

The Pitfalls of the “Italian Diaspora”

STEFANO LUCONI

This work investigates whether the notion of *diaspora* offers a feasible paradigm to define the migration of the Italian people outside their native land that has occurred since the flight of the exiles of the Risorgimento in the early and mid-nineteenth century, which preceded the beginning of mass departures from the peninsula a few decades later following the political unification of the country. It is now well acknowledged that, like other western Europeans, Italians have been migrant people since premodern times (Pizzorusso 2001; Incisa di Camerana 2003; Barbero 2009).¹ Research has, however, focused primarily on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² So will the present study. To this end, this essay first provides a survey of the most recent developments and re-elaborations the idea of *diaspora* has undergone in scholarship and then analyzes whether such a category can be properly used to define the Italians’ outflow abroad.

After checking the main features of the model against the actual experience of Italian migrants, this article eventually suggests that the nature of the push factors and the contents of the expatriates’ orientation toward their homeland make *diaspora* a concept that is hardly appropriate for an understanding of the exodus from Italy and the dispersion of that country’s population in foreign lands. Therefore, rather than conceptualizing what *diaspora* is or should be, the goal of this study is to outline the existing and sometimes inconsistent or conflicting typologies for such a term and to show that, in spite of their broad articulations and variety, none of them is fully applicable as a heuristic device to the case of Italian migrants. Finally, alternative expressions valorizing the specificities of the Italian experience will be considered.

The Theoretical Debate about Diasporas

Though relatively recent in its applications to social sciences, the notion of *diaspora* is nowadays one of the most used – if not even one of the most fashionable and trendy – categories in migration studies along with *transnationalism* (Portes 1999; Brubaker 2005; Gabaccia 2005a).³ For example, an empirical estimate has concluded that almost two-thirds of the more than 1,200 titles containing the word *diaspora* in Harvard University’s online catalogue in 2005 had been published since 1990 and 15 percent

in the previous five years (Gabaccia 2005b, 143–4). Moreover, a specific scholarly journal, *Diaspora*, was established in 1991 to circulate articles on peoples' global scattering, and the Taylor and Francis publishing group launched a book series by the name of "Global Diasporas" to the same end six years later.

In the face of the present-day upsurge in international migration against the backdrop of globalization, concepts that go beyond the nation-state as the central element of inquiry seem particularly attractive and appropriate as analytical tools to investigate people's worldwide mobility in the eyes of scholars whose research and theorizations are inevitably affected by the transformations of the world in which they live (Gabaccia 1999). Both *transnationalism* and *diaspora* refer to the overlapping of the "here" and the "there" to the effect that communities are no longer defined in terms of members residing within a delimited and bordered space in a single geographical area but are characterized by people sharing the same identity while inhabiting different and often faraway physical places (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1994, 8). If *transnationalism* means that migrants and their offspring live in at least two societies—the native one and the adoptive one—at the same time, *diaspora* implies that individuals remain part of their homeland even if they—or their parents and ancestors—have moved somewhere else. However, while *diaspora* is not tantamount to *transnationalism* (Sheffer 2006; Braziel and Mannur 2006, 8), these two notions are strictly connected. As Khachig Tölölyan has pointed out, diasporas represent "the exemplary community of the transnational movement" (Tölölyan 1991, 5).

However, the popularity of diaspora with scholars of migration studies has also involved a loosening of its meaning. The word *diaspora* derives from ancient Greek and initially designated the people who colonized the Aegean archipelago and the adjoining coasts with specific reference to the expatriates who had to leave their homeland during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). The same term was then used to identify the Jews who lived outside the "Promised Land" after they had been forced into exile following the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE (Hovanessian 1998; Baumann 2000). An additional extension of its semantic field has led the expression *diaspora* to include also the Armenians, who fled the Ottoman Empire in different waves between 1894 and 1916 to seek sanctuary from genocide (Ritter 2007). Moreover, since the mid-1960s Africans brought to the Americas as slaves and their offspring have been considered as being diasporic peoples (Irele 1965; Shepperson 1966; Harris 1982).

Notwithstanding the progressive broadening of the definition, until a couple of decades ago applying the notion of *diaspora* for cases other than

the Jewish experience was rather limited. As Daniel J. Elazar argued before the typology of this category began to undergo a significant growth, Jews were generally regarded as being the quintessence of a diasporic people because dispersion and separation from their homeland on the grounds of persecution were the main features of their historical experience between Assyrian King Nebuchadnezzar’s demolition of the First Temple of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. In such a view, a further and specific diasporic characteristic of Jews was that they had succeeded in maintaining their ethnoreligious distinctiveness from the homogenizing influences of their adoptive societies over the centuries wherever they had settled (Elazar 1986). In this respect, the founding of Israel did not mark the end of the Jewish diaspora per se, as a few scholars have continued to use this term for the Jews residing elsewhere after 1948 (Della Pergola, Rebhun, and Tolts 2005).

The first stage in the theoretical re-elaboration of the term *diaspora*—involving its use for the Armenians or the African slaves—has hardly gone beyond the use of this expression as a paradigm to explore only refugee and deported populations outside their homelands. In subsequent scholarship, however, this interpretative category has no longer been confined to describing peoples who experience forced relocation from their native places. By now, *diaspora* has been used to refer to such disparate migrant peoples as the Irish, Cape Verdeans, Mexicans, and Poles regardless of the existence of a traumatic push factor in their relocation across their respective national borders (Bathala 2004; Jacobson 1995; Smith 2003). According to this perspective, for instance, twentieth-century diasporic Ukrainians include both economic migrants, who pursued job opportunities abroad, and political exiles, who fled the Soviet regime (Satzewich 2002). As a step forward in the broadening of this category, even Chinese merchants abroad—whether opium traders or present-day businessmen—and the British settlers who established a worldwide colonial empire have been considered as diasporas (McKeown 2000; Bridge and Fedorovich 2003). Studies have identified so many diasporas in modern and contemporary history other than the classical Greek and Jewish experiences that Gabriel Sheffer has felt compelled to remind his readers that “ethno-national diasporism is not a modern phenomenon, but rather an ancient and enduring phenomenon” (Sheffer 2003, 257).

Some scholars have stuck to the idea of persecution as the crucially significant feature of diasporas. For example, in Darshan Singh Tatla’s view, Sikhs abroad, who had already left their homeland voluntarily, became a diaspora only in the wake of the 1984 assault on their most important shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, on the part of Indian troops.

In other words, the awareness of exile resulting from the attack turned a number of pre-existing emigrant communities scattered worldwide into a diaspora (Tatla 1999).

Yet a commonly shared national, ethnic, or religious identity does not seem to be necessary any longer in order to define a group crossing some kind of border as a diaspora. Class consciousness—in the footsteps of John A. Armstrong—and sexual orientation have also been included within such a category, although it has been assumed that they need not be specific causes for the migrants' relocation from their homelands. Indeed, scholars have pointed to diasporas of the proletariat, on the one hand, and of lesbian, gay, bisexual, as well as transgender people, on the other (Armstrong 1976; Gabaccia and Ottanelli 1997; Ramirez 2006; La Fountain-Stokes 2009). Technology has sometimes enabled the dispersed segments of any given community to communicate across space and has affected their self-perception. In particular, the Internet has provided a forum to elaborate and consolidate identities. For instance, the news website Tamilnet contributed to strengthening the Tamil expatriates' ethnic consciousness and sense of belonging during the civil war in Sri Lanka (Ranganathan 2002). The Internet also helped the construction of a global community among Eritreans in the world (Bernal 2005). Nonetheless a casual reader might come to think that, in the present-day digital era, the existence of media maintaining connections among people outside their native or ancestral lands is more important than the dispersal of individuals itself to identify a diaspora (Karim 2003).

Additional features have slowly replaced forced or traumatic migration as the main characteristics that define diasporas. In Robin Cohen's opinion, a scattering of people outside their own native territory or the homeland of their ancestors makes per se a diaspora. In his view, such a concept cannot remain confined to the victim tradition. He has, therefore, elaborated five models of diasporas on the basis of the different factors originating the spreading of any given population: traumatic diasporas, trade diasporas, imperial diasporas, labor diasporas, and cultural diasporas (Cohen 1997). Conversely, according to Michel Bruneau, the possible types of diasporas are only four: entrepreneurial diasporas, religious diasporas, political diasporas, and cultural diasporas (Bruneau 2004).

Regardless of the quantification of the potential varieties of diasporas, it is clear that a single catastrophic event such as political or religious persecution is no longer considered as being a prerequisite of diasporas, providing that border crossing occurs (Ember, Ember, and Skoggard 2004). Geographical dispersion, orientation toward an imagined or real homeland, and the preservation of a distinctive identity of the immigrant communities

abroad, as opposed to the single broader adoptive societies, are the core elements that describe diasporas in present-day scholarship (Brubaker 2005, 5–7; Dufoix 2008, 4–34). As a result, for instance, the Greek diaspora extended beyond the Mediterranean, spreading in ancient times to include the grain traders who set up merchant houses in southern Russian cities along the coast of the Black Sea between the late eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century as well as the global expatriates of the twentieth century (Kardadis 2001; Clogg 1999). In the case of present-day Jews, to Henry Goldschmidt, even relocation from Brooklyn to the suburbs of New York City's metropolitan area makes a diaspora, on the condition that the movers share their recollections of their previous neighborhoods and miss their former places of residence (Goldschmidt 2000). As a result, Titus's infamous destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem yields to the decidedly less wicked march of Robert Moses's urban renewal and development, as well as social and residential mobility (Caro 1974; Diner 2004, 259–304).

In any case, however short the distance, traveling a few miles from Brooklyn to New York City's suburbs still implies some kind of resettlement and separation from a previous milieu. Nonetheless the concept of *diaspora* has eventually extended beyond the notion of migration itself. People's mobility is no longer a prerequisite of such a model when the relocation of political frontiers and their redrawing replace the dispersal of individuals. Actually, scholars have also identified as diasporas the separation across borders of ethnonational communities living in different states as in the case of a few eastern European minorities (Mandelbaum 2000). Furthermore, *diaspora* has become the privileged term to designate minorities in present-day multiethnic postcolonial societies, especially in the face of the significant influx of newcomers from former colonies into western Europe and North America that has gained momentum in the age of globalization (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998, 68–70; Mellino 2005, 77; Giri 2005).

Yet, after the abandonment of border crossing as a theoretical requirement for diasporas, even the idea of minority has undergone a radical reassessment. Specifically, the divide between minority and majority in any given society has collapsed. To Avtar Brah, for instance, in any diasporic discourse belonging and otherness are not distinct concepts because their existence stems from their dialectical exchange and interaction so that the resulting identities are a matter of reciprocal interpenetration. She has, therefore, envisioned a diaspora space "where the native is as much the diasporian as the diasporian is the native" (Brah 1996, 196).

Consequently, from a concept involving people's dispersion from their native into a number of receiving countries, *diaspora* has progressively

turned into an analytical tool for understanding the elaboration of cultural identities (Clifford 1994). For example, according to Paul Gilroy, the black diaspora stemmed from the hybridization of African, Caribbean, American, and European cultures (Gilroy 1993). Similarly, according to Christine Chivallon, cultural hybridity per se makes the French Caribbean into a diaspora (Chivallon 1997).

The Diaspora Model and Scholarship about Italian Emigration

The diaspora paradigm currently enjoys great popularity with studies on Italian emigration as well. To Reinhard Strohm, for example, the eighteenth-century musicians who crossed the Alps to get work with various European sovereigns and aristocrats constituted a diaspora (Strohm 2001). Notwithstanding such an early case, this concept has primarily characterized the literature addressing mass emigration between the late 1870s and the mid-1920s and, again, in the post-World War II years (Pozzetta and Ramirez 1992; Vecoli 1995; Verdicchio 1997; Gabaccia 2000; Hagan and Rando 2007). For instance, in Aliza S. Wong's opinion, Italy's attempts at exploiting emigration to extend its influence in South America before World War I, after the country's failure as an imperial power in the late nineteenth century, made up a diaspora (Wong 2006).

Not even Italian academia has been impervious to the new and inclusive use of *diaspora* as an analytical frame for the study of the peninsula's people abroad. For instance, to Maria Rosaria Ostuni, political exiles from the area of Biella were construed as a diaspora (Ostuni 1995). Luciano Trincia has used the same category to describe Italian immigrant workers in Switzerland and Germany before World War I, and Anna Maria Minutilli has used the word *diaspora* to define the Italian exodus to Argentina (Trincia 1997; Minutilli 2003). So has Simona Frasca with specific reference to Neapolitan musicians in New York City in the interwar years (Frasca 2010). Likewise, Maddalena Tirabassi has concluded that the U.S. ethnic revival of the 1970s and the web revolution of the late 1990s have made Italian Americans aware of their diasporic condition as these phenomena have allegedly strengthened the sense of a cosmopolitan community sharing Italianness (Tirabassi 2003).

The notion of *diaspora* has also made inroads into literary criticism. In the view of Claudio Gorlier, for example, the English tongue that Italian-American writers used in the United States was the "second language of the diaspora," whereas authors of Calabrian or Italian ancestry were the voices of their ancestral region's or country's diaspora in Australia, according to Gaetano Rando and Antonio Casella (Gorlier 2005; Rando 2007; Casella 2008).

Similarly, newspapers as well as radio and television programs for Italians abroad have been labeled as "the media of the diaspora" (d'Aquino 1995; Sergi 2010). Scholars of econometrics, too, have resorted to the diaspora model to interpret the network of financial and economic transactions with the native land by Italians living permanently in foreign countries and their offspring (Murat, Pistoiesi, and Rinaldi 2009). With reference to Italian foodways abroad, Simone Cinotto has even conceived the idea of a "diasporic cuisine" as a source for the cultural identity of the emigrants' progeny worldwide (Cinotto 2009).

Italy's political unification in 1861 has not affected scholars' resort to the diaspora paradigm to define the experience of Italian migrants. Actually, it seems that, as in the case of Jews before and after the establishment of the state of Israel, Gabriel Sheffer's distinction between "stateless" and "state-linked" diasporas can be aptly applied to the experience of Italians (Sheffer 2003, 148–79). In other words, they were a diaspora without a state of origin before 1861 and became a diaspora with a state of origin following the 1861 birth of the Kingdom of Italy. Indeed, Donna R. Gabaccia has identified Italian diasporas both prior to and after the unification of the peninsula (Gabaccia 2000). Moreover, although historian Zeffiro Ciuffoletti has contended that the Kingdom of Italy was "a state without a nation" because of the survival of localistic identities among its citizens in the postunification decades (Ciuffoletti 1993),⁴ it could be more reasonably suggested that Italian emigrants continued to be "stateless" people even after 1861 on the grounds of the alleged neglect of their government for the expatriates (Tirabassi 2003, 70). As one of the latter complained, the *patria* – namely the native country – "has never done anything for us" because it "belongs to the masters! The poor people's *patria* does not exist" (Margariti 1994, 40, 55).

While the concept of *diaspora* widely referred to the Italian expatriates in the decades of mass migration, when an Italian state had already been established and the great bulk of the émigrés belonged to the working class, the use of this term has been extended to other stages of the Italian people's experience abroad. Most notably, the Italian entrepreneurs struggling for a share of the worldwide market in the present-day age of globalization are allegedly part of a diasporic business community network even if few of these individuals have left their homeland to relocate somewhere else for good, while a large majority of them have confined themselves to spending most of their time in countries other than their native one on business trips (Corradi and Pozzi 1995). To some historians, the Italian entrepreneurs' diasporic experiences would date back at least to the Renaissance (Caglioti 2009). According to Piero Bassetti, not a trained

scholar but a businessperson and former politician, diaspora is a pivotal component of the Italian identity that had characterized the inhabitants of the peninsula even before they achieved the political unification of their country. In addition, in his opinion, diaspora has involved the transborder mobility not only of the Italian people but also of the nation's values and culture over the centuries (Bassetti 2002).

To many scholars, the concept of *diaspora* is a viable notion for understanding the Italian experience, especially in the case of the emigration to the United States with the demise of the melting-pot model, the collapse of the concept of the United States as a nation-state, and the ensuing emergence of interpretations of U.S. ethnic history emphasizing cultural pluralism rather than either Anglo-conformity or acculturation (Gjerde 1999). Specifically, the rejection of assimilation and the emphasis on ethnic persistence in historical and sociological scholarship since the mid-1960s have highlighted Italian Americans' maintenance of a national identity of their own, which is a component of a diaspora (Sanfilippo 2005; Mellino 2005, 80–83). Indeed, Italian Americans do seem to comply with the three paramount criteria—dispersion, homeland orientation, and connection to the motherland—in order to fully qualify for a diasporic status. On the one hand, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, about 16 million U.S. residents claimed Italian ancestry in 2000, which marked a 7 percent increase over the number that had listed the same ethnic background ten years earlier (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002, table QT-02). On the other hand, the proliferation of Italy-related websites, the broadcast of Rai International in the United States, and the introduction of low airfares to Italy potentially let Americans of Italian background feed their interest in Italy and keep in touch with their ancestral land around the clock (Tirabassi 2003, 81–86).

The Diaspora Paradigm and the Italian Migrants' Experiences

Notwithstanding sporadic challenges to this approach (Franzina 2005; Tintori 2005), the existence of a single or multiple diasporic Italian migrations seems to be a *fait accompli* in present-day literature, especially in studies by U.S. historians about newcomers from the Italian peninsula to the United States. Yet other elements point to the contrary.

Scholars, especially those prone to the diaspora paradigm, have overstressed the political dimension of Italian emigration. They have envisaged a global community of anarchists, Communists, Socialists, and Left-wing radicals who nourished a transnational exchange of radical ideas among Italy, Argentina, Brazil, France, the United States, and other countries where these subversive exiles sought sanctuary from the authoritarianism of the

postunification liberal governments in the late nineteenth century and the totalitarianism of the Fascist regime during the interwar years (Gabaccia and Ottanelli 2001; Guglielmo 2010, 4, 63, 67, 141, 145, 158–9). To them, one might add a bunch of nationalistic conspirators and patriots who fled the Italian peninsula in the wake of the failed struggles for its political unification during the Risorgimento decades (Pellegrino 1975; Durante 2001, 201–37). These latter émigrés, however, were a minority. For instance, one of them, Giovanni Battista Cuneo, complained that most Italians living in Argentina and Uruguay in the early 1840s were not interested in politics and devoted all their efforts to their business activities.⁵ Furthermore, Fascism was quite popular within Italian communities abroad, from Australia and Great Britain to the Americas, even among working-class members, with the possible exception of settlements in France, until the outbreak of World War II (Cresciani 1979; Lombardi 1980; Cannistraro 1999; Bertonha 2001, 2003; Franzina and Sanfilippo 2003; Baldoli 2003; Pretelli 2005, 2010; Scarzanella 2005). A few Italian Fascists even fled to Argentina and Brazil in the early postwar years in the wake of the collapse of Benito Mussolini's regime and, consequently, became part of the nation's displacement abroad (Trento 1989; Bertagna and Sanfilippo 2004, 540–7). Nonetheless, as a result, the alleged diaspora of the Italian political exiles ended up including people positioned at the opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. For both factions, real or perceived threats to personal safety under a hostile government contributed to the decision to leave the native land. Even if they may have considered their expatriation as a violent loss in terms of the definition offered by James Clifford (1994), their experience lacked the second critical aspect of this latter scholar's re-elaboration of the diasporic paradigm, namely the awareness that assimilation within a new national community could not compensate for their displacement. On the one hand, Left-wing radicals nourished an internationalist worldview and did not place attachment to the homeland at the core of their identity (Topp 2001). On the other hand, Fascist immigrants to Argentina in the early postwar years considered this country as a second motherland because of the supposed political affinities between Mussolini's dictatorship and the authoritarian government of Juan Domingo Perón (Bertagna 2006).

Notwithstanding political émigrés' fears, in modern times forceful emigration in the manner of African slaves was confined almost exclusively to the deportation of Italian workers to Germany by the Nazi regime after Italy's armistice with the Allies during World War II (Klinkhammer 1993; Danese, Del Rossi, and Montali 2005). In general, most Italian emigrants were not forced into exile for political reasons—let alone for religious persecution, at least in modern times, with the possible exception

of Jews following the 1938 Fascist anti-Semitic turn⁶—but left their native land voluntarily to flee poverty and improve their economic conditions in such alleged countries of opportunity as the United States and, though to a lesser extent, Canada and Australia. In addition, Italian emigration did not occur in a relatively brief period of time under the pressure of irresistible forces causing traumas (Rosoli 1978; Audenino and Tirabassi 2008). Rather, most Italians staggered their departures over a number of decades within carefully planned family strategies in the hope of making money abroad that they expected to spend after repatriation or planned to send to their relatives in Italy not only to enable the latter to leave the country but also to purchase plots of land and other real estate there. Overpopulation, unemployment, land hunger, high taxation, and conscription were the leading push factors for a large majority of Italian emigrants. Great expectations, rather than catastrophe, marked these people's outflow from the peninsula (Gribaudo 1990; Gibelli 1994; De Clementi 1999).

Voluntary departure under economic pressures rules out an Italian diaspora according to the paradigm of traumatic dispersion. But it does not prevent the use of such a category in terms of subsequent reinterpretations. Gabriel Sheffer, for instance, has maintained that “the highly motivated Koreans and Vietnamese toiling hard to become prosperous in bustling Los Angeles [. . .] are members of ethno-national diasporas” (Sheffer 2003, 1).

Nonetheless, as Mark I. Choate has recently pointed out, at the time of mass emigration after the political unification of the peninsula following the wars of the Risorgimento, “Italians were never stateless,” contrary to paradigmatic diasporic peoples such as the Jews (Choate 2008, 7). Indeed, although emigrants usually complained that the Italian government did not care about their plight, especially during the pre-Fascist liberal regime, the Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione (CGE) until its demise in 1927 and subsequently the consular network assisted Italian citizens abroad—even if discontinuously and inconsistently—as it regulated their journeys, subsidized charities and hospitals, promoted Italian-language education, supported mutual aid societies, and funded repatriations (Ostuni 1983; Grispo 1985). The CGE was only one component of the administrative structure that Italy's liberal governments built at the turn of the twentieth century in order to manage emigration both economically and socially (Douki 2007). The Fascist regime also made a point of protecting the rights of Italians abroad and fighting ethnic stereotypes and prejudice (Bianchi 1992; Pretelli 2004). Mussolini even endeavored, though in vain, to prevent the electrocution of anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (Cannistraro 1996). In addition, in 1937, the *Duce* signed an agreement with the Nazi regime to send roughly 490,000 unemployed

Italian workers to Germany between 1938 and 1942 in exchange for coal and raw materials (Mantelli 1992). Drawing upon this precedent (Sala 2004, 122–3), after World War II, the Italian government tried to promote emigration by negotiating bilateral treaties with other western European countries and attempted to exploit its adherence to the European Economic Community to secure the free circulation of its own workers in the member states, although its policies were generally ill-conceived and poorly carried out (Spire 2002; Tosi 2002, 450–56; Morandi 2006; Colucci 2008; Romero 1992; Giaquinto 2008; De Clementi 2010). Italy further reached out to its emigrants’ descendants at the turn of the twenty-first century when legislation was enacted to let them reclaim their Italian citizenship and vote in the Italian parliamentary elections by mail (Zincone 2006, 4–10; Battiston and Mascitelli 2008a).⁷

On the other hand, the troubled relationship between the emigrants and their native country hardly allows the revised model of diaspora to be applied to the case of Italian expatriates. Robin Cohen has argued that “all diasporic communities [. . .] acknowledge that the ‘old country’ [. . .] always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (Cohen 1997, ix). Yet Italy’s belated achievement of political unification and ensuing delay in state building long delayed the development of a national consciousness among the people of the Italian peninsula including those who eventually left it. In addition, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the perception of the recently established Italian state as a hostile entity that confined itself primarily to levying taxes and drafting young men into the army – both major causes of expatriation – further curbed the identification with the native country on the part of many Italian emigrants (Martellone 1984, 173). To most of them, therefore, Italy was not the homeland inspiring affiliation, values, and loyalty they regretted leaving, according to the diaspora model. Rather, upon arrival in their host countries, the newcomers’ allegiance rested on their respective native regions, provinces, or even villages. Italians’ *campanilismo* – namely the attitude by which the sense of attachment does not extend beyond the earshot of the bell tower of one’s hometown (Manconi 2003)⁸ – was initially replicated abroad. As an immigrant from Campania who had settled in the United States pointed out, “for me, as for the others, Italy is the little village where I was raised” (Williams 1938, 17). If anything, therefore, the worldwide community that people of Italian origins established across borders was less a single nation-oriented network than a series of different regional, provincial, and localistic communities that usually remained divided along subnational lines in social activities, residential areas, and even religious life (Malpezzi and Clements 1992, 27–35).

In countries that experienced more recent waves of mass immigration from Italy, localistic allegiances were still alive in the post-World War II decades. For instance, a number of regional associations were established in Canada in the 1960s before they underwent consolidation along national lines in the 1970s in response to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's policy of multiculturalism that contributed to galvanizing Italianness as opposed to subnational identities (Poggi 2009, 163-4; Fielding 2010, 193-203; Cameron 2004). Similarly, in Australia Italians' transnational relations with their ancestral land long rested—and, in part, still rest—mainly on networks based on their home villages and regions, although this country, too, has embraced multiculturalism since the mid-1970s (Baldassar 2001; Jayasuriya 1997). The re-elaboration of the Italian immigrants' ethnic identity caused the revitalization of localistic senses of attachment in Brazil as well (de Constantino 2002, 85-86). A similar phenomenon has also occurred in Argentina, where the number of the associations grouping the progeny of the immigrants from Piedmont alone has increased from four in 1974 to as many as seventy-three today (Tirabassi 2010, 52-53; Canovi 2009, 203). For this reason, it seems easier to identify a plethora of localistic diasporas rather than a single national diaspora. For instance, with reference to a little Sicilian village by the name of Sortino, whose emigrants settled primarily in Australia, John Gatt-Rutter has called attention to the existence of a Sortinese diaspora as opposed to both a Sicilian and an Italian diaspora (Gatt-Rutter 2007). *Campanilismo*, however, hardly resulted in village-oriented diasporas because members of the same families—let alone fellow villagers—living in different countries outside Italy seldom had contacts with one another and retained relations almost exclusively with kinsfolk in their native land (Baily and Ramella 1987; Templeton 2003).

When emigrants or their offspring eventually developed an Italian consciousness, they did it mainly in response to the xenophobic attitudes they experienced in their adoptive countries. Bloody anti-Italian riots and even lynchings occurred almost worldwide. At least nine Italian immigrants were killed in Aigues-Mortes, France, in 1893; thirty-nine in the United States from 1879 to 1910; and three in Kalgoorlie, Australia, in 1934 (Sanna 2006; Barnabà 2008; Salvetti 2003; Boncompagni 2001, 196-7). Other Italian newcomers were murdered in Tandil, Argentina, in 1872 and became targets of ethnic hatred in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1892, 1896, and 1928 (Lida 1998; Bertonha 2005, 98). Italian miners who pursued job opportunities in Great Britain in compliance with the Collective Recruiting Plan agreement between London and Rome still endured hostility in the early 1950s (Colucci 2009, 91-109). Such animosities did not manage to fade away half a century later as British laborers in Lindsay went on strike to

oppose the hiring of Italian workers in a local Total oil refinery between January and February 2009 (Cavalera 2009; Maisano 2009). Likewise, the *frontalieri*—Italians who reside in northern Italy but commute daily across the border to their jobs in Switzerland—were portrayed as vicious, threatening mice eating Swiss cheese in a poster campaign in the canton of Ticino, where most of them work, as late as the fall of 2010 (Longo 2010; Stella 2010). Furthermore, the stereotypical representation of Italian emigrants as *mafiosi* tenaciously persists. This bias, for instance, surfaced again and spread once more in Germany as late as 2007, in the wake of the murder of six Calabrian immigrants who were shot dead outside an Italian restaurant in the city of Duisburg on August 15 in an execution-style ambush that was immediately linked to a feud among criminal organizations (Prinzing 2008).

The almost daily experience of anti-Italian prejudice, discrimination, and intolerance made people of Italian descent from diverse local backgrounds aware of their common national ancestry and helped them develop a sense of Italianness that they or their parents had lacked when they settled abroad (Harney 1985; Carelli 1985; Scarzanella 1999; Deschamps 2000; Salvetti 2008). In this view, the adoptive lands helped shape the sense of affiliation of first- or subsequent-generation Italian emigrants. Conversely, the diasporic models tend to postulate that immigrant communities are impervious to cultural influences on the part of their respective host societies and preserve their original identities and sense of collectiveness (Shuval 2002).

As a matter of fact, in the end, the Italian emigrants' progeny even yielded to assimilation. This process was particularly manifest in the United States. Herbert J. Gans has pointed out that in this country Italianness retains almost exclusively a symbolic meaning and is confined to fruition in personal and family terms, primarily in spare time activities spanning from wearing Italian-style clothes and eating in Italian restaurants to vacationing in Italy (Gans 1979). On the other hand, social mobility and suburbanization have spelled the demise of the Italian urban districts as their residents have left the inner-city immigrant ghettos for such residential melting pots as the suburbs (Alba, Logan, and Crowder 1997). The few Italian neighborhoods that have managed to survive have also shrunk to facades of restaurants and stores that operate less for Italian Americans than for urban consumers from diverse national backgrounds looking for ethnic flavors and thrills (Krase 2006).

However, the progressive disappearance of an Italian-American identity in the United States is not only physical but cultural as well. Defensiveness against the alleged encroachments of African Americans under the pressures of racial tensions in the 1960s and 1970s made Italian

Americans join forces with other immigrant groups of European ancestry (Rieder 1985; Formisano 1991). Consequently, they have come to lose a distinctive ethnic identity of their own and to think of themselves as white Europeans (Alba 1985). At the beginning of their mass immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth century, Italian Americans usually held a sort of racial middle ground in the eyes of their receiving society (Orsi 1992; Barrett and Roediger 1997). But, after they were initially perceived as social outcasts because the generally dark color of their skin prevented newcomers from southern Italy from fitting WASP standards of whiteness, Italian Americans eventually reproduced the racially motivated attitudes and behavior of the U.S. white establishment (Richards 1999). This form of accommodation within the host society has sometimes led the progeny of the immigrants to commit hate crimes against African Americans. One of the most infamous of these episodes was the 1989 murder of black teenager Yusuf Hawkins by an Italian-American gang (Desantis 1991). The achievement of a white self-image was a sort of rite of passage that Italian Americans shared with other ethnic minorities, such as the Irish and Jews, on their mutual way to full inclusion within U.S. society (Ignatiev 1995; Brodtkin 1998; Roediger 2005).

Coming from a colonial country with possessions in Africa, Italian immigrants to the United States were definitely aware of race differences (Gabaccia 2003). Some of them had even served in the Italian army in Eritrea or Somaliland before settling on the other shore of the Atlantic. Nevertheless racialism as part of an imperialist worldview characterized primarily the upper and middle classes in the native country. Conversely, race was not a source of self-identification for the working class, which provided the great bulk of the Italian immigrants to the United States (Vecoli 2006, 98-99). The latter's "in-between" status contributed to curb race as a component of the newcomers' identity (Fasce 2002). It was only circa World War II that Italian Americans turned whiteness into their self-perception. But, by doing so, they lost their national specificity and merged into the much larger group of white Europeans, disappearing within the Caucasian cohort of U.S. society. One of them has recalled that, when fellows of Anglo-Saxon ancestry invited him and other Italian Americans to "beat up some niggers" during the 1943 race riot in Harlem, he realized that his own ethnic minority had become assimilated: "the Italo-Americans stopped being Italo and started becoming Americans. We joined the group. Now we're like you guys, right?" (Terkel 1984, 141-2).

The increase in exogamy further demonstrates that Italian Americans have ultimately attained the status of insiders in the United States. While endogamy prevailed in the Little Italies in the interwar years even in

multiethnic New York City (Rainhorn 2005, 56–60), Italian Americans' rate of marriages to people from other ethnic backgrounds rose to between two-thirds and three-quarters, according to different estimates, in the 1980s. Remarkably, Italian-American exogamy is no longer confined to other Catholic minorities, but it has significantly extended to Protestants and Jews (Alba 1996, 179).

The demise of an Italian identity obviously undermined the orientation of the immigrants' offspring toward their ancestral country. The outbreak of civil wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s revived and consolidated the ethnic identity of the diasporic Croatians in Canada to such an extent that, although they had been born and raised abroad, a few made their way to the Balkans to join the fight (Winland 2007). Conversely, Italian Americans turned a deaf ear even to the nonhazardous appeals of their own motherland. For instance, in 1997, no more than 50,000 Italian Americans throughout the United States signed a petition urging the Clinton administration not to deny their ancestral country a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council within a short-lived reform proposal for the expansion of this body (Tirabassi 1998, 52–53; Franzina 1999, 653–4).

The assimilation of Italian immigrants and their offspring within their respective host societies occurred even faster in Latin America. For instance, in Argentina, it took place in the interwar years, as revealed not only by a growth in exogamy but also by political accommodation (Devoto 2006, 384–91). In Uruguay, too, the Italian newcomers and their children began to make inroads into politics in the 1920s (Oddone 1992, 81–82). In Chile, where males made up a disproportionate number of newcomers from Italy in the late nineteenth century, marriages with native women prevailed over endogamy as early as the 1890s (Meza 1993, 82–85). Likewise, Italian professionals who have moved to London in the last few decades as part of the brain drain pursued assimilation within British society. When they established a website of their own—*Italianialondra.com*—they conceived it primarily as a means to promote their business activities and social relations in the London area. Actually, this virtual community was so self-referential that *Italianialondra.com* was not used to keep in touch with relatives and acquaintances in the mother country nor did it include links to other Italy-related websites (Seganti 2007, 125–48). Even in Venezuela, where the great bulk of Italian immigrants arrived only after World War II and integration was rather difficult, nostalgia for the native land came to an early demise. As a first-generation immigrant has recalled, "Homesickness is just fantasy. The real *patria* is the country that gave you a future and welfare and enabled you to make a decent living" (Grau 1996; D'Angelo 2010, 144).

Notwithstanding attempts at saving the concept of *diaspora* in terms of hybridity and creolization (Hall 1990, 235), the reformulations of this notion cannot make it broad enough to include also the entry into the mainstream of the emigrants' progeny in the adoptive country. The growth of an Italy-oriented national identity out of pre-existing subnational affiliations by the people of Italian extraction in the United States might fall within the context of a syncretic approach emphasizing the tension between the preservation and erosion of boundaries as a feature of diasporas. This, however, is definitely not the case of Italian Americans' whitening since the 1960s. Regardless of whether migration was forced, self-segregation, endogamy, and resistance to assimilation in the host society are the foundations of diasporas. These three characteristics must also persist over the generations because diasporas are long-term phenomena (Armstrong 1982, 206–13). Therefore, Italian emigration has failed the litmus test to qualify for diasporic connotations because of the fading away of the distinctiveness of Italian communities abroad over time.

In any case, the dynamics of Italian emigrants' attachment to their homeland make the notion of an Italian diaspora problematic even in the heyday of a national identity arising from allegiance to Italy. During the era of mass migration across the Atlantic Ocean—before the United States enforced laws restricting immigration from eastern and southern Europe in the 1920s—and to western European destinations in the late 1950s and the 1960s, many emigrants did not regard the separation from their native land as being irreversible. Instead, they planned to go back to their mother country and to enjoy there the money they anticipated making abroad. Contrary to the thesis that return migration was a doomed dream for most expatriates who left their native countries prior to the 1990s (Portes 1999, 225), many Italians did eventually resettle in the peninsula before the late twentieth century (Cinel 1999). Actually, repatriation accounted for 52 percent of Italy's worldwide emigration between 1916 and 1942 and for even 58 percent between 1946 and 1976 (Cerase 2001, 116). In particular, while 4,660,000 Italians settled in the United States between 1880 and 1950, 2,322,000 people—namely about 50 percent of the newcomers—moved back to their native country (Livi Bacci 1961, 32). Likewise, the ratio of Italian repatriation from European destinations rose from 58 percent between 1952 and 1957 to 65 percent between 1958 and 1963, reaching 88 percent in the remaining years of the 1960s (Romero 2001, 412). The returnees usually remained in Italy until they ran out of their savings and then left again to earn additional money abroad. Actually, roughly 10 percent of the Italian immigrants to the United States in 1904 had previously been there in search of job opportunities (Daniels 2002, 25).

Seasonal migration did not occur only to European countries but even to locations beyond the Atlantic. During the decades of the mass exodus across the ocean, many Italians either sailed to Argentina in winter in order to find agricultural jobs in the *fazendas* and then returned to Italy for the harvest in summer or went to the United States in the spring in order to get work in road and railway construction and came back home in winter at least until the U.S. restrictive legislation on immigration put an end to the era of the birds of passage (Martellone 1984, 408–9). Indeed, it has been calculated that roughly half of the Genoese immigrants to Argentina in the late nineteenth century actually traveled several times back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean (Devoto 1994, 684). Similarly, *golondrinas*—migrants who spent six months in Italy and six months in Argentina—were at least 20,000 per year in the decade that preceded World War I (Baily 1999, 60).

In addition, repatriation was not confined to the decades of mass migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Repatriation from European countries surpassed emigration to European destinations in the 1970s. During the following decade, the time the average Italian expatriate spent abroad was less than twelve months for many European destinations and exceeded five years only in the cases of France and the United States (Corti 2006, 929). Furthermore, a few Italian Argentineans exploited their double citizenship to seek sanctuary in Italy after the 1976 military coup in Buenos Aires (Incisa di Camerana 1998, 368). In addition, the descendants of many Italian emigrants went back to Friuli and Piedmont from South America in the early 1990s and numerous Argentineans of Italian origin tried to return to their ancestral country after the 2001 economic crisis by exploiting loopholes in Italy’s legislation that let the offspring of its expatriates reclaim their ancestors’ Italian citizenship. To many of them, however, Italy was only a way station from which they moved to Spain and even the United States, thus reclaiming their ancestors’ citizenship was merely an attempt to gain legal status that made entry into those countries much easier (Rhi Sausi and Garcia 1992; Grossutti 1997; Bramuglia and Santillo 2002; Bertagna 2005; Tintori 2009).

Drawing upon the principle of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood), Italy’s liberal policy in granting citizenship to the emigrants’ descendants, while making it almost impossible for immigrants to the Italian peninsula to acquire it (Zincone 2006, 4–10), highlights another shortcoming of the efforts to define the spreading of the Italian population abroad as a diaspora. Actually, although the notion of *diaspora* has been elaborated against the backdrop of the decline of nation-states as a source of people’s sense of affiliation, the case of Italy points to an experience in which a nation-state did play a significant role in shaping identity. The relatively successful contribution of the

campaign of the Fascist regime to stimulate and strengthen the allegiance of the Italian emigrants and their children to their native land—especially in the United States—before the outbreak of World War II, overcoming their previously well-entrenched *campanilismo* offers a further example of the nation-state as an effective creator and promoter of identity (Luconi 2000; Pretelli 2008).

Conclusion

Italian migration has been less a worldwide diasporic dispersal of people than a continuous inflow and outflow of individuals—often the same persons at different times in their lives—across the country's borders. Confining the concept of *diaspora* to the Jewish experience of forced exile alone seems a rather narrow application of this notion, although the case of Jews does aptly fall within the various ranges of the paradigm (Foa 2009). Consequently, the few Italians who succeeded in seeking sanctuary abroad—especially in the United States—after the passage of the 1938 Fascist anti-Semitic legislation can be properly identified as part of a broader diaspora, that of Jews (Foa Yona 1978; Segrè 1993; Ginzburg Migliorino 2004). But defining *diaspora* as a mere scattering of an originally homogeneous group sounds too broad a use because it fails to highlight differences in emigration mechanics and characteristics among single nationality groups. Mainly a pursuit of economic opportunities abroad by people who felt rejected by their native country and long retained subnational identities before assimilation within their host societies, Italian global migration has had specific features of its own that are both at odds with the classic definition of *diaspora* and unable to stand out in scholarship within the framework of the unbound reformulations of such a category.

Donna R. Gabaccia has pointed to terminologies that Italian historians in particular have used as alternatives to diaspora (Gabaccia 2005b, 145). Few are hardly viable in supposedly neutral scholarship, namely in uses that do not reflect political agendas. For instance, *italiani all'estero* has political implications. Actually, this very expression became a replacement for *emigranti* in 1927 when the Fascist regime made an attempt at emphasizing the dignity of Italians in the world, in contrast to the often disparaging connotations of the former word, as undersecretary for foreign affairs Dino Grandi stated that year and the first secretary of the Fascist clubs abroad, Giuseppe Bastianini, reiterated in 1939 (Grandi 1985, 131–2; Bastianini 1939). Within the same conservative section of Italy's political spectrum, in 1909, a prominent nationalist and a future Fascist fellow traveler, who had been an emigrant to South America himself, Enrico Corradini, explicitly

denied the existence of an Italian diaspora. He contrasted this latter notion, as a cause for sadness and sorrow to Jews, with the relocation of Italians abroad, as an opportunity for individual economic and social improvement (Corradini 1923, 73).

Further alternatives to diaspora, which Gabaccia has not listed, are barely suitable either. Among them are *Italici* and *Italicity*, notwithstanding their growing popularity inside and outside the academia in the last few years. These somehow overlapping expressions have been elaborated by Piero Bassetti to define all the people who share a common interest in and passion for Italy regardless of their cultural, ethnolinguistic, and national belonging. Therefore, besides reflecting a postethnic concept of self-perception à la Werner Sollors, by which membership in a minority group and identity are not matters of descent but of consent, *Italici* and *Italicity* have eventually turned out to be more eye-catching words to support the marketing of Italian products worldwide than scholarly notions (Bassetti 2003; Accolla and d’Aquino 2008; Sollors 1986).

Yet terms other than *diaspora* can be more aptly used to define Italian emigration so as to stress the peculiarities of this phenomenon and its worldwide spread. All of them suggest the scattering of the Italian population abroad without yielding to the homogenizing effect of the word *diaspora*, which does not take the specificity of the Italian experience into full account.

For example, Robert Viscusi – not Piero Bassetti, as Paolino Accolla and Niccolò d’Aquino have erroneously contended – has devised the expression “Italian Commonwealth” and the Turin-based Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli has elaborated the concept of *altreitalie*, while author Luigi Meneghello has coined the neologism *dispatrio*, with particular reference to his own experience in Great Britain (Viscusi 1993; Accolla and d’Aquino 2008, 45; Meneghello 1993).⁹ Moreover scholars Loretta Baldassar and Ros Pesman have referred to emigrants from Veneto and their offspring in Australia as a cohort of the “global Italians,” a definition that can be easily and reasonably applied to the experience of first- and subsequent-generation Italians in other countries as well (Baldassar and Pesman 2005). Drawing upon a case study of the worldwide displacement of people from Biella (in Piedmont), Dionigi Albera, Patrizia Audenino, and Paola Corti have also suggested the term *plurilocalismo* to stress the establishment of transnational networks made up by the specific and circumscribed places where the migrants were born, got jobs after leaving their native land, and retained relatives. Indeed, the *Biellesi* outside Biella revealed a sense of allegiance at least to both their hometown and the place where they had settled. But such loyalties could also include the places other than Biella

where kinsfolk lived (Albera, Audenino, and Corti, 2005). Similar attitudes have also been identified for other Italian communities such as Casalvieri, a town in the province of Frosinone in the Lazio region (Miranda 1996).

In any case, discarding the use of *diaspora* as an interpretative concept will definitely benefit the field of Italian American studies. On the one hand, going beyond this somehow homogenizing paradigm will prevent scholarship from failing to take into account the specific features of the exodus from the Italian peninsula as opposed to other peoples' outflow from different areas. Specifically, tending to stress the crossing of borders with few extremist exceptions in the manner of Goldschmidt, the notion of *diaspora* does not incorporate the attempts at superseding the distinction between the domestic and international mobility of the Italian people that recent scholarship has conversely endeavored to highlight (Corti 2007; Arru, Caglioti, and Ramella 2008). On the other hand, placing aside the idea of *diaspora* will help focus on both the emigrants' individual or family agency and the circularity of an experience that was often characterized by repatriations and temporary sojourns rather than by a definitive physical separation from the homeland.

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Notes

1. For mobility in western Europe, see, among others, Moch (1992).
2. A detailed overview of the scholarship about Italian emigration is offered by Sanfilippo (2005).
3. For the specific case of Italian emigration, see Fasce (2006), Vezzosi (2006), and Bertonha (2010).
4. Ciuffoletti's conventional interpretation has recently been criticized by Silvana Patriarca, who has argued that the existence of both Italians and Italy's national character predates the political unification of the country (Patriarca 2010).
5. Giovanni Battista Cuneo to Giuseppe Mazzini, Montevideo, April 24, 1841, in Mazzini (1914, 275).
6. Actually, the Fascist persecution was not confined to the practitioners of Judaism, but it was extended to all the members of what Mussolini's regime improperly defined as the "Jewish race," regardless of their religion (Sarfatti 2006).

7. For specific case studies, see Mignone (2008) for the United States as well as Battiston and Mascitelli (2008b) for Australia.
8. For a case study, see Carle (1996). For an in-depth theoretical examination of the loyalty to the hometown as opposed to the attachment to the native country among Italians, see Viroli (1995).
9. For the scholarship promoted by the Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, see Gorlier (2000). For Meneghello, cf. Franzina (2009).

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