IMMIGRANT STORIES
Rising Above the Treacherous Promised Land

Tutorial II, I.F. Galama
S1671235
Begeleider:
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Over there all the women wear silk and satin to their knees
And children, dear, the sweets, I hear, are growing on the trees
Gold comes rushing out the rivers straight into your hands
When you make your home in the American land

The McNicholas, the Posalskis, the Smiths, Zerillis too
The Blacks, the Irish, Italians, the Germans and the Jews
They come across the water a thousand miles from home
With nothing in their bellies but the fire down below

They died building the railroads, they worked to bones and skin
They died in the fields and factories, names scattered in the wind
They died to get here a hundred years ago, they're still dying now
Their hands that built the country we're always trying to keep out

(American Land, Bruce Springsteen)
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Introduction

History has some ironic quality every now and then. During The Great migration countless Italians traveled to America, in pursuit of happiness, wealth and a life free from starvation. In America they met with racism and stereotypes though. Italians were considered not white, dangerous, uncivilized and unhygienic, hardly any better than negroes. Since a decade or two Italy itself became a destination country for the hungry and the poor. The rapidly growing number of immigrants is confronted with seemingly identical stereotypes. They are not white, exotic and dangerous. Just like Italian settlers a hundred years ago, they don’t belong to the superior Western World. The faint scent of irony in this was the main incentive for writing this article: a comparison of immigrant experiences, separated from each other by, give or take a century and a different destination.

To compare migrant experiences one should first have to admit that it is impossible. Experiences stay unknown to the world until they are narrated. Life and the story of life are not the same of course. The transformation into a narration simultaneously obscures and reveals the actual experience. By telling a story something new is created. Words add meaning and, at the same time, are incapable of duplicating reality. Still, how else should one compare experiences if narrations cannot be used? Naturally the stories written and told by immigrants are valid to do so. They are perhaps the only useful sources, for how would statistics, for example, ever capture experience? The voices of immigrants are heard through literature and other narrations. By telling their stories immigrants find a way to counter stereotypes, to be heard and become a person instead of a foreigner, or worse, a nobody lost in history.

In Migration Italy Graziella Parati tries to define, in her postmodern words, the importance of migration literature:

The relevance of (migration literature lies in fact in its role as a corpus of unerasable texts that enable unpredictable articulations of cultural hybridization, that rigid boundaries cannot contain .... Literature is, therefore, a possible agent of social change, able to articulate what is absent from dominant narratives.

This article is though shy of any fight for hybridization or against dominant narrative. A lot is lost in the postmodern flood of politicizing every word written. Migration literature is perhaps more interesting on its own merits, and is in essence apolitical. There is more to it than changing a stereotype here and there. It’s about hard life, the road to the promised land, belonging nowhere, deception, survival and finally some kind of conquest: a piece of hard earned land, a home or a permit. Immigrants are real people, with real stories. Their dreams, adventures, despair and disappointments in life are worthwhile. It is fascinating, in its own right, to read about people who have the guts to leave everything behind, facing unknown territory and prejudice. Brokenhearted people, longing for a home they cannot go back to, living in the badlands every day to stay alive.

Studying migrant literature is, due to the diversity of its sources, not without complexion. In this article several types of immigrant stories are used: autobiographies of immigrants, semi-autobiographies of second-generation writers writing about their youth and parents, diaries, articles and interviews. The work of a novelist writing about his immigrant mother differs endlessly in style and perspective with that of an immigrant making notes in
his diary about his daily experiences, or with an interview of an old man who is narrating ad-hoc about his immigrant-life in retrospective for an oral history project. Yet, to compare stories of the great Migration with experiences of immigrants today, differences in style and perspective are not the only complications. One should as well consider the giant time-leap.

The world was a different place a century ago. Migrating then was not the same as it is now. Dozens of articles could be written about how globalization in the twentieth century brought about countless chances for migrants. Cars and planes reduced the impact of distance. Televisions and internet increased knowledge of destinations. Phones and digitalization radically improved communication with the ones left behind. People no longer travel to a New World. Meanwhile, migrant policies established new boundaries for immigrants. Bureaucratization and the expansion of administration hinder people to travel freely or choose a destination to settle and work. Laws pursue people into illegality, for migration has become a worldwide phenomenon of political concern. Substantial though the differences might be, migrants then and now still have a lot in common. Migrant stories tend to have some inevitable elements, independent from time, destination, style and perspective and unaffected by globalization. The commonness of these stories constitutes the structure of this article.

What follows is a comparison, based on literature and other narrations, of immigrants in Italy in the most recent past and Italians seeking their luck in America during The Great Migration. The consecutive paragraphs in this article are composed in accordance with the basic narrative of migrant literature. The common immigrant story starts with farewell and a journey that rips life in two pieces of before and after. Paragraph one various authors give account of their journey and the pain, joy and fear belonging to farewell and traveling for good to a new destination. Paragraph two shows how myths and dreams of a promised land are broken through disillusion and discrimination and how this makes migrants suffer loss of identity. The time of hardships and sorrows succeeding the initial disillusion is addressed in paragraph three. As will become evident, life for migrants is seldom without a fight. Finally, in paragraph four, for some immigrants hard times are overcome and some melancholic joyfulness is found or a modest victory achieved. This short article is really rather modest in its approach. It simply gives a voice to dozens of, mostly unnoticed, immigrant writers and narrators. Together these authors create a common immigrant story and hopefully give a glimpse into the heart of immigrant life.

1. The Journey

The best way to uproot a plant without stripping it is to give it a sharp jerk.  
(Carmine Biagio Iannace, Italian immigrant on his way to America)

Often people migrate out of necessity, to earn some money for the family, escape poverty or oppression. Sometimes they migrate for adventurous reasons, or because they dream of a land of plenty. In most cases a combination of causes push migrants to the unknown. Whatever the cause though, farewell is rarely easy. This is quite bitterly described by Luigi Toniazzo, heading for Merica: “It was precisely good Friday of the year 1893 when I was leaving my village of birth and felt my heart breaking with pain of leaving my homeland I felt like an innocent condemned to death. After many kisses, hand shaking, weeping and sighting, I had
to go on foot until Marostica, greeting for the last time all the friends I met. My head was broken so that I forgot twice my coat so good for the trip.”

More than a century later, on 24 March 1989, also a Friday, Mohamed Bouchane sits in a train that just departed from Rabat station (Morocco). Earlier that day he said his family farewell, now he is on his way to find fortune in Italy. He seems nostalgic in advance and writes in his notebook: “Now that it’s over, though, I’d like to go back – just for a few hours – so I could still be at home. Everyone was at my uncle’s house – my cousins, my sisters, and my mother. All there to say good-bye to me and to spend my last hours in Morocco together. I had a lump in my throat the whole day, knowing that I would have to say good-bye to them. I didn’t want that moment to arrive, ever. We spent the whole time laughing and joking about this adventures of mine, about my trip to Italy: my relatives seemed determined to have me forget about things for a while.” Then his inevitable departure. “Before making up my mind, I go in and out of the room, where everybody has gathered, three times, each time with tears in my eyes and each time determined to wipe them away so they won’t see my emotion. Though I managed to do this, my mother burst into tears. I will never forget it.”

After farewell, the real journey begins. Often a long, exhausting boat trip troubled by storms, poor living conditions and fear for immigration services. Immigrants tend to experience their harsh journey as a true rite of passage. The ship carrying them to the other side divides life in before and after. The past has become immobile and lives on merely as memory. The future is as unknown and promising as it will ever be, for the voyage washed away the last remnants of the former life. At least for Pietro Riccobaldi it was like this. With America in sight he writes: “I became so happy I did not know what I was doing. I washed myself, I shaved, and I prepared my soul for this jump into a new life.” Even a heavy storm can be metaphorically used as cleansing of the soul, as does Gregorio Sciaia: “Terrible storm for four days, that nauseated all the passengers with seasickness, in all corners of the ship you saw people laying on the floor and all sick, the women especially seemed souls coming out of purgatory with disheveled hair that were pitiful to see, it looked like a torture in every corner of the Ship, and so from one day to the next we went on and crossed the Atlantic, the sea that before Cristoforo Colombo was considered an immense abyss without end.”

For some, crossing the Atlantic would become a lovely childhood-memory to never forget. Victor Tartarini was interviewed for the *Ellis Island and the Immigrant experience* oral history project and nostalgically recalls the exultant atmosphere on the ship that took him from Italy to America. “They played the accordion, and had a mandolin. A lot of Italians like mandolin, accordion, guitar. They used to dance every night upstairs, you know, singing blablabla. Once every while used to come down some of the fellows, you know, a little ubriaca, happy, you know what I mean. It was happy family-like. Everybody was so happy to come in these country, that eh, eh was a joy to watch. Something beautiful, you know, there was another world. Oh, they were all exiting.” The happiest moment was when the ship docked at Ellis Island and the passengers saw for the first time, still at some distance, the face of New York. Tararini, in his charming Italian accent, speaks about his first impression of America as if he landed yesterday. “We saw statue of liberty, my god, you know what I mean, we saw statue of liberty, that was something beautiful, I knew I was in America you know, I came in this country, ah come on. They started to sing Italian, getting ubriaco, dance around, it was a beautiful time. Because I was a little kid, I used to watch them, you know.”
Enthusiasm is easily overshadowed though by fear for what is coming, for the unknown seems to provoke childish joy as well as gloomy fright. This anxiety is beautifully captured in *Hamadi’s Promise* by Saidou Moussa Ba. In his autobiographical novel Ba tells about his little brother, who, in the author’s footsteps, chooses to migrate from Senegal to Italy. On a ship somewhere on the Mediterranean Sea, surrounded by dozens of other illegal immigrants, fear kicks in. “In reality he felt anxious, his nerves tense. Maybe he caught the general tension. The deck was crowded, but nobody breathed a word while the large white ship completed a full turn, left the port of La Goulette and headed towards the straights of Sicily. The only sounds that were heard besides the humming of the engines were the voices of the crew and the cries of some babies. All the other passengers remained in silence, with their eyes pointed towards the coast, towards the hills of Tunisia that drifted away and were lost in the night.”¹¹ Then the writer takes the overview, as if he sees the ship from above. On deck a crowd of migrants, surrounded by nothing but water. “Each had his own story, each his own pain, each his own hope, and the white ship in the darkness of the night was like a huge petal that carried all over the waves, those pains and those hopes that added and melted together into one, to spill them onto the land, week after week, month after month. I know each and every one of those stories.”¹²

By far most nerve wracking for illegal immigrants is the moment they are confronted with immigrant service, or passport control. When Ba’s younger brother arrives at the dock of the port of Trapani he has to show his papers to two agents. “In those instants, which seemed extremely long to him, his heart was beating so strongly that he thought it was going to explode in his chest. In the end the men gave everything back to him and they sent him back, to the group of the rejected.”¹³ Rejection or approval can seem so random to the immigrants that they start to become superstitious. In his bestseller *I am an Elephant Salesman* Pap Khouma describes his arrival. While the plane is descending, and the captain calmly informs the passengers about the weather in Italy, he and his fellow Senegalese immigrants nervously employ strategies to assure that they won’t be sent back right away. “One after the other, we fish around in the bottoms of our bags and pockets containing a lucky charm liquid. We pour it into our palms and then splash in on our faces. Someone reads verses from the Koran, those that the marabout had shown him before he said goodbye to relatives and friends. One, two, three times. If I read the verses five times I will be allowed into the country. Or maybe if I read them seven times. It depends. They had also recommended that I pay attention to which foot I put down first as I step onto Italian soil: the left or the right, depending on the day, because the left is not always the good one and the right the bad one. It depends.”¹⁴ Perhaps a more rational strategy to avoid suspicion of immigration services is used by Riccobaldi: “On the ocean I spoke little. The fear that they could understand my intentions continued to worry me, therefore I pretended to be a little dumb so that they thought: “where do you think that cretin can go?””¹⁵ Due to his acting skill or not, he manages to enter American soil. Seven years later his dream comes true as he acquires American citizenship: “Those were the happiest days of my life, I could not believe that it was true…I wasn’t “undesirable” anymore, but only a foreigner.”¹⁶

Having now finished the hard journey, passed border control and reached the country of destination, the real story of migration yet has to begin.
2. Promise and Betrayal

To Merica…to Merica. This is the speech you hear, stronger than any other preoccupation, you hear it everywhere in these country places, in pubs, in private houses, in the streets and even in church…Merica…Merica. If the owner asks for one more cent, Merica; if a light hail falls by disgrace, Merica; if sometimes you feel like getting plenty of tobacco, or wearing a watch with a big chain, Merica; you find everything and easily in Merica. (Emilio Franzina)

The Promised Land does not tend to keep its promises, and rather often leaves the immigrant embittered and in need of a new identity. About a month after his heartbreaking farewell Mohamed Bocuchane again writes in his notebook: “I had gone from the tranquil life that I had in Morocco, where I studied biology, to the life of a street person. In my city, I often saw homeless people, forced to scrounge a place to sleep, something to eat. I never would have thought I would end up like them.”

Migrants are obviously full of expectations about their destination. Friends might have talked about it, perhaps they’ve heard fantastic stories, or read about it, seen it on television, or only on a map. They have dreamed and fantasized about it, still their destination is very much unknown to them. Traveling to a new place, one hardly ever finds the expected. The Westerns World tends to represent everything that’s good, plenty, modern, beautiful, rich and carefree. It is the land of milk and honey so to say, equally true for impoverished and suppressed farmers from the south of Italy at the turn of the nineteenth century as for immigrants right now risking their lives to reach Sicily or Lampedusa. Somehow, in a timespan of roughly hundred years, Italy managed to make a shift west, at least on a mental map. Or, as Maria Verongo, an Ethiopian immigrant-writer, puts it more concise: “Italy was our America”. Reaching her America though, she finds out white-man’s life is a little different than imagined: “At Fiumicino airport the porters had white skin. In the bathrooms the attendants were white. In the hotel the chambermaids were white, the waiters, the shoe shiners, the sweepers had white skin. What a shock! In Asmara every white woman had at least two black letté (maids).”

Mohsen Melliti, a Tunisian dreaming of a better life in Italy, is possibly even more surprised when he arrives in Naples. He experiences severe cognitive dissonance. As he wanders around Piazza Garibaldi he realizes that he has reached a place worse than his own country: “… nobody had fair skin, everybody was like me. They did not differ in anything; they had dark hair like me. Girls there were like ours, and also the women and children. The station surprised me quite a bit; it was big and clean. I looked around and left. There was a big square, buses, taxis, a lot of movement and people. On that square there was a market; on the sidewalks merchandise was displayed: dresses, shoes, appliances, objects for the house, books, new and old, various objects. There were people betting money; food displayed in the open on a counter, and prostitutes. The old buildings had not been repainted for many years. I told myself: ‘this city is poorer than my country, I must leave as soon as possible.’” Hence, expectation and myth easily raise disillusion.

Few words have larger mythical proportions than America. For Italians simply: Merica. Few dreams are stronger than the American. According to Carl Gustav Jung myths are compensatory productions of the collective unconscious. Perhaps for poor, southern-Italian farmers the idea ‘merica’ compensated for everything that was lacking: freedom,
enough food, comfort and money. In an epoch before the collective use of mass-media, airplanes and telephones America could as well be extraterrestrial. Immigrants in those days moved to another planet, where everything would be completely different, better most of all. America was one big promise. A promise, for example, to young Joseph Pagano. Before he moved to Colorado himself he watched his father read letters from family members already in America. All the neighbors and villagers wanted to read these letters as well. “They used to gather in my grandfather’s house whenever one of the magical missives from the New World arrived, listening again and again to the incredible accounts of America which the letters contained, nodding to themselves, muttering aloud, and occasionally giving vent to delighted, incredulous exclamations. America: it was a name that fraught with breathtaking delight, a vast, nebulous, glamorous world which in their imagination held all the delicious warmth of that other paradise which Father Grivaldi promised them every Sunday morning.”

No wonder Joseph decided to follow thousands of other poor Italians on their way to substitute paradise.

The American myth is strong and immigrants are reluctant to admit that it does not keep its promises. Old-aged interviewee Victor Tartarini joyfully formulates the essence of this feeling: “A lot of people, they brag about America, a little bit was lying, a little bit was true you know, but us people, us poor people , we thought that American was… But don’t get me wrong I really love America, but us Italian people thought America was gold. That’s it, that’s it, they thought everybody was rich. They thought nobody had to work, well I worked hahahaha.”

At times, wish and reality cannot be further apart, thus becomes evident in Camillo Cianfarra’s early autobiographical account An Immigrant’s Memoir. While his relatives in Italy probably expect him to be rich by now he hardly earns a living. “Ah, if only my old friends and schoolfellows could see me, those who link America to all their dreams of fortune and glory and look with an envious eye at all whom destiny forces to depart! Fortune? Wealth? Yes, precisely these: a pot of glue, a brush, a pile of deceitful labels, and six dollars a week that, once I’ve paid my room and board, leaves me two dollars and twenty-five cents that I could save if I didn’t smoke and were happy to give up collars and starched cuffs. And how long will this life last? Two, four, six months, a year?”

Apparently America is not an earthly paradise and therefore disappointment is about inevitable. The trains do not really fly high up in the air, the streets are not paved with gold, the trees do not grow dollar leaves and not everyone has a job and an easy life. In The Fortunate Pilgrim, a novel about his immigrant mother, Mario Puzo beautifully captures this space between dream and reality. “America, America, what dreams are dreamed in your name? What sacrilegious thoughts of happiness do you give birth to? There is a price to be paid, yet one dreams that happiness can come without terrible payments.” Puzo’s mother and her neighbors, during long summer night gathering at the square in front of their Brooklyn tenement, continually curse America: “At the end of each story each woman recited her requiem. Mannaggia America! – Damn America.”

The broken myth though is better than no dream at all: “Here there was hope, in Italy none.”

Immigrant disillusion of course consists of more than shattered myth and unreal expectations about streets of gold and heavenly happiness. Broken dreams or not, from the moment of arrival on life is often hard on immigrants. A house to live in is not guaranteed and a job hard
to find. If a job is found it may be physically tough or humiliating. Family back home might expect money to be sent. The immigrant looks and feels different from the happy and rich people he sees around him. His skin color might be diverging, maybe he looks shabby, doesn’t speak the language or perhaps he is stunned by the cold culture of his destination country. Most of all, there’s quite a chance the immigrant does not feel welcome at all, for he is being stereotyped and insulted. Discrimination evidently enhances disillusion like nothing else. Cosma Sullivan for example experienced this. She was an immigrant like so many others, and was interviewed for a large oral history project concerning The Great Migration. She did not find the expected: “When we were in Italy people would say, ‘Oh, you’re going to a wonderful country, you’ll find money in the streets, and you wouldn’t dare pick them up because the American people would look down on you. And of course, we found nothing like that.” What she did find was something completely different. In contradiction with Americans, Italians usually had handmade shoes. Apparently in those days it was not considered a luxury to have handmade Italian shoes, for it made Cosma and others recognizable as Italian immigrants. “They used to call us ‘Guinea’ and ‘Wops.’ Tear our clothes off our backs, and that went on for years. And, uh, when we first came here, no Catholic, I’m a Catholic, no Catholic came near us.”

Stereotypically Italian immigrants are known to be either uncivilized farmers, street vendors, artists or criminals. They have dark skin, a mean looking face, funny clothes and an exaggerated accent. Sure enough they have a mustache and probably they wear a hidden dagger as well. In all likelihood they have criminal intent. In his autobiographical Dago Red Italian-American writer John Fante recalls how much it hurts for a kid to be called a Dago in public. Meanwhile he ironically confirms one of the stereotypes about Italian immigrants. “I don’t like the grocer. My mother sends me to his store every day, and instantly he chokes up my breathing with the greeting: ‘Hello, you little Dago! What’ll you have? So I detest him, and never enter his store if other customers are to be seen, for to be called a Dago before others is a ghastly, almost physical humiliation. My stomach expands and contracts and I feel naked. I steal recklessly when the grocer’s back is turned. I enjoy stealing from him.” Immigrants not only fight for a living but even more so for acceptance and against inferiority. This is not less true for contemporary immigrants from all over the world trying to settle in Italy. Conform Italian immigrants a century ago, the typical black foreigner in Italy is an illegal street vendor. Everyone who has ever been to Italy knows them. Like cobblestone pavement they belong to the streets of touristic Italian cities. Black men in silly clothes selling sun glasses, umbrellas and small objects of little use. Always ready to instantly pack all their belongings to run away from arriving carabinieri. They move around in the darkness on the edge of town as if they were ghosts, entities different from the money spending tourists and the hospitable, charming Italians. Their lack of fair skin, a respected job and a permit entitle others to offend or neglect them at will. This might be a stereotype but Pap Khouma, who, due to his superstition or not, entered Italy without a problem, actually became street vendor. He sold little wooden elephants, and describes the hardships of such a life: “The trouble is that we can never defend ourselves because we are illegal and the law is against us. Everybody knows it. Like that elegant gentleman who one night blackmailed us: ‘Either you give me the goods at the price I want or I’ll call the carabinieri.’ Or that guy with the crewcut who makes
fun of you, mimicking your voice, your movements, ‘Vu’ cumprá, vu’cumprá?’ or “wan da buy, wan da buy?” ‘Ignorants,’ I say to myself. No one can hear me and the insult stays inside of me, I drag it around with me for the rest of the night.”

Identities are lost in the midst of migrations. Disillusion for a lot of immigrants culminates in a sense not belonging anywhere. The place of birth is left behind and no longer defines one’s identity. The country of destination breaks its promises and makes the immigrant feel unwanted. Life is tougher than ever imagined and nostalgia for the now idealized homeland consumes hope and replaces it with desperation. For some immigrants, belonging nowhere and the loss identity is the breaking point. Journalist Jadranka Hodzic, who fled the war in Bosnia, took her own life on the beach of Rimini and left this note: “You settle temporarily and you think that you have made it, because you think that the most important thing was to escape from a war from which you are separated only by the sea. Suddenly you understand that you don’t belong to anyone, not even yourself. Your life is off-track; you are guilty without being guilty of anything. You feel like Kafka: the light in your eyes is dimmed while you look at the sea. You imagine what’s on the other side of the Adriatic Sea, on that coast that once made you feel who you are, and now you cannot step on that land without asking for special permission.”

Other immigrants never reach such a breaking point. They settle, fight destiny, earn a living and have children. Still, they will always feel different from the rest. Even their own children, born and raised in their destination country, can be strangers to them. Puzo was born in the U.S.A. In *The Fortunate Pilgrim* his mother contemplates: “America, America, what different bones and flesh and blood grow in your name? My children do not understand me when I speak, and I do not understand them when they weep.”

3. **This Hard Land**

She was a hardened veteran to disaster and her spirit was not weakened by young and foolish dreams. She fought now as one desperately fights merely to remain alive. (Mario Puzo, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*).

After the life changing journey, in spite of many a disillusion, the immigrant has no choice but to come to terms with the treacherous land of hope and dreams. Life goes on, especially for the immigrant. He has not the luxury to dwell on the past and his broken heart, for life will not be easy on him before long. Hardness of life encompasses a great deal of the immigrant story, a story often at the fringes of society. A roof and enough money to live are not self-evident in the country of destination, nor are respect and a little bit of human touch. No matter how hard life is, there can be no surrender though, for there is nothing to fall back on. The immigrant simply needs to be tougher than the rest and accept all jobs that come across. He is the jack of all trades, possibly heavily overeducated, working for bare wages in factories, on the streets or in the mines. Exhaustion and humiliation are as common as exploitation and empty wallets. Some immigrants are stretching the edge of honest ways of making money or become downright criminals. Women sometimes end up working as prostitutes. Anty Grah for example, in her award-winning *The Chronicle of a Friendship*, tells the story of her best
friend Aïta, one of the most beautiful girls of Abidjan. When Aïta migrates to Paris communication between the two friends fades until Anty decides to leave Ivory Coast as well. She wants to find her old friend. Though Aïta tries to avoid contact, finally they meet. It turns out Aïta works as a call-girl. Anty Grah, now living in Rome, concludes: “Life can change you, especially life in Europe. It is so hard that weak people can make the wrong choices. Here there is nobody, you have to take care of yourself.”

Hardness of immigrant life culminates in Princessa, the autobiographical short-story of Fernanda Farias De Albuquerque. Growing up as a transsexual in Brazil, oppressed by her family, she expects to find freedom in Europe. Yet, what she finds is work as a prostitute in Milan, HIV and drug addiction. De Albuquerque writes her story in prison after she is convicted for attempted homicide on the landlady of the brothel she worked for. Her account of living in Europe is perhaps as bitter as it gets: “I streak my eyes with colors and cake lipstick onto my mouth. It’s no longer the beautiful ritual. I perfume my body and take it to the final clearance sale. I spit sperm and grease my ass. I snort heroin; I have no future. Europe is burnt out; I grop in the dark. I don’t know what I want anymore, nor why I do it. It never turns to day, and I don’t know who I am. … In Europe, without any effort, one arrives into the arms of the demon, with a whisper and in silence. Here, one doesn’t die loudly, shot or stabbed, amongst shrieks and scissor jabs. Here, one disappears ever so quietly, in a whisper. Silently. Alone and desperate. From AIDS and from heroin.”

Though the hardness of life emerges in practically every story told by an immigrant, De Albuquerque’s encounter with Europe is quite extreme. Migrants are not inherently confronted with HIV, prostitution and narcotics. More common perhaps is the story of Mohamed Bouchane, every now and then writing in his notebook his new experiences as an immigrant in Italy. His depart was heartbreaking and the destination country a disillusion. As a biology student he had never imagined himself living off the streets: “I Can’t deal with the trains, the sleeping cars and the stations anymore”.

Though unpleasantly surprised by the toughness of immigrant-life, he accepts his new role, and starts to fight for improvement. He depends on free meals in the mosque or in the church and sleeps in dormitories. While he tries to obtain a permit he switches one undeclared job after another and attends Italian lessons in the evenings. His first job is the distribution of flyers. His long working days in Como are extra hard during Ramadan: “It’s a pretty city. It would undoubtedly seem nicer if I were seeing it as a tourist. Work is still heavy. It doesn’t jibe with fasting. In Morocco it’s different: during Ramadan, workdays finish at 1:00 P.M. Here I have to work until evening.” No matter how many flyers he delivers a day it seems impossible to make a living out of it. “They pay me seventeen lire for every flyer delivered. I earn very little because I don’t manage to deliver more than fifteen hundred flyers each day. Today, though, Allal explained the secret of his speed to me. As soon as the driver goes away, he and his friends take entire packages and throw them into the sewers.” Bouchane decides to cheat too, but feels guilty for religious reasons. He consults his Imam who instructs him to stay honest. Yet, cheating is still too tempting: “When I would return with packages of undistributed flyers, I was scolded and earned little. Now that I cheat they are happy and I earn more.”

Some time later Bouchane washes car-windows at a traffic light: “These were terrible days, spent arguing with motorists in the sun, suffocated by exhaust fumes. Days that left me with injuries.” One day a fellow Moroccan throws an empty soda can at his head and then
pulls over to quarrel: “‘Do you speak Arabic?’ I was dumbstruck. ‘I speak Arabic, English, Italian and French. If you want to talk there’s no problem. Why throw a can at me? I’m not having fun at this stoplight, I’m doing this to earn a living. I want an honest job. Otherwise, why would I ask every construction vehicle that stops here if there is work for me?’” Naturally, stories like this haven’t happened only to me.”

Bouchane walks to a nearby bar: “I took two rolls, a yoghurt, and a half liter of milk. Then I threw my window-washing sponge into a garbage can. I finally decided to stop doing this job too and to look for a better one.” In the months that follow he holds several positions. Bouchane, continually struggling and barely making a living, works for an automobile garage, is temporally construction worker and amongst other things Arabic teacher for a private family. Meanwhile the idea takes root in his mind that he might be able to publish his notes as a diary: “I don’t think that anyone would be interested in my story. However, I feel like I have fallen prey to a strange uneasiness. I am moved and keep thinking about my evening notes being transformed into a book.”

Perhaps a little more than others, immigrants are obliged to fight destiny. Figuratively they fight for recognition, survival, a living or a normal life. Occasionally though immigrants have to be prepared to fight quite literally. Thus becomes clear for instance in Mount Allergro, the autobiographical novel of Jerre Mangione about his youth as son of Sicilian immigrant-parents and growing up in the Italian community of Rochester. In Mount Allegro Mangione’s uncle Nino tells him how hard life was for the first Sicilian immigrants in Rochester: “The men were good strong workers but the Americans regarded them as bandits and intruders, and their employers treated them as though they were nothing but workhorses. They all forgot that they had been foreigners once too, and they made life as miserable as possible for them.” The storekeepers would not sell food to the new immigrants. In desperation “one afternoon they armed themselves with pickaxes and marched into one of the largest groceries in town. While they stood by with their pickaxes over their heads, their leader addressed himself to the chief clerk. The leader did not know a word of English. He made motions with his hands and his mouth to show that they were all very hungry. He also made it clear that unless the men were allowed to purchase food, they would tear up the store with their pickaxes. The clerk was a very understanding fellow and sold them all the food they wanted.” Uncle Nino concludes that “prayer isn’t always the way to ask.”

This conclusion is undoubtedly shared by John Fante. He remembers his days as a schoolboy. During a baseball match on school some other boy calls him a wop several times: “This is the first time anyone at school has ever flung the word at me, I am so angry that I strike out foolishly. We fight after the game, this boy and I, and I make him take it back. Now school days become fighting days. Nearly every afternoon at 3:15 a crowd gathers to watch me make some guys take it back. My brother brings home furious accounts of my battles. My father listens avidly, and I stand by, to clear up any doubtful details. Sadly happy days! My father gives me pointers: how to hold my fists, how to guard my head.” Not only school-kids but adults as well, at times raised their fists to gain respect. Margaret Lehan, interviewed for the above mentioned oral history project, commemorates how her Italian father became a boxer. He worked in a factory and was bullied and called Ginny day after day. One day he planned to seek armed revenge, but the boss intervened and decided there would be a boxing
match between her father and the main bully. “My father won the fight, and from that day on, he became a boxer, an amateur boxer for a while. And he became one of the gang. And he had no fear after that. They used to call him ‘Rockefeller’. In a contorted way Lehan’s father not only fought bullies and opponents but stereotypes as well. Lehan tells that “in 1929, a social critic made a curious comment about his style of fighting: acceptance trough fists: Italians who fought with their hands were showing the first signs of Americanization because they were abandoning the infamous stiletto!”

Whether literally or figuratively, it becomes clear that few migrations are without fight and struggle. Which is why migrant stories are worthwhile. It has some heroic quality to leave home, seek the promised land, be disillusioned and finally accept the rough road ahead. The immigrant is a smalltime hero. Or, as Mario Puzo puts it more striking: “The thing that amazed me most was their courage. Where were their Congressional Medals of Honor? Their Distinguished Service Crosses? How did they ever have the balls to get married, have children, go out to earn a living in a strange land, with no skills, not even knowing the language? They made it without tranquilizers, without sleeping pills, without psychiatrists, without even a dream. Heroes. Heroes all around me. I never saw them. But how could I? They wore work clothes and handlebar moustaches, they blew their noses on their fingers and they were so short that their high school children towered over them. They spoke a laughable broken English and the furthest limit of their horizon was their daily bread. Brave men, brave women, they fought to live their lives without dreams. Bent on survival they narrowed their minds to the thinnest line of existence. It is no wonder that in my youth I found them compatible. And yet they have left Italy and sailed the ocean to come to a new land and leave their sweatbones in America. Illiterate Colombos, they dared to seek the promised land. And so they, too, dreamed a dream.” (From Puzo’s article ‘Choosing a Dream’).

4. We Shall Overcome

I had faith in myself Without realizing it, I had learned a great lesson in America: I had learned to have faith in the future. No matter how bad things were, a turn would inevitably come – as long as I did not give up. I was sure of it. But how much I had to suffer until the change came! What a thorny, heart-breaking road it was! (Pascal D’Angelo, *Son of Italy*)

Mohamed Bouchane’s notes end joyfully, he has an appointment with an editor. “We speak with the editorial director, who is satisfied with the idea of making a book out of my diary. We talk about the contract, the compensation, and the length of the book. I don’t say much; I just listen. Carla and Daniele converse, discuss problems, ask for explanations. We say goodbye. We will meet later on, when the work is finished. I still don’t know whether to believe it.” Publishing his notes clearly marks a turning point for Bouchane and a triumph over immigrant-struggle. As if he is no longer a nobody, lost in history. “A book? Who would have thought? It’s true. Since I was a boy I have dreamed, as I’m sure everyone has, of doing something important that will last after I am gone. But I stopped dreaming long ago.” The fulfilment of Bouchane’s wishes make him suffer pleasant insomnia. “How can I sleep with the idea of a book going round and round in my head?”

Before proposing that immigrant stories tend to have a bittersweet happy-ending, one or two rather self-evident reservations should be made. Of course, for one, not all stories end
well. For Mohsen Melliti immigrant life is nothing but a sequence of consecutive disillusions. When the old factory in Rome he lived in with many other illegal immigrants is burned down, and the police send him back to his own country, he asks: “What if I wanted to leave for heaven, from what departing exit should I leave?” Journalist Jadranka Hodzic actually took her own life at the beach of Rimini, she only left a note. Without that note her fate would have stayed quite unnoticed. Hence, immigrant life is obviously not synonymous with the immigrant story. Whereas a story needs narration, life just is. Most lives never transform into stories and thus most stories remain untold. The immigrant stories that are told do rather often end in some kind of modest victory though. Toughness and bitterness of early immigrant live is overcome, respect won, a permit obtained, a house bought, a family founded or a diary published. Humble though the conquest, the immigrant is fierce for he made it against odds, as if he defied destiny.

The sense of victory is not restricted to fictional immigrants, second-generation novelists writing about their parents or immigrant-writers producing polished and beautifully narrated diaries and autobiographies. The immigrants telling their story for the oral history project often feel, in one way or another, victorious as well. The hardships overcome fill them with modest pride. Cosma Sullivan for example, feels privileged though her life was hard: “Somehow I feel lucky we came. Even though we had to fight hard. But I don’t regret the fight I had to pull up all my life. And it was a fight. Everything we did in our life we competed. To better ourselves right along. That was our aim all through our childhood days. We had opportunities and we took them.” Felice Taldone praises America for giving him hard work: “This country is a beautiful country. There is a chance for everybody, there’s opportunity for anyone to make a dollar. I dug and dug so much, I gave all. Alone. Alone. No one to give me a glass of water. If you work it’s a beautiful country.” America gives opportunities. A life of hard work in America, to start with scratch and then slowly build something, is better than the alternative. John Titone would surely agree: “I had a choice. Whereas if I had stayed in Sicily I’d be a farmer to take care of the land that my father and mother bought when they got married. I had no choices, but here in America, I had a choice.”

Most Italian-American immigrants, sooner or later, began to appreciate their land of destination. Still Josephina Reale would never forget her initial disillusion: “I went to public school and it was a very, very tearful time for me. I had the most miserable time. I would come home and cry and cry and say ‘I don’t understand them and they don’t understand me.’ And I would just weep bitter tears till gradually, little at a time, I began to like this country. I began to forget we had left palm trees and the Mediterranean. And we became accustomed to living in America. Only thing, the streets were not paved with gold.” The streets may have been a little more ordinary than expected, yet the luxury absent in Italy but common in America made schoolboy Vicor Tartarini feel rich: “I hadn’t got a backhouse in the back of the yard, I didn’t have no lights, I didn’t have no cream, all that beautiful stuff that eh, eh, eh a clean shirt every day to go to school. You know what I mean, it was a different life. It was beautiful, eh, I fell like a millionaire, my father used to give me five cents, ten cents to buy myself an ice cream or, or, or chocolate. O my god, in Italy I never had a nickel or nothing…no, it’s a different world there.”
All men and women interviewed for the oral history project could easily have been characters in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, Puzo’s semi-autobiographical ode to his small-time immigrant heroes. The protagonist in this novel, Puzo’s mother, is indeed considered quite fortunate. In the end at least, for life sure was tough. Lucia Santa, the mother, came to America as a seventeen year old illiterate girl to marry a man she had only known when they were both children. To her own disgrace she owned nothing, not even a dowry, as she landed at Ellis Island. She spent her life fighting for the survival of her family. Meanwhile her first husband was killed in a construction-site accident, one of her sons committed suicide and her second husband was sent to a lunatic asylum. It could have been a lot worse though. “Look at those misfortunes Lucia Santa had escaped. Daughters pregnant without a husband in sight for miles around; sons who became jailbirds of the finest feather or found a way to rest their disobedient legs in the electric chair. Drunken, gambling, whoremastering husbands.”

Her moment of immigrant-victory comes when she moves her family from their Brooklyn tenement to a beautiful house on Long Island. For Lucia Santa “The magic time had come.”

Yet, her joy is not without regret. As she sits for the last time in her old, now empty kitchen, she cries: “I wanted all this without suffering. I wanted all this without weeping for two lost husbands and a beloved child. I wanted all this without the hatred of that son conceived in true love. I wanted all this without guilt, without sorrow, without fear of death and the terror of a judgement day. In innocence.”

Still, Lucia Santa is considered fortunate: “All her children were strong, healthy, handsome, the world was before them. Soon she would reap the rewards of all her travail. So, courage. America was not Italy. In America you could escape your destiny. Sons grew tall and worked in an office with collars and ties, away from the wind and earth. Daughters learned how to read and write, and wore shoes and silk stockings, instead of slaughtering the bloody pig and carrying wood on their backs to save the strength of valuable donkeys.”

Lucia Santa and her old tenement neighbours, cursing America during long summer nights, would secretly have to admit that they fell in love with the blasphemous promised land. “The truth: these country women from the mountain farms of Italy, whose fathers and grandfathers died in the same rooms in which they were born, these women loved the clashing steel and stone of the great city, the thunder of trains in the railroad yards across the streets, the lights above the Palisades far across the Hudson.”

Perhaps in the next decade a former elephant-salesman’s novelist-son will write about how his father praises Africa and curses Italy while he is enjoying excellent espresso and his offspring is attending college. Who knows.

**Conclusion**

Faint sense of irony is perhaps not a solid ground for comparative research. It’s quite random and subjective to compare the stories of Italians in America during the Great Migration with those of modern immigrants in Italy. A time-leap of a century is obscured, and there is no substantial argument for not including immigrant-stories of other origin or destination in order to create a common immigrant story and give a glimpse into the heart of immigrant life. Still, there needs to be some demarcation, maybe irony will do.
In spite of different destinations, a time-leap and various complex differences in style and perspective, the narrators of concern in this article have a lot in common. Of course they do. Bouchane, Puzo, the interviewees and all the other authors demonstrate that every migration consists of a few inescapable elements, independent from when or where. Farewell, the journey, a destination and being a stranger are universal immigrant experiences. Hence, immigrant stories tend to have resemblances, and often share a common basic narrative. The heart of the immigrant story comprises high hopes, disillusion, struggle and modest, melancholic victories. Immigrants tell their stories, not only to be found in history, but also because they’ve seen ugliness, hardships, passion and beauty in its essence. They simply have a story to tell. For this, studying or reading their work can be worthwhile. There is no point though in transforming immigrant-writers into agents of social change and subordinating them in a pseudo-academic web of words in quest of a hybrid promised land. Immigrants could tell that promised lands can be delusive. Or, better, as Melania Mazzucco puts it in Vita, her recent novel about immigrant life in the United States: “L’America non esiste. Io lo so perché ci sono stato”. (America does not exist. I can know, for I’ve been there).
‘Wop’ probably means gangster or pimp. ‘Guinea’ is a country in Africa. In other words, Italians were stereotyped as being African.

‘Dago’ means dagger, so this term is derived from the cliché that every Italian wears a dagger.

Mediterranean crossroads 65.

The fortunate pilgrim 225.

The fortunate pilgrim 207.

Idem 143-144.

Idem 47.

Idem 46.

Idem 47.

Idem 50.

Idem.

The imagined immigrant 28.

Ginny is a deterioration of Guinea.

The imagined immigrant 23.

Idem.


The imagined immigrant 17.

Mediterranean crossroads 57.

Idem 56.

Idem.

Idem 117.

The imagined immigrant 231.

Idem.

Idem.

Idem 251.


The fortunate pilgrim 267.

Idem 277.

Idem 281.

Idem 267.

Idem 7-8.

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