that when people practiced or expressed hospitality, this hospitality was often about control. This control that I am speaking of could be over others, over the stranger-guests, as we know from the vast literature on care and control at the European, humanitarian borders (Cuttitta 2015; Garelli and Tazzioli 2018; Moreno-Lax 2018; Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2022; Stierl 2018). What this literature does not address, but which my study does, is that this hospitality could also be about exerting control over *oneself* in such a way that emphasised both connection with others and autonomy. I discuss different modes of control, including: over one's identity, over one's economic future, over landscape, home, and space, and over meaning. Across these different forms, we can see people engaging in struggles for control over self and home that aim to address deep uncertainties.

On the face of it, this argument may seem to align with that of other scholars who have highlighted hospitality's double-edge. Like certain forms of humanitarianism or charity, hospitality often does involve a tension between care and control (e.g. Kidd 1996; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; 2022), between altruism and selfishness (Herzfeld 1987), or between ethics and

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Genova's argument that illegality is produced by the law (2002).

calculation (Marsden 2012). As I witnessed it, hospitality could indeed be ambivalent (cf. Candea and Da Col 2012; Pitt-Rivers 1968; Rosello 2001). At times, in this thesis, I even go further, arguing that hospitality could be manipulative and threatening. This ambivalence is key to my analysis, but is not the main point.

My argument also does not seek to negate Derrida's deconstructionist assessment of *hostipitality*: that hostility is necessarily contained within hospitality. However, I also believe that hostility does not fully capture the complexities and dynamics of hospitality. Hostility is a drastic term, one that covers some of what I saw, but not all or even most uses of hospitality. Being hostile, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'pertains to or is characteristic of an enemy', and hostility frequently relates to outright 'warfare'. We could perhaps aptly project this idea of *hostipitality* onto state bordering policy, as Irit Katz (2023) has done, where control involves policing.

Yet in what I call its grounded forms, hospitality was often doing something more complex. I observed that often hospitality was based on *openness* towards others. This was not unconditional openness. Openness towards others could be a precursor to hosts' exerting control. But I mean control less in the sense of state policing, and more as a force that is self-directed, and in line with one's own aims, values, or strategies. These included processes of meaning-making, identity-making, money-making, and home-making that relate to securing one's self and future.

I do not deny the ways hospitality could be part of marginalising, exclusionary and paternalistic behaviours, or reinforce existing, often racialised hierarchies. I consistently show throughout how hospitality was limited, partial, and often momentary. But what I am above all interested

in is how hospitality can serve as a useful lens precisely for understanding how control operates amidst interpersonal relations and meaning-making in borderlands.

Often, it had to do with reinforcing the presence of a self in a particular historical time and geographic place – a place that we could call the borderlands of euro-modernity. And often this was a sense of control exerted by people who faced what the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (2012 [1977]) called a 'crisis of presence' – a feeling of what he describes as having been thrown out of history, of one's existence not mattering. This experience, characterised by a sense of loss and disconnection, de Martino argues, can occur precisely when a group or individual feels that they no longer have control over their circumstances.

De Martino was writing during a period characterised, among other geopolitical forces, by war and its aftermath. In my empirical cases, such a loss of control was brought about often directly by state bordering policies – especially in the case of migrants and people who worked in the reception centres. But as my chapters will reveal, many Sicilians more broadly felt a sense of neglect, abandonment, and uncertainty. They implied that this abandonment was *done by someone,* and pointed to various macro, systemic causes, often relating their sense of unease with the ways they were treated by the national and local authorities, as well as by the ways their homeland had been ravaged by the Mafia. This often resulted in a feeling of vulnerability caused by a sense of loss of autonomy, connection and meaning. It meant that people felt that they could not decide their circumstances, and that they could not overturn macro-forces enough to change things. This situation had both affective and physical effects on people.

Many people, whether migrant or Sicilian, felt uncertain about their futures. This uncertainty was economic and political, but it was also felt as physical, emotional, and existential. People

wondered if they should leave Sicily, but often did not have the economic security to do so. Then, there was also a feeling of having lost a sense of meaning. This had to do with the broad forces of which I have been speaking, but also to being in a place that was so affected by bordering. The consequences of bordering could often feel surreal, absurd, or devoid of meaning. Across my sites, people expressed feeling stressed, nervous, crazy, or confused about what was *real.*

On the one hand, this was about a gap between what was stated (by authorities or the media) and what was practiced. It had to do with performances and spectacles of migration that fetishised migrants but did little to improve their material conditions. And it had to do often with a feeling of senselessness – regarding the fact that everything felt so uncertain, evanescent, or that the police and law were mobilised often simply as a flex of their own power, in ways that did not even necessarily make sense either according to the logic of the market, nor to that of human rights.

For both Sicilians and migrants, practices of hospitality emerged as key to efforts at rootedness and homemaking among people for whom a sense of home, meaning, identity, and future were uncertain or felt threatened. In reaching out to migrants through rhetorics, performances or practices of this grounded hospitality, new avenues for asserting oneself seemed to open. The arrivals of newcomers brought about new ideas, and crucially, funds, for representing the city of Palermo, or for changing the dying landscape in the Sicilian countryside. It opened new avenues for making meaning about one's work, status, and lot in life, for the workers of reception centres. It formed efforts at making home amidst uncertainty that characterised the lives of migrants and Sicilians alike.

This did not mean that this hospitality was morally pure or 'good'. Part of the openness towards newcomers had to do with European and Italian funding opportunities to promote this openness, through what was called 'development'. There was media and public attention that could be harnessed for political and business opportunities. Indeed, hospitality could be part of business efforts that relied on racialised labour structures, appealed to tourists and commodified local identity, or else served as a kind of rationalisation for exclusionary or violent behaviours. Distinctions can be made between hospitality towards those with more versus less social status: when projected upwards, it can seem subversive, when projected from the top-down, it can resemble how control function in camps or at borders (e.g. Agier 2011; Fassin 2011, 2012).

But differently to the approach currently taken in the literature on care and control, or on hospitality in the context of humanitarian bordering, I look at hospitality as it appears in grounded forms. This is a slightly counterintuitive label, because I address instances of hospitality in which it may be practiced or rhetorical, performed ironically, or else sincere and self-serious. But overall, what I mean by 'grounded' is that these examples relate to what I saw empirically, 'on the ground': crucially, they are to be differentiated from state hospitality, related to bordering, which is top-down. Some statist hierarchies re re-inscribed in the grounded hospitality I study. Still, many forms of grounded hospitality stand at a remove from or try to contest state hospitality as it relates to the care and control paradigm of EU bordering.

By focusing on grounded hospitality, this work shows more generally how studying social concepts of welcome and hospitality can be vital to understanding how people use the arrivals of strangers to shape and reshape their understandings of self, of their homes, of their meaning-making, and of their futures (see also Cabot 2014; Honig 2009). The places we call

‘borderlands’ are helpful for such a study: they can be places where migrants, nation-state borders, and hospitable hosts interact daily and visibly, even in everyday conversations.

In this context, migrants are often abstracted, exoticized figures, but they are also often portrayed as hopeful figures. Welcoming these others can be exciting, even usher in moments of utopic thinking (cf. Jameson 2004). As per classical work on reciprocity, hospitality towards these others could often be triangular, referring to something else beyond the interaction: forms of openness brought on possibilities for the renewal of self and home, for exerting life force over the landscape, or for making meaning amidst uncertainty and emplacement, often caused by bordering efforts. Of course, hospitality did not always (or even ever) fully succeed: inadvertently, it could often play into bordering aims, and it could be difficult to move beyond systemic constraints. But it emerged empirically under these conditions, as alternately hopeful and strategic way of trying to take back control.

I have chosen to focus on Sicily for its prominence in migration reception as an EU border, and for the central place that hospitality and migration occupy for many people. As such, the chapters in this thesis include themes – like the Mafia, Southernness, or an approach to religion – that are special to this context and perhaps its near regions. However, many other elements can be found much further afield. Borderlands exist all over the world, at the edges but also in the interstices of nation-states (Agier 2016). Emigration, falling birth rates, worries about uncertain futures, a sense of decline and demise, distrust of national governments and cynical or nihilistic approaches to capitalism, as well as the perception of being sidelined in global affairs, and finally, immigration: these are themes that affect people across Europe and beyond, and are themes which themselves create borderlands. They are reflective of attitudes that can be linked to geopolitical forces that organise social and political life in contemporary times.

They produce meanings and social relations that have specificities based on the location in question but also evince tendencies that can be seen more broadly.

The Road Ahead

Following this Introduction, Chapter 1 offers further depth on the context and theory of this thesis. I place state uses of hospitality within the history of the formation of Sicily as part of the border of the EU. This provides the framework for better understanding hospitality as it is often studied in contemporary bordering settings, i.e. as part of a care and control apparatus. It also provides a contrast to the grounded hospitality that I go on to analyse.

At the same time, this chapter sets the context for the sites of my empirical chapters, as they are produced by bordering. I show how and why scholars see hospitality in the law as akin to humanitarianism. I explore these similarities, but also juxtapose them to the opposite literature on hospitality which analyses it as a form of contestation to the state. These provide the background to understand the hospitality that I delve into in my empirical chapters, including because they show how the concept of control within hospitality exists at different scales.

In Chapter 2, I offer further reflections on my methodological approach, as well as on ethics, positionality, and my choice of field-sites.

Chapters 3 to 7 are ethnographic chapters that each explore a different form of grounded hospitality, including: Mediterranean hospitality (primarily focused on control over identity); postmodern hospitality (primarily focused on control over an economic future); hospitality as an antidote to death (primarily focused on control over the landscape); hospitality as homemaking (primarily focused on control over space and physical survival); and hospitality

as meaning-making (primarily focused on control over meaning). Control and transformation go together: it is precisely over change that people wish to have a say. What is crucial is that in each chapter, interlocuters express notions of change and of control through the idea of hospitality.

In Chapter 3, I juxtapose the hospitality rhetoric of Mayor Leoluca Orlando with experiences of migrants in the city. I show how Orlando constructed an idea of Palermo as '*la città dell'accoglienza'*, or the city of hospitality, in the model of the city of solidarity movement: as an urban locality characterised by cosmopolitanism to contest the hegemony of the nation-state and the borders it creates between people. Orlando argued that Palermo has a preternatural tendency towards hospitality because of its geo-history at the crossroads of the Mediterranean. With this rhetoric, Orlando flipped tenets of the 'Southern Question' so that discourses that framed southerners as backwards and insufficiently modern were instead used to celebrate local identity. I argue that offering hospitality to migrants in Palermo can be understood as a struggle for control over local identity and self-sovereignty, a narrative attempt at wresting municipal autonomy from the nation-state. Such attempts are limited because ultimately these different state entities are fused. Hospitality thus ultimately becomes a tool, part of a narrative of change for the city, a vision in which the city's 'true essence' of extroversion and welcome towards outsiders is liberated from a previous Mafia stranglehold.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how one social enterprise in Palermo used *accoglienza*. Through the concept of 'postmodern hospitality', I show how enterprise actors drew on familiar ideas of hospitality but unmoored the concept from traditional duty-bound behaviours. This allowed the enterprise to claim political and business aims, seemingly without internal contradiction: as they put it, business was part of regenerating local economy, which was interpreted as a

political feat in light of economic troubles. The 'migrants'[16] it employed as part of its *accoglienza* ethos often restated the social enterprise's claim that it was hospitable. This gesture helped them claim space in this workplace and city. At the same time, they critiqued the enterprise for the ways in which its rhetoric and business model subsumed them into the role of migrant-guest – a category that was reinforced by the media and voyeuristic tourism. Although the local enterprise attempted to exert control over their own, the neighbourhood's, and the city's economic future through an *accoglienza* stance that echoed Orlando's vision, hospitality emerged as part of the spectacle and commodification of migration and local identity.

In Chapter 5, I move to the rural hinterlands of Campobello di Mazara, in the adjacent Trapani province of western Sicily. In this chapter, I follow locals involved in welcoming migrants who arrived each autumn to pick olives. Unable to find homes to rent in town, these migrants set up informal encampments that were dangerous and uncomfortable. Hospitality emerged in Campobello as a response to the death of a worker as a result of living conditions in the encampment. But in the narratives of the town's activists, the death of the worker extended metaphorically to a general perception of the death of the town due to Mafia activity, tied to emigration and state neglect. In this setting, hospitality was a way to exert control over the landscape (and, at times, migrants) by trying to transform abandoned buildings into homes for migrant workers. Activists interpreted their work as a response to the state's absence, but also understood regaining control over the landscape – through hospitality – as a means of bringing the town back to life and ascertaining their own futures. As in Palermo, this vision of change had much to do with a desire to overcome the sense that the Mafia had a hold on the town.

[16] I use scare quotes here because though its employees are typically referred to as migrants, not all of the business' employees are actually migrants – some are second generation children of immigrants; some did not travel across the Mediterranean, and thus do not consider themselves migrants but rather immigrants or Afro-Italian.

However, their ability to fully exert control and see this vision through was limited by local authorities' unwillingness to engage in their projects.

In Chapter 6, I look at the hospitality offered by the migrant-workers living in the informal *ghetti* on Campobello di Mazara's outskirts. Hospitality emerged as a form of homemaking, which I define using Mary Douglas' (1991) idea of home as exerting control over space. In this case, hospitality was practiced by people who often had no choice but to live in settlements in which they were both 'at home' and stalled in their pursuits. In this context, hospitality represented a moment of sedentarism amidst otherwise uncertain conditions: it involved, for instance, rituals of care involved in being a good host and making a home. Where Sicilians were guests, hospitality could succeed in momentarily upending dynamics of power. It created strategic boundary-making that enabled forms of reciprocity while mitigating the threat that outsiders pose. Finally, it reinforced the at-homeness of certain of the *ghetti's* residents. However, this hospitality was only partial and momentary: it was undercut by the fact that the instability of legal precarity was often internalised within migrants' bodies, minds, and identities. Ultimately, state policies made the *ghetti* themselves evanescent.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I go inside official reception centres in western Sicily, to juxtapose state hospitality with its grounded forms as they appeared in official bordering contexts. I show, on the one hand, how the state's language of hospitality resulted in a sense of the absurd: migrants and asylum-seekers contended with how hospitality in the law was not practised. Often, the state's language was re-inscribed in the language and behaviours of many reception-centre works. It could be used as a mode of extreme control over, or even of manipulation of, both migrant-guests and outsider-guests (like me). But in this gap, which could feel to interlocuters like a kind of senseless void, other grounded forms of hospitality emerged: hospitality was a

way some reception workers tried to make meaning out of their work. In response to the surreal of state bureaucracy, as well as their feelings of being socially stigmatised, of being stuck, and of economic neglect, they re-articulated their work as being *personally* transformative, often using spiritual terms. Here too, such attempts were limited by dynamics of gender, race, and class that were difficult to transcend, and more often played into the systemic relationship between the reception centres and agri-business.

Across these chapters, I explore how control operates through hospitality in different ways. I show how hospitality is both about a particular relationship, but also reflects how people deal with material and existential uncertainties that speak to desires beyond the hospitality that is articulated. These are often traced back to the state and its bordering regime, but are ultimately about autonomy and connection more broadly. As reflected in my title, this thesis is an ethnographic 'search for welcome'. I am prompted by the reflection of a priest I spoke to early in my fieldwork, that the state does not provide 'real welcome' – a comment that led me to wonder what, exactly, real welcome could be, or if it could even exist. In my conclusion, I reflect further on this idea, and on the extent to which my interlocuters were able to find ways to exert control in order to enable connection, autonomy, and meaning-making amidst the borderland in which they found themselves.

Chapter 1: Hospitality and the Border in Context & Theory

This study of hospitality in Sicily begins with the development of migration laws and policy in Italy. My first aim is to offer context, as immigration and asylum legislation partly produced the dynamics I observed in the borderlands. What's more, these laws and policies often employ the language of hospitality. As a result, on the ground many people associated *accoglienza* with such laws and the resultant reception centres. They distinguished their uses of *accoglienza* from the state's (i.e. the priest's declaration that state *accoglienza* is not 'real').

My second aim is to show in this chapter how a quest for control can be studied across scales. As a result, this chapter proceeds first by investigating how hospitality is used in Italian immigration and asylum law. I then turn to scholarship regarding care and control, to examine how and why scholars have analysed hospitality similarly to humanitarianism at the border: specifically, they have understood control in both as part of state authoritarianism. I juxtapose such analysis to that of scholars who have analysed hospitality in a similar context of Mediterranean migration, but from a different stance: as a form of bottom-up contestation of the nation-state-system and its borders.

Overall, in this chapter I both distinguish my approach from that of these literatures but also show complementarity between different ideas about control in hospitality, as well as hospitality as bottom-up contestation of the state. In my study, I look at how control manifests through hospitality, but focus on a range of everyday, grounded situations, including in local politics, in workers', activists', and migrants' struggles, or even in the business strategy of a local enterprise.

*

Italy's Constitution is one of the few across the world that offers the right to asylum for anyone 'denied the effective exercise of the democratic liberties guaranteed by the Italian Constitution in his or her own country' (Article 10(3)). This low bar for protection, written in 1948, is reflective of the country's war-time experience, and of the fall of Fascism and of its monarchy. Italy's constitutional definition of asylum is capacious enough that it would likely grant protection to most of the so-called migrants who arrive on Italian shores today.

In spite of Italy's participation in international measures and compacts, in Italian border islands and towns like Palermo, the arrival of migrants had often been met through informal, direct, or what I have called grounded hospitality of individuals or, mostly, the Church (Friese 2010).[17] Beginning in the 1970s, Italy became a net immigration country, as for the first time numbers of immigrants exceeded those of emigrants.

In response to growing levels of transnational migration, by the mid-1980s Italy further systematized immigration laws (Peano 2021). Such legislation included elements of protection laid out by international asylum conventions, but also included regulations and constraints on movement geared towards '*clandestini'* and other forms of migrants that hardened its borders. For example, in 1989, Italy formally granted recognised asylum seekers 34,000 lira daily (Decreto/Legge 1989, n.416).

In 1991, several thousand Albanians landed in southern Italy on the *Vlora* ship and were

[17] See Kaarina Nikunen's (2014) ethnography of hospitality in the southern Italian town of Badolato. During my doctorate, I also interviewed an Albanian refugee who informed me that many of her co-nationals had been sheltered in peoples' homes. This ties also with my interviews at the Caritas in Ballarò, where various leaders claimed that it was the site of the city's first unofficial reception centres for migrants. The city's first reception centre, the Centro Astalli, is also connected to Jesuit groups.

temporarily interned in a football stadium in Bari. This highly mediatized event was 'a key episode, also for the impact it had on Italian public opinion in building the myth of invasion' and, I would add, emergency (Campesi 2014: 5).[18] The Italian scholar Giuseppe Campesi regards it as marking a beginning of Italy's humanitarian-securitarian framework and 'humanitarian government' (citing Agier 2006, in Campesi 2014) which functions according to a logic of 'risk management' that characterizes migration as an emergency that merits both securitarian and humanitarian responses.

Indeed, these laws were marked by what scholars call the care and control paradigm: they included measures that offered hospitality and care to migrants and asylum seekers, but which were also key to governing their mobility. They also included measures that hardened borders, increased police surveillance of foreigners through identification measures, or facilitated detention and deportation (Bellina 2009). Such laws and decrees included, early on, the 1990 Martelli law*,* the 1996 Dini Decree, the 1998 Turco-Napolitano law*,* and the 2002 Bossi-Fini law. [19] They were passed by national governments on both the centre-left (1996-2001) and the centre-right (2001 on) of the political spectrum.

It is within this body of laws that we note the appearance of hospitality language at a state level. The 1998 Turco-Napolitano law, for instance, first created the system of reception centres that are still in use to this day, colloquially referred to as the *sistema d'accoglienza.* The text of the law itself frequently employs the lexicon of the other Italian word for hospitality, '*ospitalità'.* It includes its variant forms also, including *ospitare,* to host; *ospitante,* the host; *ospitati,* the

[18] In the 1980s and 1990s tens of thousands of Albanians sought refuge in Italy following the fall of Enver Hoxa. When the *Vlora* tried to disembark in the port town of Brindisi, the Italian Ministry of the Interior closed the port, citing the over-taxation of the Italian welfare system due to previous arrivals of Albanians. The ship was later allowed to disembark in Bari on humanitarian grounds. But the poor conditions of the stadium where people were housed, and the knowledge that the government planned to deport most, led to highly-mediatised protests.

hosted; *ospite,* usually employed to mean guest (it also can mean host). This was the law that replaced the state's earlier practice of giving money directly to asylum-seekers. That allowance was replaced with mostly in-kind basic necessities. Although an allowance of €70 a month is still ascribed by law, the reception of this money is now contingent on residence in the *accoglienza* centre. This law also laid the foundation for later policy, including government documents (*circolari*) such as the *patto di accoglienza,* or 'hospitality pact', that outline the responsibilities of these centres towards their 'guests' by law (cf. Chapter 7).

In addition to such control methods for 'deserving' subjects, the law also introduced further securitarian measures geared at the 'undeserving': for instance, by lowering the required conditions for the detention of immigrants. As Campesi summarizes, the *Questura* was granted permission to order the detention (*trattenimento*) of a foreigner if they could not immediately 'execute the refoulement or removal order because of (i) the need to provide aid … (ii) the need for further clarification regarding his/her identity (iii) the need to acquire travel documents, (iv) or because of the unavailability of a suitable means of transport' (2014: 5). Campesi argues, 'this law made immigrant detention an ordinary means of control' (ibid.).

The Strategic Banality of State Hospitality[20]

Hospitality language in these laws suggests openness on its face but is compatible with motions to control the boundaries of the Italian polity. I call it 'strategically banal'.

It is useful to note that the language of hospitality was inserted in the law by legislators who stated that they aimed to push forward norms of openness towards non-citizens. As such, there

[20] Arguments and observations contained in this subsection and in other parts of this chapter were first made in my master's thesis (see Neil 2018).

may have been some intentionality behind the use of the language. As some evidence of this aspiration, the legislator who gave her name to the law, Livia Turco, later wrote a book entitled, *I nuovi italiani: l'immigrazione, i pregiudizi, la convivenza,* in which she makes the case for an expansion of the understanding of 'Italianness' (Turco and Tavella 2005). She does not necessarily provide reasoning for the use of the vocabulary of hospitality in the law, but in her book, she does imply that she meant for such legislation to encourage Italians to be more open and tolerant of diversity. Daniela DeBono deems to be 'real' or 'true' hospitality, 'a peaceful relationship … which involves reciprocity, exchange, ritual, reception, and at times, entertainment of a guest' (2019: 341). The language of hospitality here may have meant to imply an ideal of welcome towards others.

However, if we analyse this language of hospitality in the law amidst the broader legislation on borders, refuge, immigration, and citizenship, it does ultimately emerge looking strategically banal. The use of the concept illustrates the ways hospitality is part of a familiar lexicon (see Shryock 2008; 2012). Given the cultural and religious frames of Italian hospitality, one could surmise that the state's invocation of *accoglienza* and *ospitalità* took a familiar framework and inserted it into laws and policies (Friese 2010; Rosello 2001).

Yet while this familiarity insinuates that the state and public are talking about the same thing (i.e. a traditional custom of welcome) in fact slippages and differences in meaning do exist. As Mireille Rosello has written, hospitality is easily and 'constantly reinvented … borrowed from a variety of traditions … sometimes similar to, sometimes different from, a supposedly shared norm' (2001: 6-7). As a result, hospitality is 'everywhere' yet simultaneously 'nowhere' (Candea and Da Col 2012: S2) – this 'nowhereness' leads to forms of meaninglessness. There seems to be agreement about its meaning – in particular its insinuation of openness and

generosity on the part of the state – but there is not necessarily. What is more, hospitality is clearly not incompatible with forms of closedness.

What I am calling a strategically banal effect of state language of hospitality can be seen in reception centres, for instance. State reception centres in Italy call asylum-seekers 'guests', in a seeming gesture of respect. Though they often have as their official, stated aim the autonomy and full integration of these 'guests' into the Italian body politic (whereby the guest is transformed into something else), they often operate as a kind of filtering system. The reception centres control the movement of some but not others; they allow some to pass through legally and others to fall into forms of illegality or be detained and/or deported (see for instance Campesi 2018, 2020; Mezzadra and Neilson 2011; 2013). Indeed, they are part of the legal grammar that, as Nicholas De Genova (2002) writes, creates 'illegality' and serves to make certain kinds of people 'deportable'. They are compatible with the slew of later legislation that hardened the border, criminalised certain forms of migration, made it easier to deport certain categories of people, and more generally adopted an explicitly securitarian framing on the question of immigration (e.g. the Bossi-Fini Law of 2002, or more recently Salvini's so-called 'Decreto Sicurezza' of 2018). This is why Daniela DeBono called the hospitality in the reception centres 'empty' and 'plastic' (DeBono 2019).

What is more, hospitality is time-limited: as Julian Pitt-Rivers (1968) noted long ago, after a certain amount of time, guest-hood becomes something else, and in the process its privileges and responsibilities also transform. In the Italian context, though hospitality may evoke a beginning stage of welcome that could lead to forms of incorporation into the 'home' of the body politic, this is not necessarily what happens. As I will illustrate below, the surrounding legislation on immigration and citizenship actually leaves little room for the political and social

inclusion of foreigners as equals in the polity (Tuckett 2018). If people wish to remain in Italy in the long term, this must often be done on certain conditions that reinforce some measure of their exclusion or secondary status.

For example, in Italy, legal citizenship remains associated to ideas of lineage.[21] These laws in Italy have recently been altered, but broadly they remain based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* or 'right of blood' which means that it is difficult for non-Italians to ever achieve citizenship (Calavita 2007: 8). As I was completing this dissertation, a referendum in Italy proposing to change residency from a minimum of ten to a minimum of five consecutive years in order to gain citizenship did not reach the required 30% participation for the votes to be counted, after a vocal campaign by the far-right urging citizens not to vote.

Further, these legal boundaries of citizenship are perhaps even harsher when we consider citizenship more broadly as a sense of cultural or political belonging. As Anna Tuckett (2018) found amongst many of her Black interlocuters in Emilia Romagna, a full sense of 'belonging' in Italy remained elusive even where people obtained documents and citizenship. Belonging, or a sense of being at home in Italy did not depend on whether people had documents granting them permanent residency or citizenship, in part because interlocuters often reported being made to feel like outsiders based on their race or origins.

For those migrants who have arrived in Italy in the past decade, meanwhile, it remains

[21] Postcolonial scholars have argued that ideas of Italianness remain homogeneous, and related to ideas of 'blood' because there was no clear break, in the form of struggles for independence, in Italian colonial contexts (in areas in North and Eastern Africa, including Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia) as there was in other French or British postcolonial contexts. According to Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, this factor, as well as the fact that Italy did not receive immigrants from its previous colonial territories in the same numbers as France or Britain, 'prevented Italian society from processing the meaning and import of the colonial experience, thus deferring the development of a postcolonial consciousness' (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 7).

'extremely difficult… to achieve [permanent legal] status', which ensures peoples' 'continued marginality' (Calavita 2007: 8). Indeed, even for those who manage to get forms of protection, these must often be renewed frequently, and such renewals often require legal employment and other measures of formal 'integration'. But these are difficult to obtain, since significant work for non-citizens is 'concentrated in the "underground" or illegal economy', which, Calavita argued (2007: 9), allows Italian employers to 'save on taxes' while ensuring the perception among Italians that non-citizens are different and inferior.

The limited possibility for recently arrived non-Italians to achieve full membership in the form of legal citizenship, long-term visas, work permits, or even social recognition can result in what Michael Walzer has called a 'caste of residents who subsist in a lesser status than that of full members' (Walzer 1983: 69; see also Bosniak 2007). In their 2007 ethnography in Sicily, Jeffrey Cole and Sally Booth note that most immigrants in Sicily are employed in what they call 'dirty work': cleaning, agriculture, crime, or (often forced) sex work. Though perhaps some things have changed (I spoke to children of immigrants who were enrolled in university degrees), my ethnography also shows that much has not (see also Palma 2021).

Analytically, such realities point us back, firstly, in the direction of Derrida. His point on hospitality as an ethics – whose moral potential is in theory infinite – is inevitably limited by the politics of hospitality that involves, as Rosello writes, 'calculations and the management of finite resources, finite numbers of people, national borders, and state sovereignty' (2001:10). As Matei Candea and Giovanni Da Col noted (2012), we are speaking here of the 'impossible pairing of the necessary ethical requirement of absolute openness to the Other' but also 'the equally necessary exclusionary sovereignty' that they argue underly the modern conception of the nation-state (2012: S4).

Moreover, what emerges from this analysis is the ways, as scholars have shown, that forms of openness can easily go together with bordering and other forms of control that are also closely linked to the creation of an easily exploitable labour force. Borders are not just made through exclusion: the Turco-Napolitano law, while evincing hospitality on its face, combined elements of inclusion and exclusion, of openness towards others – and of their control or management. Scholars have referred to this interaction as 'inclusive exclusion' (Agamben 1998) or 'differential and selective inclusion' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011; 2013).

Seeking to move beyond the understanding of borders as binaries between inclusion and exclusion, these authors have noted the ways in which so-called 'irregular migrants' are often 'included in the space of labour markets and citizenship' but do not share the '"belonging" (the legal status) to which a whole set of rights correspond' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011: 63). For De Genova, inclusion occurs but is a 'form of subjugation' that is 'devoted to the subordination of their labour' (2002: 1183).

To conclude, state language of hospitality may illustrate certain professions of openness towards strangers. But this language does not negate, or even necessarily offer an antidote to, securitarian measures of control, through the various forms that bordering and deportation might take. Rather, they may even be strategic: a show of meaningless openness towards some that enables the subjugation of others (de Genova 2002). As I stated in the Introduction, the apparent familiarity of an ethical stance of openness suggested by the term 'hospitality' often simply ends up meaning that it becomes devoid of moral or semiotic meaning. Whatever Livia Turco intended, this familiarity makes concepts like hospitality easily manipulable by those in power (state authorities, police, border-workers and so forth), or compatible with exclusion,

control, and hostility.

Hospitality as Humanitarianism at the EU Border

Concepts such as 'differential inclusion' or 'inclusive exclusion' help explain why and how contemporary scholarship on hospitality in migration contexts often highlights the concept's use by authorities and officials within the context of the humanitarian border of the EU (see, e.g. Calhoun 2010; DeBono 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Rozakou 2012; Walters 2010). In this section, I show how hospitality and humanitarianism do share much in common in their use by the state. Namely, I highlight one shared genealogic strand deriving from Maussian logics of the 'gift', as well as another shared intellectual origin that draws on their derivation from the concept of pastoralism. What such overlap indicates is how and why at the humanitarian border, scholars have argued that both hospitality and humanitarianism participate in care and control logics, and can function as modern-day forms of pastoralism linked to securitarian aims.

Scholars working on the humanitarian border often treat humanitarianism and hospitality as overlapping concepts. For instance, William Walters (2011) roots his ideas and arguments about the 'humanitarian border' in a reception centre for asylum-seekers (a *centro di accoglienza*) on Lampedusa, where he homed in on the involvement of professional humanitarian organisations such as the Red Cross and Save the Children.[22] From there, Walters noted that the border can be understood as a 'complex assemblage, comprising particular forms of humanitarianism, specific forms of authority but also certain technologies of government'

[22] An small island geographically to the south of the main island of Sicily, Lampedusa is administratively under the jurisdiction of Agrigento, a city and province on the south coast of Sicily. Because of Lampedusa's proximity – just about 100km – to the coast of Tunisia, it is a common site of first arrival for people trying to get to Europe and has become a key place wherein to study the spectacle (De Genova 2002) of the EU border.

(2011: 142). The presence of humanitarian actors within the reception centres, he notes, resulted both in acts of 'charity and protection' and also had the effect of 'normalising … border practices' by providing the moral logic needed to 'neutralise' outrage regarding violent bordering acts – including expulsions, poor treatment of migrants and refugees at the hands of European officials, or even deaths at sea (2010: 145-46).

Walters argues that humanitarianism, articulated as language, logic, and practice, can provide moral covering that enables control, expulsion, or, worse – forms of violence and even death to occur (cf. Agier 2010; Danewid 2018; Fassin 2011).[23] For some scholars, the presence of hospitality language or practice (in reception centres or embodied in and re-inscribed by reception workers) at the EU's 'humanitarian border' is thus assimilated to humanitarianism linguistically. As I have shown in my analysis of the Turco-Napolitano law, hospitality like humanitarianism offers moral language in what is a political context (cf. Pallister-Wilkins 2015; 2022; Scott-Smith 2016).

Although both DeBono (2019) and Rozakou (2012), working in the Sicilian and Maltese, and Greek contexts respectively, specifically state that their understandings of hospitality are different to humanitarianism, they also argue that 'the use of the hospitality paradigm takes place within the setting of this humanitarian border, and rather than challenging it, it supports its construction and compounds its effects' (DeBono 2019: 342). For these authors, there is a gap between professed state hospitality and the social realities of living in reception centres

[23] Such violence and death refer, perhaps above all, to those in the Mediterranean Sea. Maurizio Albahari (2015) borrows the notion of 'crimes of peace' to conceptualise the ways in which European and humanitarian policy bear responsibility for thousands of deaths of migrants trying to cross the sea. These are not accidents or inevitabilities over which people have no control, he argues, but rather the result of concerted policies and voters' attitudes. Such policies range from a lack of legal pathways to arrive in Europe, to the outsourcing of bordering and rescue to 'third countries', such as Libya's so-called 'coast guard', to the neglect and abandonment to a consequent death of many boats at sea.

that harkens back to anthropological notions about hospitality as duplicitous or Janus-faced.

Through other scholarship, we see not only the linguistic, but also the conceptual similarities between hospitality-as-gift and or humanitarianism/charity-as-gift, and the ways in which this results in dynamics of control. For instance, as Craig Calhoun writes of humanitarianism, it 'is often embedded in more hierarchical understandings of humanity, as part of the obligations those with resources and standing owe to those without. It constitutes a relationship of dependency, not of equivalence' (2010: 35; see also Bornstein 2012). This is almost identical to Alan Kidd's analysis of the ways hospitality operates, in cases in which the receiver of the gift/hospitality cannot hope to reciprocate (such as many migration, reception, or encampment contexts). This in turn ensures the host's control, and so tends to reaffirm existing social hierarchies (1998).

The treatment of 'the gift' in humanitarianism and hospitality literatures are not the same. However, in both we see scholars observing the presence of moral language related to care that is compatible with forms of control. Candea and Da Col observe that elements of hospitality can become 'prime manipulating substance[s] designed to lure and establish a pivotal asymmetry between hosts and guests' (2012: S10). Michael Herzfeld (1987) likewise notes that it can be difficult for a guest to refuse the generosity of a host, which places a guest in a position of subjection by the host and in turn enables a host to exert further control over the guest. This helps the host mitigate the risk that a stranger, if we return to Pitt-Rivers' early analysis, inherently poses by virtue of their unknown status. The result, as Rosello has written, is that, in welcoming a stranger into one's house, one's role as host (what she and Derrida refer to as the 'master' of the home, in any case the person who has control by virtue of at-homeness and perhaps also patriarchy) is reinforced (2001:12).

Empirically, these examples of hospitality may be far removed from the ways migrants are treated by states, who certainly offer no lavish meals, comfortable beds, or embellished forms of entertainment. But conceptually and theoretically, we can understand why some scholars might trace forms of state hospitality back to humanitarianism or may not think twice about assimilating these concepts. Just as scholars of hospitality have pointed out the ways in which it is laden with power relations or a tension between care and control, scholars of humanitarianism like Polly Pallister-Wilkins have noted that it is not 'a value-neutral field' but 'an act based on relations and hierarchies of power and utilized for the governance of populations' (2015: 58).

Furthermore, just as in hospitality, power dynamics within humanitarian activities can be geared to the management of risk, or of risky people – people who, in Claudia Aradau's (2004) clever formulation, are sometimes *at risk,* and other times pose *a risk.* Such logics are based on the fact that migrants are often alternately painted and produced by the law as 'refugees' (humanitarian objects worthy of protection), or else as 'illegals' (undeserving people who pose a threat to the population) (De Genova 2002). This extends control even beyond humanitarian governance, to the relationship that exists in borderlands between humanitarianism and policing – and more broadly, I would argue, modes of control that amount to 'securitization'. For instance, humanitarianism and policing are, as Miriam Ticktin writes, 'intimately linked, with policing often accompanied by a gesture toward the humane, and toward the ethical, where force is justified in the name of peace and right' (2005: 359).

What emerges is that both hospitality and humanitarianism relate to the notion of protection. Protection (over the guest or victim) is a motivation for care. But it also goes hand-in-hand

with modes of control over the guest/victim: what Didier Bigo calls forms of 'filtering, channelling, and surveillance' (2006: 84-85). In her work on humanitarianism, Pallister-Wilkins argues that humanitarianism is 'based on earlier forms of pastoralism' that have found 'new life in modern forms of governmentality focused on securing the population through a range of mechanisms, one of which is border policing' (2015: 59).

We see also how hospitality and humanitarianism share a link to pastoralism as described by Foucauldian-derived theory, in which a given authority shepherds, and cares for the well-being of their flock in part by controlling them, and keeping out potential threats (cf. Foucault 2007). The pastor in this case is alternately the humanitarian government or the host state which may very well be one and the same in these border contexts. It may be embodied in a figure of authority who is seeking to mitigate the risk posed by strangers by controlling their mobility or detaining them, while caring for (some of) them as well. Regardless, practices designed around the notion of 'protection', aim, as Pallister-Wilkins argues, to 'contain and control'.

Though their register is not the one I adopt in this thesis, the literature on care-and-control at the humanitarian border has been helpful to understanding my context, and I do not reject their analysis. Primarily, this is because I witnessed firsthand many of the forms of control related to policing and/or humanitarian care, as well as in the management of asylum-seekers in the reception centres. Across my chapters, forms of state control emerge as part of what made so many of my interlocuters feel *out of control*. For migrants especially, to echo De Genova (2002) again, the 'palpable sense of deportability' created by the legal system reinforced peoples' sense of their own vulnerability. These were part of what resulted in the creation of the informal settlements in Campobello di Mazara. Activists and reception workers also felt this system of state control: people differentiated their own forms of grounded hospitality from the state's

forms of control, but their attempts at such hospitality were also limited by the state.

And yet, differently to this literature, in examining grounded instances of hospitality rather than state hospitality, I also seek to home in on other ideas about how control operates within hospitality – not as part of state authoritarianism but as part of grounded 'taking back' control by individuals and groups. This incorporates some, but not all, insights from the literature on hospitality that views it not as akin to humanitarianism working in tandem with the state, but rather as a form of bottom-up contestation of the nation-state system.

Contestations: Hospitality as Mediterranean Openness

If the last section was about the linguistic and logical overlap between hospitality and humanitarianism in state uses of hospitality (including their transcription in everyday policing or border management), this section instead discusses the ways in which these can *also* be understood as two very different concepts. I will pay particular attention to the ways hospitality has been understood as quintessentially 'Mediterranean': a gesture that weaves together its disparate shores so that the sea becomes a region that stands in opposition to Eurocentrism and EU bordering (cf. Ben-Yehoyada 2017; Braudel 1972 [1966]; Sorge 2018).

Although, as I will show, much of the hospitality-as-contestation can become overly utopian, I agree with this literature that grounded forms of hospitality often do something quite different to what we see happening at the state-level (cf. Sorge 2021). However, unlike much of this literature, in my own work I will foreground the concept of control. My stance is also not normative as some of this work is, in the sense that I do not argue on moral or political grounds that there should be 'more hospitality'. I do not see hospitality as necessarily providing an alternative to the nation-state system or as being capable of collapsing boundaries between

people. Finally, I do not necessarily see grounded forms of hospitality, even where they are related to borders, as being explicit contestations to that system. But I agree that grounded forms of hospitality exist in ways that are distinct to the state language of hospitality and its effects.

*

A key difference between the concepts of hospitality and humanitarianism is that humanitarianism is professionalised, understood as universal in a deracinated sense, and often corresponds to a state of emergency (see Calhoun 2010). Hospitality, by contrast, is often thought of as being place-based, the product of specific cultural or national characteristics, and, while in some sense universally human, it also is understood to 'embed social interactions in materiality' (Candea and Da Col 2012: 1-2). It is tangible, personal, warm, human – instead of the cool distance and professionalisation of humanitarianism, hospitality offers rather the possibility for openness to an 'other' that also has the potential to alter the 'self'.

In his 1968 essay, Pitt-Rivers highlighted that, while the unknown stranger poses a risk, this 'unknown' quality is also associated to the extraordinary, to the divine, or to the elsewise metaphysical. He writes: 'the stranger derives his danger, like his sacredness, from his membership of the "extra-ordinary" world' (506). If hospitality has been understood to harden or create new borders between people (Rosello 2001), another branch of the study of hospitality has instead endowed it with the somewhat utopian capacity to *break down* borders.

Some scholars and activists, including in Sicily, have placed great hope in hospitality as a practice of radical politics from below. Because hospitality is both rooted in the collective identities of particular cultures or regions, yet also considered to be universal, or transnational,

philosophers like Seyla Benhabib (2006) have argued that fostering hospitality can help to create trans-border solidarity. Such theories are rooted in intimate, personal practices of hospitality, such as welcoming another into one's home. This welcoming act, such theories suggest, can collapse the distinction between self and other through modes of exchange, social bonding, and sharing of space, food, and conversation that lead to new forms of understanding and empathy. The idea of 'feminist hospitality', for instance, seeks to disrupt the idea that borders between people are impermeable, through the idea that hospitality can contribute to a 'conceptualization of connected identity' (Hamington 2010:21).

These qualities may help to understand why hospitality, in grounded forms, has *also* often been key to *contestations* of the EU border in places like Sicily, and its representation as 'Fortress Europe' – which calls to mind an image of impenetrable walls and warfare. By extension, hospitality has also been key to counter-discourses against 'Europeanness' as both related to a bounded geographic space (of the EU), but also what Dace Dzenovska and Nicholas De Genova call a 'normative trope' in the sense of it representing a measurement of 'civilization,' or 'moral, political or economic conduct' (2018: 24).

To understand these contestations, it is important to address another aspect of the historical context: namely that Italy's laws and policies around immigration and borders, and care and control, have largely been marked by the country's membership in the EU. This membership is characterised by a two-way interaction between the state and the supra-state. But borders such as those in Sicily are also shaped by EU aims, incentives, values and funds – which Italy participates in but also strategically resists for political leverage.[24]

[24] This includes policies geared at hardening the border as well as those geared at reception conditions (e.g. the Reception Conditions Directives of 2013, recast in 2016 and 2024, which sets minimum standards for reception centres). Italy is party to the Dublin Treaty. But Italy has also purposefully mismanaged its centres and borders to make it harder for other Member States to 'Dublin' people back to Italy (Mahmud 2024).

These are not only political agreements, but economic ones as well. Through funds such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) or the European Social Fund Plus, the EU has and continues to pour billions of euros into programs for Italy. These aim both to promote integration, inclusion, or hospitality efforts, while also shoring up its borders, with money to create detention centres or implement surveillance technologies.[25] Sicily is a place where, today, it is possible to see the same infrastructure and social dynamics that you might see elsewhere in the southern EU border, in Greece or in Spain: hotspots and detention centres, reception centres and humanitarian organizations, as well as EU-backed projects fostering bonds of friendship between locals and migrants (which also often employ youths from other European countries, as part of efforts at intra-EU integration).

Such efforts at inclusion, care, and control reflect processes of 'EU-ropeanization' (2016). As Luiza Bialasiewicz writes, the ongoing project of creating the EU has been accompanied by discourse, policy, and economic incentives that push certain areas, including Member States with key external-facing border areas like Sicily, to 'work for Europe' (2016: 2). They are called to do so in such a way that projects an 'essence' of Europeanness. This includes promoting often intangible values (such as integration, inclusion, diversity, tolerance, and so forth) while also performing the material work of bordering Europe to 'protect' these values.

In particular as crossings over the central Mediterranean became a more prominent topic in the media, the island became a place where you could see what Ruben Andersson (2014) has called

[25] According to the website of the European Commission, over 2021 to 2027, the EU will provide €512 million to the Italian government through the Ministry of the Interior and the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration – the departments in charge of reception and detention centres, as well as all laws related to immigration, entry, and deportation. It will also provide €14.8 billion for 'social inclusion measures' and 'active labour market and training measures' (European Commission 2025).

‘the business of bordering Europe’. Abandoned buildings in Sicily, left empty as a result of a slew of economic and geopolitical issues – from emigration to deindustrialization, to the departure of American military, to failed development projects and Mafia activities – were transformed into reception, containment, and detention centres for migrants. In some places, like Mineo, in central Sicily, the business of hospitality employed entire towns: until it was shut down by the far-right government under Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, the CARA di Mineo (considered at the time to be the EU’s largest refugee camp) employed thousands of people.

There also emerged a bourgeoning industry of projectisation: people who became trained and experienced in writing grants to gain access to EU funding for projects that promoted integration and social inclusion. Thanks to EU funds, in Sicily – where emigration is still considered by many to be the only way to secure an economic future – immigration, whether through reception or detention became, for some at least, a crucial source of livelihoods.

Although Italian-EU relations should be understood as a two-way interaction (which also include clear economic and political benefits for Italy, and for some Sicilians), this context also brought about the emergence of new layers to an already-extant Mediterranean-based ‘counter-discourse’. Hospitality – and in particular, ‘Mediterranean hospitality’ as a stance of extreme openness towards others – became key to contestations in which ‘individual and collective voices speak up against states that want to shut their doors and close their borders’ (Rosello 2001: 8). These counter-discourses, often romantic in both tone and logic, are often geared at EU migration policies, but the critique becomes extended towards ‘Europeanness’ more generally. Often, actors focus on the ways in which the violence of the EU’s ‘humanitarian border’ reveals more generally the hypocrisies of state behaviours, including the Eurocentrism

(and thus partiality) of supposedly universal notions of human rights.[26] In this scenario, the Mediterranean emerges as a regional imaginary and affective counter to Europe.

Naor Ben-Yehoyada's (2016) work has shown, for instance, how hospitality has an ability to speak out at scale. This enables actors to use hospitality to speak out against the Italian State and the EU. Ben-Yehoyada argues that examining hospitality as it shows up emically in the Mediterranean can 'illuminate transnational processes' and offer clues about how 'regions come to life' (2016: 1). In this case, it is partly because hospitality can be understood as quintessentially Mediterranean (see also Shryock 2012 for further analysis of hospitality in the Mediterranean). This process unites the Mediterranean's shores in such a way that disrupts the idea of the Mediterranean as a border zone. This vision conflicts with projects of EU-ropeanization and re-establishes an understanding of place as connected to a region dominated by the liquidity of the sea rather than the harshness of territorial borders (Braudel 1972 [1966]).

For Luigi Cazzato, who also works in the Italian Mediterranean context, *accoglienza* by actors from southern Italian places like Lampedusa or Apulia amounts to a 'decolonial practice' that aims at rejecting an understanding of the Mediterranean as a border, and espousing rather 'an enlarged, Mediterranean, decolonized "us"' that is 'decolonised' insofar as it sees 'no contrast between "us" and "them"' (2016: 13).

[26] This use of hospitality – to critique human rights and more generally legal, egalitarian approaches to welcoming and treating others – has presence in the literature on hospitality that precedes the turn towards a migration focus (e.g. Chatty 2017; Milner 2009; Shryock 2004; Zarjevski 1988). As one example, Herzfeld argues that hospitality 'is the social format that permits Greeks to englobe the dominant cultures of Europe' (1987: 86). Herzfeld observed that Greeks in a small town often invoked hospitality with the Western European backpackers who travelled there. They used hospitality to negotiate the contempt they felt towards the 'only constant representatives of the "European" culture to which [they] aspire' and yet who could 'pay them so little'. Compared to these 'stingy ingrates', by expressing hospitality, the Greeks' 'morality comes to seem more "European" and "respectable"' than that of the foreign customers (Herzfeld 1987: 85).

Research that argues explicitly in favour of 'Mediterranean hospitality' draw on an array of writings on and about the sea that highlight its 'liquidity'. Portraying it as the ends of the European continent, this liquidity is depicted sensually, as the antidote to the hardness of borders. We see this logic at play in Franco Cassano's (2005 [1996]) *Pensiero Meridiano.* In this book, Cassano takes some of the quintessential stereotypes about the Italian South and transforms them into qualities. He recalls, for instance, the ways southern Italian areas including Sicily were seen as being the metaphoric 'ends' of the continent and its norms – and turns these into its strength, the source of an alternative philosophy of politics and life. He homes in especially on the possibilities offered by the metaphor (and sensual experience) of the Mediterranean Sea, which surrounds southern Italy and its islands:

> 'At the Mediterranean, the Old Continent is redeemed of its eurocentrism, and discovers that its own finitude is not an obstacle, but a resource, a path forward… The highest meaning of the Mediterranean is precisely in its ability to transform our limits into a common advantage, a tragic memory in the struggle against all fundamentalisms' (2005 [1996]: xxv).

Cassano's writing is evocative, but, like Cazzato's analysis that it precedes, may be debatable. Borders are not as hard or clear-cut – as 'fundamental' – as these images would lead us to believe. They operate, moreover, not only at the cartographic edges of nation-states, but also inland and at sea (Balibar 2003). They also frequently operate through, or alongside, forms of openness or inclusion. The point, nonetheless, is that what we see in this scholarship on hospitality and the Mediterranean is the ways in which it is understood by actors (and sometimes by scholars) in utopian terms, as something radically distinct from the state's creation of borders. This is logically opposite to scholarship that understands hospitality as playing into the care and control paradigm of the humanitarian border.

Ilaria Giglioli (2017) has argued that the EU border served to 'produce Sicily as Europe': taking 'the border as part of a broader relational geography of difference' that demarcates the 'civilization borders of Europe', Giglioli argues that the 'socio-spatial difference' between

southern Italy and North Africa has today become the ‘key dividing line between the “west” and the “rest”’ whereas the line dividing northern and southern Italy has ‘become less significant’ (2017: 407). Such observations show how, and gives a glimpse into why, people try to counter the EU border, and what it is seen as bringing to Sicily – namely, a sense that Europe aims to dominate the Mediterranean. Hospitality is offered as a contrast, one that harkens back to an earlier history in which Sicily was part of Italy’s and Europe’s ‘other’. This offers the foundation for an alliance with other southerners, through the concept of hospitality. I discuss this approach further in my empirical chapters on Palermo the capital of Sicily.

Conclusion: Rethinking Hospitality in the Borderlands

In this chapter, I have focused on the existing scholarship on hospitality in contexts of EU bordering and Mediterranean migration, particularly in Italy. I have juxtaposed state uses of hospitality with grounded uses of hospitality. This illustrates the ways in which this is a central concept in this context, and that is true across various scales.

The literature on hospitality in state responses to migration offers useful analysis of the ways in which hospitality can be strategically banal. If on the surface it seems to offer welcome, in effect it works in tandem with efforts at control. My analysis of the literature on hospitality at the EU’s border, and on the relationship of hospitality to humanitarianism and the state, is helpful to this study for two main reasons: first, because it illustrates one analysis of control, by the state, that my study takes up by instead looking at hospitality in grounded form. Second, it offers a mode of thinking about the state through the lens of control. While partial, this helps provide context for my study, which is not an analysis of the state but does reflect on certain of its effects as understood by my interlocuters. Namely, I argue that people employed

hospitality to take back control because they often felt that control had been taken away from them, and often pointed to the state or its embodiment in various types of authorities as the source for this lack of control.

I also highlighted a very different literature, which interprets instances of grounded hospitality as explicit contestation of, or even forms of resistance to, the state. As I showed, notions of Mediterranean hospitality were often deployed as a means of uniting the Mediterranean into a region across its shores. This served to contest EU-ropeanization efforts in Sicily through re-territorialising places like Sicily as Mediterranean, rather than European. It offered a form of hospitality that was understood as being able to collapse rather than reinforce boundaries between people.

This literature is useful because it shows instances of grounded hospitality. It points to the place-based quality that hospitality can have, and it has shaped my thesis' attention to context accordingly. Crucially, it points to the ways in which people understand hospitality as a form of openness in which the arrival of others can provoke a change in the self. However, this reading of hospitality can also often result in romantic or utopian approaches. Here, the 'control' aspect is often neglected, leading at times to uncritical readings of hospitality – for instance, seeing it as 'decolonial' or 'feminist', while ignoring the ways in which these types of hospitality can be performed, or feed bordering.

As such, in this dissertation I aim to try and hold the tension between welcome and control. I examine grounded forms of hospitality, and I see them as being related to – but not necessarily (successful) contestations of – the state and the EU border. I am interested in openness as a key aspect of hospitality, but I am also interested in control. This is not the authoritarian control of

the state and its care-and-control systems (though it can play into these). It is rather a way to examine ethnographically Lévinas' idea that hospitality is a form of welcoming the 'other' that creates the 'I' (1969).

Understanding this 'I' to refer both to an individual and collective self, or polity, I am interested in the ways in which this practice of being open to another is tied up with forms of homemaking and self-making that root people spatially, temporally, economically or existentially. These can form an antidote to a feeling of unease or disaffection with the state. I am not interested in whether that is good or bad, but rather in what it says about what peoples' approach to immigrants may reveal. As such, I aim to understand how people see hospitality as helping to create this 'I': how they refer to hospitality but also speak beyond it to reflect how the presence of others is interpreted and incorporated into peoples' understandings of themselves, of their homes, and of their futures in this particular historical and geographic juncture.

Chapter 2: Methodology: Methods, Ethics, and Positionality

The research for this study was conducted over approximately 15 months, between 2021 and 2022. It includes analysis of aesthetics and rhetoric, and it also involves about 80 semi-structured interviews, as well as participant and non-participant observation. I followed civil society actors, local entrepreneurs, reception centre workers, and migrants. After two months of initial 'scoping' in the summer of 2021, formal fieldwork began at the end of August 2021, and I returned to Oxford at the end of September of 2022. I spent roughly equal time across my fieldsites, although in the autumn of 2021 I focussed my time observing the reception centres, while in the spring I spent more time at Moltivolti. Throughout the 15 months, I went to Campobello at least once a week, and frequently stayed the night, which enabled me to observe how life in the settlements developed over time.

Methodologically, I began with the idea of 'following the metaphor' (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980]). This is itself a version of 'following the thing', a form of multi-sited ethnography that focuses on what George Marcus calls 'the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space' (1995: 96). As Marcus writes, this form of ethnography concerns 'an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation' (ibid.).

This guiding method proved useful for a study of hospitality in the western Sicilian borderlands and informed my own 'search for welcome'. Hospitality was very obviously a central theme in the capital city of Palermo, where the mayor touted the city's transformation into '*la città dell'accoglienza'* in media articles that reached the world (the subject of my first empirical

chapter). It would have been possible to remain in Palermo, to focus my entire study of hospitality on the efforts of a 'city of solidarity' (although in itself this might have been a multi-sited ethnography as the city is vast and contains multitudes). I ultimately wanted to conduct a study of hospitality as it related to the variegated territory that is a borderland: an area characterised by different modes of bordering and welcome that are connected through policy, imaginaries, and the movement of people. As such, it made sense to extend my field site beyond the port city of Palermo.

For example, people in one site frequently referenced people or places of another site. An activist interlocuter in rural Trapani province evoked Moltivolti, the social enterprise that I was studying, located in the heart of Palermo's Old Town, as a model to which they aspired in their work. At Moltivolti, in turn, the founders often communicated to me that their project was conceived of as an alternative to the *accoglienza* of both the state reception centres or of the Church. They also posited their employment model as standing in clear opposition to the exploitation of African workers in the agri-businesses in Palermo's hinterlands such as those that I was studying in Campobello. As Herzfeld wrote of his own experience conducting research across an urban and rural site in Greece, 'Gradually, I stopped thinking about [them] as separate entities. Each is situated within the other's experience' (Herzfeld 1991: 24).

Furthermore, there was significant human mobility between different sites, so that it felt like I was studying a community – one that took the shape of a web or a network. My interlocuters often knew each other, or had interacted, and frequently moved across place, and I frequently followed them.

It also became clear that migrants and asylum-seekers also travelled across sites. I would

sometimes see those who lived in the informal settlements in Campobello in the centre of Palermo – to purchase goods, or to hang out with friends. Furthermore, due to the volatility created by the asylum system, many people had been moved from one reception centre to another in a different part of the island. Individuals with such experiences were as a result intimately acquainted with centres, or with corners of a given city, and the people who worked or inhabited these places, that I too encountered.

This web of people became important guides and brokers through which I gained access and understanding, in particular, to the ways grounded hospitality related to the state and its borders. These actors showed me how and where the border operates in Sicily. They pointed out the ways the conditions of reception centres results in labour supplied to Sicilian agri-business that in turn feeds global supply chains. They helped me to understand in grounded ways how Italian and EU policy (especially the alternate neglect, abandonment, and sudden presence of state authorities) create constraints that shape peoples' movements. They helped me understand the connections between my sites in lived, physical ways, beyond what I had intuited or read about. They helped to shape and develop my idea that hospitality had to do with the ways people sought to operate in the interstices produced by state and spectacle.

The Sicilian civil society groups and individuals that I followed across the island (typically from middle class, urban, educated backgrounds) for instance, often suggested that it was a kind of duty to work in places where, in their words, '*non c'è rete'* – there is no net, intending no networks or infrastructures of social services that could help to bridge the absences of the state. They (and I, following them) worked to try and help people who were undocumented get documents. They worked to monitor the state-funded reception centres. They often entered reception centres spread across the island, and understood their presence as breaking the

unseen, yet palpable, sense of confinement that asylum-seekers experienced in these places. They often tried to suggest to people who lived in the informal self-settlements that there might be other avenues forward, if they felt able and ready to pursue them – though these strategies had mixed success.

Tracing hospitality through a multi-sited ethnography thus enabled me to see my fieldsites more clearly. It revealed what was intuitive to me but not articulated at the beginning of my field research: that these sites were clearly connected. Though hospitality took different forms across sites, these were each a product of the interplay between bordering and welcome that takes place in the borderlands.

In turn, the specific notion of 'following the metaphor' allowed for an open, flexible approach that would enable me to encounter different forms of hospitality. The idea of the 'metaphor' was the starting point. In *Metaphors We Live By,* George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) argue that, through exploring metaphors, we can understand the ways people make meaning in social life. They argue that even metaphors we take for granted or for dead – such as hospitality, which, to invoke Shryock again, is 'everywhere' yet 'nowhere' – might nonetheless have a role in shaping how we think and act. Hospitality is not only a metaphor, of course, it is also a practice. It is palpable. Even so, hospitality also pertains to something other than the interpersonal relationship between a host and a guest. Hospitality often involves the kind of triangular meaning-making that metaphors do. Embedded in my choice of guiding method, then, is my initial hypothesis that in invoking hospitality, people are telling us something bigger. Tracing hospitality was about learning the effects and reasoning of why and how people respond to, and make meaning from, encounters with others in contexts otherwise marked by state bordering.

An Eclectic Comparative Approach

Although I do not think of this as an explicitly comparative study, hospitality across these interconnected sites inevitably involves an element of comparison. Comparison 'is immanent in social life and will inevitably motivate and shape ethnography' (Shryock 2020: 412). This relatively uncontroversial observation is made overt in this study, in which I examine different shapes that hospitality takes: my approach inevitably involves juxtaposing forms of hospitality against each other to develop insight and argument.

While extolling its virtues, Matei Candea (2007, 2018) has also warned of the common practical pitfalls of using comparison as a method for in ethnography. He argues that comparison 'as a method' constantly risks being reductive, and even antithetical to the anthropological mode of inductive reasoning. This is because each instance of a phenomenon is embedded within its own thick context. Though context is itself a disputed term (Dilley 1999) I take Candea's point that:

> 'we ought to build comparisons which have their own resistance, independent of our ends. Comparisons which are intricate enough to object, to slow us down, to throw up all sorts of entanglements and complications even as we crave for a neat reduction' (2018: 353).

Heeding this advice, I have tailored my methodological approaches to the context of each site. 'Tracing' as a starting point enabled what I call an 'eclectic comparative approach'. By this I mean that I varied slightly in methods across sites, because studying rhetoric and images in Palermo required a different approach to studying practices of hospitality in informal settlements or in official reception centres. Within my broad guiding approach of 'following the metaphor', across each field site, I catered my methods and approaches to the context.

In the chapters which take place in Palermo, for instance, my analytical approach was ethnographic (based on interviews, and both participant and non-participant observation), as well as discursive. I was interested in semiotics, performance, and aesthetics. This approach reflects on the one hand, my attempt to grapple with what Antonio Sorge has called the 'semantic burden' that we find in work in and about Sicily (forthcoming). As Sorge writes, ethnographers need to operate with 'semantic vigilance' that is self-aware about how 'Sicilian things' – commonplace, folkloric, and stereotypical ideas – 'operate across multiple registers of meaning'. These notions – such as Mafia, backwardness, the futility of life, or Sicily as a place from which to mount an agentive critique of Europe – are engrained ideas about the island that are also 'continuously reinterpreted' by locals for different audiences (ibid.). Indeed, according to Sorge we must consider what interlocuters say on two levels, one 'for themselves and once from the projections, and even aspirations of outsiders' (ibid.).

Aware of what Sorge calls this 'double helix' – and believing that it characterises all ethnography to some extent, not only in the Sicilian context – I thought deeply about how to present the material to the reader. I wanted to lay out the emic reasoning actors were providing to me in such a way that it would be legible and understandable, but also provide my etic analysis that aimed to take my interlocuters seriously while also understanding the ways in which they might be performing, narrating a story, or even keeping me at bay through the repetition of known ideas. In this context, it seemed important to include semiotic analysis, particularly where, as in Palermo, actors were clearly using aesthetics and rhetoric in strategic ways. This was fruitful in that it helped me think about how spectacles are produced, which ended up being a key concept to this study.

This approach also reflects my training in both humanities and social sciences. I was interested

in how rhetorical hospitality was repeated to me in different ways by various interlocuters. I wanted to understand how interlocuters were engaging with broader public discourses and intellectual histories. Sometimes they were doing so explicitly, and sometimes they were echoing ideas that had become part of a broader 'cultural reasoning' or imaginary – possibly imagining that these ideas were new to me, or on the contrary trying to establish forms of cultural intimacy with me. I was not so much interested in the 'truth', as I was in how imaginaries affected rhetoric and in turn, social life.[27]

John Bowen takes a similar approach, which he refers to as the 'anthropology of public reasoning'. In his book *Why The French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State and Public Reasoning,* Bowen examines 'how French public figures understand the proper relationships among religion, the state and the individual' and crucially how they 'justify' these understandings, particularly to the public, using concepts such as 'laïcité, Republicanism, and equality' (3). For Bowen, the idea of 'public reasoning' has to do with seeing, and making visible, the 'connections among political philosophy, public policy, and common sense by studying how people deliberate about an important social issue' (ibid.).

In Palermo, I similarly examine hospitality in rhetoric, speech, or forms of aesthetic geared towards the public (sometimes through media, advertising, or public works of art). I examine how public actors treat the concept of *accoglienza* in these situations, by investigating its connections to existing histories and narratives of Sicily, as well as how elites connect it to other ideas about related concepts – like cosmopolitanism, *convivenza*, or Meridionalism. I then use ethnographic methods to investigate how such rhetorics play out in social reality, or otherwise affect peoples' lives in the city – particularly due to the ways they are limited, or

[27] See also Geertz' work on interpretation in the ethnographic study of 'culture'(Clifford and Marcus 2010; Geertz 1998).

perceived to be limited, by other state laws, policies, or discourses.

Across my other sites, my methodology was more straightforwardly ethnographic, involving participant observation, non-participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. But it still involved the kind of 'semantic vigilance' that Sorge writes of. Leonardo Sciascia wrote that a person's experience in Sicily will be marked by a Pirandellian sense of 'pseudo-reality', involving what Sorge refers to as 'a strain between what is imagined and what is real' (forthcoming). In fact, I found that as an ethnographer I had to deal with something like this across my sites, but it was not necessarily due to something 'quintessentially Sicilian' so much as produced by the effects and spectacle of the border. People expressed that they sensed a discrepancy between what was supposed to be and what was, what the bureaucracy or law evoked and what was practically possible, between the moral values of hospitality and the violence with which people were treated. This discrepancy, as I explore in the later chapters, often resulted in existential quandaries.

As a result, Sorge's words resonate with me, because his advice proves generalisable about ethnography in borderlands. It was as true in urban Palermo, in rural Campobello, and in the reception centres as in the self-settlements of the Sicilian hinterlands where certainty of meaning and ethics, and stability in life, often remained partial and momentary at best.

That said, the Sicilian context also presented another specific complication, which related to the Mafia. The presence of the Mafia in Sicily oscillates, as the Sicilian researcher Martina Lo Cascio has written, somewhere between 'myth and reality' (2016). As Sorge observes, to discuss the Mafia in Sicily is inevitably also to usher in semantic baggage, and it is easy to fall prey to cliché. But in my experience, the Mafia presence and threat was really felt by many of

my interlocuters. This presence (or its threat) also constrained and shaped what could be known for my research. I found this to be particularly true in the Sicilian hinterlands, in Campobello and in the reception centres. Some people chose to speak directly to me about the Mafia and its doings. But often I did not know whether they knew what they were saying to be true, or if they had picked up whispers and rumours that they were now relaying to me. Was it speculation that they related to me for effect? On the other hand, I also sensed that peoples' silences, or through their reluctance to give me straight answers, might have to do with fear or norms around organised crime. This is often referred to as *omertà,* but it seemed to me to be something also less codified, more simply about wanting to protect oneself. Regardless, this silence, and my desire to be as discerning as possible about rumours and stereotypes, has meant that at times I have had to do the best I could with partial information.

Of course, the outcomes of my different approaches bled into each other, as I never 'forgot' what I was seeing and listening to in the other sites. This is perhaps the point of comparison: it is through a consideration of differences and similarities amongst particular sites, and then an understanding of the ways in which they compose a whole, that I could come to certain arguments about hospitality.

Ethics and Positionality

Prior to my fieldwork, I completed all required ethical forms to CUREC, Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee, for review. I received permission from the Committee fieldwork in June of 2021, and in July of 2021 I moved to Sicily. In this section, I highlight some of the ethical considerations as related to my positionality. I initially wrote about some of these in my required ethics applications, and others that emerged during my time in Sicily.

The central running thread of these ethical considerations is that many of my interlocuters were considered by the University's Ethical Committee to be 'vulnerable', in the sense that they faced constraints to their life and liberty in such a way that might be understood to affect their choice in whether or not to participate in my ethnography. This is especially true of people with undocumented legal status, or those living in reception centres or in the informal settlements of Campobello di Mazara. As I show below, this juridical status, the constraints imposed by the state, and their consequent 'vulnerability' shaped the ways I thought about the different aspects of my own positionality and the ways they shaped the emergent research. Names of all informants, whether considered 'vulnerable' or not, have been anonymised, except for names of public figures.

A Dual – or Triple – Role

My central ethical consideration pertains to my 'dual role'. Alongside my research, I volunteered for two NGOs: 'Borderline Sicilia' and 'Arci Porco Rosso'. I had reached these groups through what is often called 'snowballing', thanks to relatives, friends, and contacts I had made while living in Palermo previously, especially on a Fulbright grant in 2016 and 2017. I volunteered for these NGOs for a variety of reasons: understanding the landscape of bordering and reception in Sicily, gaining access, and creating trust with interlocuters. After briefly introducing the two NGOs, I will explain this reasoning in further detail.

*

Borderline was a very small association that conducted monitoring operations, mostly of reception centres, across Sicily. Their aim was to speak to residents of the centres and write reports based on their accounts of the centres that would then serve as a written historical record. These reports were also often used by lawyers, both in defences of individuals and in

bigger court cases against the Italian and European governments. Thus, for about six months during my research time, once a week I would drive to a centre and try to contact residents who lived inside.

Because it was difficult to enter, I would hang out around the centre and wait for residents to emerge. I would explain who I was, what my aims were, and ask whether they would like to talk to me. My job was to write up reports based on their accounts that would then be published on Borderline's website. These reports served as a historical record of what was happening in state reception centres in Sicily during these years. These accounts almost always contained awful details of life inside the centres. Even if they did not form part of my official ethnographic fieldnotes, it was impossible to forget them, and they certainly informed my understanding of the 'humanitarian border' as it manifested in Sicily. On occasion, these accounts were so terrible, violent, or even criminal that they merited a request for a formal permission to enter the reception centre. These visits were likewise documented and published on Borderline's website, often anonymously to protect my identity.

I also volunteered regularly for Arci Porco Rosso. Porco Rosso, named for the character in a film by Miyazaki, who became a pig rather than join the Fascist forces, was a *sans-papiers* hub located in the centre of Palermo. On Wednesday afternoons, the centre, located in an airy, ground-floor building in the Ballarò neighbourhood, opened, for what they called chatting sessions. Anyone in the surrounding community could come and discuss issues in their lives that they might need help resolving. The place was envisioned as a community centre, and in its early days also hosted public events like book presentations and musical performances. Its users were overwhelmingly people who needed support navigating the law, the bureaucracy, and state institutions meant to provide welfare, rights, documents, and so forth.

The group that started the centre were mostly middle-class millennials from Palermo, as well as other parts of Italy, and beyond – not exactly a statistically representative group. They had been involved in student politics, and this centre bourgeoned from that work. This group was different to other pro-migrant activist groups I encountered in western Sicily, who often pitched themselves as anarchic or who had a very confrontational, often explicitly anti-state style of politics. At Porco Rosso, the *operatori* and *operatrici sociali,* or social operators, as they called themselves, conceptualised their work as offering a bridge between the state and the community. To outside groups of students or activists who came to visit the hub, the group explained that they 'wished they did not have to exist'. They conceived of themselves as something between activists and social workers, and though often they needed other sources of income (teaching, translating, or working for an NGO), they did receive donations from individuals, private foundations, bigger NGOs, or even public funds to fund aspects of the work. They were highly selective, however, in what funds they accepted, prioritizing their independence.

On Wednesdays each week, I participated in the chatting *sportello* (a 'hub' or 'help desk'). The aim was to listen, and through listening, understand what issues people presented, and try to accompany them as they sought to tackle whatever problem they related. Though the work started in this centre, it led elsewhere: I went with asylum-seekers to courtrooms and translated as they faced judges during hearings that would determine whether they would receive documents. I went with them to doctors' offices and appointments; I accompanied them to shelters or to the reception centres where they would live temporarily; I accompanied them also to public offices if they needed to obtain certain documents. Although I do not think I was particularly brilliant at this work – especially next to the seasoned *operatori* who had years'

worth of experience – this work gave me a first-hand look at the way migrants, asylum-seekers, and undocumented people in Palermo interfaced with the state through local institutions and authorities.

Although Porco Rosso's main hub was in the centre of Palermo, through what they called the '*sportello mobile'*, the mobile *sportello,* the activist-socio-legal workers who volunteered at the hub also travelled across the island, especially across Palermo and Trapani provinces. It was by following with them that I first went to Campobello di Mazara, a small, agricultural town about an hour and a half southwest of Palermo. They had begun going to Campobello several years earlier, especially in the autumn, when seasonal labourers gathered for the olive picking season.

Campobello was home to western Sicily's largest informal self-settlement. Because they could not find a place to rent in town, seasonal labourers, who by 2021 were mostly west African, set up informal encampments, building small huts in empty plots of land. Campobello was one site of what has been called an 'encampment archipelago' (Peano 2021): settlements and camps across agricultural Italy, whose agri-business relies on the labour of migrant workers. These labourers, in turn, had typically 'escaped' from nearby reception centres. With little access to lawyers or other welfare provisions, the services of the *sportello mobile* were in high demand in this settlement. While some had documents, many were undocumented, or had expired documents. Their work and living conditions also often meant that they needed medical and psychological attention.

Working with these groups inevitably shaped my findings. As Elena Fontanari, Camilla Gaiaschi, and Giulia Borri write: their own double role as practitioners and researchers served

as ‘an advantage for understanding the complexity of the research field’ (2019: 144-45). I too felt that in following these groups, learning to do their work, and understanding their perspectives, I was granted key insights and knowledge about Italian legal frameworks. These helped me understand, and inevitably shaped, the ways I saw hospitality as positioned in relation to the Italian state. As ethnography can, I learned about listening to people and about seeing social phenomena through following them in their work. As I was following actors who studied and monitored the law, such modes of listening and seeing related particularly to the ways I was shown how peoples’ juridical conditions shape their lives, choices, and identities.

The question of access was also important, because the ‘border’ contains sites that are often difficult to find and gain permission to enter. For instance, it was very hard to know where reception centres were located on the island. It was also difficult and even in certain circumstances (depending on the type of centre) illegal to enter without the management’s permission. I tried to pay attention to where I was and was not granted access as part of a reflection of how the border operates, rather than as a measure of how good an ethnographer I was. But it is also true that through my involvement with both NGOs, I did gain forms of access that were elusive: I learned reception centres’ locations, and gained connections that ultimately enabled me to enter them.

My involvement also shaped my work insofar as the fact that studying hospitality cannot really be disentangled from an ethnographer’s own experience of conducting research. This relies on another kind of hospitality: that on the part of participants towards the researcher (Boccagni and Bonfanti 2023; Herzfeld 1987, 2012; Shryock 2012). As a ‘guest’, my layers of ‘roles’ also multiplied: I had not only dual roles, but triple relational roles that complicated my presence in the field. I was a social actor, I was a researcher, and I was a volunteer for these two groups.

This shaped my work as it meant that I had to comply by their rules: I had to act as a good guest. This was particularly true during my research in the self-settlements in Campobello di Mazara. In those instances, I was not just a guest of the group that I was following – we were all guests in peoples' domestic spaces, within settlements that could be characterised by nefarious or delicate dynamics. People living in the informal settlements were very sensitive to journalists and the media, as they were private about their living circumstances and aware of the ways in which they were used as part of a political spectacle. In such settings, the group obviously did not want me, for instance, to ask for 'interviews' off the bat, as this could jeopardize their work.

Knowing that rules of hospitality were at play also affected what groups I chose to follow into the settlement, which also inevitably coloured my experience and findings. In Campobello, I mostly followed the group of social and legal workers from Porco Rosso. It was their approach that I felt most comfortable with, because it had the lightest footprint. They did not promote a contentious politics, nor did they have religious undertones, nor did their work involve the neon uniforms of international humanitarian organisations. They were discrete. The two or three members I followed each week valued listening. They fore-fronted manageable problems, and aimed at trying to creatively solve specific issues, rather than making grand promises – the sorts of things that got other groups kicked out, or in trouble, when promises were not fulfilled. In short, they too acted like good guests.

Alongside such inevitable choices that shape findings, these layered roles also provoked ethical and social conundrums, both during fieldwork and during the writing-up stages. For instance, I wondered, would the entrepreneurs I was following in Palermo think of me as an activist,

someone who they imagine might be predisposed to have certain biases about their own work? Would they relate to me accordingly?

From an ethical standpoint the crucial questions related to migrants, asylum-seekers, and undocumented people. Would they feel coerced in speaking to me, thinking that if they didn't, they might not receive help from the organizations I followed? As my ethnography makes doubly clear, I was often speaking to people who faced vast constraints on their life and choices that also made them vulnerable. Did our relationship ultimately and inevitably constitute one of hierarchies that implied a conflict of interest (Bell 2019)?

I also often felt a duty to give something back to people who had been so welcoming and open with me. I would sometimes wake up at 4am to pick up one of the *operatrici sociali* that I frequently followed. Together, we would drive first to Campobello to pick someone up from the informal encampment, and then to the big multiplex centre, just outside Trapani, where the person we had picked up had to be by 9 or 10am for their asylum hearing. It was particularly satisfying when the person in question received refugee status – though this certainly did not always happen. In any case it often seemed like an ethical and politically just action to take, even if it went somewhat beyond the scope of my research strictly. But also, I wanted to help because I felt a duty to reciprocate the forms of social bonding that my hosts had provided to me. Did this feeling of needing to help relate simply to a form of debt?

In the end, I did not exactly answer these questions fully, but I did conclude that embedding with these NGOs offered more benefits than drawbacks, both in terms of research and ethics. My involvement enabled me not only to form connections and understandings that I have already discussed, but also to gain trust. This itself might be criticised as a form of

instrumentalization: gaining trust, often through helping people, for utilitarian purposes, as Kirsten Bell observes, may be construed as the creation of 'intimacy as a scholarly knowledge practice' which can appear 'intellectually sloppy and ethically suspect' (2018: 22).

And yet, as Bell further notes, 'the moral tensions of fieldwork arguably differ in degree rather than in kind from the tensions raised by human interaction in all its forms' (2018: 15). These involve, for instance, those tensions between 'sincerity and insincerity, genuineness and hypocrisy, honesty and self-deception' (Geertz 1968: 155). In this case, I felt that beyond whatever was required of me by official forms, building trust was key to trying to working transparently with populations facing the sorts of constraints I detail throughout this thesis – those which made them, in official terms, 'vulnerable', and in practical terms shy away from 'interviews'.

I agree with Bob Simpson who observed that the ethnographic approach 'takes us beyond a rule-based notion of ethics and into a much more complex terrain in which the skill of the ethnographer lies in developing and managing relations founded on trust, respect and an avoidance of delimiting the subject' (2011: 385, in Bell 2018: 16). To me, building trust was part of a broader process of respecting my interlocuters, and treating them as social beings. My 'dual role' made clear to me the ways their juridical condition affected their lives and identities, but I did not want that understanding to accidentally turn into a patronizing methodological approach. This is why the idea of 'respect' is key. I aimed to translate this respect to my writing practice, but it also related more directly to my presence as a social being among others, in which questions of power differentials are always present, but often in ways that move beyond the expected, as I will now discuss briefly.

Gender and Belonging

Two elements of my own identity also shaped my findings and approach to ethics. One, which I will mention only briefly, concerned my gender. This informed the way I explored or understood certain dynamics (especially in the self-settlements and in the reception centres). It also affected the spaces I could enter, or whether I could enter certain places alone (especially in Campobello, where the women present were often sex workers and their presence in the camps often physically unsafe). Most of all, it affected my interpersonal encounters: across national and ethnic origin, many of my informants were women, but overwhelmingly they were men. It often seemed to me that this situation affected the ways I was treated, or the ways people understood what I was doing.

At the very least, a sense of bodily awareness was key to the way I navigated space and interactions during research. But it also complicated the ways I understood positionality and interpersonal dynamics in the field. As Fontanari et al. write, the researcher is typically understood as the 'strong' subject, whereas research participants are often considered 'weak' (2018: 147). I was a white researcher from an elite, British university, and thus carried what is often referred to as epistemic power (or the potential for such). Yet during research, I often felt as they did that 'the gender issue flipped the power positions between researchers and subjects of research upside down' (ibid.).

The second element I wish to touch on is my relationship to Sicily. My grandfather is Sicilian, but left in the 1950s, as a young man in his 20s. I lived in Sicily as a young child, and returned during summers, before living in Sicily again in 2016-2017 and then for fieldwork. I speak fluent Italian, and my speech is inflected with some Sicilian; though I can understand much of the dialect, I cannot myself produce it. Because of Italian *jus sanguinis* laws, I also have an

Italian passport and citizenship.

My relationship to Sicily is one of the insider/outsider. This is similar yet distinct to Ben-Yehoyada's concept of 'cousinage' (Ben-Yehoyada 2017). I am not from another Mediterranean country, where certain cultural habits or even *habitus* will seem familiar, if somewhat distantly so. I am both of Sicily and not of Sicily – something which, in different ways, my interlocuters made clear to me by finding modes of both assimilating themselves to me and differentiating themselves. I was an insider/outsider, a liminal subject who both belonged and did not.

This status affected my work in different ways. For one, it made me – even before I arrived, in 2021, for fieldwork – attentive and interested in narratives and practices of welcome and belonging (see also Abu-Lughod's discussion of 'halfie' [2006] [1991]). It may have made me particularly sensitive to the mythos of hospitality in Sicily in the first place. I had long felt that it was not as easy to belong, to feel at home, to feel welcomed, or to feel oneself, in Sicily, as certain Mediterraneanist discourses might lead one to believe. Even those who critiqued forms of exclusion in Sicily would often tell me that ultimately, there was a place for everyone here.

But as someone who was 'liminal', my mere presence pushed up against such views constantly. I was often tested on the extent of my belonging: I was asked if I knew this or that word, if I knew about this or that dessert, if I could translate this or that Sicilian phrase. If I failed at such tests of knowledge – taken to be markers of 'true belonging' – I was subtly reminded of the ways I should, but did not, fit in. I believe the bar was probably higher for me on such tests of belonging (as understood to be connected to knowledge about place, language, and customs) as it would have been for someone from other Mediterranean locales, or from further afield.

They would not be expected to know about these particularities but might delight interlocuters if they did.

On the other hand, I found that this 'insider-outsider' status sometimes enabled me to bond with interlocuters of foreign origin. They, like me, had often spent significant time in Sicily, and sometimes in other places in Europe – enough to have gained ideas about certain aspects of Sicilian and European culture. In many, though certainly not all cases, they felt attached to the island, or to parts of it. But at the same time, we shared outsider points of view gained through having spent significant portions of our life outside the place. Sometimes we shared a linguistic bond – this was especially true with two of my interlocuters, one Nigerian and one Gambian, with whom I became rapidly acquainted through our common excitement and relief at being able to speak English with each other.

By extension, however, I did reflect that if it was difficult for me – with my Italian passport and traits that blended in – then what must it be like for people who did not have such characteristics? For migrant workers, immigrants, and even their descendants? Perhaps they would not be tested in these ways (a different form of bias), but certainly their juridical status and racialised status would also affect how people related to them.

Without wishing to draw false equivalences or project my experiences onto others whose identities and modes of thinking may be far from my own, I also want to be self-aware about the ways in which this positionality did sensitise me to certain questions about belonging, control, and homemaking that served as the impetus for this study. It also highlighted, once again, that, insider-outsiders though I and migrant interlocuters both were, our material realities, and the ways we were treated in public offices especially, were drastically different –

with absurd and often tragic consequences. Although I and migrant interlocuters had similarly come to Sicily from elsewhere (and often approached Sicily with shared curiosity) our respective presences and mobilities were understood in utterly opposite terms. Mobility is 'embedded in unequal power relations' (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Undoubtedly, this difference also helped reveal to me repeatedly how central state governance and authorities are to peoples' lives.

Chapter 3: Mediterranean Hospitality in Palermo

In April of 2017, *The Guardian* ran an online article about Leoluca Orlando, then mayor of Palermo, the capital city of Sicily. The headline read: 'He fought the Mafia and won. Now this mayor is taking on Europe over migrants'. The article then began: 'Every time a ship with rescued migrants enters the harbour of Palermo, the mayor goes to greet them. "Welcome," he says to them. "The worst is over. You are citizens of Palermo now"' (van der Zee 2017).

Although the article grasped something about the energy in the city of Palermo in the mid-2010s, the story was also embellished. It was part of a certain kind of media attention the capital had begun to receive in those years. As it became a site of the border of Mediterranean migration, it also became part of a media spectacle, composed of images of disembarkations and migration that gave no sense of place, but rather epitomized one collective idea about what 'migration' was (De Genova 2002). Journalists increasingly covered not only the violence of the border, but also sought to promote those who preached against it. This could still feel like part of creating a fetish of migration and borders and made one wonder what the rhetoric of hospitality was all about. Was it about practices of welcome, or was it a performance of self geared at something else?

I saw this spectacle, and what it was depicting, up close. For a time in 2016 and 2017, I would go to the port of Palermo whenever a rescue ship was set to disembark. These vessels often docked at night, in the pitch dark, and waited until morning to let people off. I would ride my bike over to the port, when the light was still bluish with night. Upon arrival at the port, I would wave to the guardian seated in the little booth at the entrance, point my finger, and loudly

mouth *sbarco*. He would wave me forward, and I would head towards the disembarkation area.

In the moments before I arrived at the dock, it was hard not to think about what a strangely layered site this place was. More than a century earlier, my ancestors had worked here, loading and unloading cargo from ships that arrived from as far away as China – the type of activity that had for many centuries made Palermo an important commercial hub in the region. Black and white pictures that I had seen in museums across the island documented a different phenomenon, which also took place at this port, in the early 20th century: crowds of people awaiting to board ships that would take them elsewhere, soon-to-be emigrants. In more recent times, less than a kilometre away from where Frontex ships docked, cruise ships glided into port, bringing in ever larger numbers of tourists. The ships were so big that they dwarfed the buildings on the shore, and took so much water that sometimes, especially in the working-class neighbourhoods of the city, there was no water to be used. And now, with the landings of rescued people from sea, Palermo also became part of the constellation of Europe's humanitarian border, one of its external-facing sites that dotted southern European coastlines, that represented both opportunity and control.

The contours of the scene, and the rituals of the disembarkation, will be familiar to anyone who has witnessed official landings of migrant rescue boats in Italy. Volunteers from Caritas were busy setting up food and shoes, as if for a market. The different personnel in their vests milled about: Frontex in navy, the *carabinieri* with their tall black boots, Save the Children in red, UNHCR in turquoise. They blended – a lay person would be forgiven for thinking they were all doing the same thing – but the humanitarians and NGO volunteers always reminded me, in hushed tones and stern looks, not to translate for Frontex (I would not have, but their remarks were telling). Sometimes, my local Franciscan friend came too, dressed in his friarly brown

garb. He had spent time in the Congo and spoke French. Then there was me – I mostly translated for doctors, helped distribute extra food, or sat with people and chatted with them as they waited. Today, I don't think my presence would be permitted, but nine years ago, the landscape of reception in Sicily, and its securitization, was still professionalising.

Usually, the wait before disembarkation was long. The big ship docked idly in the meantime, which gave people who lived and operated in separate worlds time to stare at each other, as different lives crossed for a moment. The first time I went, the Swedish crew of a massive orange vessel being used by Frontex leaned against the ship's railing. Their blond hair was cropped close to their skulls, their blue eyes were piercing, their uniforms smart. On some ships, the passengers on board – who were from Africa, sometimes from the Middle East and more rarely, then, from Southeast Asia – remained hidden for a while. On other ships, they sat out beneath an open sky, crowded, as the hot sun rose more confidently overhead.

The coffins would come off first. They were carried into a truck waiting just to the side of the media tent. I could hear the click, click, clacking of the journalists' cameras. Next came those in especially vulnerable conditions: pregnant women, extremely small children travelling alone, young men who winced and limped from the ghastly burns on their bodies, inflicted by the mix of the salty sea water and the gasoline from the motor dinghies that they had been rescued from. Then, everyone else. They descended the ship, and walked across the draw-bridge, inevitably barefoot. Some people were then immediately approached, surrounded by the police and questions. The *carabinieri* were looking for *scafisti,* the supposed smugglers who were treated like *mafiosi* and the target of Italian police crackdowns. This practice evinced a policing approach in which migration was blamed on people who were often those who knew how to drive a boat, not part of organised criminal networks (Borderline Sicilia 2021).

Everyone else lined up, and were haphazardly handed plastic shoes, a cheap version of the Australian brand, Crocs. Caritas operators guessed people's rough shoe sizes by looking at them, and hurriedly planted a pair in each person's hands. Shoes on, people then moved on to the tent where they would receive plastic bags with bread, water, and a piece of fruit. Mostly, people complained about the food – a Syrian couple I met sitting on the dock one night refused to eat it, because it was what they had been getting for three days straight on the rescue ship.

Some people deemed 'highly vulnerable' were moved into a tent to get medical and psychological attention. The rest were ushered through another queue, where they stood and waited to get their picture taken. They were asked their name, date of birth, country of origin, and why they had come to Italy. This wasn't a formal request for asylum, but it would inform what happened next – particularly because this was a moment when some people would be identified as minors, and others, adults – a judgement that could make a huge difference to their future life in Italy. In the meantime, personnel from UNHCR and Save the Children handed out leaflets that discussed what to do if you, or someone you knew, had been trafficked.

My impression of all this was total confusion: it was not clear whether the humanitarians were even speaking in a language, or in a way, that people understood, when they spoke about trafficking or asylum procedures, and there seemed to be little effort to check whether any of the newly landed travellers were following what they said. None of the disembarked people received any guidance, as far as I could tell, on how to fill out the forms. And many people were being questioned about their experiences in Libya right off the bat – before they had even managed to get food or sleep or proper clothing.

After the queues and the confusion came the wait. Individuals who had completed the forms were made to sit under another set of tents. They were to remain there, sectioned off with rope, until buses were ready to take them to the next stop: to the police station where they would get fingerprinted, and then to a *centro di accoglienza,* the name colloquially given to the reception hostels. People with certain nationalities, especially Tunisian or Gambian, were given a *foglio di via* telling them they needed to leave the country within three days, or else were taken straight to a detention centre.

Because there was only so much time, space, and equipment at the local *Questura* (police station) many people had to wait, sometimes overnight, to leave the port floor. Some received flattened cardboard boxes from the food and shoes that Caritas had provided. Some would wrap themselves in metallic thermal blankets, symbols of the material culture of migrant arrivals. But this was only if they were lucky enough to get a spare one. In the meantime, if anyone stood up abruptly, or began to move around too much, the police would come over and yell, in English (a language some, but not all, understood) – 'Sit down!'

I realised quickly that most of the people sitting beneath the waiting tent had no idea where on earth they were. There was no big 'Welcome to Palermo' sign here, as there were in other landings spots in the city. Some would guess, seemingly at random: Italy? Football fans might yell, hopefully: Napoli! Back then, my answer, 'Palermo', often drew blank gazes. So, I would sketch a map and indicate: here is the coast of Tunisia, here is the Mediterranean Sea, and here is the island of Sicily. If you keep going, here is Italy and then onwards, into the rest of Europe. The first time I did this, a very young man looked at the map I had hastily drawn and then stared back at me, exclaiming: 'That's where we are?! Then, we haven't even gotten to Europe yet – we are still in Africa!'

*

Although *The Guardian* had reported that the Mayor, Leoluca Orlando, was often at the port, welcoming migrants, I never saw him there. But I begin with this scene from the port to illustrate the backdrop against which Leoluca Orlando was operating, as he aimed to turn his city into the *città dell'accoglienza* or 'City of Hospitality'.

From at least 2012, when Orlando was re-elected mayor for his fourth, and then fifth terms, he began to call Palermo, '*la città dell'accoglienza'* or '*la città aperta',* the city of hospitality, welcome, and openness. His message of hospitality related to the migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers who had begun to arrive in Palermo. But in referencing hospitality, he also drew attention to a mythico-history associated to the city. He also drew on an intellectual history on the island that borrowed from ideas of *convivenza,* 'cohabitation' which originated from studies in and of Andalusia, Spain. The aim of these studies was to 'rediscover' Arab Sicily: to paint the island as Arab-Norman, a place where civilizations and difference meet to make an open, cosmopolitan, and tolerant kind of society (Wyer forthcoming).[28] Crucially, for as much as Orlando discussed hospitality towards migrants, his rhetoric was also about re-imagining Palermo, recalling it as Mediterranean in order to promote an identitarian project linked to the idea of the city's transformation.

[28] Because I argue that Orlando is a bricoleur who aestheticizes and rarely defines his terms, I do not spend much time explaining what I mean by 'cosmopolitanism', 'multiculturalism', 'tolerance', or *convivenza,* except where I describe the genealogy of *convivenza* in the Sicilian context as coming from Andalusia (see Campbell 2018; Hirschkind 2020). A different chapter might explore the tensions among these concepts, especially considering hospitality's tendency to 'embed social transactions in materiality' (Candea and Da Col 2012: 2) which contrasts with a vision of cosmopolitanism as an atomised form of world citizenship that prioritises individual liberty (e.g. Nussbaum 2019). Broadly, we can conclude that Orlando uses 'cosmopolitanism' in many senses all at once: in the Kantian sense of 'a set of loyalties to humanity as a whole' (Harvey 2000: 530; Harvey 2009) but also as what Ulf Hannerz calls a 'stance towards diversity itself, toward the coexistence of cultures in the individual experience…an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other' (1990: 239). He is also playing on connotations of cosmopolitanism as connected to being modern, civilized, as embodied by cities like London or New York (Appiah 2015). See Wyer's forthcoming book for more on this discussion in Palermo.

Through Orlando's rhetoric, Sicily emerged as distinctly different to the social and legal terms of euro-modernity, which preach inclusion but operate on the basis of borders and exclusion.[29] Orlando's rhetoric glorified new migrants, painting these outsiders as possible saviours for the city, people who might breathe new life into a much-beleaguered, even dying, city. Put succinctly, hospitality operated as a form of 'taking back control' over the identity of Palermo – away from being a so-called backwater-cum-EU guardian, it was reframed as a profoundly Mediterranean space in which people mixed with each other. Orlando's was an identitarian discourse that in turn aimed to contest both nation-state sovereignty and Mafia rule. It was also a mode of trying to take back control over space on behalf of its residents. We can conceive of this discourse as primarily being about control over identity, but its effects operated on multiple layers: spatial, temporal, political, economic, and existential.

The scene at the port helps to provide a contrast to Orlando's political vision of openness, and a sense of what he was trying to pitch his form of *accoglienza* against. Juxtaposed, these indicate how Palermo was a borderland – a place of both openness and closedness. It also gives an idea of how difficult it might be to actually enact Orlando's vision, because Palermo was technically under the nation-state's jurisdiction. Finally, it illustrates some of the disconnect between what Orlando envisioned and painted for his city, and what life what could look like for migrants in the city.

Orlando had been mayor on and off since the late 1980s and had gained prominence for his vocal anti-Mafia stance, as well as for policy that had 'opened' the city in other ways. He had, for instance, helped to renovate and open to the public some of the city's major architectural

[29] This stance may also be considered a rearticulation of what has been called *sicilianismo,* what Antonio Sorge calls 'a stance born of Sicilians' supposed desire to assert their agency and dignity in the face of a difficult history and the circumstances it has generated, not least by the machinations of a colonial North and Centre of Italy that is said to have deprived the island of its political economic autonomy' (forthcoming).

buildings. His narrative since that time hinged on ideas of openness and liberation – the idea being that the city had been 'closed' and 'insular' in the grips of the Mafia, but was now ready to reveal its true, 'Arab' or 'Arab-Norman' self once more. By the time he was elected for a fourth time, in 2012, and again in 2017, such rhetoric was employed both in his economic efforts to attract tourists and outside investors, as it was with his efforts to espouse a radically pro-migration stance. He signed symbolic documents like the Charter of Palermo and documents attesting to individual migrants' honorary 'citizenship of Palermo'. He attempted to change policy and the workings of individual offices in the city. And mostly, he wove a story: 'Palermo in ancient Greek meant "complete port". We have always welcomed rescue boats and vessels who saved lives at sea. We will not stop now' (Wintour, Tondo, and Kirchgaessner 2018).

Orlando's efforts can be compared to that of other municipalities in Europe that became known as 'cities of solidarity' for projecting attitudes of openness towards migrants that contrasted with national and EU responses to migration, which were increasingly geared towards hardening national borders. As such, these cities' stances also contributed to a debate about what it means to belong, to be a citizen, to be European. As Agustín and Jørgensen write, the urban scale became 'the place to locally articulate inclusive communities where solidarity bonds and coexistence prevail before national borders, and cosmopolitan imaginaries about welcoming, human rights, and the universal political community are enhanced' (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019: 198). They are a place from which counter-discourses of hospitality can easily be observed.

The hope placed on cities to be hospitable where the nation-state would not or could not be connects Palermo directly to Derrida's work. In his 1997 work on cosmopolitanism and

hospitality in cities, Derrida interrogates Henri Lefebvre's (2009 [1968]) idea of the 'right to the city'. Derrida asked: 'Would the City, a right of cities, a new sovereignty of cities open up an original space here that the inter-state-national right has failed to open?' (Derrida 2007v[1997]: 22; cf. Rosello 2001). Derrida's own efforts to create a city of solidarity movement, originally called the 'International Parliament of Writers' even has a direct link to Orlando and to Palermo in the figure of the Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka. Soyinka was the first president of the Parliament (which became the Network of Cities of Asylum); years later, he was made an honorary citizen of the city of Palermo by Orlando, with whom he collaborates and has often shared the stage, including during public discussions about migration.

Leoluca Orlando preaches a form of unconditional hospitality that Derrida would argue is impossible, because of the ways nation-states operate, namely that: unconditional ethical openness is always conditioned by the practicalities of laws, politics, and governance. As I will show, Orlando's argument for the city's inherent ethical openness is constructed by drawing on existing imaginaries of Sicily as Arab, Arab-Norman, or Mediterranean. This ethical possibility hinges on a deferral of practical responsibility for 'closedness' to the state authorities at the national level. This gesture enables Orlando to popularise the rewriting of certain historical narratives and ideas about Sicily but requires a level of resistance to nation-state structures that were not available on a systemic basis in the city except symbolically.

Though the figure of the stranger is represented in the city as its saviour, Orlando's vision is interrupted in practice by the fact that the city cannot fully operate outside of the laws and authority of the nation-state. To do so, in fact, would also be counter-productive to other of Orlando's aims, including: his commitment to *legalità* as part of continuing the work of the anti-Mafia, as well as to the work of civil society responsible for the hospitality efforts that

Orlando touted. My ethnographic investigation of hospitality in Orlando's Palermo thus also makes clear the ways in which the category of 'other' can quickly move from being that describing a saviour, worthy of guest-hood that transcends ideas of law, to being a threat, a usurper of state power who disrespects the law, as represented in this case by the Mafia.

We can see the ways hospitality reveals concerted attempts at 'taking back control' over space, meaning, and future in the city. Because of juridical limits, it is through reframing Palermo's identity and using the figure of the migrant to do so, that Orlando seeks to exert control over the change happening in the city. His aim is to define Palermo's identity so that it may have global resonance in the 21st century.

Orlando's Palermo

In one of my first encounters with then-Mayor Orlando, back in 2016, he stated that he believed Palermitans have a 'chip on their shoulder'. It was a statement, the sentiment of which he had often repeated, publicly, in various guises since the 1980s. An openly Catholic, religious man, Orlando often framed things in psycho-spiritual terms. This was his way of explaining his broader view, that the city's denizens had more than their share of potential and vivacity, but that they had been encumbered by historical forces, the consequences of which he deemed psychological, existential, and spiritual (see also Puccio-Den 2002).

Orlando's reflections were mirrored, if in slightly different ways, elsewhere. In a 2016 study of twenty European cities, Palermo's residents were consistently amongst the most dissatisfied with their city (Koceva et al. 2016). A large graffiti on the side of a wall, just at one of the city's entrances, read, 'Palermo deserves respect' (see Fig. 2). As of writing, it has been there, looking re-painted, for over a decade.

Figure 2 Graffiti 'Palermo Deserves Respect' (photo by author)

This graffiti, these statistics, even Orlando's comments, should of course be read considering ongoing political and economic factors which I have previously discussed, including: Italy's economic dualism, continued out-migration, and ongoing discourses of backwardness such as those represented by the 'Southern Question' which I addressed in the Introduction.

For Orlando, who came of age and who built his career in politics during some of the most violent chapters in the Mafia's history, these sentiments also had to do with collective feelings that, he believed, had long permeated Sicilian society: namely, the cliché that nothing could ever change in this city or on this island. Some writers and intellectuals have interpreted this feeling in cultural or psychological terms – what Theo Rakopoulos calls 'Siculo-Pessimism' (Rakopoulos 2017; Sciascia and Padovani 1991). For Orlando, inertia and backwardness were

due to something more specific: the ways politics was so entangled with Mafia interests. In his own words, unlike the older generation, of which Sciascia was the representative member, Orlando believed that things in Sicily could change.

Orlando was the son of a bourgeois university professor father, and of a mother who descended from the aristocracy. He himself inherited land in Sicily, studied in a prestigious private Catholic school, and was part of elite clubs across the city. Orlando had studied law, first in Palermo, and then briefly in Germany. In his memoir, he posits himself as an intellectual (he mentions seeing Heidegger lecture in Heidelberg, and of receiving the best grades on the Italian national exams), but also as a rebel (he mentions his involvement with the student protests of 1968, and of receiving poor marks in 'behaviour'). Orlando saw justice, and the law, as holding potential for civic reform, and for much of his early career understood himself as a person who was best positioned to change things from the inside.

In the late 1980s, during his first term as mayor with the centrist Christian Democracy party (DC), Orlando's aims had thus largely centred on promoting change in the city by trying to tackle the entanglements of party politics and the Sicilian mafia. This era of his tenure became known as the 'Palermo Spring' – an expression that recalls Orlando's frequent recourse to religious or mythical framings and connotes new life through cyclical resurrection. It was to be brought forward through a spirit of justice and adherence to the law. As mayor, Orlando preached publicly against the collusion and corruption of his own party, and even spoke out against its own ties to the mafia. He understood himself as a kind of whistleblower, choosing to try and change things from within (cf. Puccio-Den 2008). Orlando was critiqued for his anti-Mafia stances from many sides, including by Leonardo Sciascia. Sciascia, an elder and acquaintance of Orlando, was clearly referring to him when he critiqued the *professionisti*

dell'Antimafia – the politicians who used anti-Mafia polemics to consolidate power and build their careers.

Yet it is also true that Orlando was public about his stance – and about the direction that local and national politics should take to create lasting change – during a time when he could have been killed for doing so. His memoir covering his early years in politics is filled, indeed, with pages including stories and names of friends, colleagues, mentors, and innocent citizens in Sicily who were killed all around him for trying to do the same thing that he aimed to do: change the way politics and power operated in the city. Although his first term in office was often referred to as the 'Palermo Spring' – it was followed by several years of unprecedented violence towards police, magistrates and other individuals who embodied the authority of the Italian State. This era culminated symbolically in the 1992 killing of two magistrates, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino.

For this reason, when I spoke to local actors who otherwise espoused radical political views, many came to Orlando's defence. Sure, perhaps he was a magnanimous, possibly vain, actor who wanted to see himself as a hero, and certainly he had his weaknesses – *but,* crucial to many peoples' opinions of him was that he had stood by and for the city at a time when it put him in personal peril to do so.

Orlando returned to office in 1993, following what Deborah Puccio-Den calls a 'wave of emotion' (2008) following the death of these two judges, who were understood to be martyrs in the fight against the Mafia. Yet over the 1990s, it seemed like times really were changing in Palermo: Jane and Peter Schneider titled their 2003 ethnography of the Mafia and Palermo during those years, 'Reversible Destiny', and the book provides a sense that the tide in Palermo

really could change; that this was not just rhetoric. The maxi-trials, following but also enabled by the work of Falcone and Borsellino, as well as the new kinds of politics such as the one Orlando spearheaded, had put a dent in the Mafia stranglehold on the city. Thus began a new era which Orlando called the 'Palermo Renaissance': just as the Italian Renaissance had been a time of artistic and intellectual exploits, Orlando likewise aimed to accompany 'civic renewal with hosting and sponsoring a circle of artists, intellectuals and writers' (Fabre and Puccio-Den 2002).

During this time, a narrative of liberation from the Mafia began, and was also accompanied by two other elements that shed light on what happened in the city later. First, Orlando preached the 'culture of *legalità'* and promoted it through educational and artistic programming that aimed to combat the 'culture of the Mafia'. According to his philosophy, it was through this 'cultural change' that a new spirit of justice and regard for the law would be instilled. Orlando's views echo efforts that were already happening locally and nationally: from teaching '*legalità'* in schools, to planting trees and even memorial parades honouring the fallen magistrates. They reflect an aesthetic approach to virtue and justice that is part of identity-making in Italy more broadly. As Anna Triandafyllidou has written, the 'cult of virtue and beauty and the Catholic tradition of solidarity' have been understood as 'essential elements of Italian culture and identity' (Triandafyllidou 2003: 216). I would add that they were also crucial to the *making* of this culture and identity. Orlando epitomises this view, except that he focussed on the identity-making of Sicily and Palermo specifically, seemingly in subversion – or contestation – of national identity.

As an extension of these efforts, Orlando began to conceive of development plans for the city that hinged on tourism (Azzolina 2009; Schneider and Schneider 2003; Vinci 2021).

Specifically, plans were made to 'revalorise' the city's architecture and heritage, painting it as *arabo-normanna,* Arab-Norman (de Spuches and Mercatanti 2023). The municipality emphasised the restoration of the *centro storico,* Old Town or historic centre, where you could find many architectural examples of this 'Arab-Norman' culture that were to become UNESCO World Heritage Sites (see Palumbo 2006; 2011; Wyer 2024a; 2024b).

Since he had first became mayor of Palermo in 1985, Orlando had expressed statements such as 'Palermo is a live city. We must render the city more *visible'* (Orlando 1990: 61, emphasis mine). This kind of statement begins to get at what can be called the Orlando approach: to create a new representation of and for the city, one that valorised its essential characteristics by translating them into legible aesthetic and narrative terms, believing that this could bring in change and new life. For Orlando, the pessimism and lack of confidence which he felt permeated in Sicily were sentiments that needed to be tackled to ensure lasting political, social, and ultimately economic change in and for the city. The way to do this was, in large part, through this 'cultural approach' that mythologised the city's history, and thus began to create a different representation of, and, in something like didactic terms, also *for* the city. In the years of the anti-Mafia, memorials, shrines, and murals, as well as parades, were set up to commemorate the work of the Antimafia heroes. Alongside these, however, Orlando wanted to 'revalorise' another aspect of Palermo's identity too.

From Arab-Norman Palermo to City of Hospitality

For Orlando, Palermo's heritage and appeal could be illustrated by its buildings, which revealed something of its essence: '… we are not a European city. Palermo is a Middle-Eastern city in Europe... not because we have Arab-Norman monuments, but because we are now Arab-Norman' (De Luca 2017). In making statements such as 'we are not a European city', Orlando

borrowed from longstanding stereotypes about Sicilians and Palermitans but re-framed the moral connotations of this identity. Being of 'Arab' origin wasn't a bad thing, he argued – just look at the beauty of our buildings and our 'culture'.

Reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism' (cf. Wyer 2024a), Orlando used elements that were often used to denigrate Sicilian identity, but instead celebrated it. For instance, Sicily is often discussed as having been dominated by 'everyone': Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Spaniards, Americans, Italians (Bubola and Cipriano 2024; Carney 2021; Mackay 2021; Ragusa 2006). Setting aside one narrative which considered Sicilians as thus being a 'dominated people' cursed by a servant mentality because of having been dominated by so many peoples, Orlando celebrated instead the idea that each ruler had left behind a piece of themselves, so that today's Sicilians were a rich product of these peoples' DNA and cultures.

As Sean Wyer (forthcoming) explores in depth, Orlando pulled from an intellectual genealogy of Sicily that aimed at 'rediscovering' Sicily's Arabness, often for political and identitarian ends. Various Arab peoples had arrived in and ruled parts of Sicily in the 9th and 10th centuries. This epoch eventually gave way to Norman rule. They were perhaps not as tolerant as the mythologising of certain historians would lead us to believe (cf. Norwich 1992). Yet there is a common story that the Normans incorporated certain inventions in sciences, arts, and politics that enabled continuation with this 'Arab' era rather than rupture. As Wyer points out, in his *Storia dei Musulmani in Sicilia,* published between 1854 and 1872, the Sicilian historian Michele Amari referenced the writings of Arab travellers – including Ibn Jubayr, Idrisi, and Ibn Hawqal. He observes that they themselves noted the tolerance exhibited towards Muslims under later Norman rule to put forth an argument for the ways Sicilians had, since their rule,

continued to be, in part, 'Arab' (Amari 1854). Amari, as Wyer writes, had explicitly political aims, first, for Sicilian separatism and then for Italian patriotism (in Wyer forthcoming; Mallette 2010).

Amari's views were taken up in the 20th century by the island's two most prominent public intellectuals of the time: Sciascia and Vincenzo Consolo, who read Amari through the work of Americo Castro, in particular his thesis of *convivencia* in Andalusia (see Wyer forthcoming). In their writings for the public – including newspaper articles and essay collections meant for popular consumption – these authors argued that the arrival of Muslims in medieval Sicily marked the island's glory age, and also the beginning of a 'Sicilian way of being' (Consolo 2007: 228). This 'Sicilian way of being' is not wholly positive: as Sciascia writes, 'whoever disembarks' on this 'island with an Arab face' is 'immediately assaulted by an atmosphere of violence' (Sciascia and Padovani 1991: 3). In such comments, we see traces of the stereotypes of the 'Southern Question' – namely that places like Sicily are distinguished by a stubborn, almost indelible cultural pattern of violence.

Yet, also key to this idea of the 'Sicilian way of being' is the idea of cohabitation. In one essay, entitled *Sicily and Arab Culture,* Consolo, for instance, extols all the grand achievements of the arts and sciences that the Arab dominators brought to Sicily, and which remain. He argues, like Sciascia, that traces of 'Arabness' are visible in Sicilians' habitus. Crucially, he writes:

> … the greatest miracle achieved during Muslim domination was the spirit of tolerance, the cohabitation of peoples of different culture, race, and religion. This tolerance, this cultural syncretism, was to be inherited by the Normans, under whom the ideal society was truly realized, a society in which every culture, every ethnic group lives in respect of others (229).

As Wyer also shows, Sciascia and Consolo both wrote explicitly of the influence on their work of the Spanish historian Américo Castro, who first theorised *convivencia* in the Andalusian context. Similar to Castro's idea of *Andalucismo,* to describe the enduring influence of

Muslims and of medieval cohabitation on contemporary Andalusians, Wyer coins the idea of '*Siqillismo'* to refer to the cosmopolitan reading of Sicilian identity that is 'cosmopolitan' insofar as it is rooted in an idea of Sicily's mixed, Arab-Norman, Mediterranean identity, which can be read in the work of these authors.

Orlando's representations of the city for the public borrowed from such intellectual sources and narrativizing of Sicily and Sicilians that ties not just to an 'Arab' past, but also crucially to the Mediterranean – as a place, as a font of ideas, as a place of exchange. He repurposed their ideas, however, for distinctly political and economic means that aimed to, in his words and in the local parlance, 'revalorise' Palermo. His audiences were diverse, as he tried to convince both locals and foreigners, and people of different social classes, of what he was saying.[30] Towards locals, his aim was, in part, to fix what he perceived as the 'chip on their shoulder' by promoting an essence of what made Palermitans, Palermitans, and then valorising this essence. As such, he was not concerned with the details of history but with the glory and aura of myth. Such efforts went together with his attempts to build a heritage industry in Palermo – one that would both enable Palermo's citizens to live their city in a new way, and also attract foreigners. Foreigners, in his logic, might bring money, but also a new outlook on the city that saw value in it that locals did not.

More broadly, we see in Orlando's early attempts to make Palermo an 'Arab-Norman' city, aims to re-position the city in, as Dino Palumbo (2011) has written, the global hierarchy of values. Orlando's policies would later usher in a series of critiques about the commodification of Palermo's identity and history through the creation of something like a heritage industrial complex that is now causing new issues for the city, as tourists and Airbnb take over working-

[30] In this, Orlando is evincing a skill that Leonardo Sciascia described as 'Pirandellian': an ability to navigate between different identities in order to persuade different audiences (Sciascia 1996).

class parts of the city (cf. Palma 2021).

But if we return to the time in which these ideas germinated for Orlando, and the ways he deployed them rhetorically, what we see in more analytical terms is a continuation of his anti-Mafia work as he saw it. In his framing, the Mafia had caused a level of closure and insularity within the city that it was now free of.[31] The narrative of Arab-Norman Palermo was at its core an aesthetic narrative about openness to outsiders: it was a way of telling history that proved that, at their most essential, Sicilians were a mixed people whose greatest achievements had come from their openness to outsiders and to outside cultures. Being Arab-Norman meant being Mediterranean, as a place of mixedness between Europe and Africa or the Middle East. In turn, this meant being welcoming to outsiders – people who might bring new energy, insight, and crucially, money to the city.

When Orlando came to office again for his fourth term, after a ten-year hiatus in which he had been, among other things, an EU Parliamentarian, the year was 2012. Others had been mayor in the interim – and, according to some of my interlocuters, even done a better job of actually enacting things that Orlando merely talked about. Already, he had gained a reputation for someone who spoke well, but did not always execute. Still, as one journalist put it during an event I attended in 2021, at the close of Orlando's final term, 'Orlando is Palermo, and Palermo is Orlando'. This is undoubtedly a product of the fact that, beginning in 2012, Orlando's last two terms in office were marked by a continuation of the narratives and work of change that he had first set out for himself in the 1980s. This is true even though this time, there was a new

[31] As always with Orlando, we should not take what he is saying literally, but mythically, akin to Liisa Malkki's (1995) idea of 'mythico-history'. The Mafia, for instance, was clearly not an insular force, as it had international if not global ties, predominantly to the US (Lupo 2015; Puccio-Den 2002). What he means however is that, in mythical, spiritual terms, its grip on the city prevented the city's true spirit of extroversion, of entrepreneurship, of creative invention – epitomised by its 'Arab-Norman' essence – to thrive.

geopolitical issue at play: following the fall of Muammar Ghaddafi and the Arab Spring after 2011, more people had begun to land on Sicilian shores. These individuals – alternately called migrants, adventurers, *clandestini,* refugees – had crossed the Mediterranean in search of new life in Europe. Orlando's message of openness took on new meaning.

This new meaning comes to light in one of many passages from an interview Orlando gave to Italy's daily, *La Repubblica*:

> 'Today, in Palermo, the prince, the pauper, and the grocer who feeds them both, all live in the same building. It's a model for civic cohabitation, and immigrants are a huge opportunity for us, to save and to bring ahead our model of living together. … But all of this doesn't mean anything if we don't carry forward that extra thing that makes us one step ahead: the Charter of Palermo, our proposition to abolish the temporary permit of stay. To be the capital of culture doesn't just mean bringing thousands of artists and works of art here: it means being a model for hospitality (*accoglienza*)' (De Luca 2017).

It is around this time that Orlando's message of openness and liberation becomes more closely associated to the idea of hospitality, the Italian *accoglienza.* The arrival of migrants at Palermo's doors heightened the value of what Orlando and others had already been pushing: the city's 'Arab-Norman' tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and *convivenza*. Their arrivals allowed Orlando and other public actors in the city to 'prove' what was otherwise just talk: by showing hospitality towards these newcomers, they were *enacting* this spirit of tolerance that historians and intellectuals had preached, and which characterised being Mediterranean and southern.

In turn, the message of hospitality was a key part of turning Orlando's Palermo into a kind of 'city of solidarity' – a place from which to contest the Italian and European bordering policies that were manifest across the city, beginning at the port. Where once Orlando had pitched himself against the Mafia, now he pitched himself, and his city, against the border regimes of Italy and Europe. Orlando often said that Europe should be sued: Europe was the mythical birthplace of 'human rights' yet, as Orlando argued, it was responsible for acts of genocide

against refugees and migrants. He was referencing the ways European border policies, the lack of legal pathways, and increasing resistance to rescue efforts resulted in people dying in the Mediterranean (van der Zee 2017). His critiques were clear, and he used language that resembled activist slogans in 'No Border' movements.

By contrast to 'Europe', Orlando sought to project an idea of Palermo as offering unconditional hospitality. Referring to those who crossed the Mediterranean as 'our brothers', Orlando stated that anyone who arrived in Palermo became a Palermitan and that 'in Palermo, there are 670,000 migrants. Either we are all migrants or no one in this city is' (Virga 2018). Orlando called Palermo a 'mosaic', but also a 'melting pot', again premised on its mythico-history: being 'Arab-Norman' encapsulated the idea that Palermo was geographically and culturally at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, where different people were welcomed, could peacefully cohabitate, and then become local, Palermitan. To 'prove' such statements about the city's hospitality, Orlando embarked on a series of efforts which were often symbolic and theatrical, but nonetheless formed open contestations of anti-immigration politics and approaches that characterised mainstream Italian politics. They formed public performances aimed at trying to take back control.

For instance, he offered what he called 'symbolic citizenship' to all migrants living in the city, and in some cases, this was replete with a citizenship ceremony (covered by the media). Orlando also oversaw the launching of the 'Charter of Palermo' (Città di Palermo 2015), a document that put forth an 'acknowledgement of a universal right to human mobility' (Cusumano 2021). It offered structural plans for trying to uphold this right, such as the idea of promising indeterminate stay to all migrants. Though improbable, this document held value as a codification of what many people across the European border zones were fighting *for,* not

just against. Orlando also frequently stated that Italy should eliminate the temporary permit of stay that was so problematic in peoples' lives, as the need to constantly renew it often made it difficult to find legal, contractual work, and meant that people often became undocumented. Orlando also tried to spearhead efforts that would enable anyone who was resident in the city – whether citizen or not – to be able to get the *carta di identità,* the identity document that had both practical and symbolic value for its holders, evincing belonging to a city and serving as a useful legal identity document.

A key moment for Orlando was his showdown with then-Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini. In 2018, Salvini closed all Italian ports, leaving hundreds of people stranded at sea. Salvini was playing his own theatrical politics: he was trying to force other European countries to open their ports, in the name of 'burden sharing'. But, in his speeches, Orlando interpreted Salvini's closure of the ports as a sign of the general 'closedness' of the Italian state, and he stated instead that he would keep the port of Palermo open. At moments like this, Orlando again invoked the ancient Greek name for the city of Palermo, 'Panormus' meaning 'complete port' – characterising Palermo as a city of refuge, whose openness and hospitality was total.

Because Palermo is under the jurisdiction of Italy, the port was not Orlando's to open. He also seemed unable to get the local *ufficio anagrafe,* the office responsible for providing identity documents, to comply with his injunction to give out identity cards more liberally. As a result, what emerged was a symbolic politics that projected 'unconditional hospitality' and deferred all responsibility for closedness onto the national state and Europe. Yet this politics remained unable to effect significant legal change in the city for migrants.

Because much of Orlando's efforts remained largely symbolic – a politics of theatre and of

spectacle – its limits and critiques were plentiful. Many in the city criticised Orlando for being a good talker, a charismatic man who could hold a stage, but not a *doer.* Others lamented that Palermo was becoming a playground for tourists. Orlando was open about the fact that his plan was partly economic: '[Palermo is] the city of hospitality, which thanks to hospitality has become exciting and safe […] we welcome migrants and tourists come' (Merelli 2016).

At the same time, his message had clear resonance for the audience within a city like Palermo: his message of hospitality opened a way of making meaning out of the city's existence and its history. It meant that emigration, that the problems that plagued the Italian South, a place once considered to be beyond the European pale, could now be understood differently. Just as Herzfeld (1987) called the hospitality of Greeks towards Europeans a form of 'moral englobement', we can see here too how Orlando's rhetoric of hospitality enables Sicily – a place long considered as part of Italy's foremost 'other', against which its Europeanness was constructed – to emerge, actually, as seemingly *more* 'civilised', *more* concerned with human rights, *more* moral than Europe. We can say that Orlando engages in a kind of representative cosmopolitics that re-territorialises his city as 'Mediterranean', offering an alternative form of social cohabitation, founded on the duty and cultural characteristic of hospitality, that values inclusion rather than exclusion. This is a form of identitarian control-making, through the invocation of hospitality, or openness towards foreigners.

Mirrored in the City: The Stranger as Saint and Saviour

Orlando's narratives of hospitality glorified both the city, and the strangers that had come to call Palermo home. In this way, they crystallised the morals and lessons contained within some of the city's most celebrated folklore and hagiography. During the Orlando years, the attention and spectacle of the migration question helped to bring these myths and stories, part of the

folklore of the city, to its surface. I mean this literally, as large murals and public portraits depicting these myths and saints appeared during the Orlando years. Such activities translated the city's history and myth into a contemporary language that was supposed to be visible and legible to locals of different classes, as well as to outsiders – whether tourists, the media, or migrants. Indeed, as my opening illustrated, this attitude was exciting to the international media.

These efforts emanated from the work of a few, often charismatic, highly educated, and not uncommonly activist, individuals and groups, who were mostly aligned in their politics with Orlando. Such efforts thus often had the effect of seeming to serve a kind of didactic role. This didacticism went together with the oft-repeated 'revalorization' an idea that smacked of class-based understandings about change of the city's physical spaces, which were typically in working-class neighbourhoods. In this way, they are reminiscent of what Asher Ghertner (2015) calls an 'aesthetic mode of governing', in which a particular aesthetic is deemed, usually by elites, to communicate positive traits about the city.

What is interesting is that these efforts often seemed to replicate 'bottom-up' modes of aestheticizing a public place, such as through murals or gardening efforts. And indeed, they were part of promoting a 'southern' or 'Mediterranean' identity that clearly contested, in form and content, the aesthetic of Italian nationalism. Often painted or conducted in public squares, in working class neighbourhoods frequented by locals and migrants, they suggest attempts at a 'culture shift' that is reminiscent of that of Palermo's Renaissance in the 1990s, when Orlando championed events, memorials, and arts that promoted a 'culture of *legalità'*.

In this case, many of the myths represented through these urban activities revolved around, and

re-interpreted, the city's folklore in which the stranger was seen as a bearer of gifts, as a saint, or in certain cases, as a saviour of the city. The national state, its bureaucracies, its austerity – not to mention the Mafia – were not figured in these efforts, but were in some sense an absent presence: they were some of the ghosts lurking in the crumbling buildings on which these murals were painted. The continued abandonment, neglect, and denigration of the city had the same culprit that was killing migrants at sea: the Italian state (the narrative some people held was that more resources *must* have been sent up north, where, *of course,* things worked better). By contrast, certain urban myths, folklore, and hagiographies were represented and placed over these ruined sites, depicting strangers as sources of benediction and as presences which are loyal and intimate to the city, and represent its strength.

One such example is the painting of San Benedetto il Moro, by Igor Scalisi Palminteri (the painter of the mural at Capaci) in a small piazza in Palermo's working-class Kalsa district. San Benedetto is known to be a man who descended from enslaved people of African origin who had been brought to Europe. He became religious and a saint, and, in 1713, was named the co-patron saint of the city of Palermo, together with his counterpart, the better-known and more widely celebrated Saint Rosalia. In both his interviews about the painting, and the newspaper articles that covered it, the details of the saint's life are threadbare – but historical complexities are clearly not the point. The point is that he is a Black man of African descent, that the city of Palermo made him a saint in the 18th century, and that today – according to Palminteri at least – locals welcome his refiguration in this public place. In one interview, Palminteri describes, for instance, how passersby complimented the painting, even buying him a beer to thank him for his efforts (Marsala 2018).

Figure 3 The mural of San Benedetto in Kalsa, Palermo (photo by author)

The articles covering the painting also all mention how this was a square where youth of African origin engaged in football games, and where local children played. However, according to these same articles, the square was apparently full of trash until a group called 'Mediterraneo Antirazzista' arrived, pursued clean-up efforts, and even helped to insert a new turf where people could play proper football. The mural was part of these efforts at 'revalorization'. It was also a touchpoint that brought forward, in the news coverage, other kinds of stories about Palermitan '*accoglienza',* apparently by the local, working-class

community. This included, for instance, the story of a young African boy who, after having miraculously survived being shot in the head, was taken in and cared for by the local community (e.g. Marsala 2018; Rotolo 2018). As a symbol of hospitality, the mural of San Benedetto, also becomes a means through which the media communicate Palermitans' inherent openness to outsiders. As both foreigner and Sicilian, he represents how foreigners are understood as sacred, but also how the 'foreignness' of Sicilian society is itself the source of Sicilians' own sacredness. Here is a key example of the ways hospitality is invoked, yet it is about something other than itself: in this case, a re-establishing of Sicilian identity.

A similar example is a mural, in an adjacent working-class neighbourhood, the Magione, that juxtaposed an image of the tale of the *teste di moro* with a contemporary image of white and Black children studying together (see Fig. 4). The open book in front of them depicts a boat in the middle of the sea – a clear reference to migration – and the page reads 'Education is the strongest weapon that you can use to change the world'. In a sense these two images stand in tension with one another, but this tension shows us something about what the mural is doing. The myth of the *teste di moro* describes a tale in which a Sicilian woman falls in love with a soldier of Arab origin during the occupation of Palermo. Upon discovering that he has a different lover back home to whom he intends to return, the Sicilian woman cuts off his head and plants basil into it, using it as a vase on her porch. In some renditions of the tale, her own head is cut off by the authorities as a punishment for her crime. This is said to be why, today, ceramic shops across Sicily sell two heads together: a female, usually white, and her partner, a male, often depicted with traits meant to read as 'Arab' or 'African'.

The image's juxtaposition with that of young schoolchildren of different skin colours, and the message written within the mural itself, connotes different messages. On the one hand, it

sanitizes the myth, showing the two together and alive, seemingly happy. It is thus almost more reminiscent of other tales that can be found across Sicily, such as that of Mara and Grifone; across these tales a male outsider is domesticated through love and marriage to a local woman, which then enables him to become King and founder of Sicilian cities. The mural's juxtaposition of these two images puts the contemporary phenomenon of migration within this longer mythico-history of Sicily. Like Orlando's rhetoric, the murals suggest that people of different backgrounds get along today in Sicily just as always. By embracing outsiders (through an education in diversity and in coming together across difference) great things can be accomplished for the island's future.

Figure 4 Two murals near the Magione (Photo by author)

Just as Palminteri's mural overlooked a big piazza where activists ran a football league for young African men, this mural was painted along the walls near a school, and was situated next to a different, enclosed football pitch. Here, another activist organization, called AddioPizzo, also ran a football club for local school children. AddioPizzo was an anti-Mafia organization that had started in the early 2000s and morphed into an NGO that engaged in a broad set of activities geared at combatting the Mafia 'in all its forms'. Antiracism and anti-Mafia efforts

come together and become enmeshed in spaces such as these, and in how they are discussed.

These are but two examples of many murals or 'public paintings' that exist throughout the city. Their messaging, and their locations, offer a clear lesson about foreigners and diversity that recall elements of Pitt-Rivers' (1968) work on hospitality, and in particular on the sacredness of strangers as I discussed in the Introduction and Theory chapters. Pitt-Rivers' invocations of the divine and of spirituality to explain hospitality and social views of strangers well befit this Catholic context, even as the readings on hospitality differ (and more closely resemble Marshall Sahlins' work on stranger-kings).

We can see clearly how such notions, related to *theoxenia,* operate in Orlando's rhetoric, as well as the public paintings and murals such as those that I have mentioned. Across these representations, strangers – whether the mythical 'Arabs', San Benedetto il Moro, or a generic representation of foreign men who become kings in Sicily – are depicted as portents of good fortune, of divinity, of the gift of knowledge. They are compared to contemporary migrants, who thus become themselves such potentially divine figures. But they are also identified as being Palermitans, a move that both celebrates the 'otherness' or 'in-betweenness' of Sicilian identity (as both southern and Mediterranean) and, crucially, upholds the value of hospitality – even teaching *accoglienza* through representations that a broad public is granted access to. Such representations show the ways, through the figure of the 'migrant', certain elite or public Sicilian actors aimed to rewrite Palermitans' and Sicilians' history in mythical terms that celebrated local identity. The public narrativizing and visual representations show how this message was then related to local people and outsiders, whether migrant or tourist.

The Parable of the Street Vendor: Multiculturalism vs. Legalità

I began this chapter with a scene from the port of Palermo. Despite my discursive attention to representation and aesthetics, what I remain interested in is the ways the imaginary promoted by Orlando and other elites in the city was in turn understood and lived out by the people it represented – in particular, the so-called migrants who had become symbols of the city. Over my fifteen months of fieldwork, I had the chance to ask many immigrants to the city about how they felt in it. Across the various sites where I conducted participant-observation, I met people who had different living conditions: some had been in Palermo for decades and even acquired citizenship. Others had lived for years undocumented. Still others had arrived very recently and were still trying to get their footing, having recently applied for asylum. In some cases, I asked directly if they thought Palermo was a 'welcoming city'. In other cases, I asked vaguer questions, about their 'experiences in Palermo', or if they thought Palermo was a place where they would like to stay for the long run.

The answers I received spanned the gamut. Some told me that they felt very welcome, even at home, in certain parts of the city. More than one said that the market in Ballarò had reminded them of Africa: sellers even offered some of the same wares, being themselves from different parts of the continent. One pointed to the mural of San Benedetto as a source of hope. Others felt, however, that as soon as they left the Ballarò neighbourhood, they would be treated differently. One recalled a neighbour calling the police on him, when he moved into an upper-class building in a different section of town with his Italian, then-girlfriend.

For others, even Ballarò, which had gained a reputation for being an 'immigrant neighbourhood' that best epitomised Orlando's ideas about Palermitan *convivenza,* did not offer the welcome that they had expected. One Nigerian man I spoke to had actually landed in

France but had come to Palermo because he had heard from other Nigerians living in Italy that it was a welcoming place. But he did not feel this welcome, at least not in the terms he needed: nearly six months into his life in Palermo, he was still sleeping on the streets, working without a contract, and had not heard back about his request for asylum. He was beginning to miss his family terribly.

There were worse stories too, in the city: about people getting beaten up, getting evicted from hostels where they were staying, getting exploited at work. Between these discussions, and the volunteering I did at the *sportello,* it was difficult not to get quite cynical about Orlando's 'vision' of and for the city. For instance, when I first told the people working at the *sportello* that I was interested in studying *accoglienza* and understanding what its effects were, they immediately directed me to a man I will call Karim. Karim and his parents had arrived in Palermo decades earlier and worked as street vendors along one of Palermo's main arteries, Via Maqueda. I grew to know Karim fairly well over the course of my time in Sicily.

In a lengthy conversation we had in a nearby café, Karim finally laid out his version of his story. For years, ambulatory vendors, mostly of North African or Bangladeshi origin, had sold their wares from carts. I knew exactly who he was referring to. Stationed at the edge of the sidewalk where it met the road, which was now a pedestrian zone, closed to traffic, they sold light-up toys and magnets, jewellery and sunglasses. At some point, they began to face harassment from passers-by and the police that, Karim felt, directly linked back to Orlando.

According to Karim, the Orlando administration initially refused to recognise the vendors as official, even though many of the sellers had documents and visas that were based on their commercial activities and were thus '*in regola',* in obeyance with the law. He explained that

vendors were nonetheless called '*abusivi'*, a word that is reminiscent of the lexicon of the anti-Mafia, to describe a person who acts in flagrant disrespect of the law, often related to housing or commercial activity. Then Orlando even issued an '*ordinanza'*, a city order, '*per il decoro urbano'*, 'for the public decorum'. This order, Karim told me, led to an atmosphere in which the ambulatory vendors were harassed by passers-by as well as by the police. In the face of this harassment, and with his livelihood jeopardised, one young man had lit himself on fire in protest and died.

During this era, Karim described himself as having become a spokesperson for the other vendors. As he saw it, he was targeted by the police because of his role. He told me that he was falsely accused of physically attacking a female police officer (it was the police, he said, who attacked him). Although he was ultimately absolved, the case continued for years before it was resolved. He believed the police had taken advantage of the fact that he was North African – '*arabo'*, coincidentally – to play on stereotypes about how men behave towards women and create a believable story that he was violent towards a female police officer.

In the meantime, he continued his activist work, requesting to meet personally with Orlando to explain the vendors' side of the situation. 'All of our requests for meeting with Orlando were rejected' Karim told me. 'I agree that the Palermo of today is not the Palermo of yesterday. It used to be a city where you had to be careful walking down the street'. But, he continued, Orlando 'presented us with an image of multiculturalism, and it isn't like that'. It was only once the protests became big enough to attract national attention that Orlando finally sat down with Karim, who was acting as a representative for the other merchants. Karim reported to me that what Orlando said in public was different to what he had said to them in private. He told us, 'first off, you aren't migrants, you are *Palermitani'*. Karim smiled at this, and remarked

how Orlando was ‘good at talking’. He added, ‘if you ask migrants of today about Orlando, they will say he is an angel. But for us, when the right had power, we didn’t feel racism, and now, with the left, we do’.

This case illustrates the ways Orlando’s two foundational pillars – hospitality (associated to the Arab-Norman identity, which Karim here describes as ‘multiculturalism’) and *legalità* – seem to contradict themselves in the lives of migrants (Wyer 2024a). Here, Orlando as an anti-Mafia mayor and Orlando as the ‘pro-migration’ Mayor of ‘Palermo, *città dell’accoglienza*’ seem to have competing priorities. As Wyer (2024a) has written, in the case of the street vendors, Orlando is acting in stated accordance with the anti-Mafia idea of *legalità. Legalità* is seen as the antidote to ‘*abusivismo’* – the concept that Karim alludes to, which is associated with the Mafia or mafia-like behaviour in Sicily, but which officially regards any activity operating outside of or against the law.

This example also makes clear the ways in which legality has normative connotations linked to ideas of civility and development, which are explicit in Karim’s explanation that Orlando mentioned the ‘urban décor’. *Legalità* could be read as a convenient excuse to cater to certain interests over others – the store owners that lined Via Maqueda, for instance, whose shops were hidden by the ambulatory vendors’ carts.

But it also shows how ideas of legality, anti-Mafia, and development affected migrant lives in such a way that partially contradicted Orlando’s image of hospitality. This regards the image of Orlando’s hospitality that was seen by people as a mode of contesting the nation-state approach to borders of the nation-state that render migrants *illegal*. *Legalità* was not originally meant support these bordering efforts, but it was, ultimately a pro-state stance. It makes sense

in the longer context of Orlando's, and the city's, trajectory, in which breaking the law is both a betrayal of the polis, and historically a sympathetic line of argument to those who grew up in the Antimafia movement. *Legalità* may persuade some people who otherwise might come to the defence of a migrant salesperson accused of breaking the law, much more than 'law and order' approaches elsewhere.

But for Karim, the matter symbolised that what he called Orlando's 'image of multiculturalism' didn't pan out. Although there are plenty of examples of the ways multiculturalism and a 'rule of Law' approach to governance are compatible theories, what Karim seemed to be getting at was that Orlando could use this image to paint a nice picture of Palermo, but he could also deviate from it when it wasn't in his interest. Here, class and material politics come into play again, as street vendors saw their livelihoods endangered, and perceived them as being sacrificed within a city that claimed to be 'multicultural', hospitable, cosmopolitan, open, Mediterranean, and so forth. As such, it felt to people like Karim that Orlando's was a selective celebration of diversity that didn't apply to them – whether for business reasons, classed aesthetics, or allegiance to the discourse of legality and its underlying assumptions of 'urban decorum'. Hospitality worked as depicted in murals and public paintings, but, according to Karim at least, it didn't seem to pan out in life.

The situation of the street vendors recalls Slavoj Zizek's (1997) critique of what he refers to as 'liberal centrism': namely, that under multiculturalism, supposedly all cultures are created equal. Except, Zizek argues, for that of the arbiters of the given society, who are understood as being in positions of 'neutrality'. But this very position of arbitration, 'which presents itself as neutral and post-ideological' and relies on the 'rule of the Law', gets to decide who or what fits into its vision of 'multiculturalism'. The case of the street vendors indicates how, as mayor

of this city, Orlando was also inevitably part of the state. He made governance decisions, and often these aligned with certain material and business aims that resulted in the very kinds of bordering and exclusion mechanisms he decried in his rhetoric, and projected onto the Italian and European states.

For people like Karim, Orlando's 'city of hospitality' vision could thus come to seem a very classed, aesthetic form of celebration of identities. It could seem like it was only permitted when it came to Arab-Norman architecture or to recent initiatives within the Ballarò neighbourhood that pitched the city's 'immigrant' or 'multicultural' identity: the sorts of things that could be aestheticized and sold, to attract tourists and the media, or to redesign the city according to a particular, often elite, aesthetic (cf. Ghertner 2015).

What this situation also presents is a clear tension between how Orlando understands the Italian state's central 'others'. On the one hand, you have migrants, the celebrated strangers who are represented as saints and saviours, as contemporary *arabi* ready to usher in a new glory age for the city. In some sense, these strangers also come to represent Palermitans themselves. This is both because they were long considered the 'other' of the Italian state (as southerners and Mediterraneans, thought to be perennially addled by organised crime). It is also because of Orlando's idea that strangers become immediately assimilated as *palermitani.* On the other hand, you have the Mafia, who have come to represent the other side of the 'stranger' that Pitt-Rivers elaborated: the threat to the legitimacy, purity, and even monopoly on violence of the state that southerners *also* often represented in a national imaginary. In Orlando's rhetoric and symbolic politics, hospitality was the mechanism that enabled attempts to contest the state by trying to act *outside* its jurisdiction, through preaching a kind of unconditional welcome. But the continued threat from the Mafia (the other 'other' of the state) highlighted the conditionality

of these claims. Migrants like Karim were caught in the web of these conceptual and practical contradictions that traced back to issues that long predated their arrival: the formation of the Italian nation-state, the history of the Mafia and the counter-Mafia, the uses of the law in those struggles, and the psycho-spiritual dilemmas all of these forces created for southern Italians and leaders like Orlando.

Enacting Hospitality Amidst the Palermo-State Entwinement

Like Karim, I often felt a gap between what was preached and what was enacted. It created whiplash, a kind of cognitive dissonance. A city that often felt so warm, that was so beautiful, could also be so harsh. Now I am falling into clichés about Palermo; nonetheless these stereotypes only seemed amplified in the context of migrant lives. But perhaps this was to be expected: Orlando preached a vision for a kind of utopia, but the reality would fall short of the radical hospitality that animated his rhetoric (Jameson 2004). Derrida's city of hospitality has often been described as a '"non-utopia" utopia' – an acknowledgement of the conceptual impossibility of the ethical standard that he elaborated (Darling 2014; Kelly 2004). After a while, like Rosello (2001) I too began to look less for the ways in which social life in the city disproved Orlando's rhetoric, and more for the conditions under which forms of hospitality *could be* made possible.

In Orlando's story, hostility towards migrants or outsiders, was deferred onto the national 'state'. This meant that hospitality, to be 'real' in the sense of adhering to Orlando's terms, would have to involve actions that resisted the nation state, or created spaces outside of its jurisdiction. The example that came to mind was how, at sea, captains of NGO ships that rescued migrants were performing a kind of 'civil disobedience', refusing to obey the state's orders not to rescue certain people, or to dock at certain ports, and even risked arrest and being

tried as a smuggler for these acts. Yet, within the city, Orlando's idea of a permeating, radical hospitality that described the essence and energy of the city was in fact often curbed, both by *his* limited jurisdiction (because the city was part of the state, so ports were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Transport), as well as by internal contradictions of his own politics.

There was also the inevitable fact that the 'state', onto which he projected all the hostility or restrictionism that people might experience, often overlapped in and with Palermo. It was not some 'out there' entity but was embodied by the many *palermitani* who worked in its employ: magistrates, police officers, reception workers, but also doctors and lawyers (and to some extent, Orlando himself). Through my work at the *sportello*, I saw how these individuals affected migrants' and asylum-seekers' lives: these state-*palermitani* could grant documents or not, could offer a bed for the night or not, could focus on someone's asylum case or treat them in impersonal ways (after all, they would be paid whether or not their client received asylum).

As a result, I often felt that for actors in the city like the volunteers of the *sportello*, the question of how to welcome migrants lay, actually, in acting as a bridge through which migrants could *better access* the 'state' – its impenetrable laws, bureaucracy, and policies, even its officials – which would need to be strategically negotiated if one hoped, as many people did, to be able to live legally in Europe. At the *sportello*, people rarely articulated their work as hospitality, because they associated *accoglienza* with glib rhetoric, or with the state-funded reception centres. Like some of the scholars whose work I discuss in my Introduction, they saw it as moral or apolitical language that served the interests of the state.

For many of the socio-legal operators that I followed at the *sportello*, as well as other volunteers in the city, although they distinguished the national state from the municipal one, they similarly critiqued Orlando's use of the term. They often said that they felt that Orlando took credit for the work that was done by civil society actors like themselves. Over the years, they had worked hard to form a heterogeneous if tightly knit infrastructure of NGOs, associations, and informal groups of citizens that tried to include, support, or otherwise accompany migrants in Palermo.

These actors were interested in notions of welcome, or refuge. They used *accoglienza* in their own vocabulary. But they differentiated it from both the Italian state's use, and the municipal authorities' use. To them, *accoglienza* often meant enabling people to get the proper documents, to access the services that these socio-legal workers felt was their right, and which many people needed and desired to build a life in Sicily. The socio-legal workers critiqued national laws and policies, but also worked strategically to try and navigate them, to get the best possible outcome for the people they were working with.

This required gaining expert knowledge of Italian law, as well as thinking creatively about how to frame peoples' cases, even pushing elements of the law to see how judges would react. For instance, in 2016, I watched as the socio-legal workers at the *sportello* would sit with asylum-seekers, helping them to rehearse their stories about why and how they left to emphasize the elements of their trajectories that could amount to 'persecution' in the sense of the Geneva Convention. By 2024, these same people were explaining to asylum-seekers that all the magistrates cared about was if you could speak Italian, had an employer who was ready to hire you legally, and could show some social ties or sense of loyalty to your community in Italy, through volunteer work, for instance.

This work could be subversive if you started from the assumption that the state did not do it. It was clear to these actors, for instance, that those in power did not want too many people to get documents, perhaps because that would not benefit them politically, nor would it benefit the Italian economic structure that relied on cheap, easily exploitable labour necessary for 'dirty work' (Cole and Booth 2006). Using often creative logic, these actors found ways of getting documents for people who had slipped through the cracks. A key example is a young woman, born in Sicily to Tunisian parents, whose birth had never been registered with the local anagraphical office. Although she spoke Sicilian, although her entire life was based in Sicily, she had no documents to prove it. In the meantime, she needed serious medical attention that required her to have certain residency documents. The socio-legal workers ended up applying for refugee status, and despite the judge in question's misgivings about offering refugee status to someone born in Italy, the status was granted because of the specificities of the case.

But this kind of work often also meant that migrants had to interface with state authorities, and the socio-legal workers ultimately acted as brokers to and with the state at different levels. In many cases, these socio-legal workers brought undocumented people into the reach of the state. Their undocumented status was risky, as it could mean deportation or detention, but as I will show in Chapter 6, in the absence of controls, it also allowed people to act in a space of a certain kind of freedom (see Ellermann 2010). By contrast, these socio-legal workers sometimes brought people to the very spaces governed and established by the Italian state – like the reception hostels – that they condemned. They were aware of the contradictions and dilemmas of this work, and even ideologically sometimes did not know where to position themselves. While they thought that it would be more correct to think of themselves as 'state socialists', many spoke of a longing to think of themselves as 'anarchist'. I will return to the work of these actors in later chapters.

Conclusion

What we see in this chapter is how difficult it was in practice to separate out 'the city' from 'the state'. Orlando had set out an identitarian, imaginative and highly aesthetic idea of unconditional hospitality that hinged on the restrictions, hostilities and constraints imposed on migrants being the responsibility of the Italian and European states. He projected the city as a kind of cocoon, a place where migrants were celebrated and envisioned as essential to the city: they were a sacred kind of 'other' that evidenced the sacredness of the city itself, epitomised in the idea of Palermo as 'Arab-Norman'. This mythical image-making had different audiences: from the city's own residents to politicians governing the Italian national state, to tourists.

If, as I am arguing, hospitality involves a certain element of control, here we can say that hospitality involved control over identity, and an attempt at control or sovereignty over the space of the city, and over its symbolic meaning. Such control was based on a narrative of being open to foreigners. In turn, it might restore a certain kind of mobility to them, if only within the bounds of this city.

But Orlando's hospitality rhetoric was also using host-guest dynamics for the hosts: it was about regaining control on behalf of *palermitani* from both the nation-state and the Mafia. Often described in terms of rebirth or regeneration, it marked a mode of re-rooting, of declaring one's at-homeness in the city that was characterised by the opening of urban space. This had to do with an openness towards mobility to and within the city, but it also had to do with beauty and aesthetics that operated as forms of didactic meaning-making across the city. It reinterpreted this southern city as Mediterranean: not the Mediterranean characterised by the

deadly border, but an earlier Mediterranean, connected to a time in history that was foundationally marked by interconnection (not least with Andalusia, and borrowed ideas of 'Arabness'). Into the meaningless void created by a landscape of death, hospitality language meant that actors could bring aesthetics of renewal and rebirth that had psycho-spiritual connotations, if not always juridical ones.

Fundamentally, this control-through-hospitality was also about establishing the autonomy of the city, now and in the future. It was meant to be about change that was symbolic, psycho-spiritual, and part of the theatre of politics, but, as I will show in more depth in the next chapter, it was also economic. The change it aimed at was trying to curb emigration through the creation of industry and business.

In practice, hospitality consistently rammed against the law, which was not only imposed on Palermo by the outside – by the overly controlling nation-state – but also from the inside. Notions of *legalità,* and the ways the state was woven into the city, embodied in and by many of its people, made it impossible to avoid. Even if it was neglectful, criticised, and so forth, local actors often felt that the most practical way to welcome migrants – whether they called it hospitality – was to work *with* the state and its national legal frameworks. In this sense, Orlando's 'city of hospitality' might best be understood through Frederic Jameson's notion (2004) of 'non-ideology': a utopian moment in which the normal order of things looks like it might be entirely upended. The hope is that even if it is not upended – indeed even if it ultimately reflects or gives way to a status quo, in terms of class structure and nation-state dominance – perhaps something of the utopic vision remains.

Chapter 4: Postmodern Hospitality in a Social Enterprise[32]

Moltivolti's main site is a restaurant and social enterprise, situated in a refurbished building at the corner of two sloping cobblestone streets in Palermo's Ballarò neighbourhood. Decades ago, following World War II, the building was a factory where US dollars were printed. Today, this past has been mostly scrubbed, to make way for a colourful, contemporary 'Brooklyn aesthetic' (Parasecoli and Halawa 2021) that makes the place resemble any number of hipster cafés in cities across the world. Here, to emphasise what Fabio Parasecoli and Mateusz Halawa call the 'deeply local' quality that is part of this aesthetic, the elements of the décor reference this enterprise, in this neighbourhood, in this city, on this island, in the Mediterranean Sea.

The walls are covered in paintings of maps, faces, and abstractions recalling the sea, travel, encounter, and hospitality. These are mostly designed and executed by the artist whose name is by now familiar, Igor Scalisi Palminteri. One map depicts the island of Sicily, only the names of its cities have been replaced with words like 'care' 'hope' and 'refuge' (see Fig. 5). Another wall is painted with faces of staff and frequenters of Moltivolti. The faces are looking at each other to suggest the value of encounter across difference – reminiscent of the idea of *convivenza* that the Ballarò neighbourhood has come to symbolise. The name 'Moltivolti' itself is a portmanteau meaning 'many faces' – a reference to the fact that its owners and staff represent twelve different nationalities, yet across differences of identity and provenance, they all work together to create this project. Above, bespoke panels, splattered with blue paint to look like crashing waves, move back and forth, kinetically mimicking the ocean tide.

[32] A version of this chapter was published as a standalone article in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (see Neil 2024).

The newest piece in 2022 was a simple phrase, written in neon yellow tube lighting across one wall – ‘A tavern in the middle of the sea’. The wall text reads: ‘Moltivolti represents a safe place in the hostile sea’. This decor oozes references to hospitality and its related themes of encounter, refuge, the sea – through a kind of aesthetic reflexivity and contemporary, playful reappropriation of these themes that opens them up to a plurality of semiotic uses. Like Orlando and other actors in the city, Moltivolti recycles old themes to create a future-looking story about the identity and politics of this place, in this neighbourhood, in this city. At Moltivolti, the stated aims are expressly both economic and political.

Figure 5 Behind the bar at Moltivolti, painted by Igor Scalisi Palminteri (photo by author)

Perhaps more than any other actor in Palermo, Moltivolti has adopted Orlando’s vision of the city. Indeed, Orlando – who frequently patronised Moltivolti – told me that Moltivolti was a sign that ‘what we have begun to create will go on,’ and in my interview with one of the co-founders, Paolo, the relationship between Moltivolti and Orlando was made more explicit:

> 'I think that Orlando is a mighty (*grandissimo*) leader – I mean really, an incredible visionary and intellectual. He is tracing a vision. It's up to us to translate it into practice, but the vision is that one, of the *città dell'accoglienza,* not of the city that pushes away, or is xenophobic. And that is already important.'

Moltivolti thus serves as a useful space in which to explore the micro-dynamics of Orlando's rhetoric as it is put in practice by one social enterprise that felt called to speak about and manage diversity, in its image as well as in the broader neighbourhood. As an internal document expressed Moltivolti's aims: 'Hospitality, stories, food, and traveling are the pretext to express a vision of the world: "A world in which people can move freely simply because they have the right to do so."' Articles have called it the 'heart of Palermo, a bulwark of hospitality, integration, solidarity, asylum, and a place of encounter among the cultures of the Mediterranean' (Redazione 2022).

Many of the same tensions that existed in Orlando's vision also exist at Moltivolti. These include the tension between its political agenda and its business model; the tension between what it narrates and how it is structured; and the tension between its central stated value of hospitality and other values, like solidarity or a cosmopolitan ethos and right to free movement. In Chapter 1, I explored the gaps and limits of Orlando's vision for his 'city of hospitality' as offering a space of refuge from the Italian state. I focused on laws, policy, and the work of civil society. Here, I explore a different aspect of this 'city of solidarity', namely the ambiguities and tensions that arise in one social enterprise's stated aims of trying to implement Orlando's vision, within a city where tourism emerged as the main economic avenue. I explore what this can mean for our understanding of hospitality as related to change, to the making of the self, and to attempts at controlling one neighbourhood's economic destiny.

In particular I focus on Moltivolti's playful, ironic use of social media, aesthetics, and food, as part of its entrepreneurial attempts at catering to a consuming public. Though it didn't use

overtly religious symbols as elsewhere in Palermo, Moltivolti frequently employed ideas about alchemy and magic that nonetheless produced a similar idea: that strangers, through hospitality, had something other-worldly about them, and that this quality could produce change and something new. I explore how they undertake this meaning-making, and then ask what it means for the 'migrants' it employed.

I call what I saw at Moltivolti 'postmodern hospitality' to emphasize the ways in which actors use hospitality – a concept which, as we have seen, has symbolic, historical, and religious resonance in Sicily – yet unmoor it from the sorts of cultural codes and dynamics studied by a twentieth-century anthropologist like Pitt-Rivers. Hospitality thus becomes a symbol of something recognizable, but it can also have multiple, elastic meanings and usages. Using tools like reflexivity, critique, social media aesthetics, and performances of various kinds, Moltivolti exemplifies a local and regional phenomenon of creating a contemporary instantiation of hospitality that is legible transnationally.

As was true with Orlando's Mediterranean, urban, and religious sense of hospitality, what I am calling postmodern hospitality is linked in its messaging to rights for migrants. This contributes, as before, to attempts to re-gain control over a narrative about the Mediterranean as a place of borders, restrictions on mobility, and even death. It is also part of regaining control about the story of Palermo, of Sicily, as a part of 'the South'. Based on the popular idea that Sicily – as a Mediterranean island – shows exceptional solidarity with outsiders, it can be used to form a critique against statist narratives and European migration praxis. In contrast to the restrictionism of the wider EU, Sicily is presented as hospitable: a place where southernness and Mediterraneanism are valued. This strategy, however, also involves an attention to tourism and the media as a font for economic survival and future. Though part of trying to regain entrepreneurial control over the identity and economic future of this enterprise and the

surrounding neighbourhood, it is also entwined with the spectacle of migration at Europe's southern border. As such, it risks fetishising and commodifying ideas about both rights for migrants, and Mediterranean/southern identities.

Following the theorist Linda Hutcheon (1987; 2002), I argue that this hospitality can be called postmodern for three reasons: (1) it plays with recognizable elements of hospitality but uses aesthetic and rhetorical bricolage to create new meanings; (2) it is reflexive and seemingly playful – though this 'play' sometimes masks darker realities; and (3) it involves performance geared at outsiders who are invited to participate in a form of Mediterranean hospitality wherein people in a role of 'migrants' are seemingly included. This is framed as an opposition to what happens in such tourists' countries of origin. It also enables Moltivolti to play with, and blur the distinctions between, self and other, tourist and migrant.

Through postmodern hospitality, distinctions between insider and outsider, host and guest, traveller and tourist are destabilised. The concept of postmodern hospitality also serves as a tool to blur politics and business, and analysis indicates how there are both benefits and a price to pay for adopting this strategy. The aim is not simply to critique a local social enterprise. Rather, I use Moltivolti as a prism to explore the tensions among politics, notions of morality, and economic necessity in one contemporary Mediterranean, southern European, city, as locals seek to reinvent it on a global stage. I show the ways notions of hospitality are at the centre of these efforts, even as the concept is employed to consider broader themes.

Introducing Moltivolti

Moltivolti began as a restaurant that employed migrants and served what they called 'ethnic' or 'international' food as a way of feeding, celebrating, and employing migrants living in

Palermo. The menu includes a variety of dishes whose diverse origins are reflected in their names: maffé*,* khachapuri*,* or cous-cous. Through 2022, when I completed fieldwork, its business activities included a bar, a B & B, and a gelateria alongside its signature restaurant. Initially, migrants living in nearby reception hostels had come to dine at Moltivolti, but over the years the balance of the clientele had shifted as numbers of tourists had grown.

Despite the attention to tourism, the co-owners were adamant that Moltivolti had social aims that went above and beyond the legal requirements of their juridical status as a social enterprise. They had always sought to put any profit back into the wider community. 'Moltivolti community', for instance, was a set of activities funded by Moltivolti profits and designed to serve the local community, including Italian classes and basic computer literacy classes that mostly catered to young migrants living in Palermo. Moltivolti also spearheaded projects in Ballarò. Local NGOs frequently partnered with the social enterprise when they applied for EU or Italian development grants. As one co-owner, Fabio, put it to me, Moltivolti aimed to be a 'motor for development' in the neighbourhood.

Moltivolti acted as a hub, and as part of a broader *rete* – a word that can be translated as 'net', like 'social safety net', but also 'network'. This *rete* was composed of hyper-local, but also international, groups that work broadly in *il sociale* – for social welfare, mostly around the issue of migration, with close ties also to the important, national anti-Mafia NGO, Libera. It also became a strategic spot for NGO work that came through Palermo: the SAR rescue ship and operation *Mediterranea* was born, after hours, behind its walls. When top MSF Italy members came to Palermo to scout out a place for a new, special reception home for people arriving with specific psychological needs from Libya, Moltivolti was one of their first stops – they wanted to get advice from one of the co-founders, whom they knew could also connect

them with other relevant, powerful actors in the city. Such examples show how Moltivolti was part of concrete efforts to contest state bordering actions and promote a different kind of hospitable approach.

But it wasn't the nuts-and-bolts of this work alone that distinguished Moltivolti. There were hundreds of other actors in the city involved in the tough, often invisible, work of migrant inclusion, of struggles for socio-legal rights, of working to employ migrants in the city, or of networking with international actors. But it was Moltivolti that was covered by media articles. Thanks in part to its success with the media and the political savvy of the co-founders, politicians of all levels came to visit Moltivolti. The Mayor and Archbishop of Palermo often patronised the restaurant, especially during events or days that celebrated the city's stated multiculturalism. National politicians made pitstops at Moltivolti, during visits to Ballarò, for a selfie with one of Moltivolti's branded shirts that showed their motto, 'my home is wherever I place my feet'.

Moltivolti also became a must-stop for guides of the city, geared at tourists interested in what were referred to as the 'social realities' of Palermo, such as tours run by the anti-Mafia association AddioPizzo, or the environmental NGO Palma Nana. This meant that, if you frequented Moltivolti on a given day, you might encounter a whole host of people: humanitarians from Save the Children or Doctors Without Borders; the local archbishop, or Giuseppe Conte, the former Prime Minister of Italy whose stance on migration changed radically over time; migrants who were working there or who used to work there or who come to take part in an *intercultura* activity; but also, Dutch tourists asking, where did the Queen of Holland sit when she came, and could they please have the same table?

Food, Identity, and Politics

Part of what distinguished Moltivolti was the way, through aesthetics, storytelling, performance, and use of media and social media, its owners wove compelling stories about the place, directed at a consuming audience. Moltivolti's messaging and branding served to create a story that was remarkably close to Orlando's. But where many actors, Orlando included, often interpreted this in overtly religious or mythical terms, Moltivolti's owners had other tools which, while seemingly secular, were also filled with an other-worldly promise of social and individual change that emerged from clever narrativizing of themselves and the neighbourhood in which they had founded Moltivolti.

Figure 6 A photograph of the Dutch Royals' visit on display at Moltivolti (photo by author)

Primarily, Moltivolti used food to convey its messaging. This was convenient because food is something people eat, something that can be sold, and it is also a fitting metaphor for social and political messages. The following dialogue illustrates how these three dimensions fit together. The dialogue emerged during an encounter between the Moltivolti co-founder Paolo, and a group of tourists from northern Italy. They had come to visit Moltivolti while on a trip to Palermo. The back and forth illustrates how, firstly, the social enterprise used food to talk in a seemingly banal way, about identity and politics:

> *Paolo*: 'Have you ever noticed how you only define food as "ethnic" when it comes from the South?'
>
> *Audience Member*: 'But from a tourist perspective, why, in Sicily would they want international food, instead of local food?'
>
> *Paolo*: 'Well, first, what is local food? What is international food? To analyse food is to analyse what happens in our land. For example, cous-cous – is it local, or is it international?'
>
> *Audience Member:* 'International!'
>
> *Paolo*: 'But in Trapani [a city and province of western Sicily, where cous-cous is part of the local cuisine], you would say it is local. Let me explain in simple terms what I mean: what we are trying to do, is describe differences in our surroundings. Ballarò is a multicultural neighbourhood with fourteen different ethnic communities. Food is an easy way to talk about this. We have five chefs from five countries, meaning the menu is international. Food, in our restaurant, in Sicily, in the South, in the Mediterranean, it is international.
>
> We have found a way to create sustainability thanks to food: a way to employ people. Sicily is not just about lasagna, it is a mix of cultures, a way to talk about another Sicily, know about what happened. Sicily is a land of dominations, a lot of people, cultures passed here. Every time they passed through, they left something.
>
> Food equals values. Some years ago, there was a campaign for *jus soli* in Italy. The question was: who is Italian? It was a campaign to give citizenship to children born in Italy of non-citizen parents. We participated by making a comparison between food and people: take the red onion, that everyone uses here to cook. It comes from Turkey, and after centuries, travelled across the Mediterranean. We naturalized food, but not people. How come? Our aim is to create a discussion.'

Beginning from Moltivolti's location in Ballarò, and from its own business model, in such discussions Paolo, a former social worker, uses food to talk about local identity. Then, from

this positionality, like Orlando, he forms a critique of nationalism and evinces a human rights-based politics of cosmopolitan free movement.

On some level, Paolo is deconstructing ideas of authenticity about food and cuisine that were a key part of Italian nation-building throughout the 20th century. In referencing 'lasagna', which is not Sicilian but generically Italian, he is making a point about the fictionality of national unity. He is exerting a form of semiotic control through trying to reterritorialize and re-claim Sicily – not as Italian, but as Mediterranean, and as southern: as fitting uneasily at best in Italian nationhood, in Europe. In beginning his discussion with the idea of 'ethnic food', Paolo is doing something similar – like Orlando, he is reclaiming his identity as a 'southerner', of Italy and Europe, but also, cleverly and as in Cassano's work on *Meridionalismo*, of the world. Such comments aim at reconsidering understandings of citizenship and belonging, of what it means to be 'Italian', and open cosmopolitan ideas of solidarity that transcends national boundaries.

Then, like Orlando, from his position as Sicilian – 'southern' and 'Mediterranean' – Paolo makes a point that is ultimately not about food, but about migration and the right to freedom of movement. In talking about food that has been 'naturalised', he is reiterating, on some level, the idea of a 'hospitable' Mediterranean, which is again juxtaposed to the exclusionary nature of nationalism, evidenced by Italy's *jus sanguinis* citizenship philosophy: the idea that you belong to Italy by virtue of blood rather than by being born and growing up in Italy. Welcoming difference is framed as the precursor to a local idea of cosmopolitan identity, imbued with a Meridionalist politics. It echoes Orlando's idea that there 'are no migrants in Palermo' because everyone in Palermo is a migrant: in Sicily, 'local' food is 'international', e.g. it becomes Sicilian but was brought over the centuries from elsewhere. This is understood as a good thing, a thing to be celebrated – a multicultural identity, Orlando's 'melting pot'. It is from this

position of aestheticized, multiculturalist, Mediterranean mixedness that Moltivolti mounted political critiques at scale against politicians on the far-right.

Mixing Food, Politics, and Business

Although this Mediterranean identity was often reiterated throughout the city, one of the distinguishing features of Moltivolti is that it used social media to do so. In one exemplary post, for instance, a young man holding a carton of fish stands next to a graffiti that reads '*Salvini Parassita', '*Salvini Parasite' (Fig. 7). The man is clearly an employee of Moltivolti – he wears the uniform T-shirt that reads '*la mia terra è dove poggio i miei piedi',* 'my home is wherever I place my feet' – a phrase that encompasses both the notion of hospitality and of the right to free movement. He is smiling, suggesting that he likes what he is doing, and is happily

Figure 7 A social media image from Moltivolti's Instagram page, cropped for anonymity

integrated in the local economy. In this instance, we can read the crate of fish as a symbol of

'Mediterraneanness' – with fishing being the region's quintessential economic activity. Launching it publicly on social media is also meant to be an overt critique of the politics and politicians of the far-right, which Salvini especially embodied during those years.

Such social media posts are public messages of their politics, contributions to the political domain. But they also point to one of the key tensions of this enterprise – are these stories and posts not also glossy promotions of themselves and their message, that serves their business interests? Another encounter at Moltivolti, this time with a group of French schoolchildren, illustrates this tension. One of the co-founders and a long time Senegalese employee whom I will call Mbaye were discussing maffé when the teacher interrupted them.

> *Teacher*: 'How many of you know about maffé?'
>
> A few students, out of a group of twenty, raised their hands. The teacher, eyebrows raised, said to Fabio:
>
> *Teacher*: 'Do you see this? These kids are from Paris, and only four of them know about maffé!'
>
> *Mbaye*: 'Maffé is from Senegal, a country verrrry far from Europe. […] Here, there are people of every race: African, European. But we aren't European, and we aren't African.'

Here, Moltivolti actors and the French teacher co-recreate the idea that is also encapsulated in the image of the young man in the Instagram post: that the Mediterranean has something to teach the rest of Italy and Europe (including its *grandes capitales*, symbols of European cosmopolitanism) about living together across difference. In this instance, it is couched in what they deem to be apolitical, aesthetic terms – talking about food. But Mbaye's attesting that 'we' are neither African nor European reinforces ideas about plurality and syncretism, again promotes the idea that Moltivolti, Palermo, and the Mediterranean are spaces of multiculturalism. Such encounters are also linked to Moltivolti's business plan: after, the students had lunch at Moltivolti's restaurant and then headed down to its new gelateria.

By 2021, some of Moltivolti's early supporters had begun to critique the enterprise, suggesting that it was losing its edge, becoming 'just a business' – if a poorly-run one at that, considering that none of the co-founders had experience in running a profitable restaurant. But the co-founders maintained that the business and social-good elements of their work both continued to function, and that each reinforced the other's strengths while limiting their weaknesses.

Over the course of interviewing and following one of the co-founders, Fabio, it became clear that he had a well-developed, reflective story about Moltivolti which highlighted how important the dual aspects of politics or social good, and business, were. The story was closely linked to his biography and identity. Fabio grew up in Palermo but moved to Milan and worked for years in the corporate rat race: 'I was bad, and I thought, I need to become good'. So, he got a master's to work in social cooperatives. Degree in hand, he went to Tanzania as a volunteer to help build a hospital. However, he found, to his disappointment:

> 'The same perversions of the capitalist system were present in the world of do-gooding. NGO work meant the imposition of a culture, a fearsome paternalistic approach… People became dependent on the aid… I didn't see the promised development, and the relationship between the aid workers and the beneficiaries was like colonialism. I didn't see the creation of real relationships, as equals.'

He decided to return to Palermo. In Palermo, he worked for a time at a reception centre, but found that there, too, an attitude of paternalism reigned. This was part of what led him – and other co-founders, who mostly had training and experience as social workers, to try and 'do something different' from both the state and the Church. He had come up with the idea for Moltivolti, he said to me, while on a trip with a Senegalese friend to Senegal. In Fabio's storytelling about himself and about the enterprise, he would often explain to me that 'Senegal is where I get my best ideas'.

It took him a little while to get a few others on board and gain momentum, but eventually, they applied for a grant-and-loan scheme from Sviluppo Italia, an agency set up to promote the development of the Italian South and hinterlands. Moltivolti is thus emblematic of the 'new economic planning initiative' that began in the 1990s – coinciding with Orlando's culture-and-tourism strategy. Unlike previous structural development funding from the Italian state, the new model 'omitted infrastructure-related investments altogether and focused above all on small- and […] medium-sized enterprise' (Pescosolido 2019: 450). To qualify for the scheme, they needed to meet certain stipulations: e.g., employ a certain number of women.

In accordance with this understanding of what could help the development of Sicily, the co-founders turned to entrepreneurship. This was a free market outlook, but with a southern Italian twist that was articulated as resulting from fatigue and disappointment with how Moltivolti founders felt the Church and state treated people.[33] Without it seeming ideologically incompatible, ideas about entrepreneurship and empowerment were being wielded by people in the same breath as they talked about things like *autonomia* – concepts borrowed from worker's rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. This reflects one position that cofounders espoused, understanding broader forces of state and capital as working differently in the Italian South – this view further legitimised, in a sense, their turning to business to *andare avanti*, or 'move forward'.

For Fabio and other co-owners, its social aims involved changing the narrative around migration – through creating 'dignified' jobs for newcomers – but also: the *rigenerazione del territorio*, 'regeneration of the territory'. In Fabio's words: 'The presence of our project becomes a motor, a centre of education for processes of development. Remaining here means

[33] Just as I had been told by a priest that the state's was not real *accoglienza,* Moltivolti founders felt that both Church and state hospitality did not match a professed ideal.

activating a series of actions that have effects on the territory: themes of safety, of valorisation of diversity, of urban regeneration'.

According to Fabio's claims and the business model, then, eating a meal at Moltivolti was good for the broader Ballarò community, and for migrants in Palermo. Moltivolti illustrates the continued proliferation in Italy of the idea of 'critical consumerism' and the identification of 'economic choice as political behaviour' emerging from anti-Mafia and anti-Globalisation movements (Bosi & Zamponi 2015: 372).[34]

In Sicily, critical consumerism had a particular history, because of the success of a grassroots group called AddioPizzo. This organisation began as a movement whereby shopkeepers would post a little sticker in their storefronts that said '*Addio Pizzo'* – 'goodbye *pizzo'*. *Pizzo* is the name of the fee that shopkeepers had to pay as a kind of tax to the Mafia, for so-called protection. The group urged consumers to only buy from places that they knew didn't pay the *pizzo* to the Mafia. The movement is considered to have been wildly successful in eradicating this practice and thereby doing significant harm to the Mafia that brought about real change in Sicily. And it was all down to consumer choice and behaviour. Moltivolti argued that it sought to do something similar: to change the city, including by spurring migrant integration and local development, through processes by which consumers choose to spend their money at *aziende accoglienti*, or 'welcoming enterprises'.

The Alchemy of Consumption

In the way the cofounders spoke about it, Moltivolti's hospitality was also about more than trying to do good for migrants and the city. The commensality it offered was also about

[34] This phenomenon is different to, but may share some effects with what has been critically called 'woke capitalism' (Rhodes 2021), in which corporate co-opting of political stances has weakened democratic struggles, and served rather the aims of capital, despite what the messaging might say.

changing the individual self. Though seemingly a secular endeavour (there were no mentions of saints or religious rites here) eating at Moltivolti was pitched as a magical, alchemical experience that could have transcendent effects on the consumer.

As Fabio explained to a group of students:

> 'The idea of Moltivolti is not to assimilate, but to enter into contact with difference. Food is the ideal way to do this. When we talk about politics, it is easy to fight, religion too. But when it comes to food, you see that difference is not a threat. *When you eat maffé, that is a piece of Senegal* [italics mine].'

Reminiscent of both the anthropological literature on hospitality and commensality, and theological writings on transubstantiation and the eucharist, food was being represented here as an easy, non-painful, yet powerful contaminant. It was a non-threatening way of 'encountering difference' (Allerton 2012), directed at a non-migrant, usually tourist, audience. Eating the food that was different to their own, that was cooked mostly by African migrants was, *if* you believed the co-founders, a way for customers to move out of their comfort zone, to travel. It was an experience through which ingestion could lead to individuals' 'opening of minds' – a phrase Fabio frequently employed.

At first, I thought that Fabio was simply borrowing from rather banal, if internalised, ideas about travel, such as those that you might find on a brochure for studying abroad. As he had explained to me, travelling and living in Africa had changed him. Alongside Moltivolti, he also operated a travel business that took Palermitans on several weeks' long trips, including to Senegal, nominally to pass along these experiences to others. But the more I listened to their messages, the more I also felt that beneath what felt like recycling known ideas about travel, there was also another message that was rooted in this place, this neighbourhood. It had to do with ideas about alchemy, magic, and change that was projected onto foreigners and the food

they made.

The young Sicilian chef who oversaw the kitchen, and decided the menu explained to me that, initially, he had asked the young African cooks to make maffé the way they remembered their mothers making it back home. The dish had then been altered over time to cater to Sicilian and tourist tastes: the maffé had been changed based on feedback from paying consumers. I knew from having talked to the cooks, and spent some time in their domestic spaces, that the maffé they made at work was different to how they made it at home. It was easy to tell even before tasting: the Moltivolti maffé looked and smelled different to the home maffé. There were several lunch spots in Ballarò where you could probably eat maffé that was closer to this home cooking. Evidently, the point here was not necessarily about authenticity in the sense of loyalty to home cooking (see Ray 2020).

Rather, it was about performance – about the *idea* that these young men were going to serve you something from their memories, something infused with the intangible of their journeys, which were recalled in the surrounding décor. In this way, if you bought into the performance of it all, and accepted that, initially at least, this maffé was based on young male migrants' recollections of their mothers' maffé back in Senegal, for one meal, consumers were promised a comestible experience of difference. A meal at Moltivolti offered what, inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss' (1982) ideas of the magic of hospitality and commensality, we might call a kind of postmodern transubstantiation: the promise of alteration, even of a kind of enlightenment through eating food cooked by extraordinary 'others'.

Again, what we emerge with is, as elsewhere across the city, a message of hospitality in which strangers hold a magical potential for change. Here, it is through a different refiguration that

this change can happen – not the stranger as literal saint but premised rather through the eating of their 'strange' food, cooked in a certain way by those whose bodies evidenced them as the 'right people' to be cooking this food. In this narration, ordinary people and activities took on much more metaphysical potential (see Ahmed 2000).

Of course, this 'strangeness' was controlled. Moltivolti was often described to me by people in the neighbourhood as *pulito,* clean – a reference both to its aesthetics and atmosphere, its literal cleanliness, but also of its political, class, and economic orientation. Due to its visibility, Moltivolti only employed people who had documents. All its African cooks and waiters spoke Italian very well, and approached its clients with familiar manners, jokes, and always wearing the uniform 'my home is where I place my feet'. It thus provided a kind of safe space for tourists and for white Sicilians, to try and 'experience difference' without going too far down the path of the unknown, where threats lurk.

Moltivolti thus created an atmosphere in which the threats posed by the unknown were managed, and yet in which forms of transcendent change were offered. The message went that, through the consuming of this food, the boundaries between self and other, between categories of 'North' and 'South' could be blurred. This is the message involved in some of the ethnographic vignettes I have offered: the history of the red onion that Carlo described illustrated this, as did the narrative that if you came to Moltivolti to eat maffé, you would be 'eating a piece of Senegal'.

Thus, we see again how, through narrative and aesthetics, Moltivolti co-owners opened a semiotic space between the object of the food itself and what the act of eating it promised the consumer. I call it 'postmodern hospitality' in part because it uses tools of postmodernity –

aesthetics, irony, play – to open a space between object and meaning in such a way as to create plural interpretations of the 'truth'. Irony and play allowed for critiques of dominant stories and discourses.

Moltivolti plays with surface to suggest that the corresponding depth of things is not what it seems: an onion is not just an onion, it is a sign of Sicilian acceptance of the stranger, and of its consequent mixed identity, the brilliance and uniqueness of its cuisine. Similarly, the idea of a 'social enterprise', particularly as translated through Moltivolti's narratives around food, or its use of social media, gains a particular aura. The tools of postmodernism mean that existing labels are destabilised: things can be both that which they are and which they are not. Within this kind of postmodern universe, the roles of host and guest, the identities of self and other, or the coordinates of north and south are blurred or switched. As this narrative goes, things, or people, can change their very substance through coming to Moltivolti, eating there, and forging encounters.

Moltivolti in Piazza Mediterraneo

Just as Moltivolti played a part in narrating hospitality, in particular commensality, in Palermo as related to migration, it also played a role in creating meaning about Ballarò. Headlines described Ballarò like this: 'The centre of Sicily's biggest city was emptied by the Mafia. Now it's being reclaimed by migrants' (Merelli 2016). The headline was based on fact. Ballarò *was* a diverse neighbourhood in terms of nationality, ethnicity, religion or class. It *was* a place where you could eat in restaurants owned by Ghanaians serving pan-African food, buy *touba* coffee at convenience stores run by Bangladeshis, or get your clothes tailored by a man from Côte d'Ivoire.

But it was also clear that these were quotidian commercial activities that were aestheticized and narrativized in representations like Moltivolti's. Moltivolti co-founders clearly saw themselves as both inspired by Ballarò, and as playing a managing role in this neighbourhood. As Fabio told me:

> 'Ballarò is perfect because there is an extreme biodiversity. There are new and old shops, twenty different ethnicities of migrants, artisans, different categories of work, all different social classes. If you aren't here, where are you supposed to be? This place is a melting pot. It's a place where everything happens, for good and bad, from the most chilling to the most sublime. You realise here that when the governance of diversity works, the results are beautiful. These are Moltivolti's goals, that's why we are here […] we have a vision of the world in which people can move freely, not because they have to, but simply because they want to'.

Such quotes again reveal the role that Moltivolti co-owners saw themselves playing in the neighbourhood: it was up to them to 'manage diversity' (see Wyer 2024b for a link to Orlando). They did this by being a mediating force, by opening economic activity in the square, and by providing a clear meaning to what they saw and to what they were doing that could be consumed by outsiders. This included people like me. Fabio often narrated Ballarò and described ideas for the projects he wanted to do in the neighbourhood. What most people in Sicily complained to me as bureaucratic headaches – such as the fact that the rental contract for the building they were renting for Moltivolti's new gelateria was not showing up in the system, even though it had been signed – Fabio attributed, excitedly, to the fact that 'anything can happen in Ballarò'.

Just as he had told me that the idea for Moltivolti came to him during his trip to Senegal, Fabio also described Ballarò to me as a kind of magical place that inspired him. For instance, he pointed out, near one side of Piazza Mediterraneo, a street named for Alessandro Cagliostro. Cagliostro had been an 18th century occultist and alchemist, an adventurer who had a mixed reputation. Not only had he been born here, his story and spirit seemed to represent what Fabio

liked about Ballarò – what he perhaps even felt was its essence. In his narratives, this so-called 'immigrant neighbourhood' was the place where the 'otherness' and 'otherworldliness' of came through. At Moltivolti, he wanted to narrate this, and perhaps even contribute to it – if in a way that was controlled, *in regola* – in abidance with rules and the law. Many of the residents of Ballarò, he said to me, were, by contrast, *dei scappati di galera* – prison escapees, lawless.

In the spring of 2022, Moltivolti opened this new gelateria, called BarConi, in Ballarò, just down the road from their flagship restaurant. They had received critiques about their labour structure, and in response, were set to open this new shop that was advertised as being 'entirely run by migrants'. As I was eager to better understand the enterprise's social relations in the neighbourhood, as well as how these young employees would feel in their new roles, I began to spend more time in and around the gelateria.

The shop was opened in a square of Ballarò called Piazza Mediterraneo. It had begun to be called Piazza Mediterraneo*,* in 2016, after a group of activists had, in their words, 'liberated' it from a dispute between the State and the Church: both entities claimed it was theirs. In 2016, this group had instead claimed it was 'free', for and of the people. For some it held political symbolism that was closely tied to migrant rights. On one wall, someone had painted a mural of George Floyd that read 'no racism' – a key part of the square's political identity. In my time in Palermo, I attended various public events on the topic of migration in this square.

During the day, this was mostly a place characterised by small commercial activities. These included a tiny family-run bar that sold soft drinks and snacks. A woman I will call Delia ran a nondescript bar, and her son, a man I'll call Luigi, had set up a kind of food cart in front of it. If the bar was somewhat innocuous, the food cart was anything but: it sat beneath a bright

orange umbrella decorated with catchy Sicilian motifs –citrus fruits, and other folksy elements that symbolised the island. Luigi sold freshly squeezed orange-juice to tourists all year round.

Figure 8 Piazza Mediterraneo (photo by author)

Further down was a restaurant that was considered a Ballarò institution – a place where you could get family-sized plates of fried seafood for cheap. There was also a shop that sold pricey, hand-made crafts, that had patterns and colours that looked like they could be inspired by African prints. Then there was a building that I thought had been empty but turned out to be the party headquarters for a far-right group that became more animated as the 2022 mayoral election campaign season got underway.

When I had first arrived and was still getting to know the various inhabitants of the square, Luigi, wearing his usual aviators and straw fedora, and another man, Carlo, who owned property on the square, had invited me to sit with them at some of the plastic tables in the centre of the square. After I explained my project to them, they decided to order me lunch. And as I sat there with a big plate of fried swordfish and calamari – enough for three people at least – they chatted to me enthusiastically, urging me, '*scrivi, scrivi',* write, write:

> Carlo: 'Let's write something beautiful about Palermo, about its neighbourhoods [like *Ballarò*] that have the worst reputations!'
>
> Luigi chimed in too: 'Write that you were hosted in a public piazza, Piazza Mediterraneo, eating calamari and sword fish, *addu piciezzu* [in Sicilian, without paying].'
>
> Carlo: '*Calò meghiu!* [it went down better (because it was free)!]'

What was interesting to me about this invitation was the way Luigi and Carlo, like Moltivolti and Orlando, were using hospitality to promote an idea about change for the square. Like them, they were persuading me, an outsider with a pen, to change the *representation of Palermo*. Where Asher Ghertner has spoken of the 'aesthetic mode of governance' as being the provenance of elites, here were people who, although they clearly had some power in the square, came from different class and education backgrounds relative to Orlando or even the Moltivolti cofounders. The aesthetics were different, deriving from different strands of Sicilian folklore (one, Moltivolti, that self-consciously incorporated outsiders; one that was silent on the theme). Yet in a sense they seemed to be promoting a similar way forward, based on different interpretations of the same theme: hospitality.

When I asked Luigi, the orange-juice seller, what he thought of Moltivolti, he shrugged and replied, 'today there is work in Ballarò, not like before. Tourism has brought work.' But Luigi

also wanted to make sure I understood the role that he and his mother played in the square that went beyond Moltivolti's involvement. He explained to me that they cleaned and decorated. A bike hung on one wall, and he told me that he himself had mounted it up there.

He had also strung up across the square pink and black flags that symbolised the Palermo football team, which had recently been promoted to a higher league after having been demoted to the lowest league when the then-owner went bankrupt. This success was partly thanks to the fact that it had been bought by a Qatari group that also owned Manchester City – an event that the media kept referring to as an auspicious 'return of the Arabs': hopefully the new ownership would usher in another 'golden age' for the city, or at least its football team. Luigi didn't tell me this story though. In fact, he said to me that he wasn't even a football fan – he put up the flags because he thought that, like the bright orange, Sicily-themed umbrella with lemons he stood under every day, they might attract clients, foreign and local.

Moltivolti also sometimes played a mediating role in the square that Luigi felt could be advantageous for his business. Another time, a group of undergraduate urban landscape students, led by their professor, came to Piazza Mediterraneo to scout it out as a possible location for a project they wanted to do, which involved planting different vegetables that were 'classically Mediterranean' in select areas around the city. The student group, the professor explained, wanted to plant aubergines here in this garden, with signs that explained how aubergines were brought to Sicily by the Arabs – indeed the etymology, the sound and meaning, of the Italian word '*melanzana',* the students explained, could be traced back to the Arabic, '*badinjan'*.[35] This project they called 'Multicultural Mediterranean'.

[35] Massimo Montanari (2011) offers a conflicting etymology, suggesting that *melanzana* comes from the Latin *mala insana,* or 'insane fruit', reflecting how aubergine was long stigmatized in Italy and associated to Jews and the poor.

That day, the professor had come to Piazza Mediterraneo to meet with some locals, because she and her students were not from Ballarò, and didn't necessarily see themselves as having a long-term investment in the project. They rather wanted to spearhead the project, and then hand it over to the people who worked and lived in the square. They would need help in clearing the brush to prepare for the aubergine, and wanted to be sure someone would take care of the aubergine once planted. Because they saw their work as aligned to Moltivolti's, they had asked Fabio to act as a mediator between them and other actors in the square. So, Fabio brought a meeting together, and asked Luigi and Carlo to attend.

The local vendors present in the meeting showed enthusiasm for the project and for the further attention that it might bring to the square. Luigi eagerly mentioned that perhaps he could use the aubergines for frying, and sell them to tourists inside *pane e panelle* (a Sicilian dish, recently re-branded as 'traditional street food', and also often advertised to be of Arab origin, made up of a fried chickpea patty, sometimes fried mashed potato, and aubergine, placed together in a bun, and seasoned with lemon).

At the same time, not everyone in the square was as enthusiastic as Luigi. Later, I spoke to Luigi's mother, who grumbled:

> 'People always come, take pictures, for some event or other, and then the project is abandoned. You see those planters, the ones made of plastic bottles? They are all dried up! It ends up being me who has to look after the trash, the piazza.'

What's more, once the gelateria did open, there was some, but not too much, contact between Luigi's family and the young employees of Moltivolti's new ice cream shop. They occasionally came to buy ice cream, but otherwise inhabited the square simultaneously yet separately. On the day of the Moltivolti opening, for instance, in which Mayor Leoluca Orlando made an

appearance, and crowds gathered around to taste the gelato, Luigi was busy catering a wedding in the square. Hippy, activist types stood next to, but did not mingle with, women in high heels wearing long, glittery dresses.

What began to emerge from Piazza Mediterraneo was the ways Moltivolti was an actor among others in the neighbourhood – one that some of the local entrepreneurs were clearly happy about, because it seemed like it really did bring business and connections that they might benefit from. At the same time, we begin to see how Moltivolti had narrativizing power that embellished, and made meaning out of, some activities, while it left others silent. It played a semiotic role in discussing the neighbourhood as magical, a place of tolerance, a place of change. In turn, it could easily slip itself into this image it was constructing, as an agent promoting and moulding that same change.

Slippages: Self and Other

In Fabio's telling, Sicily's position at the intersection of 'North' and 'South' was an important factor in developing Moltivolti's model, and in the blueprint for how Sicily should develop and regenerate. Fabio called himself a man of the South: his view recalls Cassano's (2005) idea that to be 'of the South' potentially enables solidarity with other 'Southerners', beyond the Mediterranean, with whom you can claim allyship against the hegemony of 'Northern' ideals. As we've seen, this anti-hegemonic stance also involves reimagining tropes about the South. For example, one co-owner introduced the guided tours of the city by telling tourists: 'In Ballarò, we take care of each other' – a reconfiguration of the stereotype that in the Italian South, there is a 'social contract more based on care than on money' (Corsi, Aloè, and Zacchia 2021: 207).

Again, narrative storytelling helps recreate ideas about the 'South' broadly writ that aim to take back control through the narrative of hospitality that is entwined with the material aims of trying to create a sustainable economic project. It has identitarian, social, political, and even existential stakes, given the Sicilian context of emigration due largely to economic factors that make some feel that the future lies elsewhere.

Still, Fabio's insistence on Moltivolti's political-social aims, in a postmodern vein, also surfaces a 'contradictory relationship of constant slippage' (Hutcheon 1987: 25). On the one hand, in rethinking the 'South', or even in re-imagining dishes, history emerges not as a 'master narrative' (1987: 18) but as a 'human construct' (1987: 21). This is done in seemingly playful ways – ways that privilege surface and aesthetics without taking itself too seriously. But this light-heartedness masks more serious themes. Play opens alternative ways of thinking about self, and about the future and perhaps even changing these categories. But if politics is mediated through the kind of narrative that is also meant to appeal to consumers and tourists, it also risks becoming a 'simulacrum', in Baudrillardian terms, of that politics (1994).

For Jean Baudrillard, simulacrum involved describing reality in a way that loosely resembled it, but also distorted it, embellished it, or even departed from it. Because communication in modernity, as Guy Debord (1994) has written, is typically 'mediated through images', simulation can come to replace social life in terms of peoples' understanding of reality. This can lead to a sense of hyperreality, which, as Dino Palumbo has written, 'display a hyper-excited and metaleptic relationship with the past' that locals can 'skillfully manipulate' for a variety of audiences, both internal and external (2024: 309).

A slippage occurs when it is possible to observe that there is this interaction between different

types of ‘reality’. At Moltivolti, if we deconstruct its use of tools that I have been describing as ‘postmodern’, we see how simulation is employed for weaving a new story. This makes certain, perhaps even magical, things about the neighbourhood visible. But what does it mean to base a political stance on an aestheticized narrative that amounts to a simulacrum?

A slippage is evidenced, for instance, in the ways Moltivolti plays on the notion of ‘hospitality’. It proves its ‘hospitality’ towards ‘migrants’ by advertising how many of them it employs (over 30 people from over 10 countries); the fact that it is part of a network of ‘*aziende accoglienti’* (welcoming businesses); and the kind of food for sale. While traditional hospitality is usually defined in opposition to impersonal economic exchange (Pitt-Rivers 1968; Shryock 2004; Sorge 2009) in its employment and business structure Moltivolti fuses them. Across its activities, ‘migrants’ who are the original ‘guests’ become ‘hosts’ for the tourist (client) ‘guests’. Its newly opened gelateria is advertised as being ‘entirely run by migrants’ (though they are not the ones making the high-level decisions); in its guided tours around Ballarò, a ‘migrant’ leads tourists on a visit of ‘their Palermo’ (see also Palma 2021). Such examples illustrate how Moltivolti plays on definitions of hospitality, not just as a juridical and cultural concept, but as a business: as in, the ‘hospitality sector’.

A similar tension occurs in Moltivolti’s conceptualisation of migration. In an interview, Fabio recalled a line by the Italian actor Massimo Troisi: ‘It’s his first film, he plays a Neapolitan, and someone asks him, “are you a migrant?” and he says, “what, I’m not allowed to travel?” It’s the same thing: we project stereotypes onto migrants.’ Like their use of the story of the red onion, migration-as-travel enables the key element of their message: that people should be able to move freely, that migrants are not always refugees that leave home because they must, but also because they want to, and thus they should be treated as assets rather than criminals or

charity cases.

This view of migration and hospitality is influenced by co-owners' identities as 'Southerners', especially as Sicilians with a long history of emigration: it references a cosmic, cyclic migration that contemporary phenomena merely extend. This subjectivity paints the migrants who work in the kitchen, the tourists who eat and pay for their food, and the Moltivolti owners all, in their respective ways, as metaphoric travellers – across space and life. Moltivolti becomes a space of physical and metaphoric encounter and refuge for *everyone.* In this utopic vision, it doesn't matter who comes from the 'North' or the 'South', if you are a tourist or a migrant. It only matters that there is an encounter, in this space, mediated and transformed through food – the substance that renders hospitality alchemical.

Moltivolti's political message resonated with many consumers. In January of 2022, a short-circuit caused a fire at Moltivolti's main restaurant. It was forced to close for a few months, although a fund was set up to collect money to help with the renovation costs. People donated money from all over the world – including the Dutch Royal Family, who gave €5000.

At Moltivolti's re-opening a few months later, in which hundreds of people gathered in the nearest piazza – Palermitans and visitors alike, mostly white – I asked people why they were here, what Moltivolti meant to them, and whether they had contributed to the fund. A couple of Milanese tourists responded that yes, they had donated, because 'such places make sense… for the protection and nurturing of the community… Business is difficult, especially in the Sicilian territory, and the institutions don't offer support.' A couple from Palermo told me they were here because 'it seemed like a cool thing – the future seems like it is this: Moltivolti'. Another woman, who had returned to Sicily after years in northern Italy told me that 'Moltivolti

is the symbolic place of my return – it is the place from which a whole series of other encounters were made possible'.

Many people I spoke to told me that Moltivolti represented, for them, a place of encounter, of welcome, a place where you could feel at home, and a place where you could feel the *atmosfera solidale,* the atmosphere of solidarity, that they believed had come to characterise Palermo more generally. Though they obviously espoused pro-migration political views, many individuals also saw *themselves* in Moltivolti's project: in looking at the images of the sea that hung from the ceiling at Moltivolti, in which waves seemed to be crashing, for instance, one woman said, 'of course, they symbolise *that* trip, but also, who in their life hasn't faced a storm?'

The flattening and assimilating of self and other clearly resonated, but it also elided key differences between asylum-seekers or people called 'migrants', and others traveling, physically as tourists or metaphorically through life. Some residents with African origins and migratory backgrounds in Palermo did conceive of their trips in *bildungsroman* terms: many equated travelling with learning. But they still had to contend with border regimes, and linguistic, cultural, and bureaucratic obstacles. These changed what travel and inclusion looked like compared to tourists coming to Sicily for leisure visits, or even middle-class Sicilian émigrés who were eager to return home. It affected what kinds of jobs they could get, and how they felt and were expected to behave in those jobs. This was as true across the city as it was at Moltivolti.

Furthermore, despite Moltivolti's rhetoric, labour relations sometimes remained an issue – when it came to who had decision-making power, who could voice criticism within the

organisation, who had long-term job security, and more generally how the place was structured versus how it was narrated (Calavita 2005; Neil 2024). When, after the fire, Igor came to re-paint the faces on the walls, a few of the African employees were miffed. The artist hadn't asked for their opinion, just painted the faces that he wanted. As a result, the faces of some passersby were included on the wall, while cooks who had been working there for years were passed over. It wasn't a big deal, one of the cooks explained, but it illustrated something about the restaurant's internal dynamics and about whose story was being told.

Although many of the cooks told me, repeating Moltivolti's line, that it is *un posto accogliente* – a hospitable place, this hospitality was often restricted. Because Moltivolti was also trying to operate in accordance with *legalità,* and promote themselves as being *in regola,* as part of their attempts to change the neighbourhood, they only hired people who already had documents. Of course, being hired at Moltivolti was crucial for these people to maintain their documents. The cooks in the kitchen often joked about their precarious status: they would yell *permesso!* meaning 'excuse me', if they had to move behind someone in the kitchen's tight spaces. Another would make a pun, responding *permesso di soggiorno!* This 'permesso' refers to the visa required to stay in Italy legally. To me, such jokes, while clearly about 'mocking power' (Franck 2022), were also a reminder of how central these documents were in this whole endeavour. Without them, one would not be hired at Moltivolti in the first place.

Moltivolti did have some undeniable material effects, both on the neighbourhood and for those it employed. But more remarkable was its narrativizing of migration and of Ballarò, and of the changes it was trying to promote through its simple presence. This presence seemed to rely on, and to cater to, the tastes of its owners and clientele. It was perhaps a savvy business strategy. But the aestheticization of migration and of the neighbourhood into terms that might be

appetitive and consumable to tourists and Moltivolti clientele, the sorts of people who could afford and were willing to pay €10 for a dish of maffé – also elided questions of the ways racial, class, or national difference is inextricable from everyday decision-making and autonomy. This type of grounded hospitality was involved in a push for a certain kind of change, but as with Orlando, the change could only go so far.

Spectacles of Migration

It was difficult to get a real sense of what Moltivolti's employees thought about their job, especially in the restaurant. I wondered if I might have better luck down at the gelateria, where the employees had a space that was more their own – where their bosses did not come in unexpectedly.

Moltivolti's new gelateria that I have been speaking about was called 'BarConi': in Moltivolti style, the word was a portmanteau for 'Bar', what Italians call a café, and 'Coni' or cone, as in ice cream cone. But it was also a play on the word *barconi*, the dinghies that brought people across the Mediterranean into Europe. With the rise of Matteo Salvini and anti-immigration politics of the last half-decade or so, the word *barconi* had acquired a stigma. Fabio explained to me that in calling the gelateria 'BarConi', he was trying to reclaim the word and turn it into something fun. Moltivolti went all in on the theme: the gelateria was decorated in such a way that, from afar, it even looked like a boat. Fabio hoped to open *una flotta di BarConi,* a flotilla of dinghies, meaning turn this gelateria into a chain. I had bristled, initially, at this branding, which seemed to make light of a deadly situation, but I wanted to understand how others saw it, particularly those it claimed to be describing.

So, throughout the summer of 2022, I often hung out with the handful of young men and women

who worked at the gelateria. I pulled up a chair and sat behind the counter, asking them about the choice of music they put on to attract customers or create a pleasant environment for themselves, and observing their interactions with customers and passers-by. One employee, for instance, liked to put on a YouTube playlist that generated different African DJ sets. The music, she said, made her 'feel comfortable', and distinguished the place from the other commercial activities in the square, which often blasted the Neapolitan *neomelodico.*

One day, I was sitting at the gelateria that Moltivolti had just opened in the square, when a local man came in. He asked for two brioches and one cone. 'It's for the president of the school across the street', he explained – proudly, I thought. But when the employee asked him for ten euros, he balked. 'My compliments' he responded sarcastically, and added, 'these are tourist prices! We are in Ballarò, you know!' After his reaction, Moltivolti owners stated that they might implement a tiered system, in which locals and tourists would pay different prices. The young employees did not know quite how to respond – and I thought it noteworthy that their presence was being marked by increased prices and more tourists to the square. If 'The Migrant' was represented as saviour and saint, would these migrants be understood as such?

Another time, a group of French students had lunch at Moltivolti, and then went down to the new gelateria for dessert. Their teacher – the one who had lamented that they were from Paris, yet did not know about maffé – came in too, brandishing her phone. She asked if she could record a video interview with some of the people at work at the shop. Ibra, one of the employees, asked politely in turn, 'what is this for?' He was wary of interviews. Because she said it was for educational aims, since she was a teacher, he agreed that she could ask him some things and film this impromptu interview:

Teacher: 'So, how do you see your future? Do you want to go back to The Gambia, or

stay here?’

Ibra: ‘For now, stay here.’

Teacher: ‘What is it that you like about Palermo?’

Ibra: ‘Palermo welcomed me. When I arrived, I thought I wanted to go to Rome.’

Teacher: ‘My impression is that most people see Italy as a place to pass through on their way to somewhere else.’

Ibra: ‘If you live it like a temporary step, you don’t end up resolving your problems. Here, there are actually more possibilities for getting documents, money, than elsewhere.’

Teacher, nodding: ‘Yes, there are a lot of closed attitudes in Europe.’

This interchange was interesting to me in part because of the way Ibra, a West African migrant, really did challenge the view that the French teacher had of Sicily, and in a way that seemed sincere, repeated the language of welcome and hospitality. Ibra had benefitted from employment at Moltivolti – so much so that he could afford rent in Ballarò’s rapidly changing housing market. But Ibra was also used to these kinds of interactions and had well-rehearsed answers. Tourists, including journalists and researchers, often asked Moltivolti’s staff to give interviews about their journeys to Italy and life in Europe. It was evidence, in part, of what tourism looked like in the 21st century: where smartphones and social media allowed everyone to be a kind of journalist, or voyeur, or influencer, or activist. It enabled also a self-perception that one was not a tourist, but a traveller – such ‘interviews’ were proof of a certain depth of meaning that travelling could produce, unlike the superficial leisure of tourism.

When I asked the workers at the ice-cream shop how they liked their role at Moltivolti, several said they liked chatting with tourists and clients. One said he liked ‘meeting new people’. Others expressed excitement at being in a role that was public facing so that they could be *seen*.

Jennifer explained:

> ‘People ask me, what do you do, and I say, ‘I work at the gelateria’ and they say ‘how, are you serious? Oh, you are lying.’ I’ll be like, come, this is where I work, you can pass by and check on me and you will know if I am lying. They’ll be like, no, you are lying, how can *you* work in the gelateria. Who would hire you? And then they are like ok, ok, fine, maybe you are a cleaner there. And I’m like, are you serious, I’ve been going to school for 3 years, paying [tuition] just to be a cleaner? No way. People do not believe. Until they come there to see us.’

For Sabrine, another worker, being in such a role was part of her feeling that in Palermo, ‘things were changing’:

> *Sabrine*: I had a friend who studied *pasticceria* [baking sweets]. She tried to get a job at a *pasticceria* [sweet shop] in Palermo, but they wouldn’t hire her, saying, ‘White people don’t eat cakes made by Black people.’
>
> *Me*: So, you are saying it’s not like that anymore?
>
> *Sabrine*: Things are changing now. Now we can find dignified work. I see that there’s more hope for us to find decent employment in Palermo. My mother passes by here, she’s really proud. When we came here, before, like my mom’s generation, we could only be care or domestic workers [*badante, colf*].

Sabrine’s views resembled those expressed to me by many on the staff. They also reflect Moltivolti’s positioning that their model is a progressive catalyst of regeneration in Palermo because it puts migrants in positions of visibility and offers dignified work. Thus, to use a word the co-owners often used, it ‘empowers’ them while contributing to growing the local economy and reimagining the image of the city. Ultimately, management decisions – name, décor, location, gelato flavours, pricing, hiring decisions, and publicity – were made up the street at Moltivolti. However, the young staff of the shop expressed genuine, happy surprise at how much they were left to their own devices in the shop’s day-to-day running. Often, as above, this included being interviewed and chatting with foreign customers and negotiating these customers’ expectations of Palermo and its foreign-born residents.

Jennifer’s story illustrates this well. She was an intern, and considered herself a founding member, of the shop. She had arrived in Palermo about three years before on a visa to be

reunited with her mother. Her mother had been in Sicily for two decades, working as a cleaner and caretaker. Jennifer expressed that these are the jobs expected of Black people in Palermo. Her point was reinforced by the arrival of the waitress of the café where we sat down to chat, in a different neighbourhood near to Ballarò: when she came to take our order, she looked at us quizzically and asked if I was interviewing Jennifer for a job.

Like Sabrine, Jennifer was enthusiastic about the ice-cream shop (which she called her 'child'). She had even considered forgoing her place at university in northern Italy to stay and help the project. She told me she had never seen a Black person in such a good job: 'Moltivolti is really doing something else.' However, there was one thing she didn't like:

> 'One of the only things I'm not comfortable about [is that people think] everybody who works here came by the boats … The fact that people just come in and think, like, all of them came with boats, is the rudest part of it… some of the whites think that all the immigrants came by boats.'

'Whites' had directly asked her questions about how the trip was, what kind of boat she had crossed in; she told me, 'I said, excuse me, I came by air. Sitting.' Although Jennifer did not think the brand of the gelato shop needed to be changed so that it no longer referred to dinghies, the boat imagery that surrounded her at work did not help dismantle the idea – propagated by media – that all Africans in Palermo were refugees who had arrived by boat. Like members of the second-generation, Jennifer had to contend with being 'subsumed under the label of migrant' (Saitta 2011: 318), which in this case, the imagery of the dinghies also reinforced as being similar to *clandestini* or refugees.

At BarConi, some West African staff liked their jobs *because* it was public-facing, meaning they were no longer in the kind of 'dirty work' (Cole & Booth 2007) expected of immigrants or 'migrants'. As I've indicated, this felt like a step forward to many towards further inclusion.

However, as Jennifer's story also illustrates, the visibility of the 'migrant' position was predicated on the storytelling and theatrics that make up the new Moltivolti/Palermo-as-hospitable identity. This identity was seen as necessary to its success but promoted specific ideas about 'migrants' in Palermo that Jennifer and her co-workers then often had to play into. For instance, the dramatic arrival by boats, or that Palermo represents a place of welcome and alternatives when it comes to living together across difference, especially compared to northern Europe or America.

It thus felt that these stories were, at least in part, made for tourism or consumers. This contributed to the creation of a simulacrum of Palermo that is constructed according to the desires of outsider-consumers – not unlike the maffé on the menu that was altered to tourist tastes (Hom 2015). Moltivolti enabled tourists (as well as students, journalists or researchers) to come into close contact with an aestheticized, and consumable, fantasy of what 'border zones' look like. This is part of a broader fetishization of Mediterranean migration: the curiosity over how Ibra or Jennifer arrived in Sicily, and the episode with the inquiring teacher, thus illustrate how Moltivolti's presence (even if unwittingly) becomes part of the spectacle of boat migration at Europe's Mediterranean edge: in this case what Andersson refers to as a 'helplessly romantic fascination with the unfortunate African traveler' (2014: xxxvii).

Moltivolti may be a single player in one city. But some of these mechanisms recall ways in which spectacles serve bordering interests insofar as they fetishise migration, so that migrants become an image of themselves, not singular but rather the epitome of 'otherness'. For De Genova, spectacles are a form of epistemic violence (2002: 1182). He cites Guy Debord's Marxist reading of spectacle: '"at the root of the spectacle lies that oldest of all social divisions of labor, the specialization of power" and "the social cleavage that the spectacle expresses is

inseparable from the modern State, which . . . is the general form of all social division'" (Debord 1967: 20). Spectacles are thus the 'self-portrait of power' (ibid. 19, in De Genova 2002: 1187). They are, as I have written earlier, what De Genova argues make possible not only a racial division of labour, but also a nationalist view that sustains the borders of the nation-state and permits the production of illegality and deportability.

In its stated aims, Moltivolti claims to counter all of this: the violence of the border, and the far-right narratives that sustain it. They decry exploitation and forms of exclusion, arguing that they are changing peoples' connotations around the boats, for instance, so that they become something unthreatening. These are the practices I have called postmodern, as they play with meaning and destabilise existing labels and signifiers. It is part of a strategic and clever critique. Yet these forms of postmodern hospitality also tend to similarly fetishise the figure of the 'migrant'. Here, there is a kind of voyeurism that contrasts with that of the violent or distressing spectacle at the nearby port, in nearby hotspots, or in the nearby sea (cf. Cuttitta 2015). But its effects are also othering, and easily form a glossed over and commodifiable identity for the enterprise and the city. It becomes part of a transformation of the city as a place where foreigners can touch the 'migration issue', can interact with 'real migrants', through encounters that are part of a fantasy-come-to-life of utopian forms of hospitable social life.

Moltivolti's guided tours promoted this idea of Palermo, enabling tourists to meet a version of this borderland, as portrayed in the media. I attended a few of these tours. One was given to a French-British couple who lived in the U.S. Although it was meant to be a tour of 'the guides' Palermo', we visited many of the sites as on a previous iteration of this tour, albeit with a different guide. The guides stuck to sites included in a binder Moltivolti uses as training material. While not inherently immoral, what emerged were the ways Moltivolti maintained

control over the perception of outsiders: certain truths about Ballarò were offered and repeated, while others were omitted (see Palma 2021).

For example, we passed *Casa San Francesco,* which housed a dormitory for people without shelter, many of whom had immigrant backgrounds. I knew from having spoken at length to one of its current residents, an African man who had arrived a few months prior, that conditions were not great: none of the staff spoke English (which Africans in Palermo often rely on as a lingua franca) so it was impossible to communicate, or for him to understand what was going on, or build trust with staff; strict rules about entry and exit greatly limited his abilities to cultivate a social life and work required hours; he had had precious possessions stolen. However, our guide did not mention the shelter nor its complicated dynamics: instead, he told us about another social enterprise housed in the same building, in which immigrants and formerly imprisoned people were paid to make baked goods that would be sold. At this, the man of the couple said 'Wow, it's amazing how organised they are. How many associations *are* there in Ballarò?'

We stopped at the mural of San Benedetto, and finished at Ballarò's historic market. 'This is the place that made me fall in love with Ballarò, with Palermo' our guide explained, 'When I came here, I thought, this is my home. I found food that I have in Africa. Maybe the sellers are different colours, but it feels like home.' After the tour, the man came up to me, knowing I was a researcher, and marvelled, 'They really walk their talk here, right?'

In this tour as in others, 'migrants' are invited to play the role of host to the 'tourist' guest. The story of Orlando's and Moltivolti's 'cosmopolitan' and 'hospitable' Palermo is repeated. As in the gelateria, immigrants being placed in roles with responsibilities and visibility are part of

the narrative of Mediterranean hospitality and collective, layered identity. Part of the 'proof' that this really exists, is that 'migrant-guests' seemingly become hosts. In a sense they really are hosts: the guides made the decisions about what to show, and, while influenced by Moltivolti (their employer), they may have also stuck to the guidelines in the binders to protect their own privacy.

But, to return both to Jennifer's observation and connect it to the idea of the fetish, in these supposed 'host' roles, 'migrants' can exert forms of agency, but are also visually and representatively stuck precisely in their roles as 'migrants'. In these roles they are often pressed to talk about their journeys, hopes, desires – the sorts of things expected by their interlocuters, usually because of media portrayals of migration, which many interlocuters also seek to reproduce using their own forms of media. In these 'migrant' roles, individuals conform to the expectations of being 'good guests', through reappropriating the stories elaborated by the original 'hosts', like Orlando or Moltivolti. For some of the employees of Moltivolti, going to 'work' thus meant stepping into the role of 'migrant'. Because of labour structures, connected to document regimes which meant that they needed a job to maintain legal residency, it was difficult to exert choice at work (though aesthetic choices, like what music to play, could here emerge as moments of exerting their own modes of control). At work, even as they were granted certain forms of social status, their identity was also mostly subsumed. As I have written elsewhere with Federica Cerruti, this meant that they were not necessarily valued as employees tout court, but as migrants (Neil and Cerruti 2025).

I do not doubt the sincerity of the guide's explanation that Palermo reminded him of Africa and home. In fact, many visitors from across the world told me that they felt at home in Palermo. I understood this feeling. Yet it is *also* true that, particularly when told on a guided

tour through the neighbourhood, this framing helpfully echoes the image of Palermo promoted by Orlando or Moltivolti. As I have mentioned, such activities recall Baudrillard's idea of 'simulacra': different from 'feigning', which is fake and without grounding in reality, simulacra operate in a feedback loop with reality – so that saying Palermo is hospitable because it is Mediterranean, southern, and so forth, and performing these qualities, and believing them, also reinforce or become part of its embodied 'reality' (1994).

Conclusion

Simulation has imaginative consequences. Moltivolti's use of aesthetics and narrative contribute to the broader project of re-constructing a new image of Palermo for insiders and outsiders, immigrants and emigres, migrants and tourists. Their use of such semiotic tools helped move the image of Palermo away from being a place of Mafia, of emigration, tinged with the lingering aura of backwardness that stigmatised southern Italy in the discourse for decades. And this kind of simulation also had concrete economic consequences, which some, like Luigi or even the African workers at Moltivolti, welcomed. Some people could now find (better) work in Palermo, thanks to this tourism which relied in part on the stories being told about migration and about the neighbourhood. Ideally, more people would want to return or stay to live in Palermo, because of a new narrative about the city, and the money that tourism brought in, so that in a funny way stories about migration and hospitality might serve a virtuous cycle that brought emigrants back. Some of these emigrants might return – or might at least contribute to Moltivolti's business – because they saw themselves in the migrants, or at least in their journeys as narrated by Moltivolti.

We can see the ways in which this 'postmodern hospitality' is related to our central ideas of control and change. There is an attempt at linguistic control that contributes to rewriting a narrative about local identity, that is also a struggle for control over what it means to be from

Palermo, from Sicily, or from the South. Moltivolti co-founders used this identitarian strategy to try and exert control over the neighbourhood and over its economic future. In making a big show about welcoming migrants, they reaffirmed their status as hosts, they re-rooted themselves in this place and re-affirmed their existence and view of the future.

At the same time, I have shown in this chapter how there were prices to pay for this strategy. Locals often had to deal with the annoyances (and rising prices) brought by tourists. And the central risk was epistemic: that, through what I have been calling the use of postmodern hospitality, images would come to supplant the very things they were supposed to be describing, locking people into specific modes of consumption and a commodification (if not reification) of local, southern, Mediterranean, and migrant identities. At the very least, this exposes an internal tension in the project, as these ideas and strategies were stated as being mobilised for political, and political economic – if not existential – purposes that were supposed to subvert the national order. Yet it often ended up reproduced the same structural (in which labour structures are racialised) hierarchies of control. Like Orlando, Moltivolti projected a vision of hospitality that eclipsed what it could actually deliver. As it celebrated the ways Ballarò, migrants, or commensality could be magical, transcendental experiences, it also commodified these experiences.

As with Orlando, we see here how hospitality was deployed to exert control over self-identity – including over the narration of space and migration – in the hopes of bringing aesthetic and psychological, as well as economic and political, change to the city. Similarly, actors at Moltivolti painted ‘the migrant’ as a kind of otherworldly figure, one that activated the potential for change that in some sense was already within Palermo, as evidenced and embodied by the Ballarò neighbourhood.

Chapter 5: Hospitality as an Antidote to Death in Campobello di Mazara

'Look!' Salvo pointed with his finger out the car window, 'this one was also bombed in the war with Russia!' He cackled out loud at his own joke, which he had already repeated a few times to me this morning. Salvo was a *muratore* (builder) from Campobello di Mazara, an agricultural township in Trapani province, about 100km south of Palermo. It was a rainy spring morning, and Salvo, along with two of his friends – I will call them Carlo and Laura – were giving me something of a tour of their town. Like Salvo, Carlo and Laura often employed irony and dark comedy when they talked about Campobello. Many of their jokes employed the metaphor of death, and its Sicilian cognates of violence, degradation, war and the Mafia.

Carlo, a musician in his late forties, bald with a big, wiry, greying beard and gauges in his ears, was at the wheel. It was he who, in his deep voice, made gruff from decades of smoking rolled tobacco, pointed out the various buildings that had once been part of the 'Moceri empire'. Moceri, he explained to me, was a local man who went to Milan in the 1980s to sell pots. But, Carlo explained, all was not as it seemed: the suspicion was that Moceri was a *prestanome,* literally, 'name lender', who 'loaned' his name and businesses out so that money could be laundered through them. This was part of how he built a small empire in Campobello, Carlo explained to me: car dealerships, bars, clubs, a pizzeria: 'For a while, he sold Toyotas in Campobello, and everyone in Campobello had Toyotas'.

It was obvious which businesses had belonged to Moceri, because they were eponymous: he added 'Mo' to the generic name of whatever business he was operating. They show me the 'MoBar', and the apartment above it where the Moceri family once lived. And 'MoCar' – once

a car dealership, then abandoned, had now been taken over by the government and repurposed as a makeshift vaccination centre during the Covid-19 pandemic. ‘Now he’s dead,’ Carlo told me, and topped it off with a pun: ‘*Mo’ Morto’* (Mo’ Dead means ‘now he is dead’ as ‘*mo’* in Italian means ‘now’). He chuckled at himself.

Towards the end of our tour, Laura insisted on taking me to the *palazzo di vetro,* the ‘building of glass’ (Fig. 10). I had heard a lot about this building in the past few months. Laura held a seat on the local council with a leftist party. She was a mother, and worked informally to earn money. But she directed much of her energy towards her political work trying to improve conditions for migrants living in Campobello. The building of glass epitomised her hopes.

We approached it, and Laura initially made a face, twisting her lips with something like impatience. It was called the building of glass because it was built to house glass sheets that would be used for the windows of buildings constructed in the area. But the building had never been completed. It stood there, nearly finished, except – as fate would have it – for the windows, which stood without glass panes. The irony was too perfect for my interlocuters that morning: the building meant to house glass for windows was incomplete, and it was precisely because there were no glass panes on its windows. Carlo seemed almost gleeful. Salvo again joked that Russia had bombed this building, too.

Figure 9 The Building of Glass (photo by author)

Despite her irony, Laura seemed annoyed – even sad. It was too predictable. Rather than joking, Laura wanted to do something. This building, she imagined, could be part of her plans: she had been talking about it to everyone she could, about it being a potential site where she might create a kind of accommodation, dormitory, and service point for the seasonal migrant workers who came to Campobello each autumn.

Since the 1990s, migrant workers[36] had been coming to Campobello for the olive harvest. Olives were Campobello's primary economic output, and by now, the producers in the area depended entirely on the labour of these men, mostly from West Africa. Yet these workers – who frequently arrived after having escaped or been evicted from the official reception centres – were often subjected to poor labour conditions and lived in makeshift homes in informal settlements. These settlements, which did not have electricity or running water, were prone to fires. Every couple of years, a worker died. These self-settlements were akin to those migrants made across northern Africa and southern Europe, and when I spoke to their inhabitants, many people had clear reasons why they wanted to continue living in them. But in Campobello, some people also attributed their existence to local factors: there had been a '*mancanza di accoglienza',* missing hospitality, on the part of Campobellesi, as one bar owner put it to me, referring to the fact that it was difficult for these men to find suitable places to rent in town.

Although many in town viewed the presence of migrants – despite their economic utility – as a sort of continuation, or symbol, of the town's death or *degrado,* 'degradation', for a few actors their presence catalysed new hopes. Here, standing before the building, Laura explained her vision to me: it wouldn't necessarily replace the encampment, as some workers said they liked the community and autonomy provided by the self-settlements. Still, this building could

[36] Nandita Sharma (2006) offers further discussion of this term and its relationship to immigration policy.

provide an alternative for whoever wanted to stay in a different kind of place. The bottom floor, she envisioned, could be full of offices offering the different services people might need – a social-legal space, another place for medical services. And the top floors could be turned into dormitories. It would provide everything that the government was not currently providing for these workers.

Laura was dreaming big, but she knew there were resources for this kind of project. NGO workers and activists that she often worked alongside estimated that there were millions of euros from the EU, via the Italian government, that could be made available through various post-Covid recovery grant schemes, like the PNRR, or those, like the *Pon Legalità,* that broadly sought to combat organised crime through the development of areas where the Mafia was a known problem. Crucially, Laura thought, recuperating this building could be mutually beneficial to both the workers and to Campobello: recovering it would bring some life, beauty, and hope back to Campobello while ameliorating living conditions for migrant workers.

In this chapter, I explore the ways hospitality towards migrants could be conceived of as an antidote to what many referred to as the deaths in, and the related death of, Campobello. Though death has often been studied from a cultural and literary studies perspective, used to describe an essential trait marking the fatalism of the Sicilian character,[37] in this chapter I look at the way death appears in social life. I argue that people often spoke of death – and the associated ideas of degradation, violence, abandonment, and neglect – as a way of describing their town physically. Although they *were* often fatalistic, and attributed death to a kind of

[37] Leonardo Sciascia called this *sicilitudine,* a melancholy state which, according to Sorge, 'is a cast of mind that recognizes the futility inherent in the desire to alter the circumstances of life in Sicily, both at an individual and collective level. It encompasses a cultural ethos and worldview that expresses the widespread malaise born of the region's historical experience, manifesting in fatalism, melancholy, and distrust towards the outside world' (forthcoming).

mythical cycle of history that Campobello was subjected to, it was also clear that they understood death to be an active, human, rather than a natural process – but this did not mean necessarily that they themselves had to be passive recipients of this death. Rather, there were also actors to be blamed and counteraction that could be taken.

Death described the consequences of actions and neglect on the part of the Mafia, especially, closely connected to what was, in their view, a weak, neglectful state at both local and national levels. The Mafia, they felt, also had had a tight grip on local industry, because of which people emigrated from Campobello. The arrival of migrants each season marked, for some, a continuation of this 'death' – and in Campobello, people explained this as one reason for the 'missing *accoglienza*', or outright hostility. But for a handful of others – like Laura – the arrival of migrants, and the hostility they felt in Campobello, acted as an impetus to try and change things. This work was often conceived of as *accoglienza* and *ospitalità*, understood as actions that could improve workers' material living conditions, as well as metaphors that operated at a mythical level. Laura, standing in front of the building of glass, imagined it in a different form, as an active housing centre. Hospitality was likewise conceived of as a direct counter to the layers of death in and of Campobello.

I argue that for some Sicilian activists, hospitality provided a meaningful reason to stay in Campobello, rather than leave. This engagement with migrants through hospitality can thus be considered through the lens of the southern Italian anthropologist Vito Teti's concept of '*restanza'*, or 'remaining': the idea of deliberately choosing to stay in southern Italy and purposefully contributing to its regeneration. As Teti defines it, *restanza* is a 'phenomenon of the present, that regards the necessity, the desire, the willingness to generate a new sense of place(s)' (Teti 2022). Hospitality, I argue, emerged as a practice and imaginary that served to

counter the surrounding hostility and pessimism and provide meaningful engagement with peoples' home territory that enabled them to generate this new sense of place. As Laura Ann Stoler (2013) has written, places haunted by forces of violence, neglect, and abandonment, and described as 'dead', could, through hospitality, become sites of hope for the future.

Through practices of hospitality, activists aimed to gain a sense of control over the landscape, and through it, their futures. These, they felt, had been taken away from them by the state and Mafia. At the same time, efforts at hospitality were often limited or curbed. Hospitality thus emerged as a partial, never quite sufficient, practice of remaining and rooting oneself at home, through welcoming others and seeking justice from the state.

Two Closed Quarries: The Mythos of Death in Campobello

I first became attuned to the way people in Campobello used death to describe the landscape of their town when speaking with Salvo. As a construction worker, it made sense that he paid attention to the built environment, but it was the *way* he spoke about it that piqued my interest. Once, Salvo took me up close, to see a building made of *tufo,* tuff. Tuff, Salvo explained to me, was a local rock that became a popular building material during the region's post-war construction boom. It helped to keep houses cool during the hot Sicilian summers. But it hadn't withstood the test of time: after 50 years, it was subject to deterioration. He showed me how the tuff buildings' outer walls were no longer smooth, but now had round chunks taken out of them, porous like Swiss cheese. They were rough to the touch, in the way that pumice is, except that the tuff jutted out of the walls in unexpected ways, so that you would scrape yourself if you brushed against it too hard.

Though, as Salvo pointed out, many of the houses in and around town were built with tuff,

today they used cement to build. He showed me the old tuff quarry of Campobello, which lay seemingly dormant and abandoned. However, I knew from having spoken with others in Campobello that people speculated that the quarry was being used as an illegal dumping ground for toxic waste. This was a notorious Mafia business, often involving collusion with businesses as well as local, regional and national Italian government officials who wanted the waste to 'disappear' from records. Disposing waste informally, for instance, meant that the municipality could report less collected waste, which in turn made it eligible for other monetary benefits from the federal government – supposing the waste came locally, though it very well could have been brought in illicitly from elsewhere. The cynical speculations about the quarry began when an unusually high number of the town's young people were being diagnosed with severe brain tumours. Salvo lit his cigarette as he remarked, in response to the closed down quarry, that there wasn't a great deal of construction happening anymore: 'the town is dying, it's dead'.

The metaphor of death appears dramatic in reference to the town's economic sluggishness. But it was personal. As a construction worker, Salvo often had to leave to find work. Salvo joked often with me, so his embellishment – equating closing with death – could have been a slightly wry comment. But death was also a common leitmotif in Sicilian social life: fatalism was a cliché, a stereotype of Sicilians. It was what Antonio Sorge might call a 'Sicilian thing' – a concept that was part of a lexicon about Sicily that people used with self-awareness, often repurposing it strategically, for social and political aims, or to make certain meanings out of social reality. Death was sometimes real, sometimes a vivid metaphor, and sometimes itself a dead metaphor.

In a widely known interview with the journalist Marcelle Padovani, the Antimafia judge-cum-martyr and folk hero Giovanni Falcone noted:

> 'Here [*da noi*] the day of the dead is a big party: we offer treats called 'heads of the dead', made of sugar that is as hard as stone. Solitude, pessimism, and death are the themes of our literature, from Pirandello to Sciascia. It's as though we are a population that has lived too much, and all of a sudden, feels tired, worn-out, emptied, like Tomasi di Lampedusa's Don Fabrizio' (Falcone and Padovani 2012[1993]: 71).

For Falcone, the Mafia – the ways in which it used killings and violence to exert power – was an outgrowth of the wider, and more deeply historical 'cult of death' that he viewed as permeating Sicilian society. As Falcone notes, and as Sicilian anthropologists have likewise explored, death is both celebrated, even venerated, in Catholic feast days – as the start of new life (Buttitta 2006, 2017).

Death also forms a key concept in a literary gaze on the island that equates a Romantic fondness, even a longing for death, with forms of inertia and pessimism. The island's most well-known authors – including the oft-cited Tomasi di Lampedusa, as well as Leonardo Sciascia – tended to portray this pessimism, this affinity for death and inertia, as being an essential part of the Sicilian character and culture. As Sciascia remarked, 'when I am asked about the pessimism of Sicilians, I want to answer: "how could we not be pessimistic, in a land where the verb in the future tense doesn't exist?"' (1979). Theo Rakopoulos has noted how the 'fatalistic views of many native authors' (2018: 36) can be compared to Afro-pessimism, coining the idea of 'Siculo-pessimism'.

In describing Campobello, some of my interlocuters directly referenced this literary gaze. Laura, for instance, told me that she blamed Tomasi di Lampedusa for certain of her fellow towns-peoples' fatalistic attitudes – for popularising the Sisyphean idea that in Sicily, nothing ever changes, even as everything looks to be changing. But even if they didn't refer explicitly to these authors, my interlocuters were aware of the connotations of death and pessimism in Sicily. This was perhaps why death was such a common theme, why it came up so often to

describe the landscape, if in different ways that ranged from ideas of decay to violence. These links and connotations were part of a kind of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 1997), a known vocabulary used to talk about things beyond itself, not so unlike hospitality.

Many of my interlocuters were highly self-aware about the stereotype of death and pessimism in Sicily – so that often they were auto-ironic or joking about it. It was not always clear to me the extent to which they saw me as being 'in on the joke'. However, even in the repetition of ideas about death, futility, or inertia in Sicily, it was clear to me that this irony and joking often oscillated in peoples' speech with more serious emotions of sadness or frustration. Even if the language could not always be trusted, the underlying sentiment could be perceived.

For instance, Carlo and Laura wanted to take me to the nearby *Cave di Cusa.* They began the outing with excitement: the caves marked the site of a quarry where ancient Greeks had mined stone that was used in the nearby temple of Selinunte. Selinunte remained an important international archaeological dig site. Symbolically, it illustrated – like the Arab-Norman architecture in Palermo – the centrality that Sicily had had in history. These buildings and their ruins stood through time as proof of what the island had contributed to human heritage. It may have been pride that made my hosts look forward to bringing me, their guest, there.

However, when we arrived, we stopped the car a short distance from the site only to see that the surrounding fence was locked shut. A big sign warned people not to trespass. I asked, 'So they are closed?' I must have sounded earnest or surprised, because Carlo, teasing me, responded: 'try to be more Sicilian'. Then he changed his tone a bit: 'no, it's cool what you are doing. You know, we don't give a s***. F*** this s***. We are used to it: the sequesters, Mafia collusion – we already know how it's going to be.'

Figure 10 Tuff building, up close (photo by author)

The night after she showed me the *Cave,* Laura expressed to me how the abandoned buildings and heritage sites were evidence of death – in her terms, a 'deterioration', a 'not-aliveness':

> '…it means that you aren't caring for your own story, history. People care so much about buildings, and yet I don't understand how they can abandon them, let them deteriorate with time, when that is exactly what reflects your own sense of home, heritage, history. If you take care of a historic building, you keep the history and story of that place alive, and with it, you keep alive your culture.'

The *Cave* could have been turned into an important heritage and tourist site, a place that evidenced that the cultures that had built the Greek temples of Selinunte – masterworks of human craft and engineering – were still alive and present and embodied in contemporary

Sicilian culture. On the way back into town from the *Cave,* on a street that took us past the informal encampment where migrant workers lived, Laura had said that the rock and columns had been rolled down these very same roads to arrive at Selinunte. I don't know how accurate that was, but the image was striking for the way it conjoined Campobello's past and present, and thus possibly said something about its future, across a vast, mythic timescale.

In moments of sadness, exasperation, and frustration about Campobello, my interlocuters sometimes repeated essentialist framings of Sicily and Sicilians that suggested – as Falcone, di Lampedusa, and Sciascia had – that things could never change. For example, for a long time, I had translated the name of the town, 'Campobello', as 'Handsome Fields'. But several months into fieldwork Laura told me that Campobello should in fact be translated as 'the warring fields': 'bello' didn't denote beauty necessarily, but rather came from the Latin *bellum,* for war: 'Campobello was built on the ashes of the battles that surrounded her'. It could feel like violence, death, and inertia were so engrained in Campobello, so part of its cycles of history, that change would have to be radical.

My interlocuters in Campobello were using a familiar concept, that of death, and, oscillating between humour and fatalism around this death, also used it a means of speaking about other things. To some extent, I believe they may have been 'entertaining' me: their joking, their teasing, their self-deprecation, but also their mythologising of Campobello were clearly ways of indicating to me that they were aware and self-aware about stereotypes of Sicily – about the ways death in Sicily has been written about and talked about for a century at least.[38] The literary critic Patrick O'Neill has written, 'black humour' or 'gallows humour' 'allows us to envisage

[38] In talking about death, as well as their descriptions of the Mafia, my interlocuters were repeating elements of what Antonio Sorge, taking from Gaetano Mosca, calls 'Sicilian things' that 'reflect Sicilian adaptations to broader social and political dynamics, [and] also express a range of sentiments and perceptions that impart cultural meaning to local realities' (Sorge forthcoming).

the facelessness of the void and yet be able to laugh rather than despair' (1990 [1983]: 145). Although joking about death could be interpreted as a life-affirming counter to fatalism, to me it also illustrated the ways in which people felt powerless to change things. Everything was re-interpreted back through dead metaphors and puns that utilised familiar language.

Different to similar terms that ethnographers have raised in other locations, death in Sicily did not just refer to a particular date or moment, but was part of a long, cyclical history that reached back to ancient, even mythical time. This was also part of what made circumstances difficult to change. The wars, the building of the Greek temple were events that had dates, but dates that reached so far back as to become part of a vague 'before time'. This temporal approach marks a contextual difference in Sicily relative to similar anthropological work or ruins, abandonment, or emptiness, for instance, conducted in post-industrial, post-colonial, or post-Soviet contexts (cf. Mah 2012). In these settings, locals can point to a specific date in which these processes started: in her work in Latvia, Dace Dzenovska (2018) marks 1989/1990 as the time when 'emptiness' began.

Even though, as I will show, my interlocuters also pointed out specific recent actors and factors for the death of the area – particularly the Mafia – the reasons for the death, deterioration, and violence of the place were described as various, intertwined, and often even mysterious. The Mafia itself could take on a kind of mythical aspect: because of its secretive and backroom dealings, it was not always easy to say specifically who or what was killing Campobello, but the Mafia always emerged as a possible answer (Lo Cascio 2022). Sometimes people talked about specific mafiosi, other times about 'criminals in general', and still other times about 'La Mafia' – an abstract entity that could take on a kind of mystical aura. These interlocuters that discussed the Mafia were not representative in Campobello – in fact, they took on clear political

stances that purposefully demarcated themselves from others in town.

Understanding death as an available metaphor with local resonance helps to explain why literal deaths – as well as the arrivals of newcomers – were often talked about as much in material and affective terms as in mythical ones. It helps understand also the capaciousness of the metaphor of death, and its historical layers, many of which will emerge over the course of this chapter. Such mythical terms, while for many were condemnatory, also pushed for others the idea that death was cyclical, which crucially implied that renewal was also possible (and, in this context, might be ushered in by hospitality).

Finally, myths about death and renewal – like the aesthetics, rhetoric, or performance of hospitality in Palermo that imbued strangers with divine or magic qualities – implicated hospitality. As in Palermo, it was invoked here as a means of welcoming newcomers that also rooted people in processes of making both place and meaning. It operated as a form of control over these elements that in turn helped to combat a sense of helplessness and frustration that people could feel with the reality that was before them. This emerged especially clearly with Laura, the protagonist of this chapter, who often repeated things to me in a way that reflected linguistic stereotypes of *sicilitudine* but contrasted them to the hopes placed in the possibilities for change brough about by the practice of grounded hospitality. These also helped her make sense of things that were in front of her, including the senselessness of death, of the living conditions of migrant workers, and of the seeming lack of care on the part of other *Campobellesi.* It even helped her to make decisions about whether to stay or go.

The Four Horsemen of Death in Campobello

'I've always hated this town, even when I was little', Andrea, the name I will give to this local

olive producer and activist, told me from the driver's seat. I was accompanying him on some errands. First, he had to bottle some of his olive oil for a client at a local mill, so I had met him there. Then, he had to go buy some water and deliver it to the half-dozen African workers he was hosting in a run-down cement building on the land he was renting for his olive production. In exchange for keeping him company, he told me about himself and about Campobello. He had grown up here but had always wanted to get out. He had gone up to central Italy for work, but had returned a decade prior, after his job fell through following the economic crisis of 2008. His story mirrored that of many other emigrants from Campobello, who left Sicily but maintained ties, and often came back in moments of crisis.

Andrea pointed out buildings or personal landmarks of the town that we came upon as we conducted our errands. For the most part we passed a lot of *casolari,* little concrete buildings, surrounded by encroaching grasses or olive groves. These were places where migrant workers sometimes lived when they came to these parts during the autumn to pick olives. Some of the concrete or tuff huts looked half-built and unfinished, others looked like they were once whole and were now crumbling. One had 'for sale' scrawled on the side, a phone number below (Fig. 12). When he pointed them out to me, Andrea commented, 'Buildings are the mirror of a city. This is a town that has been devastated by criminality, by lassitude (*dal non far niente*)'.

Andrea's explanation was perhaps the one that was most common for why the town was in the deteriorating state that people kept describing it as: people pointed to the Mafia as the cause of Campobello's ruination. Like Salvo, Andrea too compared the built environment to a war-torn landscape: 'it looks like Beirut, a bombed-out town!' The comparison of Campobello's landscape to that of a place at war was metaphorical, but it was also viscerally felt to be true. In Campobello, Mafia presence felt outsized because Campobello was thought (correctly, it

turned out) to be the hiding place of the current boss of bosses, Matteo Messina Denaro. Towards the end of my fieldwork, Messina Denaro was caught after three decades on the run – he had indeed been living in Campobello. Messina Denaro was behind some of the most violent attacks of the 1990s, including the killings of the judges Falcone and Borsellino.

Figure 11 'For Sale 333846015' (photo by author)

But Matteo Denaro had also lived and conducted business in Campobello di Mazara for many years. Through his business, he was involved in the local economy and social fabric. Messina Denaro often came up during my fieldwork as people often linked parts of the olive industry

and drug business (both of which also implicated migrant workers) back to him.

The Mafia also left its mark on the built environment. As we have already seen through Carlo's explanation of the Moceri empire, mafiosi or their associate might own buildings that were fronts for illicit activities, or whose ruined state made them less visible to the authorities. They had no incentive to take care of these buildings. Other buildings were abandoned when the state removed them from Mafia-linked owners.

The more I spoke to certain locals, the more the question was less how the Mafia marked the built environment, and more whether there was any space that it hadn't touched. This rhetorical question has two layers. First, sometimes the Mafia was felt more by its absence than by its presence. Each week, for instance, to come to Campobello, I drove on the A20 highway that connected Palermo to Trapani. Although this highway had many spots along the highway where cars could exit and rest, there were no gas stations. My interlocuters attributed this absence to the role of Mafia bosses who controlled this area (see Bova 2021). This absence was as much evidence of the power of the Mafia as of the weakness of the state, or of collusion between the authorities who worked for each entity.

While walking in Campobello, Laura pointed out two long pieces of cement that emerged through wildflowers and grasses (Fig. 13). They extended behind and ahead of us, like train tracks leading nowhere. I did not know what they were, and I probably would not have noticed them, amidst the rubble and waste that dotted the countryside. But Laura explained to me that they were foundations for a planned sidewalk that had never been completed. According to her, these sidewalks had been started with funds, from the Italian state, maybe originally from the EU. But somewhere along the way, the funds to complete them had vanished.

When I asked her why, she shrugged. She did try to offer some possibilities: corruption, possibly linked to organised crime, or perhaps the money never arrived. The funding might have been promised but then taken away because the work wasn't finished by a given deadline. Austerity politics might have taken effect just as the rest of the money was due to come in. The exact reason wasn't clear, even for residents who had long-term memories of the place, but this missing sidewalk, like the missing gas station were material signs of the ways the state couldn't seem to do its job. For this reason, as much as people blamed *la Mafia* for things, they also showed great frustration with the state and its authorities – whether national, regional, or local. Like the Mafia, the state was also blamed for deaths in, and the decay of, Campobello, even as people who worked for the state were often victims of these killings.

The more time I spent in Campobello, the more it seemed impossible to reach a place or a person that people felt the Mafia *hadn't affected.* I began to envision it as like a many-tentacled octopus which sprayed its sometimes-invisible ink on everything. It had gotten so deep under the Campobello skin that its presence could be noted even in the dunes that dotted the shoreline of Tre Fontane, Campobello's beach town: it was from these dunes that, in the 1990s, people had taken sand, mixed it with water, and sold it as cement by Mafia-owned groups trying to make a profit.

Indeed, just as the Mafia was intermixed with how the state operated in Campobello, it was also intertwined with Campobello's boom and bust cycles. Mafia groups had been, and continued to be, involved in all of Campobello's major industries: grapes and wine growing, waste, construction, drugs, and the olive industry. The Mafia shaped Campobello's economy. For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s, Mafia groups from Palermo had come to Campobello in

search of new economic opportunities. A 1968 earthquake had decimated most of the Belice Valley – Campobello had not suffered as much damage as places like Gibellina or Poggioreale, which became famous for the scale of destruction. But there was government money that had arrived for Campobello anyway, and Mafia groups shortly followed.

Figure 12 Unfinished sidewalk in Campobello (photo by author)

According to an elderly man who had been working as a contractor during those years, local contractors received a clear message: there were new bosses in town. These Mafia-backed groups used corruption and collusion to win government contracts. If locals tried to stand up

to them, they would be killed – something that happened to one of this man's colleagues. He left Campobello shortly thereafter, only returning for his retirement.

This presence in the construction industry also helped explain why people immediately thought of the Mafia when they looked around. Though not every building could *actually* be traced back to a mafioso, Laura was speaking both metaphorically and literally when she said to me that 'the territory feels it [the Mafia presence]'. The built environment was generally a reflection of either the Mafia or what she and others called a 'mafia mentality': 'that idea [that] you just build the house [without permits], and then you get amnesty (*sanatoria*). It's that mentality of, "I do what I want, and then we will see."'

As Laura saw it, because of this 'mentality', people built their houses quickly, often without the proper permits or consideration for urban décor, landscaping, or neighbours' well-being. She pointed out a house that had been constructed on top of an existing street, cutting it in half and creating dead ends on either side that changed traffic flows and access to the sea, fifteen minutes outside of town. Others, she reported, had extended their backyards so that they now blocked their neighbours' front steps. Some houses in the town were half-finished: the piping was exposed, or they had dormant columns on second floors that supported invisible roofs, perhaps never to be built. Finally, many of the buildings had not been fully or properly registered: they did not thus 'exist' in a legal or bureaucratic sense, so that if you wanted to get renters, or renovate, or even sell, it was impossible to do so legally without a lengthy and costly bureaucratic process. This meant that more houses were left to abandon, as it was difficult to rent or sell. Although Fabio at Moltivolti had described a similar situation in Ballarò, expressing delight at its surreal kind of magic, in Campobello my interlocuters expressed frustration so deep that it reflected why they themselves constantly thought of leaving.

Indeed, for many people, this situation – that my interlocuters often described with recourse to concepts related to 'death' – led inevitably to emigration. Although there were 11,000 people officially registered as residents of Campobello, local authorities told me they guessed the real number was about half of that at most. And as people moved, they left behind lives and houses, which meant that there would be even more abandoned buildings.

It was clear that many Campobellesi felt that the intertwined dynamics of the Mafia, the state, the region's economic outlook, and emigration were mirrored in the built environment. As Laura put it, they were part of a cycle that resulted in people shrugging – she made the gesture with her shoulders – and 'not living' and then leaving:[39]

> 'These discussions, you see, I like them, but I don't. It seems dumb, but it makes me want to cry. If I stop and think about it, it makes me want to cry. I don't understand how you can live in a place, without living. How can you think of living in a place, but not think of being able to take a walk, or like you can't easily access a functioning sidewalk if you need to with a pram or a stroller. This place is like a dormitory for ill doings (*malaffare*). […] Because in fact, even those who live here, don't live it, they don't live the place. They shrug their shoulders. Like this [shrugs shoulders]. And if by chance they think things aren't going well for their children they send them away. … because here, there is nothing.'

In their descriptions of Campobello and Campobellesi, my interlocuters often began from the built environment and moved on to the Mafia and its interconnections with the state, local industry, and emigration. These are the four 'horsemen of death' in Campobello – the factors that people blamed for deaths in Campobello, and the town's death, abandonment, and degradation. My interlocuters were clear about the emotional, sensual, and affective toll that this built environment took on them, and on how it symbolised a Mafia presence that also affected how people behaved. People who were scared, threatened, or disillusioned often left

[39] Here, Laura is echoing sentiments observed by Diego Gambetta (1988). As Sorge writes: 'that the existential condition that mafia generated in Sicily gave rise to two rational options: to mind one's own affairs, or to emigrate' (forthcoming).

or became numb, inert, they 'shrugged' in Laura's interpretation.

Figure 13 Cemetery of Campobello (photo by author)

Indeed, my interlocuters often read this disillusionment towards life into the built environment as well. For instance, Laura once insisted on taking me to the cemetery (Fig. 14). She took me to the fancy end: marble tombs glistened in perfect rows. Laura contrasted these symmetric rows with the buildings in the Campobello town centre. By contrast with those unfinished or abandoned buildings in town, in the cemetery, the marble exteriors of the tombs glistened along

the narrow pathways they lined perfectly. They are called tombs, Laura said to me, but here the tomb is like a home, a place to live again with your family. For Laura, these tombs signalled that in Campobello, 'people cared more about the dead than the living'.

Figure 14 Memorial Stone For Vito Lipari (photo by author)

Perhaps Laura should have clarified – certain dead people. Along the side of a state road that I often took, I would pass a memorial dedicated to a former mayor, Vito Lipari, who had been killed by the Mafia. It sat on the side of a main state road that connected Campobello to the surrounding countryside (Fig. 15). This seemed to be a public dedication to a man, a representative of the state, who had died at the hands of the Mafia. And yet this story was itself complicated, partly obfuscated, as Lipari was known to have connections to the Salvo brothers, local entrepreneurs who themselves were connected to the Mafia. The material of this public memorial reflected the ways death in Campobello seemed to accrue, in layers of perceived rot

that built on top of each other and sedimented. Indeed, the stone of the memorial itself was chipped and broken, the flowerpots placed beneath it had fallen over. Perhaps my interlocuters had gotten into my head, but I understood what they were seeing: how deaths and death had become inscribed in the landscape, referring to literal, ethical, and metaphorical forms of decay that had affective consequences on people who lived in their midst, or even simply drove by.

Degraded Places, Degraded People

For some in Campobello, the presence of migrants came to be associated with the town's degradation, and those factors that provoked its death. While for some, this association was part of an impetus to act on behalf of migrants, for others, these factors were interpreted in such a way that migrants were seen as the new perpetrators of this death and degradation. This interpretation – of what Pitt-Rivers might frame as 'strangers as posing a threat' – was part of what led to a dominant sense of hostility in town, towards these migrant workers.

Migrant workers from West Africa, primarily Senegal and the Gambia, had been coming since the 1990s, but their numbers grew in the early 2000s, so that by the 2010s their presence was more visible. They replaced an earlier labour force, North Africans mainly from Tunisia, to work in Campobello's olive groves. They arrived in response to changes in local agriculture as an industry: in those years, Campobello was given an official 'DOP' label by the EU for a special, prized kind of olive, the *nocellara del Belice*. It was predominantly this labelling that drastically changed the industry in Campobello: from an earlier generation in which people planted gardens with varied vegetables and fruits for subsistence and to sell at the local market, to an era in which grapes and olives began to dominate, by the 1990s the area became a monoculture – everywhere you went you saw the squat groves of the nocellara olive trees (Lo Cascio 2018).

Because they needed temporary shelter, the men (and occasionally women) who worked to pick the olives found refuge in the abandoned or half-finished cement and tuff huts across the countryside. Other times, they joined together to create settlements: small, shanty-town-like communities composed of huts made of tarp and wood that people built themselves. The settlements themselves could be dangerous and dirty places to live: there was no running water or electricity. There were no bathrooms or options for trash collection. People used gas generators to heat up water, to cook, or to charge their phones. These were highly flammable, and in 2016 and again in 2021 – fires spread through the settlements, killing one man each time, and injuring dozens more.

Many activists, and even some of the workers living in the settlements that I spoke with – both local to Campobello and those who came from across Sicily – understood the settlements to be a result of town racism and/or state bordering policy. It was clear that state bordering efforts played a part. In 2021 and 2022 at least, the years I conducted my research, many of the migrant workers had either escaped from, or been evicted from, state reception hostels. A couple of times, I met people who had come to Campobello directly from the port. Usually Tunisian or Gambian, these individuals had been given a *foglio di via* directly, the document ordering a person to leave the Italian territory within a matter of days. Significant numbers of research articles have likewise made clear the connections between the poor conditions in state reception centres, and the need for cheap, easily exploitable labour – arguing that the poor conditions amount almost to a policy of discomfort that drives people away, or else that these reception centres are purposefully located in remote areas to supply the labour needs of agri-business (Calavita 2005; Rigo and Dines 2015; Gianguzza 2022).

It also seemed clear that local government and authorities played their part. For instance,

following the Covid-19 pandemic, the mayor of Campobello refused to continue collecting the waste from the self-settlement. As a result, waste piled up high outside the settlements, contributing to the stigma that certain townspeople and local government officials attached to migrants. The mayor blamed them, suggesting that they could resume trash collection 'when the migrants learned to recycle'. Many activists felt that local governments and humanitarians weren't willing to think of more long-term strategies for better housing or living conditions.

Workers living in the settlement, as well as activists and aid workers I spoke to, also often attributed the lack of decent housing, of hospitality, to racism:

> 'I am interested in finding a place to live, but in this place, they don't rent to Blacks' – M., young Gambian worker who had just arrived in his car to Campobello.
>
> 'They've rented two houses in seven years [to Black migrants]. You have to ask yourself, what is the motivation? Romanians ok, Tunisians ok, but Senegalese, no? And then they answer – oh, you're the guy who says that Campobellesi are racist' – Andrea
>
> 'Italy is a country of welcome and hospitality, but here… the Campobellesi are still peasants [*contadini*]… Senegalese people are peaceful' – I., older Senegalese worker.
>
> 'My dad wouldn't talk to you [an outsider]. The Campobellesi are hard to penetrate… it would be hard to find a room to rent' – M., former Campobello youth activist.
>
> 'We are looking for a house [for a Senegalese woman, her sister, and her sister's baby]. It's really hard to find. The ones we do find sometimes have mould or other problems. So, I'm having this experience [*sto facendo questa esperienza*]. We hear 'Blacks no' from the *Castelvetranesi* [nearby town] … there is also the past experience on the part of the landlords. They have had difficult experiences, problems with people who haven't paid, even other Italians, so there is a lot of mistrust. I'm from [city in the Italian North], I had never seen such a thing' – aid worker.

When I spoke to other town residents, people who both had and didn't have experiences renting to workers, they disputed this framing, telling me overtly they were 'not racist'. Two families I spoke to who had rented to Africans in the past both told me they had had negative experiences. One, who lived above the rented apartment, complained that there was always trash everywhere, including plastic bags full of waste and empty alcohol bottles.

I had no way of verifying if this was true or not, but it contributed to a broader framing that existed in Campobello as across Italy. In Italian and local media, African agricultural workers were often pictured sitting in plastic chairs, outside self-made shacks, often with waste bags near or around them. In Campobello this framing was exacerbated by the fact that the municipality was not picking up the waste outside the settlement so that it accumulated. To echo Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]) people surrounded by dirt and waste became associated to that dirt and waste, which reinforced their exclusion – as matter, and people, out of place.

There was also the issue that I have mentioned that many of the houses in town were not habitable or rentable. Another man, who had been gone from Campobello for three decades had returned to farm his father's land. Upon return, he had found several workers living in different abandoned huts on his property. Again, he told me that he 'was not racist' – he had worked side by side with Africans in factories up north. But these men had to go, mostly out of safety and liability. If anything happened to them because a part of the buildings that he owned fell onto them, he would be legally liable.

Finally, some people in Campobello associated Africans not just with waste, or to the crumbling buildings, but also with the Mafia. This was not just because mafiosi were known to enter the settlement – it was about how the settlements themselves were run: they were the opposite of *legalità*. For instance, a reception worker who ran the centre in Campobello expressed to me that, 'In my centre' she said, 'we promote regularity [*regolarità*] – that camp is irregular [*irregolare*].' A few days earlier, a man that she presumed to be one of the workers had run through the doors of her centre, crazily, scaring her as well as the 'guests' ('*ospiti'*) of the centre. She said that last time there was an informal housing settlement near her centre, the land had been left in disarray, and she had had to clean up the leftover trash, replete with bits of decaying animal remains that had been left behind after the olive-picking season was over.

As another aid worker put it to me:

> 'I understand that it's interesting for them to live [in the encampments]: it's social, it's a place of gathering, and it's far more frustrating to try to find a place to rent – but what I don't understand is this taking advantage … they say it doesn't hurt anyone, but that's not the point: the point is that if you want to do this, buy your own piece of land, do this, even run it yourself [*auto-gestione*], but with Italy's OK. You can't just build these shacks, you have to follow norms and rules, it's a safety thing.'

I pressed her to understand better what was at the heart of the matter, and she explained through the example of what she claims happens in the ZEN, a public housing zone on Palermo's periphery that is sometimes used as shorthand for discussing the mafia. In this neighbourhood, she explained, one person builds, say, a porch addition to their house without getting the proper permissions. Ok, this doesn't bother anyone, but then their neighbour wants a porch, so they build one, similarly without getting the proper permissions, and it blocks the other person's door. But they can't say anything, because they were the first to build a porch without getting permission. The problem is that now there is a disagreement, and you can't go to the state because neither of you followed the law, so, you must find a local, informal arbitrator. But this person has no need to follow the law; you are going to them precisely for extra-legal judgement. This, she was explaining, is how Mafia comes to be, and how mafia-related violence reinforced. This aid worker wondered whether the workers' way of thinking 'converged with *legalità'*.

In different ways, these various residents of Campobello expressed the ways migrants represented a continuation, but also an exacerbation, of problems that the place already had. The arrival of migrants coincided with the birth of the monoculture of the olive, with the continuation of processes of death of a way of life, and visually, these migrants became associated in town with places characterised by waste and illegality. Echoing Douglas, Stoler (2013) has pointed out that people living in 'degraded places' often themselves come to embody this 'degradation'.

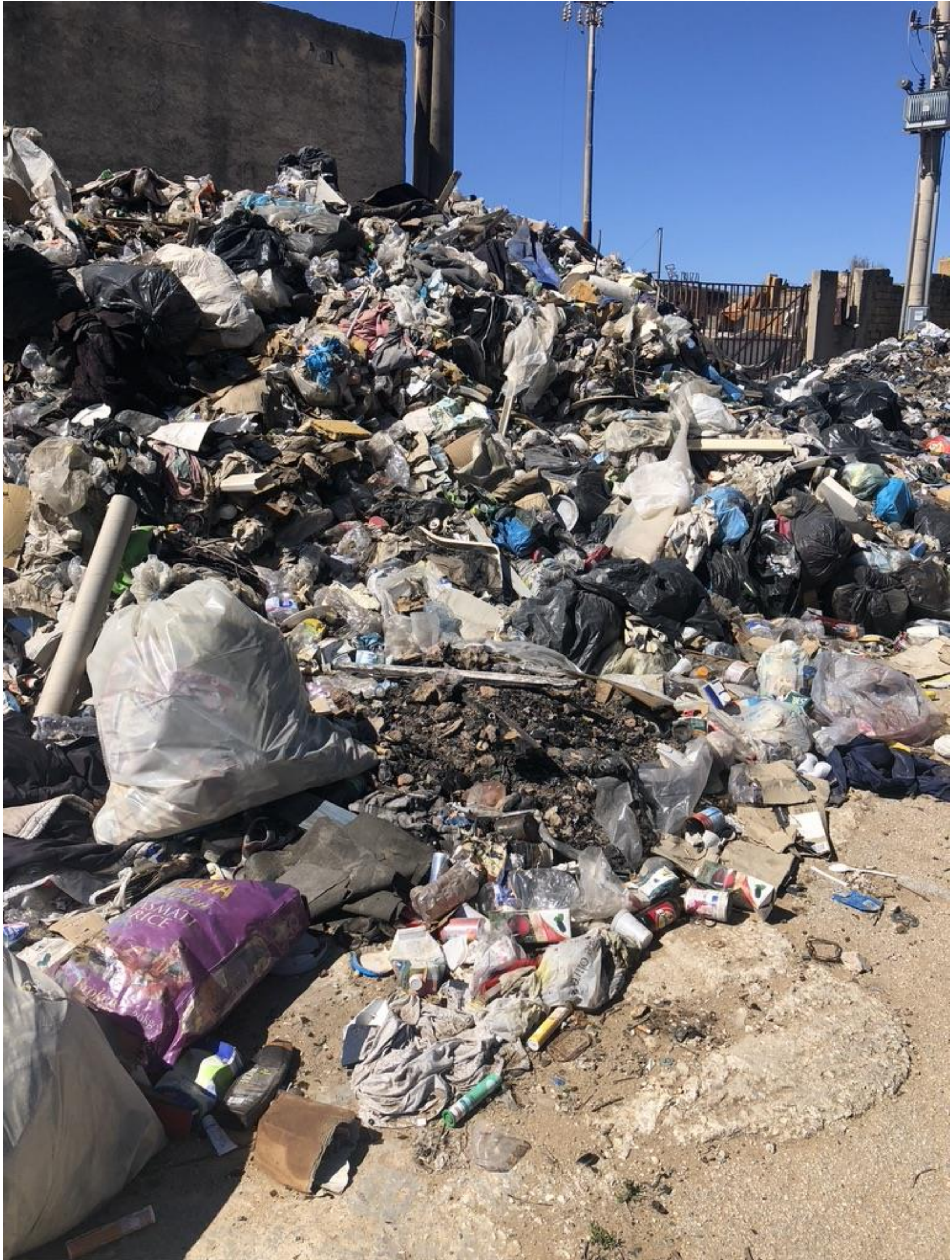

Figure 15 Mound of waste at the entry of the informal settlement (photo by author)

For others in Campobello, however, it was not the migrants who symbolised a continuation of the death of the place – it was the fact that some locals 'cared more about the dead than the living' that evidenced the continued process of degradation, abandonment, violence, and so forth. In such mythical terms, backed by the very material reality that it *was* difficult to find good housing in Campobello, these activists framed Campobello as a hostile, almost accursed place, to which the antidote – or rather, the way forward and out – was finding a way to offer hospitality. Hospitality would help to provide a sense of control over space and over meaning that the senselessness of death, and the neglect of the state, seemed to take away.

Hospitality as Renewal after Death

Activism around the migrant worker issue had begun in 2013. Everyone I asked about it told me that I needed to speak to a man that I will call Tommaso. Tommaso was not from Campobello, but lived in a nearby town, and had worked across Sicily for decades. He was a longtime volunteer with Libera, a national Antimafia organization.

I met Tommaso in the coastal town where he lived, about an hour from Campobello, and he invited me to dinner to talk about a period from 2013 to 2016, that people often referred to as the 'Campobello Spring' – the same terminology that had been used in Palermo to describe a period of renewal. Although this 'Spring' was 'over', it lingered in the memories of many still trying to operate in Campobello, including Laura.

Tommaso was an affable man with a warm laugh who said hello to everyone in the restaurant. Indeed, I kept having to pause our interview recording because people would come up to shake his hand and chat. He was also an amateur anthropologist of folklore, and collected puppets from across the world which, like traditional Sicilian puppets, he understood to partake in

ordinary peoples' aims to speak truth to power through seemingly innocuous, joking, or disguised means.

Tommaso explained to me that he had had no idea that migrant workers were living in these poor conditions until he heard about the death of the man called Ousmane in 2013, and then he thought that he had better do something about it. He explained to me:

> 'Why wasn't anyone taking care of this issue (*com'è che nessuno se n'è mai occupato)?* Because there hadn't yet been the disgrace of a man who died. We dedicated the mural to him for this reason. And in that moment, I ask myself, what could we do? And I say, the first thing that we should do is bring some hospitality, some welcome, in a more dignified way' (*'mettere un po' di ospitalità, di accoglienza in modo più dignitoso').*

For Tommaso, hospitality was firstly an actionable response to the death of a worker, of a man. It involved hospitality in a material sense: finding a place where people could live in what he called a 'more dignified way'. This search was influenced by his own decades of experience in the Antimafia movement: reflected in the laws, people, and modes he knew about to find a housing solution. Consequently, hospitality also began to have broader meaning that related to combatting the Mafia in Campobello – the main source of the region's 'death'.

Tommaso's work with the national NGO Libera, and in the Antimafia movement broadly, informed his agenda and strategy: under a 1982 law known as 'Rognoni-La Torre', the state had a right to sequester and ultimately confiscate property from people convicted of Mafia crimes, or of association with the Mafia. Following this 1982 law that sequestered and confiscated buildings and property of known Mafia associates, in 1996, the Italian government passed another law, authorising the use of these buildings for '*scopi sociali'* – for social aims. In part, the 1996 law responded to public complaints that the buildings and businesses that were sequestered or confiscated from the owners subsequently lay abandoned – any equipment rusted, the businesses went bust, buildings decayed and further blighted landscapes. The 1996 law was meant to turn this process around. This was a law that Libera had pushed for, through

collecting signatures and creating a 'public petition' so that what the Mafia had taken away might then be 'restored to society' through the 'good', i.e. 'social' use of these buildings ('*restituire il maltolto'*).

Tommaso used the connections he had developed over his decade in the Antimafia to talk about the issue with public authorities and judges. He was provided with a list of buildings confiscated from the Mafia, that might, in his words, 'be fitting for the hospitality of these people'. As he put it, 'amongst all the things that they showed us – maps, inspections in situ, fields, businesses', one place stood out. It was called 'Fontane d'Oro' ('Fountain of Gold'). Tommaso liked it because of the physical arrangement of the building and a surrounding lot, and the fact that it was right in front of Erbe Bianche ('White Grasses'), the field where the settlement that had killed Ousmane had been. As such, it was in a familiar and convenient location for the migrant workers.

As they looked into the building and how to go about repurposing it, Tommaso explained that it had been confiscated, but it hadn't been reassigned. According to him, 'through other Mafia trials, through wiretapping, we found out that the oil mill at Fontane d'Oro was considered the golden goose for the local Mafia (*'la gallina d'oro per la Mafia locale'*). So, they were trying to keep it, [it was] linked to Messina Denaro'. He continued:

> 'The oil mill remained officially confiscated, but, when … we went with the police (*carabinieri*) to see the place, we found ourselves with people inside – the mafiosi from whom the building had been confiscated! The oil mill wasn't working anymore, but obviously that was the aim … so the first real political action that we took … was to throw out the people [still using Fontane d'Oro]' (Interview December 2021).

Tommaso's account shows how the efforts to 'provide hospitality' for migrant workers is about different kinds of change: it is about providing better living conditions, and it is also deeply coloured by and enmeshed with another political action – kicking out the Mafia. This is literal

but becomes metaphoric. Transforming this lot, aptly called the Fountain of Gold, was alchemical. As it had been in Palermo, here too this action was tinged, in Tommaso's story, with an almost magical, spiritual quality – it entailed a kind of purifying through recuperating. It was a moral and an aesthetic transformation, as this building was re-painted and renovated. The mural on the side, commemorating Ousmane's death, made the building symbolise something totally different: from abandonment and Mafia involvement to hospitality and the hope the emanated from memorialising a young African worker.

For Tommaso, welcoming migrants was thus inextricable from the work of combatting the Mafia in the area. Hospitality was his actioned answer to the death of Ousmane, as his opening quote illustrates, but it also was a way to continue decades-long efforts to combat the Mafia in the region, which had been responsible for so much other death, physical and metaphorical.

Once they had kicked out the *mafiosi,* Tommaso and others began the work of trying to run a different kind of encampment – one where workers had autonomy and voice and decision-making power, where people of different races worked together to raise wages, where there were latrines, working electricity, and running water. It began the chapter that I have mentioned, which many referred to as the Campobello Spring, a period from about 2013 to 2016, when the encampment was activist-run.[40] In my interviews with activists from the time, internal tensions and dynamics were often glossed over or omitted from peoples' recounting (including power dynamics inside the encampment, or the relations with the rest of the town). Broadly speaking, the activists I spoke with remembered the time as one of hope, when their understanding of what it meant to be from Campobello or from Sicily changed.

Indeed, activists and members of various groups who participated in building this new

[40] Toni de Bromhead's ethnographic film (2020) documents several weeks' worth of life in the encampment (see also Pai 2021)

encampment that I spoke to all seemed to have a kind of glimmer in their eye when they spoke about that era. ‘If Campobello ever had a glory age,’ one told me, ‘That was it’. Almost everyone I spoke to reminisced about how everyone would eat together. As they spoke, they pulled up and showed me pictures of these meals on their phones or laptops or gifted me USB keys with long videos from that time. They recounted to me how they fought for – and obtained – crucial things from the municipality: latrines and showers with running water. They managed to raise the remuneration from €2.50 per box of olives collected to €4.50 or €5. They organised sit-ins at the municipality, protesting the living and working conditions. There were two ‘camp-carers’ (de Bromhead 2020), one was Andrea, a local Campobellese, and the other was Nigerian, a man who had since moved away. At the time, they lived together inside the building that had been confiscated from the Mafia.

When I spoke to him about that time, Andrea told me, ‘We lived there for two years, we were a heterogeneous group – including Tunisians, Senegalese – and the whole time, only one incident ever occurred’. Other people that I spoke to corroborated exactly this vision: they discussed how wonderful it was that everyone was eating together, sleeping under the same roofs. Many of the activists would spend the night, in tents or in the building, as the workers did. In many ways, people remained divided along ethnic, linguistic, racial, and national lines. But the activists nonetheless described it as a kind of moment of utopia (at least for themselves, and relative to the ways migrant workers had lived before and after).

Part of this feeling of utopia seemed to be that, although nominally it was activists like Tommaso who were offering hospitality, as he had put it – in many ways they became special, honoured guests of the very people they were hosting. This led to a kind of relationship-building that was part of what was exciting to the activists because it seemed to them like it

broke down usual barriers between people, or at least between the activists and the workers.

As Tommaso told me:

> 'I stayed there, I began this relationship with these men, the workers. There were about four or five hundred of them that year, we were a network of volunteers. We would take turns sleeping there. But the great thing is that we would ask ourselves, tonight, where will we eat? With the Senegalese? With people from the Maghreb, Tunisians, to eat cous-cous? Or with the Sudanese? So that's just to say that the climate that was created was very, very, very wonderful (*molto molto molto bello*)'.

Figure 16 The building at Fontane d'Oro with the 'Ciao Ousmane' Mural (photo by author)

Another young woman, a local from Campobello who had been a teenager at the time (who

subsequently decided to work inside the reception hostel housed in the same building at Fontane d'Oro) likewise expressed her enthusiasm, even wonder, at participating in this project. She described the encampment like this: 'it was massive, everyone was so well organised, there was a barber, and a big restaurant where everyone would sit around and eat with their hands.' At this point in her story, another woman working at the reception centre chimed in to say she would have had a hard time participating in something like that. But the younger woman continued, 'I was just thinking, when will I ever get the chance to do something like this again?' Perhaps she exoticized the experience; the point is that for her, going there had been an important part of her adolescent experience; part of her growing up. She went without telling her father, who himself employed some of the same people that she would sit around and eat meals with. Her participation was thus an act of transgression, one which had opened new worlds of possibility for her.

I spoke at length with another activist, Marta, who was still active in Campobello. She was from a small town in Palermo province, more urban than Campobello, but with its own parallel legacies of Mafia corruption, violence, and emigration. At the time, she had been studying Political Science at the University of Palermo. She described her experience like this:

> '[We were a] pretty heterogeneous group, people who had lost work [in other parts of Italy] and had just come back, without work, and were reasoning – [do we look for] a shit job, in Turin, or try to understand what we could create here, to stay here, to try and recuperate a world that is inherently different. … we just went to drink caffè *touba* there, and then we learned together how to mount a spout to have some water, how this could start a process of rethinking how to live in Sicily, because we wanted to see Sicily in a different way, as a positive stimulus. For us, it was a revolution.'

Like others, Marta's sense that this experience was somehow revolutionary related in part to the fact that it felt like this experiment in hospitality invited a kind of dismantling of hierarchies that allowed her to see Sicily in a different way, and imagine a different possible future for herself and for the island. She explained:

'The first year was a year of coming into contact, the journey, from Palermo to

> Campobello – that you now know well – and understanding the meaning of moving from that urban centre to a place that de facto can seem quite peripheral… so we go, we spend time. The first element that emerges is that of, simply going to get caffè *touba* at Erbe Bianche. Bit by bit it was changing our way of thinking, here, in Sicily. And it was important to do it with activists from Campobello, because we wanted to break down, you know, that division in the citizenry.'

For Marta, a key element of this whole project was the inverting of the periphery/centre dynamic. This was 'revolutionary' to her because it also enabled her, and others, to rethink their relationship to Sicily. She said:

> '… It's not a coincidence also that the collective, and the people we associated with in Campobello, began to occupy themselves with the issue of the illegal dump in Campobello. From the issue of migration and agriculture, immediately we look at the territory (*territorio*). … We want to understand what happens in this territory … think about how the mere presence of these migrants in this place changes a territory, changes the landscape, and changes our lives.'

In Marta's telling, engaging with migrants through acts of hospitality was not just linked to an ideology of welcome, or of human rights. It was political but rooted in human, interpersonal acts of exchange, one which involved relationship-building across usual dynamics of power. Crucially, reaching across the 'centre-periphery' divide in this way enabled her and other activists to reimagine their relationship to their own home. This experiment in hospitality brought life back to Campobello – literally through instances of conviviality, on a piece of land that had deeply symbolic resonance as a place from which Mafiosi had been kicked out. But it was also life-affirming in the sense that it gave the involved activists a sense of purpose that rooted them to their homelands. Crucially, it was the presence of immigrants that was key to these individuals' decision to stay in, and fight for, their own homelands. It helped to reestablish a sense of control – that they could change their outlooks, determine their choices about their future away from the status quo, and even have an impact on the physical landscape of their home territory.

In listening to the Sicilians who lived and worked in the activist-run encampment of the

Campobello Spring, it also struck me that this life-affirming work was an interesting twist on the findings of classical anthropological literature around death, funerary rites, and hospitality. For instance, in their investigation of funerary rites, Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982) discuss how they are social rites that offer a communal symbolic meaning: while mourning a death, funerals also connect death back to life through the regeneration of the community and its spirit (cf. Frazer 2009; Grotti and Brightman 2021; Jackson 2013; de Martino 2005 [1961], 2021 [1958]).

Within these cycles of renewal, scholars have argued that the figure of the stranger, or more specifically, the stranger-guest, can play an important role. As Vanessa Grotti and Marc Brightman note in their work on migrant presence across southern Italy, 'migrants, as objects of hospitality, are stranger-guests' (2024: 48). They cite Pitt-Rivers, who argued that stranger-guests occupied a 'midway status' which 'in terms of kinship, evokes affinity and thus the potential for the creation of new life in the form of social reproduction' (ibid.). These observations are in line too with other observations about how stranger-guests, often through marriage rites, offer, quite literally, new blood to a community (Sahlins 2009 [1981])

In Campobello, we are not speaking of marriage rites, nor of kinship and reproduction in a literal sense. Yet it seems clear from activists' accounts of that time that hospitality in its various forms was a mode of openness towards others – and their ways of living – that similarly positively affected the host society by bringing new life in. Hospitality was a life-affirming, and life-renewing, practice that helped reinforce a sense of rootedness, community, and home, and this was predicated on an openness towards outsiders.

As I have discussed, scholars often highlight the control that a host has over a guest. Such observations hold considering the ways activists sometimes talked about their forays into the

camp: they exoticized it, without going in depth to analyse hierarchies and power relations that must have also been present (and which are hinted at in Toni de Bromhead's film of the encampment). Their accounts emerge as partial at best. At the same time, they interpreted their acts and practices of hospitality as a mode of affirming life, presence, and place in Campobello. It offered a mode of taking back control that they had previously felt they did not have, of trying to live out social and political alternatives to the ones they were presented with.

Cycles of Death and Renewal: Hospitality as Restanza?

The Campobello Spring did not last forever. There were internal differences among activists and managers. But mostly, according to Tommaso at least, by 2015, 'we began to encounter the hostility of the Campobellesi'. He said that he was stopped many times on the street by people who would say (and here he switched to Sicilian), 'they left the oil mill to the [somewhat derogatory Sicilian term for Black people] and us, where should we work?' They wondered what was an organisation like Libera, symbol of the Antimafia, doing here, in Campobello, with migrants who were *illegal* and not in conformity with the Antimafia principle of *legalità*? A Facebook page was headlined, 'Let's liberate Campobello – Send them back to their own homes'.

Over a few seasons, the lot at Fontane d'Oro was closed and padlocked by local authorities, who framed the endeavour as an 'illegal occupation'. Police began to harass migrant workers and activists. Disillusioned, many of the local activists left Campobello for good. Those who remained felt that the situation for migrants was deteriorating even further, due to police evictions and harassment, humanitarian projects that did not offer real solutions, as well as the consequences of Covid-19. By 2021, when I arrived in Campobello, migrant workers had set up a new settlement, behind the walls of an ex-cement factory that had once been sequestered on suspicion that its owner was connected to the Mafia.

That era had left its own death mark on Campobello's territory. Andrea and I passed an abandoned football pitch. Once, it had been the site of a games of a league created to help promote relations among different groups in Campobello – in particular, between some of the farmhands and local residents living in the public housing nearby. They had been living in proximity, and there had been tensions. The sociable football club had helped, according to him. But now, the pitch lay empty. There was a big puddle in the middle of the field, and a massive hole in the surrounding fence. Andrea shook his head and complained that the municipality was doing nothing to take care of the place. The abandoned pitch now stood as a memorial to past hopes and efforts, but also became one more thing to point to in the broader landscape, yet another sign of present neglect and future uncertainty. Still, he liked to repeat a line from the leftist, 1970s singer-songwriter Fabrizio de André: '*dai diamanti non nasce niente/ dal letame nascono i fiori'* – 'out of diamonds, nothing is born/ out of shit, flowers bloom'.

By 2021, the only person from Campobello still active in efforts at hospitality was Laura, with occasional help from Andrea, who by this time was busy with his own olive production. During the time of the Campobello Spring, Laura had been pregnant and then had a small child – perhaps this was why she hadn't burned out, or left, disillusioned, like many others. For her, the Campobello Spring remained a source of inspiration. But because she didn't have the experience, connections, or support that Tommaso, Marta, and others during that time had had, Laura often had to go at things alone.

Laura was a key point person for migrant workers, aid workers, and activists who came to Campobello. When, in 2021, another fire erupted in the new settlement, killing another man, Laura was first on the scene. Following the fire, some of the workers marched in protest back

to Fontane d'Oro. When the power there went out, leaving people in the dark without electricity, she woke early in the morning to go turn it back on. Laura knew many people in the camp, and ensured that people received needed basic necessities. She partnered with a religious aid worker to open the church once a week so that workers could obtain clothes.

Laura tried also to advance her bigger agenda. She had an idea to create a mapping of all the empty homes in Campobello, to see if the local government would take charge of them and recuperate them, and then turn them into housing for migrant workers. This was a version of the '1€ house project' that had become popular in Sicily, in which municipalities conducted mappings of empty and abandoned houses in towns to sell them to tourists for cheap. And she also wanted to continue pressing the municipality to turn the building of glass into a kind of super-accommodation and resource centre.

Following the fire of 2021, there had again been renewed energy to try and ameliorate the living conditions for migrants. But as the year went on, Laura felt that her efforts were also not leading to much. She toyed constantly with leaving. She was growing increasingly pessimistic about the chances that the building of glass project would work out. In the spring of 2022, she organised a meeting with the mayor and vice-mayor, to try and outline her idea. I attended the meeting, along with another NGO worker. Though they spoke in strong Campobello dialect, I understood the outlines of the conversation: the administration seemed (pleasantly) surprised to learn that there was potential money available for an *accoglienza* project. But when Laura mentioned the building of glass, the vice-mayor immediately shook his head: 'no, no, that building was being reserved for municipal offices' he replied. Laura left the meeting dejected.

After I finished fieldwork, Laura also left Sicily briefly. But eventually, she came back. She

returned for familial reasons, and she had missed the sea, she told me. But without her activism with migrant workers, she stated, ‘I wouldn’t be able to stay’. Her work of hospitality seemed to help her combat forces of pessimism that she had talked to me about, but I wondered if her situation also highlighted limits to Teti’s concept of *restanza.* Laura oscillated between hope and dejection. Her idea that hospitality could bring change was often limited by local constraints. There was only so much that she could control – though the *doing* was the crucial part.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how hospitality towards migrants was conceived of as a response to deaths in Campobello, to bring about social and political change. A movement of hospitality was mobilised following the death of a worker. Also, hospitality related to trying to move beyond the town’s moral and historical decay, epitomised in the degradation of its landscape through neglect and abandonment. Some people understood the presence of migrants as exacerbating a sense that the town was falling to ruin. Others instead blamed the absence of the state, the presence of the Mafia, and the abandonment of its people through emigration or lack of care.

For many of the activists I spoke with, this ‘landscape of death’ (Nevins 2002) was characterised by a sense of emptiness that was spatial and temporal. It had sensual, linguistic, and meaning-making elements, and together these sometimes combined to produce an existential affect. This existential attitude was expressed as deep sadness about why things were this way when, at other times in history, they had been different. Interlocuters exhibited pessimism about people dying, about things not working, about migrants living in such states of abandon when they were so crucial to the local economy, and about emigration emerging as the only solution.

Yet from this pessimism, related to a kind of frustrating void of sense about why things were this way, grounded hospitality emerged clearly as a practice of regaining control over space and meaning, to take matters into one's own hands and try to bring about the change that people wished to see. Practices of grounded hospitality granted activists modes of creating connection (with each other and with migrant-workers) that countered the sense that Campobello was primarily characterised by disaffection or the lingering effects of the Mafia.

This grounded hospitality also supported modes of autonomy from state authorities and Mafia forces. Although they did sometimes work (or try to work) with the state, through the (semi-legal) occupation and recuperation of buildings and lots, they exerted physical control over buildings and space that was grassroots. It was not exactly a form of opposition to *legalità:* indeed, Tommaso was a longtime member of the anti-Mafia organization, Libera, and he had received permission from state authorities to take over Fontane d'Oro. But unlike the state-centric, top-down model of *legalità*, this was a bottom-up effort at building community. At the same time, it blurred the lines between what was legal and illegal, operating in a kind of liminal condition. As in that period before the rise of Salvini on the national stage, activists did not feel the need to obey the state's rules of official *accoglienza,* they could experiment in their own forms of community making.

Though there were imbalances in social hierarchies amongst the activists and migrants, what I wish to highlight here is the ways in which this control over space, through the practice of hospitality, became experiments in forms of autonomous community making. These had imaginative effects, a lingering aftermath in the local memory of certain people: through these efforts people re-imagined what they understood Sicily, or Campobello, to be. They found

modes of bringing life back to places characterised by death – in such a way that meant that they might even have control over their own futures, be able to decide, against the overwhelming tide, to stay rather than to go.

As I have also shown, these efforts at control over space, meaning, and future, were predicated on openness towards outsiders. But this openness towards outsiders also ended up being a political problem, as it was easily weaponised by local politics. Once public opinion shifted, the experiment faced its end. Though it lingered in the imagination of people like Laura, it also became clear that it had been predicated on numbers and energy of people, as well as on a particular collaboration with the state. This collaboration required the state to cede a certain amount of control, which it had done largely because of a personal connection of a magistrate with a charismatic local figure. But it was not easily reproduced – illustrating the ways hospitality-as-control and an impetus for change is often limited by structural constraints.

Chapter 6: Hospitality as Homemaking in Informal Self-Settlements

It was a cool autumn day in 2021, and I had just entered the self-settlement, a place people called the *ghetto,*[41] when I heard Ismail call my name. The informal settlement where migrant workers came to stay each fall was located on a plot of land that had once been the site of a cement factory. It was now reduced to a rickety, rusty shell of metal. The lot was emptier than I had seen it a few weeks earlier.

The first time I had come had been in mid-September, the olive-picking season was about to start, so the place had been buzzing with the anticipation of a new season. Each autumn, migrant workers arrived from across Italy, attracted by the opportunity for livelihoods that agriculture provided. Most of these workers were from Senegal and The Gambia, though also from Mali, Sudan, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Tunisia. Many had begun life in Italy in a formal reception centre, from which they had 'escaped' after hearing about agricultural work and the informal settlements in places like Campobello di Mazara from co-nationals – men who had walked this path before them. Sometimes, their reception centres were not too far from the agricultural town. Once they entered the circuit, it could become a way of life: these men often followed the seasons, moving from agricultural town to agricultural town, harvesting olives, tomatoes, potatoes, greens, oranges, and so forth. Some men developed relationships

[41] Such informal settlements exist across migratory routes, from the Sahel to North Africa and into Europe (e.g., Andersson 2014; Brachet 2016). They are referred to as *ghetti* by migrants themselves, from whom Sicilians take linguistic cues, even though in the Italian context the term has its own genealogy. Although migrants' *ghetti* were enabled certain kinds of autonomy, both kinds of *ghetti* speak to a similar dynamic: they are separate from the rest of society, and from the standpoint of the nation-state serve as places of 'confinement of dispossessed and dishonored groups' (Wacquant 2004). These contemporary ghettoes are 'spaces that have been built up on the frontier, at the edges, or other limits of the social and the national' (Agier 2009: 857; see also Wacquant 2013). They are often the spatialized result of where migration confronts visible and invisible borders of the nation-state (see Katz 2023; Vuilleumier 2024).

with certain producers, who called them to work for them year after year. Others relied on intermediary figures, often called *caporali,* to find them work. For some, jobs were even more occasional or spontaneous: they knew that if they went to one of the informal settlements, it was likely that they would find contacts through whom they could access work.

As such, at the beginning of the 2021 season, a couple of other socio-legal workers from Porco Rosso and I had made our way up and down the *ghetto's* lanes. We chatted at some length to a Senegalese man with a Roman accent just unpacking his car, and to a Gambian man who sat up on top of a half-built shack, hammering nails in to seal the roof in preparation for other workers' arrivals. Such activities demonstrated the ways informal settlements were communities – places in which men were not only farmworkers who needed a place to live, but also where they had different roles and responsibilities. If the media and government authorities frequently described the need to 'overcome' such undignified forms of living, many men also found community and different modes of livelihoods in the settlements themselves.

Shortly after my first visit to the settlement, at the end of September 2021, a fire decimated the camp, killing a man and scattering others in search of better refuge. Many of the Senegalese workers had marched back to Fontane d'Oro – the site of the old activist encampment – and occupied half the lot. With the old showers and electricity still in place, it offered safer and easier living conditions, and it was a site of memory for many who remembered the days of the Campobello Spring. Here, by contrast, only fifty or so people remained – a couple of them were women, but most were men. Among them was Ismail. Ismail had managed to escape the fire without so much as a scratch. But some of his most prized possessions had burned. These were objects he had carried with him from Senegal and which, in his recounting, seemed to have taken on an almost talismanic aura. They had been his companions all these years of

moving. They included a hat his daughter had woven for him before he left, and a necklace his late father had gifted him as a souvenir, upon return from a work trip. Despite these losses, Ismail remained in the ex-cement factory – a place some of the workers had started to call the *campo brutto,* the 'ugly camp', a play on the name of the town 'Campobello'. This also distinguished this burnt camp from the one that many workers were reestablishing over at Fontane d'Oro, which became the *campo bello,* the nice camp (Fig. 18).

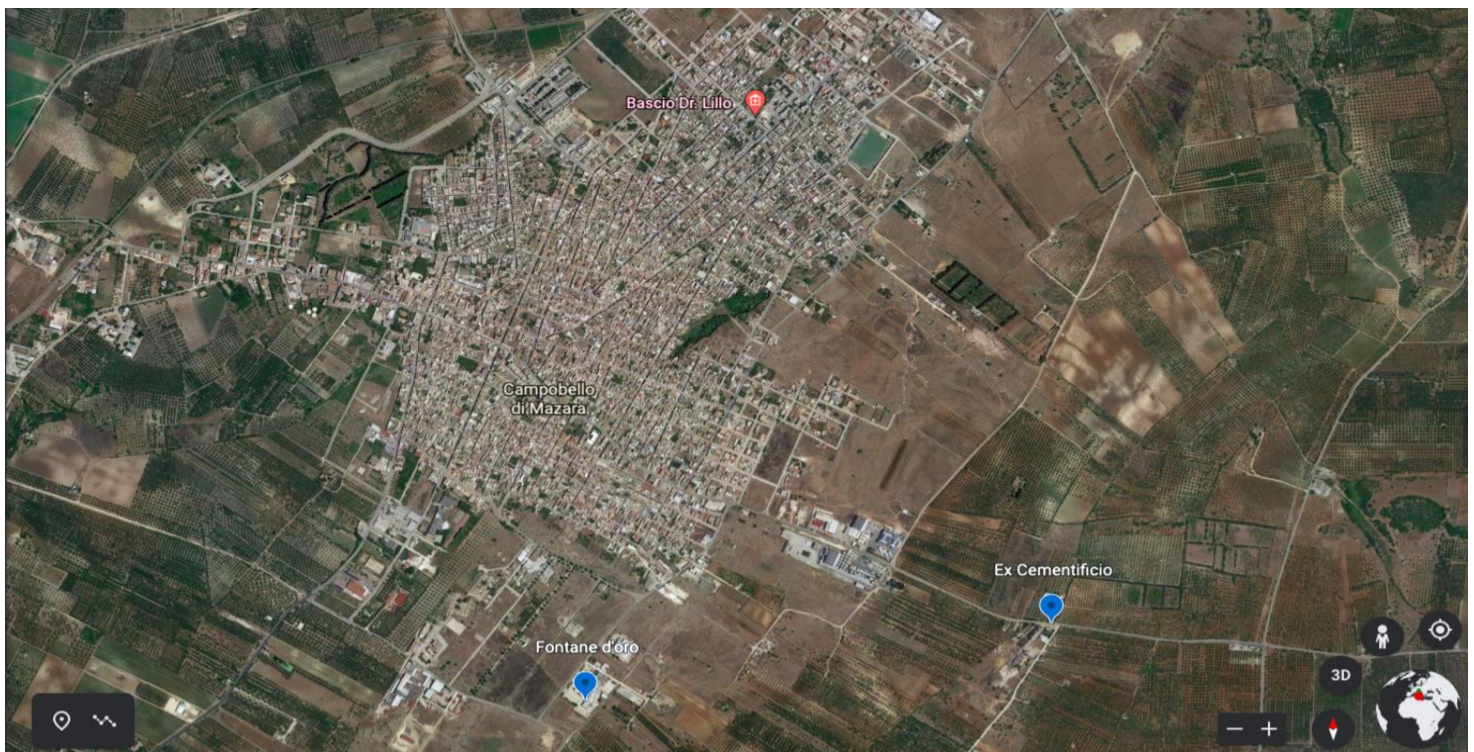

Figure 17 Map of Campobello di Mazara and the settlements in 2021

This day Ismail was grinning broadly and ushering me towards him. I followed him as he led me to his *baracca,* the small hut that he shared with two others. Like most of the other shelters that stood side-by-side in this crowded settlement, Ismail's place was made of large pieces of recycled wood and broken-down pallets, of blue tarp and rope. It had been rebuilt quickly, mere days after the fire. This speed was necessary: Ismail and his housemates had nowhere else to go. But the hut's presence also stood as evidence of what Ismail often repeated: despite what outsiders and insiders both described as harsh, violent, and often illegal living conditions

of the settlement, Ismail wasn't going anywhere. Here, he claimed, he was *tranquillo.*[42]

Once, Ismail had claimed he was *tranquillo* in the *ghetto* in front of Laura. She had arched her eyebrows in scepticism: 'This, *tranquillo*?' she had asked him, as though to say, 'be real'. He had leaned his head back, and laughed as if to partially cede her point, without having to answer further.

In Sicily, migrants often used this language to describe that they felt relatively safe from the police. In Campobello, the men who described themselves as *tranquillo* were often afraid of the police for a variety of reasons – many had experiences of being harassed, evicted from other settlements, or caught without documents. Some men who were genuinely on the run from the law had had to leave the encampment. Sometimes, in the *campo brutto,* this term was also a kind of code, used by men (I never heard a woman call her life in the *ghetto* '*tranquilla*') who were involved in illicit or borderline businesses, or who had police records and thus needed to be careful to stay out of the way of authorities. Indeed, some of the men who chose to stay at the *campo brutto* probably often did so not out of stubbornness, but because this was the place that offered them the best chances at staying out of the way of the police, while continuing their various livelihoods activities. This was different from the situation of the *campo bello,* whose better living conditions also meant that it was more inviting to newcomers and more open to outsiders.

Before pulling back the curtain and entering his home, Ismail took off his shoes and carefully laid them beside the door. I stayed on the threshold, and he made it clear that I didn't need to take off my shoes. In any case, the place was small and there wasn't really anywhere for me to

[42] In speaking to other ethnographers who have conducted research along the migrant routes in northern Africa, it has emerged that this term is part of the migratory lingo that predates many peoples' arrival to Italy. It describes the *ghetti,* or life within them, as *tranquil, tranquilo* or *tranquillo* depending on the language.

go. He showed me around from where I stood. Faux green grass, like turf, was laid carefully on the ground and served as a floor. Sheets were hung to separate the place into different rooms: the bedroom, with mattresses and a space heater, was made distinct from a kitchen with a little gas stove, on which coffee was being prepared. He pointed to the blankets hung up on the walls and explained to me that his home was well insulated from the cold and rain. He repeated matter-of-factly, '*oui*, *c'est confortable, c'est confortable'*.

I waved my hand at his roommates who sat on their mattresses in the bedroom. I smiled and tried to appear gracious for this moment of welcome which, given the cramped space and lack of place for me to sit, also felt like trespassing into a private space. As we left and moved back out into the parched, still ashen landscape of the settlement, Ismail told me that *les blancs,* 'whites' often had asked to come in. He told me that he always said no. He laughed, 'why would I let them into my house?'

Despite its appearance, the *ghetto* received a steady trickle of visitors. The *campo brutto* was hidden from street view behind tall stone walls. A foreboding mountain of smelly, rotting rubbish stood right at its entrance, as if to deter visitors' entry. The plot of land on which the settlement was built was owned by a man who had been investigated for criminal activity related to the Mafia (the land had at one point even been sequestered by the state, but then returned to him). From afar, you could see the rusting frame of the old cement factory, its tower that threatened to keel over at any minute. The smell of ash lingered in the air and mixed with the toxic stench of burning plastic that constricted my throat. Bits of dead sheep carcass and hoofs littered the floor, along with empty water bottles and litter.

Nonetheless, people did come to visit. There were the humanitarians, aid workers, and activists who arrived in twos and threes and fours. There were journalists and researchers on the hunt for stories and knowledge. Police usually stayed out – rumour had it these were orders *dall'alto,*

'from above' – but sometimes administrators from the regional government came on 'official visits' to tour the place (municipal officials did their best to stay out).

There were predators of all kinds who came into the *ghetto*. There were the men who sometimes entered, and sometimes paced just outside, waiting for one of the women, or occasionally, one of the men, to emerge so that they might roll down their car window, and flag them down to ask, '*quanto?*', 'how much?' One socio-legal worker that I frequently followed compared them to vultures circling over prey. Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, changing supply chains meant that the *campo brutto* had become a new stop on a drug supply chain that, it was rumoured, began in the coastal city of Mazara del Vallo, and was also rumoured to be mafia-linked. In my mind, I assumed that this was why, when we entered, there were sometimes strange white men in slacks, huddled in twos and threes, with piercing, threatening stares (or perhaps that was my imagination). They were rumoured to be (Mafia) bosses doing business – though I never got close enough to really find out.

Skinny young men and women with sunken faces and dark circles around their eyes sometimes came in too, carrying old carpets or furniture that they hoped to trade for drugs, probably crack. Once, a man came through, running and screaming after a younger man. He carried a stick in his outstretched arm, and the look in his eye suggested he was ready to physically beat him. A lawyer who was there chased him all the way to his car, yelling after him – only to find out that the older man was the younger man's father, trying to bring his addict son home.

Such were some of the 'whites' who entered the settlements – and while peoples' aims, and the effects of their presence, differed – to me Ismail described them as an undifferentiated mass. Perhaps out of disappointed expectations, Ismail expressed particular bitterness towards aid workers: 'For four years now, you know, people come, and write in their little books, and

take down our numbers, and yet – everything is the same for me', he told me. Ismail preferred to keep everyone, at least everyone external to his community, out of his domestic space.

Figure 18 The frame of a house being rebuilt at the ex-cement factory, after the fire (photo by author)

I asked about myself. I was, he claimed, an exception because we had met by chance, outside of the *ghetto* and its dynamics. I didn't know if this was true, that for this reason he hadn't put up one of the boundaries that life in this settlement seemed to require of him. More likely, it was a sort of fluid, evanescent truth that proliferated in the *ghetto*, a place where words like *tranquillo* had multiple meanings, where people spoke in codes and gestures, and had identities

that shifted, both of their own will and not, according to their multiple names, jobs, and even what was written on documents (often due to clerical errors that mistook their names and countries of origin).

In this case, Ismail's response that singled me out as a special guest seemed itself like a concerted form of hospitality, intimately related to boundary-making. It enabled keeping people both in and out, and so seemed alternately strategic and existential. Certainly, it had much to do with survival.

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In this chapter, I explore forms of hospitality across the self-settlements of Campobello di Mazara, as they existed in 2021 and 2022 when I conducted fieldwork. I focus mostly on the *ghetti* at the ex-cement factory and at Fontane d'Oro, but also touch on the smaller, individual occupations of abandoned huts, hidden in the surrounding countryside. Focusing on migrants' hospitality towards outsiders, I investigate how men and women living in the *ghetto* both sought out, and offered, hospitality in the settlement, and explore the extent to which this can be understood as a means of exerting control amidst circumstances of extreme uncertainty and lack of control brought on by the authorities representing the law, particularly those enacting the humanitarian border inland.

As I will show, for most of the people living in the *ghetto*, the settlement offered a moment of what Anaïk Pian (2009) has called 'stability in instability'. This instability, as Michael Agier has written, can only be understood 'against the background of deeply unequal North-South relations' (2011: 62), which, in the context of the Sicilian borderlands, relates especially to difficulties in obtaining documents, the unhomeliness of the reception centres, and the general hostility of the securitarian-humanitarian border. The alternate neglect, threats, and paternalism

of this system pushed people looking for autonomy and ways of making money towards the agricultural hinterlands – where they often found other forms of uncertainty and exploitation.

In the *ghetti,* people like Ismail who invited us, with much politeness, into their shacks, often referred to these abodes not as *baracche* but as *case,* using the Italian word that means both house and home (cf. Gianguzza 2022). Following the emic use of this term I argue that the stability people sought to create in the *ghetti* had to do with one version of what we might call homemaking. A concept that relates both to the care people took in making their own homes, it also scaled to the level of community-making in the broader *ghetto.* Homemaking, in this context, can be understood through Mary Douglas' (1991) idea that 'home starts by bringing some space under control'. Through this definition we can begin to understand conceptually how homemaking was a response to a broader context of uncertainty, in particular as related to the law and authorities.

There is an existing literature related to homemaking in migration (see, e.g. Boccagni and Bonfanti 2023). Yet my focus on control and autonomy within a broader focus on hospitality aligns also with other ideas about the ways migrants seek out autonomy amidst state bordering. In particular, I am thinking of Elena Fontanari and Maurizio Ambrosini's (2018) idea of 'interstices', which the authors define as 'spaces of autonomy within the structural constraints' of the state (in Fontanari 2019: 596). Interstices are 'a constituent politics of claiming space, building affective ties and forming autonomous polities' (ibid.). *Ghetti* reflect an 'active role' that migrants can play, but also highlight the ways that the 'regulation of mobility' is a 'principal concern of the state' (Fontanari 2019: 599). In particular, Fontanari refers to a 'complex regime of migration management' (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), that includes aspects of 'crimmigration' (Stumpf 2006) with 'the responsibilities of reception associated to

… human rights principles' as well as the 'manifold international interests' (Fontanari 2019: 599) in particular as related to the need for a flexible, just-in-time workforce, as in Campobello (Anderlini 2024).

In this context of struggle that articulate state borders not just on the Sicilian coasts but also inland (Balibar 2003) hospitality emerges again as a mode of exerting control over space and interactions that aims at claiming forms of autonomy. It included activities related to homemaking and community-making, as well as to protecting embryonic social and spatial formations (mostly geared towards other men). Hospitality took different shapes, including inviting people into one's house, giving outsiders a 'tour' of the settlement, cooking for people (as a business), but also kicking visitors out or denying them entry. In each of these examples, welcome and control go together: visitors were welcomed but their presence controlled in the settlement. This was for strategic and political reasons which, again, pertained to exerting and seeking forms of autonomy.

Specifically, outsiders were welcomed because, although they brought potential threats, and were sometimes embodied representatives of the broader uncertainty and hostility of the world outside the *ghetto,* they also brought 'gifts': information, support, goods, and business. Hospitality emerged as a form of reciprocity that was thus often important for the survival of people inside the *ghetto*. However, outsiders' presences also needed to be controlled – precisely because they carried with them all the very real, violent threats of the outside world (embodied in the aforementioned 'vultures' that circled the settlement).

As a byproduct of this attempt at control, acts of hospitality also could, if only momentarily or partially, upend the normal hierarchies – when directed at white figures who represented the

state-aid nexus. Hospitality, like the broader efforts at homemaking, could be understood in political terms: acts of hospitality represented moments in which the macro intersected with the micro, in which geopolitical dynamics could be rectified through personal dynamics (Boccagni and Bonfanti 2023). In this sense, hospitality, like homemaking more broadly, had an existential quality – it represented moments of affirmation of self, amidst a broader context in which this self was constantly threatened (see also Mould 2018).

And yet, as I will also show, this hospitality was itself partial, often dependent on gender and other demographic factors, and inevitably momentary. Especially for those in the settlement with the least amount of control – in particular I am speaking of women, but also some of the younger male arrivals – the forces that led to instability and lack of control often had effects on these individuals and were often described to me in bodily terms, as conditions that had seeped into peoples' physical beings. But even for the brashest residents of the *ghetto,* hospitality, as a mode of spatial control, was itself temporary. While the settlements could serve as parenthetical breathing spaces from state authorities, the latter encroached, often in new and more controlling ways, making the spaces of the settlements themselves evanescent.

The Ghetti vs. The Red Cross

Like Ismail, some of the other men who decided to continue living at the *campo brutto,* even after the fire, rebuilt their homes within a matter of days, if not hours. Others took a bit longer, because they decided to upgrade. They added, for instance, a cement platform to their lot and waited for it to dry before building a new house upon it.

To some outside aid workers this seemed unbelievable. 'Why do they stay there?' asked a social worker employed by the government humanitarian project Su.Pr.Eme. 'Here is so much

nicer', she said, referring to where we were standing at Fontane d'Oro. From this spot, we could see both the *campo bello* and the new humanitarian camp being set up next to it.

In the days following the fire, some of the younger, politically engaged Senegalese workers who remembered the activist-run settlement of Fontane d'Oro had led a large group of workers over to this storied site. Men had begun pitching tents, opening commercial enterprises, and living on the other side of the plot in a kind of semi-legal 'occupation' (it was illegal except that the prefecture had given its tacit approval, considering the exceptional circumstances of the fire). This place that became the *campo bello* consisted mostly of tents, but very quickly, people had built bars, cafes, restaurants, corner stores, a mosque and butchers' shops (each its own locus of hospitality). In the *campo bello,* shops and cafes differentiated themselves from the sea of tents that had been pitched as a quick response to the fire. They built *baracche* and set up lights. Just outside the gates of the *campo bello,* once a week, men from North Africa and Bangladesh set up tables and blankets, where they displayed shoes and apparel for sale.

If you went into the *campo bello* at night or in the afternoons after workers returned from the fields, the atmosphere was merry: men played cards, and roasted halal meat on skewers, and talked or laughed boisterously as music blasted. During the day, family-run restaurants served warm, freshly made fish-and-rice dishes like thieboudienne. One restaurant-owner had come accompanied by her sister and nephews: I liked to stop by whenever I was around to play briefly with the young children, one of whom was still a toddler. And inevitably I met workers doing the same – hanging around, playing, laughing, chatting.

Figure 19 The lot at Fontane d'Oro, tents on one side of the gate and Red Cross housing on the other

A couple of days after the *campo bello* was built, Red Cross volunteers began constructing IKEA BetterShelters on the other side of the Fontane d'Oro lot, next to the 'occupation'. This property was also divided in two, with a fence separating the tents and *baracche* of the *campo bello* from the area where the Red Cross was busy building, in front of the building that Tommaso had once kicked mafiosi out, which was now an official reception centre (Fig. 21).

In what the Red Cross and local media alike billed as '*accoglienza'* for a '*permanenza dignitosa'* (dignified stay), volunteers spent weeks pitching the IKEA BetterShelters, donated from UNHCR (Croce Rossa Italiana 2022). These had been meant as field offices but the Regional Government had asked for them to be sent to Campobello instead (some state authorities communicated this to me with embarrassment, as if to reiterate how very dysfunctional government in Italy was, having to rely on humanitarian aid organizations

instead of ensuring the readiness of its own response).

The Red Cross shelters, when they were built, stood in neat, clean little rows. Rules were established to explicitly promote health, hygiene, and order. Workers could get a space if they had the 'Green Pass' to prove they had received the vaccine against Covid. They had to put their names down on a list, and, officially at least, present some sort of documentation proving they were employed in agriculture. These were considered the legal housing 'solution'.

Figure 20 Satellite image of the lot at Fontane d'Oro

At this camp, Red Cross uniforms interspersed with Police uniforms, and over the course of the season, all sorts of official groups came to visit, often with the media in tow: from the IOM to the CGIL-FLAI, Italy's biggest agricultural workers' union, to Su.Pr.Eme. These shelters were something to show off, particularly for the Regional Government which had stuck its neck out to obtain them. Optically, they provided a clean, suburban-looking, and state-run

alternative to the shacks or tents, depicted in the media and by local authorities as being full of waste and chaos (see Scott-Smith 2020). Finally, the government could respond to criticism that it wasn't doing anything to ameliorate the living conditions of seasonal workers in Sicily. This encampment was supposed to offer a 'legal' and 'humanitarian' alternative to the informal settlements at both the ex-cement factory and Fontane d'Oro, which were both 'illegal'.

Some workers chose to stay there and were able to secure a bed. The Senegalese woman who ran the popular restaurant in the *campo bello*, for instance, happily took over one of the shelters with her sister and nephews, excited that it was clean, dry, and that there were five spaces available – exactly the number of people in her family. She also provided testimony to the media, praising the shelters and thanking the authorities publicly. She only wished they had also provided more bathrooms, as she did not enjoy having to share the latrines and showers with the men – especially because, she complained, she was the only one who cleaned them.

However, most of the workers did not find housing in the Red Cross camp. There were different reasons for this. Some people tried to stay away from the authorities, and from the spotlight in general. When I asked around, many people did not elaborate about *why* they did not want to go to the humanitarian shelters, but simply shook their heads. In this silence, I surmised things: for instance, in other such humanitarian encampments across the island, the official lists had been shared with the authorities. People who had been placed under the 'care' of humanitarian organizations had been arrested and sent to CPR, detention and repatriation centres (for similar analysis elsewhere, see Katz 2022; Mould 2018; Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Ticktin 2005). How could those like Ismail feel *tranquillo* here? If they did not even want to come to the *campo bello,* they would not want to expose themselves to the Red Cross camp.

Figure 21 Red Cross camp at Fontane d'Oro (photo by author)

When I spoke to one of the men who had led some of the workers over to Fontane d'Oro and helped established the *campo bello,* he said, simply – '*quella non è casa'*, that is not home. I could see what he meant on various fronts: in the Red Cross camp, there were no spaces to cook food the way you liked it, or in the halal mode dictated by religion and custom. There were strict rules about entry and exit times, and the need to conform to certain health and legal measures and show *proof* of these things. Especially if, as this man did, you had some power, status, or standing in the settlement, it did not make sense to enter the Red Cross camp, where your authority and sense of control over your time, space, and even the relationships you could possibly build were mostly relinquished. This was true even if living in the *ghetti* presented difficult conditions – even if they could be characterised, as one elderly Senegalese man put it to me as '*un disastro'* a disaster, and another: '*pire que l'Afrique'*, worse than Africa.

Whether or not the Red Cross camp managers collaborated with the police (it was the possibility that they might that mattered) the official camp presented modes of operating that illustrate unwanted forms of humanitarian governance. Reflecting forms of 'humanitarian reasoning', on the basis of the exceptional, emergency circumstances of the fire, the Red Cross, in conjunction with the Regional Government of Sicily, offered charitable forms of housing (Calhoun 2010; Fassin 2012). Yet here, being welcomed was predicated on agreeing to relinquish control, through obeyance to camp rules. In the evocation that the camp 'was not home', people were also trying to explain is that those were not places where autonomy was afforded. Perhaps certain forms of homemaking could be enacted, but it would have been difficult for *hospitality* to emerge. This is because, as official guests, migrants were humanitarian subjects, subjugated to the rules of the camp managers (Agier 2011).

By contrast, the *ghetti* presented various opportunities for community and economic life, as well as for autonomous forms of homemaking that were available to entrepreneurs, free spirits, and anyone seeking refuge. Crucially, homemaking in the *ghetti* was not just about domesticating space, but about exerting forms of control including those related to welcoming outsiders in. Crucially, hospitality reaffirmed their status as 'hosts', in control of a given space (Rosello 2001).

A Tour of the Campo Brutto

Most of what I learned about life in the *campo brutto* I learned from a young Gambian man that I will call Lamin. We grew familiar over the course of fieldwork, particularly once he left the *ghetto* and moved to Palermo. We had met just after the fire – his foot had been burnt, and we accompanied him to the hospital in the car. His Italian was fluent, but he opened to me upon learning that I was a native English-speaker.

When I visited the *campo brutto,* Lamin would often show me around. It was through Lamin, mostly, that I understood the organisation of the settlement. Its description as a place of *illegalità*, and the images depicting it in the media, suggested chaos. In fact, it was a highly controlled, ordered space – homemaking in Douglas' terms, in which home starts with exerting control over space, was in operation.

In the shadow of the ex-cement factory, the massive lot of the *campo brutto* was divided into two sections, along ethno-linguistic lines but often called the 'Senegalese' and the 'Gambian' quarters. They were separated by a lane called 'Via Santiago' named for one of the residents of the settlements, who had been around longest, since the days of Erbe Bianche. The different living quarters were themselves sub-divided into individual lots. These lots, Lamin explained, could be bought, sold, rented, or loaned out. Men either built shacks for themselves or occasionally for a single female dweller, or else were hired to build shacks for other men. In September, before most of the seasonal workers had arrived, the *ghetto* had been mostly populated by builders.

As at the *campo bello,* there were mosques, butchers, and corner stores where you could buy lunch, *touba* coffee, or provisions. The American Bar was the loudest place in town: it often blasted music and radio talk shows from the US and announced itself grandly with a flag out front. In both settlements, residents filled in the gaps created by missing infrastructure and services. They had social roles that were vital to community-building or provided informal economic opportunities: Ismail, for instance, had a small side-hustle warming up water for other residents.

Although life here did not announce itself as being quite so vibrant as in the *campo bello,* forms of care, and the individuality of the different homes that had been built in the *campo brutto,* were evident. Unlike the rectilinear homogeneity of the materials and forms of the Red Cross camp, here each house took on its own shape, as people used different textures, patterns, and fabrics. This was done out of necessity, because builders used often traded-in or found materials. Still, the care and attention to detail was evident, on the singular level of the houses as on the scale of the *ghetto*.

One of the more remarkable houses in the *campo brutto* was two storeys high, with a thatched roof and shutters that held at a right angle. It was immaculately painted a bold green and blue. It seemed built to impress: its builder had worked in construction back home in The Gambia, and he was clearly showing off his skills, I thought. Perhaps this building was something of a status symbol, and exceptional in this regard. But even more ordinary people who did not have such capacities or experience often had homes with pleasing aesthetics that showed care and an attentiveness to detail, that took time and attention.

Men found patterned blankets and matched them together thoughtfully. Sometimes they devised elaborate systems of knots to tie tarp down, which, again, may have been functional and done out of necessity, but which nevertheless displayed an attentiveness to detail and form. There was plenty of mismatch, of rusting nails and uneven pieces of wood – but amidst the need to use mostly what you found or were given, there was consideration.

A man who lived alone, on an abandoned plot of land up the road from the *campo brutto,* had built up a veritable house from ruins and used building materials he had found. The materials he used were sometimes cracked, and we noticed and informed him that the roofing material was likely to have poisonous lead in it. At the same time, doors were fitted carefully into perfectly aligned walls. Stones were piled onto each other to form steps. One side of the house

was tiled, to be used as a bathroom. Like most of the inhabitants of the self-settlements, the man took his shoes off and left them by the side of the door before entering. This care was functional – the man would live here for three years. And it was quotidian, a normal routine of the home and its rituals which were as much social as about a distinct relationship to the space and materials of his home, which he had laid out with care, order, and control.

Once, when Lamin was no longer living in the settlement, he decided that he wanted to give me a proper 'tour' of the *campo brutto.* We weaved in between places I knew, moving through the Gambian quarter, its American Bar and mosque built with funds from Italian activists, to the Senegalese quarters, its butchers' and cafe. But Lamin also brought me outside the normal bounds of our weekly entries. We went to the way back of the settlement, behind the area that was designated for toileting and washing, to see the part of the encampment that smelled awful, where butchers threw out the remainders of the animal parts – the carcasses, the hoofs, the ears, the guts. Mostly, the dogs of the *ghetto* (for reasons that may have to do with creating familiarity, they were all named Paco, at least according to Ismail) visited this part.

Although the settlement was walled on the side that faced the street, its back part opened up and gradually gave way to the surrounding countryside. We went to the very bounds of the self-settlement, to visit an abandoned concrete hut that he told me a group of Sudanese had lived in briefly, and which now seemed to be occupied primarily by flies, feasting on left-behind food. We went out, past what must have been the legal bounds of the plot on which the encampment stood, where it gave way to fields of wildflowers and litter, out far enough so that we got a visual on the creaky steel remains of the cement factory that loomed over the settlement (Fig. 23). From this angle, you could see that the tower really did seem like it could fall over at any moment. Lamin and I observed the self-settlement from this vantage point for a moment, before looping back around to one side. He wanted to show me another abandoned

concrete shelter, where he told me a lengthy story about a friend of his, who had hidden there for a while before skipping town: he had found himself on the wrong side of an angry local, who had gotten the police involved, and so now he was on the run. And then we were back to where we had begun.

Figure 22 The former cement factory, seen from afar (photo by author)

Perhaps because he was no longer living in the *ghetto* at this point, Lamin was revisiting, or haunting, old sites and maybe building up the camp's mythos to me. He swore, for instance, that beneath the ruins of the old cement factory was an underground bunker that *mafiosi* still used. My tour with Lamin re-iterated the ways places characterised by ruins can also be

‘inhabited places’ – places that are lived, experienced by people, and ‘integrated into social and economic life’ (Mah 2008: 19). In this case, the ‘control’ of homemaking that Mary Douglas spoke of seems apt for describing the sort of orderly domestication of the space of the ex-cement factory. It highlights how the settlements provided the means for staying still, that in turn also transformed these spaces into places where social life, aesthetic life, and forms of memory-making could emerge.

Lamin’s tour also made something else clear: unlike the Red Cross encampment, which was operated and controlled by humanitarian authorities in conjunction with the police and with the regional government – where I could not enter – the *campo brutto* and the *campo bello* were places where hospitality towards people like me (journalists, researchers, aid workers, activists, and representative state authorities) was possible. That is to say, they were places where the residents, the people who had built the encampment themselves, could welcome in outsiders – an act that was both strategic and which also reaffirmed themselves as hosts. In this capacity they were also able to exert some control over the presence of outsiders.

Hospitality in the Ghetti

One of the benefits of living in a large settlement, as opposed to the smaller ones was that these places were visible and well-known. This meant that outsiders could find them, and come in. Such outsiders could be helpful but could also be threatening. Hospitality, enacted at the scale of the individual home and of the community, mitigated the threat while enabling people to benefit from the ‘gifts’ strangers might bring.

Hospitality as Strategic Reciprocity

Once, a man that I had seen often invited me to spend some time with him in his *baracca*. It

was a store: inside, every inch of the place was covered in goods: bags of rice, boxes of coffee and tea, and packs of cigarettes. He motioned for me to sit down, and I did. For hours, I sat on the floor of the shopkeeper's den, and even helped him shell and bag peanuts to be sold in snack-sized units. During this time, we spoke, and the shopkeeper provided information for my research. When we were done, armed with the knowledge that I often went back and forth from Palermo and Campobello, the shopkeeper asked me if next time I could please bring him back a few provisions from the Bangladeshi-run corner shop in Ballarò, as his stock of several items was running low. He had provided information for my research, and now it was my turn to help him with his shop.

Such instances of hospitality abounded, in which I might be offered a place to sit, something to eat, something to drink. At times, these gestures were gendered: people were taking *care* of me, even just by offering me a seat to sit on, but thereby also putting me in a position that established a particular dynamic. These moments could formally mark welcome, but they were also moments when my hosts could gather information – about me or about the world I came from. They were strategic moments, in the way that offering someone a gift is always strategic (even if not obvious or known) because it introduces a form of social bonding or invites the receiver to reciprocate according to ethical codes or interpersonal norms.

Often, the men who ran the shops and the cafes were usually older, and more experienced. Most were Senegalese, and had arrived as early as the 1990s, meaning that they often had permanent visas that allowed for unlimited entry and exit. And many of them were no longer agricultural labourers, but small-scale entrepreneurs who opened shops, cafes, and restaurants in the self-settlements. They followed the seasonal workers travelling across the southern Italian agricultural archipelago. This class of workers comprised what might be considered the bourgeoisie of the settlements: people who had worked their way up, and whose livelihoods

depended on the existence of the self-settlements and of new workers. They provided services that were part of homing activities and community-making, though they also profited from these services (see Perrotta and Raeymaekers 2022).

As such, I felt that in their case, hospitality towards me was linked to a form of networking. If I stopped to get coffee or lunch, for instance, the men of the café would ask me questions about myself, which they did, and use this information to place me and my presence in the settlement. Who was I associated with? What was my role, my job, and what was I looking for in the *ghetto*? This initial questioning, though phrased each time differently, helped transform me from a stranger to a guest that could be classified, and approached with relevant behaviours. In their questions, I sometimes felt like they were trying to categorise me: was I a spy, a sex-worker, a benign presence, a possibly aggressive one?

For others, who were less sanguine about their document status, offering me something – even if it was just a hello or a place to sit down – could lead to a connection that meant I could then be asked to help obtain a Green Pass, or drive someone to a doctor's office. Other outsider-guests to the settlements, most often white Sicilians, brought free clothes or mattresses. Like the socio-legal workers I followed, outsiders brought expertise related to Italian law and bureaucracy.

Such observations may seem obvious, but they lay bare the ways, thanks to their semi-autonomous and visible form, the *ghetti* sustained hospitality towards outsiders. Hospitality in turn was part of interpersonal modes of connection that people used to gather support, information, or business contacts that also enabled these *ghetti* and their inhabitants to live and survive. Outsiders could be a link to the vaster world, both within and beyond those established

with people of one's common ethnic, linguistic, or national group. In this sense, denizens of the *ghetti* offered welcome, tied to modes of control, through reciprocity, that served hosts' needs, whether social, business, legal, or related to protection of self and others. Everyday activities, common to interpersonal relationships everywhere, here take on political and economic valence because they are tied to struggles for survival at the EU's Italian border.

Hospitality and the Threat of the Spectacle

Ever since 2013, after Ousmane died in the fire at Erbe Bianche, the settlements had become known to locals, but also to activists, authorities, and the media. Particularly in 2021, after the second fire was followed by the humanitarian encampment, Fontane d'Oro became a site of the spectacle of migration that resembled what I had seen at the port, or at Ballarò. Humanitarians, the police, government officials, journalists, researchers, activists, joined the local producers and the denizens of the *ghetto* themselves.

At Fontane d'Oro, just as in Ballarò or at the port of Palermo, here too there were moments in which these groups ushered in media. Mostly the cameras remained near the *campo bello* and the humanitarian camp. The agricultural unions, the regional government, and the media wanted to film the UNHCR houses going up, to show the presence of the Red Cross, and to interview participants who would speak positively about the aid projects. The interviews were a way of advertising that the government was doing something, against critiques of its inaction (or of its modalities, such as the fact that their 'housing solution' was only available halfway through the season). But it also had the effect of border spectacle of which I have spoken. This type of media coverage reinforced the separate roles of authorities and migrants, fetishising each as provider and beneficiary of aid, mostly along racial lines. It was part of what has been described as the 'refugeeization' of the agricultural workforce – in which workers are

transformed into ideal victims and receivers of aid (Rigo and Dines 2015).

At the *campo bello,* the people who agreed to be filmed on camera seemed to be those who had nothing to lose, and perhaps much to gain: the Senegalese woman who ran the popular restaurant, for instance, and a Black aid worker who did not live in the settlement at all. The woman was only in the settlement temporarily: she had a home back in Calabria and had come to Campobello for business. Indeed, participating in an article could draw more outsiders who visited the settlements to her restaurant. The aid worker, meanwhile, was explicitly paid for his work, and filming the *ghetto* did not implicate him as he had documents, a job, and a house somewhere else.

Leftist activists who mobilised for worker rights also wanted some of the workers to join them in protests that would also be mediatised, through livestreaming on Facebook and TikTok. I followed them once, as they brought a group of young workers over to a grocery store in the nearby town of Castelvetrano (Fig. 24). The workers held up signs as the activists filmed them, next to staged tables where olives and oil were laid out. The activists handed out fliers to shoppers, until the management of the store came and asked them to leave. On the fliers and posters were phrases including: 'the economy of Campobello di Mazara survives off exploitation' and 'Omar Baldeh died to pick your olives'. Though these activists were fighting for workers' rights (and were part of a group that had managed to gain some key labour rights previously) one of the young men later asked me to translate into French what had been written on the signs. Clearly, hierarchies of control were at play here, too, along the same social lines.

Figure 23 Table set up for protest outside Castelvetrano supermarket (photo by author)

At the *campo brutto,* where the stakes were higher, often the government representatives, the humanitarians, or the media, were simply given tours – perhaps not so different to the one that I had been given by Lamin. It was sometimes hard not to laugh at them: surely well-intentioned, high-up officials of the Sicilian Regional Government arrived in heels and ties, trying to retain composure in front of cameras or their colleagues, while checking they hadn't stepped in too much mud – or on a stray sheep hoof that one of the Pacos had left strewn about.

In observing and talking to other, usually white outsider-guests of the settlement, it occurred to me that when they – or we – were given 'tours', it was easy to come out feeling either

shocked or smug. Sometimes, such guests, be they officials or aid workers, would seem quite content at their visit – they had been shown such and such a place, they had unlocked some deeper understanding of the workings of the encampments that were not immediately visible. These tours and activities, whether televised or not, could come to resemble the kind of fetishisation of migration, and of life inside the *ghetti* that was reminiscent of what I had seen in Ballarò: the ways migrants were called upon to participate in the spectacle of migration.

Indeed, tours and the media presence were signs that the humanitarian border was clearly present here, inland, in the Italian hinterlands. Zones like these, in areas which were often distinguished from Sicilian cities and coasts through their description as desolate, dying, barren, or empty, were here sites of border spectacle. Spectacles were created through the visibility of camp infrastructure (see, e.g. Agier 2011; Ibrahim and Howarth 2016; Katz 2022). Whether we are speaking of the formal Red Cross camps or the informal *ghetti,* mediatised processes that included humanitarian and political discourses used the setting of the camp to create 'visually identified and clearly defined spectacles… of *hostipitality* through which irregular migrants are included by their receiving societies as only objectified, distant, and temporary guests' (Katz 2022: 1).

Within this setting of state, humanitarian, and even at times activist-led contributions to the border spectacle, forms of hospitality within the camp served as a struggle for control. Such tours provide a good example of this struggle: within and around these walls, the inhabitants of the settlements had forms of knowledge and modes of exerting autonomy and decision-making that outsiders did not have. Denizens of the settlements knew the area best – its secrets, its social lives that they could hide or partially reveal to visitors strategically: perhaps at times to impress, or to obtain something, or else to protect themselves.

As hosts, they had leeway over deciding where to bring guests, and what to show them. There were not the kinds of tourists who came here, as they did in Ballarò: no school children or Milanese 'travellers'. These outsiders were researchers, sometimes journalists, activists, and aid workers, or else those who worked for the regional government. But, in these tours such outsiders did become, literally, tour-ists. People living in the encampments were wary of this voyeurism. They were called upon to provide the means for it – and often had little choice in this matter. But the hosts of these tours of the encampments also had some control over what outsiders saw and didn't see, what they were told and were not told. In this they cooperated in the makings of the spectacle, but also found ways of maintaining a balance between the helpful and detrimental or invasive aspects brought on by outsiders.

If they were deemed too detrimental, these guests might very well just be kicked out. Although the cameras mostly stayed near the *campo bello,* occasionally some of the more daring activists might bring them also to the *campo brutto.* But this was risky and threatening. A man who fashioned himself as part of the Baye Fall group, a branch of Senegalese Mourides, for instance, lived and operated his Halal butcher shop right at the entrance of the *campo brutto.* Because of this positioning, he greeted almost everyone who came in – and for those who entered the settlement regularly, greeting him was a ritual. When we came in, we often saw him feeding his lambs, chopping his meat, chatting with someone or other. To outsiders, he had created a kind of aura around himself. Mostly his presence in the camp seemed relatively innocuous – but to outsiders he appeared, and acted as, a kind of gatekeeper or bouncer. He took it upon himself to determine who was let in and who was kept out.

One morning, he seemed in a particularly bad mood, and he told us that it was because he had

discovered that one of the activist associations had posted a picture about the settlement that included him on Facebook. In this case, members of the activist group had uploaded the picture in a post geared at garnering solidarity with African workers. Yet in doing so, they had angered him, because they had violated his privacy. When they tried to return to the settlement, the man said that he would not let them come in. We could say that they had betrayed the terms of their guest-hood – as bad guests, they were thrown out.

Across these various examples, hospitality towards outsider-guests emerges as part of the making of porous boundaries. These outsiders, often white, are allowed in, often for strategic purposes: indeed, a strength of the larger, more visible *ghetti* is that they were places which outsiders knew about. Instead of going to go find a lawyer, for instance, people who lived in the *campo bello* could be pretty sure a lawyer would come to them. However, these outsiders also brought risks that needed to be mitigated, or they could cause various forms of harm to the residents of the *ghetto.*

Hospitality was a key tool for this kind of porous boundary-making that offered modes of controlling also the risks posed by the *ghetto* as a visible infrastructural space. Hospitality allowed for people to welcome in outsiders while ultimately providing modes of containing much of their experience and thus emerged to protect the people and space of the *ghetti*. It also enabled the men to engage in struggles for control. Against the *hostipitality* of the state, they could enact their own forms of bottom-up *hostipitality,* which was part of asserting control over space and making home through upholding boundaries.

Hospitality and Homemaking as Upending Hierarchies

In these moments of hospitality, we can also see some of the ways in which macro-dynamics

intersected with the personal (Boccagni and Bonfanti 2023). Global and state hierarchies were at play and embodied by the different characters that entered the *ghetti.* These individuals were both specific people and instantiations – often literal representatives – of the state, or of other hostile groups that were the reason people found themselves in the settlements in the first place. Through hospitality as a means of controlling the presence of white Sicilians, the residents of the *ghetto* could, if temporarily and partially, invert the usual hierarchies. If for a just a little while, Sicilians – who were often in the direct employ of the state – became the outsider-guests whose presence in the *ghetti* was shaped and limited by, and thus also relied on, the permission of their migrant insider-hosts. These guests' understanding of the *ghetto* could be partially controlled, and the guests themselves could be kicked out, or denied entry. Hospitality, particularly when directed at representatives of the state-aid nexus, could – momentarily and partially – flip the hierarchies of racial power that normally drew borders.

In my experience, such moments in which the scripts were flipped, or at least equalized, were also often intimately woven into moments when hosts were clearly establishing their own *at-homeness* in the settlements. When I went to the *campo brutto,* usually with some of the socio-legal workers from Porco Rosso in Palermo, we would often be invited inside living or socialising spaces to sit and chat.

When we were invited in, we were often ushered into a communal space, arranged as a living room or dining room, or else like a bar – with the counter to place orders, and tables and chairs in a larger space. We would be asked to come in, and sit, firstly. I sat on many crooked stools and broken plastic benches, but I also was invited to sit on deep leather couches, and on wooden dining chairs with floral engravings. In some of the homes, the interiors looked, well, like the domestic interiors that they were. Facing me as I sat on one leather couch, for instance, was a

silver mirror in the shape of a sun, hanging from a nail in the wall. I noticed it because it looked heavy. Its heft suggested it was the kind of item one might put in a permanent home. Once seated, we would typically be offered water, tea, or coffee – and then, after a bit of joking and breaking the ice, the serious chatting might commence.

As I have already said, these were moments in which welcome was given in exchange for information, as well as real help on documents and legal matters that were top of mind for many in the settlements. But such instances of hospitality were also reflective of a broader interplay between stability and instability, or between control and lack of control, that characterise all of life yet which stood out particularly starkly in the *ghetti.* More precisely, they seemed to be moments in which the ordinariness of stability and interpersonal relationships won out over the instability and threat of hostility and uncertainty. This was important on a human level because if things were normal, ordinary, and under control – if they were 'comfortable', to use Ismail's word – it was more possible to have a semblance of equal interaction, and for the involved parties to maintain a sense of their own dignity.

In such moments of hospitality, our hosts' role as such was being reaffirmed: namely, that they were present and comfortable in their home. This sense of control – over self and space – seemed, parenthetically at least, to equalise social dynamics. Even as we would be talking about documents, status, or someone's migratory journey, for a moment, this ordinariness would win out.

And yet, at the same time, such moments of normalcy also sometimes had the feeling of the uncanny about them. As much as they were moments in which stability seemed to reign, this stability was undermined by the contents of our conversation, by the scene outside, by the limits

of this hospitality and the evanescence of this act of homemaking.

The Limits of Hospitality, or the Evanescent Ghetti

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I asked Lamin for a long interview. Among other things, we discussed the advent of the settlement at Campobello. Lamin explained to me that there were different reasons people came to the *ghetti (*ghettoes):

> '[There were] a few people, three to four Gambians and some Senegalese, and some Malians. Their camps were finished. In those days, you will be at the camps, and then they will tell you the camp is finished, you need to leave. … Some just come to work. But some came for a different story – *you understand.* This is what keeps people coming. Most people live there because they came to renew their documents, cannot get what the *Questura* [police department] requests of them. They can't get a job contract [all the documents that are required]. Some, it's been years since their documents expired' (Interview with Lamin, September 2022 [emphasis mine]).

Lamin's origin story reiterates the ways in which the reception system – its un-homeliness – help to produce the *ghetti,* the way these two places are inseparable from each other in the European bordering context (Campesi 2018a; Corrado, Pisacane, and Alarcón Ferrari 2024; D'Angelo 2019b; Palillo 2025; Palumbo 2024; Welch and Schuster 2005). The *ghetti* were spaces that allowed people to exert forms of control, but were themselves created by constraints on peoples' autonomy, because of the care and control paradigm that characterised the nation-state's bordering efforts.

Indeed, many of the men I met in the *ghetto* had, in their words '*scappare'* (to escape'), an indicative term that made the reception centres sound like prisons, a depiction that was reiterated by their detailing of the miserable conditions within. Many came to the settlement wanting to make money, and had left the endless limbo of the reception centre at the first text they received about this work opportunity. In his aside, 'you understand', Lamin was evidently explaining to me that people come to the *ghetti* also to hide from the law and the police – often

because their experiences with these authorities had been so scarring that, even if they were now out of trouble, they wanted to make it as difficult as possible to get in trouble again.

Yet even as they could be considered spaces of refuge, the *ghetti* were also places that continued to be the focus of police activity, humanitarian management and state control. As elsewhere, such actions were often taken under the explicit reasoning that the encampments were places of 'illegality', or else with recourse to an emergency logic, following a fire or other form of violence. People moved, with some autonomy, but also with the state in mind.

From Erbe Bianche, as I have recounted, the settlement then moved to the activist-run encampment at Fontane d'Oro. When that was closed by the authorities, people moved back over to Erbe Bianche. A year or two into this new-old settlement, in 2018, Matteo Salvini and the coalition government took away a form of subsidiary protection that was what most successful asylum-seekers living in Italy (and in the settlements) had spent years waiting to obtain. Many of the people in the settlements who had had documents now would no longer be able to renew them. What's more, that year police raided the settlement at Erbe Bianche, and even destroyed the old cement foundations that Italian workers in the 1960s and 1970s had established, and later workers used as a solid foundation amidst the muddy fields. It was after this eviction that the men of the Campobello *ghetti* found shelter at the ex-cement factory.

Lamin did not know exactly why they had chosen this site. But, as the longtime Campobello researcher and activist Martina Lo Cascio explained to me when I interviewed her, it was possible to guess why whoever chose it had done so. It was a large plot of land, divisible so that different ethno-linguistic groups could self-organise accordingly in separate spaces. It was on a main road, meaning it was accessible for bosses searching for workers, and near to the fields where many labourers went to work. It was also surrounded by a large wall that blocked

it from view – this wall separated it from the exterior, made it feel somehow more protected and insular from the outside world than the open fields of Erbe Bianche had. If police wanted to come, they had to physically enter into a semi walled-off space.

Most of the long-time activists and observers of Campobello also did not believe that it was a coincidence that the ex-cement factory had connections to the Mafia. The lot had been initially confiscated from a man for his connection to the Mafia. It was then given back, meaning he must have been acquitted, but many people I spoke to who knew and worked in the area suspected that the place was somehow still tied to mafia groups. I have alluded to certain presences in the settlement that made outsiders uneasy and suspicious. And then there was the fact that the police did not touch the settlement or enter it, even though there was known drug activity and more. Rumour had it, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, that policemen had told aid workers that they had wanted to come in, but had received orders from on high not to.

Now I am entering the realm of suspicions, myth, and speculation – but what this means is that, in a sense, the denizens of the *campo brutto* faced not only the *hostipitality* of the state, but they also likely became guests of certain mafiosi or criminals, and faced what must have been other forms of *hostipitality* from them. Rumours and whispers are perhaps not to be trusted, especially when they concern the Mafia in Sicily. It is a cliché that exploited or undocumented African workers end up working for the Mafia as they 'run' from the police. Nonetheless, in this instance there seemed to be truth to the fact that police, and for that matter humanitarian, activity forced people who had no other housing option onto a property that had suspected links to the Mafia.

Though these dynamics may be specific to this context, such effects align with De Genova's (2002) articulation of 'illegality' being a product of the law, or of legal activity by state

authorities (in this case the police). In this case, the particularities of Sicily simply mean that this illegality was embodied in and by the Mafia, which emerged looking like the only counterforce powerful enough to provide protection from police raids and harassment. The protection was mutual, according to some: in addition to the business benefits of having a group of largely undocumented, legally and economically precarious men living on one's land, the men were scapegoats who also shielded the owner from government interference.

It is not possible for me to go into the specifics of what hospitality looked like towards the Mafia or criminal forces, as for obvious reasons I did not get near enough to know. Still, what emerges here first is the ways in state action resulted in the encampments thus indirectly encouraging illegal and criminal associations and activities. Even the Red Cross camp, with the biosecurity and the spectacle it attracted, as well as its links to the police, meant that settlements became tiered, with the most desperate (in both a juridical and emotional sense) ending up at the *campo brutto.* In this situation hospitality towards some outsiders could only serve as a partial and momentary bulwark against these broader forces, which were portents of legal precarity and thus instability, uncertainty, and fear.

Movement as a Way of Life?

Key limits to homemaking also had to do with peoples' own subjecthood and positionality. Different people lived this mode of being in different ways. For instance, Lamin, Ismail, and others that I encountered in the *ghetti* often originally used these places as stopping points on a life journey in which – largely because of state bordering tactics – people were 'never sure of reaching the end of the path that they embarked on' (Agier 2016). Lamin did not express life in the settlements as *tranquillo,* like Ismail had. Still, somewhere it seemed to me that, like Ismail, he had also accepted this life in motion, or at least made a social identity out of it.

For many, the difficulties of obtaining stable documented status had, over the years, morphed into something like a reluctant acceptance that they might have the best chances at creating a life (earning money, creating social networks and even a social role) within the *ghetto*. Inside the *ghetto,* Ismail made money off the seasonal workers by charging a small fee to heat up their water. Outside the *ghetto,* he worked, as he put it, *'al mare',* at the sea, but suspiciously did not specify what that meant. Some aid workers surmised that when he said he was *tranquil* in the *ghetto* – it was because offered a decent hiding spot from the police.

By contrast, Lamin often went in and out of 'legal' document status. At one point, he left the *ghetto.* He moved to Palermo and began to work in a restaurant. He also volunteered for Porco Rosso and was even able to earn a small salary through the association, by working as an informal *mediatore culturale,* 'cultural mediator'. This was position that had developed in the borderland landscape and referred to a person who acted as a linguist and cultural bridge, and who leveraged their own migratory experiences to find legal employment. However, a few months after my fieldwork ended, Lamin had returned to work as an agricultural labourer – moving from place to place, again following the seasons.

Lamin was one of the men who most often described his migratory trajectory in traveller's terms. He described Libya to me as 'beautiful', referring to the classical architecture of Tripoli, and he described the Sicilian temples of Selinunte in similar terms. He had lived in Switzerland. He had lived in terrible conditions and in good ones. Lamin's approach was often philosophical, and he seemed to make both practical and metaphysical meaning out of being a wanderer. Similarly, a former resident of the *ghetto* told me, years after he had left Campobello and moved to northern Italy, that he felt himself to be a 'child of the world'. In a way that

reminded me of Moltivolti's messaging, he stated that travelling was key to his sense of self – because travelling meant learning, and if you weren't learning you weren't living. He quoted Tupac for life lessons, and responded '*lascia stare'* (let it be) when I asked him if he hoped to one day obtain Italian citizenship (he had been in Italy for close to a decade). He spoke of places he had been to, and those where he hoped to go, basing his desires on work opportunities, women he deemed beautiful, and places where there might be an interesting nightlife.

Agier might say that these men's attitudes amount to 'movement thinking', a mode of thinking that 'helps people imagine the possibility of moving forward in a completely hostile context' (Agier 2011: 62). In response to the unpredictability of greater forces, these men created an identity and a way of life in which movement had become the point. Agier writes that there are those 'who adapt to this wandering by making it the context of their social organization and their subjectivity' (2011: 62).

What I noticed was that these men projected a sanguine attitude about their life and conditions. Although Lamin talked to me about fear, discomfort, and other negative feelings he had felt in the *ghetto,* or during times when he had squatted in abandoned buildings, he also made meaning out of these experiences. People like Lamin and Ismail – or the older Senegalese entrepreneurs that I often encountered in the *campo bello* – could speak in such terms that made them seem heroic, made their lives seem exciting. In this schema, they could practice hospitality in such a way that was also grandiose. Hospitality evidenced an adaptive mode of exerting control over circumstances that were otherwise difficult to control. It was illustrative of seizing control over transforming social identities and the meaning of a life inextricable from mobility.

For others that I encountered in the *campo brutto*, however, such attitudes were less attainable.

The first person I had ever met in the *campo brutto* was building a roof when we stopped to chat with him. He had been sitting on top of the shack, and at some point, hopped off. As he did so, his wristwatch fell. He picked it up to look at it and seemed to realise quickly that it was broken. Frustrated, he threw the watch back onto the ground, hard, as if to say, *not this, too*. The man reported to us that he had difficulties sleeping, due to psychological distress. In his case, it dated to events that had happened in Libya, but it was exacerbated by life in the self-settlements.

Life in the *ghetto* took its psychological and physical toll: we often took people to the doctor who had stepped on nails, who had severe burns, or who had been hurt at work. After the fire, others reported being scared to sleep in case another should break out. In this man's case, after years in Italy, he still did not have legal status, and this was taking its toll. He had a family back in The Gambia, and frequently said he was considering asking to be voluntarily *rimpatriato,* repatriated.

I have spoken mostly about men. For women, the contradictory conditions and experience of the *campo brutto* were largely exacerbated. For a long time, I did not even manage to speak to any of the women living in the *campo brutto* – I saw them appear fleetingly, and disappear just as quickly behind a corner, or into a *baracca*. It was many months before one of the handful of women would talk to me, let alone tell me about her life. For her, the *ghetto* was in some ways not so different to what it was for Ismail: a place where she could feel safe from the law and authorities. She had spent time in jail in northern Italy. Though she was now cleared, she still felt afraid that she might be sent away. She told me that by contrast, in the *ghetto,* 'I feel safe, safer than in any skyscraper in the world… it's so real, trust me'. A man had given her a place to stay for free. In her eyes, she was 'a disaster, like a boy, because I fight', but in this

encampment, ‘because I am a woman, I am taken care of’.

And yet other times, she was far less happy. Sometimes we found her in tears, and she told us of moments of violence, of rape, often by people from outside the settlement. She spoke of barricading herself in her shack – to which she had added several locks. For her, and in a way that recalls critical feminist readings of home, this place could be both a site of safety as of harm. Living there meant protection from authorities, but it brought other violence and fear of.

Figure 24 Via Santiago, separating the two neighbourhoods of the campo brutto (photo by author)

For both women and men, the conditions of the *ghetto,* brought on by the broader hostilities of the humanitarian border, including the authorities, racism, and so forth, were such that people felt them in their bodies and minds. This creeping in of the bordering system, beneath the surface of peoples' skins, was made evident to me one day when a man approached me speaking of 'pain'. Thinking he needed to go to a medical doctor I asked him what part of his body hurt. He corrected me, in English: 'no, no, it's *document* pain'. This striking turn of phrase suggested that the difficulties presented by not having proper documents were so deep that they had become part of his body and psyche (cf. Andersson 2014; Tuckett 2018).

This transitoriness, uncertainty, and precarity translated – even for the toughest people in the *ghetto* – into forms of sociality and identity. Within the ghetto, for instance, people often had dual or triple names: they had their legal names that were written on documents, and then they had the names they introduced themselves with names like 'King', 'Prefettura', or 'Santiago'. These nicknames often had stories behind them that evidenced forms of self-mythologising. They conferred authority onto their name-holder, even as they seemed to mock the 'real' authorities, reminiscent of the ways the cooks at Moltivolti joked about the '*permesso di soggiorno'*. For instance, '*prefettura'* means prefecture in Italian, it is the province-level authority that is responsible for the police, and some of the reception centres, and which reports back to the Ministry of the Interior.

At the same time, these names were evidence of the ways waywardness as a way of life followed people into the *ghetti,* particularly where people were trying to evade the law. And they were themselves apt to change: I once called 'Santiago' 'Santi', a diminutive that made everyone laugh because 'Santi' is a very Sicilian-sounding nickname. From that point on, Santiago wanted me to always call him Santi.

Conclusion

Under such circumstances, hospitality (and homemaking) appear, on the one hand, as markers of what Martin Heidegger (2009 [1954]) calls dwelling – dwelling, he writes, 'is the basic character of Being, in keeping with which mortals exist' (1993: 362 in Blunt and Dowling 2022: 12). If, as Douglas argued, home is about exerting control over space, then I would argue that in Campobello, it is through forms of exertion of such control that this idea of dwelling is enabled. It can, in turn, form a struggle against the political, identitarian, and existential uncertainty that migrants of the *ghetto* faced, even carried in their bodies and identities.

Yet these moments of hospitality were also only ever partial, limited, and momentary. In these places, permanence and impermanence lived close together: transitoriness was found within structures that were fluid but also meant to provide stability. This included peoples' identities, their hopes and plans, as well as the state of the *ghetti* themselves: a fire, an eviction, a deportation – such events were always present. They indicated evidence of governmentality at play – of the ways in which the humanitarian border had crept into Campobello, replete with its capillary devices for maintaining control.

These modes of control could feel senseless, could make people feel like they were living in an alternate universe. Humanitarian organisations and logics of emergency were put to use creating encampments that could be used to manage people, to limit their autonomy and mobility, while providing little by way of actual housing 'solution'. This meant that they were often performances of government action, effective mostly as a spectacle that reasserted migrant-workers as subjects to be managed or deported. Further, though police were called upon to 'manage illegality', this often simply resulted in the production of further illegality. In

following the trajectory of the settlements, it becomes clear that such seeming contradictions feed into ways that authorities can gain control. Hospitality was one piece of a struggle to regain control, to create an alternate sense of self and community.

Still, against such actions, the hospitality of the inhabitants of the *ghetto* could do little in the long run. Just a few months after my fieldwork ended, none of the self-settlements that I had known and visited remained. The macro, dominant forces of state control took over, though each self-settlement ended in a slightly different way. While I was still completing fieldwork, the individual self-settlers were kicked out of the homes they had made for themselves. The owner of the land returned to his inherited home after decades living in northern Italy, in the hopes of transforming his fields for olive and olive oil production. And after the 2021 season, the municipality again closed Fontane d'Oro to the workers. Meanwhile, following the arrest of Mafia boss Matteo Messina Denaro shortly after I completed fieldwork, police entered the self-settlement at the ex-cement factory, evicted, and razed it. Some of the men I had known ended up in Italian CPR or prisons. Many others escaped and dispersed.

I have been told more recently that during the autumn season, workers live in a new informal settlement, located on land owned by one of the area's largest producers. Unlike earlier informal settlements, the landowner enforces strict rules of entry and exit, including for outside observers – restrictions that some sought to avoid by staying in the *campo brutto*. Here, we see the re-establishment of the care and control model of showing 'care' by offering a place to live, while establishing rules of conduct geared at controlling peoples' mobility. Certainly, it is a model that favours control over an important labour force, including by limiting autonomy.

Chapter 7: ‘That is not real *accoglienza*’: Between Official and Unofficial Hospitality

I waited for the manager of the reception centre in an empty hallway. We had agreed to meet here directly, in one of the centre’s two buildings on Palermo’s periphery, in an area best known for a large rubbish dump that inevitably caught fire every couple of years. Next door, a smaller building housed women and children. This building, the one I was in, had a distinctly institutional feel, despite the hot Sicilian light that poured in from the hallway’s large windows. As I waited to speak to the manager, I peered out of the window closest to me, where the view opened onto an abandoned playground. Swings and a merry-go-round stood eerily still. In a previous life, this building must have been a school.

Every so often, men shuffled through the corridor and poked their heads into an open door, asking for something from a person who I surmised to be the centre’s nurse. Loud voices emanated from behind the closed doors opposite the infirmary. Probably this was the manager’s office. A person with a raised voice was very upset about something to do with deleted emails. Not wanting to seem too nosy, I pretended not to hear, and made myself busy instead looking at the cork notice boards posted onto the hallway walls. I imagined that once, there might have been announcements about after-school activities, schedules, or class assignments pinned up here. Now, there were pamphlets in English, French and Italian indicating what to do if you wanted to return to your home country, and others with government regulations for Covid-19, regarding mask-wearing and hand-washing.

I turned around when I heard the manager, Ornella, finally coming out of her office. With her coiffed blond hair, pearls, and slightly heeled dress shoes, she looked like a Sicilian Hillary Clinton. She smiled brusquely, shook my hand, and led me down one of the corridors, away

from where the shuffling men had emerged. She loudly enquired if anyone knew of an open office, then led me to a spacious room with a stage at one end (it must have been the school's theatre). There were torn bits of drawings still taped to some of the walls. We removed two plastic school chairs from tall stacks and sat.

Ornella had a niece who was an anthropologist. For her, she said, it was fine if I wanted to observe. But she would need to speak to the management of the cooperative, and said I would need to speak to the *prefettura,* the prefecture, the district entity that reported to the Ministry of the Interior, which was ultimately responsible for this centre. She thought the cooperative would be happy to have me on board – I could translate, provide free labour for a needed skill. However, she added, the management of the centre was possibly changing at the end of the month. And, though unspoken, we both knew that the prefecture would be difficult – if not impossible – to get in touch with, let alone to get permission from for my study.

On each of the three occasions that I would encounter Ornella, at some point, she would yell. The first time, a week before our official meeting, she shouted at a young Tunisian mother in the Italian the woman did not speak, 'Your entire country is emptying out! All of Tunisia is coming here! You understand?' They were preparing for the arrival of about a dozen Tunisian men. They expected the men to be gone by morning, as they would want to escape almost certain deportation.

On another occasion, when again I went to visit a Tunisian mother who had asked me to procure her some baby formula, I once more heard arguing from the office of the women's centre. When Ornella had heard me buzz, she peered out the window of the office, and then emerged to open the door for me. 'We are a family,' she smiled, and 'families fight'.

Figure 25 A reception centre (photo by author)

For all that Ornella could seem stressed and highly-strung, however, she did her job in a concerted way. Her job was *accoglienza* in the sense of official hospitality – and I was

beginning to see that this term was directed at more than just the nominal 'guests' of the centres, the asylum-seekers. Her job was directed also at outsiders like me – researchers, journalists, and NGOs. Perhaps, her hospitality was to do with decorum. Perhaps, it was about the privacy of the asylum-seekers. Or it may also have been to avoid raising suspicions that anything strange, unhappy, or not-perfectly-legal was going on within the centre.

Over the decades, numerous scandals had emerged linking Mafia groups or related individuals to the management of official reception centres. For example, 'Operation Brother', in Trapani province, where many of the reception centres that I visited were located, was a years-long investigation that ultimately revealed that several reception centres had been fictitiously registered to various individuals, but were actually under the control of one man, Onofrio Fratello (whose last name translates to 'brother'), who had previously been convicted of being complicit in mafia-like criminal activity. As reported by Italy's newspaper, *Corriere della Sera,* this enabled Fratello to conceal various profits and avoid his obligation to disclose assets and profits, per his previous sentencing (Jakhnagiev 2018).

In the wake of such criminal scandals and investigations, official reception centres had become points of interest for journalists and researchers aiming not only to uncover poor living standards, but also possible criminal or corruption activity. Whatever was going on in this centre, Ornella was apt at keeping nosy researchers at bay. She was welcoming me in, but controlling the interaction and what I saw, so that she could artfully show me back out.

Ornella never sent me the direct contact for the person she had mentioned at the prefecture, so I tried in other ways. A friend of a family member was in turn family members with someone high up in the prefecture of Palermo. But when I spoke to the friend, they told me it was a

difficult time for him personally, so not the right time to be putting in any delicate requests. Clearly, my presence was not desired in this centre.

Searching for Accoglienza

When I told people in Sicily that I had come to study *accoglienza,* most people figured I was coming to study the official *centri di accoglienza,* state-funded reception hostels that had proliferated across the island in the past decade, such as the one Ornella managed. This was partly because the language of *accoglienza* proliferated in the official lexicon and vernacular used to describe the centres.

In this chapter, I return to ideas about how hospitality or *accoglienza* specifically are used in state versus grounded ways. I provide analysis that incorporates ideas about grounded hospitality that have surfaced along the way. These include, for instance: the ways *accoglienza* is rooted in a sense of Sicilian identity; the ways it can be part of a counter-discourse to the state; the ways in which it can provide meaning, even as a practice; or the ways in which it is used by migrants, against the constraints of the state or the border spectacle. Across each hospitality marked a moment of struggle for control over autonomy and meaning, often in service of a desired transformation. In this chapter, this struggle takes place inside reception centres, in which legal and bureaucratic forms of hospitality occur in immediate juxtaposition with forms of grounded hospitality.

The 1998 Turco-Napolitano law that established reception centres in the first place is full of the vocabulary of '*ospitalità'*. In addition to '*ospitalità',* the law further mentions *ospitare* (to host), *ospitante* (the host), *ospitati* (the hosted), *ospite* (guest). Article II, explaining the procedures to be taken upon entry and stay of a '*straniero*' (stranger), uses the word *ingresso*

(entry) and *soggiorno* (stay). But as opposed to more neutral synonyms, like *entrata* or *permanenza* respectively, the chosen words were part of a vocabulary of the house, designating the rooms one might specifically reserve for the reception of guests: the entryway (*ingresso*) and living room (*soggiorno*).[43]

Later *circolari* – official letters sent out by the government to describe new procedures – also employed '*accoglienza',* further cementing it as a key concept through which to discuss migrant reception. Similar to what we find across the EU humanitarian landscape, the '*kit dell'accoglienza'* was the name used to refer to the basic necessities that asylum-seekers were offered upon arrival to a centre: toothbrush, soap, a towel.[44] The '*patto di accoglienza',* or hospitality pact, meanwhile, was a multi-page document that defined official *accoglienza* by laying out its constituent parts, including that the centre must provide:

1. Room and board;
2. Clothes and products for personal hygiene;
3. Legal information and assistance during the procedure for requesting international protection, including through *operatori* with specific competencies in the related areas;
4. Intercultural mediation;
5. Accompaniment to ensure school placement for minors, and ensuring access to courses for learning Italian for adults;
6. Orientation and accompaniment to social and health services;
7. Interventions for social integration (including volunteer activities in organisations and associations that promote the social good, as well as possible internships)

The document also set out that each asylum seeker should receive a €2.50 per diem, amounting to roughly €70 a month.

Crucially, the document also outlines the rights and duties of each party: the 'managing subject'

[43] These are observations that I first made in my MSc dissertation (Neil 2018).
[44] Ruben Andersson (2014) similarly mentions '*kit de acogida'* in his analysis of reception centres in Spain, revealing the ways in which this is not only an Italian phenomenon, language, and dynamic, but is present in other sites too along the EU's southern border.

– usually referring to what were known as the *operatori/ operatrici* or operators who staff the centre, but also to the managers, and cooperative owners – must 'work to guarantee hospitality across a series of interventions' as listed; the 'beneficiary must work to ensure an active and participatory stay' in the centre. The rest of the document, which was supposed to be filled out by both the operator in charge and the asylum-seeker, had blank boxes where operators should fill out how each of the requisites of *accoglienza* would be met. Then there was a space for each party to sign.

If these reception centres dealt in the language and practice of hospitality, I imagine that people also immediately thought I had come to study them because they had become notorious. Investigative journalists and NGOs had publicised their uneven quality, and the typically squalid living conditions in which asylum-seekers had to live for undetermined time as they awaited the results of their requests, the links that the cooperatives who ran them had to Mafia groups, and the ways they were often used as money laundering schemes.

Scholars had in turn shown how these unhomely living conditions, which could be found across Europe, amounted to what Jonathan Darling (2011), studying the UK, called a 'politics of discomfort', and what Giuseppe Campesi (2018), studying southern Italy, referred to as a strategy of 'containment, confinement, and dispersal'. Technically people could go in and out of these reception centres. Yet experientially, they resembled other forms of encampment, whether *ghetti,* detention centres, Red Cross camps or reception centres (Agier 2011; Peano 2021). This is in part because many people felt stuck in them. As much as they were infrastructural sites of bordering, they were also places of temporal and spatial liminality, where people had little sense of being able to pursue their life, or exert autonomy through individual forms of control over circumstances (see, e.g., Jefferson, Turner, and Jensen 2019).

In Italy, this was partly because reception centres were located in remote, inaccessible areas, which isolated asylum-seekers and restricted entry into Italian social and economic life. The reception centres themselves were repurposed buildings, which often recalled the idea of a 'house' but could also be virtually any kind of built environment (see Scott-Smith and Breeze 2020). These places were once houses and hotels, but also containers, former schools, buildings confiscated from the Mafia, or, in one case, a former military barracks for American personnel, designed to look like an American suburb, replete with box houses and lanes called 'Constitution Avenue'. What's more, the centres often closed at a moment's notice – adding further layers of instability to the already uncertain and transitory conditions of migrant life.

Such forms of neglectful hospitality alternated with state-sanctioned forms of control-through-hospitality (both are modes of *hostipitality*, as Katz [2022] argues). Control is reflected in the documents, which, through what is called a 'pact', set out the terms for asylum-seekers if they wish to continue living in state-funded housing. While the centres' operators and management also have responsibilities, for the asylum-seekers this 'pact' touches on 'very private aspects of their personal lives, such as their food consumption, health, and patterns of mobility in/outside of humanitarian spaces' (Palillo 2025: 76).

As elsewhere in the EU, in Sicily, places that were colloquially called welcome centres tended to do the opposite of welcome: they pushed many asylum-seekers to escape. People either tried to move on, to northern Italy, or out of the country, or, especially as that became harder to do, simply find work in the nearby agricultural fields, often the most direct way to earn money (e.g. Campesi 2014; D'Angelo 2019; Mahmud 2024; Rigo and Dines 2015).

Lilith Mahmud has argued that such practices amount to a policy and practice of purposeful mismanagement of the *accoglienza* centres that provide leverage with other EU countries. For example, she argues, the control over asylum-seeker guests mixed with the seeming lack of care about whether asylum seekers stay or go is often attributed to a stereotypical notion of 'Italian disorganization'. However, Mahmud suggests that this is not rectified because it serves to counteract Italy's (perception of) unfair burdens under the Dublin system, in which asylum-seekers' requests must be processed in the country of first arrival (2024).

Such literature helps to explain why Ornella and the Prefecture were loath to grant me access to the reception centre in the Palermo outskirts. There had been enough nosy researchers interfering in government business already. They did not need more bad press – particularly at a moment when support for *accoglienza* was at an all-time low, critiqued from the left and right. It helped explain why, when I told people I came to study *accoglienza,* they often glared back at me. 'I refuse to set foot in those places', one Moltivolti co-owner said. A priest with whom I had first visited *accoglienza* centres in 2016 now tried to dissuade me from entering, exclaiming, 'No, but that is not real *accoglienza!*' The priest's words were reminiscent of the work of scholars who understand state uses of hospitality (or *hostipitality*) to be a form of biopolitics, a *dispositif* of control that has lost all sense of its semiotic connection to 'welcome' (DeBono 2019; Katz 2021; Rozakou 2012).

This idea of a discrepancy between what is written and performed for outsiders, versus what is practiced (and reported by asylum-seekers) is both the starting point and central object of investigation of this final chapter. Across the different reception centres that I visited – or tried to visit – I witnessed and heard about these discrepancies. As has been true across most of my chapters, 'hospitality' in the centres on the part of its managers and operators was likewise

directed at different audiences, or ‘guests’: hospitality towards outside ‘inspectors’, like me, often seemed to be a performance that aimed at trying to convince these outsider-guests of operators’ adherence to the law. This contrasted with how the asylum-seekers claimed they were treated and felt inside.

The discrepancy between what is written and what is practiced, mimicked by the discrepancy between the hospitality that was performed for outsiders versus that which as directed at asylum-seekers, could produce a sense of surreality. By highlighting again this sense of the absurd that emerged from spending time in the centres, I wish to highlight that here too, performances of hospitality, however official, were also part of a spectacle of migration. As elsewhere, this spectacle seemed geared at establishing the authority of some over others, along national, ethnic, and often gendered lines (because so many of the reception-centre workers were women). Beyond the usual tension of hospitality as being a form of welcome that implies control, certain forms of enacting state hospitality became modes of manipulation that even enabled criminal forms of exploitation to occur within the reception centres.

Asylum-seekers felt the mental health effects of living in the reception centres – not merely because of the physical conditions, but also because of such psychological effects, which made them feel like they were going crazy (see Corso 2019). Some reception centre workers *also* felt the negative psychological effects that were created by a tension between needing to enact state hospitality as part of their job and wanting to enact what I call ‘grounded hospitality’ – forms of hospitality that tried to do something different to state hospitality by foregrounding a personal, meaningful approach instead. Grounded hospitality provided a way to make meaning out of a job that often made some operators feel sad, depressed, or hopeless. These feelings stemmed also from a sense that they were stigmatised for doing work that did not even give

them economic independence.

As I will show, reception centre workers and asylum-seekers both tried to fill the void of sense and feeling created by state hospitality with language that related to the family. In some cases, this language felt like an extension of the palpably 'crazy' conditions of the encampment. Outsiders were being fed a language of family and hospitality to cover for illicit, negligent, racist, maternalistic, and even criminal activity.

But in other cases, such language (reminiscent of homemaking discussed in the last chapter) indicated attempts at using grounded hospitality to fill a void with meaning.[45] In the reception centres, certain practices of hospitality described through the language of home and kinship emerged to make meaning out of the arrivals of migrants. As in Palermo and Campobello, this hospitality took on a spiritual tone at times: in such narratives, young male asylum-seekers were portents of personal changes that reception workers had undergone. In this scenario, grounded forms of hospitality emerged as that which is distinct from state hospitality: namely, as forms of care that were personal and parental, and yet which also sought to transcend material divisions of race, class, and gender including by enabling spaces of autonomy for the asylum-seekers. As I will show, these acts often inadvertently played into the hands of the state system, as tied to the makings of an easily exploitable labour source. Nonetheless, they mark moments of seeking control over, struggling for change in the meaning of *accoglienza* work.

To study the centres, I would need to find them. This was easier said than done. Although I heard about some through word of mouth in Palermo, I knew that most were spread out across Sicily, located in small towns or hinterlands. This was part of a government strategy and was

[45] These findings recall Liisa Malkki's (2015) argument regarding Finnish humanitarians, that they were drawn to humanitarian work because it provided a source of meaning in their lives.

couched under the idea of 'burden sharing': to avoid everyone going to the same big cities whose welfare systems would be taxed. But it had the major repercussions of dispersing people, making it hard for Sicilians to find and access asylum-seekers, and vice-versa.

Through the NGO I was working with, I obtained an official list of centres they had officially requested from the government. It was a list full of places with names like 'CAS Welcome' owned by cooperatives called 'Development in Solidarity'. But I quickly realised that, at best, this list was indicative of – and often bore no correspondence to – reality. By the time the list was published the centres had closed or reopened, sometimes with the same management in a slightly different location, sometimes different management in the same location, sometimes same management in the same location but with a different name.

Still, diligently, once a week, I would get in my car, plug in one of the addresses into Google Maps, and travel to the place indicated by the red pin on my phone. This chapter is organised accordingly. I highlight encounters that I made in four of these locations, as I embarked on what was at times a quixotic endeavour of finding *accoglienza.*

'Don't you Know? The Migrants are Just a Business!'

On one of my first forays out of Palermo in search of the centres, I was feeling uncertain but determined. On this occasion, I was looking for a CAS. 'CAS' was an acronym that looked like the Italian word 'casa' for home but stood for *Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria.* These were also often referred to as 'primary reception centres', though the English translation does not transmit the idea of emergency that the Italian 'straordinaria' conveys. Run through the Ministry of the Interior, they were the places that asylum-seekers were transferred to immediately after disembarking. Following Covid-19, this meant that they disembarked after

having spent time on either a quarantine centre or ship – cruise-ships which, remaining empty during the pandemic, had been repurposed into something like floating detention centres. They often hovered close to the Sicilian shore, their presence made eerie by the fact that you weren't sure if on-board, there were sunburnt American tourists, or rather Tunisians and Gambians, locked in cramped cabins.

Because they were supposed to be for a short duration, CAS did not have a great reputation for providing a homely environment. This context likewise served as an excuse for the centres' gross material shortcomings. More accurately, they were described as warehouses that gave people a roof and not much else, while they waited for the legal system to sort them into deserving subjects – who might go on to a secondary reception centre – or undeserving, who might be transported to a detention centre (Aas 2010; Palillo 2022). In practice many escaped.

I arrived in the town an hour outside of Palermo and parked my car near where the centre was supposed to be. It was a small *paese* – the kind of place where generations of emigration had amounted to a depopulation that was leaving physical traces. Though not an agricultural town like Campobello, the ambiance was one that Sicilians might refer to with similar recourse to ideas of death, abandonment, or desolation. I asked at the one bar I saw in town if they knew about the centre; the bartender asked a man buying lotto tickets, and then a woman who poked her head out from an office in the back. No one knew or wanted to tell me. I paced back and forth along the block where the centre was supposed to be, and then I decided to call Amir.

Amir was a friend of a friend. He was an asylum-seeker, and he also worked in a CAS in this town. Thanks to his ability with languages – including in Italian, English, and Arabic – he had managed to get a job as a cultural and linguistic mediator. He was not paid much, but he had a place to live, and the job would look good on his asylum request. He loved cars, and hoped

that, once he had his papers, he could leave Italy and open an import business dealing niche and luxury automobiles.

He told me where to meet him, and I found him sitting on a bench outside. 'I am happy to see you!' he said, in English. He seemed genuinely relieved. Though I could not say that we were anything more than acquaintances, he greeted me with the warmth of a long-lost relation. He told me he had not seen friends in a long time.

I asked him how things were going. He stared into the distance and informed me, 'there are many problems'. A few days earlier, a man in the centre had had some kind of medical incident – a heart attack, or was it a stroke – Amir was not sure. Anyways the management did not take the man to the hospital. Apparently, he had survived but had lost control over one of his hands. This was not the first such instance. Recently, a Tunisian man in his twenties had been speaking to himself, muttering under his breath. Amir said it was clear the man needed to see a psychologist – yet for months, they did not take him. 'It's because they want to save on gas,' Amir said, dryly. 'Maggie! Don't you know, the migrants here are just a business!'

To Amir, as to others in Sicily, '*business'* here had a particular meaning. The manager, Amir had been told, came from a Mafia family. This association explained her behaviour, according to Amir: she was neglectful of the guests. Forget the *accoglienza* pact: this manager actively tried to sabotage peoples' lives, at least according to Amir. 'I was explaining to someone how healthcare in Italy worked,' he explained, 'and she told me to be quiet, not to tell him!'

Later, Amir's stories about this manager would be corroborated by other of the centres' 'guests' that I spoke to, who likewise discussed how the manager was neglectful and uncaring. While these centres were supposed to be places that promoted legal pathways to life in Italy, in fact

for Amir, his experience with the CAS informed his understanding of Sicily as a lawless place. ‘You know, in Switzerland, the police saw my documents, they said to me, “you are from Palermo, take off all your clothes!” – and searched me for drugs!’ He concluded, ‘I just need to get out of Sicily for one week’.

Amir was spooked by the centre. But it was also his source of livelihoods, the place where he lived, and the plan that he needed to work out until his documents came through. A few weeks after I saw him, he called me up, stressed and nervous. There had been an inspection of the centre, after word got out that the operators had neglected to take people to the hospital. Amir had heard that they were probably going to close the centre. As much as he hated the place, this news caused him to panic: ‘I am going to lose my job! And the manager, she is part of the cooperative family – she will just get to keep hers! They will probably just repaint, and open a new centre under a different name, to house Ukrainians or something!’ The government had allocated new money to the reception system for Ukrainians. Indeed, it was possible that the closure and reopening of the centre would ultimately be good for the cooperative’s bottom line.

Amir’s worries highlighted a central tension that state *accoglienza* centres presented for asylum-seekers. If you wanted to get your documents, living or even working in these centres could be your path to legality in Italy. But these centres were fickle, often neglectful places. They offered an uncertain future and were indeed connected to business interests – licit and illicit. They were places from which often people wanted to escape. The opening and closing of these centres echoed eerily with the evanescence of the *ghetti:* they too produced transitoriness and precarity as fixture of migrant life in the borderlands, often with effects that migrants felt in their bodies and minds. If the reception centre should offer stability and comfort of home away from home, from what Amir was saying, the opposite was true.

Performances of State Accoglienza

The kinds of things that Amir and other guests of that CAS told me resembled testimonies I would hear, in my capacities as both an anthropologist and an NGO volunteer in Sicily, about the experience of living in the *accoglienza* centres. These included: the same food in the same Styrofoam containers, night after night. Mouse droppings in food. No access to medicine or understanding of where a doctor was, even, so that, as one person told me: 'We always pray no one should get sick'. And another: 'They force us to work in the fields'. Broken shower heads. Broken windows. Broken stovetops. No access to hot water. Only two eggs for dinner each night. 'All the lawyers are the same: always, negative, always, appeals'. 'They treat us like children, but we are grown men'. No way for children to get to school except to walk along the side of a highway. Sometimes, conditions inside the centres could get physically violent. There was little privacy. In the words of one woman: 'The *operatori* don't care how we are surviving'. Before coming to Europe, this woman had thought of whites as reliable and trustworthy – now she changed her mind: they were unreliable and cunning.

Many of these elements of living conditions were so normalised, even for NGO workers and activists, that they did not warrant outside inspection (often the only way to formally enter these centres). However, in one reception house, 'guests' that I had encountered outside reported that they were being forced to work in the fields. It was common, when trapped in legal limbo and dependent on state care, for asylum-seekers looking for ways to earn a living to work in agriculture. But being *forced* to work in the fields was another matter.

As a result of their claims, I was granted access to a reception centre for adult men in my capacity as a volunteer with the monitoring NGO. The manager of the centre was more or less forced to let me in by the local government – and she knew that I would write a report that would be publicized. This centre was nominally a 'secondary reception centre' – meaning not

only that it was supposed to have better quality of care, and more long-term vision, than a CAS, but also that it was under the purview of the municipality, not the Ministry of the Interior.

This centre was located in a different small town in western Sicily, though it equalled the other in terms of reputed history of Mafia involvement, and feeling of *desolazione* (desolation). It was also just as hard to find as the CAS that Amir worked at. When I finally did find it – down an unpaved, somewhat hidden road off the side of a major state road – I was greeted by one operator of the centre who told me that indeed, it was so hard to get to that the local mailman either could not find, or refused to service, the place. This had resulted in the delay of several of the house's guests' health cards, the documents needed to access medical care.

In my previous conversations with 'guests' across different centres, in different ways, each expressed feeling physically ill or emotionally down in the centre. 'I have a toothache, always. I tell them, but they don't listen. I feel discriminated against' said one. Another said, 'Always there are problems. Problems in our countries, we escape war. Problems in Libya, we escape. Now problems in Sicily'. Yet another, who had been in Italy living in reception centres for six years, simply told me 'I am tired'.[46]

The men had reported to me that they had never received clothes or money for clothes, and, even when the state allowance, what they called 'pocket money', came to them, there was rarely enough money to buy food – and none was supplied by the centre. The stovetop was broken – they had to use a big rock to keep the flame in place. They told me they were the only people who cleaned – except when there was an outside 'inspection' scheduled. As these were

[46] A vast literature on mental health effects of asylum reception centres exists, analysing and documenting the ways traumas from journeys are often exacerbated in these centres, and how conditions of the centres also have their own effects (for studies that span Anthropology and Public Health in the EU and Italy, see, among others: Barbieri 2021; Blitz et al. 2017; Caroppo et al. 2023; van der Linden, Weeda, and Dagevos 2023).

frequently announced the day before they happened, suddenly the *operatori* would rush to clear and clean.

Figure 26 A broken shower in a reception centre (photo by author)

The men also told me that they had not seen a lawyer for months, nor had they had Italian classes for a long time. The most glaring thing they reported – the reason I was there – was that there was an *operatore* who 'intimidated' and 'provoked' the men until they went to work for a friend of his in the nearby fields. They were supposed to be paid for this work, but often were not, or were paid very little very late. The man who explained this was so angry that at some point during our conversation, he clicked his tongue, stopped talking, and looked away.

The version the men gave was in many ways the exact opposite of what the manager, Silvia, and the *operatori* who accompanied her, would explain on my visit. This visit took the shape of a tour of the reception centre. From the beginning, the language, the architecture, and the intimacy of hospitality were being used in this 'tour' in often performative ways that seemed to help Silvia and the other *operatori* gloss over my often-direct questions about things the 'guests' had said. As I have shown from the descriptions of tours across my chapters, these are instances of performed hospitality in which the host is very much in control of what the 'guest' – in this case, me – sees and hears.

And yet in this case, I also had testimony from the men. And the gap between what the operators said, and what I had heard from the men, or even what I felt in reaction to the space of the centre itself, was so wide that it created a void in meaning and cognition. As I had seen in both Palermo and Campobello, there was a performance of hospitality that was connected to establishing control. Part of this control had to do with this discrepancy between what was performed and what one felt to be true, which could make you feel crazy, spooked.

The centre, Silvia explained as we entered the first room, was in fact originally a *real* house – it had belonged to an old couple. When the man's wife died, he had decided to give over part

of the house to the cooperative. The guests, she said, had called him '*papà'*. He had since passed away too, following which the cooperative had gained control of the entire building. Although the place did have a view over the surrounding, wooded hills, it had little to commend itself aesthetically, otherwise. It was a non-descript building, constructed with the angular, cement features that characterised the architecture of many houses built in the 1970s, during Sicily's construction boom.

Inside, we saw first the large, dark rooms of the bottom floor, where the old man had, until recently, lived. Silvia explained that these rooms had only come to the centre in the past few months. As such, they lay mostly empty, except that on the wall hung a blown-up, pixelated photograph of a white woman and a Black man hugging. The caption read '*complicità'*, complicity.

Like the English 'complicity', *complicità* has multiple meanings: evidently, as a caption to this photograph, the aim was to insinuate complicity in the sense of mutual bonding, or of building bridges across division lines, in this case of ethnicity, race or gender. That form of complicity might stand in opposition to state bordering efforts. Yet, in this centre, this was not the kind of complicity that people reported, and it was not what I was seeing. Rather, it was another meaning of complicity, as being complicit in a crime, that came to mind upon looking at the poster. Or else, complicity directly with the state, which was after all their employer.

Like the performance of hospitality, this image produced an odd, even creepy sensation, that in some ways summed up the entire experience of being in this reception centre. Activities that were meant to promote bonding were absent – rather, as I will discuss further later, one felt racism and maternalism at play, in the ways that the managers of the centre spoke of the

asylum-seeker guests. Was this poster meant to convince outsiders that positive social activities were happening in this centre? Or was it instead meant as tongue-in-cheek, geared at the reception centre operators and their associates who – if we are to believe the men of the centre – not only controlled and infantilised them but also exploited them and coerced them into working for their 'friends'?

The only room on this lower floor that had furniture was a cluttered room off to the side, which served as a kind of classroom. On the walls hung photographs and collages. These, like the 'complicity' photograph, Silvia explained, were the results of projects done by the men. She puffed her chest slightly as she explained this to us, it seemed to me – perhaps because they were evidence that the centre enacted 'activities' to 'promote integration' as per the *accoglienza* pact. But the effect was again a strange one: these were grown men living in the centre, and yet the arts-and-crafts projects she was showing us looked like something that might have been very suitable indeed for a group of ten-year-olds (see also Andersson 2013).

When I asked her about the lawyer and about the Italian classes, Silvia again offered a very different story to the one the men had given. 'From a bureaucratic point of view', she explained, 'we make sure everything is done right'. She did admit that the Italian classes had been paused, but said this was the fault of the government: the money to fund the classes had not come through. Hers was a common, yet somewhat middling excuse: in general, cooperatives were chosen for contracts by the government because of how much liquidity they had, as often they would have to front the money for activities and payroll, document their transactions, and then claim reimbursement from the government.

Silvia also reported that on Saturdays, a lawyer came to educate the 'guests' about labour rights.

She taught them, Silvia explained, '*che non bisogna lavorare in nero'*– that you should not, or do not need to, work under-the-table. What the men had described as being coerced to work without contract in the nearby fields, Silvia subsumed under the title of 'agricultural internship'. The payment, she said, was coming. She chalked up the men's interpretation to a misunderstanding of the way the internship system worked.

As our tour continued, and I pressed her about the various topics the men had brought up to me – the food, the cleaning, the broken appliances – Silvia frequently attributed their complaints to the fact that they lacked '*un'educazione domestica',* an education in domesticity. This, Silvia claimed, was often the 'first challenge' the operators faced with the men, because they are 'so disorganised'. According to Silvia, they needed to be taught everything from how to clean, to how to take out the trash, separating it from the recycling, to how to properly store food in the fridge versus the freezer. They *had* received money for clothes, Silvia said, but, she believed, had wasted it on who knows what. Silvia chalked it up to their being men: '*sono ragazzi maschi, non hanno la cura di una donna',* 'they are boys, they don't have the care of a woman'. The final stop would be the bedrooms. She knocked on the door, shouting 'Inspection!' Though it was nearly 11 am, the bedrooms were dark, shades pulled. Many people were still asleep.

I wrote up the contents of this tour in a report that was published and sent to the municipality. Later, I reflected on what role *accoglienza* had played. It was clear that the guests and hosts each felt that the 'pact' they had signed had not been upheld by the other party. But what was also noteworthy was the ways in which Silvia and the other operators used and performed an idea of *accoglienza* to maintain a sense of control and power in the situation – glossing what was at best a transactional relationship, at worst an exploitative one, with the moral language and theatrical gestures of hospitality.

Here, the gap between what was said and what was done was exorbitant. It was mapped, in turn, on the different kinds of hospitality that were evident. On the one hand, there was the state hospitality as it was enacted towards the asylum-seeker guests, which was marked by forms of extreme control that verged on the manipulative, with clear mental health implications for the men who lived in the centre. On the other hand, there was also the performance of hospitality towards us, 'inspectors' as guests. This performance was, however, ultimately part of a spectacle of asylum management that played into state hospitality: it did so by reinforcing their authority over the situation by explaining what was going on inside the reception centre in ways that manipulatively reframed what asylum-seekers had reported.

At these various levels, it was not just that hostipitality emerged, but also that the presence of hospitality became, as DeBono (2019) wrote, a 'plastic, empty signifier'. It was a performance and simulation of a normative idea of welcome. Yet because it diverged so deeply from social realities, its various guests were left confused, depressed, and fearful. These states caused by this spectacle made various guests easier to control and even manipulate.

Such uses of hospitality exhibit what Herzfeld has called a 'concern with managing conceptual slipperiness in human relations' that reveals a tension between 'intimacy and fear' (2012: S215). This dynamic can be observed among the different hosts and guests: the camp managers, themselves perhaps fearful of the asylum-seekers and of the 'inspectors' like me, aimed at instilling fear in us through gestures and the lexicon of hospitality or *complicità* that denoted social bonding, but at the same time could be read as threatening, either because it could be read according to its second meaning, or because it was so clearly a bald-faced lie. Herzfeld has remarked that the 'mafia treatment of *amicizia* (friendship) plays on the same ambiguities'

merging categories of friend and victim 'while accentuating, in word and deed, the extreme danger that such a relationship entails' (ibid.). This similarity may not be coincidental in the circumstances.

We can extend this analysis to the use of the language of family in this context, including diminutives like '*maschietti'* – little men, or the comment that the men called the old owner '*papà'*. Such terms were meant to denote intimacy, on the one hand, and yet there was very clearly a *lack* of intimacy between the operators and asylum-seekers. This resulted in a rather patronising, and racist, view of the 'guests' – perhaps one that they imagined I, as a white female, might join in on. For Palillo (2022) such gendered forms of infantilisation contributed, as I have discussed, to the biopolitics of refugee governance. Certainly, what I noticed was that it seemed to enhance the hosts' level of control over the situation. Like Ornella, who had said that 'families fight', this use of the language of intimacy and of the home, offered a way to talk about the situation that helped to maintain secrecy, to avoid reproach around how the guests were treated and thus enabled forms of domestic abuse and violence to occur.

This form of hospitality enabled, as Amir had put it, the reception centre to use migrants as a business, whether licit or, more likely, illicit: being forced to work in the fields (or was it an 'internship'?), providing cheap or free labour that was likely also a source of profit to employees of the cooperative. This same cooperative, according to the manager herself, seemed loath to disburse any money even for the most elemental aspects of the '*accoglienza* pact': clothes and food, let alone Italian classes or a lawyer.

After the inspection, I had a better understanding of why Amir felt he needed to 'get out of Sicily'. The literature on mental and physical health in reception centres has addressed the

temporal uncertainty of being stuck in this kind of limbo, as well as the anger, depression and hopelessness that emerges from both this temporality and the rapport with the reception workers. But in addition, I also saw, and felt affectively, the senselessness, the craziness of the situation. In centres such as this one, it wasn't just that there was no hospitality in the form of welcome or social bonding. It was that hospitality was performed, or simulated, to return to Baudrillard, in such a way that the concept of hospitality itself seemed to have become a kind of manipulation device. It was a word and an idea about interpersonal norms that was used in such a way as to confuse reality, to confuse intimacy with fear. This ultimately undermined what, as a guest – either asylum seeker or outside observer – one believed to know and feel was real. It caused not only a loss of control over one's space and life, but also over the meaning one could make about one's surroundings.

What do you think about the operatori?

Although Ornella had not let me into her centre, she had introduced me to a young *operatrice* that I will call Marta. Marta worked in the centre with Ornella, but also in various centres across Sicily, in both primary and secondary reception. I still had not been granted much sustained access into the reception centres beyond speaking to angry and upset 'guests' and being given uncomfortable *accoglienza* 'tours' by *operatori* 'hosts'. Marta had insinuated that there was a centre, for young men, mostly between the ages of 18 and 21, that I might be able to spend some time in. But first, she wanted to have a chat.

We met at a café. I sipped a tonic water with lemon through my straw on a rickety metal table; the weather was still warm, though autumn was surely coming. Marta's demeanour was one of friendliness, youth, and competence. She stood out to me as different from Ornella or Silvia. She dove right in: 'So what is your impression of the *operatori?*' she asked me. Ah, I thought, so this was her concern. She knew that reception centres and the people who worked in them

had received bad press and critiques from the left and right. In the past few years, even the far-right leader, Matteo Salvini, had also become a vocal critic (though he used humanitarian justification for cynical and xenophobic ends). I had barely eked out an answer – something about wanting to understand what really went on – before she continued, 'A lot of Italians think the *operatori* don't know anything, that they haven't been properly trained.' In that moment, she seemed to have a mix of shame and fear, or maybe she wanted to provide an excuse. But I also sensed a desire to correct the record.

To her, it was true that the reception centres were caused by *disagio,* a word whose transliteration was 'dis-ease', and could mean anything from unease, to discomfort, to difficulty in English. But in her experience, she explained, much of this stemmed from the fact that the people living inside the centres were different amongst themselves. Africans, she felt, even those who did not speak the same language, could become best friends. But Africans and Bangladeshis, in her view, did not get along. The other issue that often presented itself, she told me, was that many people living in the centres got impatient with the Italian bureaucracy. Perhaps trying to establish a form of cultural intimacy with me, she explained: 'They don't understand what the system is like in Italy,' and so could get angry and frustrated.

The dynamics of managing people, combined with the fact that pay-checks for the operators often came months, or even years later, meant that there was very high turnover. 'This work [*lavoro*] is not for everyone,' she told me. She dealt with it, she explained, in part by becoming numb. And yet, she also reiterated that for her, 'it had changed everything'. It taught her things about her own country that she had never imagined: how the medical system worked, what a *permesso di soggiorno* is (the visa document allowing people legal stay in Italy). It even changed her ideas about other Sicilians: 'there is still a lot of racism here', she told me.

The best part, for her, was when she managed to do something good for people. She told me

the story of a young Ghanaian boy, who told her that he had left his village when he was so young, he couldn't even remember its name – only that it was a small town near a mountain and near a bigger town. She had decided to help him find his way home: she put him in touch with other Ghanaians that she knew, and sure enough, they managed to figure out where he was from. Now, she said, he wanted to try and find his mother.

Shortly afterwards, she told me I could come and visit the centre as soon as I wanted. This would be a better centre to observe the work – it was a secondary reception centre, and nominally for minors. This meant that people stayed rather than escaped, and they followed the plan laid out for them. Indeed, many of those who had arrived as boys had become men because they had stayed in the centre for so long. But whereas time in the centres for adults felt fuzzy and uncertain, in these centres, people seemed to be making progress towards certain goals. It seemed, she was insinuating, that here I could see 'good' work – or at least, work that people did not try to hide and cover up from outsiders like me.

The Centre Near 'The Phoenix'

This time, I took the scenic route. It was a beautiful drive: a relatively narrow state road along the side of a mountain eventually led me to the outer edge of the small *paese.*

Once arrived, the centre would be difficult to find, Marta warned me – if you put its name in Google Maps, nothing would appear. By now, I was used to this. So, as she had instructed me, I called her once I reached the gas station called *La Fenice. Fenice* meant 'phoenix': a symbol of death and renewal, it was a popular title around here. As I looked for her number, I reflected on how '*La Fenice*' had become a familiar term to me: it was the name of Sicily's biggest cooperative, the one that ran most of the island's reception centres. I kept bumping into it.

Marta directed me on the phone past a big pink *palazzo,* through the narrow street to the left, into an open parking area where three big white cars sat. I stopped the car and got out as it began to drizzle. Marta, wearing a puffy jacket with a faux fur lining, poked her head out of the back office, and ushered me in. She had been helping a young man with his homework. He was from the Ivory Coast, wore a grey tracksuit, and, upon learning I had grown up in the US, informed me that he wanted to go to America to become a body builder.

Marta introduced me to Giulia, the *educatrice,* or educator, a rare and often difficult to find figure whose presence indicated that this was probably a relatively well-run secondary reception centre. Giulia wore a pink tracksuit and sparkly sneakers, and her hair was blown out. She greeted me warmly, and directly. When I told her that I had taken the scenic route to get here, she warned me not to do so on the way back: there would be fog now, and it would be hard to see later in the day, as the light went down.

As Marta returned to homework duty, Giulia and I began chatting. She was loud, quick to laugh, and frequently reverted to Sicilian, which I thought she used to indicate that she was a straight shooter. As we spoke, guests would come in. When they did, she would sometimes yell in their face, bring them to her, and kiss them on the cheek. Her behaviour struck me, off the bat, as invasive and infantilising, in a similar way to what the men in the other centre had complained about. However, in this centre, there were also differences.

Once, I followed Marta up to the hall where the Bangladeshis stayed. We passed the kitchen (‘do you smell the smells of India?’ she asked me) and moved out to the porch as dusk was settling in. We sat at a plastic table, along with three guests. Marta was going to complete the C3 form of a new arrival (a person’s formal request for protection). As the new arrival did not

speak Italian, two of his compatriots who had been here for longer served as translators. Marta wrote in pencil, in case anything needed to be changed by the *mediatore,* the mediator who came once a week and could speak directly without a translator.

Some things, Marta knew herself. Where the sheet said '*nome'* or name, she asked the new arrival, '*babar naam ki'*? As an aside she informed me, 'I learned that all the women who are married have '*begum'* as part of their last name'. One of the guests told me, '*lei impara tutto',* 'she learns everything'. Apparently, they often liked to bring her around, to show off the things she could say to fellow Bangladeshis. 'She even looks Bangladeshi!' another told me.

As she moved on down the sheet, Marta could anticipate the answers the asylum-seeker was going to say. As they continued to fill out the forms, more of the other residents of the centre gathered around. This otherwise rote bureaucratic and legal process was made fun: people laughed and teased each other. One of the 'guests' had a ring around one of his fingers – he joked he was married, and then added – to Marta's sister!

As in the centre managed by Silvia, language related to family and kinship abounded. Here too the managers were mostly white, Sicilian women, and the asylum-seekers were young men of African and Asian origin. These demographics brought questions of race and gender to the surface. In the other centre, it had been Silvia who had referred constantly to the men as 'little boys', and who had tried to convince us of the familial relations. There, it had felt demeaning: a maternalism that used assumptions about gender and race to justify management's behaviour.

In this setting, such maternalism was not entirely absent. Yet what struck me about this setting was the way, though the Bangladeshis were in the role of 'guests' and Marta in the role of 'host', in their jokes, *she* was the one being brought in to *their* extended households and

families, at various scales. This was evident in their comments about her being Bangladeshi, or about them being related through marriage. These were jokes, but suggested a level of comfort and trust with Marta that I had not seen guests in many other centres exhibit towards *operatori.* In turn, this language and their behaviours suggested an attempt at forging genuine connection amidst a context otherwise characterised by the sterile formality of law and bureaucracy in these state-run hostels.

Nervous outbursts

Although in this centre, the atmosphere was calmer and more trusting, the *operatori* also often repeated to me how difficult this work was. Marta had described 'going numb'. Giulia told me that frequently she had '*scatti di nervosismo',* 'nervous outbursts'. And more than once, I was asked if I was going to do a *denuncia* – issue a formal complaint with the municipality about their work (sometimes the tone was serious, sometimes joking). In my time in the centre, I tried to understand why they said these things. Did they have something to hide, as I had felt from other centres I had visited, or was this stress about something else?

The answer, I learned, was somewhere in between, though not in the way I had expected. In our original meeting, Marta had been right to be sceptical of me – because in turn, I *was* sceptical of the *operatori*, with good reason, based on what I had seen. The behaviours of many *operatrici* suggested they had something to hide, and that this related to a disregard for the law that often amounted to criminal activity. In this centre, though their stress also related to the law, it seemed more about an *inability* to adhere to the law in every sense. Ironically, this stress was borne of a desire to do right by both the law and the asylum-seekers of the centre.

One of the first things some of the *operatori* wanted to show me was their paperwork. At first, I noticed mostly the sheer amount. Giulia pulled papers and folders off shelves and from within

filing cabinets and lay them on the desk in heaps, to show me. They were color-coded: magenta was for the *diario,* the regular reports they had to update about the boys' activities and progress. These often fed the '*relazioni',* the reports that the *operatori,* and especially the *educatori* like Giulia, had to write up for the judge who decided on the asylum claim of the person in question. A red folder, meanwhile, held the newest arrivals' documents. She opened the folder and showed me the latest one: a boy who had come from Villa Sikania (the notorious centre about which an MSF worker, who had himself made the crossing to Italy, told me: 'if you want to know what Libya is like, go there').

People were assigned to the reception centre through a process that Giulia described to me as arbitrary (all she knew was that they did not have any say). Next, the *operatori* were responsible for making sure they completed everything the law demanded of them – laid out in the *accoglienza* pact. Each of those bullet points on the pact's list had to be done in the right order, and, crucially, with the proper documentation to prove that they had been completed, with the right people present, with the correct information written, and in the order demanded by the bureaucracy. Without the documentation, the actual work might as well not have existed.

For instance, to complete the transfer, there was a letter from the quarantine centre or hotspot the person had been to (e.g. Villa Sikania). Once they arrived, the *operatori* explained that they '*fare l'accoglienza',* 'do hospitality' – which they defined in a narrow sense as first, providing new arrivals with a *'kit dell'accoglienza'* – the basic personal items a new arrival would need to keep clean, including soap, toothbrush, and towel. This kit distinguished the official *accoglienza* phase from the quarantine centres: as my MSF contact had explained to me, at Villa Sikania, no one even washed the sheets.

Once these basics were provided, the *operatori* needed to get started on a flurry of other activities: they worked together with the lawyers and *mediatori* to understand which path the new arrival should take to apply for asylum – usually, Giulia explained to me, it was either through 'international protection' or through '*minor 'età',* being underaged. That was started through the completion of the C3 form, which I had observed Marta completing.

There was also healthcare. As soon as someone arrived in the reception centre, they had to go to a special office, the *ufficio assistito,* where they would get the STP. STP was an acronym that stood for *straniero temporaneamente presente* – temporarily present stranger. This document, which contained the information for a unique code that was valid for six months, permitted a person who was 'undocumented', or who did not yet have the right to residence in Italy to nonetheless access the medical system. In fact, it was a quite sacred document – the enactment of Italy's constitutional 'right to health', regardless of legal status. More prosaically, it was the bureaucratic step one needed to undertake before going to get vaccinated. It was thus of particular importance to the Italian State during this post-pandemic time that guests would be vaccinated against the Covid-19 virus.

As people legally recognised as minors, the guests of this house were enrolled in school. This too, was the responsibility of the *operatori.* Often there was no local school nearby. Many of the boys in this centre, the *operatori* explained to me, had to go all the way to Palermo. The bus could take an hour and a half each way.

The *operatori* also had to develop a PEI, which stood for *progetto educativo individualizzato,* or 'individualised educational project'. Above and beyond academic instruction, this involved broader elements of a person's development. It was itself subdivided into three other

documents. *Scheda A,* which was supposed to be completed in the first two weeks, asked personal questions – regarding the person's family, the countries they travelled through in order to arrive, whether they had any illness, and their relationship to hygiene. *Scheda B,* which was meant to be completed within the first month, outlined in more depth what a person's personal objectives were – from education, to future career, to the seemingly ever-elusive 'integration' in Italy – and how the centre and asylum-seeker were going to reach these goals. Finally, *Scheda C,* to be completed later, included a box for asylum-seekers to write their own observations.

I commented on the paperwork, all of which was done (at least initially) by hand, in hard copy, and Giulia laughed. 'This isn't even all of it!' She continued, 'but yes, everything, everything [has to be written] and not one detail can escape'. She paused, then lamented, 'and then they say that we don't do anything!'

In fact, it was not just the amount of paperwork that was stressful, it was also the fact that it needed to be done in a certain way, and correspond then in turn to reality, in a way that was not always possible. For instance, it was supposed to be completed with a *mediatore culturale,* 'cultural mediator' present, but this person was not always available on the day, or within the amount of time, in which a form was supposed to be completed. Often, they told me, there would be mistakes that happened along the way – a spelling mistake in someone's name, for instance, possibly not even made by them, but by someone else in the bureaucratic chain – that would mean they had to start again and re-do the whole process.

All this work, and the primacy it took in the *operatori's* minds, led one to wonder what the 'real' work of state *accoglienza* was – if it was simply box-ticking to adhere to the state's

definition, or if there were other dynamics at play. It highlighted how situations like those in the other centres could be made possible: if papers were correctly filled out, it did not matter what went on in terms of social dynamics. The exception was if there was an inspection – which is perhaps why so many of the managers did not want to let me enter, and indeed may have been fearful of my presence, and mitigated it through performances of hospitality.

Giulia and Marta seemed genuinely committed to these objectives: on each occasion that I visited the house, I saw them at work in this regard. It was taxing care work, the kind that, when it involved working with people that were legally recognised as minors, as in this centre, really would ordinarily have been done by a parental figure. Marta and Giulia spoke with the young men and boys often, including about their deep and varied traumas; they helped them with their homework; they showed them a map indicating (or reminding them) where they were in the world; they reprimanded them for not making their beds or wearing their coats outside; they opened up the back closet where they kept extra snacks.[47]

In this way too, this centre too felt different from what I had seen at the centre managed by Silvia, or the one where Amir worked. They took the substance of their jobs very seriously. The objectives they had outlined for and with the boys, they said, had to be repeated by everyone, '*come il rosario*', 'like the rosary'. This was important because it was their job, but also because they took the documents seriously. As the stated aim was 'autonomy', the *operatori* understood the program outlined in the forms as also being the boys' ticket to gaining more permanent documents and visas to be able to stay in Italy.

However, sometimes the substance and form of these documents were incompatible with each

[47] These details of their job recall the literature on labour in humanitarian spaces and care-work, in which abstract notions of universal rights are often enacted by local aid workers, who are called upon to provide knowledge, expertise and labour in such a way that reproduces hierarchies of power, often along national, racial, or gendered lines (see, e.g., Bian 2022; Pascucci 2019)

other. For instance, many of the asylum-seekers also often worked in the nearby olive groves, before heading off to school. This was possibly illegal on several levels: these young men did not always have the proper papers to work; they were legally considered underage; and they were not supposed to be given housing in the reception centre if they had a job that earned them a certain income. And yet, as Giulia put it, 'We don't see anything or hear anything'. This was partly a practical response: 'they are teenagers, it is impossible to control them all of the time.' Her reaction also demonstrated clarity about the discrepancy between the hospitality described in the state texts, and the socio-economic realities that asylum-seekers actually faced.

For instance, while the pact granted a living allowance to asylum-seekers, it was €2.50 per day, amounting to maximum €70 per month. That was barely enough to cover food costs, if everyone pooled their money together. But also, Giulia knew, 'many of them have to send money back home'. To have enough to send back home, they *had* to earn money through a job. As bureaucratic timelines were slow, many did not yet have even temporary documents that they might be entitled to, so it would be impossible for many to find work with a legal contract.

Giulia and the other *operatrici* saw that this discrepancy existed. They knew it because many jobs in Sicily were 'under-the-table', only this posed more problems for migrants. In addition to their sheer amount of paperwork, however, this knowledge accentuated their stress. It may have been why they often asked me if I was going to report them. Although they aimed to do right in the eyes of the law and the bureaucracy, in turning a blind eye to what the boys were doing, the *operatrici* also opened spaces of allowance technically outside of the state demands.

Ironically, such behaviours simply ended with asylum-seekers working the fields – as in other reception centres. The *operatrici's* behaviours show the ways in which the systemic connection

between state bordering and agri-business relies on gendered forms of care. This is true even though in this relationship between the *operatrici* and the asylum-seekers, the *operatrici* were trying to allow for spaces of autonomy. They did so even though it put their own livelihoods at risk and created other repercussions like stress.

'Ho Studiato!': Stigma and Economic Woes of Accoglienza Workers

Alongside the stressors of the job that related to its bureaucratic demands, and the discrepancy between the law and social reality, the *operatrici* of this centre described feeling unappreciated in this job, even stigmatised. Giulia, the *educatrice,* felt like she was invisible, even in relation to other jobs in the centre, like that of the psychologist. The role of the educator, she put it was '*serie C'* (C-list). It was even worse if you worked with *'i migranti'*. In this town, she said, she was known as 'the white lady with the Black friends': a remark (sometimes with sexual innuendo) that evidenced how her job bled into the rest of her life and social identity. Attitudes towards race, class, and gender meant she was stigmatised because of this association. People always asked her why, with a father who worked in politics, a brother who had a good job in Rome, she decided to work with migrants. She felt like she had to defend this choice constantly. Meanwhile, the psychologist, a woman named Bianca, whose fingernails were each painted a different shade of brown, herself felt misunderstood: 'In Italy, being a psychologist, especially here in the South, it's not prestigious – people associate it to crazies, to the mentally disturbed'.

This lack of social prestige was mirrored in the fact that the *operatrici* were rarely paid on time, if at all. There had been a period last year where they were paid every month, on time. But it had been over eight months since they had been last paid. As Giulia put it to me, 'It is very frustrating, in all ways' and repeated to me, as she often did, *'ho studiato!',* 'I've studied!' Here Giulia was speaking to the fact that she had earned a university degree that she believed would grant her professional standing, class status, and economic autonomy. And yet, here she was –

she had earned her professional degree, but she barely received an income and was neglected by her employer (via the cooperative, this was the Italian state). Her feelings were echoed by others who felt that the social contract had not been kept and experienced the unfairness of the job market in Sicily as a form of betrayal. Searching for a silver lining, she said that it could have been worse: 'Here, in Sicily, there are people who will take advantage of you. [But in this job] they do thing right: we are *messi in regola* [we work with a contract], we get a pension, our taxes are paid.'

For the *operatrici,* often, this job was one of the only opportunities to find work with a contract. One of the *operatori,* a night-guard, and the only man I encountered working at the centre, had a job during the day in construction. He had taken this position at the cooperative because his normal job usually was done without a contract, which was not only technically illegal, it also meant he would not receive a pension. So, he spent his nights at the centre.

At the same time, Giulia explained: '*Vorrei andarmene, ma non lo posso fare'* – 'I would like to leave, but I can't'. Giulia told me about how, at some point, she had looked for a job in northern Italy. She had received the position, but it paid only €800 a month, the equivalent of what she was supposed to earn here, except that here she had a free place to stay as she lived with her parents. She did not feel that €800 was enough to really live on independently, and so she stayed in her home *paese.* Though her pay-check had not come in eight months, she continued to work at the centre, benefitting from the fact that she could still live with her family.

The *operatori* of this centre clearly felt they were stuck: in Sicily, in this job that they felt was not well-regarded by the rest of society, and living with their families in what they felt to be a stereotypical situation of southern Italy: 'you know how it is here… you live with Mamma and

Papà until you are fifty!' Giulia would often remind me that her brother lived in Rome, and that what he often told her was true: '*giù, siete troppo indietro, troppo',* 'down there, you are too, too behind [backwards]'. Her work with asylum-seekers seemed to only confirm this idea. 'Here, in this town, there are no associations', she explained to me. This was not exactly true: there was a football club that tried to unite asylum-seekers and locals; and she herself had helped spearhead an internship at a local restaurant for young asylum-seekers in her care. But her feeling was that the town was full of nothing, evidenced by its being closed to newcomers.

These various frustrations illustrate how dynamics of race, southernness, gender, and class come together in the reception centres. They affect the internal dynamics: young asylum-seeking men are mothered by white women who are still living with their own parents, because they are themselves emplaced in their own economic and social position. The lack of respect that the *operatrici* felt is, to some extent, a result of the notoriety of the centres – much of it well-deserved. But it is also a result of a stigma that they were describing, in which even to be associated with migration through one's job could result in forms of social marginalisation.

Such effects were reflected in the remarks people made to them, which suggested they were downwardly mobile. It was also reflected in the temporality of payments. While being paid late, or without a contract, was something many interlocuters in Sicily reported, in this case it added a layer of frustration to already stigmatised work. Scholars have reported on the ways the temporality of bureaucracy affects asylum-seekers' lives, mental health, and onward mobility (Jefferson, Turner, and Jensen 2019). In this case, for reception workers as for asylum-seekers, it was the temporality, or the delay of payment, that acted as a form of neglect which in turn affected their lives (see Duffield 2019). For asylum-seekers, it often meant that they sought work in agriculture, a place where they might face various forms of exploitation and

criminality. For reception workers, it meant that they were stuck and emplaced – that they themselves could not realise their dreams and hopes of either spatial or social mobility.

In response to these conditions, reception workers created meaning out of their work that helped them cope with, or rationalise, such economic, spatial, and social emplacement and stigma. This is reminiscent of what scholars have written of humanitarians who express that they are motivated by other forms of remuneration beyond material gain (Fechter 2023; Malkki 1992). For instance, although Bianca said to me, 'I am not here just for them, otherwise it would be volunteer work, and I want to be paid!', she also maintained that 'what keeps me here are the *ragazzi,* the guys – you accompany them. To abandon them would be…' She didn't finish her sentence, not finding the words to express herself, and letting silence take over in our conversation as a mode, in itself, of making meaning.

Giulia, who had spoken often to me of the fact that *accoglienza* work offered little by way of social or economic remuneration, discussed her work in the quasi-religious, even ascetic, terms of epiphanic transformation: she had been raised as '*una buona figlia di italiani',* 'a good Italian daughter' – a way of saying that she had been brought up to have certain petit bourgeois, consumerist, conformist values. She said that before this work, she had spent all her money on clubs, on branded bags, and on clothes. Now, she said: 'They help me understand that there is more to life. I began this journey, and I changed. I became more humble. Five, six, seven months without pay, and I barely complain. I just have to renounce'.

Alongside the change in how she understood herself, Giulia felt, as Marta had also expressed, that working with the young men had helped her see her surroundings differently: 'Here, you know,' they see these kids as 'strangers, they are convinced that they get €35 a day, that they will steal your job.' Once, she told me, a police car had started following a group of the boys

around town. They had said, in Sicilian, ‘leave, Blacks’. She concluded, as Marta had, that in Sicily, ‘there is racism, and there always will be.’

Thanks to the *accoglienza* work at the centre, however, Giulia could set herself apart from these other Sicilians: ‘This work,’ she explained ‘has helped me understand myself. Sometimes I say something, and then I just ask myself, why did I say that? You ask yourself a lot of questions’. Giulia did not feel politically empowered in the ways the activists in Palermo seemed to – evinced in their big ambitions to change their surroundings and longstanding framings of Sicily. But she could change, or control, her own way of thinking about things, which enabled her in turn to imbue this very difficult work – the work that made her have ‘nervous outbursts’, for which she was paid little and in which she often felt stuck – with meaning that to her, was important.

Giulia smiled a wide smile when she reported to me that the asylum seekers often called her ‘mamma’. As with Marta, it did not feel so much that the lexicon of the family was being used here as a threatening cover-up. Rather, it was being used to fill the void created by the neglectful conditions of *accoglienza* centres. It served, to her, as ‘proof’ of what her underlying message to me: Giulia felt that, through her work with the people that the other Sicilians of her town called ‘strangers’, she had by contrast formed an understanding of the difficulties they had gone through, as well as of the uncertainty of their futures. This was about her empathy, connection, and bonding with them. In her words, the work had changed her, in the ways that an encounter with ‘others’, in its most philosophical form, is often believed to do: ‘When I am with them,’ she explained, ‘I feel full. This work gifts you strong emotions. I need this.’

Conclusion

What has emerged in this chapter is how grounded hospitality appears in the landscape of state hospitality in Sicily. While *accoglienza* is present in the language of the bureaucracy and law of official reception centres, there is a mismatch between what is set out in these texts and what is practiced. As I have shown, sometimes this is a concerted form of neglect or exploitation – part of the licit and illicit modes in which state hospitality towards migrants is a booming business. Other times, this mismatch occurs because of the *impossibility* of matching the form of bureaucracy to the substance of social life. The result can only be described as absurd: state forms of hospitality as written out in the bureaucratic guidelines become the *real* hospitality, and the grounded forms of hospitality, at least in the eyes of the state, barely matter. In fact, the slippage is, as others have noted, part of the policy of mismanagement that forms the governance of migration at the EU's humanitarian border – in and beyond Sicily.

Forms of grounded hospitality emerge to fill this gap. Sometimes, as I have shown, these modes of hospitality are performative. Their goal is communication in service of control. Geared towards outsiders and asylum-seekers both, they aim to ensnare and manipulate. The language and gestures of hospitality – and cognates related to home and kinship – are useful for their slipperiness, for the ways they can suggest both intimacy and threat. As a form of extreme control, this hospitality can be manipulative, allowing for violence and coercion to exist under the guise of intimacy – amounting to a form of domestic abuse.

Other times, as I have also tried to show, grounded hospitality emerges to fill the sterile void created by state hospitality. State hospitality renders the relationships between *operatrici* and asylum-seekers transactional yet controlling. All the while, it contributes, through economic neglect, to the broader stigmatization of these reception centres (a stigmatization which, I

would argue, enables criminality to flourish in this sector). In this context, other forms of grounded hospitality (related to kinship language) emerge as ways of controlling the meaning of this encounter. This understanding of hospitality personalises it and re-envisions *accoglienza* in spiritual terms that can help people cope emotionally and psychologically. Here, we see echoes of what we saw in Palermo and Campobello, in which strangers are re-imagined as salvific beings who provoke a transformation – at the level of the individual or the collective hosts.

The *operatrici* of the centre for young men, as I have shown, also had to exert intimate forms of control that could, as Palillo has written (2022; 2025), reproduce colonial, racist dynamics, and certainly reiterate power hierarchies that resemble those I have illustrated elsewhere. The spiritual, yet often de-politicised language they used could make it seem like they were concocting a fantasy. This fantasy is clearly gendered and racialised and thus can have the effect of maintaining the status quo. Indeed, in imagining themselves as 'mothers' – a term the young men themselves used – permitted them to enter an intimate realm. In this realm, they could imagine themselves to be, as Karina Nikunen (2014) has written 'heroes and helpers' to 'children' (i.e. passive, innocent victims). Similarly to what Andrea Muehlbach (2012) has observed, the state relies on such gendered forms of care, and on such religious lenses which perpetrate a broader economic and legal system (whatever the intention). Even where they may be used as coping mechanisms to the state's neglect in the first place, such views often allow this neglect to continue. For instance, they create a rationale for continuing work without pay or attention from their employer (the state).

Keeping this in mind, what I have tried to show is that hospitality, as both grounded and performative, nonetheless emerged as inextricable from state hospitality – even though it was

endowed with different meanings. In various ways, grounded hospitality served as a way for reception centre workers to regain control over the situation. If, amidst the entwinement of power dynamics and traps of control, there was any space for transforming living conditions for asylum-seekers, it was in the moments in which they were allowed autonomy through reception centre workers' momentary *relinquishment of control*. Yet ironically, moments where they were tacitly allowed to conduct activities that were not directly condoned by the state – namely, working in the agricultural fields so that they could send some money back to their families – were partial and momentary. Ultimately this too was part of the EU bordering system, whose alternate forms of control and neglect fed the agri-business of its periphery.

Conclusion: In Search of Welcome

In this thesis, we have travelled through different sites of the Sicilian borderlands, studying in each place the ways hospitality appears in grounded forms that are related to, but also stand at a remove from, state hospitality. These examples of grounded hospitality relate to the state both directly and indirectly. They emerge amidst the creation of the EU's humanitarian border in Sicily, and sometimes offer a direct response to the Italian state's language of hospitality as visible in this border. But, as I have shown, these grounded examples are different to state hospitality. Sometimes people explicitly countered their forms of grounded hospitality to the state, while other times they did not – in such cases hospitality emerged as a response within a broader context.

Like the grounded hospitality which I have focussed on, state hospitality can be characterised by elements of welcome and of control. This tension can be understood differently at different scales. Hospitality in laws, policies, bureaucracies and as repeated by authorities can be understood as pertaining to forms of state control. The literature on borders has often characterised this form of control as authoritarian in approach, and in a Marxist-derived sense, fused to the market.

At this scale, the tension between care and control principally results in governing mobility. It involves activities related to containment, deportation, detention. Intentionally and not, in this system, people are made vulnerable, and then channelled towards agricultural and other forms of what Cole and Booth (2006) call 'dirty work'. We have seen, for instance, how – even despite certain individuals' intentions, the system of (gendered) care (and neglect) in reception centres pushes people to work, often undocumented, in agriculture. At the border, there is also

the constant threat that carers and the police may work together, through sharing of information, language, or logics. Since my fieldwork ended, this has been occurring increasingly in Campobello. Such threats affect peoples' choices, and their living conditions because they contribute to the creation of 'deportable' subjects (De Genova 2002).

The focus of this thesis is not specifically an analysis of state hospitality, but it is important to remember how these forms of control have been theorised, in part because, as I have shown, many interlocuters were affected by such forms of control. As my ethnography has shown, many of these observations stand, though interpreted in perhaps a different register by those on the ground. For many interlocuters – both migrant and Sicilian – there was a palpable sense of constraint, that was structural, material, and existential, regarding the meaning of their lives. It showed up in whether people felt that larger forces enabled or blocked their ability to be autonomous, including: to move forward economically and socially, to create community and belonging, or to maintain a sense of self. Many interlocuters understood the state, in its myriad forms and embodiments, as playing a central role in policing the boundaries of belonging, which related to the lives and worth of Sicilians and migrants alike.

For many migrant interlocuters, the state was represented by authorities and legal structures which affected their mobility, livelihoods, or their ability to obtain documents. It was epitomised most deeply in a fear of arbitrary controls by the police, but it reached beyond the police as well. Migrants escaped the alternately neglectful, liminal, or controlling reception centres, only to find themselves in the settlements of Campobello di Mazara. Migrants preferred the settlements to the Red Cross camp, which they described as 'not home' – a vocabulary that alluded to the fact that those humanitarian camps did not allow for certain forms of autonomy (including through the ability to offer hospitality) that the informal

settlements did. Though obtaining documents was a major goal of many, others tried to create a sense of self and of life where there was space to operate beyond the constraining logics of the state. For many Sicilians, there was a feeling that the social contract had been broken. This betrayal was felt economically but also resulted in many feeling either emplaced or displaced. In both cases, the ability to move freely, and to exert autonomy in other ways seemed constrained.

For migrants as well as Sicilians, migration policies, and the accompanying discourses and spectacles, further exacerbated a sense of mistrust in, or disappointment with, the state. People were palpably affected by what they perceived as the hypocrisy of a state that professed human rights but killed people at sea (and on land); of reception centres where people should be cared for but which were characterised by neglect and criminality; or because of the ways, in a town that relied on migrant labour, townspeople did little to welcome them.

Local authorities often offered grand announcements, communicated through the media, that centred on migration: claiming this or that housing solution, this or that eviction of a settlement or reception centre in the name of human dignity. Yet little happened to improve material conditions for people – if anything, over the years living conditions for migrants only worsened. As a result, the sense from many people is that these were spectacles meant to flex the state's muscles – or just to communicate to people that the state is *doing something in response.* But to those who are involved on the ground, such statements and performances come to seem empty, devoid of meaning, absurd. The sense of the social contract being broken is exacerbated as a result. This could lead to further hopelessness and dejection – but it also created voids that people tried to fill.

It is in this landscape that grounded forms of hospitality emerged, in what I have argued amount to forms of taking back control through welcoming others. The control that I have been describing is related to the effects of the state bordering system. However, I have offered a different notion of control. This is not the authoritarianism of the state, nor (necessarily) the everyday policing on which it relies. Rather, people sought to use hospitality to create forms of autonomy and connection that enabled them to re-establish meaning – about themselves, and their homes – but predicated on a stance of openness towards strangers. This relies on an idea of welcome that goes beyond traditional notions of hospitality: welcome implies openness to another, in such a way that can affect the self, and thus create transformation of self at different scales.

Such openness towards strangers sometimes overtly contested the state: in Palermo or amongst activists, openness took the form of a 'no borders' stance. Welcoming migrants was part of a critique of the nation-state system and its violence. In such instances, hospitality resembled forms of political struggle or resistance to the state and the supra-state. But often, the tension between welcome and control in hospitality had to do with something existential, or psycho-spiritual and people did not direct it towards the state explicitly. Often, it was through this stance of openness to strangers, expressed in practices of grounded hospitality, that people formed an alternate imaginary of and for themselves, Sicily, and their futures.

This new imaginary was rooted, firstly, in the fact that foreigners brought gifts, in the shape of new ways of doing things or of seeing the world. Some activists, such as those in Campobello, found inspiration in the extraordinary potential of this newness. But it was also the practice and idea of hospitality itself that lent people a sense of control. This control could be over their identities, over the landscape, over space, over economic futures, or over the meaning of their

work. Across these cases, grounded hospitality can be understood as practices and/or imaginaries that helped people re-root themselves in place and time. They helped people create and believe in a feeling of being at home that was crucial to forming and maintaining a sense of self amidst overwhelming uncertainty, even crisis.

This is a different take on scholars' existing observations that hospitality reinforces the host's position as 'master' of the house. I am arguing that yes, indeed, it does. Hospitality is characterised by an interplay of welcome and control. However, scholars have often focussed on how these dynamics reinforce hierarchical relations between a citizen-host and migrant-guest. By contrast (without necessarily rejecting their conclusions) I have focussed instead on the ways in which, no matter who is host or guest, hospitality can reaffirm one's sense of self in political, existential, and material ways. In this way, it can also speak beyond the immediate interaction of host and guest towards broader issues and forces – addressing uncertainty and crisis through re-establishing a sense of the self. This provides anthropological thickness to Lévinas' abstract philosophical notion of hospitality as a duty, for the reason that it is in welcoming others that we create ourselves.

My broad definition of control is distinct from the notion of state hostility or authoritarian governance of migration. It is also distinct from the idea of everyday policing, by which grounded actors re-inscribe and re-enact state forms of control. Interpersonal hospitality *could* be about control over others in a way that reinforced social hierarchies, privileging the 'host' over the 'guest'. It *could* intersect with the control of the state. The fact that it could do so (even where actors did not intend to police) illustrates how bordering works as a capillary system. But hospitality did not necessarily or entirely do so, and this was not its only consequence.

My notion of control in hospitality is also distinct from familiar ideas of resistance, struggle, or agency in the face of the state. Sometimes hospitality *was* stated as a form of explicit contestation to the state and intersected with these ideas. But other times, my interlocuters did not aim at 'resistance'. Even if, like some of the reception centre workers, they worked within the structures of state hospitality, they created meaning out of the work of *accoglienza* that aimed to be distinct to that offered by policies and 'kits'. These they diligently tried to fulfil. But in parallel, they created a narrative about their work of hospitality that filled the voids of sense and interpersonal connection that these forms of state *accoglienza* resulted in. From my etic perspective, grounded forms of hospitality were inseparable from state forms of hospitality and bordering, but my interlocuters did not necessarily articulate this connection as such in words – making it distinct from the idea of resistance especially.

The hospitality of which I speak is also not morally 'pure'. Sometimes forms of grounded hospitality could be personal, embedded in the materiality of social interaction, and thus were felt at an affective level to be about social bonding. This aspect was certainly different to state hospitality, its emptiness of meaning and dead metaphors. But for some of my interlocuters, hospitality was also characterised by a gap between imagination and practice. Some approached hospitality in what I have called a postmodern sense, unmoored from practices or traditional codes. In these cases, the language of hospitality came back alive, but it was merely the *idea* of openness towards others that served to re-create a sense of self. The grounded hospitality of which I speak thus lays no claims to being *real* or genuine in the sense of a theological, moral, or Platonic ideal.

Indeed, I have shown how grounded hospitality emerged and co-existed (if sometimes through conflict) with forms of local or grounded control – and could thus be limited. This dynamic is

primarily evident through the tension between hospitality and *legalità*. *Legalità,* as a positive relationship to the law that takes the notion of a social contract seriously, promotes an idea of the law as a force for good that can nonetheless sometimes align with more authoritarian readings of state control. But in Sicily, *legalità* was, like hospitality, *also* used by local actors as a juridical and discursive way to 'take back control'. As an approach to the law imbued with an identitarian discourse, it countered the lawlessness of the Mafia, and the stereotypes of the Southern/Sicilian Questions.

In weaving *legalità* empirically throughout this dissertation, I have tried to show the ways hospitality was both distinct from, at times in conflict with, and yet other times also intersected with legal approaches to the state. Where *legalità* sought to suture the social contract, hospitality often aimed to find an alternative – primarily because *legalità* was visibly limited when it came to migrants. For instance, migrants who were being welcomed to Palermo through *accoglienza* got caught in the crosshairs of *legalità*, an approach to the law that pre-dated their arrival but which affected them because of their 'other' juridical status that assimilated them to *mafiosi.*

Other times, *legalità* was politicised in a way that directly curbed grounded hospitality. In Campobello, the cultural resonance of the notion of *accoglienza* likely enabled semi-legal or even illegal occupations of space, in the name of a higher form of moral conduct, following a person's death. *Accoglienza* emerged as a human response to the rigidity of *legalità*, a recognition of the ways strict adherence to the law does not always permit for flexible responses to complexities of life. Yet *legalità* was also an excuse to end informal encampments and experiments in grounded hospitality, because they and their denizens were understood to be illegal. Here, *legalità* produced illegality and enabled a state response (De Genova 2002).

Grounded hospitality was a form of welcome that aimed to create connection, autonomy, and meaning. But it was only ever partial, momentary, and from the viewpoint of a Platonic ideal, flawed. This analysis shows how grounded hospitality was limited by, and even resulted in similar effects as, the state bordering system, including hospitality language, the paradigm of care and control, and the restrictions on mobility closely linked to the country's labour needs.

Chapter Overview: The Road Traversed

Within this overarching argument about hospitality, each chapter presented distinct ways in which hospitality emerged as a form of taking back control that was directed at both structural constraints and meaning making. In each instance, hospitality had both different forms and limitations that depended on the empirical context. While all chapters focused on forms of grounded hospitality, they moved generally from an analysis of semiotic to practiced hospitality, and from easily accessible (to outsiders) approaches to hospitality in urban contexts, towards hospitality as it was practiced in rural hinterlands or small towns (which were characterised by spectacle, but also invisible and dispersive).

In Chapter 3, my first empirical chapter, I discussed hospitality in the city of Palermo. I placed it in the rhetoric of Leoluca Orlando as he aimed to re-brand his city, *la città dell'accoglienza.* Here, hospitality was a form of contestation to the state that countered EU and Italian policies that the mayor argued were resulting in a genocide within the waters of the Mediterranean Sea that surrounded the port city. Orlando defined hospitality in Mediterranean terms, linking it to Palermo's identity as *arabo-normanna,* a place at the crossroads of civilizations, that had always welcomed foreigners and would continue to do so.

In his rhetoric, as in public paintings throughout the city, hospitality discourse helped recuperate an alternate meaning of the Mediterranean, as a place of encounter rather than as a border. In turn, the aim was to regain control over the city's identity: away from the discourses of the Southern Question that had othered Sicilians as a European backwater, hospitality served to re-establish Palermitan centrality in world affairs. In contrast to stereotypes of criminality and the Mafia, hospitality was proof of a kind of moral authority.

Predicated on an openness to migrants, this Mediterranean hospitality was also about establishing control over urban space – even if it was mostly symbolic. From painting portraits on buildings, to writing up symbolic documents, to staging theatrical politics stating that Palermo's ports would always stay open to migrants, Orlando and other public actors sought to re-establish a sense of local sovereignty in and over the city. This was closely tied to trying to establish self-confidence in Palermo's people, and open up an economic future for the city.

While this hospitality was pitched as a mode of taking back control from the nation-state across different levels of identity, space, and meaning, juridical hospitality was limited by the fact that the city was territorially and jurisdictionally controlled by (and enmeshed with) the nation-state. The two were braided, spatially and in the embodiment of people who could be both *palermitani* and members of the state. The degree to which migrants felt welcomed in the city was also limited by *legalità.*

In Chapter 4, I turned to Moltivolti. I showed how this social enterprise echoed many of Orlando's framings of Palermo as a city of Mediterranean hospitality. I showed the ways in which the enterprise played with notions of hospitality, using the media, performance, aesthetics, and irony. I argued that this form of hospitality aimed to blur politics and business,

as part of a strategy geared towards regaining control over peoples' economic futures – specifically those of the founders and of the Ballarò neighbourhood at large.

At Moltivolti, different forms of control in fact emerged: the founders professed wanting to manage diversity across the neighbourhood. There was the control involved in the labour structures and in the day-to-day decision making of the business. But, as for Orlando, hospitality also emerged as a way of valorising migrants to try and tip scales of power: overthrowing metaphorical, legal, and often psycho-spiritual yokes to regain a sense of 'mastery' over their own home. It was thus similarly about creating autonomy for themselves and superimposing new meanings on migration and Palermo over nation-state-centric narratives of Sicilians and migrants as 'others'.

Here too I showed that postmodern hospitality had its aspirational limits. Moltivolti elided the juridical differences between migrants and other travellers. Migrants became abstracted in this narrative, reduced to a role they played in the story. What is more, in focusing on migrants as part of a highly mediatised narrative – crucial for their strategies of taking back control – Moltivolti inadvertently participated in the spectacle of migration.

Though Moltivolti explicitly stood against Italian state bordering, the enterprise's tactics sometimes resulted in producing migrants as 'others'. In Moltivolti's narratives, aesthetics, and performances of hospitality, migrants were fetishised. By virtue of their ethnicity or ancestors' provenance, the people it employed were often called upon to act the *role* of migrant: for instance, to answer tourists' questions about journeys that some had never been on. As such, this resulted in a commodification of the identity of both 'migrant' and 'Palermo': the city became a site that outsiders could come to 'touch' the issue of migration physically – to

encounter ‘real life migrants’ and experience what life was like in a hospitable Mediterranean borderland. For economic and identitarian purposes, Moltivolti also contributed to transforming Palermo into a kind of utopian fantasy of hospitable, Mediterranean society. This had some positive economic effects, but limited revolutionary potential.

In Chapter 5, I moved to a focus on Campobello di Mazara. Here, I showed how local actors and activists practiced and imagined hospitality in response to the death of a migrant-worker. Local actors related this singular death to a broader sense of the death of place. To some of my local interlocuters, this ‘death’, a common metaphor, was related back to the Mafia, the neglect of the state, and local inertia and emigration. It was represented in the buildings and infrastructure of the town that were decaying, abandoned, or unfinished.

Hospitality towards migrants emerged, first, as a way of taking back control over these buildings and thus transforming the Campobello landscape. In kicking out the mafiosi who still occupied the building at Fontane d’Oro, activists exerted a form of control over space that aimed to topple an old regime. In this move, again we see the ways in which hospitality emerges as a form of control over space, in which migrants’ presence provides an impetus for a struggle over (self-) sovereignty. It is also a form of control over language, where people seek to move beyond the battered metaphor of death, towards new framings and discourses.

Hospitality in the form of an openness towards migrants provided new ways of re-imagining what Campobello could be and what it could signify for people. It served as a counterforce to the idea that people had to leave or that the future lay elsewhere. As in Palermo, we see how hospitality was an important imaginative tool that marked moments of contestation over dominant forms of making meaning out of Sicilian identity. Like the hackneyed metaphor of

‘death’, these old ways of understanding Sicily nonetheless had real effects on how people saw their futures.

Yet here too we saw the limits of aspirations of ideal hospitality. The Campobello Spring experiment in hospitality ended. It ended in part, again, because of the logics of *legalità*: in this case, members of the anti-Mafia were promoting a migrant encampment that was at best semi-legal, and certainly full of undocumented people. Beyond the particularities resulting from the history of the Mafia in Sicily, what we see more broadly is the ways in which state logics of legality/illegality work to curb grassroots experiments in autonomous and communal living. For as much as this form of *accoglienza* was different to state *accoglienza,* the model could only work with the approval (tacit or explicit) of the state.

In Chapter 6, I remained in Campobello di Mazara, and shifted the focus to migrants’ informal settlements, called *ghetti*. I showed how hospitality was also used by migrants and seasonal labourers as a form of homemaking to create forms of stability amidst instability. I showed how this instability was a result of the hostilities of the ‘humanitarian border’: most of the people living in the settlement had escaped from official reception centres. Many had a complicated relationship to the law and authorities and used the *ghetti* as places of refuge. In this context, hospitality towards Sicilian outsiders emerged as a strategic practice that enabled people to obtain valuable information and support that itself was often related to law or bureaucracy in Italy.

The strategic welcoming of certain people enabled helpful forms of outsider presence, but still allowed people to control the space. This was necessary because outsiders often also brought the threats of the border, of its authorities or of its spectacle. Through hospitality at various

scales, from leading tours of the settlements to inviting outsiders to sit in one's *casa,* 'home', hosts exerted some control over what visitors saw or understood about the settlement. If these guests misbehaved, they could be thrown out. The *ghetto* represented, and indeed by many measures *was,* a space of autonomy away from the authority of the state.

And yet, here as in the previous chapter in Campobello di Mazara, eventually the state authorities encroached and the *ghetti* proved evanescent. Attempts at homemaking in both cases were often limited, in and of themselves transitory states. As in other chapters, hospitality as a form of taking control away from the Mafia or from the authority of the state (and the state-capital nexus) only worked partially and momentarily. Hierarchies of power and control were still at play, and in an intersectional mode, peoples' own subjectivities – including their gender, document status, or the approach they took towards mobility – also affected the degree to which they could take advantage of the hospitality offered by the *ghetto*. Hospitality was often reduced to its imaginative potential of transforming peoples' sense of self.

As following the activist-run encampments, authorities also deployed logics of *legalità* and humanitarianism: the state evicted and razed the settlements on the grounds that they were illegal and unsafe. If many of the activists of Chapter 5 were left disillusioned and wondering if they should leave, for the migrants of Chapter 6, evictions meant fleeing once more. If for some mobility was approached coolly as a life of travel, adventure, and philosophical wandering, for many instability was a forced mode of being and an identity that was deeply painful. In this light, hospitality that had existed began to look uncanny in a disturbing way – destined as it, and the autonomy and community it evinced, seemed to be, to evaporate.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I go inside the official reception centres. Here, hospitality dominated the

official language of kits, policies, and laws that governed how reception centre workers were supposed to act. But grounded hospitality also emerged as reception centre workers aimed to retrieve and retain control over the centres, or over the meaning of their work.

Sometimes hospitality could be purposefully manipulative. Towards outsiders and insiders both, it was often used in such a way that it mimicked its norms of welcome, inclusion, or social bonding. Yet, in surreptitious ways, its wielders could make clear to their audience that they knew this was not the form of hospitality that was *actually occurring.* This kind of hospitality – performed and theatrical – also often made asylum-seekers and outside observers feel as though they were going crazy because of the mismatch between what people professed and what occurred. This was crucial for the *operatori* to control others' perceptions, to minimise authorities' interference in their centres, and thus to protect themselves from prying eyes. This form of grounded hospitality often enabled or hid criminal activity and was thus often deployed in opposition to the interference of state authorities and their 'inspections'. At the same time, it clearly fed into what Mahmud (2024) called Italy's policy of 'purposeful mismanagement' of the reception centres.

At the same time, in other cases grounded hospitality emerged in response to such situations of absurdity, of craziness, or of cognitive dissonance produced by the gap between what the reception centres were nominally supposed to offer, and what went on socially inside of them. For some reception workers, hospitality emerged again as a way of making meaning out of the presence of strangers – this time, strangers in their direct care. These *operatori* often struggled with the social stigma of working with immigrants and in the reception centres, with neglect on the part of their employer, and with what they perceived as the challenge of implementing the bureaucratic requirements while trying to do right by the people in their care. In this

situation, hospitality was sometimes described in quasi-spiritual, and often familial terms: as having a transformative effect on the hosts, who became *mamma* to migrants.

As at Moltivolti, such narratives of self-transformation could lock asylum seekers into certain roles. The dynamic was gendered and racialised: operators leaned into a form of maternalism that offered their work meaning, based on being needed by these young, lost, boys from faraway places. At the same time, like findings from research with humanitarian workers, we can see how such narratives also serve as a form of rationalization that helps people keep working in circumstances that otherwise offer little by way of economic or social remuneration.

Across these chapters, we see over and again how hospitality emerges in the interstices left by state language of hospitality and the social realities and effects of bordering. On the ground, in these different ways, individuals re-purpose the language of hospitality, often turning it into a performance or practice. They have strategic and existential purposes that enable them to manoeuvre at the borders or borderlands. Hospitality is part of efforts to find spaces, meaning, and a sense of self away from that defined by the state. This is particularly stark in the chapters regarding the official reception centres. Often, it does not entirely succeed – or it may even play into the hands of the state: for instance, the prevalence of the maternalistic frames shows how they served a function, if we take the point of view of the broader bordering system.

This inability to fully exit the system, the perpetrator of disaffection and a permeating sense of crisis stands in tension with the ways grounded hospitality is also a key part of an important affirmation of self. In both a structural sense and as an approach towards making meaning, across these different sites we see how hospitality, predicated on an openness towards others, is a means of exerting control over oneself, one's space, and one's future. This is distinct from,

but occurs amidst, and is inextricable from, a bordering context characterised by what people understand as oppressive or hostile state forces.

Avenues for Further Research: The Sacred Stranger?

This thesis has taken the shape of a journey, in the form of a 'search for welcome'. This was prompted by a Franciscan priest's remark that state *accoglienza* is not *accoglienza,* is not *real* hospitality. His words were echoed in those of activists and Moltivolti entrepreneurs who also felt that whatever the state (and some felt, the Church) was doing with migrants was at best 'accoglienza' in quotes.

Such observations implied that there exists a Platonic (or theological) ideal version of hospitality. Similarly, there is an underlying slippage in much of the literature which separates 'real' hospitality from 'corrupt' hospitality. As Mireille Rosello has written, hospitality is 'inherently perverse, and always and eminently corruptible' (2001: 176). Non-corrupted hospitality, she argues, 'may require that, in some ways, both the host and the guest accept, in different ways, the uncomfortable and sometimes painful possibility of being changed by the other' (2001: 176).

In the broader literature on refuge and migration, including that which does not focus on Sicily otherwise, the island is often upheld as a place where it is possible to see such ideal forms of hospitality occurring in action. As one example among others, in her book on the history of sanctuary in myths across the world, the literary scholar Marina Warner ended with a chapter in Palermo, focusing on a grassroots group that works with young migrants on elaborating forms of bottom-up storytelling (2022). Warner is a proponent of sanctuary – her book argues that in a world where borders and nationalism reign, refuge is radical and subversive.

I do not necessarily disagree with Warner (or Rosello) in normative terms. Such attention to Sicily by an otherwise outsider also reiterates my own choice to focus on Sicily. As Sicily has come to symbolize more generally alternative approaches to welcome and hospitality from that of the nation-state system, I hope this study will be of interest to Italianists and non-Italianists.

Yet, as my emphasis on the limits to hospitality – not to mention the highly performative aspects of hospitality in Palermo – should also indicate, my central purpose here is not to reiterate these ideas about Sicily's quintessential hospitality, nor about its potential as a source of alternative thinking to the nation-state system of Euro-modernity. As I have shown, even the sincerest attempts at hospitality could inadvertently play into the hands of the state. Imagination and language which are often central to efforts at renewal, and, while important, this thesis has also instructed me on the difficulties of escaping the nation-state-system.

Rather, I am interested in what this search for welcome, as an ideal, indicates. In some sense, my study has been very particular to Sicily. I have focused on its history and heritage, on the Mafia, on discourses of Southernness, that are relatively unique to this place. In part, this attention to its specificities was aimed at an intricate understanding of how and why people use hospitality here. To recall Candea (2018), context matters – not just for the sake of methodology, but for a deeper understanding of phenomena of the present. Furthermore, hospitality is differentiated from near concepts like humanitarianism precisely because it has place-bound, specific meanings. It is often invoked in identitarian terms that have to do with peoples' sense of themselves in a particular time and place. The relative translatability of hospitality makes it useful in all the ways I have shown in this thesis, but it is also complex in a way that is deeply bound to place.

As a result of this specific context, I have argued that this search for welcome – or the rhetorics and practices of hospitality – mark attempts at taking back control. I have shown that this is a response to, if also remote from, a feeling of control having been taken away from people. It is about creating forms of autonomy and meaning that are predicated on an openness to strangers that begets a possibility for transformation. In Sicily, this has a specific valence due to history and mythologies, the Southern Question and its discourses, and its current site as an EU borderland.

However, if we generalise from such contextual specificities, it is possible to see the ways hospitality as I have studied it is the result of phenomena and disaffection – approximating de Martino's 'crisis of presence' – that can be seen more broadly. This includes, namely, a sense of feeling unrecognized and neglected within the current system, a feeling often deferred to the nation-state. The politics are opposite, but there is a curious similarity to the feelings of those who participate in contemporary nationalist politics.

I have analysed grounded hospitality in juxtaposition with state hospitality and rooted my study in the humanitarian border and borderlands of the EU. Yet I see my study as opening the door for further, possibly comparative studies or research further afield, that may or may not even take place in borderlands (though if we take Agier's definition of borderlands, they can be found anywhere). What is key here is a permeating feeling of disaffection akin to a 'crisis of presence', often mapped on to disappointment with the nation-state, and the extent to which people use hospitality as a response.

This brings me, finally, to the notion of the stranger as sacred – or in less religious/spiritual

terms, of foreigners as providing benefits to the nation-state (Honig 2009). Across my chapters, foreigners emerged as symbolic or strategic portents of help. In Palermo, this was closely tied to a mythologized, religious, or psycho-spiritual idea about the city that had to do with its specific geography and history. But in Campobello or in the reception homes too people made meaning out of the arrival of strangers that helped provide a sense of hope towards the future, or at least a coping mechanism for the present. Strangers became a source of affection and connection, a mode for thinking about the future that was an antidote to the disaffection and alienation resulting from a feeling of betrayal in the social contract, often mapped onto the nation-state. Even in its most strategic forms, such as at the *ghetto,* strangers were understood as bearers of gifts from another world, who could be helpful to the migrant hosts.

Such observations are based in Sicily, but they intersect with longstanding anthropological notions of *theoxenia,* of foreigners as bearers of gifts, often associated to the gods for their mythic potential to renew or offer miraculous changes to a home. And they bring up the likelihood that such uses, and making meaning, of hospitality and strangers may be found much further afield. This is grounds for further collaborative and comparative approaches to the study of hospitality (for more on this method see Dzenovska, Martin, and Artiukh 2025).

As I write, it strikes me that a focus on hospitality is not at all in keeping with the zeitgeist. The current news is dominated by reporting on the hardening of borders and a new zeal for deportations, as well as the tightening of immigration and citizenship laws. Migrants (and increasingly new classes of non-citizen foreigners) are held up as posing extreme threats. Strangers are pegged as the problem behind voters' woes – not as their solution. There are fewer mainstream mentions of hospitality being a salvific balm, or a source of meaning, or an alternative to state hostility.

In the last few months, Italy has tightened its citizenship laws, restricting even the *jus sanguinis* paradigm. Meanwhile, so far, the *jus soli* laws remain as restricted as ever. Governments around the world are putting more funds in the creation of detention and deportation centres, and disappearing people in a way that was once (perhaps naively) considered to be beyond the purview of so-called ‘western, liberal democracies’. To put it simply, the state is busy creating more strangers, and busy trying to keep them out – or locked up.

As the numbers and kinds of strangers proliferate, this might, however, also mean that hospitality, in the forms that I have discussed, which are often informal and removed from state-based hospitality – may only be more relevant if less visible. While imperfect, partial and momentary, hospitality will likely continue to exist in grounded forms. These deserve to be studied and understood not only for the ways in which they manage or fail to uphold a subversive, revolutionary ideal. They also deserve to be studied for a better understanding of how, why, and to what effect people reach out to others who are different to themselves, even in – or perhaps especially in – times of great political, economic, and existential uncertainty.

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