


June 2014

Immigrants, Roma and Sinti unveil the “National” in Italian Identity

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Recommended Citation

Melfi, Francesco (2014) "Immigrants, Roma and Sinti unveil the “National” in Italian Identity," *Cultural Encounters, Conflicts, and Resolutions*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cecr/vol1/iss1/6>

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Abstract

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Keywords

Immigration, Roma, Minorities, Italy, Nationalism, Identity

Immigrants, Roma and Sinti Unveil the “National” in Italian Identity¹

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This essay picks up a few threads in the ongoing debate on national identity in Italy. Immigration and the intertwining of cultures locally have stretched the contours of the nation state to a breaking point. As a result, the social self has become a sharply contested terrain between those who want to install a symbolic electronic fence around an imagined fatherland and those who want a more inclusive nation at home in a global world. After discussing the views of Amin Maalouf (2000), Alessandro Dal Lago (2009), Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) and Patrick Manning (2005) on national identity and migration in the first half, the essay goes on in the second half to examine the powerful contribution to the debate by leading Italian Romaní intellectual, Santino Spinelli (2012), and Romanologist Lorenzo Monasta (2008). The depth of the current identity crisis in Italy makes this country an ideal laboratory to probe new *approaches on the subject*.

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How far back in time should we
project the origins of our identity? Don't
waste your time. In truth, we're all
Africans, Lucy's children.

Lorenzo Monasta. (2008, p. 14)

... it is difficult to say where
legitimate affirmation of identity ends
and encroachment on the rights of
others begins.

Amin Maalouf. (2000, p. 32)

¹ *Roma (Rom, sing.)* and *Sinti* refer to the two main Romaní communities in Italy.

1. Introduction: “Uno Stato poco onorevole,” A Dishonorable State.

Taken together, Lorenzo Monasta’s and Amin Maalouf’s quotes unveil identity as something that is at once inconclusive and dangerous. If born of necessity as infinitely open to becoming, how legitimate an operation is it to reduce it to finitude? And, once defined, is it ever innocent? In other words, can we reflect in ourselves that foundational openness identity bore in the beginning of time and make it an idea congruous with the needs of a global society today? It seems to me that the very moment we impose an enclosure around it we cut it off from that *res extensa* of which it is naturally a part. As a result, it turns immediately into psychological entrenchment impinging nastily on our humanity.

In his book *In the Name of Identity* Maalouf (2000) advances an idea of identity that recognizes all the natural strands that historically make up our individual and collective self-perceptions. He encourages us to accept our own diversity and see our own identity “as the sum of all his various affiliations, instead of as only one of them raised to the status of the most important, made into an instrument of exclusion and sometimes into a weapon of war” (p. 159). Maalouf happily embraces all his own affiliations, including those he did not choose, such as place of origin and parental culture. More importantly, he does not make excuses for or express any qualms about being equally at home in France as he is in Lebanon, in the West as he is in the Middle East, writing French and speaking Arabic, being Christian and being a proud citizen of an ancient and universal Arab-Muslim civilization: “societies themselves need to accept the many affiliations that have forged each of their collective identities in the course of history, and that are shaping them still” (p. 160). Painfully aware, however, of how perilous the path he is treading can be, he aptly titled his book in French *identités meurtrières*, literally, identities that kill. The French/Lebanese writer documents and analyses both diachronically and synchronically how the narrowest possible definition of identity—in which one allegiance alone manages to take exclusive hold of us—has become, in the last few decades, again so dominant in the West.

This one allegiance that has been taking an exclusive hold in Italy today is the idea of *patria*, or fatherland—a result that was never inevitable and one which owes its success to a resurgence of nationalism. Those who reject identification with this socially constructed model become unpatriotic, that is, potential *outsiders*. Now, for a long time since the end of World War II and well into the 1970s and 1980s in Italy these were the terms consistently invoked by *fascists*. Evidently, Italy has changed so much in these last two decades that the marks of a fascist worldview have now become the signposts of a “democratic” one.

Interestingly, among the cases he examines, Maalouf also finds that the construction of an extremely reductive and, for this very reason, absolute form of identity is so symbolic that it may just be the result of unreflective reaction: “The identity a person lays claim to is often based, in reverse, on that of his enemy” (p. 14). The example here is that of an Irish Catholic that defines himself by all that his Englishman counterpart is not. Can this mechanism explain what happens today to a growing number of Italians confronting migrants and Romaní minorities? Would it be true to say that more Italians today may identify with these fascist symbols because Eastern European, Middle Eastern, Romaní and African workers have been immigrating to Italy? What do Italians see in these migrant workers and in the Romaní minority in particular, one may wonder, that they want to be them but *in reverse*? Could the notion of *freely* chosen identities which immigrants and Roma seem to carry be what scares increasingly more people in the host country? Completely in the dark as to how painful and ambiguous the process of migration really can be and what ideals or inhumanity may be its root-causes, many Italians’ response to these “invading hordes” is to recoil in fear and re-claim ideas one might have believed confined once and for all to the dustbin of history: *patria* (fatherland) and its collateral set of *patriotic* rituals that include a redusted military hero cult and additional choreographic fanfares.

Italian sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago, author of a groundbreaking book, *Non-persons* (2009), unceremoniously attacks this resurrected notion of *patria*. He points out the “relatively short, conflictual, and dishonorable (*poco onorevole*)” history of the Italian State, a state which in a little less than a century and a half has been ruled by an authoritarian monarchy, a totalitarian regime, and a corrupt democracy. The main problem with resurrecting an Italian *patria*, according to Dal Lago is that “it coincides with a process of rendering inferior other societies” (Dal Lago, 16).

Dal Lago’s findings witness the return of rituals and a pernicious set of concepts that eerily evoke a brutal past in recent Italian history, and this is cause for alarm. The repackaging of an Italian national identity now underway around an exclusive and segregating concept of *patria*, in fact, seems to follow the same sequence that cadenced Fascist national myth-making in the 1920s. Then the Fascists also imagined a fatherland. They fantasized that this, Fascist Italy, was the modern incarnation of ancient Rome; invented an empire with a preposterous Italian master race; allied their pet fatherland to two other newly and similarly repackaged fatherlands, the German and the Japanese, each also with its own wing-clipped and thus distorted identity, an identity now made so much smaller

and thus intolerant; and together, these three fatherlands, ushered in WWII causing untold suffering for millions of people worldwide.

If this were not enough, we should never forget what two of them also did about thirty years before. In 1914-5, to be precise, Italy and Germany, then still recent nation-states, acted on a similar “imaginative” course competing with their European sister fatherlands, notably England, France, Holland and Belgium—all of them similarly powered by distinctively murderous special identities and grand colonial vocations. This first time around the world *carnage*, as WWI was called in the end, had been fueled by a series of wars against imagined enemies that were determined, according to the nationalist propaganda of the time, to frustrate the glorious “re-birth” of their imagined sacred fatherlands.

Today, as was so tragically shown once again in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a myth about a community is being re-created and its exclusivism and mythical superiority proclaimed. For this to take hold, however, *outsiders* must be imagined. Consequently, as Alessandro Dal Lago explains, an appropriate enemy must be identified and then degraded to the status of a *non-person*. Paradoxically, the more the dominant group succeeds in degrading its imagined enemies, the more secure its citizens feel because now finally they “know” who they really are. After all, as the Nazi slogan advertised, “Gott mit uns,” God is on our side. This is a mentality that unfortunately is still with us. No matter how brutal our soldiers can be in war, they still return home to us as heroes. At this point, it is only to be expected—after a few waves of immigrants have reached Italy—that these should become the ideal targets of a newly rediscovered Italian fatherland.

As Dal Lago points out, intellectual theorizing in some quarters has quickly produced reasons in support of exclusive and segregating identities: “Rather than conceiving of diversity as plurality, the articulation of a shared and egalitarian human condition, differentialism has often hypothesized cultural separation and has mythologized national and cultural roots.” What is impressive again today in Italy is the gross unanimous front against these foreign workers and “why many intellectuals and a large segment of the media, the political class, and ‘average citizens’ formed a coalition that was hostile to migrants when confronted with a phenomenon of limited dimensions” (p. 15).

Clearly, large numbers of Italian intellectuals have moved to the right in these past thirty years *organically* attaching themselves (as Gramsci would have it) to a parasitic state and economic powers historically encoded with all kinds of cancerous cells packed with fascistic, clerical, and mafia-loaded information. Despite the new republican veneer applied to the new Italian state after the war, this continued to a large

extent to embody the legacy of the Fascist period. Moreover, the state was also rapidly recast and reconfigured with an injection of democratic values within the new NATO environment as its authoritarian form was updated. This was the memorable result of a US sponsored break-up in 1948 of the Anti-Fascist Coalition that had led the *Resistance* against Nazism and Fascism to victory. Their brief work in office had aroused for the first time in recent Italian memory the hope for a total democratic renewal of the state through the establishment of a “repubblica fondata sul lavoro,” a republic grounded in labor ideals –as the Italian Constitution written by the Coalition recites. Due to the new geopolitical realities that set in following the war, however, this new democratic republic never materialized completely. The history of the next thirty years is, therefore, a chronicle of painstaking and, in the end, vain efforts to establish that more humane “republic of the producers” envisioned by that generation of Italians (Communists, Socialists, Liberals, and Catholics) who had epically defeated Fascism.

From all that has been said so far it should be clear that the old Italian authoritarian state recast anew after the war is the very same state we have today, a *patria* hardly to be proud of, a fatherland furthermore—we need to keep this in mind—that has not shied away even from routinely conspiring and sponsoring violence against its own citizens. This is a reference to *strategia della tensione*, the concerted action of the state and its repressive organs against the Italian Communist Party, the entire political Left and the unions. Beginning with the Reggio Emilia massacre of 1960, state-sponsored violence continued all through the 1970s with the 1969 massacre of Piazza Fontana in Milan, the 1974 bombing of the train *Italicus* and the Piazza della Loggia massacre at Brescia, and the 1980 massacre at the train station of Bologna. More state conspiratorial violence against social and political dissent was unleashed also through the infamous *P2* group, *Gladio* underground activities in cooperation with the CIA, attempted right-wing coups, the many Mafia related assassinations of magistrates and activists, and the bloody decade of Red Brigades terrorism that culminated with the kidnapping and murder of liberal statesman Aldo Moro in 1978.

It is surprising how all of this and more still remains unknown to the public opinion outside Italy. The book *Gomorra* by Neapolitan journalist Roberto Saviano (2006) is only the most recent document revealing the tight relationship between state and Mafia. It is precisely to this state that many intellectuals of today have been organically cemented through the creation of an American type of *intelligenza mediatica*, a media-based intelligentsia, a reoriented intellectual class that operates virtually unchallenged through the media constantly manufacturing

consensus for the ruling class through the press, reality shows, opinion makers, and a plethora of insipid tv programs devoid of any educational content, all of which are interrupted every five minutes by an otherwise endless flow of stultifying commercials. Accordingly, the only news allowed to be printed or broadcast is the one appropriately selected and carefully repackaged by the intellectuals corporately organized to operate the media networks. The only subjects up for public discussion are the ones approved by the networks.

This cloning on Italian soil of this slice of the American way of life was finally accomplished more recently through the authoritarian wholesale purchase by Berlusconi of the quasi totality of the national and local media. Having no significant political dissent to contend with, with a *magistratura* or judicial system relentlessly attacked and diminished by Berlusconi's officials, with no fully independent working class organizations, with no conscious revolutionary subject, with a civil society in which even liberal Kantian intellectuals of the Edward Said type, constructively critical of power, have been incapacitated, a growing number of Italian intellectuals have ended up manufacturing daily class consensus around a new *murdering* national identity against which Maalouf has warned us.

It is against this background that Alessandro Dal Lago digs deeper into his subject. Explaining what motivated him to write a larger work than he had previously planned, the sociologist interestingly notices how the appearance of foreigners seeking work or other social opportunities "made what we took for granted about humanity, tolerance, and rationality in our culture magically disappear." What appeared, instead, were overt manifestations of racism such as acts of violence against defenseless foreigners and children, xenophobic intolerance against "criminal" immigrants, irrational proposals to blacklist immigrants in every way; deliberate or implicit falsification of information regarding foreigners. Looking for what may have caused all of this, Dal Lago points his finger to a "decline (*involuzione*) in our political culture," which has degenerated to the point that it can "only conceive of expelling, containing, or confining migrants, and thus refuses to recognize them both as human beings and as economic resource..." (p. 14).

This is the sociologist's factual report, not an episode from the *Twilight Zone* series. In today's Italy "non-persons" are real and "persons" are very dangerous. According to Dal Lago's laconic conclusions, humanity is divided into majorities composed of citizens endowed with rights and formal guarantees, and minorities consisting of illegitimate foreigners (non-citizens, non-nationals) to whom guarantees are denied. Due to

social mechanisms of labeling and implicit and explicit forms of exclusion, Dal Lago concludes, “humanity is divided into *persons* and *non-persons*.”

Once identified as such, I wonder, can *non-persons* ever revert to being *persons*? It can happen, in Sayad’s (2004) view, provided that the host culture faces immigration as a “premiere mirroring opportunity” to take a deep look at itself. Short of this, Dal Lago again concludes, any analysis on immigration is necessarily “amputated” and “false” (p. 19). For him immigration triggers, in fact, a “cognitive problem” as a result of the key role immigrants play in the production of social and scientific discourses. Here we are clearly reminded of the ‘specular function’ which Sayad ascribes sociologically to migration. Precisely because they live among us, “migrants are those who require us to reveal who we are: in the discourses we maintain, in the knowledge we produce, in the political identity we claim” (Dal Lago, 2009, p. 19).

In other words, those Italians who accept the challenge of looking at themselves in the mirror provided by the immigrants would become aware of the collective removal from their national consciousness of the fact that a great many of their co-nationals have until not long ago themselves been *émigrés*, migrants, emigrants, and immigrants; which means that today’s Italians are the children of yesterday’s *e-migrants* and *in-migrants*. Emigration is, in fact, a traditional *topos* in the recent history of Italy. Scores of Italians from the South went to work in Northern Italy as “hordes” of Italians also emigrated to Northern Europe, Australia and the Americas. Only someone like Maalouf who has not repressed his migratory past knows how hard it must have been for those generations of Italian migrants to leave their country and their families, knows that “before becoming an immigrant one is a migrant, an *émigré*” (p. 38).

Of course, emigration itself represents another endemic result of a malfunctioning and parasitic Italian state that forced many of its own citizens onto this harsh and painful road. It is enough—Maalouf reminds us—to go through the police archives, past medical records, or sociological studies compiled in those countries that “welcomed” those Italian migrant workers to understand the impact that poverty and different customs and language must have had on them. The migrant stays suspended between two worlds, no longer belonging entirely to either one and yet constantly alimending both. Deeply etched into the memory of generations of Italians this profound and universal human experience has now apparently been written out of official Italian identity, and has been replaced by a fear and a hatred of the immigrant. All this goes a long way towards explaining the behavior of those Italians who, unable to bear to look at themselves in the mirror, attack “those who embody that part of themselves which they would like to see forgotten.

History contains many examples of such self-hatred” (p. 16). It is exactly this self-hatred, in my view, that reveals a psychology that always runs against the current of what it is to be human. Migration, according to Patrick Manning, a student of migratory movements in human history, “stems from the very core of human behavior” (p. 2).

With this then, it seems, we have come full circle. The necessity for an unbounded identity—evoked in the opening lines of this essay—set in the beginning of time as an evolutionary gene gave rise after all to the *modus vivendi* of our species: migratory movements. These have stood the test of time articulating the ongoing process of becoming human, as—in Manning’s words—a “human habit” and “as a thread running through the full extent of our history as a species” (p. VIII). Romanologist Lorenzo Monasta (2008) makes this same point but with a tinge of humor: “Even a dog knows that our social and cultural progress can only be the result of the steady intercourse and the coming together of people who are different from each other” (p. 10).

Whether or not Italians are able to redefine their collective identity in more inclusive ways, only the future will tell. But now, in Sayad’s (1999) terms, what would Italians learn about themselves by looking in the mirror held for them by the Roma and Sinti who live in Italy?

2. Roma and Sinti Question National Identity:

From what has been said so far, Italians would learn that the nation itself is a problematic locus, as any discussion on immigration shows. For Manning (2005), however, “migration is usually left out of the debates on nationhood. Yet the migration of people was central to creating the need for new identities,” *national* identities (p. 140). So, migration is responsible for both reproducing national identities and producing ever new ones, but it is nonetheless usually left out of the equation. But immigration embodies by definition the non-national. It is in its nature always to confront the nation as its own opposite. It is the “limit of whatever stands for a national state, a limit which brings to light what the state inherently is thus revealing the fundamental truth about it,” says Sayad (p. 396). We have again the mirror effect here. Immigration functions as a mirror for the national state, unveiling its concealed essence, its truth. And, what is the truth about the nation state? Let’s now turn to the Roma and see how their presence mirrors the nation state’s inherent, concealed truth.

If, following Manning, migration is in our human genes, then Roma and Sinti are migrants too, just like the rest of us, with a caveat. Mass migrations have never been holiday trips or wondrous voyages embarked upon for the sake of collective enrichment. Migrations have always been in

many ways forced upon people, triggered by necessity and/or persecution. In the Romaní case, migrations have been the result of persecution. Naturally, not all Romaní people are or have always been migrants. The Roma do not migrate unless they are forced to relocate, although—this must always be kept in mind—a majority of them was forced into slavery in the old Rumanian principalities for a few long centuries. Also, many have managed not to migrate for many generations by hiding their own identity. Of course, forcing people into hiding egregiously emblemizes one of the ways in which the national state enforces national identity.

Because we are speaking of the Romaní people a distinction is in order here: migration and nomadic life are two different phenomena. It is important to repeat this fundamental notion: The Roma and their co-national Sinti, Kale, Manouches and Romanichals are *not* nomads! They have never had a *nomadic* “vocation” or a *nomadic* life style. Roma, Sinti, Kale, Manouches, and Romanichals, instead, make up all together *one* trans-national minority people. Here lies the essence and the truth about the nation state unveiled by the presence of the Romaní communities. It is their very trans-national existence that strikes at the core of national identity.

As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) has demonstrated (p. 395), we live under the shadow of what the French philosopher has called *pensée d'État*, or State-Thought, that is, in Sayad's phrasing: “a form of thought reflecting through its own structures (mental structures) the structures of the State that as a result have become embodied” (*forme de pensée qui reflète, à travers ses propres structures (structures mentales) les structures de l'État ainsi faites corps*). Accordingly, we think of everything, including immigration, says Sayad, through the refracting lens of these nation State-mediated mental categories, State categories born with the nation State which they now constantly mediate on all ideological levels. All of these categories are therefore *ab origine*, he points out, ‘national’, and therefore, immediately ‘nationalistic.’ In essence, anything *national* is *nationalistic*. In this view, then, the State as Nation, *nationalist* in nature, stands as the supreme arbiter (Sayad is borrowing from Émile Benveniste here) endowed with an ultimate power, the “*acte de définir*,” the right to define others, an act, a prerogative, that presides over every opposition, dichotomy, and contradiction including those defining an individual or group as national/non-national, national/foreigner, national/immigrant, national/Rom, Italian/Rom, and at home/non-at home. Thus the very nature of the State is to discriminate.

This is the cause for the ambiguity which enshrouds migrants in their inseparable double-helix personae of emigrant and immigrant. Their presence leads to a contradiction which Sayad calls *provisoire qui dure*,

enduring provisional: How can one continue to be present in a place in which one is by definition – that is, according to the dictates of State-Thought—absent? Conversely, how does one manage to be but partially present and be in a way absent when one is physically present? Finally: is it even possible to think of migration outside of State-Thought categories? (pp. 418, 420-421). That is why the existence itself of majorities and minorities in the nation state is problematic and derivative of nationalisms that have imagined nation states by turning historically diverse populations into the modern national peoples of today. The nation state is, therefore in this view, the ultimate source of prejudice against whoever according to State-Thought does not fit the prescribed national norm. Not surprisingly, *prejudice* is what Roma and Sinti have been and continue to be up against. Prejudice, in fact, frames their relationship with the dominant population in all nation states in which they live as a minority group.

“Migration was forced upon them,” repeatedly insists Santino Spinelli in his important book, *Rom, Genti Libere: la storia, l’arte di un popolo misconosciuto (Rom, Free People: the history, art and culture of a misunderstood people)*. As he recounts the history of his people and the immeasurable sufferings inflicted upon it by all governments; as he chronicles the long European record of brutal expulsions, deportations, five centuries of slavery for 600, 000 Roma in the old Rumanian Principalities, and the genocidal *Porrajmos*, a Romaní word that literally translates “devouring” and that is used for the final solution decreed by the Nazis for one million and a half Roma, the massacres meted out against Romaní communities in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and the horror of “campi nomadi” (*camps for Nomads*) in today’s Italy – the reader learns that each of these events has forced the Romaní people to be continuously on the lookout and on the go. “Driven out” of all European states they might settle for awhile in those border areas that looked more like natural refuges. That is how the Romaní’s continuous attempts to escape inhuman repression have been mistaken for a nomadic lifestyle. Spinelli drives this fundamental point home to us when he emphasizes that this image of the Romaní people is so ingrained in us that “even today public opinion, despite the fact that we live in the era of communications and advanced technology, still holds this erroneous view of the Romaní people” (p. 88).

Santino Spinelli is an Italian Rom, an intellectual, a university professor—the first to teach the Romanès language and Romaní culture in Europe—at the University of Trieste first and now at the University of Chieti, Italy. Also, a musician and a composer of international fame, he founded the “Alexian Group” to promote Romaní music in the world. Thanks to his polymath activities in an astounding variety of fields and

media, Spinelli is *the* reason why more people in Italy can have direct access to a Romaní perspective, one that is not otherwise heard very often. It was exhilarating for me to learn that the Romaní people not only does preserve a vigorous core of oral culture but also that it has for more than a century now had a written culture, that there is already a strong and thriving Romanò literature and theatre, that recently Romanès has been standardized, that a long list of Romaní writers write in their own Romanès language in all countries in which they live, that Romaní language and culture are being now taught in schools, and that many books are being written by Romaní authors to make this wonderful culture known to a wider audience. Through Spinelli's works and music Italians can now learn about Romaní culture and history, gain genuine information on all aspects of the Romaní world, beyond prejudice, clichés, or romanticism, and, one hopes, take seriously the opportunity to *look at themselves in the mirror*. If long ago, he writes, avoiding contacts with an inimical world might have helped the Roma to make themselves 'invisible' and thus retain their *romanipé*, in today's globalized world, not sharing it may signal its disappearance.

The word *Romanipé* dots Spinelli's work. It translates the many registers articulating Romaní culture, life-styles, world-view, spirituality, and language. In brief, it denotes the soul of a global trans-national Romaní universe; in one word, it represents its identity. Thus, when Spinelli reflects on the long story of anti-Rom institutionalized prejudice in Europe—"These were measures enacted against a defenseless people that was trapped and forced everywhere to survive against all odds"—he describes it as a radical rejection of *Romanipé* on the part of the *Gajé*, the non-Roma (p. 95). This incalculable damage came with indescribable suffering, a persistent trauma that never healed. Against all odds, the Romaní people have withstood this protracted inhuman violence, paying an enormous price for their survival socially, morally, and culturally. Still discriminated against, the Roma continue paying this "overbearing tax" with no reparation in sight. Is it true—Spinelli asks rhetorically—that the Romaní communities resist being integrated into the larger society? Clearly, what they resist, he points out, is integration conceived of as forced assimilation "which itself entails a total and humiliating loss of identity."

The word used here by Spinelli and which I have translated with "loss of identity" actually carries a far stronger referential power in Italian. The word, "spersonalizzazione," literally points to a precipitous loss in value, the loss of a whole range of meanings irradiating from the word *persona*, person, the self: loss in *personhood* and in *personality*. It may also indicate a prospective loss of any role a free actor may interpret on the

stage of life and the space s/he can claim there: persona, personage, personal, personalize. This is what a rejection of *Romanipé* at bottom means, I think, and this is what a Rom resists. Because of this history and because of the trans-national nature of the Romaní universe, the Romaní communities have developed a wide gamut of different traditions that enrich their common identity with the result that “each individual today has a prismatic identity.” This is a complex inheritance textured with a magnificent variety of cultural, linguistic and psychological layers. More particularly, this multiple identity is built upon the “sum of so many diverse identities.” (Spinelli, p. 200)

This resonates very powerfully with Maalouf’s (2000) vision of a liberated collective and personal identity that is comfortable with the many layers history has built into it, and also one that is perfectly aware and accepting of its own many cultural, spiritual, national, trans-national, regional, local, universal, sexual, and artistic allegiances. Both Maalouf and Spinelli underscore the social and political relevance of such a liberated identity with no *killing* temptations. Today this kind of multi-layered identities may be key to overcoming the ubiquitous inclusive-exclusive dichotomy and in articulating better the complex challenges inherent in the notion of *vivere quotidiano*, that everyday form of abiding living that takes place in the larger society. That is why, Spinelli says, under these conditions, it is “useless and harmful to force one type of identity upon an individual or raise un-surmountable ethnic fences.” In this modern society, so dynamic and multicultural, every member of a community should have the right to choose one’s own identity (or identities). Wouldn’t this reflect one’s own sensibility better? If we did just that, he seems to say, we would help create a mutually binding relationship between individual and collective responsibilities and this in turn would also help us all “affirm an ever broader idea of identity and citizenship.” (Spinelli, pp. 200-201)

This is how *Romanipé* can be safeguarded and allowed to thrive today in a world in which everybody should be free to engage his/her identity as both an individual and a citizen. This reminds me of the imaginary conversation in which Maalouf engages with an immigrant and a native citizen that leads him to conclude that “the more an immigrant feels that his own culture is openly respected, the more open he will be to the culture of the host country” (p. 41).

This kind of thinking can be, of course, quite subversive in a country like Italy in the process of re-appropriating a long discredited notion of nationalism, a country, Dal Lago (2004, 2009) reminds us, in which “legal and political universalism has been progressively delegitimized,” and a country that has invented “new regional and sub-

regional nationalisms, over-emphasizing the local models of economic growth.” It seems that here “political society can only exist as a local community, bound in some exclusive way to a territory, and above all, in competition or conflict with other territorial communities” (pp. 14, 16). Italy is also a country, however, defined by the shameful and horrendous presence of *campi nomadi*, those notorious nomadic camps—once again, Romaní people are *not* nomads.

These camps are the genocidal places in which Romaní communities are forced to live in inhuman conditions. As Monasta reminds us, these camps are typically located near the cities but far from civilization. They are found in landfills, near cemeteries, open sewers, high voltage pylons, and kennels. These are places with no hot water, with a few toilets and no sewers, with high populations of rats running through kitchens and bedrooms, biting adults and children, with electricity running next to water pipes, with the ground constantly flooded with the water from the lavatories that in the open mixes with the sewer, with barracks, really makeshift huts, made of wooden planks nailed together with an impermeable tarp over the roofs themselves pressed down with spare tires. Finally, these are places where the spectacle of frequent fires is ever present, fires that spread in a second, devouring the whole camp as firemen arrive too late, or do not come at all. On one occasion, the firemen did not bother even going because they thought the call to the fire department they had received was a joke. This episode speaks volumes about the level of widespread anti-Romaní prejudice. Here, in these camps, because of the lack of hygiene and the frequent lethal fires, whether these are due to arson or not, not surprisingly, the death rate for children is the highest in the country.

These *campi* are also places in which people, however, try their best to live with dignity by keeping their huts and “streets” clean, socializing and even having fun at the local “coffee shop” (also a makeshift hut) just as war-time prisoners managed to find some solace in Nazi concentration camps. No Italian would ever want to live in one of these *terre di nessuno*, no man’s lands, and raise their children there. Anyone can see this shocking situation by visiting, for example, the “campo nomadi” of Poderaccio near Florence, a city celebrated for her art and museums reminiscent of the Renaissance, or by leafing through *Vite costrette* (2003), a book with numbing photographs of the camp, co-authored by Italian activist and writer Lorenzo Monasta and Romaní consultant Burhan Hasani.

“Vite costrette” in the title expresses the reality of human beings forced to live restricted, amputated lives. Translated, the title reads “forced into constricted lives.” The photographs in the book never fail to shock.

Hasani, who was born in Yugoslavia, lived for more than ten years, his entire adolescence, in this camp. Leafing through this book I was reminded of the memorial books published after WWII by Italians who had been interned in Nazi concentration camps. One of these belonged to my father Marco. Just as *Vite costrette* does, it illustrated with photos, drawings, and brief narratives, snippets of prisoners' life in the notorious POW camp known as Sand Bostel located in North-Western Germany. In his preface to *Vite costrette*, Leonardo Piasere, an Italian Romanologist, remarks that "of course, this is not a classic concentration camp ... these are layers particularly built to test human endurance and suffering ..." (pp. 7-8). These are the places where *Romanipé* lives on in a superhuman effort to resist the barbarity forced upon the Roma. These are the places of Romaní resistance and the places of non-negotiable bartering with or caving-in to the demands of the brutal institutional force regularly unleashed by an imagined Italian fatherland.

The comparison between Nazi concentration camps and *campi nomadi* is also unsettling given the massive participation of Roma and Sinti partisans in the struggle against the Nazis and the Fascists during WWII. This is another page completely forgotten in today's Italy. Echoing the feelings of the Romaní communities, mourning the loss of values and ideals in our society, the persistent and widespread discrimination against the Roma, their forced existence in *campi nomadi* and the concomitant long list of children killed by the collateral effects of racism, marginalization, and misinformation, Santino Spinelli poignantly comments that the "ideals in the name of which they fought or sacrificed their lives have been betrayed." Did those Romaní partisans sacrifice themselves for this kind of society? The Italian State has never paid any reparations to any Romaní community for the "crimes committed against them by the Fascist dictatorship" (Spinelli, p. 118). This, unfortunately, conforms to a long-standing practice that endures to this very day. As Spinelli reiterates, no Romaní community has ever received any reparation or has ever been officially included in the long lists of victims of Nazi atrocities either. No Rom was even invited to be heard at the Nuremberg Trials against Nazi criminals in 1945. Only recently a monument has finally been erected near the German Parliament in Berlin with a poem titled "Auschwitz" written by Santino Spinelli. Finally, when numbers of Yugoslav Romaní people were forced to flee from their land and tried to find asylum in Italy, they were refused refugee status by the Italian authorities and were placed, instead, in "campi nomadi." These were people who had had a house and a job in their country; they had never been *nomads*!

In his more recent book, *I pregiudizi contro gli zingari spiegati al mio cane*, Lorenzo Monasta (2008) revisits this topic, laying bare the philosophy underlying the existence of these *campi nomadi*. He takes issue with the government policy of *delocalizzazione* (delocalization) of the Romaní communities, a policy that allows for the forced relocation of these communities. This policy, he argues, defies elementary logic and is very dangerous because it naturally encourages a citizen to think of Romaní delocalization as localization happening in ‘his/her home’. That’s why these camps always turn into non-places. These are spaces “undefined by geography, history, or humanity.” Non-places, according to Marc Augé, are places *devoid of referential signs*. Here people become disoriented and isolated. That’s how the non-place exerts full control over them. At this point, Monasta quickly gets to the uncomfortable point nobody wants to entertain: “those who do not want ‘gypsies’ in their home should clearly state that there is only one other solution and that would be their extermination” (pp. 32-33). How hypocritical it is of us, he concludes, to rely on the fact that somehow someone somewhere will make this right by hosting *them* in his/her home.

The combination captured here of racist, fascist attitudes in the populace, the inconclusive criminal circularity of government policy, and the reference to French anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) is truly mind boggling. Thus, Italy, a signpost of Western civilization, turns out to be a country of *non-persons* and *non-places*. If place, the philosopher asserts, is in fact the locus for all that is relational, historical and attributive of identity, a space that cannot be so defined is bound to be a non-place. This would entail that what he calls super modernity produces real non-places, “spaces which are not themselves anthropological places,” spaces which, un-Baudelairean modern, do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are “listed, classified, promoted to the status of ‘places of memory,’ and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position” (pp. 77-78).

Italy, a country that has had a late start on modernity, leaving behind her Southern half in pre-modernity, now incredibly, it seems, overflows with an excess of super modernity! It is this condition that is responsible for dotting the place with non-places, with *campi nomadi*. Augé is concerned with a “world thus surrendered to solitary individuality,” a human condition epitomized by a dehumanizing society with clinics and hospitals as places of birth and dying, and credit card transactions that do not require the use of words. This super modern society in which everything becomes temporary and ephemeral produces *non-places*. Non-places, however, according to Augé, do not devour and annihilate places. Those coexist, instead, with places standing as opposite polarities to each other: “the first is never completely erased, the second

never totally completed; they are like the palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten” (p. 79).

3. Conclusions:

In this porous and productive intersection located in an in-between area, place/non-place, presence/non-presence, identity/non-identity, fullness/emptiness, reference/non-reference, meaning/non-meaning, humanity/inhumanity, nation/non-nation, person/non-person, national/immigrant, Italian/Rom and word/silence are negotiated by the defenders of a mythic Italian fatherland and those who prefer to read about it in history books. Here again Spinelli (2012) reveals the truth about Italian State-Thought and its embodied mental, social, and political structures of national identity: Our *campi nomadi* are centers of racial segregation or apartheid, they are part of our nazi-fascist legacy. The word ‘campo,’ he points out, naturally brings to mind concentration camps and is therefore far from capturing the idea conjured up by a Romaní ‘encampment.’ If the word ‘nomad’ may describe a particular life style it never designates ethnicity. In our case it actually conceals the real name of the ethnic group: “a people that is not ‘named’ does not ‘exist’ and if it does not ‘exist’ has no rights.” Therefore, by continuing to identify the Romaní communities as ‘gypsies’ or ‘nomads,’ Spinelli continues, we perpetuate racial hatred quite consciously, and that is why “*campi nomadi* are a crime against humanity.” The death list of Romaní children, he concludes, forced to live in *campi nomadi* or marginalized by the civilized world, is extremely long: “it is a war report in peace time” (pp. 126-127).

How many Italians are ready to hear this? How many Italians do actually understand the meaning of these words? How many Italians know that these *campi nomadi* are actually in their backyards? How many of them ever make a point of visiting them? How many do hear about and see the Roma but briefly through rapid images in the background in the news packaged with the words ‘nomads’ and ‘crime’? How many actually allow themselves to see through all this and socialize with Romaní people?

Spinelli continues by saying that the existence of thriving Romaní communities could supply the yardstick for measuring the degree of civilization attained by the society in which they live. Any notion of freedom, civilization, and democracy, he writes, will remain an empty word as long as the century-old sufferings of the Romaní communities are not made public, as long as these communities are not paid back socially, morally and culturally.

It is shocking to hear and realize as an Italian that, while many Europeans have been enjoying peace since 1945, many Romaní people have not and that actually for a long time Romaní children have been

raised, have grown up, and have become adult and old in communities that have been segregated, even enslaved, for centuries. This leads us to ask Sayad's ultimate question: Is it even possible (or allowed, for that matter) to think of Romaní segregation and repression outside the parameters of State Thought categories? It is Spinelli again who gives us a good start on this: To appreciate Romaní culture, we need to get rid of our ethnocentric mindset; we need not associate this culture with social degradation, social inequality, or unlawfulness; we need not make an entire people responsible for acts committed by single individuals by pointing out their ethnic origins. Often people are not discriminated against because, he remarks, they behave badly "but they behave badly precisely because they are discriminated against" (pp. 14-15).

Walking through the non-places of Italy as the Roma, non-persons par excellence, go about their business, and looking around in that social intersection in which fascistic identities contend for supremacy while others, more liberated ones, yearn to break through too narrow an encirclement that threatens to choke them, I am amazed, humbled, and brought to tears by the ultimate words of hope written by Spinelli in his book when he points to the artistic *ferment* underway among the Romaní communities, to the many Romaní intellectuals who work on the Romanes language and on their art to empower their group identity and win more respect in places where they live steadily. He speaks with enthusiasm of the "iron determination" with which these intellectuals try to break their 'silence' and overcome the 'empty space' which their ancestors often created between themselves and the dominant society in order to protect themselves and thus survive. These are stories of intelligence everywhere at work, of boundless courage, relentless effort, and profound unabated hope in our shared humanity. These are people who "want to be seen as they really are and be able to defend publicly their right to their own culture." Theirs, says Spinelli, is an act of courage and an "expression of trust in their own ability to persuade their own interlocutors." Standing upon the shoulders of interminable generations of Romaní people whose lives have been nurtured steadfastly by an ancient culture, an unthinkable long resistance against oppression and genocide, an incredible sense of beauty, and a profound love for what is human in all of us, Spinelli finally reaches out to us with a hard question which also contains an *augurio di buon viaggio*, or *latcho drom* in Romanes, an encouraging word of good luck for a safe journey: "This is a walk on a new road, replete, I am sure, with twists and turns. Is society ready to reach out with an open hand?" (pp. 244-245)

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