

**THE LANGUAGE OF ACCEPTANCE: CREATING SPACE FOR MIGRANTS IN  
ITALIAN LITERATURE, MEDIA, AND SCHOOLS**

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## Introduction

Given its considerable border on the Mediterranean Sea, Italy has become one of the most accessible destinations for contemporary migration flows. Its accessibility has brought more migrants to Italy in recent decades than ever before, rapidly transforming the demographic nature of the country (Bond 2). New migration patterns are bringing fewer migrants from Western Europe, and many more migrants from Northern Africa and Eastern Europe. These movements are quickly introducing diverse ethnic minorities into all sectors of Italian society, where they have begun to attempt integration. In many areas, the integration of migrants has been slow. In this thesis, I will explore the fields of Literature, Media, and Education in Italy and demonstrate how they have been transformed by the arrival of new migrants and how Italians have reacted to the changes in norms. I will demonstrate these trends with paid attention to the role of language among host society members and its culpability in so far discouraging migrant integration.

My ideas surrounding the power of language in influencing social order originated from a course I took at UNC-Chapel Hill entitled, “The Anthropology of Development.”<sup>1</sup> I took this course my sophomore year and its subject matter framed my thought processes concerning global issues for the remainder of my studies at UNC. The course, in its analysis of “development” as a phenomenon, brought up the idea that to label a country as “developed” or “underdeveloped,” consequentially constricts those places to the stereotypes that are associated with each term.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a country that is labeled “underdeveloped” becomes a country without hopes of joining the world market, or without hopes of achieving optimal efficiency in

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<sup>1</sup> This course was offered in the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of Anthropology by Professor Arturo Escobar in the Spring of 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Philip McMichael’s *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective. Fifth Edition.*

the nation's economy. We are conditioned to think that a country outside of greater world networks, a country that functions differently than those that incur the most profit, is unsuccessful. And in this manner we begin to equate "underdeveloped" with deficiency. But what if we begin to think of a country that functions differently as successful in its own manner of operating? What if we were to accept that even separate from the norms of capitalism, a country can be prosperous and provide for its inhabitants in a healthy way? When we take away the labels, we can begin to see the positives in how each nation chooses to function, and in turn, we can begin to breakdown the hierarchy that is created by placing countries into categories such as "developed" and "underdeveloped."

This thought process and the idea of categorization can be applied to the situation of migrants in Italy today. The language surrounding recent arrivals has so far served to restrict those with foreign origins to stereotypes that keep them from being accepted in Italian society. The stereotypes depict migrants as criminals, beggars, or simply, people who cannot be trusted. And by not considering the members of the foreign demographic that have nothing to do with these stereotypes, the negative ideas surrounding migrants persist. Similar to their impact on "developed" and "underdeveloped" nations, these labels reinforce a social hierarchy between migrants and natives; one that leaves migrants on a lower level.

My choice of Italy as a focus for analysis on migrant-native relations came in part from my observations while studying there in the Spring of 2016. In the way that migrants are so freely referred to by their ethnicity, and their ethnicity alone. In the way that my interacting with people of African descent was occasionally questioned by native Italians. In the way that my professors at the Italian university struggled to refer to ethnic minorities with nondiscriminatory

terminology. It was evident that the lower social positioning of migrants was being perpetuated by the everyday language used in this society.

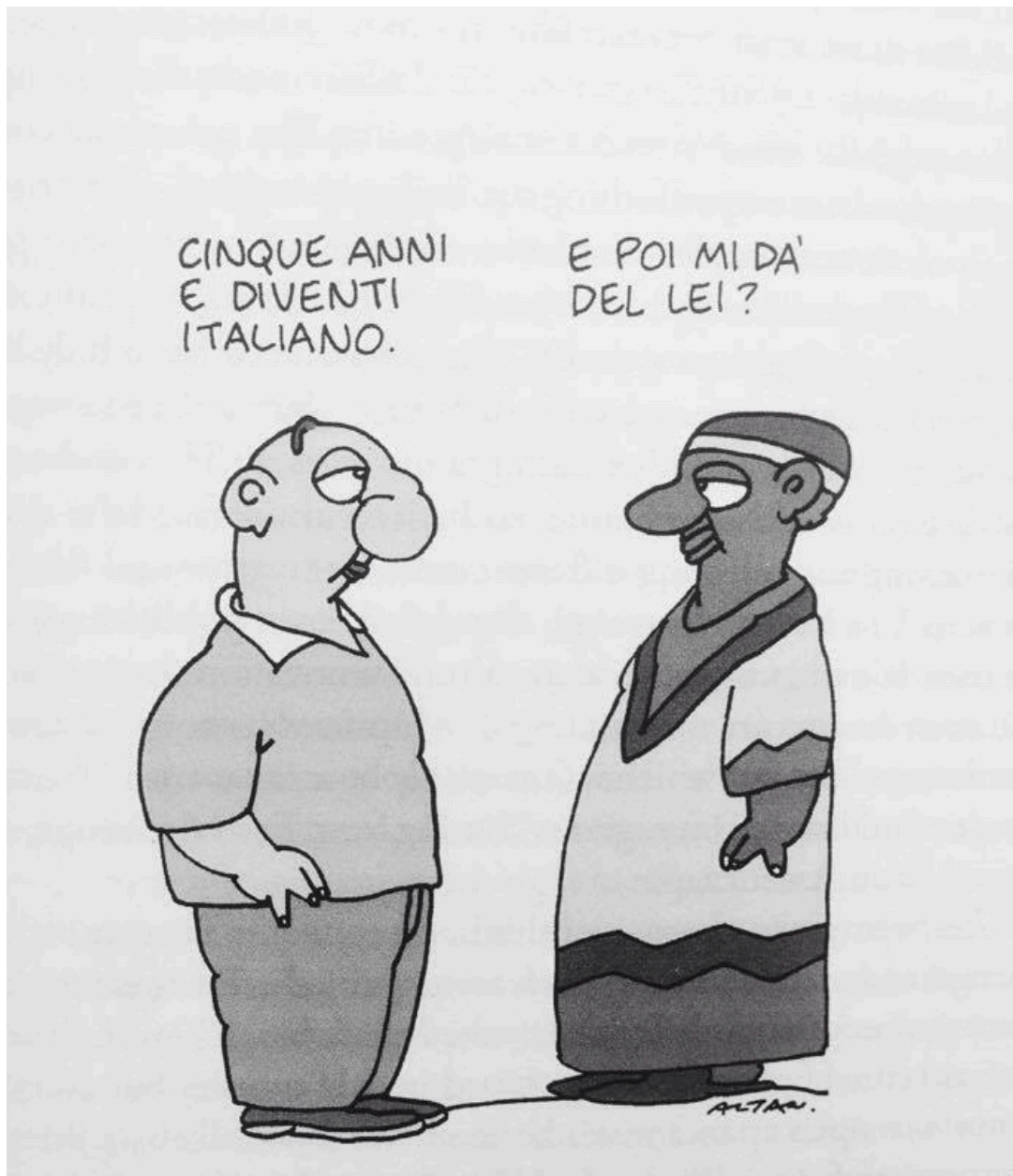
The language that I observed while in Italy was reflected in my research of the Italian fields of Literature, Media, and Education, leading me to conclude that these systems play a large role in keeping stereotypes alive. Removing divisive labels from influential fields in Italian society could have the impact of discouraging them from everyday use. This would create a more inclusive environment for migrants, in which they would be recognized in equal capacities to their native Italian counterparts.

In my first chapter I explore the introduction of migrant literature into Italy in the early 1990s and the struggle for migrants to be accepted into the broader category of Italian literature. I present post-colonial migrant authors and concentrate on their arguments regarding labeling and how the “migrant” label has constricted them in their efforts. I will build upon the work of Italian literary critic Armando Gnisci who encourages the expansion of the “Italian literature” label in order to create a richer and more representative field.

In my second chapter I will explore Italian media and its coverage of migrants and migrant issues. Building on the studies of Lorenzo Montali, Asher Colombo, Giuseppe Sciortino, among others, I show how the depiction of migrants by journalists currently serves to reinforce negative perceptions of foreigners in Italian society. I not only focus on major news outlets in Italy, including *la Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*, but also take into consideration the role of social media in perpetuating stereotypes surrounding migrants. Recognizing these trends, various journalism organizations in Italy have recently established the *Carta di Roma* in efforts to equalize news coverage of migrants and natives. I will discuss their work as well as other potential solutions to create more accurate representations of migrants in the media.

In my third chapter I will analyze modern-day Italian schools and their systemization of exclusion of migrants through their Italo-centric teaching methods and curriculum. I will discuss weaknesses in previous research on the subject of migrant performances in the Italian school system and show attempts to change unaccommodating practices. The education system is central to this discussion considering that it prepares young students for their entrance into the real world. Providing ideas of acceptance regarding migrants in early stages of life is necessary to help shift thoughts of future generations in society.

These three chapters demonstrate areas through which reforms to ensure migrant integration can begin. As stated by migration expert Roberta Ricucci, “Integration is a process involving two subjects: the individual who is attempting to insert him/herself and to co-exist as well as possible in the receiving context, and the host society which is helping, lets him/her get on with it or obstructs reaching the aim” (14). Migrants have initiated the process of integration by attempting to offer creative and educational contributions to Italian society. Now we will explore how Italians are reacting to these contributions and to what extent they are permitting them.



Taken from *Italian Modernities*, pp. 1. Original: Francesco Tullio Altan, published in 'L'Espresso', 33 (24 August 2016). Copyright Altan/Quipos.



## 1. Rethinking Italian Literature towards Inclusion

*Le parole vanno usate con cura, vanno soppesate.* - Igiaba Scego

Italian literary critics have classified literary pieces written by authors with foreign origins in countless ways. Even though *stranieri* have been publishing works at increasing rates in Italy, their literature has been continuously confined to categories such as minor/minority literature, Italoophone texts, new Italian literature, extra-European commentary, multi-cultural literature, and even African literature.<sup>3</sup> With all of these examples it is evident that critics are determined to establish a clear separation between pieces authored by people with foreign origins and those written by so-called “native Italians.” Although a separation from the broader category of “Italian literature” could bring attention to the important conversations that these new voices share in their publications, it has also served to confine this literature to a lower tier of recognition and prevent the stories from being heard. Migrant publications describe struggles with integrating into Italian society, and show a desire to be recognized as equals to Italian citizens. The inconsistent labeling of this literature shows how word-choice, among other factors, impedes efforts at integration into a new country.

I will use the term “migrant literature” in this essay to refer to works by “non-native” Italians, in order to separate them from other Italian works and bring attention to their neglect. My intention is not to further separate the works of migrants from the scope of Italian literature, as previously mentioned classifications have served to do, but rather to give identity to this group of authors and bring them deserved respect. I will use the term “migrant” in order to describe a group of people who have either migrated to Italy or who have ancestors that have migrated

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<sup>3</sup> For more on minor/minority literature and Italoophone texts see Parati’s *Mediterranean Crossroads* pp. 16, 18; For more on extra-European commentary see Gnisci and Rusnak’s *Thinking European Worlds* pp. 64; For more on multi-cultural literature see Bond’s *Destination Italy* pp. 16; Igiaba Scego discusses references to her writing as “African literature” in her autobiographical novel *La mia casa è dove sono*, pp. 197.

there. Although not all authors that are placed in the category of “migrant literature” have migrated themselves, their discussions of migration-related subjects justify their placement in this category (Coppola 122). The term “literature” will be used as opposed to migrant “commentary” in order to imply simply a “written text that envisages a readership” (Burns 9). The use of the word “commentary” confines the migrant literature to a social function of commenting on existing Italian literature or on Italian society. “Commentary” does not leave space for migrant works to pose an original voice separate from the pre-existing Italian literature. “Literature,” on the other hand, insists that migrant writers have equal rights to native Italians in adding to Italian culture.

In the past, migrant literature was consistently overshadowed by native Italian literature due to its late introduction into Italian society, its lack of similarity to existing Italian literature, and its restriction by prejudiced processes of publication. Migrant literature began to emerge in the 1990s as more migrants started to enter Italy.<sup>4</sup> Unlike other European imperial states, Italy had a short colonial history and only received a small number of migrants from its ex-colonies (Parati, *Mediterranean Crossroads* 16). As a result, many of the first migrants to Italy came from ex-colonies of other European countries. In particular, many early migrants to Italy came from French ex-colonies, leaving a Francophone impression on the migrant literature produced in Italy (Parati, *Mediterranean Crossroads* 15).<sup>5</sup> Partially because of the differences that migrant literature produced from “standard” Italian literature, migrants’ literary works were integrated slowly into Italian culture (Parati, *Mediterranean Crossroads* 16, 17). To counterbalance the

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<sup>4</sup> Migration from the Maghreb to Italy greatly increased in the late 1980s as a result of increasing demand for low-skilled workers. For more information, reference de Haas’s “The Myth of Invasion” pp. 1307. Outside of Africa, many migrants fled the ex-Italian colony of Albania and landed in Italy in March 1991. For more information, reference King’s *Out of Albania* pp. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Later on in this essay, I will discuss migrant writers Salah Methnani and Amara Lakhous, who migrated to Italy from ex-French colonies.

perceived foreignness of the literature, the first migrant works were primarily co-authored, featuring translations by Italian writers or heavy editing from Italian publishers (Bond 14). In the 1990s, migrant texts often included introductions by Italian writers that served to dominate over the proceeding migrant-written texts (McGuire 7). These aspects strictly limited the voices of migrant writers in Italy during this period. Further, Italian publishing houses valued early migrant publications solely for their exoticism instead of their literary value (Bond 16; Burns 5). Perceiving migrant literature in this manner shows a disconnect between the migrants' intentions for their literature, in being treated like regular Italian authors, and the reception of the literature by Italian society. In order for migrants to actually be granted a space in the world of Italian literature, their work would have to be accepted as such, pieces of literature.

In recent decades, migrant writers have been fighting to escape from the demeaning impacts of the “migrant” label in how it restricts them from entering Italian literature. Migrant writers Amara Lakhous and Igiaba Scego represent two authors on opposite sides of the “migrant” label. Lakhous migrated directly from Algeria to Italy at the age of twenty-five, whereas Scego was born in Italy, but her family migrated to Italy from Somalia before she was born. Both authors show a desire to abandon the migrant stereotype in the realm of literature. As Valerie McGuire explains, Lakhous makes strong efforts to enter the Italian literary world with his novel, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio*, which was introduced to Italy in 2006. McGuire explains that “Lakhous subverts the migrant writer label while positioning himself as an eminently ‘Italian’ author” (2). With his attention to accuracy in representing Italian culture and his rejection of the autobiographical platform that many migrant writers to Italy adopted before him, Lakhous separates himself from the stereotype of migrant literature and becomes recognized as “Italian” in his efforts. Scego also works to become included in the realm

of Italian literature by making clear her unhappiness with various terminology used to describe her and other migrants:

An expression that bothers me is ‘new Italians’. I don’t think of us as new Italians, I think of us as Italians, and that’s it. The same with the term ‘second generation’... I don’t like when they describe me as a ‘second generation immigrant’ because I’m not an immigrant. If you’re born here, where does the immigration part come in?... Sometimes in the newspaper I read that I’ve been described as an ‘African writer’ or a ‘second generation writer’, but never just a writer.<sup>6</sup>

Scego’s words show her desire to be addressed as a natural part of Italian society and to be appreciated just like all other Italian writers. Scego and Lakhous are two among many migrants who have been denied proper attention in the world of Italian literature.

Italian literary critic Armando Gnisci has tried to bring attention to migrant writers’ efforts, like those of Lakhous and Scego, as they work to be accepted into Italian literature. He has done this by working to convince Italian citizens of the necessity to expand the label. In his contributions to the book *Thinking European Worlds: We, the Europeans: Italian Essays on Post-Colonialism*, he argues that confining Italian literature to texts written by what society believes to be “real” Italian writers was limiting and would make the art extinct. He writes:

We will realize that the corpus of our literature is best seen as a plural body, composed of authors in dialects, writers in exile, and foreigners writing in second languages and translated from other languages... the confines of national literature are not barricades, blockades, and security gates. The confines should be seen, on the contrary, as permeable areas of transit open on many levels and in every sense. (Gnisci and Rusnak 63, 64)

With the expansion of the field of Italian literature, writers like Lakhous and Scego earn the level of respect that “native” Italians receive in regards to their literature. Gnisci strengthens his argument by encouraging Italian citizens to realize that there are fewer differences between migrants and themselves (Gnisci and Rusnak 66). By equating migrants and traditional Italians, negative connotations of the word “migrant” begin to disappear within Italian society. This

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<sup>6</sup> This translation is my own. The original text can be found in Igiaba Scego’s *La mia casa è dove sono* pp. 197.

equity is far from being realized in Italy; however, in this essay, I will explore some of the steps that Italy has taken towards achieving it.

In this chapter I will examine the gradual entrance of migrant literature into Italian society and analyze the progression from highly edited migrant texts to more individually produced works. Specifically, I will analyze migrant authors under the sub-category of “post-colonial writers,” those who migrate from ex-European colonies into Italy. These migrants need not necessarily come from the ex-Italian colonies of Eritrea, Albania, Somalia, or Ethiopia to be considered part of the post-colonial category (Coppola 122). Under this category I will discuss migrant writers: Salah Methnani, from the ex-French colony of Tunisia; Amara Lakhous, from the ex-French colony of Algeria; and Igiaba Scego, a second-generation migrant whose parents migrated from the ex-Italian colony of Somalia. I will attempt to show that migrant literature adds an outside perspective to Italian literature that expands European perceptions of migrants that reside in their country, and that also expand Italians’ perceptions of themselves and their role in keeping migrants outside of the field of “Italian literature.”

### **Emergence of Migrant Literature**

Migrant literature entered Italian society in the year 1990 as a product of two major events (Di Maio 91). The first event was the enactment of the Martelli Law in February of 1990 (Di Maio 91). This was the first law in Italy to address migration, and it guaranteed rights for non-European migrants to be granted asylum, along with granting better rights for foreign workers (Veugelers 42). This law brought about greater political visibility for migrants in the nation, which brought attention to their literature as well (Di Maio 91). The second event was the murder of South African migrant Jerry Essan Masslo on August 25, 1989 near Naples, Italy

(Veugelers 42). The event was broadcast all over Italy and brought attention to the threatening living conditions of migrants in the nation.

Migrant writers gained more freedom with their publications in the second half of the 1990s. Migrants began to publish pieces directly in Italian, without the input of Italian translators or restrictive editors. This offered Italian literature a less-filtered migrant perspective and increased multiculturalism in the publications as hints of migrants' mother languages began to emerge among the Italian words. According to scholar Jennifer Burns, publishing in Italian emphasizes the intentionality of migrants' chosen audience members. In her *Migrant Imaginaries: Figures in Italian Migration Literature*, she explains, "to express oneself as a voice from elsewhere in the language and in the cultural space of Italy is itself a bid to be recognized" (Burns 5). In learning Italian, migrants are able to set up a foundation for discussion with Italian citizens in order to define who they are, how they want to be perceived, and how they perceive Italians. As early migrant writer Saidou Moussa Ba explains,

The desire to write was born because [migrants] were essentially unknown [in Italy]. What to do to make ourselves known? If the immigrant becomes aware of himself, he can represent himself so that the other, whom the Italian has heard discussed only in generic terms, can define himself. In their books, immigrants want to represent themselves and also the "other": we are like this, but you are like this too. (Parati, "Intervista a Saidou Moussa Ba", 104-107)

In the proceeding sections I will show how literature by various migrant writers in Italy serves to form a new definition of "migrants" and "Italians," allowing for a reevaluation of the present-day demographics in Italy.

### **Post-Colonial Literature**

I have chosen to specifically categorize the following migrant literature under the post-colonial sub-category, thus bringing attention to the impacts that colonialism had on European

colonies.<sup>7</sup> In this section I will discuss migrant writers Salah Methnani, Amara Lakhous, and Igiaba Scego who migrated to Italy and have roots in Tunisia, Albania, and Somalia, respectively. I include migrant writers of ex-Italian colonies, but also writers of other former European colonies, as both groups provide pertinent discussion on migration as first-hand observers of the impacts of colonialism. This, in turn, similarly shapes their treatment once they arrive in Italy.

Daniela Merolla and Sandra Ponzanesi advance the question of whether using the term “migrant” recreates a colonial divide in the destination countries of migrants (4). However, categorizing migrant literature under the grouping of “post-colonialism” also functions to bring attention to the colonial heritage of migrants’ countries of origin in order to make sure that they are not forgotten by European nations. In her autobiographical novel, *La mia casa è dove sono*, Igiaba Scego describes the lack of Italy’s awareness regarding its own colonial legacy as “il vuoto.”<sup>8</sup> The version of the novel published by Loescher Editore combats this lack of awareness by including a section at the end of the novel entitled “Intrecci di lettura.” This section describes Italian imperialism in Somalia, the country from which Scego’s parents migrate, and describes the ways in which Italy left an impression on the ex-colony (Scego, *La mia casa* 165).

Focusing on the stories of migrants who have experienced colonialism places a sense of responsibility on the shoulders of Italian citizens; responsibility to recognize their colonial past and work to reconcile the fact that their colonial presence significantly impacted colonized

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<sup>7</sup> As stated earlier, post-colonial literature in Italy most immediately refers to migrant writers who descend from former Italian colonies, including Somalia, Albania, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. However, migrant writers who are included in this category must not necessarily be of direct descent of the former Italian colonies. For more information, refer to Coppola’s “Rented spaces: Italian postcolonial literature.” pp. 122.

<sup>8</sup> I refer to chapter 4, “La stele di Axum”, in *La mia casa è dove sono* where Scego describes how the Obelisk of Axum, representing colonialism in Ethiopia, was removed from Piazza di Porta Capena in Rome leaving a “vuoto” that seems full of hate. She states that she hopes the “vuoto” can be transformed into love or at the very least, understanding.

nations. In some ways colonialism may have even led to the migration patterns that are bringing migrants to Italy today. Post-colonial migrant literature, if read carefully, can serve to reveal these truths.

### ***Salah Methnani***

Tunisian migrant Salah Methnani was one of the first migrant writers to be published in Italy. His autobiographical narrative, *Immigrato*, began as a news article and was later developed and published as a novel in 1990 in co-authorship with Mario Fortunato who provided the translation and introduction (IV). Inserting an introduction by Fortunato, an Italian native, prefaces the work with an Italian voice that partially detracts from Methnani's succeeding perspective. Further, the Italian publisher, Giulio Einaudi, assigned the title *Immigrato*, limiting the potential for creative contribution by Methnani.

Fortunato's introduction describes his first impressions of Methnani and demonstrates stereotypes that existed in the late 1980s towards African migrants by saying, "Aveva studiato lingue straniere, teneva una laurea in tasca, si interessava alla letteratura. Era vivace, sensibile. Niente che lo accomunasse con lo stereotipo del nordafricano immigrato" (III). This comment sets up the novel in a way that separates Methnani from the majority of African migrants in Italy, implying that, in the eyes of Italians, other North African migrants do not share his admirable qualities.

In *Immigrato*, Methnani's descriptions of other migrants that he met in Italy, might partially confirm Italian stereotypes as he discusses practices of stealing and prostitution that migrants had resorted to in order to survive in Italian society. On one hand, painting this picture of migrants serves to show Italian citizens the extent of migrants' struggles in Italy. On the other hand, these negative depictions of migrants did not help to dispel established stereotypes towards



migrants in the 1990s. Methnani, however, also depicted his efforts at integrating into Italian society with his use of the Italian language. As a child, he and his father practiced Italian together in Tunisia, and it was a hobby that established a strong bond between them. When Methnani moved to Italy, his attempts at using the Italian he had practiced with his father were not appreciated by Italian society (Di Maio 97). As Alessandra di Maio explains, Methnani “soon realizes that his knowledge of standard Italian is an obstacle rather than an advantage, because it disorients those who hear it, frequently causing distrust, especially among the established who, symbolically, experience the foreigner as a potential invader and a threat to the existing order” (97). This reception of spoken Italian by migrants is similar to the reception of migrant literature in Italy- less accepted only because the migrant authors bare differences to the native Italian authors who precede them. After having his spoken Italian rejected, Methnani resorted to learning what he described as “migrant talk,” which African migrants in Italy used to communicate among each other. This example demonstrates how a rejection of migrant efforts at integration can fulfill a stereotype. However, even though Methnani changed his ways to adopt the stereotypical migrant speech while talking, he breaks the bounds of the stereotype by having his autobiographical novel published.

In the introduction to *Immigrato*, Fortunato does acknowledge the significance of Methnani’s story in Italian society as he says that it “rappresenta uno specchio per guardare dentro alla nostra italianità” (IX). Therefore, Fortunato suggests that Italians need to reassess their relationships with migrants and potentially be more open to who they accept as being Italian, including who they welcome into Italian literature. Many universities adopted *Immigrato* as their first example of immigration literature, indicating a beginning to the diffusion of migrant literature in the arenas of Italian literature (Fortunato VII). As I will discuss in my third chapter,

introducing migrant literature into Italian curricula allows for a better representation of migrants in the national school system.

### ***Amara Lakhous***

Amara Lakhous was born in Algeria in 1970 and moved to Italy at the age of 25. His attention to detail and accuracy regarding Italian culture, including references to different regional dialects and mention of various Italian icons, shows his determination to be recognized as an Italian writer, despite his foreign origins. With his book *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio*, published in Italian in 2006, Lakhous rejects the subordination imposed on other migrant writers who allow Italians to translate their texts. He originally published the text in his native language, Arabic, but in order to make the work accessible to Italian audiences, he rewrote the piece in Italian and emphasized the scenes he considered to be more necessary for Italians to grasp.

Lakhous also strays from other migrant authors as he avoids writing an autobiographical piece, such as those of Salah Methnani and Igiaba Scego.<sup>9</sup> With *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio*, Lakhous creates a *giallo*, or a crime investigation piece, that demonstrates that migrants can contribute to Italian literature with genres other than autobiographies, which many migrant writers had limited themselves to before (McGuire 2).

Lakhous convinces Italian audiences of his authenticity with his realistic depictions of Italians from various regions of the country. His widespread understanding of Italian culture reflects that of Amedeo, the migrant protagonist of *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza*

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<sup>9</sup> The first migrant literature published in Italian society came out in 1990 and was primarily autobiographical. Salah Methnani's *Immigrato* was one of the three autobiographical migrant novels published this year, along with *Io, venditore di elefanti* by Pap Khouma and Oreste Pivetta and *Chiamatemi Ali* by Mohamed Bouchane. Igiaba Scego's *La mia casa è dove sono* is another autobiographical novel produced by a migrant in Italy. However, her novel, published in 2010, shows the perspective of a second-generation migrant.

*Vittorio*, who is thought to be Italian due to his strong hold on the Italian language and his extensive familiarity with the city of Rome. In the various chapters of the novel, the characters discuss their appreciation for Amedeo, while often denying the fact that he is a migrant from Algeria. With these descriptions, Lakhous explores the idea that solely the label of “migrant” changes how one is perceived in Italian society. Without knowing one’s origin, there could be little to really distinguish a migrant from a native Italian. This contributes to the idea that the notion that migrants pose threats to Italian people is socially constructed.

The way in which Lakhous introduces characters from all parts of Italy and Europe, shows that differences do not exist just between Italians and migrants, but among Italians themselves. Lakhous’s character Antonio Marini represents an Italian from the north. He distinguishes himself from southern Italians by saying the disorganization that exists in the south would never exist in the north. He compares the way that the south operates to that of a third world country (Lakhous 73). This puts into question the homogeneity of Italians and makes us ask again, why can’t migrants be more easily accepted into a society that already encompasses so many different ways of life? On a wider scale, by introducing a character from Amsterdam into his novel, Lakhous shows that Europeans are not all so similar to each other either, and therefore, should be more tolerant towards accepting migrants and their diversity.

Lakhous uses his characters in *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* to demonstrate issues in discourses between migrants and Italians that keep them from understanding one another. His strongest examples come from his Neapolitan character Benedetta Esposito, the custodian of the elevator in question, who has much to say about the migrants who pass through there. In one scene she discusses an Iranian migrant Parviz and says,

Quello che aumenta i miei sospetti è il fatto che non conosce per niente il suo paese. Ha provato più volte a convincermi che viene da un paese che non è l'Albania. Non è l'unico a disconoscere il paese di origine per evitare l'espulsione immediata, ah eh! La Filipina Maria Cristina mi dice sempre che non viene dalle Filippine, ma da un altro paese di cui non ricordo il nome. (Lakhous 35)

What raises my suspicions the most is the fact that he doesn't know anything about his country. He has tried multiple times to convince me that he comes from a country that isn't Albania. But he is not the only one to deny a relationship to his country of origin in order to avoid immediate expulsion, ah eh! The Filipina Maria Cristina tells me all the time that she doesn't come from the Philippines, but a different country whose name I can't remember.<sup>10</sup>

Benedetta's flawed certainty that Parviz comes from one of the major countries of origin of migrants to Italy, and the fact that she cannot remember the country that Maria Cristina said she was actually from, shows a mental grouping of migrants that dehumanizes them and causes them to be taken less seriously in society. This practice of grouping migrants will be discussed further in the second chapter as it is a common practice of Italian media organizations. These interactions demonstrate a lack of attention given to the words of migrants and show that, even when migrants are given voices—whether in literature or daily life—sometimes they go unheard. Recognizing the situation of migrants in Italy, Lakhous works to escape the stereotypes surrounding the word “migrant” by attempting to enter into Italian literature.

### ***Igiaba Scego***

Igiaba Scego was born in Rome to Somali parents and still lives there today. Scego, like Lakhous, wants to be considered in a neutral way, as simply a “writer” in Italian society. She has instead been labeled an “African writer,” a person “of color,” and a “new Italian” (Scego, *La mia casa* 196). Describing Scego as an African writer ignores the fact that she was born and raised in Italy. This means she speaks the Italian language and understands Italian culture just as well as Italians whose parents did not migrate from a different country. The difference between Scego

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<sup>10</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

and most native Italians, however, is her skin color. In the section *Voci* at the end of her autobiographical novel, *La mia casa è dove sono*, Scego explains that she does not appreciate being called a person “of color.” She believes that this terminology implies that there is a right color and a wrong color to be. Instead, she said she prefers the term “nera.” “Nera” (“black”) describes her skin color and seems like a more accurate description to her than “of color.” Finally, Scego expresses her disapproval for the labeling of migrants as “new Italians.” She believes that adding the “new” again provides a distinction between migrants and Italians. Following these statements, it is clear to see that Scego believes one of the best solutions to migrant discrimination in Italy is to stop labeling them in ways to accentuate their status as “the other.” If migrants of second generation were just considered Italian and if migrant writers were just considered writers, the ways in which Italian citizens thought about these people would become more inclusive.

In *Faduma & Barni* published in 2003, Scego illustrates the impacts of stereotypes imposed on migrants in Italy. The difficulty that migrants encounter when using Italian in Italy, like that presented in Methnani’s novel, is again apparent in Scego’s short story as she writes,

“In hearing people say: ‘You blacks don’t know Italian!’ Barni had ended up believing it. She abandoned Dante, Ariosto, and Leopardi and in their place she adopted scandalously ungrammatical verbs. Her language became confused and approximate. And she ended up becoming that stereotype of an immigrant woman that society (or better, the media) wanted to see in her.” (Scego, “Faduma & Barni” 171)

This fictional anecdote demonstrates the power behind stereotypes in restricting someone to a specific place in society. With this story, Scego exemplifies a migrant woman who attempts to integrate into Italian society by adopting Italian culture, but who is rejected and resorts to falling back into the stereotype that simplifies migrants.

The migrant writers that I have discussed in this section do not succumb to the harmful effects of stereotypes in Italy, but work to overcome them by continuing to produce works in Italian and by using the language to be understood by Italians. In her autobiographical novel *La mia casa è dove sono*, published in 2010, Scego writes to level the positions of Italians and migrants by showing positive and negative interactions with both groups. One of her strongest examples comes from her early years in elementary school. She explains feeling like an outsider in classrooms full of mainly Italian children.

“Oggi alcune mamme si lamentano della presenza di bambini di origine straniera nelle scuole... Non vogliono contaminare la loro prole. Ma se qualcuno le chiama razziste, loro negano. ‘Non è razzismo. È solo che questi bambini limitano la produttività della scuola. Noi vogliamo il meglio per i nostri figli, non vogliamo farli diventare zulu.’” (152)

“Today some moms complain about the presence of children with foreign origins in the schools... They don’t want them to contaminate their offspring. But if someone calls them racist, they negate it. ‘It’s not racism. It’s just that these children limit the productivity of the school. We want the best for our children, we don’t want to make them become Zulu.’”

Facing these attitudes towards migrants, Scego was discouraged to speak up in class, which reinforced negative perceptions about her capabilities. Scego goes on to explain, however, that it was also an Italian who saved her from these negative stereotypes. Her teacher worked with her to allow her to speak about things she was familiar with, including stories from Somalia. With this encouragement, Scego began to flourish. “E non scherzo quando dico che la mia maestra elementare, quella signora dai vaporosi capelli bianchi, mi ha salvato la vita” (Scego, *La mia casa* 157). With this story, Scego demonstrates that what is necessary to better the situation for migrants is for Italians to understand and to accept the stories they have to share.

## Conclusion

Salah Methnani, Amara Lakhous and Igiaba Scego demonstrate the entrance of migrant writers into Italian literature. Methnani, as one of the first migrant writers to be published in Italy, shows the initial difficulties that migrants faced when publishing their literature. His publication of *Immigrato* was censored in the fact that it necessitated an Italian translator and editor. This aspect served to hold back Methnani's voice and detract from the full credit that he deserves as the author of the work. Methnani's novel was followed by Lakhous, who, by demonstrating a great understanding of Italian culture, minimizes differences between migrants and Italians, while at the same time expanding the credibility of migrant work among Italian readers. In the scenes of his novel, Lakhous points to how labeling of migrants is problematic and unnecessary. His points are supported in the impacts that identifying a writer as foreign can have on his/her success in the field of Italian literature. Scego also discusses her frustration with the practice of labeling migrants. Her perspective, however, is that of a second-generation migrant writer. She makes the argument that she has always lived in Italy and despite her label as a migrant writer, she was not the one who made the trip from Somalia to Italy. With this in consideration, it is important to ask: how many generations of migrants will it take for the labeling to stop?

The negative impact of labeling on the success of migrant authors comes from the stereotypes associated with migrants that live in Italy today. These stereotypes persist because of limited interaction between migrants and native Italians over the past few decades. Novels written by migrants, however, present an opportunity for this interaction to begin. When literary pieces by migrants are taken up by Italian literary critics, migrant authors' talents become more

visible. And once migrants' voices are made welcome in the medium of literature, it is possible that Italian citizens will begin to accept integration in other areas of society as well.



## 2. The Language of Italian Media and the Perpetuation of Migrant Exclusion

*Ciò che sappiamo della nostra società, e in generale del mondo in cui viviamo, lo sappiamo dai mass-media.* - Niklas Luhmann<sup>11</sup>

The media teaches the world about events and people that they may not experience firsthand. Typically, the media is necessary for this purpose because the scenarios covered in the news happen far away from those who are consuming it. In the case of immigrants in modern-day Italy, however, where there are more than 5.8 million foreign residents, the media is necessary not because of the geographical distance between the Italians and migrants. Rather, it is necessary because a majority of Italians have little desire to interact with the many migrants that live beside them (“Foreign-born”). In 1999, a study conducted showed that a third of Italians did not know an immigrant, even superficially (Colombo and Sciortino 102-103). Today, despite the larger numbers of migrants that live in Italy, this trend for the most part has persisted. Initial reluctance by Italian society to interact with the immigrants that began to enter Italy in the mid-80’s came from their differences in appearance. The migration flows starting in the mid-80’s brought foreigners from Albania, North African nations, China, and elsewhere. These flows were unlike those that preceded them, which tended to bring migrants from primarily western nations (Colombo and Sciortino 104). The reluctance of Italian citizens to interact with the new migrants of the time persisted, largely due to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes of migrants portrayed in the language of the Italian media, including social media.<sup>12</sup>

Before the 1980s, the subject of immigration did not occupy a large space in Italian

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<sup>11</sup> Luhmann, Niklas. *The Reality of the Mass Media*. Stanford University Press, 2000, 1.

<sup>12</sup> According to *From Home Safety to International Terrorism: How Italian Talk Shows Framed Migration After the Paris Attacks*, three major themes are present in the relationship between media and immigration in Italy. These are: the presence of stereotypes, their reinforcement through coverage, and the dramatization of events related to migration (17).

media coverage. During this time immigration was not considered particularly newsworthy and only western migrants tended to make the news (Colombo and Sciortino 107). These migrants consisted of Mormon missionaries and German and American businessmen, among others (Colombo and Sciortino 104). Referred to by the Italian news as “*stranieri*”, they were noted for their economic competitiveness with Italy and their ability to intervene in Italian politics. Italians felt fortunate to have these migrants in their country because they seemed to confirm the superior quality of life that Italy offered and the relative advancement of their society compared to the countries of origin of the “*stranieri*” (Colombo and Sciortino 103). News stories that mentioned migrants were focused on the institutions that they impacted while in Italy, meaning that the journalists who covered the stories were often experts in fields such as politics, economics, and religion. The journalists worked to discuss the subject of immigration in an informed manner and treated migrants just like other actors in society, typically only briefly referencing the fact that they were foreign at the beginning of articles (Perna 94). There was little prejudice shown towards the migrants in the Italian media during this period as a result of their western origins (Colombo and Sciortino 104).

It was in the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, roughly around the same time that migrant authors began to publish literature in Italy, that the representation of migrants in the media began to change. Partially due to the politicalization of the migration issue in Italy, brought about by the passing of the Martelli Law in 1990, the subject of immigration came to the forefront of Italian media discussions.<sup>13</sup> The sudden heightened attention paid to immigration led reporting on the subject to become widespread and less specialized. As a result, migrants began

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<sup>13</sup> The Martelli Law was the first law in Italy to address migration. It guaranteed rights for non-European migrants to be granted asylum, along with granting better rights for foreign workers. The law brought about greater political visibility for migrants in the nation leading to more attention from the media.

to be regarded as a single group, and instead of “stranieri”, they began to be referred to as “immigrati” and “clandestini” in the Italian media (Colombo and Sciortino 109). Tendencies of Italian news outlets to sensationalize stories and to use emotional and evocative language in their news coverage also led to the use of words like “schiavi”, “disperati”, “senzapatria”, and “fantasmi” to refer to migrants (Colombo and Sciortino 111). With this change of terms used, the ideas associated with migrants became less concerned with distinguished western foreigners affirming Italian society, and more concerned with the fear and illegality of the new migrants entering their country. To keep the stories interesting, journalists began to diversify the vocabulary with which they referred to migrants. As a result, they sacrificed accuracy in justly identifying the legal statuses of the migrant arrivals, showing a disregard for truth in stories about migrants that led to the degradation of the migrants themselves (Bond 73).<sup>14</sup> The issue with this comes from the phenomenon that Mahmoud Zidan discusses in his essay *The Image of Italy and the Immigrants to Italy in the Media: A Destination or Place of Damnation?*: “Any attentive observer of new as well as ‘old’ media cannot help but notice the effect of language on reporting the news and influencing people’s views and attitudes.” Zidan shows that the tendencies towards inaccuracy regarding migrants’ legal statuses will likely be adopted by Italian citizens as a result of their presence in the media.

From 1992 until 2002, the media discourse surrounding migration changed again to focus primarily on the arrival of migrants on Italian shores and the legislation regulating migrants. The media discussions from 2003 to 2009 shifted to concentrations on second-generation migrant children entering schools and migrants’ right to vote. The only theme that seemed to extend over

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<sup>14</sup> Refer to Bond, Bonsaver, and Faloppa’s *Italian Modernities: Destination Italy: Representing Migration in Contemporary Media and Narrative* pp. 73 for a table of various terms used to refer to migrants in the Italian media and their frequency of use.

both of the periods was the constant pairing of migrants with crime-related stories, as well as stories concerning deviance and police repression (Montali 238). The association in the media between migrants and crime reinforces the idea of their illegality among the Italian public and their need to be excluded from Italian society.

Negative depictions of migrants are also present in Italian social media, which has become an increasingly important source of news for Millennials (Mitchell). A study completed by the Trieste-based research institute SWG entitled, “Oddio e falsità in rete. La percezione dei cittadini,” interviewed 1,000 Italian natives and found that many of them agree that verbal violence is largely attributable to new means of communication, such as those available on social media (5). The study showed that 47 percent of people interviewed believe that online hate speech and violence is directed towards migration, and 27 percent of interviewees believed that migration was the concentration of much fake news that circulates on social media (SWG 51). The diffusion of hate speech and fake news regarding migrants reinforces negative stereotypes of foreigners in Italy. It does so in a more threatening manner than standard news does considering that the audiences for social media are typically younger members of the population. The youth in Italian society have the most potential for creating a more respectful environment for migrants in Italy considering that they are more impressionable. I will discuss this more thoroughly in my third chapter.

In this chapter I will discuss the different practices implemented by the Italian media when covering migrant stories and how they serve to reinforce negative ideas about migrants in Italian society and discourage the intermingling of migrants and natives. I will explore the ethnicization of migrants in the news, the inaccurate usage of terminology when referring to migrants, and the dramatization of migrant crime and arrivals by the media. In my analysis of

these tendencies in traditional media, I will provide examples that I have found in social media that support them.<sup>15</sup> I will finish this chapter with a discussion of recent efforts by Italian journalistic associations to change prejudiced depictions of migrants in the Italian media.



This example was one of sixty-four images found on Instagram that include a description involving the term “vu compra” in reference to a migrant. The image depicts a migrant in a stereotypical situation, reinforcing Italian ideas about migrants’ societal roles.

### **Ethnicization of Migrants in the Media**

Trends in Italian media coverage show that people of non-western or third-world-country origins are typically identified in terms of their ethnic appearance (Dijk 26). Compared with stories published about migrants from the west, the ethnicity of migrants from northern Africa, China, the Arabian Peninsula, and geographically-close places, are mentioned much more often. In this manner, their ethnicities become the most important part of the stories and their individual identities become lost. This trend is reflected in everyday Italian culture as many Italians tend to refer to people of Middle Eastern backgrounds as “pakastani,” people of Asian descent as “cinesi,” people of north African descent as “marochini,” and sometimes referring to foreigners

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<sup>15</sup> Although I cannot produce an exhaustive study, I will present various examples of the phenomena discussed that I have found in my exploration of Italian social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

in general as “vu compra,” alluding to a stereotypical mispronunciation of “vuoi comprare” (refer to graphic above).<sup>16</sup> All of these examples show a grouping together of migrants in potentially inaccurate ways based solely on their physical characteristics.

Norms of ethnic discussion in Italian society are determined, in part, by Italian media coverage. Van Dijk, in his book *Racism and the Press* writes:

Through education and the media the white group controls the definition of the ethnic situation. Given the social, economic, and cultural position of the major newspapers in western countries, it may therefore be expected that white Press shares in the overall system that sustains white group dominance. (33)<sup>17</sup>

This statement demonstrates that the difference in media coverage of western and non-western migrants may originate from their skin color and the pre-established power of white journalists. Given that Italian journalists are primarily white, they have the ability to utilize the media to reinforce their positions of power in other areas of society by spreading negative ideas about non-western migrants in Italy.<sup>18</sup> Considering that migrants are largely absent from journalist positions in Italy, their opportunities to offset these unequal trends are very limited.

Not only are migrants often left out of the production processes of media, their perspectives tend to get left out of the news stories that concern them. As noted by a study of the *Corriere della Sera*, quotes taken from migrants to be used in news stories are very rare in Italian media coverage.<sup>19</sup> This not only limits migrants’ voices in Italian media, but also reduces the

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<sup>16</sup> A stereotypical role for migrants in Italy is a street vendor of small trinkets. For this reason, migrants are associated with the phrase “vuoi comprare.”

<sup>17</sup> Dijk is one of the first to discuss prejudice from a discourse perspective. He argues that discourse is the main instrument through which racist ideology is reproduced. His novel, *Racism and the Press*, was released in the early 1990s after a decade’s worth of research into prejudices displayed in British and Dutch newspapers.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to chapter 1 and the discussion of Igiaba Scego’s “Faduma & Barni.” In this short story, Scego explains that the media can influence the behavior of migrants and restrict them to the stereotypes that white Italian journalists ascribe to them.

<sup>19</sup> Refer to Lorenzo Montali’s *The representation of migrants in the Italian press: A study on Corriere della Sera (1992-2009)*, pp. 246. In this study researchers from the University of Milano-Bicocca look at media discourse regarding migration in Italy and analyze how it is used to reinforce and recreate unequal relationships between different racial groups. They analyze articles specifically from the *Corriere della Sera* because it is the most widely circulated newspaper in Italy and its readership is generally of high cultural and economic profile.

amount of interaction that Italian journalists have with migrants. As a result, “the silence of the migrants becomes the only accepted migration narrative, a narrative that ultimately deconstructs itself, denying its very existence” (Bond 163). Finally, on the rare occasion that migrants’ voices do appear in the media, they are typically credited, not by name, but rather by their ethnicity (Bond 159).

### **Legal Statuses and Use of the Word Clandestino**

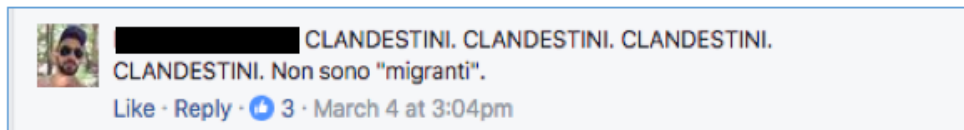
When analyzing the language of Italian media, the impacts of the word choice become almost dehumanizing towards migrants. A study that looked at seventy news stories, originating from four different newspapers, showed that the word “people” was only used three times among all of the publications (Bond 90). Instead, general terminology that show a lack of understanding of migrants’ legal statuses were used. These terms include: refugee, asylum seeker, immigrant, migrant, and illegal (Bond 90). This liberal interchanging of legal statuses points to holes in the expertise of Italian journalists that cover the migration issue. As a result, Italian citizens often inherit the misunderstanding of migrants’ legal situations, which leads to differences between Italians’ impressions of migrants and who migrants actually are.

In analyses of American newspapers that discuss migration into Italy, including *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*, terms such as “migrant” and “refugee” are used interchangeably in coverage (Bond 93). This shows a similar lack of attention to the legal statuses of migrants as the Italian publications. However, in Italian media coverage, the term “clandestino” is often preferred to refer to migrants (Bond 93).<sup>20</sup> “Clandestino” translates into English as “illegal” and with this usage, the word, which is typically an adjective used to modify unwanted actions, becomes a noun used to put the same implication on a group of people (Bond

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<sup>20</sup> The Italian newspaper analyzed for this conclusion was the *Corriere della Sera*. It is the most widely circulated newspaper in Italy.

97). The frequent use of the word “clandestino” in Italian media when discussing migrants, associates them with illegal actions, including crime. And in the discussions of crime and deviance, the ethnicity of the migrant is often mentioned (Montali 229). As a consequence of Italian media concentrating on dramatic stories in order to create newsworthiness, 55 percent of Italian prime-time news is dedicated to criminal cases (Bond 166). In this manner Italian citizens largely come to think of migrants as criminals, creating desires for the deportation of immigrants.



This comment was found on a Facebook post titled “Migranti, pace e ambiente separano il papa da Donald Trump” made by Internazionale.it. The comment demonstrates support of the usage of the term “clandestini” in place of “migranti” in Italian news coverage. The fact that this comment comes from a reader of Italian media, shows that the media’s practice of using “clandestini” to discuss migrants may have caught on with the public.

## The Subject of Arrival

Similar to crime cases, the excitement and drama surrounding the subject of migrant arrivals lead it to dominate the headlines of many Italian news stories covering migration. Specifically, the Italian media chooses to focus on migrant arrivals by sea, even though, as reported by the Ministry of Interior in 2009, less than 20 percent of migrants arrive to Italy by means of water (Montali 234). Arrivals by sea are more newsworthy as they often involve dangerous conditions for migrants and sometimes the death of migrants who fall off the boat and drown or die from dehydration during the trip. However, as noted in *Italian Modernities*, the stories that cover these situations often place more focus on the boats that capsize than the migrants’ lives lost in the tragedies. The stories sometimes even leave out the mention of migrant lives all together by simply discussing the capsizing of a migrant ship (Bond 90).



In the stories about migrant arrivals, often the number of migrants that arrive is the most accentuated detail. The alarm that the news stories tend to associate with these numbers shows that Italy has not yet recognized its transition from a country of origin for migrants to a destination country for migrants from other nations (Perna 103).



The Facebook page, “Basta con gli sbarchi in Italia”, one of many Italian anti-migrant landing pages on Facebook, reinforces the focus that Italian media places on the relationship between migrants and their arrival into Italy. The article that the Facebook group shares dramatizes the situation of arrival by referring to it as an emergency, while also taking sympathy away from migrants by reducing them to the numbers in which they arrived in Italy.

News stories where dramatization of migrant arrivals becomes the most important part of the account fail to recognize migrants as the victims of larger institutional issues (Perna 103). Italian media is not addressing the responsibility of the Italian state in caring for migrants, nor is it addressing the poverty and corruption that lead migrants to move in the first place. This takes away opportunities to produce sympathy towards migrants among Italian natives.

## Carta di Roma

Negative trends in Italian media regarding migration were recognized by the National Council of Journalists' Association and the Italian National Press Foundation. In response, they attempted to create healthier coverage of the migrants' situations in Italy with the establishment of the Carta di Roma. The Carta di Roma was adopted on 12 June, 2008 in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The aim of the code of conduct is to address the inaccurate depictions by the Italian media when covering issues concerning asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking and migrants. It lists four measures that it encourages Italian journalists to adhere to. These include: using appropriate terminology that reflect national and international law in order to adhere to the truth in media coverage;<sup>21</sup> Avoiding the spread of false, altered, or simplified information regarding asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking and migrants; Protecting the identities and images of minorities who choose to speak with the media in order to make sure they are unidentifiable; and when possible, consulting experts on the migration subject before publishing stories regarding this group of individuals (*Charter of Rome* 1).

Although the Carta di Roma was created in 2008, it was not heavily considered until late 2011 and 2012 (Bond 167). In the first six months of 2012, Italian National Press Federation and National Office against Racial Discrimination worked to organize informational sessions in the Italian regions of Puglia, Calabria, Campagna, and Sicily to raise awareness about the ideas promoted in the Carta di Roma (Bond 169). The meetings were followed by organized visits to refugee detention centers in the area in order to bring journalists and those involved in the media closer to the happenings of migration (Bond 170). A study noted that the meetings were most

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<sup>21</sup> The charter created a glossary to provide accurate definitions of the terms used in migration stories in order to promote their correct usage. Refer to *Charter of Rome*, pp. 3.

successful in areas that had: a good level of local involvement and activism; good knowledge and in-depth news treatment of migratory issues; and greater news pluralism at the local level, including higher quality publications and a number of editors and local news outlets (Bond 171). Also in 2012, Guidelines for the Application of the Carta di Roma were created in order to transform the ideas in the Carta di Roma into practical applications that Italian journalists could follow in order to become more responsible in the coverage of migration issues (Bond 174).

## **Conclusion**

Following the Carta di Roma would bring Italian journalism to a more tolerant position in the discussion of world politics, and as a result, bring about a more accepting Italian population. The most effective way to implement this code of conduct is from the bottom up. As noted by van Dijk in his discussion of race-relations and journalism, “The Press may sustain the system of racism, but individual newspapers or journalists may well challenge this system” (36). This shows us that power comes not only from the larger institutions, but from the collaboration of smaller institutions. These smaller institutions can work to bring about change on a broader level. Local news outlets or even individual journalists can become more accepting of migrants in their writing by focusing on minorities, instead of the majority group, when producing news stories (Bond 68). Smaller news efforts promoting migrants’ rights have been on the rise in the platform of social media. On Instagram, journalist and writer Igiaba Scego follows Notizie Migranti, an intercultural journalism effort, along with various minority publishing groups. The journalist also follows numerous efforts supporting migrants on Twitter, including Black Central Europe and Stranieri in Italia. The act of using social media by these organizations to spread their values gives them a better chance at reaching wider audiences that they might not have access to with traditional media.

Collaboration is also key to bringing about better representation for migrants in the Italian media. This includes collaboration between journalists who embrace the Carta di Roma and are working to implement it in their news stories, and journalists who have not yet reached that stage of awareness in their reporting. Collaboration between journalists and migrants, however, would also be extremely beneficial to the cause as it would lead to better-informed news stories. This can be achieved by using more migrants as references for producing stories about immigration, or more importantly, by hiring more migrant journalists to Italian media teams. In this way, Italian media can provide more diverse perspectives which can then be adopted by broader Italian audiences.

### 3. Accounting for the Growing Migrant Presence in Italian Schools

*Nella costruzione di sistemi di regole e codici di comportamento condivisibili, la scuola è infatti chiamata a dar corpo e significato alla sua dimensione inclusiva.* - Roberta Furlotti<sup>22</sup>

In discussing the incorporation of migrants into Italian society, it is essential to consider the education system as schools have the potential to encourage ideas of acceptance among young native Italians and foreigners that will carry on into their post-schooling lives. Schools, along with the role of relaying academic material, have the very important impact of bringing diverse students together in an ethnically mixed environment that they might not experience otherwise. As a result, schools have a moral responsibility to establish norms of inclusion and acceptance among diverse students in order to create a safe learning environment in which all students will have the same opportunities to realize academic success. This process can be achieved in part by reevaluating the language that teachers use to address migrants and by addressing language acquisition of non-native Italians in the national curriculum.

In the 2014/2015 school year there were 814,187 students with non-Italian citizenship enrolled in Italian schools (Miur 18).<sup>23</sup> The Italian Ministry of Education shows that among students with non-Italian citizenship there is lower educational attainment and poorer academic achievement than among Italians (Barban and Minello 78).<sup>24</sup> Various research has been performed in order to determine the causation of these differences, however, the current body of research behind migrants' academic performances in the Italian school system is very small.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to Roberta Furlotti's *Vorrei Vivere Qui* pp. 141.

<sup>23</sup> This accounts for preschool, primary, and secondary schools in Italy.

<sup>24</sup> Lower academic achievement is measured in inferior scores in the subjects of reading, science and math (Barban and Minello 82).

<sup>25</sup> Research on this issue is largely underdeveloped compared to other European countries (Azzolini 218). This is primarily due to the recentness with which migrants began entering into Italy society (within the last 30 years), and how the nature of migration into Italy has changed to achieve family reunification in more recent decades. As a result of these factors, migrant populations in schools remained small until much more recently, making data on their performances sparse. For more information refer to Davide Azzolini's "A new form of educational inequality?" pp. 198-199.

Further, the research on this subject has thus far focused on the home-life circumstances of migrant students as an explanation for the gap in educational achievement between natives and those with migrant origins. Home-life circumstances are made up of what Davide Azzolini refers to as “traditional explanations,” such as familial support and parental knowledge, socioeconomic background, and language skills (197, 201).<sup>26</sup> These studies place the blame of migrants’ lower educational attainment and achievement on the migrants themselves and their home lives in a fruitless manner that does not provide hope for improvement (given that their backgrounds and home environments are difficult to change). In taking this approach, the studies ignore the possibility that inadequacies in the modern-day Italian school system are responsible for migrant-native performance gaps. I believe that research in this field needs to shift from analyzing migrants’ personal lives to analyzing Italo-centric curricula and teaching methods that are utilized in Italian schools.

The Italian school system uses a national curriculum applied to all areas of the country. The education system is administered by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) which decides a general framework for schools to keep uniformity within Italy (INDIRE 11). MIUR is broken up into three departments: The Department for the Education and Training System, the Department for the Planning and Management of Human, Financial and Capital Resources, and the Department for Higher Education and Research. The Department for the Education and Training System is in charge of the general organization of the school system, including the definitions of educational and training objectives.<sup>27</sup> The current implementation of this department’s objectives reinforces the exclusion of migrants by failing to support extra-

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<sup>26</sup> Refer to Ricucci’s “Second Generations on the Move in Italy” and Barban and White’s “Immigrants’ children’s transition to secondary school in Italy.”

<sup>27</sup> The National Education Council (Consiglio Nazionale della Pubblica Istruzione) is an agency that operates on the national level and assists with the planning and supervision of education policy.

European perspectives. This phenomenon is demonstrated in an interview with an Albanian student found in *Second Generations on the Move in Italy*: “I wrote a short dissertation about Albanian literature, with references to history and the regime, which I presented for my exam. My literature teacher was perplexed and said to me ‘You’re only going to cause problems for the board members. They don’t know anything about Albania’” (74).<sup>28</sup> This student’s experience shows a lack of desire among educators in Italian schools to learn about the countries of origin of migrant students. This results in a lack of understanding between student and teacher and also a lack of respect; both of which could lead to lower academic performances for a migrant student. Ways to combat this trend include training teachers to be more aware of the cultural backgrounds of their students. This, as well as other strategies, are mentioned later on in the chapter.

In this essay I will explore migration flows into Italian school systems in the past few decades, discuss second generation migrants’ performance levels in comparison to native-Italian students, analyze prior studies on the subject that try to explain migrants’ lower performances, provide evidence towards a more productive solution to integrate migrant students, and, finally, analyze current efforts in Italy to restructure Italian school systems in order to accommodate for migrants.

### **Second Generation Migrants**

In the discussion of migrants’ entrance into school systems of a host country, the group typically focused on is “second generation” migrants.<sup>29</sup> The Education Sector of the City of Bologna defines second generation migrants as: youth and adolescent children of migrants or mixed couples who are born and raised in Italy, or children that have migrated to Italy before the

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<sup>28</sup> The name of the student was not provided by the source.

<sup>29</sup> Azzolini calls researching second generation migrants in Italian school systems “crucial” to understanding patterns of integration of migrants into Italian society (218).

age required to begin mandatory schooling”<sup>30</sup> (Comune di Bologna Settore Istruzione). In each year during the period of 1993-2007, five-hundred thousand second generation children were born in Italy (Barban and White 702). This accounts for one third of the children born in Italy during this period (Barban and White 702). In the period from 1997 to 2009, the number of non-Italian students in primary through secondary schools rose from sixty thousand to six-hundred thousand (Barban and White 703). In the period from 2001 to 2009, students with migration backgrounds made up eight percent of primary and lower secondary school populations, less than five percent of upper secondary school students, and only two percent of university enrollment (Barban and Minello 81). This demonstrates a trend towards discontinuation of education for migrants as they go through the Italian education system. Instead of continuing on the education path, many migrants enter directly into the workforce, or vocational schools, which serves to separate them from their Italian counterparts who more typically continue on into higher education.

The major ethnic groups represented in second generation migrant students in Italy are Romanians, Albanians, and Moroccans. In the scholastic year 2014/2015, Romanians made up 19.5 percent of the foreign student population, while Albanians and Moroccans accounted for 13.4 percent and 12.6 percent, respectively (Miur 26). The entrance of Romanians, Albanians, and Moroccans, as well as other nationalities, into the Italian education system in the early 1990s corresponds with the beginning of their coverage in the Italian media and the earliest publications of migrant literature in Italy. The shared space of migrants and natives provided by classrooms may have played a role in bringing attention to migrants in the media and establishing a need for migrant literature in the Italian education system.

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<sup>30</sup> Translation mine.

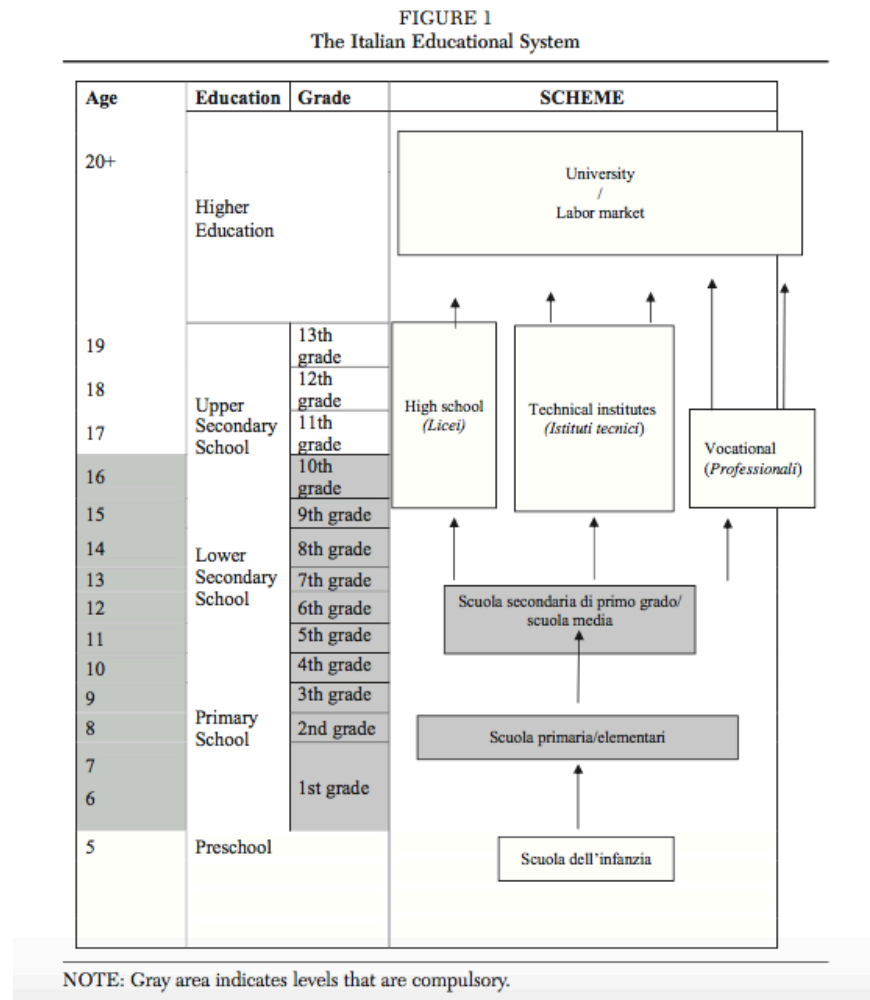


## **The Structure of Italian Education**

In order to understand the differences in educational achievement between migrants and native Italians, one must first understand the structure of the Italian school system (see table below). In Italy, students have three options for upper secondary schooling. The first is traditional high school, the second is polytechnic school, and the third is vocational school. The probability that a student will continue on to higher education is greatly determined by the student's choice of upper secondary school. All upper secondary schooling options in Italy permit students to continue on to university if they choose. However, as stated in Barban and White's "Immigrants' children's transition to secondary school in Italy," only 17.8 percent of all students in Italy who graduate from vocational schools continue on to universities, while 88 percent of students who graduate from traditional high schools continue on to university (703). This trend is due to the fact that vocational school prepares students to be eligible to enter the workforce directly following secondary schooling.

Statistics surrounding the decision of secondary schooling are provided by Barban and White. They show that non-Italian students more often choose to attend vocational schools than traditional high schools. In the scholastic year of 2007/2008, foreign students made up 10.6 percent of vocational schools' student population and only 2.5 percent of populations in traditional high schools. This encourages many migrants in Italy to join the workforce and utilize their vocational training, discontinuing their educational attainment. A lower educational attainment can have the effect of perpetuating negative stereotypes of migrants in Italy. These stereotypes are mainly based upon ideas of inadequacy regarding migrants' abilities to contribute to society. The separation of migrant minorities and native Italians in higher education removes

an opportunity in the school environment to be a site for interaction and collaboration between the two groups. This may lead to continued separation once exiting the Italian school system.



Taken from: Alessandra Minello and Nicola Barban, “The Educational Expectations of Children of Immigrants in Italy” pp. 80

## Disparities in Performance as Explained by Previous Research

In the few studies that examine the differences between migrants’ performances in school and the performances of native Italians, the gap is often attributed to lifestyles of migrants and their families that are not easy to change. Roberta Furlotti’s *Vorrei Vivere Qui* analyzes relationships between native and migrant parents and the relationships between maternal figures

of migrants and schools in determining a migrant student's integration into the Italian school system (141-165). Roberta Ricucci's *Second Generations on the Move in Italy* focuses on the education level of migrant parents, inadequate language proficiency of migrants, migrant families' belief systems in relation to education, informal education performed by migrant families before entering an Italian school, and migrant parents' resources in allowing them to provide academic assistance to their children (24-25).<sup>31</sup> Alessandra Minello and Nicola Barban point to a migrant's country of origin, and the socioeconomic status of migrant families as primary reasons for differences in academic achievement in their study *The Educational Expectations of Children of Immigrants in Italy* (84, 93). Davide Azzolini in his discussion of "traditional explanations" also limits his analyses to socioeconomic backgrounds and family characteristics of migrants (201).<sup>32</sup> All of these sources neglect the role of the Italian education system itself in accommodating migrant students and place the blame on the situation in which the migrant grew up in.

Davide Azzolini's essay is unique in that it points out that family socioeconomic backgrounds of migrants are not the sole determining factor that hold migrants back in their educational attainment (205). However, he does not take his argument far enough. Azzolini points to "a migration-related form of inequality" that explains the education gap with students' migration backgrounds (205, 217). The migration background accounts for: time spent in the country, generational status, and country of origin (217). All of these factors again place the blame on the identity of the migrant.

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<sup>31</sup> Ricucci's research does point out the quality of the teaching program and the adaptation of intercultural teaching methods as potential reasons for migrants' lower performances (24). However, the study states that these factors are less important than familial factors (26).

<sup>32</sup> Many of these studies have used the ITAGEN2 survey, which is the first nationwide survey distributed to natives and children with at least one foreign parent. The survey focuses on aspects such as familial characteristics and the migratory process to explain disparities (Barban and Minello 85).

Given that the population of migrant students increased rapidly in the past few decades, Italian schools have not yet adapted to accommodate diverse cultures. Instead of adapting the curriculum to better integrate migrant students, Italian schools have adopted many quick-fix programs to attempt to place migrants in appropriate educational settings. Azzolini's article mentions one strategy called "lower class enrollment." This is where a student with foreign origins is placed in a grade level behind the class respective to their age (Azzolini 209).<sup>33</sup> Azzolini shows that lower class enrollment can affect their future academic outcomes and can reduce the potential for relationships with classmates (209). As stated in a study by Barban and Minello, "we found that if immigrants' children think that schoolmates are important, they tend to have higher educational ambitions" (99). This shows that lower class enrollment might lead to lower educational ambitions. Their study also points to friendships made in schools as an indicator of integration (99). Therefore, with decreased opportunities to find compatible friends, as is presented with the implementation of lower class enrollment, there will be less integration of migrants into Italian classrooms.

Ricucci, in her study, points to the practice of establishing special classes for foreigners within the Italian education system. She shows that this would hinder them even further from equalizing their educational attainment considering that they will be less exposed to native Italian speakers in their classrooms (26). Another deterrent for migrants in the Italian school system is the tendency for teachers to systematically underestimate the abilities of students with foreign origins (Azzolini 212). Interviews with migrant students in Italy help to prove this trend:

The teachers treat you as if you had come from another planet, as if you were a child who needed to learn how to read and write. We're foreigners, not illiterates, but we don't know Italian. (Ricucci 73)

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<sup>33</sup> Azzolini states in his essay that this practice in Italian school systems is discouraged but in fact often implemented. Refer to Azzolini pp. 209.

This example demonstrates a need for a more accommodating system for those who are not native Italian speakers. Second-generation Somalian Igiaba Scego also expresses sentiments of being misunderstood by her teachers due to her difficulty with the Italian language. In her autobiography, *La mia casa è dove sono*, she describes a scene of her early Italian classroom: “La maestra diceva che Marco era il più bravo, che Vincenzo era spigliato, che Valeria sapeva fare bene i conti, che Silvia era brava a leggere. Di me diceva: ‘la poverina ha la testa fra le nuvole (156).’” The teacher’s idea that Scego was not paying attention during the lesson demonstrates a disregard for Scego’s struggle with the Italian language, which consequentially holds her back compared to native speakers.

Another effort mentioned in Azzolini’s essay is the recent introduction of a cap on the number of students with foreign origins allowed in a class. The cap has been placed at 30 percent (219). This practice has the potential to exclude migrants from a classroom environment that might otherwise welcome them. The effort also ensures that there is a lower presence of migrants in the classroom than natives which may not be representative of a specific region or community surrounding a school.

As shown in Roberta Ricucci’s “Second Generations on the Move in Italy: Children of Immigrants Coming of Age,” the schools where foreign students get the best marks are those in which there is strong leadership, a positive learning environment, high expectations, discipline, an organized teaching body and good relations between teachers and students and teachers and parents (77). Efforts that strive to create these kinds of learning environments are expanded upon in the following section.

## Steps towards Accommodating Migrant Students in Schools

*Vorrei vivere qui: Chiaroscuro della presenza straniera in provincia di Reggio-Emilia* identifies the importance of Italian teachers recognizing diverse cultures in their classrooms in order to let students embrace their own cultural identities (141). Furlotti, suggests approaching this issue by introducing different religions in lessons, other than Catholicism (161). The book also suggests practicing traditional celebrations of migrants' home cultures in Italian classrooms (161). "La prima lezione da imparare è che esistono diverse 'maggioranze' e che ciascuna richiede un'attenzione specifica" (Furlotti 161). These practices will not only have the effect of making migrants more comfortable in Italian classrooms, but also make native students more culturally literate and less likely to adopt stereotypes surrounding migrants.

The City of Bologna recognizes various efforts to encourage the acceptance of diversity in Italian classrooms. In their 2014-2015 "Report of the Activities on the Implementation of the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism 10 Point Plan of Action," the city lists their most recent efforts at accommodating for migrants' presence in the Italian school system.<sup>34</sup> A few of these projects include: "Educating towards the Differences" a project that began in the 2013-2014 school year and which aims to promote awareness of cultural differences by targeting the teaching methods of instructors and families; The Nanci Project, in effect from 2013-2014, that had the goal of facilitating social and linguistic integration of newly arrived third-country minors in Italy. This project implemented specific orientation programs for minors in schools and provided basic linguistic support, including Italian courses for migrants. The Bologna Report

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<sup>34</sup> The European Coalition of Cities Against Racism was an effort launched by UNESCO in 2004 to improve policies addressing racism, discrimination, and xenophobia in various cities throughout Europe. The current president of the Coalition is Benedetto Zacchiroli of the City of Bologna.

also discusses CD/LEI Centro (Consultancy and Services for School and Educational Resources), which is a center in the City of Bologna's Culture and School Department. The center promotes intercultural dialogue by ensuring equal opportunity and encouraging educational success for migrant students. It does this by offering: seminars, training courses, workshops, etc.; counseling services; support for schools to run intercultural projects and join transnational networks; bilingual materials. The efforts are analyzed annually by the City of Bologna to ensure that the city is making consistent efforts to integrate migrants.

## **Conclusion**

Given the powerful potential of schools to portray norms of acceptance among diverse groups in Italian society, it is essential that the Italian curriculum reform in order to do so. The language provided by classroom material and used by teachers in the education system is fundamental not only in shaping openness towards diversity among native students, but also in making foreign students feel welcome. The European Coalition of Cities Against Racism is not limited to the city of Bologna, but rather is joined by seven other Italian cities that spread across various regions. This demonstrates that efforts countering xenophobia and discrimination are alive in Italy and are working to create a more accessible path to higher education for migrants. Higher education can provide migrants with the qualifications necessary to enter professional fields in Italy, including those mentioned in the previous chapters, of literature and journalism.

## **Conclusion**

In these three chapters I have identified various ways in which migrants can be more fairly represented in the fields of Literature, Media, and Education in Italy. Whether it be through expanding Italian literature to support minority works, fighting for more accurate and less emotional coverage of immigrant issues in the media, or reforming didactic methods in Italian schools in order to encourage the appreciation of diversity; the opportunities are bountiful. Given my discussion of labels, I have no desire to limit what it means for these areas of Italian society to be successful in their integration of migrants. Success is something to be felt among migrants themselves, and will vary from case to case.

I use the assorted areas of Literature, Media, and Education in order to show how broadly the impact of migration has been felt across Italy. Literature poses an opportunity for migrants to contribute their creativity and media poses an opportunity for migrants to be recognized for everyday achievements. Education has the potential to be a source of empowerment for migrants while growing up in Italian society. The capacity of these fields in bringing migrants more opportunities at integration is why I have considered them in my thesis. However, their limitations should also be noted.

Of these institutions, I believe that media coverage will be the most difficult to reform given that social media has allowed almost anyone to be a journalist. The breadth of social media in its various mediums (including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) and in its millions of users, makes media a difficult institution to target in terms of establishing a system for ensuring migrants' rights. Given this reasoning, the nature of the Italian education system should be the easiest of these fields to target, considering that Italian schools adhere to a nationally established curriculum. This means, in theory, that if the national curriculum is amended to accommodate



for migrants, schools all over the country will be required to adhere to those norms. Hesitations at amending this field may arise given the values of tradition and Italian history that are central to the education system. These same values are the ones that are holding back migrant integration into Italian literature. Even so, migrant literature has found outlets in minority publishing houses and in its slow introduction into Italian schools. Recognizing these obstacles to integration, and acknowledging that certain language serves to reinforce them, is a huge step in creating space for migrants and their ideas. With this recognition, the many fields that work together to form Italian society can begin to more justly represent the emerging multiethnic population of the nation.

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