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To cite this article: Teresa Fiore & Ernest Ialongo (2018) Introduction: Italy and the Euro–Mediterranean ‘migrant crisis’: national reception, lived experiences, E.U. pressures, Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 23:4, 481–489, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2018.1500787](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2018.1500787)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2018.1500787>



Published online: 25 Sep 2018.



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Introduction: Italy and the Euro–Mediterranean ‘migrant crisis’: national reception, lived experiences, E.U. pressures

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ABSTRACT

The introduction discusses the origins of this themed section of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, based on a 2017 interdisciplinary conference about migration and the migrant experience in Italy. The co-editors recognized early on that the U.S. media was paying inadequate attention to migrant landings in Italy during the so-called refugee crisis around 2015–16, and engaged scholars active in Italy, the U.K. and the U.S. to provide further nuance to this particular migratory flow, and in particular to question how the term ‘crisis’ was used in describing it. In response to a public debate increasingly prone to alarmism, the articles produced after the conference investigate the contradictions of the Italian reception system of migrants and refugees; the often glossed-over labour, race, and gender aspects of the flows; and the critical conditions of the Mediterranean crossing as represented in film and theatre. The contributions specifically bring forward the migrants’ voices to challenge the exclusionary practices adopted in Italy and Europe in favour of structured legal channels, and to reveal the growing crisis of E.U. democratic principles.

KEYWORDS Italy; Mediterranean; migrants; migration; European Union

At the time of the publication of this issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Europe is experiencing a sea-change in its politics, society, and culture. The once triumphant ethos of a united Europe with open internal borders, and a commitment to liberal, social democratic politics that has shaped Europe since the Second World War is everywhere in retreat. There is a growing Euro-scepticism sweeping the continent. Part of this stems from feelings that the European Union does not work for everyone, that less affluent countries are beholden to richer ones, and/or that the latter must inevitably support the former. However, increasingly, the European project is under pressure because of the perception (propagated through the media and by varied populist politicians) of an overwhelming ‘wave’ of migrants coming into the continent from North Africa and the Middle East that is flowing across Europe’s open internal borders. This belief has triggered profound resistance in virtually every country.

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Britain voted to leave the European Union in 2016, with Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson declaring that in the subsequent Brexit negotiations the U.K. must 'take back control of our laws, of our borders and of our cash.'¹ In Germany, the once seemingly rock-solid government of Angela Merkel struggled to form a government after federal elections in September 2017, partly owing to what was perceived as her overly generous reception of migrants into the country, and the far-right-wing party Alternative for Germany gained a foothold in the national Bundestag and became the largest opposition party in parliament.² The authoritarian Viktor Orbán easily won re-election in Hungary in April 2018 on a platform that was anti-migration, anti-European Union, and anti-Semitic.³ And, in Italy, after the March 2018 national elections, the governing Centre-left coalition was soundly defeated by the two populist, Euro-sceptic, and anti-migrant parties: Matteo Salvini's The League and Luigi Di Maio's Five Star Movement (M5S). Salvini is on record as calling for a 'mass cleansing, street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood' of migrants,⁴ and De Maio's party's manifesto – to be sure, less extreme than The League – called for the immediate repatriation of all new irregular migrants arriving in Italy (as of February 2018), and sought a new commission that would determine within one month whether all current migrants were entitled to stay in Italy.⁵

In this context, the numbers associated with the so-called migrant crisis are worth noting. Simply limiting ourselves to sea-borne migrants arriving in southern Europe between 2014 and 2017, the total number of migrants is 1,766,186, with a peak of just over a million in 2015 alone, including 15,544 migrants who died or went missing while attempting the journey.⁶ In Italy, over that period, 624,747 migrants arrived, and 13,457 were lost along the way to its shores.⁷ Even though many migrants used Italy as a landing point with the hope of moving further into Europe, and even though these arrivals only constituted approximately 1% of Italy's population of 59 million, the threat of a migrant wave was and is frequently sounded.⁸ In this particular respect, the representation of migrants in Italy is not unique and fits an international pattern. Terence Wright has shown that media often reports on refugees and forced migrants as a danger, a disease invading the home community, in fact, they are seen as a 'tide', a 'flood' (Wright 2014, 460, 464).

In early 2016, as news of the ever-growing numbers of migrants to Europe increased, the editors of the present collection of articles, Ernest Ialongo and Teresa Fiore, recognized that the U.S. press infrequently mentioned the migrants landing in Italy, or the losses in the attempt, much less the conditions for those that arrived, despite the central geopolitical role played by the country in this specific context. Much attention, instead, was focused on the route that migrants – predominantly from Asia – used from Turkey through Greece to the rest of Europe. Between 2014 and 2015 the number of migrants arriving in Greece jumped from roughly 40,000 to *ca.*800,000. In March 2016, the EU–Turkey agreement effectively cut this route off, reducing the number of migrants

to ca.170,000 in 2016, and then to just under 30,000 in 2017. But, in that time period, migrants – predominantly from Africa – kept landing in Italy in far more consistent numbers, and actually peaked in 2016 as the number of migrants arriving in Greece plummeted.⁹

As such, Ialongo (Chair of the Columbia University Seminar in Modern Italian Studies)¹⁰ and Fiore (Inserra Chair in Italian and Italian American Studies at Montclair State University)¹¹ joined forces to organize a two-day event that would address the migration and migrant experience in Italy. The event took place on 26–27 April 2017.¹² On the first day, a panel composed of Nando Sigona, Enrica Rigo, Giuseppe Campesi, and Teresa Fiore – scholars active in Italy, the U.K. and the U.S. – discussed a variety of issues. What bound the presentations was a desire to question the term ‘crisis’. What was the crisis? Who was suffering it? What of the migrants themselves? What was their crisis? Ultimately, in challenging the term crisis as something other than a wave of undifferentiated people invading Italy, it was hoped to alter a conversation that had led to a situation in which Europe, and Italy, seemed locked into a permanent emergency, where migrants are increasingly held in exclusionary facilities, in some cases for months, if not longer, awaiting asylum processing.

In her presentation, Fiore contextualized the so-called migrant crisis, and noted that Italy has historically been a nation of emigrants, with one of the largest diasporas on record in the modern era, and an exodus of young people which has been increasing annually. Additionally, statistics dating back to 2014 indicate that the country has a similar number of people registered in the Records of Italians Living Abroad (A.I.R.E.) as it has of immigrants regularly residing in the country. As such, the information demonstrated the unfounded nature of the fear of invasion of the country (Fiore 2017, 3). It also pointed to the convergence of amnesia and the manufacturing of historical and contemporary narratives. Despite the fact that they have embarked on perilous journeys as migrants and have been – and are – undocumented immigrants themselves in some cases, Italians are somehow perceived as more entitled to relocate for work than the immigrants who move to Italy from all continents and contribute to the socio-economic and cultural fabric of the country. Through a combined reading of outbound and inbound flows, Fiore proposed Italy as a unique laboratory for migrations within a trans-national and trans-historical mapping operation aimed at dissipating the preoccupation produced by crisis- and emergency-imbued rhetorics. Sigona, focusing on Italian migration policies, demonstrated that they were based on a fundamental fallacy, that one’s point of origin simply determined if you were escaping persecution and thus were eligible for asylum status: the ‘deserving’ migrants from Syria, for instance (a very small proportion of the migrants arriving in Italy), and not those that were supposedly only arriving for economic opportunity, or the ‘undeserving’ migrants coming in via Libya. Consequently, the search-and-rescue operation carried out by the Italians, Operation Mare Nostrum from 2013 to 2014, was replaced with Operation

Triton, which was much more focused on border security, and was part of a broader European strategy through the Frontex agency of controlling the influx of people into Europe. Campesi continued this theme and showed that the crisis was not just the result of the political and economic factors driving people out of their countries of origin, but the unprepared and inefficient reception system in Italy that was easily overwhelmed by the inflow of people, and the unwillingness of other E.U. member states to share the costs of receiving the migrants during the crisis year of 2015. The result was the locking down of borders in Europe, and an emphasis on border security at the periphery that now houses people indefinitely in detention centres in Italy as well as Libya. In looking at the lived experiences of the migrants in these detention centres and those awaiting their asylum processing, Riga showed that the term crisis obscured a continuity in Italian migration and revealed a clear shift in 'migration management' and the management of public order. She noted that after 2015 the same people that were once termed seasonal workers, employed in low-skilled and agricultural labour, were now designated as irregular migrants and were being assessed as eligible or ineligible for refugee status. And, in their now more tenuous situation, as a labour force they were much easier to control. Moreover, in focusing specifically on the journeys of Nigerian women, and their high rates of deportation and refusal of asylum status, Riga speculated that this may be due to the fact that, at least for the women she interviewed, they did not exhibit the requisite deference in their interaction with Italian border authorities, and as such were sent back to Lagos on a 'one-way' trip.¹³

The presentations highlighted how complex the Italian case was, given the tension between those seeking to enforce strict immigration requirements, and those who insisted on the state's humanitarian responsibilities. Additionally, they demonstrated the friction between Italy's desire to respond to national priorities in governing its borders and post-national dynamics that are forcing Italy (along with some other Mediterranean states) into the role of a policing state for the more affluent nations in the heart of Europe. The vocal presence of the Pope – who stated in uncompromising terms: 'Migrants are not a danger – they are in danger' – and of a vast Catholic world sensitive to the needs of the migrants, further contributed to make the Italian debate diverse and dynamic.¹⁴

At their core, the speakers' presentations stressed the importance, for Italy as well as Europe, to move beyond the treatment of the situation as an emergency (Italy had been receiving immigrants in large numbers since the 1990s), and to adopt more structured solutions attentive to the interests of the multiple players involved.

On the second day, the film screening of *Come il peso dell'acqua* (*Like the Weight of Water*), directed by Andrea Segre, was the occasion to further debate issues of migration in the Mediterranean and its representation in the media and in the arts. The film, featuring award-winning actors

Giuseppe Battiston and Marco Paolini, in line with the tradition of the 'theatre of narration,' relies on storytelling, maps, the display of objects, and interviews with three immigrant women from Africa and the Middle East (Gladys Yeboah Adomako, Semhar Hagos, and Nasreen Tahaa), as well as original footage about rescues out at sea. *Come il peso dell'acqua* allows Segre to craft an innovative filmic language that renders in clear and incisive ways the complex issues at play in leaving one's country, travelling by sea, and trying to find a new home as a woman. The ensuing debate revolved around the provocative message of the film that at a time of the tightening of borders suggests instead the need to make them porous and to systematically create opportunities for legal channels – if not even free mobility – in order to stop the death of migrants in the Mediterranean. The two days combined underlined the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the issues of migration in the Mediterranean, where the sociological, legal and political analyses are put in dialogue with the humanities, precisely in order to place the human being at the centre of a public discourse, otherwise often preoccupied with aseptic numbers, fossilized images, and fear-and-exclusion-infused political statements – that the League-M5S government in power in Italy since May 2018 has only exacerbated.

Subsequent to the conference and given the urgency of an intervention into a public debate increasingly prone to scapegoating migrants to explain Italy's political, social, and economic instability, Ialongo and Fiore determined it was opportune to edit and publish the presentations, and that the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* would be an ideal medium to disseminate the results of the event to a broad, English-speaking audience. The majority of the presenters agreed to the venture, and consequently they fully revised, updated, and sourced their original presentations for inclusion in the journal as the articles published herein.

What binds these articles together is again the desire to problematize the term crisis. The crisis that the media and populist politicians have spoken of – the threat of the migrant wave – is profoundly self-serving and elides deeper problems: the crisis of the Italian state that cannot effectively process the influx of asylum seekers and frequently relies on simple detention; the crisis of Italian democracy wherein the fear of migrants brought two populist parties to power who have fundamentally different views on the goals of the national government;¹⁵ the crisis of the E.U. that has seen its commitment to the free movement of peoples within its borders questioned by the rise of populist parties across the continent; and, finally, and most importantly, the crisis of the very lives of the migrants who are held in often deplorable detention centres for months, if not years, as they await their application for asylum to be processed. It is their condition, and their voices, which must be brought to the forefront. As Crawley et al. (2018) have argued, 'the obsession with "keeping people out" meant that the E.U. (and

other countries) directed political and economic resources towards increased border controls at the expense of providing sufficient financial and other forms of support to those living in the countries hosting the majority of the world's refugees' (143).

Echoing Sigona's argument in his panel presentation about the 'normalisation of the emergency', Giuseppe Campesi highlights in his article how extraordinary interventions become structural, and problematic. In 'Between Containment, Confinement and Dispersal: The Evolution of the Italian Reception System Before and After the 'Refugee Crisis', Campesi analyses the transformation of the Italian reception system and demonstrates that it involves more than just an expansion of the capacity to receive migrants. He argues that the 'refugee crisis' and the sense of emergency it created stimulated the emergence of distinct segments within this greatly expanded Italian reception system that function according to radically different philosophies and objectives. This, in addition to intensifying the overall lack of consistency of the system, has had a profound impact on the rights of asylum seekers, greatly increasing the risk of their spatial and social segregation within Italian society.

As the word crisis becomes an objectified theme in itself, according to Enrica Rigo, the emergency culture buttresses protection measures aimed at separating regular and irregular migrants without a self-critical reflection on the issue of migrant labour that has disappeared from the discussion, given the hyper-emphasis on refugees.¹⁶ In her article, 'Migration, Knowledge Production and the Humanitarian Agenda in Times of Crisis', Rigo similarly critiques Italy's reception and treatment of the migrants, but gives voice to the migrants themselves to bring to light the effect of these policies. She further uses the Italian case to critically discuss the use of crisis as a tool of knowledge and expertise production. In recent years, she argues, the theme of crisis has played a key role in shifting migration management towards a humanitarian agenda based on the premise that migration to Europe today is comprised of forced mass movement. The article considers the extent to which migrants' subjectivities call into question the knowledge that has been produced during the current era. It also reflects on the ways in which gender and race provide fundamental insights for a better understanding of the evolution of migration management within the context of crisis.

The culture of permanent crisis and emergency, with the feeling of xenophobia that it fosters, often justifies an intensification of politics and policies of control that produce numbing hyper-visibility. Fiore's focus on cultural texts, that are strong reminders of the humanistic contribution to the discussion on migration, speaks to the need to address the invisibility of human stories in the current representation. In her article, 'From Crisis to Creative Critique: The Early 21st Century Mediterranean Crossing on Stage and Screen in Works by Teatro delle Albe and Andrea Segre', Fiore analyses

the 2010 play *Rumore di Acque (Noise in the Waters)*, by the Teatro delle Albe, and Andrea Segre's 2014 docufilm *Come il peso dell'acqua (Like the Weight of Water)*, as creative responses to the Mediterranean migrant crisis. In challenging the frozen representation and rhetoric of public reporting and discourse, characterized by recurring images of boats accompanied by the number of arriving or dead migrants, Fiore argues that both works propose a critical reading of the migration phenomenon through the focus on individual stories. As the play and the docufilm themselves cross a sea of genres and expressive tools, they also place the migrant at the centre of an interrogation of national paradigms and Western societies. They ultimately call into question the exclusionary politics and policies of the contemporary world and identify in the empathy towards the human quest for freedom and recognition a lively engine of the early 21st-century global community, so profoundly characterized by movement and displacement.

At the time of writing of this introduction (June 2018), international media was reporting on the ship *Aquarius*, operated by the migrant rescue groups SOS Méditerranée and Médecins Sans Frontières, with its over 600 migrants on board. Held out at sea for days waiting for the approval of an E. U. country to dock at a harbour, after the new Interior Minister Salvini refused its entry to Italy, the episode epitomized the profound tensions in the Mediterranean and Europe.¹⁷ The public debate on this case is a reminder of the increasing impasse related to the question of migration, which revolves around the stark clash between pity for the desperate and rejection of the unwanted, leaving out considerations of regular, organized, sustained, and safe channels for mobility across the Mediterranean in exchange for a reliance on pure border security. It is the editors' hope that this collection of articles helps create a more informed and productive discussion over the migrants' condition in Italy, Europe, and the Mediterranean, its representation in the media and the arts, and the states' responses, within an interdisciplinary and transnational framework very much in line with this journal's approach. The editors, and the authors of the articles in this section, are conscious that the politics of migration in Italy, and Europe, is in a constant state of evolution. However, in an era that is witnessing the emergence of populist, nationalist, anti-migrant sentiments, and governing regimes, on both sides of the Atlantic (at the time of the writing of this introduction, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump was defending its policy of separating children from their migrant parents at the U.S. border as a means to deter future migrants),¹⁸ we feel it is important to put Italy front and centre in this critical discussion over global migration. Italy is still a focal site for the 'migrant crisis', and as it develops, lessons may be learned, for good or ill, on how to address the crisis in a way that does not ignore its human components.

Notes

1. "Whole UK needs to take back control of borders and cash from EU, Johnson says," *Reuters*, 7 December 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/britain-eu-johnson/whole-uk-needs-to-take-back-control-of-borders-and-cash-from-eu-johnson-says-idUSL9N1M102B>.
2. Jörg Michael Dostal, "The German Federal Election of 2017: How the Wedge Issue of Refugees and Migration Took the Shine off Chancellor Merkel and Transformed the Party System," *The Political Quarterly* 88, # 4 (October–December 2017), 589–602.
3. Jennifer Rankin, "Viktor Orbán: re-election of Hungary's anti-immigrant leader is major challenge for EU," *The Guardian*, 8 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/09/viktor-orban-re-election-hungarys-anti-immigrant-leader-major-challenge-for-eu>.
4. "Migranti, Salvini: 'Serve pulizia di massa via per via, quartiere per quartiere,'" *Il fatto quotidiano*, 18 February 2017, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/02/18/migranti-salvini-serve-pulizia-di-massa-via-per-via-quartiere-per-quartiere/3399250/>.
5. "Election 2018: M5S manifesto," *Ansa.it*, February 15, 2018, http://www.ansa.it/english/news/2018/02/15/election-2018-m5s-manifesto_969d5099-d9fe-4da8-a36f-0b623fc521c6.html.
6. "Operations Portal, Refugee Situations: Mediterranean Situation," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean> (accessed 4 June 2018).
7. "Operations Portal, Refugee Situations: Mediterranean Situation, Italy," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205> (accessed 4 June 2018).
8. Yasha Maccanico, "Italy. A charter for tolerant journalism: Media take centre stage in the Mediterranean drama," *Moving Stories: International Review of How Media Cover Migration*, edited by Aiden White (2015), <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/publications/moving-stories/italy> (accessed 4 June 2018); Filippo Trevisan, "In Italy, fake news helps populists and far-right triumph," *Ethical Journalism Network*, 5 March 2018, <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/italy-fake-news>. Most recently, Crawley et al make this case for Greece and Italy specifically in the peak 'crisis' year of 2015.
9. "Operations Portal, Refugee Situations: Mediterranean Situation, Greece," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179> (accessed 4 June 2018).
10. The Columbia University Seminar in Modern Italian Studies hosts monthly talks by scholars of modern Italy. Additionally, the seminar organizes panel discussions aimed at the general public to focus on an issue of contemporary relevance, often in connection with exhibits or screenings. Migration from/to Italy has increasingly become a regular topic of the yearly calendar. See official website: <http://universityseminars.columbia.edu/seminars/studies-in-modern-italy/>
11. The Inserra Chair in Italian and Italian American Studies is affiliated with the Italian Program and housed in the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Montclair State University. This endowed position is devoted to the promotion of Italian culture with particular emphasis to its meaning and relevance in the international scene, and especially in the U.S. and in New Jersey, as a result of people's migrations and exchanges of ideas, practices,

and goods over the centuries. Past calendars have included book presentations and plays devoted to the issue of immigration to Italy. See official website: <http://www.montclair.edu/inserra-chair>

12. Full details on the conference, which also received support from The Forum on Migration at Barnard College and Columbia University's Seminar Office, can be found at: <https://www.montclair.edu/inserra-chair/events/2016-17-events/mediterranean-migrant-crisis-italy-and-the-euro-mediterranean-migrant-crisis/> (accessed 4 June 2018).
13. Full recordings of each presentation can be found at: <https://montclair.njvid.net/show.php?pid=njcore:103517> (accessed 15 June 2018).
14. Catherine Herdy, "Migrants are not a danger, but are in danger – Pope," *Euronews*, May 28, 2016, <http://www.euronews.com/2016/05/28/migrants-are-not-a-danger-but-are-in-danger-pope>.
15. The northern-based League seeks to cut government spending, whereas the southern-based 5 Star Movement seeks a basic, state-funded minimum income for low-income Italians.
16. On the topic, see "Introduction: Refugees and the Crisis of Europe" by Mayanthi Fernando and Cristiana Giordano for the June 2018 issue of the journal *Cultural Anthropology*. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/900-introduction-refugees-and-the-crisis-of-europe> (accessed 17 June 2018).
17. After a week, Spain welcomed the ship.
18. Peter Baker, "Leading Republicans Join Democrats in Pushing Trump to Halt Family Separations," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2JUHA4p> (accessed 18 June 2018).

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- Wright, Terrence. 2014. "The Media and Representations of Refugees and other Forced Migrants." In *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona. New York: Oxford University Press.