

1-2014

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## Recommended Citation

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## The Psycho-Affective Echoes of Colonialism in Fieldwork Relations

*Robert Garot*

**Key words:**  
qualitative  
methodology;  
colonialism;  
surveillance;  
refugee; interviews

**Abstract:** This article describes the varieties of relations with African immigrant interviewees in Tuscany as experienced by a white male interviewer from the United States. Franz FANON's discussion of the psycho-affective consequences of colonialism is vital for understanding how naïve and romantic notions of fieldwork relations are disingenuous, counter-productive and perhaps destructive in a neo-colonial landscape.

### Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Setting, Methods and Datasets](#)
- [3. Raising Suspicions](#)
- [4. Enlisted as a "Cooler"](#)
- [5. Conclusion](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

"When I arrived in this country, they asked me what made me leave Nigeria. I told them the reason why I left. I tell them the truth. Is it bad for somebody to say the truth?"

From an interview with Leo<sup>1</sup>, a 24 year-old Nigerian, after he had received an order of expulsion from the Police in Florence

### 1. Introduction

The process of gathering interviews from immigrants for social scientific analysis is not in itself innocuous, and is indeed deeply implicated with state practices for determining one's legal status (DE GENOVA, 2005; EASTMOND, 2007). In the tales of "illegals"<sup>2</sup> one finds a marked tension between the story told and lived experiences. A one-to-one correspondence between the two is surely impossible (WITTGENSTEIN, 1953), yet for illegals, as for many stigmatized individuals (GOFFMAN, 1963), the question of correspondence is heightened, as the story one tells may have a profound effect on one's life chances (EASTMOND, 2007, pp.259-260). Depending on one's story, one may be eligible for political asylum, refugee status, humanitarian admittance, or most commonly, none of the above (see COUTIN, 2003). As DAUVERGNE (2008, p.62) notes, "[l]ying does not exclude anyone from refugee status—it is often a necessary precursor to putting

1 All names are anonymized.

2 DAUVERGNE (2008, pp.9-19) traces how the term "illegals" has become a sufficient short-hand for those whose very identity is characterized by their relationship to the law.

oneself in the position to claim such status." Hence, one must be especially aware that social science interviews with illegal immigrants are "social to the core" (GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2009, p.5). Interviewing illegals as a social scientist is a process wrought with uncertainty and anxiety, both for the interviewee and the interviewer. [1]

According to John GILLIOM (2005, p.71), "[w]e actually know very little about the experiences and understandings of the surveilled." His study addresses this gap by focusing on how low income families in Appalachian Ohio "evade, combat, trick, criticize, undermine, or otherwise speak and act out the conflict they must inevitable have" with a welfare monitoring system, "that enacts such manifest and consequential control over their lives" (p.72). For undocumented immigrants seeking asylum or refugee status, the determination of the veracity of a story, according to guidelines typically unknown to the asylum seeker, means the difference between inclusion or exclusion, and perhaps life or death as well (COUTIN, 2003, pp.105-134; EASTMOND, 2007, pp.259-260). [2]

The possibility that a social science interview might be complicit in such a state apparatus is never far from the considerations of *clandestini*. The telling of such tales is often a "harrowing experience" for the teller, involving "a return to hell" (p.259). One must also be aware, in soliciting immigrants' tales, that "narratives are culturally variable as genres of expression. The life history as a Western genre is based on notions of 'a life' and 'self' as unique and clearly bounded units and cannot be taken for granted in other contexts" (pp.252-253). Furthermore, with the hearing of the story comes a *de facto* acceptance of responsibility to do something about the conditions which rendered the story possible.<sup>3</sup> The reluctance of immigrants to be interviewed arose from their profound awareness of the consequentiality of their stories, and their lack of trust in what might be done with them.<sup>4</sup> As Stephen GRAHAM (2009)<sup>5</sup> states, "[e]veryone must be understood as both potential suspect and therefore, necessarily, proactive spy." [3]

In regards to ethnographers, one might argue that we have always been spies. While EMERSON and POLLNER (1983) wisely counsel for the need for analytic distance in fieldwork relations, at times contingencies (EMERSON & MESSINGER, 1977; GOFFMAN, 1963) make "distance" possible or impossible. FERDINAND, PEARSON, ROWE and WORTHINGTON (2007) provide a revealing glimpse into how the dynamics of spying might be managed. [4]

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3 The words of Frank, a 28 year-old informant from Nigeria, reflected the sentiments of many *clandestini* I interviewed, when we spoke in a recreation circle (*casa del popolo*) on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007, and he demanded to know, "[o]f what purpose is this interview? How is it going to improve our standard of living here in Italy?" (compare DE GENOVA, 2004, pp.13-55). I muddled through a response, and Frank stayed with me despite my suspicion that he suspected me of lying.

4 See DE GENOVA (2004, pp.13-55) for an in-depth analysis and appreciation for the suspicions of working class immigrants towards his research in what he refers to as Mexican Chicago. KATZ (1983) speaks of how members' reluctance to provide information on various topics reveals their sensitivity to the ethnographer not as a sociologist but as a fellow member of the setting.

5 GRAHAM graciously provided a working copy of his manuscript, which was not yet in print as this article was composed. Hence page numbers are not available.

Internal Review Boards (IRBs) enforce requirements designed to reassure research "subjects" that the researcher is indeed not a spy. Yet the very tools used to accomplish this insure that those "under the lens" will become suspicious of a researcher's motives. Following lengthy and socially precarious efforts to build rapport with a potential interviewee, asking them to then sign an official form may well bode the kiss of death for trust and rapport. [5]

Below, after discussing the setting and methods, I will probe first how practices of conducting ethnography, including participant observation, interviewing, and insuring the completion of informed consent authorizations, necessarily raises the suspicions of the researched. Secondly, I will show how such fears might well be confirmed by the situations in which an ethnographer is placed, in exchange for access. [6]

## 2. Setting, Methods and Datasets

Italy, historically known for sending immigrants, is rapidly becoming, like the rest of Europe, a destination for immigrants from around the world. Not unlike the Italian emigrants of old (STELLA, 2003), the immigrants to the new Europe face myriad difficulties upon entry (LUCASSEN, 2005). What makes the Italian case interesting is the relative recency of the immigration and its dramatic acceleration. Their composition consists of almost 200 nationalities, but the general trend is highlighted by the number one immigrant according to [ISTAT](#), Albanians. With only 424 legal residents in 1990, Albanians grew to 168,963 in 2001, and 497,761 in 2013. One of the most substantial increases is in the number of Chinese immigrants, from 62,314 in 2001 to 304,768 in 2013. While the overall ratio of immigrants in the general population is lower than in other European countries, and much lower than in a traditional receiving country like the United States, it is the recency of the immigration, *growing from 2.34% to 6.77% of the general population from 2001 to 2011*, and the lack of preparation of Italian institutions, which makes Italy so important to study. [7]

Italy experienced a number of decades of immigration before developing its first comprehensive policy in 1998, largely in response to pressure from the European Union (McBRITTON & GAROFALO, 2000, p.95; SCHUSTER, 2005, p.760). Many of Italy's institutions have been unprepared for large scale immigration, including the legal and educational systems. GRANATA, LANZANI and NOVAK (2004, p.161) have shown that many immigrants have difficulty finding suitable housing, remaining homeless or in substandard conditions (also see CALAVITA, 2005, pp.111-117). CALAVITA (2004) overviews the history of immigration law in Italy, showing how many laws meant to protect the rights of workers ended up pushing immigrants into illegal statuses, and therefore illegal activities. One in three prisoners are immigrants, often confined for crimes due to their irregular status, even though their rate of deviance is lower than in the general population (DI NICOLA, 2004, p.186). Currently no studies exist in Italy to determine whether more immigrants are imprisoned due to police profiling or due to the fact that immigrants commit a disproportionate number of crimes, leaving the debate open to ideological discussions heavily influenced by the media (BECUCCI, 2006). For

instance, even SAMPSON's (2008) discussions of an immigrant "protective effect," well publicized in the U.S., are largely unknown in Italy. [8]

In order to grapple with Italian immigrants' experiences in Italy and in respect to Italian immigration law, I conducted 174 days of participant observation at services for immigrants in Tuscany, and interviewed 72 immigrants to Italy from 23 countries, 36 men and 36 women, as well as 41 lawyers and other service providers for immigrants, regarding immigrants' experiences with the law. Roughly two-thirds of interviews with immigrants and all the interviews with service providers were conducted in Italian. I observed 166 cases of immigrants' service encounters with attorneys, over a period of 155 hours in city-sponsored immigration service centers in Florence, Pistoia, and Prato, and the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro) trade union in Pistoia. I also attended eleven local, regional and national conferences in Italy lasting a day or more, on such themes as immigration and racism. As in SCHUSTER's (2005, p.758) study,

"[g]iven the heterogeneity of the migrant population in Italy, there was no intention to interview a representative sample of migrants. Instead, interviews were conducted with as broad a range of people as possible, especially in terms of legal status and length of residence." [9]

### **3. Raising Suspicions**

I spent months of hanging out at the local office of CGIL before being granted my first interview with an immigrant. CGIL is one of the most powerful trade unions in Italy, and is one of the few organizations in Italy, outside of the Catholic Church, which continues to develop policies, provide services, and make public pronouncements on behalf of immigrants. CGIL is one of several locations where immigrants can receive free assistance, and have their data officially entered into the computer system of the Ministry of the Interior. Through a series of negotiations which themselves lasted months, I was able to sit awkwardly in a cramped space behind two experienced Italian immigration specialists and observe their interactions with clients. With each client, I requested an interview, and the specialists were very supportive, often making pleas on my behalf. Over a period of months and hundreds of encounters with immigrants, not one agreed to an interview. [10]

Then one afternoon as I interviewed Sarah, a student worker at CGIL on the verge of graduating from college, a young Nigerian man named Jerry came through the office selling socks and other sundry items. Sarah knew Jerry well, and they shared some easy small talk and jokes as he passed. Sarah knew of my difficulty finding interviewees, so she asked if he might be interviewed by me. After hundreds of refusals, I can only assume that Sarah's easy rapport with Jerry was the only reason he assented so readily, even happily. [11]

When I met with Jerry at the train station a few days later, he greeted me with a friend named Isaak, smiling broadly, arriving about thirty minutes after the time

we'd arranged. Despite their smiles, Jerry immediately voiced some of their suspicions that I might be with the police. I reassured them, but soon we didn't have much to say as the three of us moved down the street. We found a table outside under a plastic canopy at a little bar by a magazine stand. I gave them my card and they scrutinized it. Jerry asked critically, "[w]hat is this that you come from a school of criminal justice?" I said I see crime as something created by laws. "Like you guys. You're not illegal, you're human beings. The law makes you illegal. That's a problem." I went inside to see about ordering, and they gave me a menu. When I came back out with a menu, Isaak was gone. Jerry said he was afraid, "[b]ut I'm not scared. I don't give a damn," he said resolutely. [12]

I pulled out my IRB permission forms, which I soon discovered were my biggest obstacles to interviews.<sup>6</sup> The interviewee seemed to think they were signing away their rights rather than having them guaranteed. I also had my tape recorder, which Jerry was adamant should not be used. But he also did not want me to put it away, and he kept checking to make sure it was not turned on. I had to show him repeatedly that the little red light was not on, and eventually I simply took out the battery to ease his mind, though I was not sure it did. He seemed to think everything could be a trick—my claimed identity and purposes, the forms, the suspiciously small tape recorder. I carefully discussed everything on the form, but he wouldn't sign it. He also carefully looked over all my interview questions. He didn't like the question "Did you need help from anyone to find work," and demanded, "Why do you want to know that?" "I want to understand your experiences," I said. "Why you wanna understand my experiences?" I found myself telling him why I went to school, how long I was in school ("Why you in school so long?"). I pointed to the bookstore behind him, and told him I wanted to write a book, "like those." We eventually agreed that I would take notes as he talked. He talked slowly enough for me to get everything. [13]

Jerry told me a story I would hear repeated by dozens of other Nigerian men. He arrived after an extremely dangerous voyage over scorching deserts and atop an inflatable raft operated by shady characters, only to be thrust into circumstances outside the law upon arrival. As is common with street vendors in Italy, he was allowed to leave Lampedusa and fend for himself, without regular papers, social contacts, nor hope for a job. He soon learned that his only means of survival was to "sell stuff on the street" and beg, dependent on symbols and declarations of Christianity for gaining Italians' sympathy. Many immigrants I interviewed claimed to be highly educated, but had no possibility of having their education respected in Italy. The Nigerian men I talked to tended to meet through extended peer and family networks, and lived quietly in overcrowded conditions. Many know and are known by the police on a first name basis, who usually permit them to sell their items, and search their bags, sometimes confiscating their items with a warning that if there is any trouble they will be summarily deported. As DE GENOVA (2005, p.248) states, "[e]nforcement rituals ... perform the spectacle that fetishizes migrant 'illegality' as a seeming objective 'thing in itself.'" Many work

6 For more on how Institutional Review Boards limit research opportunities, see a special issue of the *Law and Society Review* of December, 2007 devoted to the topic, especially the essay by Jack KATZ (2007).

long, hard hours carrying heavy bags all day on the streets, and are lucky to make €20 per day. None of these men could make any sense of why I wanted to sit with them and ask them questions. Many filled the interviews with proclamations of faith, and none had anything but the kindest things to say about Italians: they are so gentle, they are so kind, they provide me something to eat. [14]

One man with whom I often crossed paths, George, kept promising me an interview, only to put me off for another day, often after I had made a special bus trip to see him or walked through the rain. As we finally sat down at a sidewalk café, he told me to call him a different name than what I'd been using, and refused to sign the form until a nearby African man urged him to "just sign it." Then we stumbled through an awkward interview of about 20 minutes as he mumbled incoherent and contradictory phrases, broken by coherent and strident demands for "another coke" and "a slice of pizza." [15]

#### **4. Enlisted as a "Cooler"**

Such fears on the part of immigrants such as George were not altogether unfounded. I was able to gain some rapport with a Nigerian man I met at a city-sponsored service agency for immigrants, where it will soon become illegal to help such *clandestini* once the new security law goes into effect. Leo had arrived in Italy, as many Africans do, in Lampedusa, and was initially denied refugee status, since his claim was that he was coming to Italy to help his parents, living in poverty in a shanty-dwelling. He appealed the ruling, and in the meantime went to stay with his sister in a town in North-Central Italy, not knowing that the police there were cracking down on African men with or without residency permits. Although Leo had a temporary permit while he was awaiting his trial, the police ordered him to appear in Florence within five days or receive an order of expulsion. [16]

I happened to be observing in Prato's Immigration Center when Leo came to Luigi de Giorgio, an immigration lawyer employed by the city, for assistance. Since Luigi was unable to accompany Leo to Florence or find a colleague who would, he enlisted my help, and the next day I was happy to accompany Leo on the brief train trip. There, we entered a large warehouse full of hundreds of immigrants, reminiscent of images of Ellis Island from 100 years ago. Leo and I were told to wait, and then wait some more. We were afraid to step out to get food, fearing we might be called at any moment, so we managed for our five hours in the waiting room on some biscuits I purchased from the vending machine. Eventually, a number of officials approached wearing broad smiles, and asked me to translate exactly what they said. To my chagrin, I was being employed as the "cooler" (GOFFMAN, 1952), informing Leo that he had five days to leave the country or risk imprisonment. I asked them about Leo's court date in one month, but they told me to simply translate, and I suppose I was somewhat cowed by being surrounded by five uniformed officers, and surely watched by many others. As I walked back to the train with Leo he was crying, as he wondered aloud if it was better to lie than tell the truth. [17]

When I returned to Prato, Luigi was dumbfounded by the authorities' decision, saying that they had no right to make it illegal for Leo to attend his own trial. Leo, on the other hand, was a young man I continued to see nearly every day, either near my house or the train station. Each time we passed, he asked me if there was something I might do for him, and each time I mentioned how Luigi was telling me of appeals he could file and other efforts he could make to overturn the police decision. While Luigi didn't have time to process such appeals himself, he called colleagues in other cities, but by the time he lined one up, Leo's request to stay had already been denied by the immigration court of appeal. [18]

But no matter. Nearly any African street vendor can show you his five-day order of expulsion. The order is simply an official stamp on marginality. Since immigrants without permits to stay cannot rent apartments or work legally, the order of deportation becomes a reassurance to the Italian state that these young men will not compete for jobs, will not be entitled to anything but emergency medical services, and are easily exploitable as black market laborers. The state has no desire to incarcerate or deport them, but they will surely be monitored as they "sell stuff on the street," not allowed to gain any foothold in the New Europe.<sup>7</sup> As GRAHAM (2009, p.95) notes, "street vendors everywhere—are increasingly rendered disposable or assaulted through militarized discipline, forcible exclusion or state violence."<sup>8</sup> No wonder then, they might suspect the "innocence" (FINE, 1993) of an "ethnographer" coming to ask them questions. [19]

## 5. Conclusion

Franz FANON (1963, p.16) notes:

"The colonized subject is constantly on his guard: Confused by the myriad signs of the colonial world he never knows whether he is out of line. Confronted with a world configured by the colonizer, the colonized subject is always presumed guilty. The colonized does not accept his guilt, but considers it a kind of curse, a sword of Damocles. But deep down the colonized subject acknowledges no authority." [20]

So too with contemporary internal colonial relations with clandestini. The fieldworker, in questioning the neo-colonial subject, cannot help but echo colonial subjugation, if not for him-/herself, at least for the interviewee. It is no coincidence that the most professionalized branch of the Italian police are the Questura—those who question. As ethnographers, we are their auxiliaries. Despite whatever

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7 DE GENOVA (2004, p.248) shows what happens when an undocumented immigrant decides to call the state's bluff on deportation, according to the husband of his friend Maria's grandmother: "When he decided that he had had enough, and that he wanted to return to Mexico, he proceeded to turn himself in to the INS [The Immigration and Naturalization Service] ... The INS refused him the right to be deported."

8 A number of social observers have referred to the restrictiveness of Italian immigration laws in terms of less-eligibility (DE GIORGI, 2010). According to DE GIORGI (p.148), "[t]his concept was first developed in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and provided the main rationale for the Poor Laws of 1834. The principle holds that public assistance should never improve the conditions of the poor above the standards of life available to the poorest among the working poor, otherwise public relief would become 'more eligible' than waged work." See CASTLES (2004) for a discussion of hidden agendas and unanticipated consequences of immigration policies.



our intentions, ethnography is a form of surveillance, often deeply complicit in the police state. As ethnographers, we need to be cognizant of such forms of reciprocity (SAHLINS, 1972), and incorporate such reflexive awareness into our texts. As MARCUS (2007, p.1133) exhorts,

"So, the engaged reflexive subject, who cannot be a mere informant or subject of research, but in some sense, must become involved in its intellectual work and scope; the multi-sited arena of fieldwork as networked knowledge sites the ethnography of which is both thick and thin, and is patterned by very politicized relations of collaboration; and ultimately the inclusion of reception itself as an object or site of fieldwork—these together constitute an ethnographic baroque today that would move us beyond what the exemplary ethnographic textual form has come to in its past messiness." [21]

## Acknowledgments

Support from the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute and John Jay College of Criminal Justice made this project possible. Many thanks to Michele GROSSMAN for her thoughtful suggestions.

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## Citation

Garot, Robert (2013). The Psycho-Affective Echoes of Colonialism in Fieldwork Relations [21 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 15(1), Art. 12, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1401125>.