

# The Poetics of Displacement

Who are the refugees? Why do they keep coming? Michelle Messina Reale on the lives of people in Sicilian refugee camps

by George De Stefano



Refugees and Sicilians in Siracusa

Aug 17 2017

*Professor and poet Michelle Messina Reale documents the lives of refugees in Sicily by turning their words into verse. Her aim is to create awareness of the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time. "I use poetry because it's evocative, it's humanistic,*

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*and it can be read and understood by everyone," she says.*

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Many Italians regard the refugees and migrant workers who have been arriving in large numbers on Italian shores, mainly in Sicily, as a threat — to Italy's economy, its culture, its demographics, and even its national identity. The newcomers seen as most threatening are Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East. Politicians, right-wing anti-immigrant organizations, and ordinary Italians decry their presence, demonize them, and demand that the influx be reduced or stopped entirely.

But who are the actual human beings who often are reduced to a horde of faceless invaders? Why do they keep coming, and what happens to them when they arrive?

Michelle Messina Reale set out to answer those questions by documenting the lives of people in Sicilian refugee camps and "acceptance" centers (*centri di accoglianza*). She chose an unconventional approach: turning the interviews she conducted with refugees into poetry. In her poetic representations, she uses the exact words of refugees transcribed from the interviews she conducted in camps and centers, mainly in Siracusa and Augusta. She has published some of the poems in academic journals and at her website; in March 2018, they will be published as a book, *Confini*, by **Cervena Barva Press**.

"I use poetry because it's evocative, it's humanistic, and it can be read and understood by everyone," she says. It is the "main methodology" she uses in all her ethnographic research, whether her subjects are refugees in Sicily or members of her own Italian American family. (She is the granddaughter of immigrants from Calabria and Sicily.) A poet who has twice been nominated for the prestigious Pushcart Prize, Reale also is an associate professor at Arcadia University in Glenside, Pennsylvania.



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*Michelle and refugees, classroom*

In March 2011, she accompanied another professor and her students on a trip to Sicily, where, she says, “I became very aware of the situation concerning the refugees.” “I noticed immediately that while refugees and Sicilians moved along in a parallel way, I saw little or no interaction between them. I knew I wanted to discover more about that.” Reale subsequently applied for and received funding from Arcadia for a research project in Sicily. She returned in December 2011, spending the month there conducting interviews with refugees. Every year since, she has continued her research while also bringing groups of her students to do service projects with refugees, including those who are homeless. “I wanted to know why they came, and why they stayed,” she says. She notes that the terms “refugee,” “migrant,” and “immigrant” are “loaded, and highly contested.” “What they might mean in one country they might not mean in another. The use of the right term will influence whether someone is allowed to stay or not. Immigrants are mainly people who come to Sicily because they want better opportunities; they see it as a place where they can work and stay while they’re on to another place. No one pushes them out. Migrants are people who go back and forth; they’ll come to Sicily, stay a while and make a living and then they go home for a while, and then come back to work. But the refugees are people who have met with personal danger,” whether from war and terrorism, or political, religious, ethnic, or gender oppression. As educator Barbara Law observed, “An immigrant leaves his homeland to find greener grass. A refugee leaves his homeland because the grass is burning under his feet.”



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**Refugees**, she says, don't want to be in Sicily. "They stay because they have nowhere else to go. I wanted to get at the basic humanity of these people. At the time [former prime minister Silvio] Berlusconi had called them something derogatory, and I wanted to pluck individual voices and faces from this nameless, faceless mass. Because people weren't understanding the problem as a human problem, they only wanted to see it as a political problem."

"I knew of the pitfalls of doing that kind of work so I had to be very ethical in my questioning, where I questioned them, and what kinds of questions I asked. It wasn't really as straightforward as having conversations. I had to be mindful they weren't just subjects, they were real live people that I often met in periods of great pain, especially the ones who had just arrived or the ones I met in the refugee camps. A lot of them were in varying states of shock, they were despondent, they were angry, they were worried. Some were severely homesick." Reale mostly interviewed refugees, but also some migrant workers, mainly Tunisians. The people with whom she spoke came from the Horn of Africa, Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, and Senegal. She also interviewed Afghanis and Syrians, the latter mostly families in refugee camps. She conducted the interviews in English and Italian, noting that refugees who had been in Sicily for some time had learned Italian, whereas some of the Somalis came to Italy already speaking Italian.

"I have a lot of friends in Sicily who employ refugees and I would ask permission if I could

Law

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*Syrian Refugees family*

speaking with them. I was always very careful about how I approached them and where I met them. I wanted them to feel comfortable. And I always stressed that they had no obligation to talk to me and that not talking to me would not jeopardize their asylum applications in any way – something they were very afraid of. Then, it was like snowball sampling – I'd talk to one refugee and say if you have any friends who would like to speak with me, please

let me know, and that happened. I became close with a core group of refugees I followed for a while and got to know them beyond the level of the basic questions I would ask. So, I didn't really have any difficulty." That's not to say that everyone she approached was willing to talk. "I met with one man who was absolutely beside himself with anger," she recalls. "He said he was so sick of people, my type of people, white women who wanted to ask stupid questions. He said to me, 'How the hell do you think we feel?' He said, 'Get out of here, I don't ever want to see you again.' I saw that as a good sign because it was a sign of agency, that a refugee would feel the strength to push back. I really admired him, I asked his forgiveness for interfering with his private life and I wished him well."

Reale says she quickly discovered that the refugees' lives did not conform to conventional wisdom. "The common misconception is that the refugees all are poor and without jobs, drifters, when in fact the opposite often is true," she notes. "Many hold several degrees, they've been teachers, engineers, physicians. They had homes, families that loved them. it's a very common misconception that they're all downtrodden. Unfortunately, the most downtrodden will never be able to get out of their countries. They won't have the resources to be able to do that. But it's the people who have education, some mobility, and some money" who can leave. Another misconception is that once the refugees arrive in Sicily, the worst of their ordeal is over. "People think the treacherous journey is the worst part. And it is terrible. But to me the worst part is when they land. Then they are shell-shocked into a society that largely does not want them and has no idea what to do with them, and that feels that they

threaten the Italian culture. They have all these strikes against them, they're a very vulnerable population.”

After being processed through the refugee camps, the new arrivals go to centers, “where there’s a place to sleep, a kitchen to cook in.” The centers are run mainly by local women. “There are all sorts of problems in that regard; the pushing of the Catholic religion on predominantly Muslim men was hard for me to swallow. One Christmas there was a party for the refugees and most if not all were Muslims. The women asked everyone to stand up and one of the women led us in the Our Father. One of the first things she said was, ‘You are in a Catholic country now and this is how we pray.’ You have African men who have a sense of themselves and a deep sense of pride. Then you have Italian women who are either willfully ignorant of other peoples’ cultures or simply ignorant, who are basically telling these men when they can eat, what time lights are out, what time they have to come back to the center before the doors are locked. It was difficult for me to watch.”



*Michelle and Mody*

“That doesn’t mean that there aren’t a lot of good people in Sicily who are working to alleviate their suffering and pain. But like anything in Italy, progress is slow, changing people’s minds is slow. That’s one of my great frustrations. If it’s hard for everyday Italians to get things done, imagine how the refugee feels. Just doing simple things is not easy for them. They can’t find housing or jobs, or they’re given jobs that are extremely dangerous, where they’re working 12 hours in the hot sun with no access to water. It’s illegal to do so, but bosses, to threaten them to work, will often take their passports or other official papers. “The European Union



law known as the **Dublin Regulation** requires asylum seekers and refugees to seek refugee status in the first country they arrive in. “With Italy being one of the easiest ports,

especially from Libya, it ends up being the first place they land and where they have to apply for asylum,” Reale says.

“Often their applications can take years and they’re stuck.

They’re not treated well in Sicily. I’ve seen buses drive right by groups of refugees who were waiting to get on.

I’ve been on buses where Sicilians would hold their noses when refugees get on. I

always tell this story because it’s so emblematic – I was sitting with a refugee outside at a café in Siracusa and we both ordered lemon soda.

Mine came with a glass, and

his came with one of those tiny paper cups that you rinse your mouth with at the dentist. I looked at it, and he saw me looking at it, and he said,

‘This happens all the time.’” Men and women refugees also are exploited by **the Mafia**, which has not only benefited economically from their

presence by bribing officials and securing contracts to manage the accommodation of refugees; Cosa Nostra also has brought some into their criminal activities, such as prostitution and drug dealing.

Those opposed to the refugees’ presence often claim that they take jobs away from Italians because employers are willing to pay them less. Given

**high unemployment in Sicily**, it’s not surprising this argument finds fertile ground. In 2016, Sicily’s jobless rate was 22 percent —twice the national rate. In the Siracusa province, where Reale did most of her research, it was 24 percent, with youth unemployment nearly 56 percent.

“So,” observes Reale, “in this one place I know, you already have people who have no jobs. But believe me, when refugees come, they are not

doing jobs any Italian would take. They are working picking tomatoes 12 hours in the hot sun, they’re sleeping outside, they’re vulnerable to

violence, they’re doing odd jobs for people. What I personally have witnessed is the exact opposite of the story some Sicilians like to tell. I’m

not the last word on anything, I’m just giving you my experience. My experience is no, they’re not taking anyone’s jobs. It’s another scare

tactic. That unemployment rate is high for so many reasons that have



*Syrian girl and boys*

absolutely nothing to do with refugees” — mainly the longstanding inability of the Italian state to provide for its people.

Reale acknowledges that the numbers of refugees have been high in recent years. In the last week of June 2017 alone, more than 10,000 refugees from Africa arrived in Italy; the total since the beginning of the year is 85,000. Although the Italian response to the crisis can and should be criticized, **the European Union has not done enough** to help Italy bear what has been a disproportionate burden. For Reale, Italian immigration to America and the refugee and migrant influx to Italy have something in common: displacement. She grew up in Ambler, a heavily Italian American suburb of Philadelphia. “The town is made up mostly of *Calabresi* from Maida. Most of my classmates were Italian. This was in the early 70s, when we had a huge influx of Italian immigrants in our town. I remember seeing my classmates in my school right after they got here from Maida, with no English whatsoever, and how sad they looked, and how the Irish nuns really gave them a hard time. I think of my own grandfather who came here from Sicily and how he felt displaced his entire life.” Asked what she hopes to achieve by documenting, through poetry, the lives of refugees in Sicily, Reale replies, “To be honest I’m not sure. The work I do is very humble and I’m not sure what good it’s doing. I’m hoping to explicate the lives of refugees” to “influence policy and effect change.” She also hopes to “open people’s eyes and create awareness” of the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time.

## Suleiman

Can someone please tell me the meaning of

*accoglienza* and *integrazione*

for the *immigrato*?

Just send me back on the street

For the sake of Allah. My mother

would hold her head in her hands

all the day if she knew of

my life like this.

They tell me to leave the center

And stuff 500 Euro in my pocket

But that money cannot buy me the

only thing that I want:



a job.

My cap is the only

Roof over my head,

Even IT has a job.

(From: Reale, M. (2015). “We Never Thought It Would Be Like This’: Refugees’ Experiences in Sicily.” *The Qualitative Report*, 20(1), 107-114. <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss1/8>)

## Deep Sleep

My dreams? Please don’t ask me of such things.

I forgot them long ago. But I will tell you something I cannot forget.

The water was black and filthy smelling.

My body soon swelled from the sun and the heat.

I went into a coma, but I was the lucky one.

Three men went crazy because in that dinghy

they lost wives and children. The two children who remained lost their mothers.

One child was from Afghanistan. One child was from Lebanon.

We could not help the children. We could not help ourselves.

(From: Reale, M. (2015). Rolling Waves and Forgetfulness. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 8(2), 256-263)

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