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Constructing *Convivenza* in Sicily:
Palermo's Islamic and Jewish Heritage, and the Rhetoric of
Cosmopolitanism

By

Sean Christian Wyer

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Italian Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Mia Fuller, Co-Chair
Professor Charles Hirschkind, Co-Chair
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Professor Charles Burdett

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Sean Christian Wyer

Abstract

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor Mia Fuller, Co-Chair

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The word *convivenza* is used to describe peaceful 'co-existence' between diverse communities, particularly religious communities. The idea that *convivenza* is central to Sicilian identity has become commonplace in local discourse, and is often used to distinguish the island from mainland Italy and Europe. "Every Sicilian has Arab DNA," I am often told during research in Sicily, "because Sicily was once an Islamic Emirate." "While Jews were being persecuted in central Europe," some argue, "they thrived in Sicily for centuries." This narrative is neither new nor universally accepted – it is based on contested interpretations of Sicily's past and present – but has acquired additional meanings in the twenty-first century, with Sicily now a point of arrival for migrants crossing the Mediterranean. Whereas numerous scholars have analyzed the contemporary effects of Américo Castro's famous *convivencia* thesis in Spain (1948), the construction of a similar narrative in Sicily merits closer attention than it has thus far received. I focus on Palermo, Sicily's regional capital, where this narrative is especially influential. I blend cultural studies and ethnography, both in-person and digital, to study the cultural memory of Palermo's Jewish and Islamic past; its contemporary repercussions for the heritage sphere, and for the city's religious landscape; and the role of the *convivenza* narrative in political rhetoric.

I first ask how the *convivenza* narrative encourages 'rediscoveries' of Palermo's multi-religious heritage. I study how Palermo's Jewish history has been emphasized in the past twenty years, over half a millennium after Sicily's Jews were expelled in the late fifteenth century. I examine the emergence of Jewish 'sites of memory' in Palermo, including a medieval Jewish quarter; a pool that some believe was once a *miqweh* (ritual bath); and a former inquisitorial prison. I then turn my attention to two mosques and a planned future synagogue in Palermo, all located in former churches, arguing that heritage-based narratives are used to weave these into the contemporary city's fabric. Finally, I analyze political messaging by one of the most vocal proponents of a 'cosmopolitan' Sicilian identity: Leoluca Orlando, Mayor of Palermo until 2022. I evaluate how Orlando uses history-based rhetoric to make pro-immigration arguments, framing Mediterranean 'hospitality' as an inherently Sicilian value. I build on studies of nostalgia, heritage, and cultural memory, critically examining the construction of a 'cosmopolitan' Mediterranean identity. I analyze how the stereotyped image of Sicily as 'not quite European' – once used within Italy to disparage Sicilians – is being celebrated by some in the twenty-first century, particularly by those who look at Italy's anti-immigrant central government with trepidation.

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Introduction

“Those places that a few years earlier had seemed to Ibn Jubayr all a garden, began at that time to become forest,” wrote the historian of the Muslims of Sicily, Michele Amari. And thus it is always so: every calm ends in storm, every golden age is dimmed, every enchantment fades.

Vincenzo Consolo, 1999¹
“Ibn Jubayr”

“Sicily is not Italy,” reads a recurring *graffito* in Palermo, the capital city of Italy’s southernmost region. Depending on whom you ask, Sicily might alternatively be the very heart of Italy – “the key to everything,”² in the words of Goethe – or it might lie in between the two extremes. Fortunately, Sicily’s precise relationship to *italianità* – Italian-ness – is not the focus of my research. The field of Italian Studies is occasionally reminded that “the study of a culture restricted by [...] the concept of the nation/national identity has become increasingly difficult to justify” (Burdett 2018, 4). There are other questions we can and should ask in Sicily.

If Italy as a whole “can be imagined as a hyphenated, in-between space created by the multiple crossings that etch its geographical surfaces and cultural depths” (Bond 2014, 421), then Sicily, an island in the middle of the Mediterranean – the site of centuries of coexistence and conflict; emigration and immigration; invasion and rebellion – is exemplary. It is therefore especially inviting to study ‘transnationally’ in Sicily, that is, on a scale that does not primarily make recourse to the idea of *national* identity. “[P]atterns of transnational connectivity put pressure on bounded understandings of national cultures” (Burns and Duncan 2022, 4). A “change of scale” is not always merely a functional choice, but can also provide a framework with which to “th[ink] together” a number of places (Azoulay 2019, xv), and indeed times, shedding light on processes that a primarily national lens might have left obscure.

Sicilian culture has influenced and been influenced by the Americas, Oceania, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and other places still. To study Sicily globally would be a valuable lifetime’s project, but it would overspill the word count of even the most generous doctoral dissertations. And although I often meet Sicilians who consider themselves to be ‘cosmopolitan’ in the etymological sense – *πολίται* (*politai*) of the *κόσμος* (*kosmos*), i.e. citizens of the world – I meet more still who describe themselves as ‘Mediterranean.’ What this means is not always straightforward to ascertain. Indeed, that is one of the reasons for studying on this transnational regional scale, and investigating its relationship to the sub-national regional and local scales (the region of Sicily, and Palermo, its capital). But my purpose is not to demonstrate that Sicily belongs to a supposed Mediterranean “culture area” either (Herzfeld 1984). Nor do I intend to use Sicily to ask, in time-honored anthropological tradition, if such a shared Mediterranean culture actually exists in the first place (Shryock 2020). Whether or not Palermo in fact has more in common with Barcelona, Tunis, Beirut, or Istanbul than it does with, say, Milan, is not the kind of question I seek to answer (cf. Driessen 2005).

¹ Translation by Felice Italo Beneduce (Consolo 2006, 235). ““Quei luoghi che pochi anni innanzi erano sembrati a Ibn Giubayr tutto un giardino, cominciavano dunque a diventare foresta” scrive lo storico dei Musulmani di Sicilia Michele Amari. Ed è sempre così: ogni calma finisce in tempesta, ogni epoca d’oro si offusca, ogni incanto svanisce” (Consolo 1999, 226).

² “Italien ohne Sizilien macht gar kein Bild in der Seele: Hier ist erst der Schlüssel zu allem” (Goethe 1913, 266).

The *idea* of the Mediterranean – Mediterraneanism (Giglioli 2018, 2) – is stubborn. This is certainly the case in Sicily, where it plays an important role in local identity formation. This means it has important real-life consequences, which make “examin[ing] the Mediterranean and Mediterraneanism together” worthwhile (Ben-Yehoyada et al. 2020, 12). After all, “the anthropologist cannot ignore the constant preoccupations of the society he is studying” (Peristiany 1966, 10). Taking my lead from recent scholarship in and on the Mediterranean, I do not use Sicily to focus on the Mediterranean as a “physical-geographical entity,” but rather, to study its “existence as a ‘Mediterranean imaginary’” (Fogu 2020, 3). If the Mediterranean exists discursively – as an idea that people identify with, talk about, and argue against – then what meanings is it used to signify in Sicily? Decentering the national lens helps us to analyze not only the discursive construction of Sicilian regional identity, but also an important example of the how the “public use of the past” constitutes a form of “Mediterranean building” (Pavone 2014, 77). Asking how Mediterraneans are ‘constructed’ is a valuable way of moving this field of study forward, and is a central focus of this dissertation.

The Mediterranean might not quite be a “floating signifier”: a “symbol in its pure state, therefore liable to take on any symbolic content whatsoever” (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 63f). Nonetheless, it has historically been used to indicate a vast spectrum of mutually irreconcilable characteristics. The Mediterranean can be thought of as a battlefield, the site of an endless “clash of civilizations,”³ or as a bazaar, a place of “encounter and exchange” (Dursteler 2011, 413). In some instances, it is portrayed as *mare nostrum*, “our sea,” once dominated by Rome and rightly ‘belonging’ to Europe in its entirety. In others, it is *mare aliorum*, a “sea of others,” the “dystopian obverse” of *mare nostrum* (Fogu 2020). What the Mediterranean means depends on a great number of factors, including when and where we look; who is looking; and what questions they are asking.

The Mediterranean is sometimes characterized as a region of small, inward-looking villages where life is regulated by a strict code of “honor and shame” (Peristiany 1966; Schneider 1971; cf. Herzfeld 1980). At other times, it is portrayed as the epitome of cosmopolitanism, a sea crossed by a dense network of maritime connections between great multicultural and multi-religious port cities, each one a “site of cultural exchange where people from different parts of the Mediterranean world met, mixed and influenced one another” (Driessen 2005, 130). In this dissertation, my priority is to examine critically this latter imaginary, of a cosmopolitan or multicultural Mediterranean, which I encountered time and time again during my time in Sicily.⁴

Looking for the ‘essence’ of Palermo

The first time I visited Sicily, in 2015, I stayed in an apartment on the top floor of a sixteenth-century building in the historic center of Palermo. From one window I could see and hear the busy state highway, the SS 113. On the other side of that road was the Foro Italico, an open space along the coast that is a popular spot for a *passaggiata*, a leisurely early-evening walk.

³ The “clash of civilizations” model, which became influential through the work of Samuel Huntington (1996), “assumes the existence of Muslim and Christian civilizational identities characterized by ‘incompatible and incommensurable attributes and values,’ which permanently and inevitably divide two immutable cultures” (Dursteler 2011). Edward Said summarized the thesis as a “crudely articulated manual in the art of maintaining a wartime status in the minds of Americans and others” (Said 2003, 69f), but it has nonetheless had a lasting impact on policymakers, among others.

⁴ As Eric Dursteler notes, this latter cosmopolitan reading of the Mediterranean does not “supplant” the idea of a “conflictual Mediterranean,” but rather, it “complicates it by undercutting the notion of a sea of clear-cut boundaries” (2011, 434).

A stretch of the Foro Italico has since been renamed *Lungomare Yasser Arafat* (“Yasser Arafat Waterfront”), an attempt by local government to emphasize an affinity with the struggles of those living elsewhere in the Mediterranean. A brief walk in the other direction, a large mural by the Palestinian artist Emily Jacir has also since been installed to commemorate the ‘abandoned property’ of displaced Palestinians, by reproducing an *ex libris* inscription in large lettering, in both Arabic and Sicilian dialect, which indicates the original owner of an abandoned book. The juxtaposition of Arabic and Sicilian dialect suggests not an Italo-Arab or Italo-Palestinian affinity, but serves to strengthen a specifically *Sicilian* sense of solidarity across the Mediterranean.

Beyond the Foro Italico lies the vast sea itself; beyond that, the Italian mainland. From the window on the other side of the apartment I could see Piazza della Kalsa. The name of this square is derived from the Arabic *al-Khalisa* (الخالصة), the name given by the Fatimid governor of Sicily, Khalil ibn Ishaq al-Tamimi (d. 944 CE), to a citadel that was once on that site (Amari 1858, 190). Among the meanings of *khalis* (خالص) are “clear; pure, unmixed, unadulterated” (Wehr 1979, 296), although it soon struck me that the very opposite ideas – syncretism, mixing, and diversity – now took center stage in the surrounding area. In the mornings I bought *panelle*, chickpea fritters, from a stall in the square. A lot of Palermo’s street food comes with a side of mythology. Although food rarely travels in neat and linear ways, there are those who insist that *panelle* are the “direct descendants of the Middle-Eastern *falafel* brought to the island by the Saracens [sic] over one thousand years ago” (Basile 2018, 57). The idea that Palermo’s culture is part-Italian, part-Arab – and many other parts besides – is everywhere.

A few minutes’ walk away from Piazza della Kalsa, street signs in Italian, Hebrew and Arabic symbolize the city’s historic religious pluralism. There was a time, before 1492, when the city’s Jews wrote, if not in Hebrew, then in Judeo-Arabic, a dialect of Arabic written in the Hebrew script. The sense that Palermo’s essence is rooted in its historic diversity – especially *religious* diversity – has acquired a new importance for the city’s identity in recent years. Since the 2010s, Palermo has “become a migrant city” (Palma 2021, iii). Along with gentrification and an increase in tourism, as well the city’s “escape from the Mafia” (182), this has changed the way the city center looks and feels, as well as how its residents perceive themselves.

The idea that Palermo is *and always has been* a city in which peoples of different religions, cultures and ethnicities coexist alongside one another – that Palermo is archetypally Mediterranean, in the sense of ‘cosmopolitan’ – is a powerful way of making sense of Palermo’s present. It enables those who feel themselves to be cosmopolitan to argue that, by ‘welcoming’ immigrants, Palermo is carrying out its natural vocation as an outward-facing port city. They can and do argue that there is a continuity between a past ‘golden age’ of coexistence in the Mediterranean, and the multicultural and multi-religious city that Palermo aspires to be in the twenty-first century.

On the face of it, the importance in Palermo of ‘cosmopolitan’ identity narratives is perhaps surprising, given the prominence of anti-immigration rhetoric in the Italian mainstream, and the electoral success of the far right on a national level. This apparent dissonance is one of the things that makes it an interesting phenomenon to examine. It is also the case, as this dissertation will demonstrate, that some in Sicily use the idea of a ‘cosmopolitan’ identity to emphasize the island’s separateness from mainland Italy and Europe.

Palermo is far from the only place in Sicily that has experienced migration in the twenty-first century, but it is a particularly rewarding place to study the consequences of this phenomenon for ideas of Sicilian identity. I ask how a cultural memory of Palermo’s ‘cosmopolitan’ history and tradition has developed during the first decades of the twenty-first century, and continues to

develop in light of both Palermo's present and what some believe to be its future vocation. It is not my primary intention to demonstrate that these histories and traditions are selective or "invented" (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), which would not in itself be exceptional. My starting point is that "if any history is invented, all history is invented. We should not view one kind of tradition as more invented than others, although its bearers may be more powerful and therefore more capable of enforcing its reproduction" (Herzfeld 1991, 12).

My research shows that Palermo's political culture, its inhabitants' sense of history, and even the meanings conveyed by the urban landscape itself, are changing along with its experience of immigration. It demonstrates that claims about 'rediscovering' a place's 'lost' roots do not always entail a 'pure' or fundamental origin. Instead, they can even tell stories we might recognize as 'cosmopolitan.' This dissertation emphasizes, furthermore, that the kind of 'cosmopolitanism' we read into the signs of the past is partly a product of contemporary political circumstances. By so doing, my research contributes to the critical study of heritage and cultural memory; to the study of Sicily's relationship with the Mediterranean, both as a geographical space and as an "imaginary" (Fogu 2020, 3); and to the study of cosmopolitanism(s) in theory and in practice.

In *A Place in History* (1991), Michael Herzfeld observes that, just as "rebuilding the Classical heritage was the path to European identity" in Greece (11), so too does Crete's contemporary "rehabilitation" of the period of Venetian rule, over and above the subsequent Ottoman period, "fit the present political and economic absorption of Greece into the European community" (57). I build on Herzfeld's approach – the anthropological study of both 'official' and 'unofficial' approaches to heritage, and of interactions between the two – in a very different context, where what Herzfeld calls the 'Oriental stereotype' is not downplayed, but celebrated. I show that heritage is being used in Palermo not just to bolster claims to Italian or European identity, but also to emphasize a supposed Sicilian and Mediterranean 'essence.'

What do historians and archaeologists mean when they announce that they have 'uncovered' or '(re)-discovered' a buried feature of Sicily's multi-religious past? How are parts of Palermo's urban landscape becoming 'sites of memory' for certain individuals and communities? What, if anything, do 'echoes' of Palermo's Muslim and Jewish past mean for Islam and Judaism in the city today? And what does it mean for the self-image of Palermitans when Palermo's most prominent politician insists that not just tolerance, but anti-racism, lies at the very essence of his city?

Mnemonic metaphors

People in Sicily cannot literally 'remember' the island's medieval religious diversity. As the scholar of memory Astrid Erll points out, when we speak about 'cultural,' 'collective' or 'social' memory, the term "memory" is used metaphorically (2008, 4). While it is true that terms like this are "often used in an ambiguous and vague way" (1), I nonetheless see utility in these "memory" metaphors:

Societies do not remember literally, but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past *according to present knowledge and needs* (5, own emphasis).

If “all historians are magpies,” as the Welsh historian Gwyn Alf Williams suggested (in Thomas 1985) – if our present determines the questions we ask of the past and the answers we find there – this is also true for all of us engaged in ‘remembering’ histories of which we have no direct experience.

It is precisely the “past-present relation” that makes the study of memory-as-metaphor exciting (Johnson and Dawson 1998, 78). This dissertation is interested in what Paul Ricoeur, following Saint Augustine, identifies as memory *qua* the “present of the past” (1990, 218). If “all political programmes involve some construction of the past as well as the future” (Popular Memory Group 1982, 213), then it should come as no surprise that transformations in Palermitan society over past decades – including contemporary Mediterranean migration, but also, among other changes, gains made by the anti-Mafia movement – have been accompanied by transformations in the ways Palermo’s and Sicily’s histories are presented and understood. My aim is to examine these latter transformations, and to analyze their foundations and repercussions in the political present. Wulf Kansteiner advocates “rethinking memory studies from the perspective of identity construction” (2002), and it is precisely this approach that I pursue.

The so-called “memory boom” (Winter 2001) – the growth, especially since the late twentieth century, of the interdisciplinary academic field of Memory Studies (Kansteiner 2002), as well as a wider “emergence of memory as a key cultural and political concern in Western societies” (Huysen 2003, 1) – has led to a bewildering array of attributive adjectives that are used, not always precisely, to modify the noun “memory.” A non-exhaustive list of these, in no particular order:

- “collective memory”; (Halbwachs 1925)
- “cultural memory” (see e.g. Assmann 2011);
- “popular memory”; (Foucault 2011);
- “counter-memory” (Foucault 1980);
- “national memory” (see e.g. Confino 1997);
- “social memory” (Gombrich 1970);
- “public memory” (see e.g. Bodnar 1994);
- “dominant memory” (Nora 1989);
- “dominated memory” (Nora 1989);
- “prosthetic memory” (Landsberg 2004); and
- “cosmopolitan memory” (Levy and Sznajder 2011).

For the most part, these terms describe “memory that exceeds the personal” (Radstone 2008, 33), though even the phenomenon sometimes referred to as individual memory “cannot be separated from patterns of perception which we have learned from our immediate and wider social environments” (Kansteiner 2002, 185). Memory relies on language, for one thing, which is never purely ‘individual.’ Some of these formations, like “national memory,” presuppose that a group of individuals ‘remembers’ certain things, metaphorically speaking, in the same or a similar way. Although some of these terms appear superficially to be synonyms, or at least to have a great deal in common, in the interests of precision it is worth acknowledging that they each signify subtly different things.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is not necessary to list the various definitions and criticisms of the above terms, not all of which are equally germane to my research topic. Most often, I use the term “cultural memory,” which Erll provisionally defines as “the interplay of

present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (2008, 2). “Cultural memory” might suggest that certain memories are shared between a number of individuals in a cultural group, but it does not carry the implications of a mass shared memory that terms like “collective memory” and “popular memory” might. Indeed, a “cultural memory” might be shared by just a few people, and they might not all necessarily share it in quite the same way.

Cultural memory does not arise from nowhere. It is mediated by “technologies of memory” (Sturken 2008, 75), that is, by vehicles that encourage certain memories to be experienced in certain ways. Put simply, cultural memory must be produced. But who, or what, produces it? Certainly, national governments play an important role, as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger argue (1983). Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, however, criticize those who, like Hobsbawm and Ranger, prioritize “top-down” factors. They argue that to do so underestimates the agency of “individuals and social groups” to form cultural memory without the intervention of the state (Winter and Sivan 1999, 9). Both of these approaches overlook transnational factors in the formation of cultural memory to some extent (Evans 2006, 325). The national versus the subnational – the state versus civil society – is also a false dichotomy, because “the liberal-democratic nation state with its political movements also relies heavily upon, and often responds to, initiatives originating from various components of civil society” (Ashplant et al. 2013, 26), and vice versa. Technologies of cultural memory on multiple scales – the subnational, the national, and the transnational – should therefore be considered holistically.

Although other technologies of memory exist, this dissertation will focus on two main vehicles for encouraging a cultural memory of Palermo’s multi-religious past. One of these is political messaging. This is an example of a “top-down” element that I have already alluded to, although my research focuses on political messages conveyed in a way Hobsbawm and Ranger may not have foreseen in 1983, namely via social media. Another technology of memory I will concentrate on is heritage, which I take to mean the “contemporary use of the past” (Graham et al. 2016, 2). A critical approach to heritage studies can interrogate how heritage is itself discursive: “a cultural practice, involved in the construction and regulation of a range of values and understandings” (Smith 2006, 11). The study of heritage has less to do with “the debate concerning the existence of the past as an objective reality,” and more with how “current concerns and predispositions” impact understandings of the past (Graham et al. 2016).

Heritage and memory are intimately linked: as Laurajane Smith emphasizes, heritage is “an active process engaged with the construction and negotiation of meaning through remembering” (2006, 66). Pierre Nora developed the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, “sites of memory,” to describe sites “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself” (1989, 7). For Nora, these sites appear in the absence of *milieux de mémoire*, that is, “real environments of memory” (7). Sites of memory are leftovers, remains: “moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” (12). Nora describes these remains as having been “consecrated” (8). Although *lieux de mémoire* are not always religious sites, this verb nonetheless articulates the idea that they do not simply exude memory organically. Instead, they become charged with meaning. They are “created,” in other words, and sometimes deliberately (12). “Even an apparently purely material site, like an archive, becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura,” and this can only happen if there is a “will to remember” (19).

The sites of memory that primarily interest me are material features of Palermo’s urban landscape, and as such, many of them rely heavily on their spatial contexts in order to make them

‘evocative.’⁵ Some of them – stones, streets, and buildings – have an historical pedigree we might describe as ‘genuine,’ that is, they date back to the time whose memory they evoke. Others are less clear-cut, either because their provenance is uncertain, or because they have no direct link to the memories they evoke.⁶ Astrid Erll writes that sites of memory are “one of the most inchoate and undertheorized concepts of cultural memory studies” (2008, 10), which makes them an especially fruitful topic of inquiry. Conducting in-person fieldwork on the relationship between sites of memory and conceptions of local and regional identity – both by experiencing these sites of memory, and by discussing them with research participants *in situ* – has been especially stimulating for this element of my research.

I implied earlier that the interdisciplinary field of Italian Studies often views the national as the most appropriate scale for studying aspects of Italian culture, to the detriment of the subnational and the transnational. At least until recently (Erll 2010), this criticism might also have been applicable to Memory Studies, which for a long time remained “widely wedded to a nation-state culture” (Levy and Sznajder 2011, 196). Although my research decenters *italianità*, I nonetheless see value in exploring the idea of “national memory,” which can be scaled down to describe similar shared memories in subnational contexts, be they regional (e.g. Sicilian cultural memory) or local, and in my case urban (e.g. Palermitan cultural memory). Conversely, the idea can also be ‘scaled up’ to describe the metaphorical memories of transnational communities like Europe or the Mediterranean, which are no less ‘imagined’ than a national community (cf. Anderson 2006).

As well as being transnational, the memories I analyze in this dissertation are also “multidirectional.” Michael Rothberg uses this adjective to describe collective memories that “emerge in dialogue with each other and with the conditions of the present” (2019, 20). Rothberg argues that that memory is not competitive – a “zero-sum struggle” over finite resources – but instead, subject to “ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” (2009, 3). I therefore understand some apparently disparate memories and present conditions to be intimately interrelated. To name but one illustrative example: Palermo’s twenty-first-century multiculturalism, partly a result of Mediterranean migration, can be one catalyst for efforts to remember the city’s medieval Jewish history. Furthermore, the memory of that Jewish history, far from necessarily obstructing memories of Muslim Sicily, for instance, might instead be in dialogue with various other memories that recall different places, communities, and times.

Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder have scaled up the idea of national memory to what we might call its natural conclusion, “cosmopolitan memory” (2002). Their work focuses on the memory of atrocity, namely the global memory of the Shoah, and its importance in the development of a post-Shoah framework of human rights. Levy and Sznajder write that “cosmopolitanized memories are based largely on the recognition and the desire to prevent or limit future suffering” (2005, 17). I see no reason *per se* why the idea of “cosmopolitan memory” cannot also be useful in other contexts, however, which need not necessarily always be global in scale. Is there not something cosmopolitan, for instance, about the ways in which the fifteenth-century expulsion of the Jews from Spanish territories is remembered and commemorated in Southern Europe? To a large extent, that depends on what we understand ‘cosmopolitan’ to mean.

⁵ A number of my research participants used the Italian word *suggestivo* to describe some of the places I identify as sites of memory. As well as describing a place that is beautiful, or enchanting, this adjective also contains within it the etymological sense of ‘suggesting,’ i.e. ‘evoking,’ a remembered past.

⁶ An example of the latter kind of site might be a plaque in a public square, commemorating an event that took place somewhere else entirely.

Cosmopolitanisms

This dissertation focuses on how cultural memory can invoke a cosmopolitan past, and on how this remembrance interacts with the multicultural present. In this introduction, we have already been sailing for some time in the perilous semantic waters of the ‘cosmopolitan,’ the ‘multicultural,’ and their near-synonyms. Having identified a workable route through metaphors of memory, therefore, we must now face the no less perilous sea of ‘cosmopolitanism.’

The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, before defending the usefulness of “cosmopolitanism” as a term, lists the alternative words he might have chosen instead (2006). He rejects “globalization,” with its macroeconomic undertones, as something that “now can seem to encompass everything, and nothing” (xiii). He rejects “multiculturalism,” too, “another shape shifter.”⁷ He nonetheless settles on “cosmopolitanism,” in spite of its “equally disputed” meaning. But what is so special about cosmopolitanism?

We might do well not to approach cosmopolitanism as a fixed state or ideology, but to consider “cosmopolitanisms” in the plural (Pollock et al. 2002, 7). Nonetheless, Craig Calhoun identifies two dominant “variants” of cosmopolitanism (2003, 537). The first is what Samuel Scheffler calls “extreme cosmopolitanism,” which insists on an explicit identification with world citizenship, a loyalty to humanity as a whole, in some cases over and above other forms of belonging (1999, 261). For Calhoun and for Scheffler, this is typified by Martha Nussbaum’s argument that, though we may retain other “special affections and identifications” (Nussbaum 2002, 9), we ought to feel “above all, citizens of a world of human beings” (6). I do not think that this is an especially useful way of describing the phenomena I address in my research. Few if any of my present research participants identify as “global citizens” above all else. “Cosmopolitan” is also used frequently in contemporary Sicilian discourse to describe medieval Sicily, and to apply a universalist definition such as Nussbaum’s to that context would be anachronistic.

More often, a sense of global citizenship, if one professes this at all, coexists alongside “multiple overlapping allegiances of different scales” (Calhoun 2003, 539). Calhoun gives this second “variant” the name “moderate cosmopolitanism,” and Appiah’s idea of a “rooted cosmopolitanism” fits this description. Appiah envisions a possible world where “everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of one’s own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people” (1997, 618). Appiah notes that, etymologically, cosmopolitanism is a paradox. One cannot be a ‘citizen’ of the cosmos in a literal sense. The definition he settles on is more modest. Cosmopolitanism, for Appiah, is rooted in “the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association” (2006, xix). Cosmopolitanism is not “some exalted attainment,” nor even “the solution,” but instead, the “challenge” (xviii).

The challenge of cosmopolitanism is inevitable: “the human condition has itself become cosmopolitan” (Beck 2006, 2). It is how we approach this reality that is up for discussion. I have not chosen to focus on Appiah’s definition of cosmopolitanism because I necessarily share all of

⁷ If I were to compile my own list of terms I have considered but not pursued for this Sicilian study, it would include Édouard Glissant’s *creolization* (2010, 34). Although his powerful idea of “Relation” bears some resemblance to the “cosmopolitanism” described by Appiah and other theorists, and although *creolization* is connected to cosmopolitanism, conviviality, and related terms, Glissant himself contrasts the Mediterranean against the “limitless *métissage*” he sees in Caribbean *creolization* (33f).

his philosophical conclusions. I engage with it because it is influential, and reflects how cosmopolitanism is often understood in the liberal vernacular, one of the dominant languages of political discourse in Sicily.⁸

Appiah's writing on cosmopolitanism is especially salient for my work because he himself invokes a transnational "cosmopolitan memory" of the medieval Mediterranean. Appiah writes that:

For many long years, in medieval Spain under the Moors and later in the Ottoman Near East, Jews and Christians of various denominations lived under Muslim rule. This *modus vivendi* was possible only because the various communities did not have to agree on a set of universal values. [...]. Indeed, these historical examples of religious toleration — you might even call them early experiments in multiculturalism — should remind us of the most obvious fact about our own society (2006).

Appiah focuses on the most widely-cited example of supposed medieval 'tolerance' in the Mediterranean,⁹ that is, the *convivencia* thesis articulated by Américo Castro to describe a symbiosis among Jews, Muslims and Christians in medieval Iberia (Castro 1948).¹⁰ Charles Hirschkind uses the term *Andalucismo* to describe the idea that the "histories and legacies of southern Iberia's Muslim and Jewish societies" reverberate in the present, constituting an important part of local identity, and a "critical dimension of our contemporary existence" (2021, 3). Appiah implies that this past might be 'usable' in the present, that is, that it should serve as a 'reminder' of certain truths, or of exemplary ways of being.

As I will demonstrate, a similar but distinct narrative exists in Sicily. Sicily is not Andalusia: it has a different history and a different present.¹¹ Nonetheless, in Sicily too, *convivenza*, the Italian cognate of *convivencia*, is frequently used to describe the supposed peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Jews and Christians during Muslim rule, and/or in the early years of Norman rule thereafter (see e.g. Alajmo 2012, 132). I would hazard that Appiah might regard medieval Sicily as an "early experiment in multiculturalism" too.

Appiah is far from alone in viewing the Mediterranean as a privileged source for examples of historic cosmopolitanism. Dieter Haller identifies what he calls a widespread "banal Mediterraneanism" in representations of the Mediterranean, especially of its multi-ethnic port cities (2004). This is characterized by "the simple nostalgic reference to tolerance, openness and a cosmopolitan orientation" (32). But even here, he concedes that what appears on the surface to be the "merely nostalgic and banal level of the discursive creed" has political ramifications in local contexts (42). References to the cosmopolitan Mediterranean "have become ideologized political coins to refer to local and transnational forms of identification directed both against the political

⁸ Appiah, among other things, identifies as "liberal" and supports this position.

⁹ It is no coincidence that the period so often celebrated in this way predates 1492, and therefore stands in implicit contrast to the subsequent European colonial expansion across the Atlantic, which also heralded the shift in Europe's "gravitational center" from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic (Cassano 2012, 110).

¹⁰ Not all theorists of cosmopolitanism view Arab Andalusia as exemplary of a cosmopolitan society. Ulrich Beck, for instance, warns that an enthusiasm for this "early period of coexistence and toleration with others" can "easily obscure the fact that the Andalusian government was founded on a theocratic model of political domination" (2006, 178n9).

¹¹ To cite just one crucial difference: the Islamic Emirate of Sicily lasted for less than three centuries, from the ninth to the eleventh, and was followed by a period of Norman rule. With shifting boundaries, at least some part of the Iberian peninsula was under Muslim rule for over eight centuries, from the eighth to the fifteenth.

centers of the nation states and against narrow forms of ethnic and religious identity” (42). One such “political coin” will be a focus of my research in this dissertation.

If I address cosmopolitanism because it is so often invoked in Sicily, however, it also bears acknowledging that there are also Sicilians – we will hear some of their voices in Part Two of this dissertation – who perceive more than a “tinge of elitism” in the idea of cosmopolitanism; who might see it as “an ideal for an elite of globetrotting academics and executives, far removed from the reality of ordinary people” (Hemer et al. 2020, 5). This, too, is an important facet of cosmopolitanism as an emic term. Some of these critiques stem from an opposition to the very idea of cosmopolitanism. Others, however, observe that professing cosmopolitanism does not have the magical effect of challenging or redrawing power relations. On the contrary, it also has the potential to obfuscate them. Invocations of inclusion can also function to exclude; in practice, they often do.

As Wendy Brown writes in relation to “tolerance talk,” cosmopolitanism similarly implies a “line drawing between the tolerable and the intolerable, the tolerant and the intolerant” (2006, 19). This begs the question: who has the power to delineate these boundaries? Where Brown further notes the “exclusive identification of the West with tolerance” (37), so too has cosmopolitanism been critiqued for being “rooted in a Eurocentric worldview” (Hemer et al. 2020, 5). These are important challenges. As this dissertation will demonstrate, some of the most convincing objections to the image of a ‘cosmopolitan Mediterranean’ use similar lines of reasoning. To paraphrase Brown, however, an awareness of cosmopolitanism’s limitations and imperfections does not necessarily require us to declare it a “necessarily insidious value” (2006, 205). It should, however, enable us both to analyze and to “contest the depoliticizing, regulatory, and imperial aims” of some expressions of cosmopolitanism (ibid.).

I draw encouragement from the notion that, precisely because of its indeterminacy and its ambiguities, the “various embodiments” of cosmopolitanism, including its “past embodiments,” still “await discovery and explication” (Pollock et al. 2002, 1). In Sicily, I study a past that is often remembered as cosmopolitan, as well as a present in which some protagonists believe themselves or aspire to be cosmopolitan. I study them together in order to interrogate the idea that “new descriptions of cosmopolitanism as a historical phenomenon and theoretical object may suggest new practices, even as better practices may offer a better understanding of the theory and history of cosmopolitanism” (Pollock et al. 2002, 1f).

Some working definitions

I use both “multicultural” and “cosmopolitan” despite their slipperiness, and for the same reason that I insist on the importance of referring to the Mediterranean as an analytic frame. Namely, “multicultural” and “cosmopolitan” are central terms in contemporary political and historical discourse in and about Sicily. Whatever reservations I might have, I cannot ignore them any more than I can ignore the ever-present idea of the Mediterranean itself. When I use ‘multicultural’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ to describe Sicily’s past or present, I do not do so uncritically. I do not seek to make claims about the extent to which Sicily currently embodies or has ever embodied cosmopolitan ideals. Throughout the dissertation, therefore, these terms should generally be read in implicit quotation marks, as a sort of ‘free indirect style,’¹² conveying the results of my research

¹² “A form of writing that enables a narrative told in the third person to give voice to a first-person perspective. In doing so, it blurs the distinction between narrator and character, thus allowing the writer to present the character’s innermost thoughts and concerns in an immediate fashion” (Buchanan 2018).

using the terminology with which they were conveyed to me. Nonetheless, I do not use these terms indiscriminately or without precision.

I use ‘multicultural,’ like multi-religious, to describe a perceived or actual demographic fact. To use a pertinent example, city in which Jews, Arab Muslims and Greek and Norman Christians are close neighbors, harmoniously or otherwise, is *per se* multicultural (and multi-religious) according to my working definition. Although it is possible to refer to ‘multicultural’ as an ‘ism,’ that is, as a practice or an ideology (see e.g. Beck 2006), I do not generally do so in this dissertation, except when I am engaging with a quotation. I want to use ‘multicultural’ to signify something different from ‘cosmopolitan,’ and to have two ‘isms’ competing in such close proximity to one another would make these waters even muddier than they already are.

As well as multicultural (*multiculturale*), ‘intercultural’ (*interculturale*) also features heavily in political discourse in Palermo, particularly in activist circles. By pointing to “a form of exchange or interaction between cultures or cultural perspectives” (Arasaratnam 2013), “intercultural” comes close to describing the praxis of cosmopolitanism as I have defined it above. It is generally used as an adjective to modify a noun: ‘intercultural dialogue,’ for example, is a topic of discussion in Palermo, particularly with regards to the way migrants are ‘welcomed’ into the city.

It is necessary here to make a brief mention of *accoglienza*, another unavoidable word in Sicilian political vocabulary.¹³ *Accoglienza* is perhaps as mutable a word as cosmopolitanism, and it shifts shape not just on the basis of its speaker’s politics, but on the basis of context, too. It can mean ‘welcoming,’ in the sense that a city, house or restaurant can be *accogliente*: inviting or hospitable. In governmental use, it refers to migrant ‘reception’ – the Italian state runs *centri di accoglienza* as part of its border apparatus, which in reality are far from ‘welcoming’ (see e.g. Hom 2019, 17 and *passim*).

In the world of NGOs and of informal activism, *accoglienza* can refer to a vast range of migrant-facing activities, from language classes and ‘intercultural dialogue’ to accommodation services and employability training. Those critical of this infrastructure, including the right-wing former Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, refer to *professionisti dell’accoglienza*, that is, *accoglienza* careerists, implying that some people in Italy support immigration because they stand to benefit from it financially.¹⁴ But *accoglienza* can also refer to a disposition or way of being, or even to an ‘identity.’ As I will demonstrate, it is used in Sicily to describe a culture of openness or hospitality, which some believe to be uniquely or especially ‘Mediterranean.’ I have already implied that I believe it is possible to interrogate cosmopolitanism without either romanticizing it or dismissing it outright: to ask what cosmopolitan rhetoric *does*, and how various actors seek to put theory into practice. This approach can also be extended to *accoglienza*, *multiculturale*, *interculturale*, and such related terms.

“Specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an uncosmopolitan thing to do” (Pollock et al. 2002, 1). Nonetheless, it is helpful to have a working definition. I generally use “cosmopolitan” not to describe a state, but as an anthropological concept, describing an “ethos or practice of individuals and groups that are open to cultural difference and strive towards intercultural respect and coexistence” (Driessen 2005, 137). In some cases, this state of being is

¹³ See Neil (2024) for an incisive analysis of *accoglienza* discourse in Palermo.

¹⁴ This phrase contains something of the conspiratorial, and is used to bolster anti-immigration arguments throughout Italy. In Sicily it has an added layer of meaning because it echoes a formulation made famous by the Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia (1987). Sciascia criticized what he called the *professionisti dell’antimafia*, i.e. anti-Mafia careerists, who earned a living, he suggested, out of opposing the Mafia.

aimed towards achieving an aspirational political project, i.e. ‘cosmopolitanism.’ In the sense I generally use it in this dissertation, ‘cosmopolitanism’ can describe, among other things, a “curiosity about strangers”; a commitment to “get[ting] used to one another” without insisting on reaching a consensus; and an openness to “contamination” as a “counter-ideal” to the idea of “cultural purity” (Appiah 2016).

I understand cosmopolitanism to be more expansive than “tolerance” – another term that features heavily in Sicilian political discourse, alongside its opposite, “intolerance” – which implies a mere ‘putting up with’ difference, or “suffering something one would rather not” (Brown 2006, 26). Nonetheless, cosmopolitanism may still be positioned, like tolerance, somewhere along the “middle road between rejection on the one hand and assimilation on the other” (27). Cosmopolitanism need not always be utopian, but rather, it can also be ambivalent: “it reveals not just the ‘anguish’ but also the possibility of shaping one’s life and social relations under conditions of cultural mixture” (Beck 2006, 3).

Hiraeth in the Mediterranean

When I explained about my research to a friend of a friend, a Palestinian living in Palermo, he observed that “people here always want to know where you’re from, what culture are you from.” He said that this was especially the case in Sicily, when he compared it to other places in Italy he had visited. When I came to think of it, I noticed that I had been asked a lot more about my past movements in Palermo –where I was born, where I had moved, where I lived – than I had when I was doing research in Rome a few months previously.

Some Sicilians, especially older Sicilians, occasionally maintain that there are two physical ‘types’ of Sicilians – *arabi*, who have dark skin, dark eyes and dark hair, and *normanni*, who have fair skin, light eyes, and red or blonde hair. Although Sicilians occasionally joke that my long, red hair makes me look “almost Norman,” *quasi-normanno*, there is something about the way I move and dress, even before I open my mouth, that gives me away as non-Sicilian. This means that questions aimed at ‘placing’ me are seldom far away, so I quickly developed a neat and simplified life story to describe my movements thus far. This life story sometimes raises more questions than it answers. Although I have lived in London on-and-off for a number of years, and although a convenient untruth would be by far the easiest response, I am loath to describe myself as “from London,” lest I be miscategorized as English rather than Welsh. I have found that it is better not to hide where I am “really from,” i.e. Wales, in these sorts of situations, even though this often necessitates a potted history of the British Isles that I am not especially well-qualified to deliver.

Wales is less internationally well-known than Scotland and Northern Ireland. Many people outside Wales, including some English people, are unaware that Wales is not in England, and I am happy to set that record straight. After all, when introducing myself to new people anywhere in Italy, the mere fact of not being English can sometimes be helpful. In Sicily, there are times when introducing myself as Welsh is an especially good conversation-starter. On the surface, Sicily has precious little in common with Wales. However, some historians interpret Wales, annexed to England since the thirteenth century, as England’s first colony (Davies 1974). There are Sicilians, too, who follow the influential argument articulated by Antonio Gramsci, that the northern Italian bourgeoisie had “subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Translation by Quintin Hoare (Gramsci 1978, 148). “La borghesia settentrionale ha soggiogato l’Italia meridionale e le isole e le ha ridotte a colonie di sfruttamento” (Gramsci 1920).

Some of the Sicilians I speak to draw parallels between their island and what they already know about Wales, or the brief descriptions I offer when they ask. Both once fueled their neighbors – Sicily with wheat; Wales with coal – and the powers that conquered them coveted their resources. Both places are now poorer than their respective national averages. Both have been granted some devolved powers, but are still partially governed from elsewhere. I do not want to exaggerate the parallels between these two places, which remain vastly different. This is merely to say that some of my Sicilian research participants have used my point of departure as a way of talking about their own. My answer to the inevitable question – “how on earth did *you* end up *here*?” – has affected my research in ways I could never quantify. The commonality that engages me most, for the purposes of my research, is that the inhabitants of Wales and Sicily both share a reputation, deserved or not, for nostalgia. It is, in part, a deep interest in nostalgia – my own, and that of others, as well as an academic curiosity about the *idea* of nostalgia – that drew me towards the topic of this dissertation, and towards studying it in Sicily.

‘Untranslatable’ words are often held up as windows into a culture: evidence of social idiosyncrasies that cannot be found elsewhere in quite the same way. Welsh has *hiraeth*, a homesickness that is backwards-looking and nostalgic, and might also contain an element of regret. German has *Schadenfreude*; French has *ennui*; Portuguese has *saudade* (with its *hiraeth*-like connotations of nostalgia), and so on and so forth. But the fact that these ‘untranslatable’ words have made their way into other languages is evidence enough that others also find them useful for describing their own thoughts and feelings. The Arab poet Ibn Hamdis (ca. 1056–1133) describes what a Welsh-speaker might recognize as *hiraeth* for the Sicily of his youth, before the Normans put an end to the Emirate of Sicily and turned its mosques into churches: “I remember Sicily, and my grief is awakened by remembering her.”¹⁶

To the extent that people outside Wales think about the Welsh at all, many imagine us as a community bound by nostalgia, longing in vain for a past Wales that might never have been. At football matches, Welsh fans sing a song that celebrates Macsen Wledig, the Roman emperor remembered in Welsh legend as a semi-mythical ‘father’ of the nation. Though I cannot remember in a literal sense, I nonetheless inherit the cultural memory of past golden ages: before the last native Prince of Wales was executed by King Edward I of England; before our ancient language was made all but irrelevant in the densely-populated industrial South; before Margaret Thatcher declared war on striking mineworkers, decimating communities across Wales. Before, before, before...

I do not believe I have met anybody who is immune from nostalgia, although there are some who aspire to be. One does not have to be Welsh to experience something like *hiraeth*. Nonetheless, the Welsh share with certain other imagined communities, including Sicilians, a particular reputation for nostalgia, perhaps part-justified but almost certainly part-exaggerated. Inevitably, this reputation affects how we see ourselves, and in turn can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Like my Welsh family and friends, Sicilians do not agree on whether their home ever experienced a ‘golden age’ at all. If some Sicilians do look back fondly on a period in Sicilian history, they do not all agree on when this golden age was, who its protagonists were (Ben-Yehoyada 2017, 222), or what praiseworthy characteristics it represented. Indeed, some Sicilians are fiercely critical of what they see as their fellow islanders’ paralyzing nostalgia. “The problem

¹⁶ Translation by Karla Mallette (2005, 134). “ذكرت صقلية والأسى يهيج للنفس تذكراها.” (Ibn Hamdis 1960). *Hiraeth* has been glossed as “homesickness tinged with grief” (Apter 2014).

with us Sicilians,” a Sicilian friend explained to me, “is that we can’t stop looking backwards. We have no sense of the present or future, which is why it’s so hard to get anything done here.”

A migrant rights activist I spoke to in Palermo encouraged me to use my research to “debunk” the “Arab-Norman lie,” referring to the idea that medieval Sicily represented a high-water mark of cultural syncretism in the Mediterranean. Others sought some middle ground, finding examples in Sicilian history that were worth preserving or emulating, but nonetheless acknowledging that “history is complicated,” and that there are risks involved in romanticizing a supposed golden age.

While some inhabitants of Wales derive a sense of hope from looking backwards, there are also those who criticize our reliance on tales of past adversity for our sense of identity. *Yma o Hyd*, or “*Still Here*,” is a popular Welsh song (Iwan 1983), which experienced a revival during the national football team’s uncharacteristic run of successes. An activist for Plaid Ifanc, the youth wing of Wales’ largest nationalist party, laments that the song “succumbs to the idea that our greatest strength is our ability to stubbornly remain in place, like a stain that our enemies have long since given up on removing” (McCarthy 2020).

Some willingly admit to their own nostalgia; others blame the nostalgia of others for current political problems. Others still have a complicated relationship to the sentiment; they might even feel uneasy, on occasion, about “living in the past,” and wish that they and their communities could “move on.” All of these various and conflicting tendencies exist alongside one another both in Wales and in Sicily, where the *topos* of looking backwards is a central feature of public discourse, as well as being used in characterizations of the Welsh and of Sicilians from outside.

When two people in the same community have different attitudes towards nostalgia, it is often because they disagree about what the object of that nostalgia *means*. I am skeptical both about iconoclastic disavowals of nostalgia, and about wholehearted romantic embraces of the sentiment. As the historian Svetlana Boym argues, “nostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence” (2001, xvii). Whatever we think of it, nostalgia is a feature of our lives, and a fascinating object of anthropological study.

Many articulations of nostalgia in mainstream political culture are repugnant to me: nostalgia for empire, military impunity, or an imagined past ‘purity.’ But within Europe, as elsewhere, there are also historical narratives that go against the grain of those forms of nostalgia that reinforce a politics of dominance and oppression. Assertions of political identity in Wales often invoke supposed national characteristics, such as egalitarianism, by looking back, even nostalgically, to a history of anti-capitalist struggle.¹⁷

In Sicily, we can read nostalgia for a cosmopolitan past in political arguments that embracing immigration is the most essentially ‘Sicilian’ thing the island’s inhabitants could possibly do. My aim is not to determine the actual political efficacy of such narratives, a question I am ill-equipped to address. Neither is it to support or reject these narratives, which persist regardless of their historical accuracy. Instead, my priority is to observe, discursively and anthropologically, how they are articulated in the multicultural present, and how they inform ideas of Sicilian and Palermitan identity.

Dissertation structure

¹⁷ It is likely that the Red Flag was first used in protest in Britain during the 1831 Merthyr Rising, a working-class rebellion in Merthyr Tydfil (Williams 1978).

Part One introduces the phenomenon I call *Sigillismo*, a disposition that emphasizes Sicily's historic cultural 'mixity,' and insists on its importance in fostering a Sicilian identity that is uniquely well-adapted to the island's multicultural and multi-religious present and future. In Part One, I use a methodology that combines discourse analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. Accordingly, I analyze a broad range of data. In terms of discourse analysis, my sources range from texts on local history and audio-visual media resources, to visual observations of the urban environment and linguistic landscape. In terms of ethnographic fieldwork, my sources include in-person interviews with historians, religious figures, and heritage industry workers; participant observation in events such as historical conferences and walking tours; and non-participant observation in religious spaces.

Part One comprises four chapters. In Chapters One and Two, I focus on the urban geography of Palermo, tracing the development of 'sites of memory' that encourage observers to recall certain periods in the city's religious history. A central facet of *Sigillismo* is the idea that peaceful coexistence between religious minorities is an inherently Sicilian characteristic. Rather than concentrating on the prominent and canonical examples of "Arab-Norman Palermo" on UNESCO's World Heritage list, I instead focus on less tourist-facing but nonetheless important and instructive examples of how new meanings, particularly ones connected with the history of Judaism in Palermo, are being given to parts of the urban landscape. Chapter One analyzes multilingual street signs in the city center, which give place names in Italian, Hebrew, and Arabic. Chapter Two examines a number of monuments, including a possible former *miqweh* (Jewish ritual bath), and a building that was once an inquisitorial prison. I ask how these inchoate sites of memory attempt to 'revive' or 'uncover' the city's buried Jewish past, and to what ends.

In Chapters Three and Four, I discuss contemporary non-Christian places of worship in Palermo. Specifically, Chapter Three concentrates on two existing mosques, and Chapter Four on one hypothetical future synagogue, all located in deconsecrated former churches. This is not a phenomenon unique to Palermo, but it is one that is especially charged with symbolic meaning there. The Spanish historian Américo Castro used the term *convivencia* to describe the idea that modern Spain is the result of a symbiosis among Jews, Muslims and Christians in medieval Iberia (1948). I ask how these architectural 'conversions' in Palermo are used to further the idea that a similar notion, *convivenza*, is not just a fundamental characteristic of Sicilian history – an argument that is itself contested – but that what some consider to be a distinctly Mediterranean atmosphere of coexistence also informs contemporary religious life in the city.

While Part One foregrounds central Palermo's 'multicultural' urban landscape, Part Two represents a shift in both subject matter and methodological approach. It examines the attempt by Leoluca Orlando, who has been Mayor of Palermo five times, most recently from 2012 to 2022, to encourage a cosmopolitan vision of Palermitan local identity. Methodologically, Part Two falls under the growing field of social media research (Snellson 2016), comprising an asynchronous 'digital ethnography.' It analyzes a number of Orlando's pronouncements on his official Facebook page over a nine-year period, as well as observing his audience's reactions to his messaging, both supportive and critical.

Though he is best-known outside Italy as an 'anti-Mafia politician,' in Orlando's two most recent terms as mayor, he has sought to emphasize Palermo's 'cosmopolitan' values, including an openness to immigration. He uses the city's history and its geographical position in the Mediterranean to foreground its multicultural identity. He portrays Palermo as having a true 'essence': one which, because of its historic as well as its contemporary situation, is necessarily open to diversity and cultural syncretism.

In Chapter Five, I examine how Orlando seeks to establish a continuity between the narrative that Palermo has historically been a ‘mosaic,’ or a composite of various cultural influences, and his assertion that the present-day city is the ‘true,’ welcoming face of the Mediterranean. By doing so, he seeks to distinguish Palermo from the dominant xenophobia of mainland Italian and European politics. He endeavors to make an emotional and practical argument in favor of immigration, which invokes Sicily’s history as evidence of the island’s innate cosmopolitan values.

In Chapter Six, I ask how Orlando attempts to deal with the tensions inherent in the project of presenting Palermo as a locus of peaceful *convivenza*. After all, as he himself acknowledges, Palermo is by no means devoid of racism; no European city is. I argue that Orlando seeks to displace intolerance onto various ‘elsewheres,’ leaving Palermo’s true ‘essence’ untainted. I pay close attention to the risks inherent in this essentialist project – politics always involves an element of risk – while also acknowledging that Orlando uses his narrative of Palermitan identity to argue for concrete political positions that would be unpopular in many other Italian and European cities.

In the Conclusion, I summarize the results of my research, and assess the contributions this dissertation has made to the fields of study mentioned in this Introduction. I reflect on the circumstances in which I undertook this research, as well as on ways future scholarship might build upon its findings.

A note on translations

Translations are my own, except when accompanied by a citation indicating otherwise. As my readers include scholars from outside the field of Italian Studies, who may not necessarily be confident readers of Italian, the body text of this dissertation is in English. Wherever feasible, I have provided the original wording in footnotes. Conversations with my interlocutors in Sicily were carried out in Italian, but I often took contemporaneous notes in English. In these cases, my English quotations are not accompanied by the original Italian wording. Additionally, for reasons I specify in Appendix 2, which explains my methodology for Part Two, I have taken the decision to provide English paraphrases of certain comments originally made in Italian, without quoting the original text directly.

A note on names

In accordance with the research protocol applicable to this project, I have only named my interlocutors when they have given me their express permission to do so. For the most part, therefore, the people I spoke to during my fieldwork are not named. I do, however, quote from speeches given at publicly-accessible events.

Part One

Sites of Memory and Architectural Conversions in Contemporary Palermo

[...]
But if I have been driven out of paradise
Then let me still recount its story
[...]

Ibn Hamdis, circa 1055–1133¹⁸
Diwan Ibn Hamdis

1. An introduction to *Siqillismo*

The collective memory of Sicily's historic religious diversity is still “insufficiently discovered and evaluated,” argues the Italian sociologist Stefano Allievi.¹⁹ So too, I would add, is the way this collective memory is constructed. This stands in contrast to Andalusia, where a rich body of scholarship explores the idea of a past ‘*convivencia*,’ or peaceful cohabitation among the Abrahamic religions.²⁰ While Allievi's assessment remains accurate, numerous scholars have observed, since Allievi wrote those words at the very beginning of the twenty-first century, the development of a discourse in which Sicily features as a locus of rich cultural hybridity.²¹ This discourse articulates a particular form of Mediterranean ‘exceptionalism’ in Sicily, based, in part, on its history as an Islamic Emirate, then as a ‘multicultural’ Norman Kingdom, but also on Sicilians' own family histories of migration and return (Cole 2005), and on the island's geographical position in the center of the Mediterranean (see e.g. Dainotto 2007). Charles Hirschkind gives the name *Andalucismo* to the Andalusian iteration of a distinct but analogous phenomenon (2021). This Part of my dissertation instead explores regional efforts to cultivate what I will call *Siqillismo*.²²

Siqillismo's vision of Sicily, like its name, is recognizable as Italian, but emphasizes a Mediterranean character that its proponents believe has been suppressed. ‘Mediterranean,’ of course, can stand for a number of ideas. In *Siqillismo*, Mediterranean is used to mean ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘hospitable,’ among other characteristics, and is based on an interpretation of Sicilian history that emphasizes various influences on the island's culture. In particular, it privileges moments in the island's medieval history. It imagines that a period of past coexistence between the Abrahamic religions – either during the Islamic Emirate, or part of the subsequent Norman period, or both, depending on whom you are talking to – represents the essence of what it means to be Sicilian. Like *Andalucismo*, this vision of Sicily's history and present suggests that

¹⁸ Translation by Karla Mallette (2005, 134). “فإن كنت أخرجت من جنة / فإني أحدث أخبارها” (Ibn Hamdis 1960, 183).

¹⁹ “[U]na memoria ancora troppo poco riscoperta e rivalutata, a differenza di quella andalusina” (Allievi 2003, 5).

²⁰ This use of the term *convivencia* originated with Américo Castro (1948), and attempts to demonstrate (or disprove) its applicability have been present in the study of Iberia ever since (see e.g. Soifer (2009) for a critical approach to *convivencia* scholarship). For recent anthropological examinations of *Andalucismo*, a phenomenon in which the idea of *convivencia* plays an important role, see Rogozen-Soltar (2017); Calderwood (2018); Hirschkind (2021).

²¹ See e.g. Cole (2005); Dainotto (2007); Mallette (2010); Ben-Yehoyada (2017), and Giglioli (2018).

²² The ‘q’ represents the Arabic letter ‘qaf’ (ق) used in the island's name, *Siqilliya*, during the period of Arab rule. Phonetically, it is a ‘voiceless uvular plosive’ (see e.g. the accurate pronunciation of the word *Qur'an*, and the pronunciation of the Hebrew ‘qof’ (ק) in many Mizrahi communities), a sound not present in English or Italian.

the dominant narrative of Europe, and particularly of Italy, as a Christian monolith, constitutes a form of “living by denying the reality of one’s existence.”²³ Américo Castro used those words to describe a contemporary Spanish condition, but a number of Sicilians interpret their island in a similar way.

My research is not especially concerned with the strict historical veracity of the narrative told by *Siqillismo*. It is not my task to determine how ‘tolerant’ medieval Sicily really was, nor to ask whether it is accurate to draw parallels between a supposed past *convivenza* and the present-day Sicilian experience. Instead, my emphasis is on how and why such stories are told, and what consequences, intended or otherwise, they might have.

Nobody in Sicily or elsewhere self-defines as a *Siqillista*, because *Siqillismo* is a neologism. I have devised it as a shorthand to describe something that is in part an attitude to Sicily’s history – a conviction that there is some essential continuity between *Siqilliya* and its Norman aftermath, and the multicultural present – and in part a political position, the idea that such a continuity is desirable. I am conscious that I am adding to a repertoire of nouns purporting to describe Sicilian identity. These include *sicilianità*, or Sicilian-ness, which for some is simply a regional analogue of *italianità*, but for others carries negative connotations (Baldwin and Sciascia 1980, 30), and the alternative *sicilitudine*, which Leonardo Sciascia coined to describe a more “literary” form of Sicilian-ness: “the best side of feeling Sicilian.”²⁴ *Siqillismo* does not exist in opposition to these terms, but where *sicilianità* and *sicilitudine* can refer to a vast array of characteristics, *Siqillismo* refers to one specific and cosmopolitan reading of Sicilian identity.

The impulse to ‘excavate’ Sicily’s forgotten multicultural past is not new (Mallette 2010, 72). Perhaps its most well-known historical proponent is the historian Michele Amari (1806–1889), but Karla Mallette’s work demonstrates that even Amari was himself writing against the backdrop of an earlier, nascent school of Sicilian Orientalism (Mallette 2010, 91). *Siqillismo*, then, is not based on a new idea, but its manifestations are in flux. Whereas Amari, for example, sought to employ his understanding of Sicilian history to political ends – first in the services of Sicilian separatism, then later in the service of Italian patriotism (Mallette 2005, 40) – I will show that contemporary *Siqillismo* has a number of diverse protagonists, including literary figures, politicians, activists, religious leaders and heritage groups, and that it is mobilized for a variety of purposes.

Part One employs in-person fieldwork methodologies: interviews with individuals connected to the heritage industry in Palermo; participant observation in lectures and heritage-related events; interviews with religious figures; non-participant observation in religious spaces; and analysis of the urban environment. As Michael Herzfeld notes: “[e]thnography can empower voices not usually heard in discussions of tradition, historic conservation, and the like, the voices of those who live in the spaces decreed as monumental by the state. It can recover the unofficial meanings that people often read into official discursive forms” (1991, 13). My approach blends my analysis of fieldwork data with textual sources, paying particular attention to how Palermo’s multicultural past is presented in works of local history. My research is also supplemented by literary sources, which play an important role in formulating and articulating ideas of Sicilian identity. Textual work and fieldwork were in dialogue with one another throughout my research. My reading helped me to refine the questions I explored during fieldwork, and my conversations in Sicily enriched my reading list.

²³ Translation by Pilar Sáenz (1997, 162). “Vivir desviviendose” (Castro 1948).

²⁴ “[I]l sentimento dell’essere siciliani, ma quasi trasporto in chiave letteraria [...] la parte migliore del sentirsi siciliano” (Baldwin and Sciascia 1980, 30).

2. Literary *Siqillismo*

The narrative I call *Siqillismo* is constructed in historical and political discourse, and in the public sphere more generally, but is also a recurring feature in Sicilian literature. Salvatore Pappalardo's analysis of the work of Leonardo Sciascia (1921–1989) shows that Sciascia uses a “literary imagination” to construct a “mythical and utopian past” (Pappalardo 2018, 43). What Pappalardo calls Sciascia's “Arab *sicilitudine*” – claiming Arab Sicily as the “beginning of a transcultural Mediterranean modernity” (34), and positioning the uncovering of this past as a guide “into an uncertain future” (43) – falls squarely within my definition of *Siqillismo*. Pappalardo also observes, however, that Sciascia, who did not read Arabic, “never coherently developed” his “Arab myth of origin” (33), and instead “ventriloquizes” Michele Amari (35). Using the example of Vincenzo Consolo (1933–2012), I hope to show that this creative recycling (and revision) of the *topos* of medieval Sicilian *convivenza* is an ongoing literary project.

Consolo was one of the most prominent Sicilian authors of his generation. Much of his literary work focuses on Sicily and its history, culture, and identity. As well as writing a number of novels set in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Consolo was also a key proponent of the ‘rediscovery’ of Sicily's medieval history, illustrating the type of disposition that I intend to describe with the term *Siqillismo*. He articulates the idea that a certain form of nostalgia – a longing to return to or reactivate one's diverse Mediterranean ‘roots’ – contains latent political possibilities in the homogeneous and homogenizing present.²⁵ The nineteenth century is regarded as the real beginning of Southern Europe's modern ‘rediscovery’ of its medieval multi-religious past: of its Islamic, Jewish and Christian character (see e.g. Mallette 2010, Dainotto 2007). Even at the very outset of its rediscovery, however, historians were already portraying this past as irretrievably lost. Michele Amari's *Storia dei musulmani in Sicilia* (1854–1872) is full of references to “vestiges”: to “lost” evidence, to the “piccolezze” that remain.²⁶ Yet despite this, in an essay on “Sicily and Arab Culture,” originally presented at a 1991 conference at the University of Algiers, Consolo looked back to Amari's time with nostalgia. At least in the nineteenth century, he argues, unlike now, there were still some remains of Arab culture in Sicily:

How could Michele Amari not have written with the ‘seduction of the heart,’ that is with scientific rigor, but also with foresight and poetry, born and raised as he was in Palermo, in that Palermo that still in the last century conserved not few vestiges, not few traditions, of Arab culture?²⁷

Consolo writes as though Amari lived at the ideal moment from which to look back at Arab Sicily. He imagines that “this Arab flavor of the city, door to the Orient, remained for centuries

²⁵ There are other southern Italian thinkers who also advocate looking backwards, especially into Mediterranean history, for a viable model for the future. See e.g. Franco Cassano's valorization of a distinctively ‘southern thought,’ or *pensiero meridiano* (2011), and Vito Teti's explicit defense of nostalgia (2020).

²⁶ “Trivialities scorned by historians of the past,” in Mallette's translation (2005, 39).

²⁷ Translation by Felice Italo Beneduce (Consolo 2006, 229). “E come poteva non scrivere con la ‘seduzione del cuore’, cioè con rigore scientifico, ma anche con visionarietà e poesia, Michele Amari, nato e cresciuto a Palermo, in quella Palermo che ancora nel secolo scorso conservava non pochi vestigi, non poche tradizioni, non poca cultura araba?” (1999, 214).

ineffaceable, lasting intact until the nineteenth century in its monuments, in its customs, in its language, in its toponymy and onomastics, even in its cuisine.”²⁸

Amari, on the other hand, contrary to Consolo’s claim, knew that he did *not* live in such a perfect moment from which to grasp Muslim Sicily. Indeed, he had to rely on the libraries of Paris to write his Sicilian history. Even the Arab Andalusian explorer Ibn Jubayr (1145–1217) came just too late. As Consolo notes, Ibn Jubayr’s descriptions of Norman-ruled Sicily, which he experienced first-hand in his travels, are accompanied by the frequent plea: “may God restore it [to the Muslims]” (Consolo 2006, 234).²⁹ Like the mythical al-Andalus,³⁰ the ‘golden age’ of *Siqilliya*, medieval Muslim Sicily, always appears just out of reach, never quite graspable.

In recognizing their own “belatedness,” Consolo and Amari both appear “marked by an anxiety of coming after what had come before,” to borrow Ali Behdad’s description of nineteenth-century Orientalists (1994, 13): “arriving too late to the Orient, at a time when tourism and European colonialism had already turned the exotic into the familiar” (92). Their “Orient” is the European island of their birth, rather than a Middle-Eastern “other,” but there are nonetheless commonalities between laments for one’s own belatedness and what Renato Rosaldo terms “imperialist nostalgia”: a “mourning for what one has destroyed” (1989, 107). This is complicated, as we will see, particularly by Consolo’s feeling that, as a Sicilian (and therefore a “Mediterranean”), he is *both* European *and* Middle-Eastern. His specific lament is that the former part of himself, and of his island – the European part – has come to eclipse the latter.

Consolo sees his task, in part, as that of ‘excavating’ Sicily’s suppressed plurilingualism, and with it, its suppressed multicultural heritage. Consequently, he stresses the Arab etymologies of Palermo’s markets, in order to ‘revive’ a dead or dying connection with that inheritance: observing, for example, in an essay entitled “Palermo, Most Beautiful and Defeated,”³¹ that the market of Ballarò comes from the Arabic *suq el-Balharm* (‘market of Palermo’); Lattarini from *suq el-Attarin* (‘market of the spice traders,’ herbalists or perfumiers).³²

A thread connects Consolo to authors with similarly cosmopolitan sensibilities writing on the cusp of the twenty-first century. A creative reinterpretation of Leo Africanus’ story, by the Lebanese author Amin Maalouf (1986), reverberates for a generation of what we might call ‘Mediterraneanist’ authors, interested in the possibility that this transnational ‘liquid’ identity could transcend the parochial and the national. The Italian-Algerian protagonist of Amara Lakhous’s *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (Lakhous 2006, 156) learns by heart what Maalouf imagines to be Africanus’ ‘credo,’ almost as a form of manifesto:

I, Hasan the son of Muhammad the weigh-master, I, Jean-Leon de Medici, circumcised at the hand of a barber and baptized at the hand of a pope, I am now called the African, but I am not from Africa, nor from Europe, nor from Arabia. I am also called the Granadan, the Fassi, the Zayyati, but I come from no country,

²⁸ Translation by Felice Italo Beneduce (Consolo 2006, 239) “E rimase ancora per secoli incancellato nei monumenti, nei costumi, nella lingua, nella toponomastica e nell’onomastica, finanche nella cucina, questo suo carattere di città araba, di porta d’Oriente, e durò intatto fino all’Ottocento” (1999, 238).

²⁹ ““Dio altissimo la restituisca ai Musulmani” è la frase che oppone a ogni meraviglia, a ogni seduzione” (Consolo 1999, 224). “إعاده الله.” (Ibn Jubayr 1907, 331 i.a.).

³⁰ “In the Arabic tradition, Andalus is the collective lament for the lost paradise,” explains the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (Yeshurun 1996).

³¹ Translation by Felice Italo Beneduce (Consolo 2006, 239).

³² Consolo (1999, 238).

from no city, no tribe. I am the son of the road, my country is the caravan, my life the most unexpected of voyages.³³

Consolo expands the hybrid or composite identity epitomized by his vision of Sicily to cover the whole of Italy (the whole Mediterranean, perhaps) in his short story *Porta Venezia* (1988). His protagonist explores the Eritrean and Egyptian establishments of what he deems the most “authentic” quarter of Milan, the multicultural Porta Venezia. Published two years after Maalouf’s novel came out in the original French, Consolo’s protagonist exclaims, with striking similarity to Maalouf’s Leo Africanus:

I, of many races, belonging to none, the result of Byzantine weariness, of Jewish dispersal, of Arab withdrawal, of Ethiopian interment: I, born from a varied mixture, by chance white, carrying inside mutilations and nostalgia, relished and freed myself within this humanity as if on a beach warmed by the first rays of the morning sun.³⁴

The protagonist, a Mediterranean everyman, stands synecdochically for the transcultural region as a whole, in Consolo’s conception. This utopian, pluralist Mediterranean, if it ever existed in quite this way at all, is emphatically a ‘lost object’ in Consolo’s particular articulation of *Sigillismo*.³⁵ Furthermore, Consolo’s protagonist has cultivated a sensibility, an affective predisposition, through which to *perceive* his kaleidoscopic Mediterranean world in this manner. Accordingly, he visits Bar Cleopatra, an Egyptian establishment, in which:

The jukebox diffused one of those singsongs without beginning or end, very sweet and heartbreaking, that have the rhythm of the caravans, the tone of the desert, the songs that are the matrix for all Mediterranean music, for the *canto jondo* of Andalusia, for the songs of the Sicilian carters, and for the Neapolitan serenades.³⁶

Consolo’s narrator has the necessary interpretative and emotional toolkit – the cultivated disposition of *Sigillismo*, we might say – to understand that this Arab music is also *his* music, and conversely that the Andalusian *canto jondo* and the Neapolitan serenades, although ‘European,’ also belong to the bar’s Arab customers. The “matrix for all Mediterranean music” is a hidden fact that he has uncovered, but it is not immediately or universally self-evident.

³³ Maalouf (1992, 1). “Moi, Hassan fils de Mohamed le peseur, moi, Jean-Léon de Médicis, circoncis de la main d’un barbier et baptisé de la main d’un pape, on me nomme aujourd’hui l’Africain, mais d’Afrique ne suis, ni d’Europe, ni d’Arabie. On m’appelle aussi le Grenadin, le Fassi, le Zayyati, mais je ne viens d’aucun pays, d’aucune cité, d’aucune tribu. Je suis fils de la route, ma patrie est caravane, et ma vie la plus inattendue des traversées” (Maalouf 1986, 1).

³⁴ Translation by Felice Italo Beneduce (Consolo 2006, 247). “Io che sono di tante razze e che non appartengo a nessuna razza, frutto dell’estenuazione bizantina, del dissolvimento ebraico, della ritrazione araba, del seppellimento etiopico, io, da una svariata commistione nato per caso bianco con dentro mutilazioni e nostalgie. Mi crogiolavo e distendevo dentro questa umanità come sulla spiaggia al primo, tiepido sole del mattino” (Consolo 1988).

³⁵ For Sigmund Freud, melancholia is characterized by ego-identification with a “lost object” (1917).

³⁶ Translation by Felice Italo Beneduce (Consolo 2006, 249). “Il juke-box diffondeva una di quelle nenie senza inizio e senza fine, dolcissime, strazianti, che hanno il ritmo delle carovane, il tono del deserto, nenie che sono la matrice d’ogni musica mediterranea, del canto jondo andaluso, dei canti di carrettieri siciliani, delle serenate napoletane” (Consolo 1988).

Consolo's utopian *convivenza* is short-lived; it is ruptured by a police raid. The police officers ask each customer for their passport: for evidence of their sole national affiliation.³⁷ Consolo's narrator is asked: "Are you Italian?"³⁸ The response is visceral: "I felt the urge to scream at him with a deep, guttural voice, 'No, no, I am Black, I am Arab, I am Jewish, I am of all races, just like you!'"³⁹ But Consolo's protagonist does nothing of the sort. Instead, he dutifully shows the police officer his driving license, and his press card, which 'justifies' his presence in the bar as a journalist. He thereby diffuses a potential 'clash' between two Italians: one aware that the tyranny of nationality is arbitrary and reductive, and another for whom Italian-ness⁴⁰ is Alpha and Omega. Implicit in this clash is a division between an essentially cosmopolitan 'southern' character, and the 'northern' intolerance of the oppressive police apparatus. The police officers in Milan, we assume, are northern Italians, portrayed as denying or disavowing their own southern mixity in their aspiration to be more like the rest of Europe.⁴¹

Hegemonic Europe suppresses and silences Consolo's protagonist's utopian appeal to Mediterranean unity. Nonetheless, his imagined *grido*, his cry of rebellion, still contains a kernel of resistance, however muffled. For a moment, *Siqillismo* offers him an alternative sensibility to the blinkered monomania of ethno-nationalism.

3. Cultural memory and counterhistory

Cultural memories do not emerge from nowhere. The state plays a role in cultivating 'official history,' that is, an understanding of local or national identity that often chimes with the hegemonic ideology. But cultural memories are also reinforced or contested from the public sphere, or rather, from "a multiplicity of publics" (Fraser 1992) with various degrees of proximity to power. As well as being produced by discourse, cultural memory is also mediated via material culture, including through what Pierre Nora calls "sites of memory" (1989).

Anybody who has spent time in Rome will attest that the cultural memory of Ancient Rome – the idea that the city's ancient history has a bearing on its present and future, and is integral to Roman identity – is produced both by the visible traces of that history and by public discourse. Discourses invite us to 'read' stones, ruins, even the very layout of the city's streets, in certain ways. The same is true, I argue, in Palermo, though it may be a less immediately obvious example of this phenomenon.

Siqillismo articulates a 'counterhistory' (Hirschkind 2021, citing Foucault 2003), which goes against the grain of what Mallette calls "standard, normative perceptions of European history," i.e. the myth of a straightforwardly Christian Europe (2010, 98f). Michele Amari's *History of the Muslims in Sicily* (1854–1872) focuses, as its title suggests, on the island's previously 'hidden' Islamic history. This focus can still be perceived in contemporary Palermo. UNESCO has included "Arab-Norman Palermo" on its World Heritage list, for instance, although the role of the 'Arab' in this description merits further interrogation, as this dissertation will show.

³⁷ "The fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one – and only one – extremely clear place. No fractions" (Anderson 2006, 166).

³⁸ "Ma sei italiano?" (Consolo 1988)

³⁹ Translation by Felice Italo Beneduce (Consolo 2006, 258). "Mi veniva voglia di gridargli, con voce profonda, gutturale, 'No, no, sono negro, sono arabo, sono ebreo, sono di tutte le razze, come te!'" (Consolo 1988).

⁴⁰ And European-ness, we might extrapolate, in the sense of Europe as a fortress to be 'protected' from outside contamination.

⁴¹ See also Dainotto (2007) on the commonly-articulated anxiety in Italy of being perceived as deficiently or insufficiently 'European.'

But one of the ways in which *Siqillismo* is in flux is that its priorities are not stable. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, as Part One shows, there has also been an increased interest in Judaism in Sicily.⁴² The idea that Sicily was home to a thriving medieval Jewish community is important for some articulations of contemporary Sicilian identity, not least because it can be used to reinforce arguments that Sicilians are inherently respectful of minorities, religious or otherwise.

The visible reminders of medieval Jewish Palermo are few and far between. Some of them are palimpsests, barely legible beneath centuries of subsequent urban development; others are contested, and subject to disagreement regarding their ‘authenticity.’ Nonetheless, Jewish sites of memory are emerging in Palermo, not least because, in the last three decades or so, an increasing amount of public and academic interest has been directed towards ‘uncovering’ this ‘lost’ piece of Sicily’s multi-religious history. In Chapter One, I begin by focusing on some of these inchoate sites of memory.

⁴² The study of Sicily’s Jewish history is not entirely new. Three decades after the publication of the first volume of Michele Amari’s *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia* (1854), the bishop and Orientalist Bartolomeo Lagumina, together with his brother Giuseppe Lagumina (1884), published the first volume of the *Codice diplomatico dei guidei di Sicilia*, for example: an important resource for understanding the history of Sicily’s Jewish minority. Nonetheless, “il filo è rotto,” argues Giuseppe Mandalà (2020, 29), that is, this ‘thread’ of scholarship was broken in the 1930s, when Italy was under Fascist rule. This makes it possible to frame the contemporary uptick in such scholarship as a ‘renaissance’ of sorts, rather than an *ex nihilo* development.

Chapter One

Signposting the *Meschita*: Palermo's Medieval Jewish Quarter as a Site of Memory

The impulse to recognize Palermo's mosaic past, whatever its motivation, has produced the most modest of outcomes – a small yet significant aide-mémoire representing a multiplicity that is no more.

William Granara, 2010⁴³

“Fragments of the Past: Reconstructing the History of Palermo's *Meschita* Quarter”

1. Introduction

In many places in the Mediterranean, the presence of Jewish communities – whether contemporary, or in recent or distant memory – plays a role in constructing local and national identities. That role is not always proportional to the size of that community in the present, or to the visibility of its traces in the contemporary landscape. In Morocco (Boum 2013; Gottreich 2020), Tunisia (Boughedir 1996), and Spain (Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 2020; Hirschkind 2021), to name but three examples, claims regarding an historic ‘tolerance’ towards Jews are sometimes used to symbolize an intrinsic cosmopolitanism in the supposed local or national character.

At the same time, recent decades have seen an increased visibility of what the historian Diana Pinto terms “Jewish space” (1996). This is not restricted to the former *shtetls* of Central and Eastern Europe. It is also visible in places like Bragança in Portugal, where a growing interest in the enduring presence of crypto-Jews and their descendants has brought about a new synagogue, albeit not with the full involvement of the pre-existing Jewish population there (Pignatelli 2021); or in Andalusia, Spain, where a number of Jewish museums have been founded in the twenty-first century (Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 2020, 198).

Jewish Italians have been “vital to the development of Italy [...] and its cultures” (Ziolkowski 2022, 147). Some of Italy's Jewish spaces, including the historic Jewish quarters of Venice and Rome,⁴⁴ have had an uninterrupted Jewish presence for centuries, although the whole country's Jewish population was considerably depleted by the Shoah. Jewish spaces in southern Italy, however, like the Jewish Museum in Lecce, or the Scolanova Synagogue in Trani (both in Apulia), or the ‘Reconstructionist’ Ner Tamid del Sud Synagogue in Serrastretta (Calabria), have more in common with the aforementioned ‘revivals’ of Jewish space in Spain and Portugal. They too are located in former Spanish territories, and Jews there were therefore expelled, or else forced to convert, in the late fifteenth century. Naples remains the southernmost Jewish community affiliated with the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI),⁴⁵ but is not the southernmost place in Italy where Jews live or worship.

Sicily also belongs to this category of former Spanish territories. Its inchoate revival of Jewish space – and to an extent, of Jewish religious life – should therefore be placed in this context, in which the visible presence of lived Judaism has been interrupted by centuries of absence. In 2008, a revert to Judaism, having “discovered his Jewish roots in 1983,” founded a synagogue in

⁴³ Granara (2010, 53).

⁴⁴ See Wyer (2023) on the contemporary development of Rome's former Ghetto as a heritage destination, and Wyer (2024) on the interplay between Jewish-Roman and Roman identity.

⁴⁵ A ‘community’ is the basic unit of the UCEI, the official representative of organized Judaism in Italy.

Syracuse.⁴⁶ This is a city in eastern Sicily where a medieval *miqweh*, or Jewish ritual bath, was also discovered in 1991 and is now open to public visits (Corsale and Krakover 2019). The revival of a *religious* interest in Judaism in Sicily is therefore roughly contemporaneous with the ‘rediscovery’ of the island’s Jewish heritage. It can be said that Judaism is not simply ‘arriving’ in Sicily, but rather, ‘returning,’ as Stefano Allievi has argued with respect to Islam in Italy.⁴⁷ This formulation anchors contemporary Judaism in Sicily’s historic foundations, and in the few remains of its medieval presence. In spite of the historic importance of Palermo’s pre-1492 Jewish community, visible signs of the city’s Jewish heritage are less prominent when compared to Syracuse, or indeed to some of the other aforementioned sites in southern Italy. The *miqweh* of Syracuse, for example, is exceptionally well preserved, and has also been made accessible to visitors. In Apulia, Trani and Lecce both have Jewish museums. No such museum exists anywhere in Sicily, though they have in the past been proposed (see e.g. Mancuso 2006).

It is by no means the case, however, that Palermo altogether lacks Jewish space. On the contrary, as I will show, there are streets, buildings and even individual stones in Palermo that evoke the memory of the city’s Jewish history, at least for those who both know how to ‘read’ them and are predisposed to do so. Even the author of a book on the city’s medieval Jewish quarter, Francesco D’Agostino, admits that “only by resorting to the imagination is it possible to rediscover the charm of [these] places” (2018, 66). Nonetheless, the very existence of such a guidebook presupposes and confirms the existence of readers interested in making just such an imaginative leap. It invites them to depart, in the words of Evelyne Aouate’s introduction, “from the few traces that remain, and from the atmosphere that this quarter continues to provide.”⁴⁸

This chapter argues that attempts to ‘uncover’ or draw attention to Palermo’s Jewish history are inseparable from Palermo’s present political context. The narrative that Palermo is a cosmopolitan city has been vocally supported within local government, as I explore in greater detail in Part Two. Relatedly, some Sicilians, especially in activist and left-wing circles, seek to distinguish Sicilian culture and politics from the dominant nationalism of mainland Italy and Northern Europe. Immigration to Sicily in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has increased the presence of non-Roman-Catholic religious groups in Palermo, and indeed, some members of the city’s small Jewish community were born outside Sicily. If the experiences of the present do indeed affect the questions we ask of the past, then it is apt that some in Palermo today show a keen interest in the city’s historic religious diversity, including the history of its medieval Jewish minority.

If present circumstances affect how the past is understood, it is also true that this understanding of the past – the idea that Palermo’s history demonstrates a natural predisposition towards cosmopolitanism – has some bearing on articulations of identity in the present, which are *per se* political. Those who celebrate Palermo’s supposed historic *convivenza* are often well aware, especially in the present climate, that they are proudly describing a way of living at odds with a “clash of civilizations” rhetoric. This rhetoric is dominant in much of mainland European political culture, to which Italy is no exception.⁴⁹ As with projects elsewhere that aim to cast light on historic examples of cosmopolitanism, the ‘rediscovery’ of Jewish Palermo is charged with political symbolism.

⁴⁶ Corsale and Krakover 2019, 470. When the synagogue’s founder emigrated to Jerusalem in 2018, he placed the apartment that housed it on the market; it no longer operates as a place of worship.

⁴⁷ Especially in Sicily, which was once under Muslim rule (Allievi 2003).

⁴⁸ “[P]artendo dalle rare tracce rimaste e dalle atmosfere che questo quartiere continua a dare” (D’Agostino 2018, 12).

⁴⁹ See e.g. Cassano (2012, 142); cf. Huntington (1996, *passim*).

In this chapter, I begin my examination of how Palermo's Jewish past is being 'rediscovered,' articulated, and experienced in the present day. I do so with reference to locations I have identified as "sites of memory," to use the term popularized by Pierre Nora (1989). To some extent, it would be justified to call these minor sites of memory. They do not have the visual prominence of Palermo's UNESCO World Heritage Sites, nor the political prominence of sites dedicated to remembering victims of the Mafia, for example.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, when taken together with other sites studied in Part One, they provide a valuable insight into the cultural memory of Jewish Palermo, and into the formation of a cosmopolitan local identity that identifies strongly with tolerance towards religious minorities. In this chapter, I analyze an intervention in what language planners and scholars of sociolinguistics call the "linguistic landscape" (Landry and Bourhis 1997): a cluster of multilingual street signs that have been installed in the city's historic Jewish quarter. I argue that these signs have become sites of memory, invoking the city's cosmopolitan past.

2. Background

In an essay on the Jewish minority in Palermo during the Emirate of Sicily, William Granara observes that a street like Via Calderai, where craftspeople still make and sell metalwork in full public view,⁵¹ "remains powerfully evocative of a medieval *suq*" (2010, 43). From certain angles, he is quite right. But like much of Palermo's city center, this area's post-medieval history, and indeed its modernity, are also readily visible. In North Africa, French colonialists constructed a separate 'European'-style *ville nouvelle*, or new town. This both prevented the expansion of the *medina* and led to its "museification," in the words of Paul Rabinow (1995, 299). Palermo's historic city center, in contrast, is unwalled. Earthquakes, wartime bombardments and centuries of urban development have made their marks on its remaining medieval streets. Walking westwards down Via Calderai, the medieval vision is rudely interrupted by the ruler-straight Via Maqueda, which dates from the late sixteenth century. It contains some of Palermo's most unambiguously Baroque architecture, as well as bars playing pop music and, most recently, a number of small Bengali restaurants. The medieval *suq* comparison can only stretch so far.

Via Calderai once formed part of the *Meschita*: an historic neighborhood that no longer exists *per se* in a meaningful sense. The *harat al-yahud*, or the Jewish quarter, was located here. This area was not exclusively Jewish, but rather, a place where Jews tended to live, not least in order to be near to one another, as well as near a kosher butcher, a place of worship, and other such necessities. The *giudecche* of medieval southern Italy, especially during the Emirate period and in the early years of Norman rule, must be differentiated from the enforced Ghettos later established by the Papacy in the sixteenth century, in the Italian cities that still had Jewish populations. Palermo's medieval Jewish quarter has been described as a "stable place of settlement, with no evidence of forced movements in or out, and also a permeable space" (Streit and Stiefel 2022, 363).

Palermo's former *Meschita* quarter carries the symbolic weight of *Siqillismo* perhaps more than any other area in the city. The word *Meschita* comes from the Arabic root *s-j-d* (س-ج-د), meaning to prostrate. The quarter was named after the mosque of Ibn Siqlab, which stood there during the Emirate period. As an historic Jewish quarter bearing the Arabic-origin name of an

⁵⁰ See e.g. the well-known "Falcone tree" dedicated to the assassinated anti-Mafia judge and magistrate Giovanni Falcone (Tassinari 2021).

⁵¹ A *calderaio* is a coppersmith.

Islamic place of worship, and a place where Muslims, Jews and Christians are supposed to have once lived alongside one another in relative harmony, the *Meschita* is the geographical embodiment of the *convivenza* narrative that underpins *Siqillismo*. The *Meschita* was historically a residential neighborhood, which distinguishes it from the “Arab-Norman” structures on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Many of these are monumental buildings, which synthesize the cultural and architectural traditions of multiple religious communities present in medieval Palermo.

The idea of the *Meschita* as a site of peaceful coexistence is complicated, however, by the historical fates of its non-Christian religious communities. In 1487, the Italian Rabbi Obadiah da Bertinoro visited the Synagogue of Palermo and observed that it “had no equal in all of the world.”⁵² The historian Bartolomeo Lagumina uses this description of the synagogue’s grandeur to support his thesis that the Synagogue was no other than the former Mosque of Ibn Siqlab, from which the *Meschita* quarter derives its name (1897, 16n1). The Normans captured Palermo from its Muslim rulers in 1072, after which the city’s Muslim population declined (Granara 2010). At least some converted to Christianity, the religion of the island’s new ruling class (Metcalf 2009, 221f); others fled (275), and by the mid-thirteenth century, following Muslim revolts in Sicily against Norman rule, the last of the island’s Muslims had been deported to Lucera, on the Italian mainland (287). The *Meschita* area was already home to a Jewish population, so it may well have been convenient to give or sell them this abandoned building to be used as a synagogue (Cassuto 1994). Like many questions regarding Palermo’s medieval history, this is a subject of dispute; the historian Giuseppe Mandalà, for example, calls this particular hypothesis “wholly mistaken” (2013, 483).

If the synagogue had indeed been a converted mosque, this would go some way towards explaining why the building, as well as the neighborhood, was called the *Meschita* by Christians (Ashtor 1979). Christians referred to synagogues as *meschite* or *muschite* in much of Sicily (Lagumina 1897), but only from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, that is, following the decline in the island’s Muslim population (Cassuto 1994, 36), and perhaps even after the last Muslims had been deported from Sicily to Lucera.⁵³ Lagumina therefore not only hypothesizes that Palermo’s Great Synagogue occupied the site of a former mosque, but also that might not have been the only Sicilian synagogue to have done so (1897). To some, this may be a more appealing explanation than the idea that a *mesquita* was simply a Sicilian shorthand for a non-Christian place of worship.

The *Meschita* is no longer a distinct neighborhood, neither officially nor in the minds of Palermitans. Most locals know the street names Via Meschita and Vicolo Meschita, but not all are aware that these are named after the old *Meschita* neighborhood, of which these streets were a part. The historic quarter is now split by Via Maqueda, which today marks the boundary between two administrative districts: Albergheria to the west; Kalsa to the east. Even before this geographic rupture, however, the *Meschita* abruptly lost its Jewish character in 1492, when Sicily’s Jews were expelled by the island’s Spanish rulers, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile.

3. Signposting the *Meschita*

If street-level traces of pre-Norman Muslim rule are vanishingly faint in contemporary Palermo, then the traces of the city’s pre-1492 Jewish minority are even less obvious. When walking around

⁵² “La sinagoga di Palermo non ha l’eguale nel mondo.” Italian translation by Bartolomeo Lagumina (1897, 16).

⁵³ The final deportations of Muslims from Sicily to the settlement in Lucera, Apulia, took place in 1246 (Metcalf 2009, 287).

Palermo's historic center, however, one occasionally stumbles upon street signs written in Roman script (in Italian), with Hebrew script, then Arabic script, below. Although there is no street-level text explaining why the signs are there, or how they came to be, anyone with some familiarity with Sicilian history might make the reasonable assumption either that Arabic- and Hebrew-speakers live here or, more likely, that they once did. This presumes, of course, that the observer knows that these scripts are Hebrew and Arabic, or is able to guess as much.

At first glance, the placement of the signs appears haphazard, almost random. On a winding walk through the historic center, the distribution of the signs can feel uneven. They begin abruptly, and then, as soon as one leaves a narrow cluster of streets, one notices that they are no longer there. Then after turning a few corners, they materialize again. Once one has crossed Via Roma,⁵⁴ they all but disappear. It requires either good guesswork or a level of historical knowledge to know that these signs mark out the streets and alleyways of the old *Meschita*.

Granara writes that “the impulse to recognize Palermo's mosaic past, *whatever its motivation*, has produced the most modest of outcomes – a small yet significant *aide-mémoire* representing a multiplicity that is no more.”⁵⁵ But what *is* the motivation behind this impulse? The apparently haphazard placing of these signs in the historic *Meschita* is in fact not by chance, but by design. My correspondence with officials from Palermo's *Ufficio Toponomastica*, the local government's Office for Toponyms, has confirmed that the proposal for these trilingual signs came towards the end of the year 2000, via a request from the president of the Charta delle Judeche. The Charta delle Judeche began, with support from regional government, as an association of localities in Sicily that had historically had a Jewish presence prior to the 1492 expulsion. One of its aims is to commemorate and draw attention to Sicily's historic *giudecche*, or Jewish quarters. It is not quite *sui generis*: a similar such organization, now on a considerably larger scale, was founded in Spain in 1995.⁵⁶

Towards the very end of Leoluca Orlando's third term as mayor, Palermo's local government accepted the proposal to install trilingual signs in the former *Meschita*. In November 2000, the city's Office for Toponyms requested translations of sixteen names in the former *Meschita* into Arabic and Hebrew. The Charta delle Judeche arranged for these to be provided, and the Office for Toponyms had the signs installed. For the most part, the trilingual signs appear alongside the preexisting street signs (in Italian only), rather than in their place. These signs should be read as an early indication of, and an early catalyst for, an increased local interest in the multi-religious history of the *Meschita*.

Part of the wider legacy of the “Palermo Spring” – the transformation that the city underwent towards the end of the twentieth century, characterized by an increase in anti-Mafia activism – has been the reframing of the city's historical buildings, or what some call the “heritagization” of the city center.⁵⁷ The idea that local pride, or ‘self-respect,’ acts as a bulwark

⁵⁴ Via Roma formed part of a larger urban “sanification” plan in Palermo, initiated in the final decade of the nineteenth century, following the unification of Italy.

⁵⁵ Granara (2010, 53, own emphasis).

⁵⁶ The *Red de Juderías de España* – the “Network of Jewish Quarters of Spain” – is discussed in detail by Daniela Flesler and Adrián Pérez-Melgosa (2020, 98f).

⁵⁷ A number of Palermo residents have described this phenomenon to me as “patrimonializzazione.” The idea of ‘heritagization’ emerged towards the end of the twentieth century, a global ‘boom’ period for what Robert Hewison called the ‘heritage industry’ (1987), which prompted critical scholarship on the “production of heritage” (see e.g. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

against Mafia activity, has long been a central tenet of Palermo's anti-Mafia movement.⁵⁸ With the aim of stimulating civic-mindedness and community spirit – recurring themes in local political discourse – the local government supported initiatives such as “The School Adopts a Monument,” which pairs schools with a nearby historic building and encourages research projects about the ‘adopted’ monument.⁵⁹ In 1996, the first year this initiative took place in Palermo, the *Giudecca* in its entirety – that is, the historic Jewish quarter – was ‘adopted’ by a middle school in the city.⁶⁰ Taken as a whole, ‘rediscoveries’ of the city’s heritage, with the state’s enthusiastic backing, amount to what Marita Sturken calls “technologies of memory”: vehicles that produce and mediate cultural memory (Sturken 2008, 75). They aim to foster a sense of connection with the city’s past, and in some cases, a sense of stewardship over its visible traces.

In 2015, UNESCO added the city’s “Arab-Norman” monuments to its World Heritage list. The idea of installing trilingual signs in the former *Meschita* predates this by fifteen years. The signs also predate initiatives like the festival that began in 2006 at the University of Palermo, the “*Vie dei Tesori*” (literally, the “Roads of Treasures”), which aims to increase knowledge and awareness of the city’s diverse cultural heritage.⁶¹ In other words, the project represents a relatively early phase in the twenty-first century ‘heritagization’ of the city center.

In her research on Mazara del Vallo, a city in southern Sicily with significant historical connections to Tunisia, Ilaria Giglioli argues that changes in the urban landscape celebrating “Mazara’s medieval Arab heritage and its connection to Tunisia” are examples of “ethnic packaging” (2018, 52). She uses this term to refer to the ‘rebranding’ of a city in a way that formally celebrates migrant or minority communities.⁶² In their study of *The Linguistic Landscape of the Mediterranean*, Robert Blackwood and Stefania Tufi draw a similar conclusion from Palermo’s multilingual street signs, although they do not use the same terminology as Giglioli. They write that:

The average tourist [...] will be intrigued by the exotic scripts. These in turn contribute to the construction of a mysterious past for what is already perceived to be a mysterious and arcane culture in the collective imagination. The clever manipulation of existing understandings of Sicily is generated by current practices of island branding so that the link between the visitor’s expectation (the demand) and a certain construction of the past-cum-present (the supply) is established (Blackwood and Tufi 2015).

Although it is tempting to attribute initiatives such as these to the lure of tourism – and it is undeniable that the tourist industry both stimulates and benefits from the heritagization of the city center – such an approach would be reductive and over-simplistic. “Ethnic packaging” is indeed one *effect* of Palermo’s many heritagization initiatives, which include the trilingual signs. Nonetheless, in the case of these particular signs, tourism does not appear to have been a primary

⁵⁸ One of the slogans of Addiopizzo, a key organization in this movement, is “un intero popolo che paga il pizzo è un popolo senza dignità” (“an entire people who pays the *pizzo* [protection money] is a people without dignity”).

⁵⁹ *La scuola adotta un monumento* was founded in Naples in 1992, and introduced in Palermo in 1996.

⁶⁰ D’Agostino (2018, 11). The adoption of the *Giudecca* was organized by Francesco D’Agostino, a schoolteacher who went on to write a book on the *Meschita* (D’Agostino 2018). The school in question was the Scuola Media “Raffaello Sanzio,” a state middle school (i.e. for ages 11-14) in the Montegrappa quarter of the city. The school is some three kilometers away from the city’s historic *Meschita*.

⁶¹ The *Vie dei Tesori* has now expanded into a Sicily-wide festival.

⁶² Giglioli (2018, 12), citing Hackworth and Rekers (2005).

motivation. The Charta delle Judeche is a Sicilian civic society organization, aimed at encouraging a deeper knowledge of Sicily's Jewish history *among Sicilians*. At least in part, the city's 'heritagization' initiatives have at least two audiences: visitors, yes, but Palermitans too. Many events on the *Vie dei Tesori* take place in Italian, including an annual tour of the Giudecca (subtitled "when Palermo was also Jewish").⁶³ A tour I attended in October 2021, through the sites of the Inquisition in Palermo, had a majority of Sicilian participants.

I do not dispute that the trilingual signs in Palermo's former *Meschita* contribute to the 'rebranding' of Palermo as a multicultural city. It might even be true that for tourists to the city, these signs contribute to a sense that the city's past is "mysterious and arcane," as Blackwood and Tufi put it, and therefore unknowable and exotic. However, their intended purpose, at least as far as *residents* of Palermo are concerned, is the precise opposite. Palermitans are supposed to see these signs and feel that the Arabic and Hebrew scripts they contain, unfamiliar though they may be, are part of their city's intrinsic identity, and therefore part of their *own* identity. Regardless of whether or not this can in fact be achieved, the initial intention is not exoticization but its opposite, that is, familiarization.

4. Banal cosmopolitanism

It may at first glance appear unusual to use something as commonplace as contemporary street signs as a way to analyze Palermo's relationship to its medieval past, and indeed, to analyze the political significance of that relationship in the present. However, the aggregate of street-level texts, which constitutes the "linguistic landscape" (Landry and Bourhis 1997), is only apparently "neutral" (Azaryahu 2012), as Maoz Azaryahu notes in his study of street signs in Palestine-Israel. Azaryahu notes that "the apparent banality of street signs derives from the predominance of their practical use in everyday contexts, which are ostensibly detached from the sphere of ideology and the realm of politics" (ibid.). But he concludes that they can readily be used as vehicles of "banal nationalism," borrowing Michael Billig's influential phrase (1995). Street signs, therefore, can be a way of manipulating the urban landscape to political ends.

There is nothing overtly 'nationalist' *per se* about the trilingual street signs in Palermo's former *Meschita*. However, they still carry a political weight in the way that they highlight one aspect of the city's medieval past. Specifically, they direct attention to an aspect of the city's past that has important reverberations in the city's multicultural present. If these signs, unlike those analyzed by Azaryahu (2012), do not represent a "banal nationalism," then I contend that they instead put forward a form of "banal cosmopolitanism" – a symbolic representation of the idea that plurilingualism is, and has always been, at the heart of the city's identity.⁶⁴

Palermitans often refer to their city's medieval history as 'forgotten' or 'lost.' As Elizabeth Jelin notes, there is something paradoxical to such a framing: "if total erasure is successful, its very success impedes its verification" (2003, 18). If this history really *had* been forgotten, then we would not know, or 'remember,' to talk about it, even if only to talk about how we have forgotten it. Nonetheless, Jelin goes on to note that:

⁶³ "La Giudecca: Quando Palermo era anche ebreia."

⁶⁴ I use "banal cosmopolitanism" in a different way to Ulrich Beck (2004), who popularized the term. Beck uses "banal cosmopolitanism" to describe the cosmopolitanization of "everyday" cultural consumption. Beck emphasizes what we might call 'demand-side' cosmopolitanism, i.e. the increasingly eclectic and global nature of consumer preferences. The project that I am describing, in contrast, is a top-down or 'supply-side' intervention, i.e. the state-supported cosmopolitanization of a 'banal' or apparently neutral facet of the urban landscape.

There are cases when pasts that seemed ‘definitively’ forgotten reappear as a result of changes in cultural and social frameworks and acquire a new symbolic or political presence. Those changes prompt a reexamination and the assignment of new meanings to traces and residues that had not been significant for decades or even centuries (Jelin 2003).

The *Meschita*, I argue, is just such a case. As Jelin observes, traces of the past *per se* do not constitute memory, “unless they are evoked and placed in a context that gives them meaning” (2003, 18). The installation of trilingual signs to demarcate the former *Meschita* provides this crucial context. The project charges this network of medieval streets, which on the superficial level is scarcely different from the other streets that surround it, with new meanings, albeit ones rooted in an idea of the medieval Mediterranean. In other words, it produces these streets, and this neighborhood, as “heritage,” in a small and subtle way: “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 369).

5. Creating a site of memory

The installation of trilingual signs in this area is a catalyst for the *Meschita*’s transformation into what the historian Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*, or a “site of memory.” Nora defines this as a site that “by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora 1996, xvii). But for which community, or communities, is the *Meschita* an inchoate or a minor site of memory, and what effects does this site of memory produce? Some of the Palermitans I spoke to did not know that the signs demarcate the *Meschita*; a number of them erroneously assumed that their installation had something to do with the UNESCO World Heritage designation. In a very broad sense, one could argue that they are linked. Both projects are products of, and catalysts for, a reassessment and valorization of the city’s medieval heritage. But from the literal perspective of urban planning, the two initiatives are entirely separate.

C., a Palermo-based tour guide, and an active member of the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies,⁶⁵ pointed out to me that it was a shame the signs had not been particularly well-designed. There are mistakes in both the Arabic and the Hebrew lettering, which I will discuss in detail later. At the same time, however, she felt that “at bottom, it is a useful project, because it reminds the people of Palermo of their own history, and of the fact that the *Meschita* was here. There are other small traces of the historic Jewish presence in the area, but they are faint; the signs remind you to look for them.”

This is true for certain Palermitans, but it still presupposes a basic knowledge of the city’s historical geography, which is not universal. There is no explanatory text accompanying the signs, after all, to explain the thinking behind their installation. I contend that the signs *do* produce the *Meschita* as a site of memory, but principally for those with the necessary tools to ‘remember’: at least an ability to recognize that these scripts are Hebrew and Arabic, and a knowledge that this area was once a *giudecca*: neither of which are a given. For those of a certain disposition, the signs can then function as an *aide-mémoire*, a trigger for imagining the *Meschita* as the neighborhood it may once have been. The intention is to revive an awareness of Palermo’s ‘lost’ (or ‘dormant’) Jewish presence, but this can only be realized with a contextual knowledge that not all of the city’s residents or visitors have to hand.

⁶⁵ *Istituto Siciliano di Studi Ebraici*.

Those who see the Norman period as a ‘golden age’ for Sicily emphasize the cosmopolitanism symbolized by its linguistic diversity. They often cite Peter of Eboli’s 1196 epic, in which he called Palermo a “fortunate city, endowed with a trilingual people.”⁶⁶ The idea that the city’s fortune and its cosmopolitanism are somehow linked – that linguistic diversity led not to a Babelic cacophony, but to productive collaboration and creative syncretism – is a central tenet of *Siqillismo*. Conversely, when Sicily has betrayed or suppressed this essential cosmopolitanism, it is thought to have been a cause of the island’s misfortune. As a Sicilian folk saying puts it: “the Jews went away, and they sustained half of Sicily!”⁶⁷

6. Echoes of medieval multilingualism

I discussed the trilingual signs with a now-retired official from Palermo’s Office for Toponyms, who coordinated their installation. He pointed out to me that they echo the famous Stele di Anna, a funerary stone inscribed in Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic, which renders Arabic in the Hebrew script. This stone therefore represents the four religious communities of Norman Sicily: Greek (i.e. Byzantine) Christians, Latin (i.e. Roman Catholic) Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Now housed in the Zisa Palace in Palermo, it is the only known public text from Norman Sicily that employs four scripts (Johns 2018).

The parallels between the Stele di Anna and the contemporary trilingual signs in Palermo go beyond the obvious fact that they both bear multiple scripts. The archeologist and historian Jeremy Johns argues that the use of plurilingual texts in general, and the quadrilingual Stele di Anna in particular, “exemplifies the deliberate and studied multiculturalism that characterized the art and architecture of the Norman kings” (2018, 1449). In other words, texts like these supported a prescriptive and aspirational project with governmental backing, at least partly an exercise of incorporating or claiming power over the island’s various religious and linguistic groups. Similarly, the contemporary trilingual signs in Palermo’s historic *Meschita* are the product of a governmental initiative: a collaboration between the Office for Toponyms and the Charta delle Judeche, which involves a number of Sicilian *comuni*, or local authorities.

Although the contemporary trilingual signs do not amount to a literal exercise of political power over the few Hebrew-speakers and the many more Arabic-speakers living in Palermo, they nonetheless interpellate them into a narrative that they are inheritors of an essential Palermitan cosmopolitanism. The signs exercise power over the city’s cultural memory, ‘guiding’ the way in which the present and future are interpreted using references to the past. They encourage those who encounter the former *Meschita* to be attentive to one particular facet of the medieval past, that is, its plurilingualism and its multi-religious neighborhoods.

The Stele di Anna was commissioned by Grisandus, a priest in King Roger II’s palace chapel, in memory of Grisandus’ late mother. In an additional parallel, Johns writes that “it is unlikely to have mattered to [Grisandus] that very few would have actually read his quadrilingual inscription. Even an illiterate viewer would have understood, or could have been told, that the four scripts represented the four religious communities of the kingdom” (Johns 2018, 1453). Similarly, as I will explain, the trilingual signs in contemporary Palermo are almost completely useless in practical terms, but this is no barrier to their symbolic efficacy. Even many monolingual readers can see the other two scripts, make a small deductive leap, and get the gist.

⁶⁶ Translation by Karla Mallette (2005, 53). “Urbs felix, populo dotata trilingui” (see Eboli Codex 120.II, f. 97v),

⁶⁷ *Si nni eru li jude’ e ci campava menza Sicilia!* (“Se ne andarono i giudei e davano da vivere a mezza Sicilia!”) (D’Agostino 2018, 42).

7. Lost in translation

The trilingual signs in the former *Meschita* supplement the monolingual Italian signs that are already there; they do not replace them. A number of residents in contemporary Palermo can read Arabic, and a few can read Hebrew. However, there are very few in the city who read Arabic but do not so much as understand Latin script. It is less likely still that there are residents of Palermo who exclusively read Hebrew script. When I argue that the signs are of limited practical utility for speakers of Arabic or Hebrew, however, I also mean that the language used in the translations is extremely wrong: “*sbagliatissimo*,” as a teacher of Biblical Hebrew in Palermo put it to me. Even if there *were* significant numbers in Palermo who read only Arabic or Hebrew script, the text would convey imperfect information to them, making them of limited help as street signs.

In Appendix 1, I have collated all the trilingual street signs in the historic *Meschita* that I located during my fieldwork, using the original plans provided to me by the Office for Toponyms. Of the sixteen place names proposed by the Charta delle Judeche, I was able to locate twelve currently indicated by trilingual street signs. The remaining four were either never realized, or appear to have been damaged or removed in the intervening two decades. For those who read Arabic or Hebrew, a number of basic typographical errors in these texts will be immediately apparent. In the Hebrew, Latin-script apostrophes are consistently used in place of the Hebrew letter yodh (י), for example, which looks similar but serves an entirely different function. In Arabic, we can observe numerous misplacements of *i‘jam*,⁶⁸ the points that distinguish letters from one another, and the erratic use of *harakat*,⁶⁹ which mark short vowels. Taken together, these errors suggest that both the Hebrew and Arabic translations were either provided by individuals with a scant understanding of these languages, or else that they were imperfectly transcribed on their journeys from the drawing board to the typesetter.

In the Arabic texts, an attempt has also been made to provide literal translations, using Arabic terms for “street” and “alleyway,” and two different words for “square.” Some attempts to translate the street names themselves have even been made: “ponticello,” that is, “little bridge,” becomes *al-qantara*,⁷⁰ albeit with some spelling mistakes; “martiri,” that is, “martyrs,” becomes *as-shuhada’*,⁷¹ though the version on the signs does not render the plural correctly. In the Hebrew script, in contrast, the guiding principle, although imperfectly executed, is strictly to provide transliterations of the original Italian, rather than translations. Thus not only are the Hebrew words for “bridge” and “martyrs” not used; neither are the Hebrew words for “street,” “square” or “alleyway.” The signs instead attempt to approximate the Italian words *via*, *vicolo*, *piazza*, etc., in Hebrew script.

I was unable to find a definitive reason behind this discrepancy. When I asked members of the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies, they told me that their organization, which is separate from the Charta delle Judeche, had previously attempted both to identify who carried out the original translations, and to have them corrected on the signs themselves, but without success. The most plausible explanation appears to be that two separate individuals were commissioned to provide the translations, and that they were given relatively free rein in their briefing. Whoever

⁶⁸ إِعْجَام .

⁶⁹ حَرَكَات .

⁷⁰ القنطرة .

⁷¹ الشهداء .

commissioned them likely did not stipulate whether literal translations or phonetic transliterations should be provided, and the Arabic and the Hebrew translators simply took diverging routes.

As this work was commissioned in 2000, it is at least plausible that the original translations may in fact have been accurate, but were provided in hard copy to a typographer who was unfamiliar with these scripts. They do not appear to have been copied and pasted from an inaccurate electronic document: the errors in question go beyond mere occasional spelling mistakes. This would go some way towards explaining the fact that the renderings in Arabic and Hebrew do bear some resemblance to ‘correct’ translations, but with a number of errors that a typographer unfamiliar with these languages could easily make. As an illustrative example: when I studied the fundamentals of the Hebrew script, on a course offered by Palermo’s Office of Medieval Studies, I found that I sometimes confused the *vav* (ו), often written with a short serif to the top-left, with a *resh* (ר), which has a long horizontal line in roughly the same place. This same mistake, easy for a complete beginner to make, but impossible for someone proficient in Hebrew to overlook, appears to have resulted in the street signs reading *ria* where they should read *via* (“street”).

The Jews of medieval Palermo did not communicate in Hebrew as their vernacular language. Instead, as the Stele di Anna attests, for centuries they mainly used Judeo-Arabic, a dialect of Arabic written in the Hebrew alphabet (Bresc 2001). If the signs were to be precise and historically accurate, therefore – setting aside the fact that standardized street signs, such as these, are in any case a relatively modern phenomenon – they would render the *Arabic* text, rather than the Italian text, into a Hebrew script. From the point of view of their symbolic weight, it is of little importance that the signs are somewhat anachronistic. Pointing out the inaccuracies in the signs feels pedantic precisely because of the distance, in linguistic terms, between medieval and contemporary Palermo. It does not matter, in any concrete practical sense, whether the Hebrew and Arabic script signify what they are supposed to signify. It would certainly be more scandalous if the state had mistranslated signs in nearby Piana degli Albanesi, where the protected minority language Arbëreshë is spoken, because this would be a failure in its duty to communicate with speakers of that language.

The very fact that the trilingual signs have existed for over two decades without being corrected brings into relief their real significance, which is not as texts that “index” the presence of a particular community, to use the terminology employed by Ron and Suzie Wong Scollon in their work on geosemiotics, but which instead “symbolize” something else entirely: in this case, an historic religious pluralism.⁷² This is a religious pluralism which, in some political quarters – including in the mayoral office, both at the time the signs were commissioned, and during most of my fieldwork – is perceived as a sign of Palermo’s hospitable ‘essence,’ and as a model for its multi-religious future. As the conclusion to this chapter will demonstrate, these signs are also interpreted and defended as symbols of anti-xenophobia, and of the city’s opposition to intolerance towards religious minorities.

8. Conclusion: the politics of plurilingualism

Although their practical value is limited, these trilingual signs nonetheless emanate a real political charge in the present. This is precisely because they represent an interpretation of the past, and a

⁷² Scollon and Scollon (2003, 26f). Scollon and Scollon use the example of a sign for a business called “Beauty Island” in Nanjing, China, the purpose of which is not to “index an English-speaking community,” but to “symbolize foreign taste and manners” (118).

vision *for* a plurilingual and multi-religious future, which remains contentious across Europe. An official from the Office for Toponyms recounted to me what he called a “curious episode,” which occurred in 2009. A police force in Palermo took note of the signs, which had already been up for some years, and contacted the Office to ask for an explanation: assuming that they had been installed unofficially, and “fearing that this was an initiative by certain Arab immigrants in Palermo,” as the official put it.

The Office for Toponyms had to reassure the police force that the signs were installed with the Mayor’s approval. I was shown the Office’s letter of response, which explained that the signs mark out an area that “in the distant past was the core of the Jewish community of Palermo.” Put otherwise, the signs were defended as uncontentious because they had no value for the *living* immigrant communities of Palermo. They were ‘safe’ because they symbolized a distant past. It is strongly implicit that the police force’s “fear” of these signs came from their recognition that some of the text was probably in Arabic, i.e. that it represented a language used, among others, by Muslim residents, whose contemporary presence in Palermo is predominantly the result of immigration since the latter half of the twentieth century. The way to assuage these fears was to reassure the police force that the signs, to the extent that they symbolized Islam at all, represented a *dead* (i.e. historical) presence on the island.

If the Norman court made creative use of multilingual texts to demonstrate its command over the various populations under its control, then not all organs of the state have equally adopted a similar approach in contemporary Palermo. Proponents of multilingual communications within local government, symbolic as these communications too may be, must still negotiate with skeptical parties such as the police, justifying the presence of these texts in the public sphere by appealing to their purely historic significance: to their status as (mere) ‘heritage.’

As I discuss in detail in Part Two, for proponents of *Siqillismo* like Leoluca Orlando, the former mayor, to resist acknowledging Palermo’s multicultural history is to oppose the city’s “vocation” as a hospitable and “intercultural” city.⁷³ A 2017 incident in which the Arabic and Hebrew text was erased from a trilingual street sign, leaving only the Italian, was not condemned by Orlando as a “simple act of vandalism,” but rather, as a “racist gesture.”⁷⁴ The perpetrator of this act sought to erase, albeit in this case only symbolically, something that they (mis)recognized as a sign of foreignness. In contrast, according to a *Siqillista* understanding of Palermitan culture, they in fact sought to erase a constitutive part of the city: to suppress or deny an integral part of themselves.

It is for this reason, I contend, that community groups in the city, including SOS Ballarò – a neighborhood organization aimed at “regenerating” the Albergheria quarter – mobilized so quickly of their own accord to clean away the graffiti that covered the Arabic and Hebrew text, without waiting for state involvement. Some Palermitans interpreted the act of erasing the Arabic and Hebrew text as an affront to their understanding of what their city does and should represent. The contested linguistic landscape of the former *Meschita* quarter therefore goes to the root of ongoing disputes over the city’s ‘true’ identity.

I have already suggested that the trilingual street signs represent early evidence of a resurging interest in Jewish Palermo. On their own, they are a subtle but nonetheless impactful

⁷³ “A seguito della cancellazione dei nomi delle vie scritte in arabo e in ebraico nella zona di piazzetta Santi Quaranta Martiri ho disposto che si provveda al posizionamento di nuove targhe [...]. Si è trattato con tutta evidenza non di un semplice atto vandalico ma di un gesto razzista, ancora più grave perché avvenuto in un luogo che più di altri simboleggia la vocazione accogliente e interculturale della nostra città” (Orlando 3 April 2017).

⁷⁴ Orlando (3 April 2017).

reminder of an historic Jewish quarter. If we take them in context, however, together with subsequent interventions that emphasize the importance of Judaism to Palermo's history, we can see that these signs are in fact the first in a pattern of inchoate Jewish sites of memory, which have arisen in the city in the twenty-first century. I do not wish to suggest that the signs were the sole catalyst for these subsequent developments. Rather, I want to emphasize that, considered holistically, they form part of a broader trend.

The following chapter analyzes other sites of Jewish memory that have developed in Palermo in the two decades since 2000, when the initial request was made to install multilingual signs in the former *Meschita*. It examines the potential 'rediscovery' in the historic center of a *miqweh*, or Jewish ritual bath, which may or may not have ever served this purpose. Its authenticity is heavily contested, and we might even call it a 'disputed' site of memory. It then shifts the focus onto other sites of memory, which unlike the other locations discussed so far, are invoked to recall painful episodes in Jewish history.

Chapter Two

‘Rediscovering’ Jewish Palermo

After 520 years, we had re-tied the thread with our ancestors.

Evelyne Aouate, 2018⁷⁵

Introduction to *The Meschita: Palermo’s Jewish Quarter*

1. Introduction

A 2005 article announcing a new archeological ‘discovery’ in Palermo echoes a recurring sentiment: “little or nothing remains” of the city’s Jewish heritage.⁷⁶ Restating a popular (mis)conception, then attempting to disprove it, is of course a familiar *topos* in historical scholarship. In a city like Palermo, known by historians to have had a significant Jewish population, but with few traces visible to the untrained eye, the prospect of uncovering a ‘lost treasure’ is especially tantalizing.

Nicolò Bucaria and David Cassuto claim to have identified a *miqweh*, a Jewish ritual bath, under Casa Professa: a Jesuit complex near what, in the medieval period, was the *Bab al-Yahud*, or “Gate of the Jews.” It is accessed via Palazzo Marchesi, which was built as a noble residence in the late fifteenth century but has had various uses since.⁷⁷ This human-made pool of water is fed by the river Kemonia, which runs underground in Palermo, and was identified in 1985. For around two decades afterwards, most believed it to have been either (a) part of a Byzantine burial ground or (b) a *camera dello scirocco* (Bucaria and Cassuto 2005), the latter being a vernacular example of “passive cooling architecture” thought to have distant origins in the Iranian medieval tradition (Todaro 2003).

Bucaria and Cassuto, on the other hand, argued in their 2005 article that this pool was a *miqweh*. If they are right, then this would be exciting news. With few exceptions, including a Hebrew inscription on a well, now housed in Palermo’s Chiesa della Magione, there are few significant and undisputed remnants of medieval Jewish architecture in the city. As Flesler and Pérez Melgosa write with regards to “discoveries” of medieval Jewish history in Spain: “Local authorities tend to greet the discovery of [...] a water depot that could have been a *mikveh* as a treasure trove, material proof of the town’s important historical status as a Jewish enclave” (2020, 132). The situation in Palermo would be comparable, if its authenticity could be proven with a reasonable degree of certainty.

*Miqwa’ot*⁷⁸ are usually located near a synagogue, and the body of water in question is too far from the Great Synagogue of Palermo, Bucaria and Cassuto argue, to have served as that synagogue’s *miqweh* (Bucaria and Cassuto 2005). Bucaria and Cassuto therefore posit that this

⁷⁵ “Dopo 520 anni avevamo riannodato il filo con i nostri antenati” (D’Agostino 2018, 13).

⁷⁶ “Degli ebrei che per oltre dieci secoli ininterrottamente abitarono a Palermo *poco o niente è rimasto*” (Bucaria and Cassuto 2005, 171, own emphasis).

⁷⁷ Nicolò Bucaria had already mentioned the “discovery” in a 2003 interview with a now-defunct monthly journal published by the Frederick II Foundation, *L’Euromediterraneo* (Pomar 2003). He also referred to it in a 2004 survey of Jewish cultural artifacts in Sicily, written for a journal of the UCEI (Bucaria 2004), *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*. It is in the 2005 article, however, by Bucaria and Cassuto, where the archaeological evidence is first presented in detail.

⁷⁸ The Hebrew plural of *miqweh*.

miqweh is evidence that another, earlier synagogue existed in its immediate vicinity, and that the Great Synagogue, located further eastwards, emerged later.⁷⁹ According to their hypothesis, medieval Palermo was at one point home to at least two synagogues, and therefore at least two *miqwa'ot*: one for each synagogue.

Bucaria and Cassuto acknowledge that they make their claim “in spite of the absence of documentary proof,”⁸⁰ but nonetheless call their intervention a *scoperta* (a “discovery”), rather than a hypothesis or a working theory. This is criticized in the strongest of terms in an article by Mauro Perani, a Professor of Hebrew at the University of Bologna (2009), who raises a number of problems with Bucaria and Cassuto’s reasoning. For the sake of brevity, I will not list all of Perani’s objections here. Among other things, he disputes the “two synagogues” thesis, and therefore, the “two *miqwa'ot*” thesis, which rely on one another. He suggests that this is a case of circular reasoning; an intuitive leap made precisely in order to justify the claim that the Palazzo Marchesi pool is a *miqweh*. He also cites the well-documented presence of Christian burial grounds in the immediate vicinity of Casa Professa, and therefore the unlikelihood that Jews would have chosen to construct a *miqweh*, “a locus and instrument of purification *par excellence*,” in the same area as a cemetery, “impure by definition, the corpse in Judaism being the highest degree of impurity.”⁸¹

If proven, a genuine *miqweh* would become an important and visible testament to Palermo’s Jewish past. This would boost Palermitans’ perception of themselves as residents of a city with a multi-religious heritage. The debate therefore has important ramifications for the city’s sense of identity, although as I will show, it is not only archaeologists and medievalists who have the power to affect this. I describe the underground structure at Palazzo Marchesi as a “pool,” because I am not a trained archaeologist or historian of Jewish architecture. I am therefore in no position to speculate as to the likelihood or otherwise that the Palazzo Marchesi pool was once a *miqweh*. I note only that those who *do* qualify as experts in the field are split on the ‘*miqweh* question.’

Such disagreements are far from unusual in scholarship on medieval Palermo. On the contrary, the contested ‘discovery’ of a Jewish heritage site in contemporary Palermo contains interesting echoes of earlier studies of the city’s *Islamic* history, during the heyday of nineteenth-century Sicilian Orientalism. To cite one example: in an 1883 article for the respected *Archivio Storico Siciliano*, the architect Giuseppe Patricolo announced the “discovery” of a so-called *sala araba*, or “Arab room,” within the church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti (Patricolo 1883). He identified this as a former mosque. This thesis, along with others like it, became accepted by, and absorbed into, mainstream public discourse. The idea that a number of mosques became churches, and that San Giovanni degli Eremiti is one of them, now forms part of local folk wisdom, as I discuss in my Introduction to Chapter Three.

⁷⁹ Bucaria and Cassuto propose that this later synagogue, the one described by Obadiah da Bertinoro in the fifteenth century, was a result of the expulsion of Sicily’s Muslims by Frederick II, who left a large, abandoned mosque, and of the arrival of a large Jewish community in Palermo from the Maghreb, who converted it into a synagogue. This is but one of many competing theories about the previous history of the Great Synagogue of Palermo, and is by no means a matter of settled historical certainty.

⁸⁰ “Pur in mancanza di prove documentarie” (Bucaria and Cassuto 2005, 198).

⁸¹ “È quindi del tutto improbabile, se non assolutamente impossibile, che si lasciasse costruire agli ebrei – ma ancor più che essi stessi lo volessero fare – il loro bagno rituale in tale luogo adibito a uso cimiteriale e a luogo di riunione e di preghiera per i cristiani. Ossia avrebbero costruito il *miqweh*, che è per eccellenza il luogo e lo strumento della purificazione, in un’area cimiteriale, per definizione impura, essendo il cadavere per l’ebraismo il grado sommo di impurità, ed essendo il transito in aree cimiteriali proibito ai *Kohanim*” (Perani 2009, 389f).

Since the nineteenth century, however, “Some well-known buildings, traditionally attributed to the Islamic period, have been subject to a process of revision” (Nef 2013, 157n48). San Giovanni degli Eremiti is one of those buildings, whose purported Islamic origins have been called into question. It does not necessarily follow, however, that popular perceptions of these buildings have ‘caught up’ with these more recent historical doubts. As Herzfeld observes, a sustained historical discourse has the power to turn buildings “of technically questionable age,” in the case of his study of heritage in Crete, into “definitively Venetian” buildings (1991, 9). This is important because “the age of a building stakes an ideological claim” (46). In the case of both the mosque thesis and the *miqweh* thesis, announcements of ‘discoveries,’ premature as these may be, can assume afterlives of their own. This chapter begins by focusing on the ‘discovery’ of Palermo’s possible former *miqweh*. It goes on to place this in the broader context of ‘things Jewish’ in Palermo,⁸² by analyzing three interventions in the city that seek to foster a cultural memory of the oppression of Jews, rather than invoking a ‘golden age’ of *convivenza*.

2. “Even if scientifically it has not yet been verified...”

If ‘things Islamic’⁸³ were an intense focus of historical scholarship in nineteenth century Palermo, then a resurgence of interest in ‘things Jewish’ in the twenty-first-century city is emblemized by the Palazzo Marchesi pool. Palazzo Marchesi is not open for public visits, although small groups have been let in during the aforementioned *Vie dei Tesori* festival, which among other things hosts events in buildings usually closed to the public. Some members of the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies had only managed to see the pool once in the past fifteen years, and not for want of trying. When I expressed an interest in seeing it for myself, they told me not to get my hopes up.

Among other things, Palazzo Marchesi is used by the local library as overflow storage, and by Centro Astalli, a charitable group affiliated with the adjacent Jesuit church, which distributes clothing and food to recently-arrived asylum seekers. I had no idea who, if anybody, had the authority to show me around, and so I began my search by asking a Centro Astalli volunteer. To avoid getting too technical, I explained that there was a suspected *bagno rituale ebraico* (“Jewish ritual bath”) under the building, and that I was a researcher spending some time in Palermo. Perhaps they might be able to let me in to take a look. “It’s called a *miqweh*,” the volunteer corrected me. “But we don’t have the keys to let you in. And anyway, it’s closed to the public.” This was not especially promising. But I knew that Palazzo Marchesi and Casa Professa were somehow attached to one another, and so I went around the corner to see whether the Jesuits might have any leads.

The Jesuit brother I met in the courtyard of Casa Professa seemed to know a surprising amount about the Palazzo Marchesi pool. Initially, I had assumed that this was a niche topic of historical intrigue, but the more people I spoke to in Palermo, the more it became clear that I was wrong: the *miqweh* question had a symbolic importance that went beyond purely archaeological debate. He told me:

⁸² ‘Things Jewish’ is a catch-all term sometimes used in Jewish Studies, among other disciplines, to refer both to things made by Jews and things commonly thought to symbolize Jewishness (see e.g. Gruber 2002). In that sense, the term has some similarities with ‘Islamicate,’ in that it incorporates things that are not ‘Jewish’ in a strictly religious or liturgical sense.

⁸³ Adapted from “things Jewish,” a term frequently used by Gruber.

I've spoken to some of the Jews living in Palermo, and they're a hundred percent certain it's a *miqweh*. For them, there's no doubt. But there are other scholars, you know, who aren't so sure. I'm not an expert, of course, but I follow these sorts of things, local history and the like, particularly when it comes to religion. And it's by no means certain that it was ever used by Jews, even though they're convinced.

Almost everybody who seemed to know anything about the Palazzo Marchesi pool mentioned an argument for or against the idea that medieval Jews used it as a ritual bath. Most of these arguments appeared to originate either in the original article by Bucaria and Cassuto, or in the comprehensive critique of that article by Perani. When I did finally manage to visit the pool, for example, the guide who accompanied me, a local council employee, pointed out gaps in the walls that could – as Bucaria and Cassuto suggest – have served as niches for small candles, because no natural light reaches the space where the pool is located.

One member of the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies suggested to me a half-way house between the two extreme positions. She said it was possible that the pool might once have been something else – perhaps even a *hammam* during the Emirate of Sicily – then repurposed as a *miqweh*. She said that it could subsequently have had another use still, after the Jews were forced to leave, as a *camera dello scirocco*. It is possible that one such space could have had various uses over a number of centuries. After all, as the geologist Pietro Todaro notes, “the reuse of underground environments and their readaptation to new necessities of daily life [...] was a relatively common practice in Palermo.”⁸⁴

I do not wish to create the impression that the Palazzo Marchesi pool is the talk of the town. It is a subject of interest for a small but committed group of scholars, and for others interested in religious heritage: “a bit nerdy,” as one of my friends in Palermo put it, herself a keen follower of local history. Nonetheless, for those who *are* interested in the *miqweh* question, this ongoing topic of debate is, if anything, made more lively by the difficulty of visiting the pool in person. Contrary to the assertion of the Jesuit brother I spoke to, few people I asked in Palermo seemed especially “convinced” that the pool under Palazzo Marchesi either is, or is not, a former *miqweh*. It is precisely this uncertainty, I contend, that keeps the “*miqweh* question” a topic of interest, and secures its centrality in discussions of Palermo's Jewish heritage.

When speaking with G., a Jewish resident of Palermo, I asked just how central these symbols, confirmed or otherwise, of the city's Jewish heritage were from the perspective of a Jew living in the city today. “The link with Palermo's history is not the be all and end all,” she told me. “We would still be worshiping in the present, regardless of whether Jews had ever lived in Palermo before. Of course, we *are* in Sicily, and so we *do* feel the presence of this history. But it isn't indispensable; we pray in the here and now.”

Nonetheless, the unresolved question of the possible *miqweh* is symbolically significant for some in Italy's wider Jewish community, too. At a memorial in Palermo for Evelyne Aouate, who for decades, until her death in 2022, had been a driving force behind the ‘rediscovery’ of Jewish Palermo, the Vice President of the UCEI, Giulio Di Segni, delivered a speech. He celebrated how Aouate dedicated herself to:

Identifying the little or plenty – but little, I would say – that remained of the Jewish presence in Palermo, these places, the *Meschita* [...] and] where the *miqweh* has

⁸⁴ È stata una pratica abbastanza comune, nella storia ipogea del sottosuolo palermitano, il riutilizzo degli ambienti sotterranei ed il loro riadattamento alle nuove esigenze della vita quotidiana” (Todaro 2003).

been identified in Palazzo Marchesi, the Jewish ritual bath. We still don't know, it is being discussed among rabbis [...] and so on, but most probably, whereas in Syracuse, it has been clearly identified, in Palermo, it is thought that it is there. And Evelyne brought people to see it, because *in any event, even if scientifically it has not yet been verified* [...] people have come from Israel, from Rome, and so on, and most probably that is the place of the ritual bath, the ancient *miqweh*. And that too is a site of Jewish presence.⁸⁵

The absence of scientific certainty is no barrier to a place becoming a site of memory. On the contrary, Di Segni's words make clear that the *miqweh* has already become a *de facto* site of memory, treated as though it were already established as a "site of Jewish presence." The iterative practice of visiting it, including with representatives of the Jewish community from elsewhere, and of 'reading' it as a *miqweh*, in itself has some power to produce the pool as a Jewish site of memory, i.e. as an example of Jewish heritage in Palermo. Rabbis and academics are not the only figures with the authority to determine affective dispositions towards potentially Jewish sites of memory, which can and do develop without official sanction.

3. Palazzo Marchesi as a metaphor

A visit to the Palazzo Marchesi pool, which I was eventually able to organize in September 2021 via a contact in the nearby library, has almost nothing in common with a visit to the recognized World Heritage sites of "Arab-Norman Palermo." For the most part, those sites are signposted and well organized; their immediate surroundings are kept clean by regular visits from the municipal authorities.⁸⁶ When my guide from the library accompanied me through the front door of Palazzo Marchesi, he first had to explain himself to the charity volunteers at the door. We then entered a hallway containing a row of metal filing cabinets, as well as a generic *Vie dei Tesori* sign, to which a piece of paper containing the handwritten word "MIQWEH" has hastily been taped.

"We let you in because you're a researcher," he explained, "but I don't think anybody has been here for a while, perhaps since the pandemic started [in early 2020]." I asked him whether they had ever thought of opening the Palazzo Marchesi pool up to visitors on a regular basis. He told me that it would cost a lot of money to make it accessible from a health and safety perspective. As it stands, the steps down to the pool are irregular, and visitors must wear hard hats. The Casa Professa complex is also used not only as a drop-in center for asylum seekers, but also by the university, by the Jesuits, and as overflow storage for the local library. Getting the 'all clear' from every group with an interest in this complex of buildings would not be a simple task, so for the time being, the pool can only be visited by exceptional appointment, and on special occasions. Some years it is open during the *Vie dei Tesori* festival, but this was not the case in 2021.

⁸⁵ "[C]ercare di individuare quel poco o tanto – ma poco, direi – che è rimasto di presenza ebraica a Palermo, questi luoghi, la Meschita, [...] e] dove è stato individuato a Palazzo Marchesi il *miqweh*, il bagno rituale ebraico – non si sa ancora, si sta discutendo tra rabbini [...] eccetera, però molto probabilmente, mentre a Siracusa è stato individuato con chiarezza dov'è eccetera, a Palermo si pensa che c'è. Ed Evelyne portava la gente a vederlo, perché *comunque, anche se scientificamente non è ancora accertato* [...] sono venute persone da Israele, da Roma eccetera, è molto probabilmente quello il luogo del bagno rituale, dell'antico *miqweh*. E anche quello è un luogo della presenza ebraica" (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022, own emphasis).

⁸⁶ A number of people in Palermo suggested to me that the local government specifically arranges for these sites to be kept in a 'photogenic' state, while neglecting its waste disposal duties in residential areas. Whether or not this is the case, it is in any event interesting that it is perceived as such.

From Palazzo Marchesi, the interior corridor opens out into a courtyard, which visitors to the pool must walk across. The cellars in this courtyard were used as prisons during the Inquisition, in which Jewish converts to Christianity were persecuted, along with others whose Christian faith was brought into doubt. If the pool ever had been a *miqweh* before 1492, it is poignant that it is located so near a site that would later disturb the *convivenza* narrative often emphasized in contemporary Palermo.

We descended the stairs in the middle of this overgrown courtyard garden. At the bottom of these stairs, the path ‘forks’ in two different directions. One leads to an underground cistern, the entrance to which was used as an air-raid shelter during the Second World War. The other leads to an antechamber, and my guide told me that some scholars thought this could be a Byzantine burial ground. It contains what could potentially be raised tombs, stone ‘seats,’ or something else entirely. We then turned a corner to reach an L-shaped pool of water, which according to Bucaria and Cassuto’s thesis was medieval Palermo’s original *miqweh*. Some basic infrastructure has been put in place to prepare the pool for visits; there is a switch at the entrance to the underground structure, which lights various parts up electronically.

The Palazzo Marchesi pool offers a metaphor for Palermo’s history that stands in contrast to the “Arab-Norman” World Heritage sites promoted by UNESCO. Unlike the neat trajectories presented alongside the city’s better-known monuments, Palazzo Marchesi encapsulates the obscurity of the city’s distant past, and particularly, the layered messiness of its Jewish history. The building is historically significant, regardless of whether the pool beneath it was ever a *miqweh*. Palazzo Marchesi nonetheless resists exploitation as a heritage site not only because of its uncertain and contested past, but also because of its present role as a drop-in center for asylum seekers. It is therefore a space where Palermo’s multicultural present – its role as a point of arrival for Mediterranean crossings – impedes the heritagization of its past religious diversity.

4. *Convivenza* interrupted

The sites of memory described thus far draw attention to a Jewish community that once thrived in Palermo, alongside more numerous Christian and Muslim neighbors.⁸⁷ The importance of Jewish history for the broader ‘revival’ of an interest in Sicily’s multicultural past is not quite unique to the island. In some ways it reflects a particularly Mediterranean cultural memory of a distant Jewish past. As Flesler and Pérez Melgosa observe, “the myth of a prosperous, tolerant, and enlightened Sepharad”⁸⁸ was also embraced by *Ashkenazi* intellectuals in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany (2020, 38), as an aspirational counterpoint to what would later become known as the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history.” It stood in contrast, in other words, to an approach that primarily interprets the history of the Jews in Europe as a history of oppression and persecution. The idea that Jews *had* previously thrived in the Mediterranean, alongside their enlightened neighbors, came to be used as evidence that they could do so in Europe again; that oppression was not an inevitable consequence of being Jewish in diaspora.

Looking back to a recent or distant ‘golden age’ of Abrahamic religious pluralism is not constrained to Iberia. It is also a feature in some strains of historical discourse in Morocco (see

⁸⁷ In the centuries after the Norman conquest, Sicily’s Muslim population was gradually depleted, and eventually expelled.

⁸⁸ Sepharad is “the traditional name used by Iberian Jews to refer to the Iberian Peninsula and the Hebrew word for Spain. It also, and perhaps more powerfully, refers to a constructed imaginary geography in which the Iberian Peninsula stands, among other things, for the often idealized era when Jews inhabited Iberia prior to 1492” (Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 2020, 5).

e.g. Boum 2013; Gottreich 2020), Tunisia (see e.g. Boughedir 1996), and Turkey (see e.g. Brink-Danan 2011), among other places. Although the religious rite of the Sicilian Jews was distinct from that of its neighbors,⁸⁹ medieval Sicilian Jewish culture shared similarities with the Jewish cultures of Iberia and the Maghreb (see e.g. Simonsohn 2011 378n8). In Sicily, too, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the status of Jews centuries before the 1492 expulsion is often contrasted favorably against the conditions of the Ashkenazi Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, and in some cases is even cited as evidence of an innate Mediterranean ‘tolerance.’

Flesler and Pérez Melgosa argue that in Spain, where the history of ‘*convivencia*’ is often celebrated, there is also “a certain lack of interest in attempting to present the less pleasant story of how the happy medieval coexistence invoked was brought to an end, or how, perhaps, it was never that happy to begin with” (2020, 111). To what extent is this a feature of the cultural memory of medieval Judaism in Palermo too? I will now discuss some attempts to commemorate these “less pleasant” stories, mediated through three sites of memory, each of which recalls a different episode in Jewish history. As Michael Rothberg argues, when articulating his “multidirectional” understanding of memory, “remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites” (2009, 11). I therefore understand these sites of memory to be both distinct and interconnected. I begin by focusing on a site commemorating the Inquisition that followed the 1492 expulsion of Sicily’s Jews, in which a large number of converts to Christianity were tortured, imprisoned and killed. I then discuss a site invoking the Shoah, which is marked in Palermo by a garden commemorating the ‘Righteous Among the Nations’: non-Jews who helped to save Jewish lives. Subsequently, I analyze a site remembering the Fascist ‘Racial Laws,’ which were used to persecute Jews in Sicily, as in the rest of Italy.

4.1 Remembering the Inquisition

It would not be accurate to suggest that there is a lack of interest in how the medieval “*convivenza* or quasi” (Simonsohn 2011, 113) ended in Sicily. The Inquisition that followed the 1492 expulsion saw the persecution, torture and execution of *neofiti*: Jews who converted to Christianity and remained in Sicily.⁹⁰ In recent decades, this fact has become a more prominent feature of Palermo’s cultural memory.

Palazzo Chiaramonte (Steri), on Palermo’s central Piazza Marina, was the tribunal of the Inquisition between 1600 and 1782, and housed prisoners in its cells. In 1906 Giuseppe Pitre, a senator and a Sicilian folklorist, was informed that some graffiti made by the prisoners had been uncovered in Palazzo Chiaramonte, a building with an “exceptionally stratified” history (Celli 2022, 128). Pitre worked on uncovering the plaster, and on documenting his findings, which were published posthumously (Pitre 1940). The markings were soon replastered, however, before their full extent could be determined, in order to make the rooms suitable as offices for the law courts, which occupied the building at the time (Fiume 2017). After the Second World War, Leonardo Sciascia also observed and documented some of the graffiti, while the building underwent conversion by the university (Fiume 2017, 198; Sciascia 1977). Nonetheless, the full extent of these graffiti was only made visible by a comprehensive restoration project, which lasted some

⁸⁹ For example: following expulsion from Sicily, the Sicilian Jews who sought refuge in Rome established their own *scola*, or synagogue, where they could practice their own rite.

⁹⁰ These were known as *giudaizzanti* in the records of the Inquisition, and were accused of crypto-Judaism, that is, of having converted to Christianity ‘insincerely,’ and of continuing to practice the Jewish religion. Giovanna Fiume notes that, of 6,393 trials recorded by the scholar Maria Sofia Messana, 1,965 of these, i.e. almost one third, were of *giudaizzanti* (cited in Fiume 2021, 142).

seven years and culminated in 2008, when the doors of the prison cells were opened to the public (Nobile 2008).

Although they remain to be translated or studied in comprehensive detail, there are two examples of writing in Hebrew script in cell number six of the first floor of the “secret prisons” in Palazzo Chiaramonte. Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic had both disappeared from documented use in Sicily by the time of the Inquisition (Fiume 2021, 145), and yet Hebrew script is present on these prison walls. It is generally well known among those in Palermo who take an interest in local history that *neofiti* suffered greatly during the Inquisition. The *Vie dei Tesori* festival hosts annual events both about the Inquisition in particular, including a walking tour I attended in October 2021, and about the history of Judaism in Palermo more generally, which includes a discussion of how *neofiti* were persecuted during the Inquisition.

A direct link is now reiterated annually in Palazzo Chiaramonte, between the historic fate of Palermo’s Jewish population, and the religious practice of Jews living in Sicily today. Rabbi Pierpaolo Pinchas Puntarello works with southern Italian *bnei anusim*: the descendants of Jews forced to convert to Roman Catholicism. He does so on behalf of an organization headquartered in Jerusalem but operating internationally. In its own words, its mission in Italy is “to find and to help many descendants of these Italian Bnei Anusim to return to their roots and their heritage” (Shavei Israel 2015). Evelyn Aouate notes how, during a seminar in October 2013, Rabbi Puntarello was “very struck by the visit to the former jails of Palazzo Chiaramonte, and especially by the inscriptions in Hebrew characters that remained on the walls of certain cells.”⁹¹ Aouate describes the “challenge” that Rabbi Puntarello issued during the conference: to host the lighting of the candles for *Chanukkah* in the former prisons of Palazzo Chiaramonte (in D’Agostino 2018, 13).

To Aouate’s surprise, officials in Palermo agreed to the proposal, and a ceremony took place in 2013 on that very site. She called this an act of retying “the thread with our ancestors.”⁹² It has since become a regular annual event in the same location. One of the most publicly visible expressions of Jewish religious life in contemporary Palermo, therefore, is explicitly associated with one of the darkest moments of Sicily’s Jewish history. Aouate describes this first ceremony as a ‘turning point’ of sorts: “that event triggered, for all of us in the [Sicilian] Institute [of Jewish Studies], Jews and non-Jews, the desire to bring the history of Jewish Sicily to people’s attention.”⁹³

Particularly in the absence of a permanent place of worship for the city’s small Jewish community, a book on Italy’s synagogues by Adam Smulevich and Pierfranco Fabris recognizes the importance of this ritual commemoration. Smulevich’s text describes how “for a few years now, a small crowd has gathered for the [lighting of the *Chanukkah*] in Palermo, in the rooms of Palazzo [Chiaramonte] Steri. An apt *contrappasso*: once upon a time, the tribunal of the Inquisition resided there.”⁹⁴ The idea of a *contrappasso* – a just or ‘fit punishment’ that *counters* the original crime – appears frequently in erudite Italian discourse.⁹⁵ For the *Chanukkah* ceremony in Palazzo

⁹¹ “[E]ra stato molto colpito dalla visita alle ex carceri di Palazzo Chiaramonte (Steri) e in special modo dalle iscrizioni in caratteri ebraici rimaste sulle pareti di alcune celle [...]” (in D’Agostino 2018, 13).

⁹² “Dopo 520 anni avevamo riannodato il filo con i nostri antenati” (in D’Agostino 2018, 13).

⁹³ “Da quell’evento è scattata in tutti noi dell’Istituto, ebrei e non ebrei, la volontà di fare conoscere la storia della Sicilia ebraica” (in D’Agostino 2018, 13).

⁹⁴ “A Palermo, da qualche anno, una piccola folla si raduna per il rito nei locali di Palazzo Steri. / Un bel *contrappasso*: un tempo vi dimorava il tribunale dell’Inquisizione” (Smulevich and Fabris 2020, 318).

⁹⁵ The *contrappasso* did not originate with Dante (*Inf* XXVIII, 142), who first used the word in Italian. He would have been familiar with Latin translations of Aristotle, where *contrapassum* was used (Steinberg 2014, 66). However, the

Chiaramonte to function as a *contrappasso*, that is, as an act of penance or retribution, as it does for some of the souls described in Dante's *Commedia*, implies the acknowledgement of a historic 'crime' on the part of the city of Palermo.

Aouate describes how some of the participants shed tears in the inaugural ceremony. A public acknowledgment of the city's Jewish past and present, in a site evoking one of its most painful moments, cannot but be a source of great emotion. Many Sicilians recognize the expulsion of the island's Jews, and the subsequent persecution of many *neofiti*, as a tragedy. It is nonetheless also the case that some interpretations of Sicilian history do not portray non-Jewish Sicilians as direct perpetrators in the darkest moments of Sicilian Jewish history. When I put it to local historians that the medieval *convivenza* between Christians and Jews, not to mention the earlier expulsion of the island's Muslims, did not end well, many were at pains to ensure that I distinguished between events in Spain and events in Sicily. "It was the Spanish who expelled the Jews in 1492, against the will of the [Sicilian] people," argued P., a Roman Catholic and an active member of the Sicilian Institute for Jewish Studies. "Housed in Palermo is an interesting and rich document, in which the nobles of Sicily plead with the Spanish Crown not to extend the expulsion's reach to Sicilian territory."⁹⁶

As the historian Shlomo Simonsohn puts it: "Sicilians, past and present, love to describe [the 1492 expulsion] as a 'foreign import'" (2011, 567). Simonsohn does observe that there is a great deal of truth in this assertion, but also that it ultimately does not take into account the "wider context of the history of the Jews in mediaeval Europe," which is that the expulsion was "part and parcel of the process of ethnic cleansing of Christian Europe of its Jews" (2011, 567). Spanish territory or not, Sicily too was part of this Christian(izing) Europe. As with many narratives of Sicilian history that downplay the role of Sicilians themselves in the historical persecution of Jews, there are some ways in which they are partially true, and other ways in which they downplay certain salient facts. The Inquisition was a *Spanish* Inquisition, as is often emphasized in Sicily, but it was not implemented without Sicilian help. Particular facts, episodes and individuals in history can be brought to the foreground or pushed to the sidelines to paint a favorable or unfavorable picture of a city's, a region's, or a nation's heritage. There is nothing especially unusual about the cultural memory of Sicily's Jewish history in that regard, and it also bears emphasizing that a great many professional and amateur historians in Sicily pursue a nuanced understanding of this complicated field of inquiry.

4.2 Remembering the Shoah

The revival of interest in Jewish history in Palermo is taking place alongside a range of projects aimed at 'reclaiming' the city: of altering its residents' relationship with the urban environment. In 2000, the city authorities 'reopened' a site on Via Alloro that had fallen into disrepair, turning it into a public garden by ceremonially planting a laurel tree, the same tree after which Via Alloro

importance of the *Commedia* in the Italian canon and educational system has done much to popularize the notion that a crime or a sin can or ought to be punished with a counterweight. Italian citations from Dante's *Inferno* (*Inf.*) are taken from the Petrocchi edition (Alighieri 1994); English translations are from Hollander (Alighieri 2000).

⁹⁶ Presumably the document dated 20 June 1492 listed as no. 5497 in Shlomo Simonsohn's *The Jews in Sicily* (see Simonsohn 2006, vol. 8, 4739). See also an objection from the Christian community of Palermo, dated 11 July 1492, listed as no. 5548 in the same volume.

is named (Pintagro 2000). In February 2008, the garden was ‘re-dedicated’ to the “Righteous Among the Nations”: to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Shoah.⁹⁷

The Mayor of Palermo at the time, Diego Cammarata, opened the “Garden of the Righteous” – the *Giardino dei Giusti* – in the presence of Gideon Meir, then the Israeli Ambassador to Italy. During the ceremony, the Mayor stated that:

This is not only a necessary acknowledgment of a people who have been cruelly harassed, offended and persecuted, but is also an extraordinary opportunity for our city to place itself in the center of the Mediterranean in cultural terms. Palermo, with this garden, places itself among those communities that acknowledge the necessity of collectively remembering their own “righteous.”⁹⁸

The very format of a “Garden of the Righteous” reflects, in miniature, the much larger memorial of the same name in Jerusalem, which forms part of Yad Vashem: the World Holocaust Remembrance Center. As demonstrated by the presence of the Israeli ambassador, it partly serves the diplomatic function of strengthening ties between Sicily and Israel, using the idea of a Mediterranean ‘community,’ with Sicily at its center, as a means for doing so.

Not all of the names commemorated in Palermo’s Garden of the Righteous have equally strong links with the city.⁹⁹ They include Jan Karski, a Polish resistance fighter and diplomat, and Giorgio Perlasca, a former Fascist, born and raised in northern Italy, who posed as a consul-general in Hungary to save Hungarian Jews from deportation. Palermo did not have a sizable Jewish community during the Shoah, and so the Garden of the Righteous also commemorates a number of international figures, and Italians from outside Sicily, who have been awarded the title of ‘Righteous’ by Yad Vashem. The ceramic plaque at the center of the memorial wall, with a sea-blue background and a painted frame that is typical of Sicilian pottery, reads: “Dedicated to the Righteous of the world: one can always say a ‘yes’ or a ‘no.’”¹⁰⁰ The second part of this inscription recalls “Shemà,” a poem by Primo Levi that serves as the epigraph to *If This is a Man*. In this poem, Levi, an Italian Jew who survived Auschwitz, challenges readers to consider the humanity of those in the camps who “die because of a yes or a no.”¹⁰¹

Rather than solely serving as a somber commemoration of the Shoah, however, the Garden of the Righteous bears some similarities with the “positive examples” of medieval *convivenza* that are emphasized in Palermo. It uses hopeful figures of righteous non-Jews in order to project an aspirational image, perhaps even a model, for future peaceful coexistence. If the second part of the inscription is a conscious citation of Primo Levi – the poem, after all, is widely taught in Italian schools – then it repurposes his words in a radically different context. In the Garden of the Righteous, the arbitrary “yes or no” of a camp guard, by which the prisoner lives or dies, is

⁹⁷ “Righteous Among the Nations” is an honorific awarded by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, on behalf of the State of Israel.

⁹⁸ “Non solo è un doveroso riconoscimento a un popolo tormentato, offeso e perseguitato crudelmente, ma è anche una straordinaria occasione per la nostra città di collocarsi al centro del Mediterraneo in termini culturali. Palermo, con questo giardino, si colloca fra quelle comunità che riconosce ai propri ‘giusti’ la necessità di un ricordo collettivo” (*La Repubblica* 2008).

⁹⁹ See the chapter entitled “I Giusti di Sicilia” in Alessandro Hoffmann’s book (2020, 301–308) for biographies, among others, of the Sicilians commemorated in Palermo’s Garden of the Righteous.

¹⁰⁰ “Dedicato ai giusti del mondo: Si può sempre dire un sì o un no.”

¹⁰¹ Translation by Stuart Woolf (Levi 1959). “Che muore per un sì o per un no” (Levi 1958).

translated into the existential “yes or no,” by which bystanders can choose either to intervene on behalf of the oppressed, or to remain silent and complicit.

4.3 Remembering Fascism

In discussions with Sicilians about their island’s history, I have occasionally heard the argument made that Fascism, like the earlier period of Spanish rule that saw the expulsion of the Jews and the Inquisition, was imposed upon Sicilians without their consent; that Sicilian identity is *per se* anti-Fascist. While “Sicily has been called the least Fascist region in Italy,”¹⁰² there were nonetheless also Sicilians who embraced Fascism, not least among the island’s ruling classes. Whether or not there was ever a Fascist *consensus* in Sicily is besides the point. Fascist rule, and therefore Fascist policies, were implemented in Sicily, in part by Sicilians, much as they were implemented locally by Italians in the rest of Italy. Fascism was therefore *both* imposed from outside *and* implemented from within.

The ‘Racial Laws’ implemented across Italy, beginning in 1938, were no exception. Alongside a host of other discriminatory measures, these laws prohibited Jews from working in Italian universities, which included the University of Palermo. As in other places in southern Italy, a small number of Jews had moved to the city since the legal emancipation that followed Italian unification.¹⁰³ A book by Alessandro Hoffmann – *The Friends of Moses: Over One Hundred Stories of Jews in Sicily* – details the life stories of those in Sicily that were persecuted under Fascism.¹⁰⁴ In his preface to that book, Davide Camarrone argues that we know more, paradoxically, about the medieval expulsion of the Jews from Spanish territories, than we do about the much more recent Racial Laws in Sicily (in Hoffmann 2020, 15). He hopes that “[r]emembrance, in effect, could cease to be merely an indispensable part of our educational training, becoming an act of necessary resistance.”¹⁰⁵

On 30 June 2015, a plaque was unveiled at the entrance to Palazzo Chiaramonte, which as well as having been a prison during the Inquisition, now serves as the seat of the Rectorate of the University of Palermo. It commemorates five teachers “expelled from this university because they were Jews.”¹⁰⁶ In an apparent link to the Garden of the Righteous, which was inaugurated in Palermo seven years prior, the plaque’s inscription ends with the hope that “the knowledge cultivated in the classrooms of the university may contribute to the formation of generations of the righteous.”¹⁰⁷ Unlike the Garden of the Righteous, however, which leads by what we might call ‘positive example,’ this plaque is didactic in another way. It does not recall acts of heroism, but an event that must never happen again, suggesting that remembering it might go some way towards preventing its recurrence. The difference between two German words for ‘memorial’ encapsulates this distinction well. Where the Garden might be described as a “Denkmal,” inviting the viewer to “remember and reflect,” the plaque at the entrance to Palazzo Chiaramonte fulfils the definition of a “Mahnmal,” which “admonishes the viewer not to permit a repetition of the calamity that forms the subject of the monument” (Imort 2009, 236).

¹⁰² Mack Smith (1968, 508).

¹⁰³ According to records of the Central State Archive there were 114 Jews present in Palermo from August 1938; a separate undated list “records the presence of 113 Italian and foreign Jews resident in Palermo” (D’Amico 2020).

¹⁰⁴ *Gli amici di Moïse: Cento e più storie di ebrei in Sicilia* (Hoffmann 2020).

¹⁰⁵ “Ricordare, in effetti, potrebbe non esser più solo una parte indispensabile della nostra formazione, divenendo un atto di resistenza necessario” (in Hoffmann 2020, 17).

¹⁰⁶ “Furono espulsi da questa università perché ebrei.”

¹⁰⁷ “Possa il sapere coltivato nelle aule universitarie contribuire a formare generazioni di giusti.”

5. Conclusion

The foregoing chapters have demonstrated that, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, various sites have developed in Palermo that encourage a cultural memory of the city's Jewish heritage. Taken together, these operate as sites or technologies of memory. A number of historiographical metaphors are used in Palermo to link these Jewish sites of memory to one another. The journalist Davide Camarrone sees evidence of a "fertile root" in the rediscovered traces of Jewish Palermo,¹⁰⁸ but the more common metaphor is that of a "thread." Eliana Calandra, the Director of Palermo's Library Service and City Archive,¹⁰⁹ perceives in the architectural history of Palermo's historic Jewish quarter, among other places, "invisible threads, which link past and present, which unite events and people."¹¹⁰ Through the project of 'rediscovering' Palermo's Jewish history via its sites of memory, events that are distant only in appearance become part of a legible whole. As Giulio Di Segni puts it: "1493 [the expulsion] and 1938 [the Racial Laws] once again constitute a *single thread*."¹¹¹

There is no one simple explanation for why these sites of memory have developed in Palermo. A general and global "memory boom" (Winter 2001) – a public interest in memory, accompanied and reinforced by popular genealogy, amateur history, and heritage tourism – certainly plays a role. The urge to remember, and to preserve traces of the past, has become a priority *per se*, both for organs of the state and for some civic society groups. In Sicily, Jewish history forms part of this past. There are undoubtedly facets of Jewish sites of memory in Palermo, however, which are context-specific. The sites discussed so far remind those in Palermo who possess the requisite knowledge and disposition to read them, that vestiges of Judaism's long history in the city were never *entirely* extinguished. This, in turn, encourage a sense of rooted-ness both for some in the city's small Jewish community, and for Jewish visitors to the city. It also fosters a sense among some Palermitans that a Jewish community is integral to the city; that Palermo is not Palermo without Jewish Palermo.

There are scholars, including Pierre Nora, who view Jews as a "people of memory" more so than other religious communities (1989), not least because of the repeated Biblical imperative to remember: *zakhor!*¹¹² The Shoah, a genocide that annihilated entire communities – an estimated two-thirds of Europe's Jews were murdered in the Shoah (Dickerman and Bartrop 2017) – has given an urgency to this command that cannot be underestimated. The transnational "cosmopolitan memory" of the Shoah developed not instantly, but gradually, over decades (Levy and Sznajder 2005). The 1960s have been characterized as a "turning point" in the collective memory of the Shoah, partly triggered by a generation without direct experience of the war, and by a series of high-profile trials of Shoah perpetrators (Levy and Sznajder 2006, 98). Commemoration took on new, intensified, and memorialized forms from the 1990s, with a "long-term cultural memory based on monuments and museums" catalyzed by developments in Israel, the U.S., and Germany (Assmann 2010, 98). The fall of the Soviet Union also provoked introspection about what it meant

¹⁰⁸ "[R]adice fertile" (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

¹⁰⁹ Servizio Sistema Bibliotecario e Archivio Cittadino.

¹¹⁰ "[F]ili invisibili che legano passato e presente, che uniscono vicende e persone" (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

¹¹¹ "Questi due momenti, 1493 e 1938, costituiscono di nuovo un filo unico" (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

¹¹² זָכוֹר. See e.g. Yerushalmi (1982, *passim*).

to be European.¹¹³ The historian Kasia Tomaszewicz calls the Shoah “a foundational aspect of the memory boom and the politics of global alliance-making” (2021, 172). The development of Shoah commemoration, therefore, is a part of and a catalyst for not just Jewish sites of memory recalling other time periods, including sites in Palermo I have already discussed, but also for the increased public interest in memory *per se*.

Various other factors in the Shoah’s aftermath have also shaped how Jewish heritage is produced in various locations. Jewish archaeology has developed as a discipline, in Israel (see e.g. Abu El-Haj 2001) and internationally, including in the Euro-Mediterranean (see e.g. Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 2020). Scholars trained in Israel, and at Israeli academic institutions, have supported research that focuses on the history of Judaism in Europe, and Sicily is no exception.¹¹⁴ This kind of scholarship derives expertise and momentum from these forms of support. Additionally, places with historic Jewish minorities, in Europe and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, are reevaluating the importance of Jewish communities to their local and national identities.¹¹⁵ This recent attention is accompanied by the production of heritage, too: museums are founded, and sites pertinent to Jewish history are claimed, ‘rediscovered,’ or brought into wider public knowledge.

Hindus, Muslims, and a wide range of Protestant Christian denominations, among others – as well as a small Jewish community – are now visible in the city, largely as a result of increased levels of migration. If heritage is the “contemporary use of the past” (Graham et al. 2016, 2), then Palermo’s experience of a renewed religious diversity in the twenty-first century affects the things Palermitans look for and find in their own city’s history. The small Jewish community in Palermo is not the only driving force behind Jewish heritage in the city, although it is an important factor. An increase in tourism to Palermo; contemporary attempts to redefine the city’s identity without reference to the Mafia; and the recent drive to promote Jewish heritage in many parts of Europe (Krakover 2017, 89), are also important.

Jewish sites of memory encourage a distinctly cosmopolitan civic pride for those in Palermo who view *convivenza* as an essential part of what it means to be Palermitan. They can and do point to signs that Jews were ‘integrated’ into the fabric of the medieval city – traces of the *Meschita*, and possible evidence of a *miqweh* in the city center – to argue that diverse religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups have always coexisted in the city. Some offer teleological reasons for ‘remembering.’ “Reconstructing this fragment of history,” argues the journalist Davide Camarrone:

has in some way meant contributing towards ensuring that this city, which has been a site of *convivenza* between many religions, has been a place of crossing, of many identities, of many histories, continues to remember, today, that after that which has happened [the fifteenth-century expulsion; the twentieth-century Racial Laws], another history, another future is possible.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ The historian Tony Judt famously argued that recognition of the Shoah – grappling with a nation’s role in that event – became a “European entry ticket” for acceptance into the expanding European community (Judt 2005).

¹¹⁴ To name one example: an important conference on the history of Judaism in Sicily, in 1992, the 500th anniversary year of the 1492 expulsion, was co-organized between Italian and Israeli institutions (Coloni et al. 1995).

¹¹⁵ For example, on Morocco, see i.a. Boum (2013) and Gottreich (2020); on Spain, see esp. Flesler and Pérez Melgosa (2020).

¹¹⁶ “[R]icostruire quel frammento di storia è stato in qualche modo contribuire a far sì che questa città, che è stata un luogo di convivenza tra tante religioni, che è stata un luogo di attraversamento di tante identità e tante storie, resti oggi

As I have previously noted, even sites of memory invoking the oppression of Jews in Sicily are not always straightforwardly interpreted as evidence of past *Sicilian* antisemitism. Instead, they are read in various ways, including in some instances as evidence that discord between the Christian majority and the Jewish minority was a foreign imposition, inimical to an essential Sicilian *convivenza*. There are Jewish Italians sympathetic to this interpretation, too. Giulio Di Segni, the Vice President of the UCEI, interprets the fact that the deadline for the Jewish community's expulsion was postponed until 1493, rather than in 1492 as in Spain, as evidence that "the Sicilian and Palermitan political class held the Jewish presence so close to its heart, that it even resisted against the decrees that arrived from Spain."¹¹⁷

As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes: "[m]essages of reconciliation, of multiculturalism or biculturalism, or of development are likely to be encoded in the interface" of heritage production (1995, 374). Heritage does not merely recall 'the past,' but rather, it invokes whole array of political messages. In the case of Palermo, chief among these political messages is a cosmopolitan identity narrative. Celebrating past *convivenza* can convey a message that the city has a multicultural and multi-religious essence; conversely, commemorating the oppression of Palermo's Jewish minority can be interpreted as a step towards reconciliation. So far, I have focused on sites of memory that *symbolize* a religious community. I will now turn my attention to sites of religious practice in Palermo: both in the present, in Chapter Three, with reference to some of the city's Islamic places of worship, and in the future, in Chapter Four, which focuses on the city's much-discussed hypothetical future synagogue.

a ricordare che dopo quel che è stato, un'altra storia, un altro futuro è possibile" (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

¹¹⁷ "[L]a classe politica siciliana, palermitana, aveva talmente a cuore la presenza ebraica che ha resistito anche contro i decreti che arrivavano dalla Spagna" (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

Chapter Three

“Islam Left Traces in Sicily That Have Never Been Erased”: Two Mosques in Palermo

Or has every trace of Islam been obliterated?

Ibn Hamdis, circa 1055–1133¹¹⁸

Diwan Ibn Hamdis.

1. Introduction

The discourse of *Siqillismo*, as I have already noted, relies on the idea that Sicily was, is, or may once again become, an archetypally ‘cosmopolitan’ island. Although some Sicilians also espouse a universalist cosmopolitanism as a matter of philosophical principle, *Siqillismo* is based on an argument not just that Sicily’s majority exhibited tolerance towards the pre-1492 Jewish minority, but also, specifically, that adherents to all three Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam – once coexisted peacefully on the island. Both Judaism and Islam largely felt like distant cultural memories in Sicily during most of the twentieth century, to the extent that their historic presence was remembered at all. As I have shown, this is no longer entirely the case for Judaism. Muslims too are now an active and visible presence in Sicily as in much of Italy,¹¹⁹ largely but not entirely as a result of immigration.

Christianity, specifically Roman Catholicism, is the dominant and most visible religion in contemporary Sicily, and a central feature of the island’s social and cultural identity. *Siqillismo* maintains that Islam and Judaism, far from being foreign to Sicily, are also central to *sicilianità*, or Sicilian-ness. Adherents of religions regarded in much of mainland Europe as unknowable ‘others’ are acknowledged by this narrative as ancestors of present-day Sicilians. They cannot, according to this view, be anything other than ‘of’ Sicily. Specifically, *Siqillismo* asserts that Islam and Judaism properly belong to Sicily’s *patrimonio*. *Patrimonio* is often translated into English as ‘heritage,’ but does subtly “different cultural work” (Grasseni 2017, 27), not least because ‘patrimony’ contains a stronger implication that it is something transmitted from generation to generation: “patrilinearly, presumably” (9): an inheritance that can be stewarded or squandered.¹²⁰

As well as having historically been a site of literal religious conversions between the Abrahamic faiths, it is a familiar *topos* of Palermitan historical discourse that Palermo is a ‘layered’ city: the site of numerous historically important architectural ‘conversions.’ This narrative holds that, according to the shifting fortunes of Palermo’s religious populations, what was once a mosque might subsequently become a synagogue,¹²¹ or where a synagogue once stood, a church might subsequently take its place.

In exceptional cases, the city’s religious architecture is indeed palimpsestic, incorporating visible hints of earlier religious practice. Perhaps most famously, Palermo Cathedral contains

¹¹⁸ Translation by Mallette (2005, 136). “ورسم من الإسلام أصبح دارسا” (Ibn Hamdis 1960, 276).

¹¹⁹ See e.g. Allievi (2003).

¹²⁰ Etymologically, of course, ‘heritage’ contains this meaning too. This etymological sense is perhaps less dominant in the common understanding of the English word ‘heritage,’ which is often used colloquially as a synonym for ‘history.’ This frustrates many scholars of heritage, who rightly insist that there is an important distinction between the two.

¹²¹ As I have already noted, there is a theory that the medieval Great Synagogue of Palermo was housed in what was formerly the Ibn Sīqlab Mosque, but this theory is not universally accepted.

Islamic *spolia*, in the form of the Qur’anic inscription engraved into the far-left column of the Cathedral’s southern portico.¹²² From the strict perspective of architectural history, however, the idea that mosques, synagogues, and churches were habitually ‘converted’ from one into another is not straightforwardly supported by existing archeological data (Nef 2013, 157n48). Nonetheless, this perception is widespread in some Palermitans’ own understandings of their city’s past. In other words, it is important for the cultural memory of Palermo’s history, regardless of its scientific accuracy. The idea that Palermo’s churches used to be synagogues and mosques may also have been exaggerated in recent years, including to meet tourists’ desires to read Sicily as quasi-exotic or ‘not-quite-European’ (see e.g. Neil and Wyer 2023). Nonetheless, it both predates contemporary mass tourism, as I will demonstrate below, and also forms part of some Palermitans’ own self-fashioning as inhabitants of a paradigmatically diverse city.

Palermo’s reputation as a locus of architectural conversion, and the centrality of this reputation to the city’s urban identity, dates at least as far back as descriptions by medieval Arab travelers, which are well-known among *appassionati* of Sicilian history. In the year 972, while Palermo was under Muslim rule, the Arab Muslim traveler Ibn Hawqal observed “more than three hundred” mosques in the old city.¹²³ This is almost certainly an exaggeration (Houben 2002, 28), consonant with the medieval Arab travel chronicle genre – it is more likely that three hundred stands metaphorically for ‘a large number’ – but it is an intensely quotable and well-known claim, which was often cited in my fieldwork conversations about Palermo’s medieval history. Ibn Hawqal also wrote that the city’s eponymous ‘Palermo’ quarter¹²⁴ contained:

the Friday mosque which was, at one time, a Christian church. The mosque has a huge sanctuary. I heard certain logicians say that the Greek philosopher Aristotle is buried in a wooden box suspended in the sanctuary. The Christians used to venerate him and pray to him for rain. They preserved the traditions of Classical Greece which he had handed down to them from his forefathers. It was said that the reason for suspending the body in mid-air was so that the people could go and see it there, in order to pray for rain or seek cures for all sorts of calamities that befell them, be they natural disasters, death or civil strife. I myself saw a great big box which suggests that the tomb may actually be there.¹²⁵

As early as the tenth century, then, Palermo’s reputation as a site of architectural conversion was under construction. So too was the image of its religious buildings as Russian *matryoshka* dolls, after a fashion, with small traces of their previous functions contained within larger, more recent ‘shells.’ Not only was the Friday or ‘congregational’ mosque a former church. In Ibn Hawqal’s description, it also retained an important architectural vestige of that former use, in the form of a suspended tomb. This itself was a syncretic incorporation of pre-Christian worship into local

¹²² An inscription from the Qur’an (7:54) (Amari 1875, 81). Amari identifies the Ayah as 52, but the text he transcribes and translates very clearly corresponds to Ayah 54 of Surah 7.

¹²³ Translation by William Granara (1983, 96). “تَيْفٌ وَتِلْثُمِائَةُ مَسْجِدٍ” (Ibn Hawqal 1938, 120).

¹²⁴ *Balarm*, or بلرم in Arabic.

¹²⁵ Translation by William Granara (1983, 95).

وفيه مسجد الجامع الأكبر وكان بيعة للروم قبيل فتحها وفيه هيكل عظيم ويقول بعض المنطقيين أن حكيم يونان يعنى ارسطوطالس في خشبة معلق في هذا الهيكل الذي قد اتخذهُ المسلمون مسجداً وأن النصارى كانت تعظم قبره وتستشفى به لما شاهدت يونان عليه من إكباره وإعظامه قال والسبب في تعليقه بين السماء والأرض ما كان الناس يلاقونه عند الاستشفاء والاستشفاء والأمور المهمة التي توجب الفرعة الى الله تعالى والتقرب اليه في حين الشدة وخوف الهلكة وعند وطئ بعضهم لبعض وقد رأيت خشبة يوشك أن يكون هذا القبر فيها (Ibn Hawqal 1938, 118f).

Christianity, if we take Ibn Hawqal's word for it: the practice of praying to the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

Around a century after Ibn Hawqal, with Sicily now under Christian control, the *Siqilliyat* of Ibn Hamdis express the Muslim poet's longing for the island of his youth, before the Norman conquest:

I console my soul, since I see my land
Fighting a losing battle against a venomous enemy

What else, when she has been shamed, when the hands
of the Christians have turned her mosques into churches?

Whenever they wish, the monks strike, and the land fills—
morning and evening—with the sound of church bells.¹²⁶

Evocative twenty-first century echoes of these pre-modern 'conversions' – in part pragmatic ways of repurposing buildings, but which inevitably carry symbolic weight – can be perceived in the former Roman Catholic churches in Palermo that are now used for Islamic prayer, and in a former Roman Catholic chapel that is earmarked for future use by the city's Jewish community.

Palermo is far from the only city in which religious buildings have been repurposed in recent years for other religious groups. The 2020 conversion (or rather, reconversion) of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia into a mosque is another recent example, and a far more internationally prominent one.¹²⁷ But Palermo counts among those Mediterranean cities – like Istanbul in Turkey, Thessaloniki in Greece, Tripoli in Libya and Algiers in Algeria, to name a few – where the conversion of religious buildings plays an important role in recent architectural history, and where this practice carries meanings that are overtly or subtly political. It is worth emphasizing that these meanings are far from uniform, and it goes without saying that a converted religious building can symbolize different things to different people. The conversion of Tripoli Cathedral, built under Italian colonialism, into a mosque named after Gamal Abdel Nasser, carries an obvious anti-imperialist message. The reconversions of religious buildings with multiple former identities, such as the churches in Thessaloniki that became mosques in the Ottoman period, and have reverted to their original use since the 1923 population exchange, carry somewhat different meanings. As I will demonstrate, the examples in Palermo carry other valences still.

Whereas so far I have analyzed sites of memory that symbolize or evoke the history of a religious minority, this chapter asks how and to what extent Islamic places of worship, specifically those in former Christian buildings, symbolize Palermo's aspirational, cosmopolitan identity. Chapter Four will then ask similar questions of Palermo's hypothetical future synagogue, also planned to be housed in a deconsecrated church. What connections, if any, are drawn in Palermo between these modern conversions and the city's complicated religious history? How are these buildings invoked to support the idea that *convivenza* is an essential component of Palermitan

¹²⁶ Translation by Karla Mallette (2005, 135).

وعزيت فيها النفس لما رأيتها / تكابد داء قاتل السم ناحسا
وكيف وقد سيمت هواناً وصيرت / مساجدها أيدي النصارى كنانسا
إذا شاءت الرهبان بالضرب أنطقث / مع الصبح والإمساء فيها النواقسا
(Ibn Hamdis 1960, 274).

¹²⁷ The Hagia Sophia was originally a cathedral, then became a mosque in 1453, after Ottoman forces conquered the city then known as Constantinople. It became a museum in 1935, under the secularist rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

identity? I ask these questions using ethnographic methods – namely stakeholder interviews, and non-participant observation in cultural, religious, and history-related events – as well as by analyzing religious architecture and historical discourses in Palermo. I examine the affective power of historically-rooted *convivenza* narratives in Palermo, showing that the idea I call *Siqillismo* has important consequences for the contemporary city.

2. Two mosques in Palermo

As I have already mentioned, the cultural memory of Palermo as a city with multiple mosques is persistent. It is woven into the city's textural history by well-known medieval sources, as well as by subsequent writing that looks back at the Islamic Emirate as a foundational period for the island: Michele Amari's nineteenth-century study of the Muslims of Sicily, of course, but also twentieth- and twenty-first-century Sicilian literature, including the works of Leonardo Sciascia and Vincenzo Consolo.¹²⁸ Architectural traces of Islam *stricto sensu* from the Emirate period are limited, but the presence of the *Islamicate* is strong,¹²⁹ especially in Norman architecture that conveys a sense of having been influenced by Islamic styles. This is evident in 'Arab-Norman' sites like the Zisa, a palace built during Norman rule but with visible Islamic influences.¹³⁰

No Islamic places of worship remain in Palermo from the Emirate period, although some historians and archaeologists have argued that city's churches, including the Cathedral itself (Meli 1994) and the complex of San Giovanni degli Eremiti (Nef 2013, 168n75), were built on the site of former mosques and/or incorporate their remains. As Annaliese Nef notes, however, a "process of revision" has taken place with regard to some of the Christian buildings that are or were thought to have had Islamic origins (2013, 157n48). Disputes about the origins of such buildings are also significant outside the archaeological sphere. They implicitly revise, or at least qualify, an element of Palermo's cosmopolitan self-identity, as a city that owes some of its present character to Islamic influences.

What is certain is that there are over a dozen Islamic places of worship in contemporary Palermo. I will call these mosques for the sake of brevity, although not all of them are *masajid*,¹³¹ or permanent mosques. In the words of the Italian sociologist Stefano Allievi, "Islam in Sicily today inhabits other, more modest seats," in comparison to its illustrious medieval past.¹³² Some of these spaces are better categorized as *musallayat*, that is, informal prayer halls.¹³³ These are common in many Italian cities, not least due to practical and legal obstacles to the construction of

¹²⁸ On Consolo, see the Introduction to Part One; on Sciascia, see Salvatore Pappalardo (2018).

¹²⁹ Marshall Hodgson developed the term 'Islamicate' to describe that which does not necessarily pertain to Islam "in the proper, the religious sense," but rather, to the "social complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims" (Hodgson 1974, 59). The use of this term to describe art and literature, for example, produced in a Muslim-majority context, has been criticized for its false "assumption of the religion/culture divide" (Ahmed 2016, 201). Nonetheless, I contend that it remains useful in the context in which I am using it, that is, to describe culture produced in non-Muslim-majority societies – such as Sicilian palaces commissioned by Christian kings – which incorporate features inspired by or commonly perceived as 'Islamic-esque.' Used in this way, *Islamicate* most closely reflects 'Italianate,' the pre-existing term that inspired Hodgson to coin *Islamicate*. *Italianate* refers to architecture "in the Italian style," regardless of where or by whom it was produced (Hodgson 1974, 59).

¹³⁰ The Zisa (from the Arabic *العزيز*, *al-Aziz*, or "the almighty") is located in the 'Genoard' park, from the Arabic *jannat al-ard* (جنة الأرض), meaning "earthly paradise."

¹³¹ مساجد.

¹³² "L'islam di Sicilia, oggi, abita in altre, più modeste sedi" (Allievi 2003, 23).

¹³³ مُصَلَّيَات

permanent, purpose-built mosques in Italy.¹³⁴ The “current of Islamophobia within the Italian media and public opinion” (Burdett 2016, 94), and within mainstream politics, is perceptible in hostility towards the building of mosques (98), exacerbating these already-significant barriers.

In an April 2022 conversation with A., an Imam in Palermo, he counted a dozen mosques in the city, but said there could be a few more, especially outside the center. It is difficult to establish with certainty how many mosques are currently operating in Palermo. Not all are visible or well-known outside their immediate vicinity, and some are temporary or precarious. This is not unusual in Italy, nor is it uncommon elsewhere in Europe (Allievi 2010, 20).

Although Sicily does not have Italy’s largest Muslim population by percentage, it is important for the modern history of Islam in Italy. Generally speaking, southern Italy has more mosques per Muslim resident than northern Italy, with the region of Sicily ranking second only to Calabria by this measure (Bombardieri 2011, 58). This in itself is symbolic: for some Sicilians, it bolsters a self-image that southern Italy is more ‘open’ to granting freedom of religious worship to its Muslim population, in comparison with the ‘closed’ North. Some of the barriers to mosque construction in Italy are nationwide, but it is also true that regions are given flexibility to determine their own approach, and that certain regions, many in the North, have sought to impose additional legal restrictions.¹³⁵

The first modern purpose-built mosque in Italy, the Moschea di Omar, was completed in 1980 in Catania, Sicily’s second-largest city (Bombardieri 2011, 98). It has visibly Islamic design features – round arches, and window niches filled with geometric patterns – and was designed by an Egyptian architect and funded by the Libyan state. This project was led by a non-Muslim, a Sicilian lawyer, Michele Papa, who took the eccentric step, “probably unique in the world,”¹³⁶ of having his name placed in a Latin inscription on the mosque’s exterior: “Michele Papa Aedificavit 1980.”¹³⁷ The mosque is no longer in use (Allievi 2003, 22), and Catania now has other spaces for Muslim worship, but the building remains as a visible reminder.

As well as having been the center of Islam in the Italian peninsula in the medieval period, some Sicilian cities were also early, relatively speaking, to make a few pragmatic adaptations to the city’s religious architectural landscape in the late twentieth century, when few other Italian cities had done so. In Palermo, the focus of my research, Islam is once again a visible presence; its first official mosque in modern times was inaugurated in 1990. In comparison, the enormous Mosque of Rome was not opened until 1995.

Of Palermo’s mosques, two stand out as especially resonant, in symbolic terms, of Palermo’s cosmopolitan self-image: as a city with a religious architecture that is ‘fluid,’ that is, changeable in accordance with its population’s demographic composition. This chapter focuses on two mosques, both situated in buildings that were formerly churches, and asks how they fit within a metanarrative of Palermo as a site of religious ‘conversions,’ architecturally speaking. I first discuss the Gran Cancelliere Mosque, which has operated as such since 1990, and then the nearby Al-Falah Mosque, which Muslims began to use as a place of worship in 2011.

¹³⁴ See e.g. the *Patto nazionale* (Consiglio per l’islam italiano 2017, 69–71) for a summary of some legislative barriers to mosque construction, exacerbated by the absence of an *intesa*, or agreement, between the Italian state and any Muslim organization. Islam is by far the largest religion in Italy without an *intesa*, which, as set out in the Constitution (Art. 8.3) forms the basis of non-Roman-Catholic religions’ relationships with the Italian state.

¹³⁵ See e.g. *Legge Regionale (Lombardia) 2/2015* (3 February 2015). In this case, the restrictions did not single out Islam by name, but had the *de facto* effect of specifically curtailing mosques. Particular provisions in this regional law were later declared unconstitutional: see *Sentenza* (“Sentence”) N. 63 (24 March 2016).

¹³⁶ “Caso probabilmente unico al mondo” (Allievi 2003, 24).

¹³⁷ “Built by Michele Papa 1980.”

3. The Mosque of Palermo, or the Gran Cancelliere Mosque

The Mosque of Palermo,¹³⁸ inaugurated in 1990, is an early example of a permanent mosque in Italy. It is the most visible and well known among the city's non-Muslim population, although as Stefano Allievi notes, this does not necessarily mean it is the most important for the city's Muslims: "this goes for all the big Italian cities, where because of a lack of competence or simple laziness, Islam continues to be identified with the 'oldest' settlement, even if sometimes it is not the main one numerically."¹³⁹

The early phase of Islam's architectural establishment in modern Italy was in part driven by what some Italian sociologists call *l'Islam degli stati*, that is, "the Islam of nation states" (see e.g. Guolo 2003, 21). Alongside the more famous Mosque of Rome, largely funded by Saudi Arabia, but with an important Moroccan influence, the Mosque of Palermo is used as a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. Renzo Guolo wrote in 2003 that "the Tunisian state, by agreement with the Region of Sicily, *directly controls* the city's mosque."¹⁴⁰

This is itself important for how the Mosque of Palermo is perceived in Palermo. Allievi calls the 'Islam of nation states' a form of "state-diplomatic" Islam,¹⁴¹ implying a distinction between 'spiritual' and 'political' manifestations of the religion.¹⁴² How one interprets the Mosque of Palermo is indeed dependent on one's attitude towards Mediterranean geopolitics. Eight years before the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, Allievi argued that Ben Ali's regime was not interested in providing religious resources for Tunisians in Sicily as a representative of a "moderate Islam," as it was convenient for Western politicians to claim.¹⁴³ He calls the genesis of Palermo's central mosque a product of "exchanges of favors between the powerful and those who aspire to be powerful: *who naturally have nothing to do with Islam*."¹⁴⁴ Allievi's skepticism towards the spiritual value of the 'Islam of nation states' leads him to conclude that Ben Ali's regime was more interested in surveilling its observant Muslim population, perceived by that regime as an existential threat, than in their spiritual cultivation.

The 2011 Tunisian Revolution saw the end of the Ben Ali regime, but the Mosque of Palermo remains under the control of the Tunisian Consulate.¹⁴⁵ Although maintaining the mosque furthers Tunisia's diplomatic interests abroad, some of my interviewees were less critical than Allievi, viewing the Mosque of Palermo as the pragmatic result of a close, transnational relationship across the Mediterranean, that is, as a diplomatic success story. Palermo's growing Maghrebi population needed somewhere to worship, and Sicily – unlike many other Italian regions, and unlike the Italian state more generally – collaborated with Tunisia to make it happen. Just as Naor Ben-Yehoyada notes with regard to the Transmed pipeline running from Algeria,

¹³⁸ مسجد باليرمو, or *masjid balermo*.

¹³⁹ "Una storia che vale per tutte le grandi città italiane, dove per incapacità o semplice pigrizia si continua a identificare l'islam con la moschea di più 'antico' insediamento, anche se talvolta non è nemmeno numericamente la principale" (Allievi 2003, 26).

¹⁴⁰ "Lo stato tunisino, per effetto di un accordo con la Regione Sicilia, *gestisce direttamente* la moschea cittadina" (Guolo 2003, 21, own emphasis).

¹⁴¹ "Diplomatico-statuale" (Allievi 2003, 79).

¹⁴² The anthropologist Hussein Agrama explains why this is often a false dichotomy, drawn (and constantly redrawn and reinforced) by what he calls the "problem space" of secularism (2012).

¹⁴³ "Islam moderato" (Allievi 2003, 17).

¹⁴⁴ "Scambi di favori tra potenti e aspiranti tali: che nulla, naturalmente, hanno a che fare con l'islam" (Allievi 2003, 238).

¹⁴⁵ "Questa moschea è sotto controllo del consolato tunisino a Palermo" (in Friscia et al. 2016).

through Tunisia, to Sicily, transnational ‘collaborations’ such as these play a role in the “segmentary process of region formation in the central Mediterranean” (2017, 149).

If the Tunisian state contributed funding and governance, then the local government in Palermo provided the building itself. The former church of San Paolo dei Giardinieri was damaged by heavy bombing in the Second World War, and the church disposed of it thereafter, allowing the building to come into the hands of the *comune*, that is, the municipality. The municipality then renovated the building, and then “contracted” it, as Allievi puts it, to the Tunisian government.¹⁴⁶ The Mosque is in a former church, but the Roman Catholic Church by that point had no legal say in the building’s fate.

The Mosque of Palermo is on Piazza del Gran Cancelliere, in the central Monte di Pietà (or Il Capo) quarter of the city. When I approached it from Via del Celso in October 2021, there was little that indicated its current use. Its facade is typical of the late Sicilian Baroque, in its gradual transition towards the neo-classical (Blunt 1968, 44). Only when I turned the corner, to observe it from the *piazza*, could I see an immediate sign that this is *not* a church: a plaque above the front door that reads “MOSCHEA” (mosque, in Italian), and above it, “Palermo Mosque” in Arabic. Above this are the words God and Muhammad, also in Arabic, alongside a silhouette of an Ottoman-style mosque with four minarets: architectural features that are absent from the Mosque of Palermo itself.

In terms of aesthetics, there is a marked inside/outside division in the Mosque of Palermo. While the outside remains strongly reminiscent of a Roman Catholic church, save for the plaque above the door (and a makeshift cover over the tympanum, presumably to hide overtly Christian imagery), the interior has been Islamicized to a greater extent. Everything about the interior walls reminds us that we are in a former church, but a number of creative adaptations have been made that recognize the building’s new vocation. Plain coverings have been cut to size to cover Christian iconography, and these are decorated artfully with deep green Qur’anic calligraphy. This calligraphy is the dominant aesthetic theme of the Mosque’s interior, and is repeated on the *mihrab*. The *mihrab* has a pointed arch, with a chandelier hanging from it, and has been installed within what was previously the sanctuary. It is angled to indicate the *qibla*, the direction of Mecca. Similarly, the floor, which is entirely covered in large rugs, contains markings in tape to indicate the direction of prayer. The interior also contains a wooden *minbar* from which sermons are delivered; a small bookcase of religious literature; clocks that indicate the times for prayer; and towards the back of the building, a small cloth-covered corner for women’s prayer. In summary, the interior is itself palimpsestic. A prominent Islamic layer has been written onto a formerly Christian structure: a modern-day echo of the example Ibn Hawqal described in tenth-century Palermo, of the mosque in a former cathedral.

When I interview B., an Imam, we speak about the hybrid styles on display in the Mosque. “You can see very clearly that it’s a deconsecrated church,” he tells me. “We haven’t changed anything, really. Of course, we’ve covered the Christian religious art with boards, but otherwise, it’s obviously the same building. Where the altar was, it’s now clear that we’re facing Mecca, but really, we’ve done the minimum that is necessary.”

“The official name is simply the *Moschea di Palermo*, the Mosque of Palermo. There are people who call it the *moschea tunisina* colloquially, but that’s not accurate, it was a donation to the Muslim community [...]. Back in the 1990s, the Muslim community was largely from the Maghreb, although even then it wasn’t exclusively Maghrebi.” In recent years, approximately half

¹⁴⁶ “Di fatto, la moschea è stata data ‘in appalto’ al governo tunisino, anche se formalmente è gestita da un’associazione interetnica” (Allievi 2003, 24).

of the congregation, like the Imam himself, has Maghrebi origins; there are also a number of South Asians who also worship there, among others (see e.g. Friscia et al. 2016).

“We have chosen to live in Italy,” the Imam adds, “so we do everything in Italian here.” The language of Friday sermons has become a topic of public discourse in Italy in recent years. In the 2017 *Pact for an Italian Islam*, signed by representatives of many of Italy’s largest Muslim organizations, religious leaders undertake to make “concrete efforts to guarantee that Friday sermons are delivered in or translated into Italian.”¹⁴⁷ The implication is that too many mosques have historically been clandestine or “semi-closed.”¹⁴⁸ Conversely, operating in Italian makes their work ‘legible’ to the non-Muslim public, and of course, to the state. “We want to be ambassadors for Islam, and ambassadors for foreigners in general,” the Imam emphasizes.

The Imam views the Mosque’s arrangement with the Tunisian state as a positive thing: “they pay for the electricity, and they pay for the water [...]. There are *musallayat* in Palermo who don’t have this kind of relationship, because after months of closure because of COVID [lockdowns], they found it hard to open up again, because nobody was paying the bills, paying the rent, they couldn’t get hold of enough money [from their congregations].” He thus describes the relationship, which is made possible by diplomatic relations, as a practical and a pragmatic one.

The Imam tells me that he sees the diversity within the mosque’s congregation, and within Palermitan Islam more generally, as a continuation of the city’s historic cosmopolitanism. “I get invited to speak in schools, but I prefer to take them on a tour of the area. I go to buildings like the Cathedral, and show them the Arabic influences, and the influences from all the other cultures [that have lived in Palermo].” It is not by chance that the Imam chooses the Cathedral as a point of comparison. Given the widespread belief that it is on the same site as a former mosque, the Cathedral serves as a mirror image of the Mosque of Palermo, albeit that the Mosque’s previous life as a church is far more readily apparent. “Then we come back here [to the Mosque] and talk about it. It’s important that they learn about their own culture, that there were many mosques in the city before.” Drawing these affinities, therefore, enables the Imam to claim the Mosque as part of the city’s social and historical fabric; he himself uses the word *integrazione*, ‘integration,’ a number of times in our conversation.

The Imam even draws explicit connections between the Emirate of Sicily and al-Andalus: “Sicily is more or less the same as Spain,” he argues. This parallel is a way of illustrating Sicily to me, a non-Sicilian, comparing it with an example he knows is much more internationally famous. “The culture of Palermo is very rich, too [...] there were so many mosques, but they all disappeared. They were converted into churches, or some of them were built over, and became *palazzi* [...]” The memory of Palermo as Ibn Hawqal’s city of “three-hundred mosques,” therefore, can be used to assert the city’s Islamic inheritance in a relatively general way, despite the lack of visible and verifiable examples of mosques-turned-*palazzi*.

The Imam’s glance backwards contains an echo of Ibn Hamdis’ medieval nostalgic lament for the Sicily of his youth, before the Norman conquest, but with a crucial difference. Ibn Hamdis’ *Siqilliya* is lost, and he knows it; his only option is to desire it from afar. The Imam, on the other hand, tells me that “now we’re part of this history.” The Mosque, he implies, is carrying on a time-honored tradition: both an Islamic tradition with medieval roots in Sicily, but also a Palermitan tradition of making pragmatic adaptations to the comings and goings of the city’s religious communities.

¹⁴⁷ “Adoperarsi concretamente affinché il sermone del venerdì sia svolto o tradotto in italiano” (Consiglio per l’islam italiano 2017, 20, undertaking no. 8)

¹⁴⁸ “Semi-chiuse” (Consiglio per l’islam italiano 2017, 60).

4. The Al-Falah Mosque

The Mosque of Palermo in Piazza del Gran Cancelliere is perhaps the city's most widely known. If you ask a non-Muslim in Palermo where 'the mosque' is, they will probably direct you there. There is another mosque in the same quarter, however, less than ten minutes' walk away, and it too is in a former church.

The Al-Falah Mosque,¹⁴⁹ on Via Sant'Agostino, inhabits the former Chiesa del Santissimo Crocefisso di Lucca, built at the end of the sixteenth century (Piola 1870, 38). It had long been deconsecrated before the area's Bengali Muslim community began to use it (*La Repubblica* 2011). It was in private hands, rather than being Church-owned, and had been used for commercial purposes for over half a century, most recently, until 2011, as a Chinese grocery store. In 2011, the building's ultimate owners agreed to rent it out to an Islamic cultural association,¹⁵⁰ and by 2012, the building, which has been subdivided into a number of rooms, was in part being used as a mosque, but in part as a fruit and vegetable warehouse and a second-hand clothing store (Rotolo 2012).

A year after it was converted into a mosque, the building's ultimate owners, an octogenarian Italian couple, were accused of "violating urban planning regulations and the cultural heritage code," and the building was temporarily seized by the brigade of the city's Artistic Heritage Protection Unit.¹⁵¹ Something similar had happened in 2004, before its use as a mosque. The state's concerns about the building's dilapidation, and about potential breaches of planning law, predate its association with the Muslim community, although it is at least possible that its new use had prompted a reassessment of the situation. In spite of this turbulent legal history, the space is now established as a mosque. It has been used for this purpose for over a decade, with the exception of a brief period of legal hiatus and the recent COVID-19 lockdowns.

The Al-Falah Mosque is different in many respects from the Gran Cancelliere Mosque. During the daytime, there is a near-constant flow of activity in and around the Al-Falah Mosque, which almost always has a door open or ajar, and hosts the five daily prayers that are obligatory in Islam. The Gran Cancelliere Mosque, in contrast, operates to a schedule that has long been unpredictable, some Muslims in Palermo told me, even prior to the pandemic.¹⁵² The gate outside it is sometimes locked, and it is not uniformly open for all five prayers every day.

For the most part, the Gran Cancelliere Mosque is freshly painted, tidy, and well-suited as the 'public face' of Islam in Palermo. Interreligious dialogue events, which host politicians and leaders from other faiths, are often held there. It is, however, significantly smaller than the Al-Falah Mosque, which has room for more worshippers during religious festivals and Friday noon prayers, which attract a larger congregation. Indeed, the Al-Falah Mosque is described as a *jame* mosque, that is, a 'Friday' or 'congregational' mosque, capable of hosting Friday noon prayers.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ مسجد الفلاح – Mosque of Salvation.

¹⁵⁰ Many *de facto* mosques in Italy are formally run by "cultural associations," in part because of the scarcity of legal entities (i.e. organizations) with explicitly religious purposes that are recognized as such by the Italian state (Consiglio per l'islam italiano 2017, 54).

¹⁵¹ "Ieri pomeriggio, i vigili del Nucleo Tutela patrimonio artistico su disposizione del neo-comandante Vincenzo Messina hanno sequestrato il complesso cinquecentesco" (Rotolo 2012).

¹⁵² They emphasized this because the pandemic is often invoked, in Sicily as elsewhere, as an explanation for operating on a limited schedule.

¹⁵³ *Jame* (جامع) comes from the Arabic root meaning 'to bring together,' as does Friday, *jumu'ah* (جُمُعَة) 'the day of congregation.'

The disparity in funding between the Al-Falah Mosque and the Gran Cancelliere Mosque is immediately apparent. The Al-Falah Mosque is in some ways ‘skeletal,’ and bears signs not only of its original use as a church, as the Gran Cancelliere Mosque does, but also, of its dilapidation. It is evident that the building was recently used as a warehouse and grocery store, which primarily served the neighborhood’s immigrant communities. The decorations and the copious natural light that characterize the interior of the Gran Cancelliere Mosque are by and large absent in the Al-Falah Mosque; the walls show signs of damp. “There’s enough money for basic upkeep,” a worshiper tells me, “but not enough to improve the space.”

Ethnographic studies of Muslims in Italy frequently give voice to frustrations about their places of worship.¹⁵⁴ On one of my visits to the Al-Falah Mosque, A. – an Imam, and an Italian who has converted to Islam – pulls up two plastic chairs in the corner of the room, and we talk for a while. He tells me that this was “one of the better-equipped mosques in Palermo,” and that some of them are “*poco dignitosi*,” that is, undignified, and ill-suited to worship.¹⁵⁵ “It would be wonderful to modernize this building, so we could hold educational events here too,” the Imam says, “but Muslims don’t have an *intesa* [agreement] with the state, so we don’t have access to the tax funds that other religions do.”

Although some in its congregation would appreciate funding to refurbish the Al-Falah Mosque, it is nonetheless an eminently practical space. It is on a road with a lot of pedestrian traffic, opposite a small market with a number of stalls run and frequented by Bengalis, many of whom are observant Muslims. It has a small room to the right of the entrance corridor, in which, on some of my visits during the month of Ramadan, volunteers were cooking typically Bengali *iftar* meals that included rice, vegetables and *daal* on a gas stove, in preparation for the faithful to break their fasts after sundown. In short, it serves its intended purpose well.

Unlike the Gran Cancelliere Mosque, the Al-Falah Mosque has a majority-Bengali congregation, and is run by a predominantly Bengali association. Because Bengalis now make up a significant percentage of Palermo’s Muslim population – whereas in 1990, when the Gran Cancelliere Mosque was inaugurated, Islam in the city was more of a ‘Mediterranean’ (i.e. Maghrebi) presence – a number of the city’s mosques are run by Bengalis, and have signs in Bengali, sometimes alongside Italian and/or Arabic. The historically Maghrebi-majority Gran Cancelliere Mosque, the result of close geopolitical ties between Sicily and Tunisia, might fit neatly into a schema of Mediterranean interrelatedness, but the Al-Falah Mosque demonstrates that not all of the city’s Muslim places of worship can be so straightforwardly characterized in this way.

“We are a population of migrants,” the Imam tells me, “and we have tolerance in our DNA, in part because of our history.” He insists that this history has an important impact on the way Muslims experience the city today, regardless of their origins. “The Bengalis might not know the

¹⁵⁴ In an ethnographic study of young Muslims in Italy, an interviewee in Turin observes: “If I am religious and want to practise, I can’t. Italian mosques are the ugliest places in the world [...] If you have to go to the mosque, you suffer because it’s hot and smelly with people shamefully packed together [interviewee sighs]” (Mezzetti and Ricucci 2019, 414). Another, from Milan, laments: “Muslim places of worship in Milan are horrible. It makes me sad. And I can’t understand why there can’t be a real mosque, from the architectonic point of view, instead of a warehouse” (415).

¹⁵⁵ What Mayanthi Fernando terms the “trope of dignity” – an Islamophobic misconception that mosques are inherently dirty or disorderly (Fernando 2014, 121) – is also used by some right-wing Italian politicians in attempts to restrict religious practice. The Mayor of Monfalcone in the northern Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, for example, invoked urban planning regulations and safety concerns as pretexts for banning prayers in the town’s Islamic cultural centers (Giufrida 2024). It is possible, of course, for Muslims in Italy to object to the many obstacles in the way of providing adequate prayer spaces, and at the same time, for Islamophobic politicians to exploit these very same obstacles in attempts to curtail worship further still.

details of this history” – to which I would add, neither do all of the Tunisians or Italians in Palermo – “but nonetheless, we all benefit from the fact that we have the opposite here of the social distance [between cultures and religions] that exists further north.” We had already touched on the architecture of the Mosque in our conversation. The Imam argues that “some of the mosques in the North are nicer, more dignified, and better equipped, but they don’t have the tolerance that we have.” This tolerance is not just of cultural diversity, he insists, but specifically of religious diversity, too: “there is a lived spirituality that is inherent to Palermo.”

The Imam illustrates a number of his arguments with references to early Islamic history. He tells me the story of the First Hijra, in which the Sahabah, followers of the prophet Muhammad, were persecuted by the Quraysh, who ruled Mecca, and fled to the Kingdom of Aksum (in present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea). “When the Christian King of Aksum asked the new arrivals about their religion, he saw that the Qur’an came from the same light as Jesus’ gospel, and he gave the Muslims refuge. And Palermo experienced something very similar later on, under the Normans.”

Under Muslim and early Norman rule, the Imam jokes, “there was *jami*’ on Fridays, then *shabbat* on Saturdays, and then the church bells rang on Sundays, so you wonder when anybody got any work done!” This light-hearted aphorism relies on at least three commonly-held stereotypes about Sicilians: that they have a propensity for religiosity; that they are cosmopolitan; and that they have a relaxed attitude towards work. On a more serious note, the Imam tells me that “Islam left traces in Sicily that have never been erased.”¹⁵⁶ Even though the Muslims were eventually expelled, “the fire was never quite extinguished. You can see it in the Christian architecture, which contains Islamic traces too.”

There are indeed Islamic influences on Norman Christian architecture: the Palatine Chapel is often cited as a famous example. Whether these represent “part of the indigenous culture of Islamic Sicily that the Normans had appropriated” (Johns 2015, 65) however, or whether they are instead newer imports from elsewhere in the Islamic Mediterranean, as Jeremy Johns argues, is disputed. It is not always clear, in other words, whether these can strictly be called ‘traces’ in the strict sense of ‘remnants.’ Nonetheless, however complicated or contested these might be from a philological perspective, it is not uncommon to find various facets of Sicilian culture – from common surnames to folk stories (Pappalardo 2018) – attributed to the persistence of pre-Norman Islamic influences.

“There used to be a strong sense of Abrahamic unity in Palermo,” the Imam tells me, “and that’s what we’re working towards again today. Palermo is the only city in Italy where the religious groups worked together to make sure vulnerable people were fed during the [COVID-19] pandemic. There is a certain openness, you see it in the Christians, in the Archbishop [Corrado Lorefice], in the Mayor [Orlando], and in the late Evelyne Aouate [who was instrumental in the city’s Jewish community].”

“In [Muslim-controlled] *balarm*,”¹⁵⁷ the Imam continues, “Ibn Hawqal described three hundred mosques. And before that, those buildings were three hundred Byzantine churches, which became three hundred mosques, which then became three hundred Catholic churches. But on the same ground, and in the same city.” He therefore positions the congregation of the Al-Falah

¹⁵⁶ As far as Italy’s relationship with the Mediterranean is concerned, the rhetoric of “un-erased traces” has a long and interesting genealogy. This twenty-first-century celebration of Sicily’s un-erased Islamic traces has its near-mirror image in a famous justification for Italy’s colonial expansion in Libya: the argument, equating contemporary Italians with Ancient Romans: “we have already been there; we left traces there that not even the Berbers, the Bedouins and the Turks succeeded in erasing; signs of our humanity and civilization” (“ci fummo già; vi lasciammo segni che nemmeno i Berberi, i Beduini e i Turchi riuscirono a cancellare; segni della nostra umanità e civiltà” (Pascoli 1911)).

¹⁵⁷ The Arabic name for Palermo.

Mosque, and the Muslim community more generally, as modern stewards of this dynamic heritage, or *patrimonio*, with the implication of ancestry that this word carries: both the history of ‘tolerance’ that he and others argue is central to the city’s identity, and the composite layering of religious practices and architectures in the city over time, with the most recent layer never quite covering those layers that came before it. This heritage is not a static thing that can be ‘preserved’ – like the Christian architecture of this former church building, which state officials had previously sought to maintain – but is something closer to an attitude or a disposition, which can wax or wane over time.

5. Conclusion

Italy is not excluded from the Europe-wide reality of Islamophobia, and neither is Sicily. Islam in Europe – and not just in Europe – is often viewed through the lens of a “national security paradigm” (Agrama 2012, ix). Hegemonic European political culture approaches Muslims not first and foremost as heirs to a rich medieval tradition in the Mediterranean, to which European modernity is in some sense ‘indebted’ (Mallette 2010, 98), but as at least potential threats. They are seldom perceived as “the standard-bearers of a splendid civilization as occurred to an extent in Sicily and more still in Arab Spain.”¹⁵⁸

My research does not enable me to assess quantitatively whether, as Allievi claimed in 2003 (18), and as some Sicilians still maintain, there is “less intolerance” towards Muslims in Sicily in comparison to northern Italy. In any event, Sicily is not immune to the global and European security paradigm. The conversion of the former church into the Al-Falah Mosque was reported in the Palermo edition of the liberal national paper, *La Repubblica*, alongside allegations that it might in some way be linked to Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist movement that operates, among other places, in Bangladesh.¹⁵⁹ In spite of the image cultivated both by Muslim leaders and other Palermitans who feel themselves to be cosmopolitan, therefore, mosques in Palermo, as a city near Europe’s southern border, are nonetheless subject to a public scrutiny that is characteristic of the suspicion directed towards Islamic places of worship elsewhere in Italy (see e.g. Saint-Blancat 2014) and Europe (see e.g. Fernando 2014).

The Muslim leaders I interviewed in Palermo insert contemporary Islam into the narrative of *Siqillismo*. They propose a continuity between Palermo’s past religious diversity and the present moment, positioning Sicily’s mosques as the latest developments in a city where religious architecture has always been in constant flux. It is also true, however, that an idea of Sicilian identity founded on its ‘Mediterranean’ history is more helpful for some of Palermo’s residents than for others. A Bengali or a Sub-Saharan African Muslim, for example, might benefit less than a North African from the idea that a shared Mediterranean history is a basis for kinship and coexistence. “Until you hear them speak, there is no way of telling whether someone in Palermo is Sicilian or Tunisian,” an interviewee in the Al-Falah Mosque told me, explaining the ‘Mediterranean’ culture that Christians and Muslims share in Sicily. This observation is only selectively true, and it is increasingly less true, as more immigrants from outside the immediate Mediterranean coastal area settle in Palermo.

In her ethnographic study of Palermo, Agatha Palma encounters a group of wealthy Sicilians who suggest that ‘Mediterraneans’ are “never Black,” in spite, as Palma rightly

¹⁵⁸ “[N]on [sono] gli alfieri di una splendida civiltà, come accaduto in parte in Sicilia e ancora più nella Spagna araba” (Allievi 2003, xix).

¹⁵⁹ *La Repubblica* (2011). The accusation of “fundamentalism” was vigorously denied by the Secretary of Al-Falah.

acknowledges, of “millennia of Black Africans in and along the Mediterranean” (2021, 142). I do not intend to extrapolate this into a general observation, but I do want to emphasize that a narrative of tolerance predicated on Mediterranean kinship alone – even one that extends this kinship beyond national or continental borders – cannot by itself redress uneven power relations within the Mediterranean. Neither can it reliably extend belonging to an imagined ‘Mediterranean’ community to those who are not perceived as normatively ‘Mediterranean.’ On the contrary, discourses of Mediterraneanism can also function to exclude, “despite their apparent promises of multiracial and multicultural conviviality” (Hawthorne 2022, 97). Mediterraneanism, of which *Siqillismo* is a localized and historically-inflected example, is no universalistic, cosmopolitan panacea.

Appeals to this sense of Mediterranean identity can nonetheless be effective, or at the very least, they are perceived to be effective, in helping some Muslims in twenty-first century Palermo to achieve certain priorities. As Herzfeld observes: “in the multiply refracted contest over the meaning of the past and its relics, situated actors adopt attitudes that will serve their interests best” (1991, 228). The Imam in the Gran Cancelliere Mosque uses Palermo’s history to include the city’s contemporary mosques in schoolchildren’s civic education, drawing attention to Islam’s contributions to the city’s *patrimonio*, or ancestral heritage. *Siqillismo* is therefore mobilized towards practical means, from within the religious communities upon which this identity narrative relies. The following chapter will show that this is also the case, albeit in different ways, for the nascent idea of (re)founding a synagogue in Palermo.

Chapter Four

Palermo's Once and Future Synagogue

The synagogue in Palermo has no equal in the country and among the nations, and [everybody] praises it. [...] They pray on Sabbaths and Holidays with pleasant voices and melodies. I have never seen anything like it among Jews anywhere.

Rabbi Obadiah da Bertinoro, 1487¹⁶⁰
Letter from Palermo

[T]oday, after many centuries, nothing has risen from the ruins of that civilization, of that life destroyed by violence, nothing has remained but a name and a stone: the name of a small street in the ancient Ghetto [sic]¹⁶¹ of Palermo, which is still called Vicolo della Meschita (that is how the Sicilian Jews used to call their temples) and the stone that tells the outsider entering the church of Saint Nicolò in Via Maqueda [sic] in Palermo how a part of it was once the major Synagogue of the Jews of all Sicily, the center of religious life for those people, who after many centuries of struggle and of work had to be expelled. A name and a stone, which are the monument to the history of those people who once struggled and suffered in Sicily!

Quinto Senigallia, 1906¹⁶²
“The Condition of the Jews in Sicily”

1. Introduction

In Chapters One and Two, I showed that sites connected with Jewish history in Palermo have taken on new meanings as sites of memory in the twenty-first century. Pierre Nora sees a correlation between the development of sites of memory and the disappearance of *milieux de mémoire*, that is, “real environments of memory” (1989). Similarly, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls heritage “the transvaluation of [...] the dead,” arguing that “exhibition endows heritage thus conceived with a second life” (1995, 369). Palermo’s Jewish community is alive, however. Although it is very small, a tiny fraction of its medieval peak, its existence is itself significant. This community is engaged in ambitious plans to found a synagogue in the city. It would not quite be the first in half

¹⁶⁰ English translation by Shlomo Simonsohn (2011, 252).

¹⁶¹ As I emphasize in Chapter One, ‘Ghetto’ is not an entirely accurate way to describe the medieval *giudecche* of southern Italy, which predate the advent of the *Ghetto* proper. The street name has now been standardized as Via Maqueda.

¹⁶² “E ancor oggi, dopo tanti secoli, niente è risorto dalle rovine di quella civiltà, di quella vita distrutta colla violenza, niente è rimasto fuor che un nome ed una pietra: Il nome di una piccola via dell’antico Ghetto di Palermo che ancora si chiama Vicolo della Meschita (così gli Ebrei Siciliani avevan detto i loro templi) e la pietra che al forestiero che entra nella chiesa di S. Nicolò nella via Maqueda in Palermo, dice come un giorno una parte di essa fosse la Sinagoga principale degli Ebrei di tutta la Sicilia, il centro della vita religiosa di quel popolo che dopo tanti secoli di lotta e di lavoro ne doveva esser cacciato. Un nome ed una pietra che sono il monumento della storia di quella gente che un giorno ha nella Sicilia lottato e sofferto!” (Senigallia 1906, 102).

a millennium,¹⁶³ but if completed, it will be the first permanent synagogue in Palermo since the fifteenth century.

The disused Oratorio di Santa Maria del Sabato is located in Palermo's historic Jewish quarter, the *Meschita* introduced in Chapter One. It marks the point at which "Vicolo Meschita," a narrow alleyway (in fact, an archway underneath a building), opens up into Via Meschita proper. On 12 January 2017, the Archbishop of Palermo Corrado Lorefice gave this deconsecrated oratory *in commodatum*¹⁶⁴ to the Neapolitan branch of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI), to which the recently-formed Palermo "section" of the UCEI belongs.¹⁶⁵ There are hopes that the building may in future house a synagogue, as well as becoming a point of reference for the work of the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies.¹⁶⁶

2. An exceptional case

"To my knowledge, there is no other example of the Roman Catholic Church donating a religious building to a Jewish community," says G., a Jewish resident of Palermo. She believes that the Archbishop viewed the donation as a gesture of reparation: "the Church had the Jews expelled from Sicily, and now it is donating the church as an act of repentance. And that is unique to Palermo, it's a clear signal."¹⁶⁷ This echoed conversations I had had about the former oratory with other members of the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies, in which the word "reparation" had been used a number of times.

The donation of the former oratory is not the only instance in Italy in which the Church has publicly acknowledged its historic role in the persecution of Jews. Michael Herzfeld, for example, in his study of the Monti neighborhood in Rome, describes what he interpreted as a "genuinely moving ceremony of recognition for a local church's role in the forced conversion of Roman Jews" (2009, 58). If the Jewish community in Palermo succeeds in converting the building into a synagogue, it will also not be the first synagogue in Italy to have previously been used as a church. The Scolanova Synagogue in Trani, for example, spent a number of centuries as a church, following the expulsion of Apulia's Jewish communities. However, Trani's synagogue was given (back) to a Jewish group by the local government, not by the Church, which had not owned the deconsecrated building for some time. The same is true of Palermo's two mosques in former churches, discussed in Chapter Three, neither of which were in the possession of the Church immediately before they became mosques.

What has taken place in Palermo is, if not unique, then an extraordinary transaction in real estate between the Church and a Jewish organization. The involvement of Christians and Jews in this project makes it a potential site of what Erica Lehrer calls "conciliatory heritage" (2010), that is, an opportunity to use a newly-redefined Jewish space as a way of engaging in "the face-to-face

¹⁶³ During the Second World War, Jewish American soldiers stationed in Sicily established a temporary synagogue in Via Pilo, 22 (Vincenti 2002, 277).

¹⁶⁴ D'Agostino (2018). In some civil law systems, including Italy's, the phrase *in commodatum*, or *in comodato* in Italian, refers to a long-term gratuitous loan.

¹⁶⁵ Although there is no official Jewish 'community' of the UCEI south of Naples, a community can contain local 'sections' within it, as is the case for Palermo.

¹⁶⁶ D'Agostino (2017). The Palermo section is "dependent" on the Jewish community of Naples, which remains the southernmost branch of the UCEI. Palermo does not officially constitute a Jewish 'community' in and of itself, because it does not have a *minyan*, that is, a congregation of ten adult Jewish men.

¹⁶⁷ As previously noted, the former oratory has not been "donated" *per se*, but rather, given *in comodato*. This is more akin to a long-term gratuitous lease, but for simplicity's sake, I use "donation" as a shorthand to describe this transaction.

encounter that has traditionally grounded the ethical” (Lehrer 2010, citing Rothberg 2000, 271). It is rare, furthermore, because unlike many acknowledgments or apologies for the Church’s historic persecution of Jews, the donation appears intended to bear at least some of the characteristics of a “reparation,” although the Church does not officially describe it in this way.

The anthropologist Susan Slyomovics writes that “the reach of reparations as a remedy encompasses restitution, compensation or indemnity, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition” (2014, 21f). It is not my place to comment on whether these criteria are fulfilled in the case of the Church’s donation. It was evidently the Archbishop’s intention, however, to demonstrate with this donation that his Archdiocese, along with the Church more generally, had entered a new phase in its relationship with Judaism.

When I interviewed the Archbishop, he told me that as a result of his dialogue with the Jewish community in Palermo, and particularly his friendship with the late Evelyne Aouate, who until her death in March 2022 was the most active figure in this community: “I asked myself about the presence of Jews in the past. We know that in 1493, under the Kingdom of Spain, our Jewish brothers were chased away from Palermo too.”¹⁶⁸ When I asked him specifically about the gift of the former oratory, he told me that:

I embraced it as a precious thing, which could also allow this city to become a signal, particularly for the Church of Palermo, a signal of dialogue, a signal of openness and of acknowledgement of this presence, *beyond the fact that I too had the memory that in 1493, in any case, the Christians chased away [...] the Christians were also a cause of suffering for all our Jewish brothers.* [...] And so from my perspective too, this could also be an opportunity, on the other hand, to express, to acknowledge, to respect, and above all, to encapsulate how we Christians are obliged to revisit how we relate with others.¹⁶⁹

There is a direct nexus, therefore, between the historic persecution of Palermo’s Jews, including by the Church itself, and the act of donating the oratory to the present Jewish community in the city. It is the former that necessitated the latter. Specifically, as the words of the Archbishop make clear, it is the *memory* of the former – the return of this memory into the cultural consciousness of some of the city’s inhabitants, due in no small part to Evelyne Aouate’s work towards reviving an interest in Palermo’s Jewish history – that drove this introspection, and hence this attempt at reconciliation.

The date chosen for the act of donation itself, 12 January 2017, was not entirely by chance either. On the contrary, it was chosen to accentuate the symbolic significance of the event: to emphasize its link to the expulsion of Palermo’s historic Jewish community. In a 2018 recording, Evelyne Aouate explained that 12 January 1493, that is, precisely 524 years prior to the donation

¹⁶⁸ “Mi sono fatto interpellare su quella che è stata la presenza degli ebrei nel passato. Noi sappiamo che nel 1493, come accadeva appunto nel Regno di Spagna, furono cacciati via anche da Palermo i nostri fratelli ebrei” (interview with author, Archdiocese of Palermo, 26 April 2022).

¹⁶⁹ “Io accolse come un elemento prezioso che potesse anche permettere a questa città di diventare un segno, soprattutto alla Chiesa di Palermo, un segno di dialogo, un segno di apertura, di riconoscimento anche, di questa presenza, oltre al fatto che anch’io ho avuto la memoria che nel 1493 comunque i cristiani hanno cacciato [...] i cristiani sono stati anche per tutti i nostri fratelli ebrei anche motivo di sofferenza. [...] E quindi poteva essere anche per me un’opportunità, invece, di espressione, di riconoscimento, di stima e soprattutto di ricomprendere come noi cristiani, abbiamo l’obbligo di rivedere il nostro modo di relazionarci [...]” (interview with author, Archdiocese of Palermo, 26 April 2022).

of the former oratory, was the final deadline for Jews to leave Sicily under the expulsion decree (Aouate 2018). The donation symbolizes an inchoate “return,” therefore, of Judaism to Palermo. In her introduction to Francesco D’Agostino’s book on the *Meschita*, Aouate makes this explicit, thanking all those who helped to “reawaken the city’s interest, and to cause a small community to be *reborn*, which we hope may grow.”¹⁷⁰

The Archbishop was presented with the Medal of the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation for this act. This award is granted by a non-governmental organization, named after the Swedish diplomat who saved Jews in Hungary during the Shoah. It was the first such medal to be awarded to a Roman Catholic religious leader (Colina and Costantini 2017). In his acceptance speech, the Archbishop described the “historical wound inflicted by the Christians upon their own foundational tradition” as a “very painful deviation.”¹⁷¹ At least from the perspective of the Archdiocese, therefore, this gesture is intended as a “guarantee of non-repetition,” although the Archbishop does not use this wording.

If restitution – the return of that which previously belonged to a community – is another prerequisite for an act of reparation, then the historical circumstances surrounding the former oratory are of particular interest. The oratory is on Via Meschita, a central street in the historic Jewish quarter described in Chapter 1. In strict legal terms, the neighborhood was not ‘expropriated.’ Rather, the Jews of Sicily were forced to compensate the royal treasury for the loss of income that the treasury was going to experience as a result of their expulsion, a decision that “appears unbelievable to our modern sensibility, and certainly without any moral foundation.”¹⁷² This required them to spend significant sums of money, on top of the already high costs of enforced emigration.

The complex known as the *Miskita Iudeorum*, which included the synagogue but also the “dense estate of houses” in the *Meschita* neighborhood, was sold to the noble Cristina Di Salvo in October 1492 (Mandalà 2013, 482), shortly before the final deadline for Sicily’s Jews to depart. When a community knows that it is about to face exile, the market is suddenly flooded with commodities of all sorts, but particularly with real estate. In such cases, land is generally sold at an undervalue. Potential buyers know that the sellers must depart in a hurry, will have no use for their land when they are banished, and are often desperate for money to fund their impending departure and resettlement. The expulsion of the Jews from Sicily was no exception. It has been estimated that the sale price of 500 ounces may have amounted to just one third of the *Meschita*’s true market value (D’Agostino 2018, 41).

At a memorial for Evelyne Aouate, Giulio Di Segni, the Vice President of the UCEI, recalled that “we also said once that, perhaps at the inauguration [of the synagogue], the Spanish royals should come and ask for forgiveness for what their ancestors [...] did with that shameful act, with the expulsion [of the Jews] from Spain, from Sicily, and from all of southern Italy.”¹⁷³ It

¹⁷⁰ “Senza di loro non saremmo mai riusciti a risvegliare l’interesse della città e a fare *rinascere* una piccola comunità che speriamo possa crescere” (in D’Agostino 2018, 14, own emphasis).

¹⁷¹ “[U]na storica ferita inferta dai cristiani alla loro stessa tradizione fondativa [...] una deviazione dolorosissima a cui il Concilio Vaticano II ha posto fine con decisione” (Lorefice 2017). Lorefice believes that this ‘deviation’ came to a decisive end with the Second Vatican Council, which concluded in 1965. *Nostra Aetate*, a declaration promulgated that year, has been referred to as a “turning point in the history of Christian-Jewish relations” (Moyaert 2022, 117).

¹⁷² “La decisione alla nostra moderna sensibilità appare incredibile e certo privo di fondamento morale” (Renda 1995, 43).

¹⁷³ “Abbiamo anche detto una volta che forse all’inaugurazione dovrebbero venire i reali di Spagna a chiedere scusa di quello che i loro antenati [...] colla cacciata dalla Spagna e della Sicilia e da tutta l’Italia meridionale fecero con quell’atto vergognoso” (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

is evident that at least some of the protagonists in the synagogue project perceive it as a potential future opportunity to heal ancient wounds, however ambitious that vision might seem.

3. The symbolism of geographical space

The diminutive former oratory only constitutes a small part of the former *Meschita* neighborhood. This is not a wholesale return of land to a community that had been forced into exile. Nonetheless, it is symbolically significant that the former oratory is at least *near* the site of the former Great Synagogue of Palermo. To the immediate south of the former oratory is the Church of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, which contains a plaque attesting to the site's former use as a synagogue.

A recent book by Maria Eugenia Manzella, entitled *The Lost Synagogue of Palermo*,¹⁷⁴ hypothesizes that the former oratory's location is "in very close contact with the prestigious destroyed building," and claims to document for the first time the presence of the synagogue's courtyard on that site (2019, 122). This claim is by no means an established archaeological fact. Nonetheless, there is some geographical poetry in the hypothesis that followers of the three Abrahamic religions may all, at one time or another, have worshiped at the same one site. If one were to believe *both* the hypothesis that the Mosque of Ibn Siquab was later converted into the Great Synagogue, *and* the proposal that the Great Synagogue encompassed the site where the former oratory now stands, then this one plot would have been part of a mosque, then a synagogue, then a Roman Catholic oratory. If the plans are ever realized, the very same spot may in future house a synagogue once again.

In our interview, the Archbishop was aware of the symbolic significance of the oratory's location, describing a building that was "in a place where, very probably, not only was the Jewish quarter there, but is also nearby, *if not precisely on the site of the synagogue*. And among other things, it was called Santa Maria del Sabato, at least most recently."¹⁷⁵ Unlike the English "Saturday," the Italian *sabato* derives directly from the Hebrew *Shabbat*:¹⁷⁶ the seventh day of the week in Judaism, and the Jewish day of rest.

"There are hardly any other churches called *del Sabato*," explained G.:

It's almost unheard of. But could it really have been the church of the *shabbat*, because it's on a site where Jews used to pray? We would have to use scientific rigor before coming to any conclusions, we have to follow the historic data. It's important to take intuition into account, because we are dealing with religious sensibilities, but in the end, we have to be guided by the facts. They would have to do archeological research.

"Del Sabato" is certainly an unusual name, and an evocative one, but it is not entirely unique in the Roman Catholic tradition. Italy has at least two other churches with "Saturday" in the name: one dating from the late twentieth century, in Vasto, southern Abruzzo, and one dating from around

¹⁷⁴ *La sinagoga perduta di Palermo* (Manzella 2019).

¹⁷⁵ "Questo oratorio nel luogo dove molto probabilmente non solo c'era il quartiere degli ebrei, ma addirittura vicino, se non addirittura proprio sul luogo della sinagoga. E tra l'altro è intitolata a Santa Maria del Sabato, almeno ultimamente" (interview with author, Archdiocese of Palermo, 26 April 2022).

¹⁷⁶ שַׁבָּת.

1600 in Rometta, in the province of Messina, eastern Sicily. Neither of these churches has any apparent connection to any historical Jewish presence.¹⁷⁷

In the case of the former oratory in Palermo, a plaque installed in 1901 commemorates the 300-year anniversary of the oratory's founding by "the Saturday congregation," in the name of Saint Mary of Graces.¹⁷⁸ A 1719 book by a local priest, listing historic and contemporary devotions to the Virgin Mary in Palermo, explains that the congregation was "so-called because on Saturdays throughout the year its brothers went around collecting alms for the city."¹⁷⁹ It may well be nothing more than a coincidence, but it is nonetheless important for the purposes of this study that the "Saturday" name has acquired a special Jewish resonance in local discourse, regardless of the veracity of this hypothesized connection.

The precise location of the former oratory is not the only echo of the Great Synagogue that some perceive in the twenty-first-century city. A number of people in Palermo, on the basis of philological studies rather than direct documentary evidence,¹⁸⁰ mentioned to me the thesis that the city's Historical Archive is itself architecturally modeled on descriptions of the Synagogue, particularly on the detailed description given by the Italian Rabbi Obadiah da Bertinoro on the basis of his 1487 visit to the city (Lagumina 1897), just half a decade before the edict of expulsion.

The Historical Archive is another building on or near the site of the Great Synagogue. A 2022 memorial for the late Evelyne Aouate took place in the building's hall. Eliana Calandra, the Director of Palermo's Library Service and City Archive, explained the significance of using this site, above all others, to remember the driving force behind the revival of Judaism in Palermo in general, and the synagogue project in particular:

[The Historical Archive] is a symbolic site. We are in the heart of the Jewish community that existed until 1492. [...] This hall is a *transposed synagogue*. It was designed in 1882 by Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda [... who] imagined this hall on the model of the Great Synagogue that we know about because [...] Bertinoro talks about it. The hall is square [...] like the Great Synagogue. The side of the square has the same identical length as that of the Synagogue [...] there are twelve openings like the [twelve] tribes of Israel, [and] you can see the symbol of a circle inscribed within a square that symbolizes celestial time and terrestrial time [...] so it is a hall with many symbolic, hidden, secret meanings.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ These churches are explicitly named after Mary of the Holy Saturday, which refers to the day before Easter Sunday. On Holy Saturday, in some Catholic traditions, Mary is commemorated as Our Lady of Solitude, in reference to her mourning the death of her son.

¹⁷⁸ "La congregazione del Sabato / a proprio decoro e maggior culto / della madre di Dio / nell'agosto del 1601 / fondava / questo sacro oratorio di Maria SS.ma delle Grazie."

¹⁷⁹ "Acquistò la Congregazione il nome di Congregazione del Sabato, così detta, perché ne' Sabati di tutto l'anno i di lei Fratelli andavan raccogliendo le limosine per la Città [...]" (Mongitore 1719, 419).

¹⁸⁰ See Fatta (1994) for a detailed account of the reasoning behind this thesis.

¹⁸¹ "[L'Archivio Storico] è un luogo-simbolo: siamo nel cuore della comunità ebraica che esisteva fino al 1492. [...]. Questa sala è una vera sinagoga trasposta. Fu progettata nel 1882 da Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda. [...] Immaginò questa sala sul modello della grande sinagoga di cui abbiamo notizia perché ce ne parla [...] il Rabbino Bertinoro. E la sala è a pianta quadrata come [...] la grande sinagoga. Il lato del quadrato ha la stessa identica misura di quello della sinagoga [...] le aperture sono dodici come le tribù di Israele, potete vedere il simbolo del cerchio inscritto dentro [il] quadrato che simboleggia il tempo celeste e il tempo terrestre [...] quindi è una sala che ha tanti significati simbolici, nascosti, segreti [...]" (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

During the same event, the journalist Davide Camarrone added that this connection was “not shared [by Almeyda ...], not admitted, but is evident to whomever looks at [the hall],” and was intended by Almeyda as a “reconstruction of a space that was subjected to destruction, negation, the erasure of memory.”¹⁸²

The idea of latency is important in many attempts to resignify buildings that are thought to contain ‘lost’ or ‘suppressed’ meanings. But a certain amount of faith, as well as, in this case, a detailed historical knowledge of Palermo’s Great Synagogue, is required to draw such a connection. The echo is not self-evident to the untrained eye, but it exists for those who are predisposed to perceive it: for those who want to, and have the requisite local knowledge. For those who do interpret the Historical Archive in this way, it adds a further ‘knot’ to the unified ‘thread’ of Jewish memory to which I have previously referred. It intensifies a sense that the intended future synagogue, located only meters away, in the same historic Jewish neighborhood, is anything but *ex nihilo*; that on the contrary it retains a link to the Great Synagogue of Palermo’s medieval Jewish zenith, mediated by the Historical Archive *and* by the resonant location of the former oratory.

4. “The rebirth of Judaism in Palermo”¹⁸³

P., an active member of the Sicilian Institute for Jewish Studies, observed to me that:

it is interesting to evaluate how the interest, the activity, the curiosity surrounding the “rebirth” of Jewish Palermo is not proportional to the numeric extent [of the community]. In Palermo, there are over a hundred ethnicities whose groups have formal relationships with the administrative structures of the City. [...] The Jews of Palermo are irrelevant – numerically, that is – when compared to some of the others. And despite this, the interest is extraordinary.

As is the case more generally for ‘things Jewish’ in Palermo, the gift of the former oratory carries a rhetorical weight that may seem excessive given the city’s numerically small Jewish community. The community is not large enough to make a regular *minyan*, the quorum of ten Jewish men required for public prayer. It has neither a local rabbi, nor a Torah scroll. Nonetheless, some feel that the mere presence of Jews in Palermo, and the corresponding increase in local interest in Jewish history, is an important step in the direction of a contemporary atmosphere of *convivenza* in Palermo. Perhaps most crucially, this presence is invoked to support the idea that Palermo is undergoing a particular kind of *renaissance*: a return to its long-buried cosmopolitan roots.

The phenomenon I have termed *Siqillismo* is predicated on the idea that Sicily’s historic cosmopolitanism has long been forgotten or ignored. Whether or not this is entirely accurate, it is an effective narrative technique or rhetorical ‘move.’ Some sense, however superficial, of the Islamic period, and of the Norman appropriation of Arab and Byzantine culture, has always been visible in Palermo since the medieval period. The same has not been entirely true for the history of Palermo’s Jewish minority, however, of which few archeological traces remain. The epigraph to Manzella’s book on Palermo’s “lost” Synagogue, for example, is a citation from a 1906 historic

¹⁸² “[S]egreta non condivisa, non contestata, non ammessa, ma evidente a chi lo guarda, della ricostruzione di uno spazio che è stato sottoposto alla distruzione, la negazione, la cancellazione della memoria” (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

¹⁸³ D’Agostino (2018, 58).

work, which asserted that “nothing remains of the Jews of Sicily but a [street] name and a piece of stone.”¹⁸⁴ Indeed, one of that book’s stated aims is to challenge that assertion using archeological research. It intends to ‘re-Judaize’ some of the stones in the medieval *Meschita*, by attributing meaning to them as traces of the former Great Synagogue.

More so even than the so-called ‘rediscovery’ of Arab and Norman Sicily, it is especially the case that the increase in interest in Palermo’s *Jewish* history is repeatedly framed as a revival. Aouate refers to it as an “historic reality that went ignored for over five hundred years. A real *discovery* for the city of Palermo.”¹⁸⁵ Not only is Palermo discovering that the Jewish ‘other’ once formed part of its citizenry. In Aouate’s words, Palermo is rediscovering its *own part-Jewishness*: “the city *has reappropriated* its history and *its Jewish identity*.”¹⁸⁶

5. The renovation project

Members of the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies are sanguine about the amount of work that needs to take place, and therefore the funding that must be raised, before the former oratory can be either used as a place of worship, or as a cultural and educational center for the Institute’s work. The building is not open to the public. C., a member of the Institute, looks after the large, heavy key to the former oratory’s front door, which in turn is protected by a padlocked metal gate. After a few conversations with her about my research, she offered to show me around. She explained to me that she seldom brought visitors here, even those who are interested in the city’s Jewish history, because it was in such a bad state of repair. When I visited the building in April 2022, she apologized that we could not go upstairs to the first floor above the antechamber, which extends into the mezzanine of the chapel proper, and still houses a small organ. When the building came into the hands of the Institute, they had it surveyed, and were “strongly discouraged” from going up to the first floor for safety reasons.

The disrepair is evident from even a superficial glance inside the building. Upon entering, I immediately felt the damp in the air, and then saw the considerable damage that this had done to the interior walls. The building is on a relatively dark and narrow street, and has not been in regular use for any purpose, liturgical or otherwise, since before the Second World War. C. pointed to a panel on the wall, above a pew, which has collapsed entirely, and told me that, when she first saw inside, it was merely loose. “Even in the five years that the building has been in the hands of the Institute, it has dilapidated further,” she told me.

A synagogue is not always solely a place of prayer. The Hebrew *beyt kneset*¹⁸⁷ refers to a “house of assembly,” where educational activities and other such events can also take place. Accordingly, C. told me that one of the possible plans for the building’s future was to use the antechamber as a *punto di riferimento*, a “reference point” for the work of the Institute. This would involve hosting cultural activities, and educational events on Palermo’s Jewish history, and disseminating information to visitors and locals alike. “Up until recently, the reference point for our Institute was the late Evelyne Aouate’s front room,” she explained.

¹⁸⁴ “Degli ebrei di Sicilia non è rimasto che un nome e una pietra [...]” (Senigallia 1906, cited in Manzella 2019). The street name Senigallia refers to is Vicolo Meschita; the ‘stone’ is the plaque in the church of San Nicolò da Tolentino, which mentions the synagogue that once stood on the same site.

¹⁸⁵ “Una realtà storica rimasta ignorata per più di cinquecento anni. Una vera e propria *scoperta* per la città di Palermo” (in D’Agostino 2018, 13, own emphasis).

¹⁸⁶ Così la città *ci è riappropriata* della sua storia e della *sua identità ebraica*” (in D’Agostino 2018, 12, own emphasis).

¹⁸⁷ בית כנסת.

The building is already split into two ‘parts’: the small antechamber, and the chapel room proper. The room that was once the chapel could be used for worship, she suggested, and she showed me an architectural plan that had been drawn up with the assistance of the City of Palermo, illustrating how such a place of worship might look. “This is just one plan, however,” she emphasized. “Nothing has been finalized, so the finished thing might look completely different. It also depends a lot on money.”

Previously, when I had asked G. how work on the restoration was going, she was up front about the fact that it was going “badly. Very badly.” She told me that “the Mayor told us that the City of Palermo will help. But ‘help’ is not just rhetoric. It’s also a question of funding.” On my visit to the former oratory, C. echoed this sentiment, saying that, although the Mayor felt very personally invested in the project, “there were other problems that needed urgent attention, and then, there was COVID. Now, he’s coming towards the end of his mayoralty, so the City has become completely uninterested.” Five years after the keys to the building were handed over, the project remains in a “stalled phase,” as C. put it, although in March 2022, there was talk of launching a ‘crowdfunding’ website to kickstart the renovation work (*Moked* 2022).

The question-mark that hangs over the synagogue’s funding situation is sometimes used to political and diplomatic ends. The President of the Region of Sicily, for example, used a visit from Dror Eydar, the Israeli Ambassador to Italy, as an opportune moment in which to announce “the willingness of the regional government to finance the restoration of the Synagogue of Palermo, an importance Jewish trace dating back centuries, in a sign of friendship, and in order to reclaim a place of worship that has a great historic value.”¹⁸⁸

In the initial activity immediately following the Church’s donation, the majority of the overtly Christian imagery was removed from the building’s interior and stored in the Diocesan Museum, which eventually intends to clean and display these artifacts. On my visit I was immediately struck by the conspicuously empty spaces where paintings, reliefs, and crucifixes once stood. These lacunae, in the absence of any further work to replace them, or even to fill the gaps left in the plaster on the walls, stood out as reminders that the renovation project had been paused in a very preliminary stage.

There does not appear to be any intention to strip the former oratory of all reminders that it was once a Christian place of worship. To do so would likely require the wholesale demolition of the building, which is unmistakably the product of the Roman Catholic religious architecture of the Sicilian Baroque. Nonetheless, it remains the case that, unlike the mosques mentioned in Chapter Three, the former oratory still contains explicitly Christian artifacts that conflict with its intended future use as a synagogue. A non-exhaustive list of the Christian symbols remaining in the former oratory includes: a plaque beneath a now-removed votive image, promising indulgences in exchange for devoted recitations of an “Ave Maria”; the words “Ecce Agnus Dei” on the tabernacle;¹⁸⁹ and numerous *putti* both on the altar and below the windows.

Those most closely involved with the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies are conscious that the synagogue project remains in a very early stage, and are generally tentative in the language they use. Reports at a greater remove from Palermo, on the other hand, sometimes present the conversion of the former oratory as a certainty or a *fait accompli*. In 2017, the *New York Times*

¹⁸⁸ “Il presidente ha annunciato anche «la disponibilità del governo regionale a finanziare il restauro della Sinagoga di Palermo, importante traccia ebraica risalente a diversi secoli fa, in segno di amicizia e per il recupero di un luogo di culto di grande valore storico»” (Regione Sicilia 2022).

¹⁸⁹ A proclamation that the host is the body of Christ, and that Christ is the lamb of God.

reported optimistically that “the restoration is expected to begin shortly,” and “the city will cover most of the costs” (Povoledo 2017). Neither of these proved true.

A 2020 book containing descriptions and watercolor illustrations of Italian synagogues preemptively includes the future Synagogue of Palermo in its list. It describes the concession of the building as “new beginning, in the spirit of roots,” although it makes clear, in the caption to the drawing of the building’s interior, that the conversion has not yet taken place.¹⁹⁰ Adam Smulevich, the book’s author, explains that following a “long oblivion,”:

the aim (here, as in all of the South) is now to reverse the trend, helping the Jewish nucleus which has recently been re-established to find reference points and a sense of belonging once again. [...]. The concession of the oratory is a page of rediscovered light.¹⁹¹

By inserting Palermo into a catalog of Italy’s Jewish *present*, this book expresses an optimism about Palermo’s inchoate Jewish ‘revival.’

6. The future

A variety of phoenix-like metaphors are used by some to describe the hope for a tentative return of Judaism to Sicily: ‘revival,’ ‘renaissance,’ and so forth. D’Agostino’s book on the *Meschita* contains a section on Judaism in contemporary Palermo, entitled “the rebirth of Judaism in Palermo.”¹⁹² And yet, even if the synagogue project were to be completed in the immediate future, it could not be in constant use for liturgical purposes, given the absence of a *minyan*. “There are ten adults, but the majority of them are women,” P. told me, “so according to the rules of the rite followed by the UCEI, they do not count towards that majority. And so the question of a *minyan* will rear its head whenever the synagogue is built.”

There are varying extents to which any religious organization’s rules can be strict or relaxed in their admission of converts, and Judaism is no exception. The so-called “who is a Jew?” debate has become a focal point within Jewish discourse internationally since the mid-twentieth century, not least because the establishment of the State of Israel “transformed the [...] question from a theoretical or existential question to a practical issue with broad political implications” (Kaplan 2003, 89). These implications include eligibility for Israeli citizenship, now a marker of recognition by “the Jewish world” (Abu El-Haj 2012, 217). The Jewish press in Italy has published a number of articles by high-profile religious figures debating how stringent or otherwise the rules regarding *giyur*, or conversion to Judaism, ought to be.¹⁹³

One member of the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies interpreted the UCEI’s approach as a “policy of discouraging conversions in any way,” pointing to its strict application of *halakhic* (Jewish legal) definitions of who should be recognized as a Jew: those born to a Jewish mother, or those converted specifically in accordance with the criteria of *orthodox* Judaism (Sacerdoti 2020, 105). A Roman Catholic Italian who converts to Judaism with the help of a reform rabbi, for

¹⁹⁰ “Un nuovo inizio, nel segno delle radici” (Smulevich and Fabris 2020, 317).

¹⁹¹ “Lo sforzo (qui, come in tutto il Sud) è ora quello di invertire la rotta, aiutando il nucleo ebraico che si è da poco ristabilito a ritrovare punti di riferimento e senso di appartenenza” (Smulevich and Fabris 2020, 317).

¹⁹² “La rinascita dell’ebraismo a Palermo” (D’Agostino 2018, 58).

¹⁹³ See Sacerdoti (2020, 124n57), for a summary of recent debates within the Italian Jewish community on this topic.

example, would not be recognized as a Jew by the UCEI, and could therefore not become a member of a Jewish ‘community’ that forms part of that Union.

The (re-)emergence of Jewish space in some other parts of southern Italy is concurrent with the formation of small but committed groups of converts to Judaism, whether or not their conversions are recognized by the UCEI.¹⁹⁴ Elsewhere in the European Mediterranean, Charles McDonald has argued that the emergence in Spain of a developed Jewish cultural heritage industry exerts a significant influence on contemporary conversions (or reversions) to Judaism there (2019). In Palermo, in contrast – where such a heritage infrastructure is in its relative infancy, as this dissertation shows – the city’s small group of Jewish residents includes few Palermitan converts to Judaism. Many in the group were born elsewhere, and were brought up Jewish. The late Evelyne Aouate, who led the ‘revival’ of Judaism in contemporary Palermo, was no exception: she was born in Algeria to a Jewish family, and brought up in Paris (Brunetto 2022).

If Palermo’s synagogue restoration project were to be completed when my fieldwork ended in 2022, its role would in large part be symbolic. Unlike the mosques and Islamic prayer halls in the city, which have been established out of necessity during the past three decades to accommodate a growing Muslim population, plans for a new synagogue in Palermo predate the presence of a sizeable Jewish population there. Although I did not speak to anybody who put it quite like this, the synagogue restoration project appears to follow a prophetic logic: “if you build it, they will come.”¹⁹⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic, paired with technological developments, increased the number of Italian professionals engaged in what is referred to in Italian as “smart working,” i.e. working remotely, or working from home. Some businesses have made this new-found flexibility a permanent feature of their working arrangements. Parts of southern Italy, including Palermo, have become destinations for Italians employed by companies based further north, who for a variety of reasons, including the high cost of living in many northern Italian cities, would prefer not to live there. Some commentators began referring to this phenomenon as “south working.”¹⁹⁶

It is not inconceivable that observant Jews elsewhere in Italy might be attracted to move to Palermo by the presence of a synagogue. Although the presence of a small Jewish community in Palermo is by no means the only catalyst for an interest in the city’s Jewish past, this interest is not entirely disconnected from its present Jewish religious life. We might say that the two phenomena are mutually reinforcing. Even a relatively small number of observant Jewish tourists could add up to a *minyan*, enabling a potential future synagogue to be operational for liturgical purposes, even in the absence of a community of Jewish permanent residents.

As Giulio Di Segni, the Vice President of the UCEI, put it, Aouate believed that:

this temple had to be here to recreate a Jewish presence that is small today, but there is no reason that it cannot grow, and there is no reason that it cannot enrich itself with tourists, with visitors, with people who may come to stay here, people who

¹⁹⁴ See e.g. the work of the musician Francesco Lotoro, who self-identifies as a *ben anusim* (i.e. a descendant of Jews forced to convert to Christianity) and has formally converted to Judaism in accordance with the rules of Italy’s Chief Rabbinate (Freund 2011). Lotoro was a leading figure in the reconversion of a former synagogue in Trani, which had been used for centuries as a church, back to its original use.

¹⁹⁵ A common misquotation from the Hollywood film *Field of Dreams*; the wording in the film is “if you build it, *he* will come” (Robinson 1989).

¹⁹⁶ A play on the Italian phrase *smart working*, a pseudo-Anglicism that translates into English as ‘working remotely’ or ‘working from home’ (it is ‘smart’ because it involves digital technology).

could enrich the city, because diversity is evidently not a diminution [...] but it is an enrichment.¹⁹⁷

The purpose of the synagogue, therefore, is not only to serve a religious community in need of a place to pray, but also to act as a catalyst for the formation and growth of such a community.

7. “We have to bring this temple to completion. Woe betide us if we don’t!”

The Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies is not a religious organization, although it has Jewish members. I also spoke to members who identify as atheist, agnostic, and Roman Catholic. The resurgence of interest in Judaism in the city is not solely the work of people who identify as Jews. This is by no means unique to Palermo, but it is nonetheless a salient feature of the increased visibility of ‘things Jewish’ in the city.

In her book *Virtually Jewish*, which explores the increased contemporary interest in ‘things Jewish’ on the part of non-Jews, Ruth Ellen Gruber notes that:

State-, city-, or church-sponsored promotion of Jewish culture or celebrations of Jewish heritage – whether by the opening of a Jewish museum, the restoration of a synagogue, or the organizing of a Jewish cultural festival – can serve as institutional forms of cultural apology, consciously articulated mea culpas aimed at acknowledging, however tardily (and with however much self-serving political calculation), a part of history once deemed lost, if not indeed irrelevant (2002, 9).

As we have seen with the donation of the former oratory, the Archbishop has recognized the political significance of this action, although he did not use the terms “apology” or “mea culpa.” Is the inchoate ‘revival’ of Jewish space in Palermo therefore an example of what Gruber calls “virtual Judaism”?

Gruber developed the idea of “virtual Judaism” to describe “a form of Jewish culture, or at least Judaica, minus the Jews” (2002, 8). The term, as defined by Gruber, incorporates a broad spectrum of phenomena, from the perception of Judaism as an “ethnic flavor of the month,” to a “much deeper academic, artistic, humanitarian, or other involvement.” In the particular case of Palermo, the interest in the city’s Jewish past, present and future is much closer to the latter. The most prominent voice in this arena is the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies, which organizes lectures and memorial events. The city’s Office of Medieval Studies also carries out and supervises a range of academic research projects on the city’s medieval Jewish history.

What Gruber refers to as the “pop expression” of virtual Judaism is not currently predominant in Palermo. Elsewhere in Italy, Gruber observed an interest in the symbols of Jewish culture, and specifically of *Ashkenazi* Jewish culture, which developed in the *shtetls* of Central and Eastern Europe, despite the fact that Judaism in Italy has its own unique and largely distinct culture. Palermo has at least one band that describes itself as a *klezmer* band, although in reality this is only one of many influences on its musical style. It is not unusual for ‘world music’ performers, in Italy and elsewhere, to blend various musical traditions in the search for a distinctive postmodern

¹⁹⁷ “Ha creduto [...] che quel tempio dovesse esserci per ricreare una presenza ebraica che oggi è piccola ma non è detto che non possa crescere e non è detto che non possa arricchirsi di turisti, di visitatori, di gente che verrà a stare qui, gente che potrà arricchire la città, perché [...] la diversità non è evidentemente un *diminutio*, come dicevano i latini, ma è un arricchimento” (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

sound.¹⁹⁸ By and large, the interest in ‘things Jewish’ in Palermo takes the shape of historical research; attempts to integrate Jewish history into the collective memory of the contemporary city; and the synagogue project. This does not preclude the possibility that a “pop expression” of virtual Judaism could develop there in future; Gruber notes that “‘serious’ motivations” can give way to “simple cultural curiosity” on a broader scale, and vice versa (2002, 8).

The synagogue restoration project is not a paradigmatic case of what Gruber calls “Judaica, minus the Jews.” That said, there certainly are non-Jews in Palermo, including Roman Catholics, who for a multitude of reasons feel a strong obligation to contribute to the synagogue’s success. Don Pietro Magro, for example, director of Palermo’s Pastoral Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue,¹⁹⁹ gave an impassioned speech at a memorial for the late Evelyne Aouate. He praised her for having enriched Palermo with her spirituality, such that “we all became Jews, we rediscovered our Jewish roots.”²⁰⁰ This “we” has a double meaning. His speech made it clear that, alongside Palermo rediscovering its Jewish roots, Judaism’s return to Palermo also reminded him of the Jewish roots of Christianity *per se*.

Now we have to bring this temple to completion. Woe betide us if we don’t! Woe betide us! We have to strive harder, because this temple must be constructed. And when it is constructed, we will chant *alleluia*, knowing that our Evelyne is with us, from heaven, participating in such a beautiful moment of communion, of love, which is what Evelyne wanted to realize in Palermo.²⁰¹

A multi-scalar sense of duty, then – to the legacy of friend, a well-known and esteemed citizen of Palermo; to the history of the city, and of Sicily; and to the Jewish roots of Christianity, Italy’s largest religion – informs the strong and sincere commitment of some non-Jewish supporters of the synagogue project.

It is worth emphasizing that neither the donation of the former oratory, nor the process of what Gruber terms “filling” Jewish space in Palermo, straightforwardly fit Gruber’s description of virtual Judaism. What Gruber terms “Judaizing milieux” (2002, 11) have not, in the case of Palermo, been led by non-Jews. On the contrary, the late Evelyne Aouate, who invigorated both academic and religious interest in Judaism in the city, was an observant Jew, born into a Jewish family. She co-founded the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies in 1992,²⁰² and personally requested the Archbishop’s assistance in locating a suitable building for Jewish religious and cultural practices.

To the extent that Palermo is home to an interest in Jewish heritage that “dwarf[s] local Jewish populations” (Gruber 2002, 8), the primary catalyst for this interest was the organizational work of a Jewish woman. The inchoate ‘revival’ of an interest in Judaism in Palermo has some

¹⁹⁸ The YouTube page of band in question, Matrimia, describes the band as “an awesome juicy mix: Tzigan, Balkan Arab and Jewish sounds, with manush jazz tunes, ‘chanson Française’ and Mediterranean music, but also Rock and reggae.”

¹⁹⁹ Ufficio Pastorale Dialogo Ecumenismo e Interreligioso.

²⁰⁰ “Siamo diventati tutti ebrei, abbiamo riscoperto le nostre radici ebraiche” (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

²⁰¹ “Noi dobbiamo adesso portare a definizione questo tempio. Guai a noi se non lo facciamo! Guai a noi! Dobbiamo impegnarci di più, perché questo tempio dev’essere costruito, e quando sarà costruito, entreremo cantando l’alleluia, e sapendo che la nostra Evelyne è con noi, dal cielo, a partecipare a questo momento così bello di comunione, di amore, che è quello che Evelyne voleva realizzare qua a Palermo” (event at the Archivio Storico Comunale di Palermo, 5 May 2022).

²⁰² Following her encounter with Miriam Ancona, also a Jewish woman living in Palermo (Lo Iacono 2017).

features in common with certain examples of virtual Judaism, and a comparison with Gruber's work sheds some interesting light on the contours of this case study, but Palermo is far from a classic example of the phenomenon she describes.

8. Conclusion

The places of worship examined in Chapters Three and Four have experienced some difficulties in common. Antisemitism and Islamophobia remain persistent throughout Europe, and Sicily is no exception. The Al-Falah Mosque and the intended future Synagogue both have problems funding the wholesale conversion of their structures from former churches into places of worship with architectural features appropriate for their new congregations.

There are nonetheless aspects in which the two cases are incomparable. The Al-Falah Mosque – by necessity, given the area's large and growing Muslim population – is in full operation in spite of the minimal renovation work that has taken place. This is eased, no doubt, by the fact that the building was in commercial use immediately before it became a mosque. The former oratory, in contrast, had been abandoned for much of the twentieth century, and appears at least superficially to be in a comparatively worse condition. The absence of a substantial Jewish community in the present also affords those involved in the synagogue project the time to plan, without using the building as a temporary or makeshift place of worship in the meantime.

The buildings analyzed in the foregoing chapters, heavy in potential symbolism, also shed light on some differences in attitudes towards Islam and Judaism in contemporary Palermo. The 'rebirth' of Judaism in the city, symbolized by the synagogue project, is seldom reported without reference to the fifteenth-century expulsion, or to Palermo's medieval *convivenza*, in which a flourishing Jewish minority once played a role. The former churches that are used as mosques in Palermo are rarely mentioned in such terms in local discourse, on the other hand. Their resonance, as continuations of a long Palermitan tradition of religious pluralism, shifting demographics, and architectural conversions, could be said to be weaker.

Medieval Sicily's Muslims were expelled over two centuries before the island's Jewish population met a similar fate. In Spain, the memory of the expulsion of Muslims in 1609 remains "relatively obscure," whereas there are few in Spain for whom the year 1492 does not resonate (James 2020). In Sicily, the cultural memory of the expulsion of the island's remaining Muslims to Lucera, on the Italian mainland, is similarly faint. This disparity, both in Spain and in Sicily, reflects wider contemporary European attitudes towards Islam and Judaism. There are organizations in Spain who lament the "radically different treatment of the descendants of the *morisco* and Sephardic communities," not least because descendants of expelled Sephardi Jews are in theory entitled to Spanish citizenship, which has not been extended to descendants of Muslim *moriscos* who were also forced into exile (García-Sanjuán 2018).

If the synagogue project is to raise funds within Sicily, it will likely need to resonate emotionally in the region. The idea of 'reviving' an almost-dead community, which belongs in Sicily on historic bases, and of thereby righting an historic injustice, can be powerful, as this chapter has shown. Whether or not it is effective as a catalyst for cosmopolitan attitudes, and whether or not it helps to achieve practical results for Muslim and Jewish communities in Palermo, *Sigillismo* also informs how some in the city interpret their surroundings. As Part One has demonstrated, an attention to Palermo's multi-religious past, whether idealized, or in full awareness of its imperfections, is changing the texture of the city center. It also affects how those with the requisite knowledge and a certain predisposition experience their surroundings, by

imagining the former *Meschita* as it might have been, or by seeing historical traces, proven or otherwise, in the city's palimpsestic present, whether these be traces of a mosque or of a *miqweh*.

Part One has focused on heritage, and contemporary religious space; on streets and buildings, and the ways they are experienced. It has asked how aspects of Palermo's multi-religious history are 'lived' in the city. These topics are not universally recognized as ideological, but nonetheless, as Part One has demonstrated, they are far from politically neutral. If Part One focuses on the political with a lower-case 'p,' Part Two instead considers the political with an upper-case 'P' – the relationship of local politics, and especially of the high-profile former mayor, Leoluca Orlando, to particular conceptions of Sicilian identity.

Part Two

Cosmopolitan Identity in Leoluca Orlando's Political Rhetoric

The rediscovery of the South and of the Mediterranean, the transformation of its innate polytheism into a positive value, the flavor of the restraint that comes from this ancient destination at the crossroads of peoples, is possible today: it is the only thing to do. Here and not only here.

Franco Cassano, 1998²⁰³
Europe and Southern Thought

1. Introduction

A “tenacious catalog of stereotypes” exists to describe southern Italy in general (Schneider 1998, 1), and Sicily in particular. These stereotypes are in part the product of outsiders’ preconceptions of Sicilian culture, but are also influenced in part by Sicilians, as well as being co-created, among other things, by interactions between Sicilians and non-Sicilian scholars. The anthropologist Megan Carney cites a Sicilian research participant who argues that “in Sicily, everything is possible and impossible,” a riddle that reinforces Sicily’s reputation as a “land of [...] contradictions” (Carney 2021, 48). The prevailing stereotype of Sicily as mysterious is reinforced by the idea that Sicilian identity is the product of an intricate cultural ‘mixity,’ which makes it unknowable. This image, in turn, is bolstered by an identity narrative that emphasizes the island’s position in the center of the Mediterranean, its history as a locus of invasion, and its constant flow of immigrants and emigrants. We have already explored some specific features of this identity narrative, which I term *Siqillismo*.

As the capital city of the autonomous region of Sicily, Palermo is a particularly rich lens through which to analyze contemporary invocations of the island’s multicultural past. Seven of the nine locations on the UNESCO world heritage site entitled “Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale” are situated in the city (UNESCO 2015). Palermo, therefore, although it is not the only place in Sicily where this history is perceptible, is perhaps the Sicilian city in which traces of this period – “a particular political and cultural condition characterized by the fruitful coexistence of people of different origins,” in the words of UNESCO’s decision document – are most keenly felt. In recent decades, echoes of this history have been amplified by public political messaging by Leoluca Orlando. Orlando has served five non-consecutive terms as Mayor of Palermo, the first beginning in 1985, and the most recent ending in 2022. He is one of Sicily’s most recognizable political figures.

Palermo’s multicultural past is made to reverberate in the present by a concerted effort to draw attention to certain periods in its history, not least by the city’s administration, which supported the UNESCO application and publicized Palermo’s successful inscription onto the World Heritage List. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the following two chapters, these historic traces are amplified by public statements from the city’s mayor, Leoluca Orlando. Part Two uses digital anthropological methods to explore how Orlando, a prominent Sicilian politician, describes

²⁰³ Translation by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (Cassano 2012, 115). “Riscoprire il sud, il Mediterraneo, ricondurre a valore il suo innato politeismo, il sapore di una misura che ci viene da questa antica destinazione all’incrocio delle genti, questo oggi è possibile, è l’unica cosa giusta. Qui e non solo qui” (Cassano 1998, 90).

Sicily to his primary audience, i.e. his electorate.²⁰⁴ By analyzing Orlando's political messaging, as well as his audience's reactions to that messaging, we obtain a more direct picture of how Sicilian identity, and especially Palermitan identity, is being constructed, redefined, and contested among those who identify with it.

From his first tenure as Mayor of Palermo (1985–1990), Orlando became a well-known politician throughout Italy on the back of his high-profile campaign against the Mafia. Indeed, much of the existing scholarship on Leoluca Orlando focuses on the so-called *primavera di Palermo*, or 'Palermitan Spring': a period, beginning in the 1980s, of concerted anti-Mafia efforts, of which Orlando is widely acknowledged as a figurehead.²⁰⁵ In comparison, and with some partial exceptions (see e.g. Puccio-Den 2002; Barber 2013; Kron and Lebuhn 2020), less scholarship to date has focused on another dominant strain in Orlando's political thought: an outspoken commitment to cosmopolitanism and free movement, and an opposition to anti-immigration rhetoric and policies.²⁰⁶

In accounts of Orlando's career, his priorities are sometimes portrayed as having 'switched.' Having previously dedicated himself to the twentieth-century fight against the Mafia, he is said to have now turned his attention to the so-called twenty-first-century 'crisis' of Mediterranean migration (see e.g. Kirchgaessner 2015; Tondo 2017). In reality, however, these two positions have coexisted during Orlando's career. At the very beginning of the twenty-first century, Jane and Peter Schneider noted Orlando's "cosmopolitanism" (2003, 178). Deborah Puccio-Den has explored Orlando's attempts to draw parallels between Palermo and Cuba, both places of cultural "mixity."²⁰⁷ Conversely, the Mafia retains a presence in contemporary Palermo, and Orlando reminds the city's inhabitants that "the Mafia doesn't govern the city any longer, but it still exists."²⁰⁸ As the following two chapters demonstrate, Orlando understands the two struggles – against the Mafia, and against intolerance – to be mutually reinforcing, and to persist alongside one another.

Controversies surrounding Orlando's anti-Mafia campaigning contributed to his prominence in Italian political life, including a high-profile disagreement with the well-known Sicilian author Leonardo Sciascia. Sciascia accused Orlando, among others, of being a *professionista dell'antimafia* (anti-Mafia careerist): a mayor who spends all his time on what Sciascia called "exhibitions," i.e. self-promotion, including television appearances, "and finds none for addressing "the problems of the country or of the city he administers."²⁰⁹

Without entering into the merits of Sciascia's criticism, Orlando has long displayed a talent for public relations. Since 2012, he has written more than 5,000 posts on the social media platform

²⁰⁴ It is true, as many in Palermo have pointed out to me, that Palermitans are not Orlando's only audience; his messaging is also aimed at Italy as a whole, and attracts attention in international media. However, Palermitans remain the primary audience for the Mayor of Palermo's Facebook page, because they are prospective voters; the page exists in no small part to inform and persuade them.

²⁰⁵ See especially Schneider and Schneider (2003), but also e.g. Santino (2009).

²⁰⁶ This includes opposition to Italy's *ius sanguinis* approach to citizenship, and to its restrictive 'residence permit' (*permesso di soggiorno*) system. For a concise history of *ius sanguinis*, see e.g. Zincone (2010); on the *permesso di soggiorno* system, see Cantisani and Greco (2006).

²⁰⁷ "Métissage," in Puccio-Den's original text (2002, 24).

²⁰⁸ "La mafia non governa più questa città, ma esiste ancora" (*IlSicilia.it* 2021).

²⁰⁹ "Prendiamo, per esempio, un sindaco che per sentimento o per calcolo cominci ad esibirsi in interviste televisive e scolastiche, in convegni, conferenze e cortei come antimafioso: anche se dedicherà tutto il suo tempo a queste esibizioni e non ne troverà mai per occuparsi dei problemi del paese o della città che amministra (che sono tanti, in ogni paese, in ogni città: dall'acqua che manca all'immondizia che abbonda), si può considerare come in una botte di ferro" (Sciascia 1987).

Facebook, where he has over 76,000 ‘likes’ and over 85,000 ‘followers.’²¹⁰ He has also gained visibility by entering into high-profile polemics with divisive figures in Italian politics, notably his anti-immigration adversary Matteo Salvini of the *Lega* (previously known as *Lega Nord*, or the Northern League). He has achieved positive coverage of his city in the national and international press: one *Guardian* headline introduces him as the mayor who “fought the Mafia and won” (van der Zee, 2017).

Orlando has historically used newspaper columns and books as platforms for his political messaging (see e.g. Orlando 2007). Since the 2010s, however, his frequent social media usage, often posting multiple times in one day, became one of the most immediate and far-reaching ways for the mayor to communicate with his electorate in Palermo, and with his supporters and detractors elsewhere. Accordingly, the following two chapters focus on Orlando’s use of Facebook, still the world’s most widely used social media platform (DataReportal 2023). The period studied begins in 2012, the beginning of his public activity on the site, and carries through to 8 July 2021, the reference date for this study.

Text produced by a politician for social media must be analyzed from a pragmatic perspective, paying due attention to context. Just as a quote from an interviewee should be approached differently to a work of philosophical scholarship, for example, so should the ‘genre’ of political messaging on social media be analyzed with an awareness of its intended purpose. Although Orlando may, like many politicians, have well-developed theories, the principle purpose of his Facebook messaging is not to articulate and refine these. Rather, politicians use Facebook, among other things, to persuade an electorate. Politicians in office also use it to convey a certain image of the place they govern. How Orlando does so is the focus of this study. To be successful on these terms, Orlando’s Facebook posts need not necessarily be accurate or consistent; my aim is not to assess whether he is ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ Instead, in order to have its intended effect, the image of Palermo that Orlando articulates must, at the very least, resonate with enough of the city’s residents.

By analyzing Orlando’s Facebook pronouncements, and by considering some of his followers’ reactions to his messaging, Chapters Five and Six ask how Orlando seeks to construct or encourage a distinct sense of *palermitanità*, or Palermitan local character, as an identity that embodies cosmopolitan values, including an openness to immigration and to cultural alterity. Specifically, I focus on how Orlando uses the city’s history and its geographical position in the Mediterranean to foster this cosmopolitan *palermitanità*. In this conception, as we will see, Palermo is portrayed as having a true ‘essence’: one which, on the basis of its historic as well as its contemporary situation, necessarily embraces diversity.

Although my analysis focuses on Orlando’s Facebook presence, I do not contend that the arguments he makes, or the stories he tells about Palermo, are unique or original to him. Rather, they are in dialogue with existing narratives, and in many cases also reflect views I encountered regularly during my in-person fieldwork in the city. It also bears emphasizing, furthermore, that the Mayor of Palermo does not work in isolation, but rather, carries out mayoral duties with the help of a wider team.

In section 2, I briefly set out the methodology used to gather data for this research project, which is described in greater detail in Appendix 2. In section 3, I briefly detail the structure of

²¹⁰ These figures are from 2021, when this study began. Not all of Orlando’s followers are Palermitans, of course, and Facebook does not provide the tools to break this figure down by location. For context, however, 125,913 Palermitans voted for Orlando in the 2017 mayoral election.

Chapters Five and Six, which analyze the data on the basis of the dominant themes identified in this study.

2. Methodology

After analyzing over 5,000 individual Facebook posts by Orlando, using the approach set out in Appendix 2, this study directly references a total of 91 individual posts by Orlando. Given the research question at hand, the following two chapters are centered on Orlando's posts themselves. However, where relevant, I also refer to comments from the Facebook-using public, which appear below his posts: including comments that build on and reinforce Orlando's messaging, and those that engage with it critically or reject its premises altogether.²¹¹ By considering other Facebook users' comments on Orlando's posts, we can better understand not only how Orlando puts forward a certain image of Palermo, but also, and importantly, how his attempts to do so are interpreted, and at times contested, by his audience. Both the ethical considerations that inform my approach, and the position of this study within the growing body of social media research, are also described in Appendix 2.

Digital ethnography, when tailored to address a research question that could not otherwise be answered in the same way using other methodologies, ought not to be seen as a mere 'fallback' for researchers for whom in-person fieldwork is impractical – e.g. due to the researcher's disability, a conflict in the intended field site, or, as in the present instance, a global pandemic – although innovative social media research can of course assist in circumnavigating such challenges. In the case of this research project, social media analysis can improve our understanding of political discourse and local identity production over a sustained period of time. In-person fieldwork certainly would not have provided the same insights, or possibly any insights at all, into the use of digital mass-media in local identity construction.

3. Chapter structure

Chapter Five begins by concentrating on the various historical narratives of Sicilian and Palermitan identity articulated by Orlando to support his political project, including the invocation of the 'Arab-Norman' period as an exemplar of Palermo's inherent multiculturalism. It then explores some key rhetorical strategies Orlando employs to link these history- and tradition-based narratives to his professed political aims. It then discusses how Orlando characterizes religious communities living in the contemporary city, with a particular focus on Palermo's Muslim and Jewish communities.

Chapter Six then interrogates a number of tactics Orlando uses in his attempt to resolve a tension in his political rhetoric. He insists that Palermo is already a place of peaceful coexistence between diverse communities, whereas in the experience of its inhabitants, the city falls short of this ideal. I propose that Orlando seeks to displace intolerance onto a dark period in Palermo's

²¹¹ By no means all in Orlando's Facebook audience share his political aims. In May 2021, local media reported that Orlando had suspended the public's ability to comment on his Facebook posts, having received "too many insults and threats" via the medium (*Palermo Today* 2021). His office had seen fit to report some of these threats to the police. Some responses to Orlando's posts are supportive; others exhibit fierce political disagreement with his actions. Before Orlando suspended the ability to comment on his page, some public comments included vicious *ad hominem* attacks, as well as racist, homophobic and otherwise abusive language, especially in regard to Orlando's support of migrants and LGBTQ+ rights.

recent past; onto an unrepresentative minority; and onto various 'elsewheres.' I then put forward some potential objections to Orlando's narrative framework, before exploring some of the political ends to which Orlando uses this rhetoric. I conclude by discussing the ambiguities inherent in Orlando's project of identity construction.

Chapter Five

“Palermo is a Mosaic”: Constructing *Palermitanità* Through History and Tradition

[T]he spirit and the values of our people, of the Sicilian people [...] the result of our history, made of hospitality [*accoglienza*] and coexistence [*convivenza*], values alive today more than ever.

Leoluca Orlando, 2016²¹²
Facebook

1. Introduction

History plays an important part in identity formation.²¹³ It is not just the mere facts or evidence of history that inform identity, but rather, the meaning these histories are given, and the conclusions drawn from them. How we narrate the past affects how we experience it in the present. It establishes a “feeling of history,” in the words of Charles Hirschkind’s recent study of Andalusia (2021), though Hirschkind also emphasizes that the past is “recalcitrant[...] to manipulation” (158): malleable to some extent, perhaps, but by no means infinitely so. The dispositions that accompany this feeling of history influence our sense of identity and our behaviors, which can therefore affect the future.

A feeling that values exemplified by a certain period in history persist in the present, or that one *ought* to embody such a set of values, because to betray them would be to betray one’s very essence, is powerful in local as well as in national and transnational identities. This is especially true in contemporary Sicily, where political rhetoric is infused with echoes of a cosmopolitan past. In what Orlando terms the ‘Arab-Norman’ period, but not only in this period, he perceives a history of peaceful *convivenza*, or ‘coexistence,’ which informs Palermo’s political present, and especially the way his city should approach the phenomenon referred to in dominant European discourse as the ‘migrant crisis.’²¹⁴

There is extensive scholarship on the idea of a ‘Mediterranean’ identity, and the Mediterranean has been used to stand for a number of (sometimes contradictory) characteristics (see e.g. Herzfeld 2005b). This study focuses on one particular understanding of the Mediterranean, put forward by some (but not all) in this transnational region: the idea that it “evokes a continual intertwining of diverse roots and routes” (Chambers 2008, 34). For some, versions of this Mediterraneanism “romanticize the Mediterranean as an idealized space of cosmopolitan interconnection” (Palma 2021, 147), or amount to mere “multicultural [...] ‘branding’” (Giglioli 2018, 66). My research takes these criticisms seriously, while also recognizing that this vision of Mediterranean identity can be affectively powerful, and is felt by its proponents to be a politically useful tool for opposing the dominant xenophobia of mainstream

²¹² “[L]o spirito e dei valori del nostro popolo, del popolo siciliano [...] il risultato della nostra storia, fatta di accoglienza e convivenza, valori oggi più vivi che mai” (Orlando 29 October 2016).

²¹³ To cite one illustrative example: in his study of ancient Greece’s role in the development of contemporary Greek national identity, the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld cites a “patriotic enterprise” by the folklorist Nikolaos Politis: a book entitled *Modern Greek Mythology*, which explicitly aimed to “seek the kinship between our own manners and customs and those of the ancient Hellenes,” and “our continuity with our ancestors” (Herzfeld 1986, 101, citing Politis 1871, xxii; xxix).

²¹⁴ See e.g. Loftsdóttir (2018) for a critique of this term.

European discourse. Paul Silverstein observes that, although the very idea of the “Mediterranean as crossroads” is rooted in a colonial discourse, that does not necessarily prevent it from being “appropriated as a marker of cultural and political identity by various subaltern groups in the region,” in order to “imagine alternative places of cultural-political belonging” (Silverstein 2002, 13).

I interrogate the political effects of this cosmopolitan imaginary, using my Sicilian study to ask questions more frequently posed elsewhere in the European Mediterranean. In Granada, for instance – another city with a strong cultural memory of its multi-religious past – Mikaela Rogozen-Soltar has investigated how residents “mobilize historical narratives ... to navigate renewed ethnic and religious pluralism in the city today” (2017, 3). Charles Hirschkind examines the development there of a “critical reflection on the norms of European politics” rooted in Iberia’s multi-religious histories and legacies (2021, 3). This study demonstrates that ideas of multicultural history are central in Sicilian political discourse, too. It sheds light on how one of Europe’s political ‘outliers’ – an electorally popular, pro-immigration mayor, in a continent dominated by xenophobic rhetoric and policies – has crafted his political messaging.

There are good reasons to study the language of the far right, as a growing number of scholars are doing (see e.g. Wodak 2015; Berti 2021), and indeed, to examine the phenomenon some call ‘populism’ in Italy (see e.g. Bracciale and Martella 2017; Agnew and Shin 2020; Maccaferri and Mammone 2022). With some exceptions, however (see e.g. Però 2007), liberal ‘cosmopolitan’ rhetoric in Italy has until recently been studied in less detail. Camilla Hawthorne demonstrates the value of examining how the left invokes the Mediterranean “to challenge racism, xenophobia, and border fortification” (2022, 118). My research builds on her approach: taking her emphasis on the “fraught and politically ambiguous” practice of using the Mediterranean in this way (120), and applying it to social media discourse at Italy’s southern border, where the Mediterranean is felt both as a geographical reality and a political imaginary. By critically examining political language intended to oppose xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, and the popular reception of this language, we gain a better understanding of what work this kind of rhetoric does, and how.

My question is not whether the various narratives I examine are entirely supported by historiography; in many cases, this is far from clear cut. Instead, building on the approach of scholars like Claudio Fogu (2003; 2020), I focus on the political work these “imaginaries” carry out. In section 2, I explore how these contested histories function as tools for constructing a past that is ‘usable’ in the present and aimed at the future.²¹⁵ In section 3, I analyze some rhetorical moves employed by Orlando that reinforce a sense of continuity with this sometimes idealized past. In section 4, I set out some salient features of Orlando’s descriptions of Palermo’s renewed religious diversity. Section 5 transitions into Chapter Six, where the tensions that emerge from Orlando’s sense of *palermitanità* come under scrutiny, and where some of its political effects, intentional and otherwise, are brought to light.

2. Sicilian histories

To construct a vision of Palermitan local identity, Orlando draws a series of connections between periods in the city’s history and the contemporary reality in Palermo, in order to argue that these demonstrate certain characteristics inherent to *palermitanità*. This section explores the principal historical periods and phenomena that Orlando uses in this way.

²¹⁵ The idea of a ‘usable’ past builds on a classic essay by Van Wyck Brooks (1918).

This section begins by concentrating on what Orlando and others term the ‘Arab-Norman’ period, before asking how Orlando’s version of that historical period is contested by his audience. It then explores how Sicily’s historic marginalization is employed in the service of local identity construction, and subsequently discusses suggestions that Palermo’s patron saints represent the city’s openness. It goes on to examine some instances of Palermo’s historic plurilingualism, asking how Orlando employs these to emphasize the city’s past and present diversity.

“The Arab-Norman”

The historical period that Orlando most frequently invokes in the service of his vision of *palermitanità* is commonly referred to as the ‘Arab-Norman.’ The 2015 inclusion of ‘Arab-Norman Palermo’ on the World Heritage list increased the visibility of this term. In UNESCO’s definition, this term refers to the Norman kingdom of Sicily *only*, beginning in 1130 and ending in 1194, the year in which the kingdom passed to the House of Hohenstaufen (UNESCO 2015). It does not, contrary to what one might expect, encompass the earlier ‘Arab’ period, i.e. the preceding centuries of Islamic rule (831–1091). The incorporation of ‘Arab’ into the moniker refers to what some call the “Norman Synthesis”: the idea that this Norman period saw the creative fusion of Christian Latin, Byzantine Greek and Muslim Arabic cultures (Granara 2019, 147).

The choice to celebrate a particular moment in history is fraught with decisions. What precise moment should be prioritized; where does the period begin and end; and indeed, what brought it to an end? What name should this period be given? What lessons, if any, are we supposed to learn from our ancestors who lived in this period? In what sense, literal or figurative, can we call them our ancestors? Ideology informs how we answer all these questions, and no less so in the Sicilian example at hand. As Naor Ben-Yehoyada notes in his study of Sicilian and Tunisian fishing communities, his interlocutors invoked a past Mediterranean in the process of their self-fashioning, but they evoked a *different* past Mediterranean depending on their circumstances. Accordingly:

The more recent medieval past of Arab and Arab Norman Sicily offered a more tangible and resonant repertoire of relationships. Sicilians and Tunisians were forging a bond not of brotherhood but of affinity. Present-day Sicilians and Tunisians cast themselves as descendants of their respective medieval predecessors (Ben-Yehoyada 2017, 153).

Both Ben-Yehoyada’s Christian and Muslim interlocutors referred to authoritative historical precedents “in which Muslims and Christians had cohabited on the island,” and harked back to a “script that they derived from that common golden age” (2017, 222). However, that golden age is neither a universalist utopia, nor is it “one and the same” for Christians and Muslims alike. “The Tunisian side mentioned Arab Sicily of the ninth century, and the Sicilian side replied by recalling Arab-Norman Sicily of the eleventh century” (222).

Evoking a ‘golden age,’ therefore, does not elide inter-religious power dynamics. Instead, it reformulates or reasserts them, depending on the speaker’s present-day position. Foregrounding the *Norman*, therefore, is not ideologically neutral either. Notwithstanding the supposed peaceful *convivenza* between religious groups during some of the Norman period, its rulers were Roman Catholic kings, and Europeans. As Herzfeld emphasizes, “a shared rhetoric of the past, however

official it may seem on the surface, can conceal multiple interpretations and experiences of time” (1991, 15).

The UNESCO application and declaration took place during Orlando’s mayoralty, and with his office’s support. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that he celebrates the World Heritage listing as a success. Furthermore, he uses it as an opportunity to ‘charge’ Sicily’s ‘Arab-Norman’ history with political significance. He writes that the declaration:

Reminds us that different cultures and religions, like the Arab, the Norman, and the Byzantine, can coexist [*convivere*] together, influencing and contaminating one another reciprocally, as they did in the past, and as they do today in Palermo, city of peace and of dialogue between peoples [...].²¹⁶

The present is therefore described as though it ‘echoes’ an idealized past *convivenza*.

Orlando quotes UNESCO’s Sicily director, Aurelio Angelini, contrasting this vision of Palermo against “those nations which [...] prefer to build walls and fences [to stop] those fleeing from war [...]”.²¹⁷ Again quoting Angelini, Orlando proclaims that Sicily has “always been a land that has opened its arms to the foreigner.”²¹⁸ He thus proposes that there is a crucial continuity between Sicily’s capacity to absorb external influences in the Norman period, and its present capacity to welcome immigrants arriving on its shores.

For Orlando, “the inclusive spirit of our city has ancient roots, recently confirmed by the addition of Arab-Norman Palermo to the UNESCO World Heritage list.”²¹⁹ The present welcoming spirit of the city, moreover, is not a weak vestige of a past high-water mark. On the contrary, hospitality and *convivenza* are “values alive today more than ever,” and belong specifically to “our people [...] the Sicilian people.”²²⁰ Examples of multicultural heritage are promoted to remind Sicilians of their present and ongoing cosmopolitan ‘essence.’²²¹

Nonetheless, Orlando presents the project of ‘reviving’ Palermo’s Arab-Norman history, or of imbuing it with fresh political significance, as a work in progress. What Orlando regularly refers to simply as *l’Arabo-Normanno* “must become more and more a part of life in the city, in the community.”²²² It must be “lived,” put into practice by the Palermitan people, as part of the “recuperation of the city’s soul.”²²³

²¹⁶ “[C]i ricorda che culture e religioni diverse, come quella araba, normanna e bizantina, possono convivere insieme, influenzandosi e contaminandosi reciprocamente, così come accadeva nel passato, e così come accade oggi a Palermo, città della pace e del dialogo fra i popoli [...]” (Orlando 3 July 2015b).

²¹⁷ “[Q]uei paesi che [...] preferiscono ergere muri e steccati a chi fugge dalla guerra [...]” (Orlando 3 July 2015b).

²¹⁸ “La Sicilia è sempre stata una terra che ha aperto le braccia allo straniero” (Orlando 3 July 2015b).

²¹⁹ “Lo spirito inclusivo della nostra città ha radici antiche, recentemente sancite dall’inserimento di PalermoAraboNormanna nella lista del World Heritage Unesco” (Orlando 23 October 2015).

²²⁰ “Questi monumenti rappresentano e sono espressione certamente della storia e dell’architettura di questa parte del nostro paese, ma sono anche simboli dello spirito e dei valori del nostro popolo, del popolo siciliano [...] il risultato della nostra storia, fatta di accoglienza e convivenza, valori oggi più vivi che mai” (Orlando 29 October 2016).

²²¹ Not all of Orlando’s attempts to instill a sense of ‘Arab-Norman pride’ in Palermitans are equally well thought out. We might note, for instance, a video circulated by Orlando which features the Mayor in a headscarf, “dressed as an Arab” (“vestito da arabo” (Orlando 15 December 2016b)), while sitting between two men wearing crowns in the fashion of Norman kings, in order to teach children about the city’s “Arab-Norman treasures” (“tesori arabo-normanni”).

²²² “Credo che l’Arabo-Normanno non sia semplicemente una delibera formale dell’Unesco, ma invece è, e deve sempre più diventare, parte della vita della città, della comunità” (Orlando 14 September 2016).

²²³ “[I]l riconoscimento Unesco deve essere vissuto come una grande occasione di recupero e innovazione dell’anima della città” (Orlando 8 November 2016).

The meanings given to Palermo's Arab-Norman history, and its relevance (or lack thereof) to the contemporary situation, are heavily contested topics in Palermo. This is demonstrated both by Orlando's statements and by his audience's responses. Orlando's vision is by no means universally shared in the city, though some commentators respond positively to his insistence that there is a nexus between past and present Sicilian culture. Many of these cite art and cuisine as tangible evidence that historic cultural syncretism remains relevant to the daily lives of Sicilians. Such comments imply that, as historic diversity produced the high-water marks of Sicilian art history and culinary tradition – rooted in a time when Palermo was “capital of the Mediterranean,” one commentator observes, or “capital of Europe,” in the words of another – so present diversity is the key to its future cultural success.

To bolster Orlando's thesis, some commentators invoke the Arab origins of ingredients such as the eggplant, and of dishes such as *sarde a beccafico*, *caponata*, *cassata*, and almond-based sweets. They highlight contributions made by the medieval Jewish population to Sicilian street food, especially *pani câ meusa*, commonly thought to be a Jewish innovation.²²⁴ Similarly, with reference to the city's architectural heritage, one commentator writes that “we should be thanking Islamic civilization for leaving us so many artistic treasures”; another writes approvingly that “half of our beautiful city was built by Arabs.” As I suggest in Part One, this may be an exaggeration. It neatly demonstrates that a form of *Siqillismo* affects how the cityscape is perceived in the public sphere, in ways that are not uniformly supported by architectural historians. “In Palermo, al-Idrisi [a Muslim Arab] wrote one of the world's most important geographies.” What would Sicily be, it is implied, without these cornerstones of its cultural identity?

For some commentators on Orlando's Facebook page, Palermo's history as a locus of cultural syncretism determines its current ability to ‘integrate’ recent arrivals. “Everyone who comes to Palermo ‘Palermitanizes’ themselves, and often the Indians and the Senegalese speak our dialect better than we do,” celebrates one commentator. This remark comes immediately after citing the historic collaboration between Muslims, Jews and Christians under Roger II (who also commissioned al-Idrisi's *magnum opus*) as evidence of Sicily's inherent propensity for cosmopolitanism.

There are also commentators who imply that those who negate Sicily's multi-religious history are merely demonstrating that they are ignorant or uneducated. “Anyone who denies that Sicily, especially Palermo, is Muslim and Jewish as well as Catholic, should go back to school,” writes one. Indeed, another suggests that there is a subsection of Palermitan society that neither understands nor wants to understand its own history. Some commentators write condescendingly about this subsection of society: as well as being “shameful,” they are “poor” (in the sense of pitied) and “profoundly ignorant.” Not everybody, therefore, accepts that Sicily owes a ‘debt’ to its multi-religious past. If they did, those who insist that it remains pertinent would not need to repeatedly cite, reiterate, and reinforce the point.

Contesting the *convivenza* thesis

There are instances, in the comments section of Orlando's Facebook page, in which the Mayor's audience refines, disputes, or rejects his understanding of Sicilian history. Some commentators supportive of Orlando's pro-immigration stance liken contemporary Palermo favorably to the ‘tolerant’ reign of Roger II (1130–1154). Another, however, recalls that subsequently, during the

²²⁴ See Basile (2018, 99f). *Pani câ meusa*, or *panino con la milza* in standard Italian, is a soft-bread sandwich filled with chopped veal lung and spleen. It is a particularly Palermitan dish, uncommon even in other Sicilian cities.

reign of Frederick II (1198–1250), the remaining Muslims of Western Sicily were expelled to the mainland. It is by no means straightforward, in other words, to determine precisely what certain episodes in Sicilian history should mean, and what lessons, if any, can be learned from them.

Some critical commentators accept the basic veracity of Orlando's version of Sicilian history – the impact of cultural influences from across the Mediterranean – but lament that this is so. “We’re stuck in the period of the Arab invasion,” writes one commentator, “or perhaps we’ve gone back there.” This implies that to emulate this past period of supposed *convivenza*, as Orlando encourages Palermitans to do, is to regress to an earlier, less ‘developed’ state. As Herzfeld observes, “[S]ocial actors adapt the sweeping generalizations of officialdom in order to promote some of their own ideas about what tradition might be. In this process, they gradually recast official concepts to meet personal experiences and aspirations” (1991, 205).

Another commentator regrets that the comparatively less ‘tolerant’ reign of Frederick II had not lasted longer: “perhaps if it had done, we would have more German blood and a less chaotic society!” As well as reflecting an internalized *meridionalismo* – a constellation of stereotypes and anti-Southern attitudes dominant in the hegemonic conception of Europe (Dainotto 2007) – these ‘pessimistic’ readings of Sicilian history interpret the island’s ‘mixture’ not as its greatest asset, but rather, as a problem to be resolved, and as the source of its deficiently or incompletely ‘European’ (i.e. civilized, modern) character. As François Hartog and Jacques Revel put it, conflicting interpretations of history are “also argument-based narratives which often mobilize the same resources for conflicting ends” (2014, 4).

Other commentators reject altogether the idea that medieval Sicilian history is relevant to the present context. “Now we’re Italians, and our religion is Catholic,” writes one commentator, and “history is history.” Anti-immigration commentators repeatedly dismiss the insistence that there are lessons in Sicilian history, which can or should be applied in the context of twenty-first-century immigration. They refer to this insistence as a form of “*buonismo*.” This describes a naive, do-gooder attitude, which suggests that these emotional appeals to a shared Sicilian history come across as condescending. In Antonio Sorge’s ethnographic studies of the Sicilian island of Lampedusa (2018; 2021), many of the islanders interviewed disputed the idea proposed by activists that welcoming immigrants is necessarily and ‘inherently’ Lampedusan behavior. So too in the digital sphere can we observe that certain Palermitans resist their own interpellation into a regional narrative of historic and present ‘openness.’

The historical accuracy of the Norman ‘Synthesis’ thesis is itself contested in this online political community. One commentator on Orlando’s page asserts that “anyone who has studied architectural history knows that there is no such thing as Arab-Norman.” The extent of the Arab influence on Norman culture remains a topic of disagreement among historians, too. A number of historians I spoke to in Sicily lamented what they saw as the inaccuracy, or the oversimplification, of the “Arab-Norman” moniker. As Karla Mallette has argued, the debate also has political repercussions. Mallette notes that the nineteenth-century historian Michele Amari went from being a Sicilian separatist, who scorned the Italian and celebrated the Arab, to a pro-unification Italian patriot. In so doing, he came to “reject[] the notion of direct Arabic influence on Sicilian culture,” instead “develop[ing] a new way of conceptualizing the passage of Arabic cultural forms to the mainland” (2005, 40). Mallette observes that Amari’s conceptualization of Sicilian history shifted to accommodate this political change of heart. Where he had formerly celebrated the Arab *per se* as distinctively Sicilian – the very thing that separated the island from the Italian mainland – the later, Europe-facing Amari came to insist instead that “Norman *ventriloquism* of Arab culture introduced the best aspects of that culture to a European audience” (2005, 40).

The question of ‘whom we have to thank’ for Palermo’s medieval artistic heritage remains a topic of discussion and disagreement: not only in academic historiographical discourse, but also in public online *fora* such as Orlando’s Facebook page. What Ben-Yehoyada calls the ‘script’ is neither fixed nor solely informed by historical scholarship. On the contrary, my analysis demonstrates the importance of public discourse – specifically, social media discourse – for the use of historical reference points to claim an essential Sicilian cosmopolitanism. As I have shown, this script is constantly recited and tweaked in the public sphere, not just by high-profile figures like Orlando, but also by his audience, who add details to bolster this narrative, drawing explicit connections between Sicily’s distant past and its contemporary diversity. Their constant back-and-forth with those who do not accept this interpretation shows that this narrative develops through conflictual dialogue, but also that plenty of Sicilians nonetheless do not recognize themselves in this story.

Sicily on the margins

Certain commentators on Orlando’s Facebook posts are vocal in their opposition to those who would downplay or disavow Sicily’s ‘Arab-ness.’ “You too are an Arab,” insists one comment. In another instance, a commentator points out that their xenophobic Sicilian interlocutor has an “obviously North-African surname,” remarking upon the apparent irony that such a person, in particular, could be hostile towards immigrants arriving from the southern shore of the Mediterranean. “You wouldn’t exist if the Muslims hadn’t been in Sicily millennia ago,” writes one commentator. “We are the product of many cultures mixed together, and that’s the way it will always be.” Such comments argue that, whether they like it or not, Sicilians are the product of cultural syncretism: they will never be like those in the North (of Italy, or of Europe), who insist on the value of ethnic purity. “To Salvini, you’ll always be a *terrone*,” quips one commentator, referring to a xenophobic slur used within Italy to denigrate southern Italians, which sometimes occurs alongside attempts to characterize them as ‘Africans,’ or as ‘no better than’ foreigners (Cole 2005, 20).

“Sicilian history has taught us: emigrating is not a crime,” insists a popular slogan among local pro-migrant organizations.²²⁵ Pro-immigrant Sicilians often invoke the history of discrimination against Sicilians, both within Italy and in diaspora, to encourage their fellow compatriots to empathize with the oppressed. “We are a land of emigrants,” writes one commentator on Orlando’s Facebook page. “We’ve had enough hatred, enough racism. Let’s show that we’re different.” In his ethnographic work, Jeffrey Cole cites a university professor who uses this same history to negate the very possibility of racism in Sicily, in spite of copious evidence to the contrary: “we can’t be racist because we’ve been emigrants for so long!” (2005). Unlike Cole’s professor, this Facebook commentator uses the history of emigration in a call to action. They implicitly acknowledge that Sicilian anti-racism is *not* innate or inevitable, but rather, a choice to be made, albeit the one that would be most respectful or faithful to the experience of many Sicilians’ ancestors. As Hawthorne notes, there is an important distinction between using “histories of Mediterranean interconnection” to “contest Italian institutional racism,” and using them to “deny its existence” (2022, 93).

Responding to the news that thousands of Palermitans had joined a demonstration at the city’s port, calling for safe passage for boats carrying migrants across the Mediterranean, one

²²⁵ The Italian version – “La storia siciliana, ce l’ha insegnato; emigrare non è reato” (see e.g. Cuomo and Iorio 2007) – works better, not least because it rhymes.

commentator writes: “long live my city of Palermo! The South is demonstrating its humanitarian, moral and ethical values, in spite of its poverty, and in spite of all the prejudices it experiences! Those who have less give more.” It is not only the experience of poverty that is supposed to make Sicilians especially empathetic, but also the experience on the receiving end of prejudice, which is compared to the prejudice experienced by immigrants to the island in the twenty-first century. “Even if one or two of them might not be perfect, they can’t all be tarred with the same brush,” argues one commentator. “When we leave Italy, too, Sicilians are all [viewed as] *mafiosi*, and it’s horrible the way we’re all marked like that.”

Michael Herzfeld identifies a paradox he describes as “cultural intimacy,” being “the idea that stereotypes or signifiers of identity that embarrass a social group in the face of outside observers may also be the factors that most strongly create a sense of community within the group” (2005a). For some marginalized social groups, “embarrassment can become the ironic basis of intimacy and affection, a fellowship of the flawed” (29). I contend that a form of cultural intimacy is at play here too. The very things that have historically been used to marginalize Sicilians (Schneider 1998) – proximity to North Africa; poverty and mass emigration; assumptions by outsiders that Sicilians must all be tainted by organized crime – become repurposed as catalysts for empathy and therefore a stronger sense of shared humanity. Insisting that the Sicilian experience necessarily leads, or should lead, to greater empathy and solidarity with those in need, has the effect of strengthening and valorizing a sense of Sicilian identity. By implication, it is the rest of Italy, with its mainstream anti-immigration political climate, and especially the North, which is found wanting in this view.

Saints and symbolism

The hagiographies and traditions surrounding the veneration of Palermo’s patron saints contribute to a shared sense of civic identity, and Orlando specifically invokes them as symbols of the city’s openness. Saint Rosalia (1130–1166) is perhaps the best known of Palermo’s patron saints.²²⁶ At the annual procession in her honor, her chariot is shaped like a ship; in 2015, her statue arrived in Palermo from the sea, to symbolize, in Orlando’s words, “Palermo’s ancient disposition towards hospitality”: “the Santuzza [the statue of the ‘Little Saint’] arrived by sea just as thousands of migrants arrive each year on Sicily’s shores [...] the migrants are received with the same respect with which we received the statue of the Santuzza.”²²⁷ This conception ‘humanizes’ the statue of the saint, while conversely affording an element of sanctity to the migrants arriving on Sicily’s shores. Orlando thus employs the occasion of the feast of Saint Rosalia to imply that the respectful embrace of immigrants is a Christian religious duty, as well as a ‘secular’ duty shared by citizens of Palermo.

Saint Benedict of San Fratello, also known as *San Benedetto il Moro* (Saint Benedict the Moor), is perhaps even more closely associated with the cosmopolitan image Orlando attempts to portray of Palermo. Benedict was born in Sicily to enslaved African parents in around 1524 (Fiume 2012, 145). Various details, including discrepancies between hagiographies, and a popular Sicilian

²²⁶ Deborah Puccio-Den has argued that Orlando’s political life story “itself came to embody the hagiographic model represented by St. Rosalia,” modeled on the quasi-religious ‘sacrifice’ he made by risking his life to oppose the Mafia in the political sphere (Puccio-Den 2008, 381).

²²⁷ “Questa processione via mare, oltre a simboleggiare l’antica propensione all’accoglienza di Palermo, è anche un modo per coinvolgere tutta la città nei festeggiamenti [...] La Santuzza è arrivata dal mare come migliaia di migranti ogni anno giungono sulle coste della Sicilia... i migranti vanno accolti con lo stesso rispetto con il quale abbiamo accolto la statua della Santuzza” (Orlando 12 July 2015).

dialect name for Benedict, *Santu Scavuzzu* ('Saint Slave'), suggest at least the possibility that Benedict might himself have been born into enslavement (ibid.).

Orlando calls Benedict a "symbol of peace and of interculturality";²²⁸ a "son of a slave, and [...] confirmation of the culture of harmonious coexistence [*convivenza*] [and] of diversity in the name of equality, which makes Palermo a city of peace and of rights."²²⁹ In one sense, it is indeed remarkable that a Black African has been a patron saint of an Italian city for over four centuries. The invocation of Benedict as a symbol of Palermo's capacity for racial justice, however, is based on a selective interpretation of the saint's history. After all, if Benedict's example is indeed evidence that Palermo has always been a city of "peace and rights," how is it that his parents could have been legally enslaved on Sicilian soil by Sicilian families, or that, in all likelihood, his siblings could have remained so enslaved (Fiume 2006)?

Orlando describes Benedict's parents as having arrived at Palermo "like the thousands of migrants who arrive today at Palermo's port."²³⁰ This not only draws a false equivalency, however, between enslaved Africans in the sixteenth century and the migrants arriving on Italy's shores in the twenty-first. It also elides Sicily's own role in European slavery; its role as an active protagonist in a system of brutality, rather than as the 'multicultural' safe haven Orlando implies it has always been. By invoking Benedict as a "symbol [...] of tolerance and of Palermo's generous hospitality towards those who flee their own countries to save their own lives,"²³¹ Orlando downplays Sicily's historic involvement in Europe's enslavement of Africans. Slavery, after all, was not merely something that other Europeans did on Sicilian soil (see e.g. De Lucia 2020).

In Deborah Puccio-Den's account of Orlando's earlier invocations of Benedict as a symbol of 'mixture' (2002), Orlando admits to the author that he relied on what we might call a rhetorical 'sleight of hand': an optical illusion or an element of falsification. However, overlooking the complexity of Benedict's example in the service of a neat narrative, which links a supposed past *convivenza* to the present, is not only historically suspect. It also serves an exculpatory role, by sidestepping a necessary reckoning with a shameful episode in Europe's past, which is also Sicily's past. It therefore reinforces an idea that Europe, or at least its Mediterranean edge, is "innocent of its imperialist histories and present complicities" (Danewid 2017, 1676). By constructing a selective historical narrative – even (or especially) one that celebrates a supposed history of 'hospitality' – aspects of Orlando's liberal, multicultural rhetoric contribute to what Ida Danewid calls the "erasure" of a "constitutive history of empire, colonial conquest, and [...] slavery" (1679), and of Sicily's place within that history.

Plurilingualism

The idea that Palermo is a city of many languages is central to Orlando's multicultural vision. Orlando announced on Facebook the official logo for Palermo's designation as Italy's 2018

²²⁸ "San Benedetto il Moro, simbolo di Pace e di interculturalità" (Orlando 24 June 2012).

²²⁹ "San Benedetto il Moro, figlio di uno schiavo e da secoli compatrono di Palermo, conferma della cultura della armonica convivenza di diversità in nome della eguaglianza, che fa di Palermo una città di pace e di diritti" (Orlando 8 July 2013b).

²³⁰ "San Benedetto il Moro, africano, figlio di schiavi giunti al porto di Palermo come quelle migliaia di migranti che oggi giungono nel nostro porto" (Orlando 5 December 2015).

²³¹ "Il nostro copatrono, infatti, veniva dal mare ed è un perfetto e attuale simbolo di riscatto, della tolleranza e della generosa accoglienza che Palermo mostra verso coloro che fuggono dal proprio Paese per salvare la propria vita" (Orlando 28 June 2015).

“Capital of Culture,” comprising four differently colored, stylized letters in Arabic, Hebrew, Phoenician and Greek. He explained that:

Four Ps tell the story of Palermo [...] the P of Palermo in the languages of those who laid the foundations of the city. To emphasize once again its role not only as an Italian capital, but as a capital of the Mediterranean, a symbol of hospitality towards different cultures.²³²

If these ancient cultures laid the foundations of Palermo, this implies, then the multicultural city of today is building upon their good work.

Similarly, Orlando invokes historic evidence of Palermo’s plurilingual history as proof that Palermo, “since time immemorial, and through to the present day, has been an example of hospitality and fertile terrain for contamination between the cultures of the Mediterranean [...]”²³³ He describes the Stele di Anna, a funereal stone in four scripts, as “unique evidence of the complex and diverse cultural identity of our city.”²³⁴ Orlando’s text explains why the former church of Saint Michael the Archangel, where the stone was placed in 1149, was chosen as the site for the commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2013.

As with Orlando’s celebration of Saint Benedict, however, here too we might observe that a certain selective memory is required, with regard to the history of the Jews on the island, in order to describe Sicily as a straightforward locus of hospitality “since time immemorial.” After all, the island’s Jews were expelled or forced to convert to Christianity in 1492. Although Sicily’s Jewish community was small following Italian unification, which saw the legal emancipation of Italy’s Jewish population, Sicily too was subject to the Fascist ‘racial laws’ from 1938 until 1943. As in the rest of Fascist Italy, Jews in Sicily were also expelled from their jobs, forced into exile, or in at least one case driven to suicide, by the application of these laws.²³⁵

At times it is plurilingualism that represents, for Orlando, the essence of Palermo. At other times, it is a shared ‘lingua franca,’ specifically, the Mediterranean Lingua Franca or Sabir, which Orlando celebrates. He described a festival of “colors, dance and multi-ethnic sounds,” by the name of Sabir, taking place in the Ballarò area of Palermo.²³⁶ Sabir was a ‘bridge’ language once used, particularly in port cities, to communicate with people from across the Mediterranean.

²³² “Quattro P raccontano Palermo. Arabo, ebraico, fenicio e greco. La P di Palermo declinata nelle lingue di chi ha gettato le fondamenta della città. A sottolineare ancora una volta, il ruolo di capitale non solo italiana, ma del Mediterraneo, simbolo di accoglienza di culture diverse” (Orlando 29 January 2018).

²³³ “La nostra città, da tempi immemorabili e fino ai nostri giorni, è stata esempio di accoglienza e terreno fertile per la contaminazione delle culture del Mediterraneo. In quella che era allora un semplice cappella dedicata a San Michele Arcangelo fu collocata nel 1149 la lapide quadrilingue (latino, greco, arabo e ebraico), che costituisce una testimonianza unica della complessa e variegata identità culturale della nostra città” (Orlando 25 January 2013).

²³⁴ On some resonances of the Stele di Anna in contemporary Palermo, see Chapter One. The text contains four scripts but three languages: Latin, Greek and Arabic. The fourth script is Judeo-Arabic: Arabic written in Hebrew characters, rather than Hebrew itself.

²³⁵ On the racial laws and their application in Sicily, see Genco (2000). Genco cites an October 1938 census that counted 202 Jews living in the whole of Sicily. On the strict enforcement of the racial laws in respect of those Jews who were living in Sicily, see Giovanna D’Amico’s research into those removed from their posts at the University of Palermo in 1938 (2020), including some biographical details of Jews living in Palermo who were forced into exile. See also a document entitled “La Persecuzione degli Ebrei in Italia: Documenti per una Storia,” which notes that four Sicilian Jews were deported from Italy in the Shoah (Prefettura di Catania 2016), though they were not arrested in Sicily.

²³⁶ “Festa di colori, danza e suoni multietnici” (Orlando 1 July 2016). See section 4 of Chapter Six for a discussion of the problems associated with the uncritical use of words like ‘ethnic,’ ‘multi-ethnic,’ etc.

Orlando calls it a “language that symbolizes integration between peoples.”²³⁷ Sabir was primarily based on Romance languages but also borrowed from Arabic, Turkish and Tamazight vocabularies, among others (Mallette 2014). Orlando varies, therefore, between celebrating the multiplicity of languages recorded and spoken on Sicilian soil, as in the instance of the funereal stone, and celebrating examples of hybridization such as Sabir: fusions between cultures that form one distinctive Mediterranean identity.

Orlando is not the only mayor of an Italian or European city to argue in favor of migration. Some, like Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, celebrate the fact that their city was “built by migrants” (Khan 2023), or like Mayor of Naples Luigi de Magistris, claim that theirs is a “city of shelter” (de Magistris 2017, 48). But few use historical arguments as intricate and developed as Orlando’s to do so. Luigi de Magistris, for example, employs the abstract idea of a virtuous history, but without the detail and texture of Orlando’s narrative, arguing that “in Naples, we are either all illegals or no-one is illegal. This is the history of our city, but it is also our political vision.” He portrays solidarity as an active political choice, more than an historic inevitability. Orlando, in contrast, offers an unusual and instructive case study for pro-immigrant political rhetoric that, as my analysis has shown, is firmly rooted in particular interpretations of the *longue durée*, and of specific narratives about periods in local history.

3. Rhetorical strategies

Having shown how Orlando employs a variety of historical narratives in his political messaging, this section focuses on key rhetorical strategies that reinforce his vision of *palermitanità*. I discuss a metaphor of which Orlando is particularly fond: the comparison of Palermo to a mosaic, itself an important art form for the city’s cultural identity. I then examine references to blood and familiarity, both literal and metaphorical. I go on to explore how Orlando seeks to ‘reclaim’ the idea that ‘contamination’ is a thing of value, rather than a negative, before showing how Orlando mixes the metaphor of roots with the ‘modernizing’ metaphor of wings, to portray a city that is faithful to its traditions while nonetheless being forward-looking and ‘progressive.’

The mosaic metaphor

Perhaps the single most vivid and important metaphor Orlando uses to describe Palermo is that of the mosaic. Orlando is not the first public figure to employ this metaphor to support a particular approach to immigration.²³⁸ Nonetheless, Orlando is unusual in the extent to which he extends and builds upon this metaphor. He explains his reasons for referring to the “Mosaico-Palermo” with reference to the “different tiles, the diverse colors and dimensions” that comprise it.²³⁹ “This magnificent mosaic is held together because of its frame, made of respect for human rights and human beings.”²⁴⁰ The apparently contrasting shapes and colors of the individual tiles of the mosaic are indeed an apt metaphor for the kind of multiculturalism to which Orlando aspires. Each tile makes a distinct and necessary contribution to the whole. The whole, in turn, is not only capable

²³⁷ “Lingua simbolo di integrazione tra i popoli” (Orlando 1 July 2016).

²³⁸ See e.g. Gibbon (1938) for an earlier use of the mosaic metaphor in the Canadian context.

²³⁹ “Lo spirito, la storia e i valori di quello che chiamo ‘Mosaico-Palermo’, un mosaico fatto di differenti tessere, di colori e dimensioni diverse” (Orlando 3 July 2015a).

²⁴⁰ “Questo magnifico mosaico è tenuto in armonia grazie alla sua cornice, fatta del rispetto dei diritti umani e degli esseri umani [...]” (Orlando 3 July 2015a).

of incorporating contradictions, differences and tensions, but requires these very contrasts in order to convey the desired artistic effect. The whole of a mosaic is greater than the sum of its parts.²⁴¹

Significantly, the mosaic is at the very core of Palermo's artistic and architectural identity. The exquisite twelfth-century Norman examples at the Palatine Chapel and at the Church of Saint Mary of the Admiral, for example, both form part of the Arab-Norman World Heritage list, a title that does not itself reveal that they are in fact much indebted to Byzantine artistic practices.²⁴² The Muslim Andalusian Arab traveler Ibn Jubayr visited the latter building during the reign of the Norman King William II, and wrote that it was "beyond dispute the most wonderful edifice in the world."²⁴³ Since the years immediately following their construction, therefore, and even from the perspective of a Muslim traveler who hoped that Palermo would soon be graced with the sound of the *adhan* once again, these buildings and the mosaics they housed were singled out as the very best treasures that Palermo had to offer.

As well as being rooted in Sicily, the mosaic represents in microcosm the plurality of artistic influences that contribute to Palermo's artistic heritage. To name but one illustrative example, the Church of Saint Mary of the Admiral was founded by a Byzantine Christian of Greek ancestry, born in Antioch and raised in Tunisia. While the church is "anchored in the architectural tradition of the Middle Byzantine period" (Kitzinger 1990, 63), its mosaics themselves bear a "direct Arab influence," and the individual schemes and motifs cannot be attributed exclusively to either sphere (256). In short, the city's famous mosaics are the product of "strong and constant reciprocal influences in the ornamental field between Byzantium and Islam" (*ibid.*). Similarly, Palermo as a whole is celebrated for incorporating numerous cultural influences. As Chapter Six will explore in greater detail, Orlando's vision of Palermo is both "Middle-Eastern and European"; he describes Palermitans themselves as "Arabs and Normans at the same time," much as Sicily's medieval mosaics are juxtaposed alongside Islamic artistic elements.²⁴⁴

The mosaic metaphor allows Orlando to argue that diversity is a Palermitan "value," leading to a "inexhaustible richness that is born of the contrast between colors, cultures and ways of being."²⁴⁵ The mosaic could not exist without the different colors that comprise it, and neither could Palermo. Orlando sees the diversity of the urban mosaic as something that, like an artwork, requires careful consideration – "audacity, inventiveness and patience" – to make it into a success.²⁴⁶ The juxtaposition of distinct cultures "comes with a risk," but it is a risk that Palermitans are adept at navigating, given the openness that the city's history has taught its inhabitants to exhibit. Diversity is nonetheless something that must be "managed" (*gestito*), a somewhat unusual choice of verb in this instance. It needs creative direction, in other words, which

²⁴¹ Anybody who has ever started close up to a well-executed mosaic and walked slowly backwards, while remaining focused on the artwork, will recognize this.

²⁴² Demus (1950) emphasizes the Byzantine roots of Sicilian mosaic decoration; see also e.g. Tronzo (1997) and Kitzinger (1990) on the art and architectural history of the Church of Saint Mary of the Admiral and the Palatine Chapel respectively.

²⁴³ Ibn Jubayr (2020, 369). "فأبصرنا من بنيانها مرأى يعجز الوصف عنه ويقع القطع بأنه أعجب مصانع الدنيا" (Ibn Jubayr 1907, 333).

²⁴⁴ "Palermo, Cefalù e Monreale sono, allo stesso tempo, città mediorientali ed europee. Io penso che l'arabo-normanno significhi esattamente quello che sto dicendo, perciò vi ringrazio e vi dico venite a vedere come è possibile vivere in pace essendo arabi e normanni allo stesso tempo" (Orlando 3 July 2015a).

²⁴⁵ "Palermo si qualifica ancora una volta un bellissimo mosaico dove la diversità è un valore [...]. Il nostro passato e la nostra storia ci hanno insegnato a essere tolleranti, a percepire chi è diverso da noi non come una minaccia o un ostacolo, ma come una ricchezza inesauribile che nasce dal confronto tra colori, culture e modi di essere" (Orlando 25 June 2014).

²⁴⁶ "Gestire la diversità comporta un rischio, quello di mettersi in discussione continuamente. Ma noi palermitani, per fortuna, abbiamo audacia, inventiva e tanta pazienza" (Orlando 25 June 2014).

implies that political leadership, such as Orlando's, is necessary to make a success of his multicultural vision.

As the mosaic can incorporate tiles with contrasting colors and shapes, so too can Palermo incorporate "ethnicities, habits and customs which differ greatly from one another."²⁴⁷ Orlando refers to Judaism, and to Islam and the Arab world, as well as to non-Roman-Catholic denominations of Christianity, as important components of the "mosaic of Palermo."²⁴⁸ He is careful to emphasize, however, that this mosaic is not a static, finished piece comprising historic influences, but a work in progress, in continuous flux, waiting to be embellished with additional tiles.²⁴⁹ He uses the verb *impreziosire*, "to make [more] precious," to describe this process of embellishment (in that particular case, to describe a ceremony appointing a new Bishop of the Byzantine Catholic Church).²⁵⁰

Even legislative developments can contribute to Orlando's metaphorical mosaic. The foundation of a Register of Civil Unions, which legally recognizes officialized same-sex partnerships, is celebrated as "another beautiful tile in the mosaic of Palermo, a mosaic that is resplendent because it is rich with differently-colored tiles."²⁵¹ In 2016, Orlando's Facebook account begins referring to a *pergamena* or 'parchment,' a certificate of sorts that he awards to distinguished residents and honored visitors, designating them as a "*tessera preziosa del mosaico di Palermo*," or a "precious tile of the mosaic of Palermo."²⁵² Each subsequent addition is viewed as 'enriching' the growing mosaic, without subtracting from the cohesive whole that preceded it.²⁵³

When observed close-up, a mosaic's individual component tiles can be distinguished from one another; they retain their specificity, their color, size and luster, and contrast with neighboring tiles. The mosaic city is precisely *not* a 'melting pot,' a place of fusion or integration between various cultures that become blended together and lose their distinctive characteristics. Nonetheless, Orlando oscillates between acknowledging this central feature of the mosaic form, and valorizing syncretism. In one instance, he writes that "Palermo has always been *meticcio*, it has always been a mosaic of diversity and equality, a meeting place between cultures which have never been opposed to one another."²⁵⁴ In this case, Orlando seeks to use the mosaic metaphor for a purpose for which it is ill-suited. The point of the mosaic is that its tiles *can* contrast with one another. Orlando's use of the word *meticcio*, on the other hand, implies the opposite.

The adjective *meticcio*, a cognate of the Spanish *mestizo* and the Portuguese *mestiço* (literally, 'mixed') implies hybridity. It mainly carries derogatory implications (see e.g. Battaglia 1994), but not exclusively (Hawthorne 2022), and there have been fraught attempts to 'reclaim' the term in Italy (Hawthorne 2021). It is the historical product of the racialization of colonized peoples, especially Indigenous peoples of the Americas (see e.g. Forbes 1993), and of a fixation

²⁴⁷ "[Q]ui coesistono etnie, usi e costumi diversissimi fra loro" (Orlando 4 June 2013).

²⁴⁸ Orlando (10 September 2017; 11 May 2013; 8 August 2013).

²⁴⁹ This stands in marked contrast to Davide Puca's description of Sicilian culture, as it is often characterized from outside (in the case of Puca's study, by English language recipe books), as the object of "historical parcelization," or *parcellizzazione storica*. *Parcellizzazione storica* views Sicilian culture as a composite of many layers of *historical* influences, but one that is now static, frozen in time, preserved by Sicilians "as though in a tomb, sheltered from the external present" ("come in un grembo, al riparo dal presente esterno") (Puca 2020, 266).

²⁵⁰ Orlando (28 July 2015).

²⁵¹ "Stasera, con il Registro delle unioni civili, abbiamo creato un'altra bella tessera del mosaico di Palermo, un mosaico splendido perché ricco di tessere con diversi colori" (Orlando 11 June 2013).

²⁵² See e.g. Orlando (20 September 2016).

²⁵³ "Il mosaico si arricchisce sempre di più" (Orlando 20 September 2013).

²⁵⁴ "Palermo è da sempre meticcio, è da sempre mosaico di diversità ed uguaglianza, luogo di incontro fra culture che mai si sono contrapposte." (Orlando 25 June 2013).

on blood ‘purity’ (Whitten 2007). *Meticcio* was used to describe African Italians during Italian colonial rule in the Horn of Africa, and was employed in the racist laws enforced there in the Fascist period (Barrera 2002). In the pejorative use of the word, it suggests ‘bastardization’ or ‘impurity.’ Although Orlando does not intend the adjective pejoratively – on the contrary, he seeks to valorize it – it nonetheless implies a blending, a syncretism, or an ‘in-between-ness,’ embodied in one resulting hybrid entity. This could not be more different from the *trompe-l’œil* effect that is essential to the mosaic form, in which the differences and boundaries between tiles are only apparently elided, and only when viewed from afar. On closer inspection, the component parts of a mosaic retain their individuality, and they complement neighboring tiles rather than becoming one with them.

Blood and familiarity

While Orlando does not himself prioritize such arguments, a number of commentators supportive of his positions use explicit references to genetic ancestry to build upon Orlando’s attempt to valorize Palermo’s *meticcio* qualities. As previously mentioned, the genealogy of the word *meticcio* is itself inseparable from the idea of *blood* mixity, and indeed, is a product of the racist idea that such a thing as blood purity (and conversely, blood contamination) can exist.

Some commentators in support of Orlando accept the basic thesis that Sicilians are the product of considerable ethnic diversity, and agree that this should be given a positive valency. One writes that “Palermo has multicultural and multiethnic DNA; our city cannot be host to any kind of racism, Islamophobia or antisemitism.” In a similar vein, a commentator, presumably originating from outside Sicily²⁵⁵ writes: “I love Palermo and the Sicilians. I am convinced that hospitality and solidarity are in their DNA.” It is, of course, a common figure of speech to say that an abstract characteristic is so ingrained in a person’s or a group’s way of being as to be ‘in their DNA.’ This is not always meant literally. Nonetheless, such comments draw a tight nexus between, on the one hand, the presumed literal multiethnicity of Sicilian DNA, and on the other hand, the figurative idea that such a thing as ‘hospitable DNA’ is present in Sicilians, which points to a certain biological essentialism. This suggests that regardless of their environment – regardless of nurture – Sicilians are *born* hospitable by nature.

Some of Orlando’s supporters suggest that if Sicilians betray this essential vocation for hospitality, they disavow a part of themselves. On the subject of anti-immigrant hostility, one commentator writes: “they [Islamophobes] are angry with Muslims without knowing that Arab blood runs in our veins,” suggesting that ignorance of genealogy is a cause of Sicilian Islamophobia. Another responds to an anti-immigrant comment by writing: “Arab blood runs in your veins, never forget that!” This implies, of course, that the immigrants arriving in Palermo from North Africa are direct blood relations, and should accordingly be treated with respect.

Orlando celebrates what he sees as the “link of brotherhood” between Palermo and Tunisia;²⁵⁶ he cites the planned ‘twinning’ between Palermo and the Palestinian city of Bethlehem as a reinforcement of Palermo’s “willingness and capacity for dialogue with the situation in the Middle East.”²⁵⁷ Without denying that such declarations of close familiar connections with Tunisians or Palestinians are sincerely felt, either figuratively or on a literal and genealogical basis,

²⁵⁵ This is deduced by the way they refer to Sicilians in the third person plural.

²⁵⁶ “Fra Palermo e la Tunisia c’è sempre stato un legame di fratellanza [...]” (Orlando 22 March 2015).

²⁵⁷ “[I]l processo di gemellaggio con la città palestinese di Betlemme [...] rafforza ancora di più la volontà e capacità di dialogo di Palermo con la realtà mediorientale” (Orlando 21 September 2013).

I share Naor Ben-Yehoyada's critique of the "assumption that the only kinship idiom applicable to transnational situations is fraternity" (2017, 146). There is a "platitudinal aftertaste," as Ben-Yehoyada notes (224), to such declarations of pan-Mediterranean brotherhood. Not least, they do not reflect the reality of the "uneven power relations" that exist, historically and in the present moment, between Sicilians and Arabs (Giglioli 2018, 69).

What assertions of a shared distant ancestry imply, and what declarations of direct "brotherhood" can preclude, is the possibility of a relation that "permits varying degrees and kinds of difference, familiarity, misunderstanding, and structural distance" (Ben-Yehoyada 2017, 147). Ben-Yehoyada locates this possibility in the underutilized metaphor of cousinhood. Cousins can lose touch, in the same way that, as a commentator on Orlando's Facebook page writes, Sicilians might conceivably "forget" the Arab contribution to their distant family history. Cousinhood "does not impose identity or amity on the cousined parties, but rather allows them to be both somewhat different and even in conflict with each other, while still related" (Ben-Yehoyada 2017, 147). While brotherhood still carries force in Sicilian pro-immigration political rhetoric, the idea that *sicilianità* (i.e. Sicilian-ness) is a composite identity – a mosaic – might still leave open the possibility for more nuanced and less platitudinal conceptions of Mediterranean relatedness, including frameworks such as the cousinhood metaphor advocated by Ben-Yehoyada.

Cultural contamination

Alongside the mosaic metaphor, and sometimes juxtaposed with it,²⁵⁸ Orlando repeatedly refers to *contaminazione* ('contamination'), usually in collocation with *culturale* ('cultural'), in a positive sense. Orlando did not invent the phrase *contaminazione culturale*, but he uses it in an attempt to 'reclaim' another word that has historically carried negative connotations. Of seven definitions of the verb *contaminare* given by an authoritative dictionary of the Italian language,²⁵⁹ six are unambiguously negative, referring to such concepts as "rendering impure," "corrupting, infecting," "moral contagion," "offending purity," "disturbing," or "making dirty."²⁶⁰ Only one of these definitions contains a positive or neutral connotation, and it is generally restricted to a narrow, technical use: the practice of "reuniting [or] merging elements originating in different sources in the composition of a literary work."²⁶¹

Orlando is not alone in seeking to 'charge' the word *contaminazione* with positive meaning. In the Italian context he has this in common with the philosopher Roberto Esposito. Esposito argues that the present moment suffers from a "preoccupation with self-protection": an obsession with immunity which, "if carried past a certain threshold, winds up negating life."²⁶² In part, this is done by stripping away the "existence outside of [one]self," which Esposito defines with the word *comunitas*. *Comunitas*, he writes, "refers to the constitutively open character of existence" (2013, 60f).

In a separate article, Esposito explains:

²⁵⁸ See e.g. Orlando (14 October 2016): "nostra città, ieri e oggi luogo di contaminazione e sincretismo [...] Oggi Palermo è internazionalmente riconosciuta come capitale dell'accoglienza e dell'integrazione [...] queste sono da sempre le caratteristiche del Mosaico Palermo."

²⁵⁹ The *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, in 21 volumes (Battaglia 1961–2002).

²⁶⁰ "Rendere impuro"; "corrompere, infettare"; "contagiar[e un'altra persona] moralmente"; "offendere la purezza"; "turbare"; "Rifl. [...] insozzarsi" (Battaglia 1995, 629f).

²⁶¹ "Riunire, fondere elementi provenienti da fonti diverse nella composizione di un'opera letteraria" (Battaglia 1995, 629).

²⁶² Translation by Rhiannon Welch (Esposito 2013, 61).

If we keep to its original meaning, community is not what protects the subject by enclosing it within the boundaries of a collective belonging, but rather what projects it outside itself in a manner that exposes it to contact with, as well as to contamination from, the other.²⁶³

A certain type and level of contamination, then, must be embraced to enable communities to be formed and nourished. The alternative is a damaging and deadly monomania.

For Orlando, too, *contaminazione* represents an opportunity, a positive choice that the people of Palermo can and must make:

We are committed to pursuing the cultural and historic route that the UNESCO monuments mark out for us [...]. To make cultural contamination into our *modus operandi*. In essence, we take on the commitment to keep being Arab-Norman, Mediterranean, and European.²⁶⁴

To be Palermitan – which means being ‘Arab-Norman,’ itself a hybrid or fusion identity, as well as belonging to the overlapping, composite regions of the Mediterranean and of Europe – is to *embody* cultural contamination.

In a separate statement, Orlando proposes the abolition of the *permesso di soggiorno* (‘residence permit’) system, which has a restrictive effect on the lives of migrants to Italy. In support of this proposal, he writes that “contamination can and must be considered an opportunity for mutual growth.”²⁶⁵ Given the existing semantic field surrounding *contaminazione*, equating immigration with contamination might appear to be a concession to anti-immigrant logic. In the context of Orlando’s message, however, it is clear that, as for Esposito, contamination can facilitate growth, even life.

While Esposito emphasizes the nexus between contamination and *comunitas*, Orlando similarly refers to the “*civiltà della contaminazione culturale*,” the “civility of cultural contamination.” The anthropologist Sydel Silverman notes that *civiltà*, though related to ‘civility,’ the ‘civic,’ the ‘urbane’ and ‘civilization,’ has no exact equivalent in English (1975, 2). She writes that the word instead describes “ideas and values about being civilized” (4). Although she argues that it is a “fluid ideology” (8), mutable according to social, economic and political circumstances, it “always implies an *urban* way of life” (2). This is unsurprising, perhaps, given its root in the Latin *civitas*, or city, but it is crucial to our understanding of Orlando’s idea that *contaminazione* is inherent to *civiltà*.

A city must be open to exchange and external influence if it is to be worthy of its name, if it is to be *civile*. *Civiltà* is precisely *not* a synonym for *campanilismo*, a fierce loyalty to one’s village belltower. On the contrary, it incorporates and necessitates an ability to engage with a “larger society and a wider sphere of civilization” (5). In Orlando’s conception, facilitating and embracing immigration, and with it, the possibility that new arrivals might contribute to

²⁶³ Translation by Santo Pettinato (Esposito 2011, 209).

²⁶⁴ “Ci impegniamo a proseguire la strada culturale e storica che i monumenti Unesco ci indicano [...]. A fare della contaminazione culturale il nostro *modus operandi*. Ci assumiamo, in buona sostanza, l’impegno ad essere ancora arabo-normanni, mediterranei ed europei” (Orlando 2 December 2016).

²⁶⁵ “La #CartadiPalermo, che propone l’abolizione del permesso di soggiorno, è apprezzata dai giovani che comprendono che la migrazione non può essere affrontata con logiche contabili e che la contaminazione può e deve essere considerata una opportunità di crescita comune.” (Orlando 26 February 2016).

(‘contaminate’) the city’s culture, is inherent to this open, urbane form of civility described by Silverman. Silverman writes that the ideology of *civiltà* is evident in the “hospitality shown to the outsider” (2). Indeed, if *civiltà* necessitates ‘contamination’ for Orlando, then it is not by chance that *contaminazione* is repeatedly used in conjunction with *accoglienza*: hospitality, or a propensity to receive the other. Palermo, for Orlando, has since time immemorial been an “example of hospitality and fertile terrain for contamination between the cultures of the Mediterranean.”²⁶⁶

Elsewhere, Orlando writes that “our city is already a model for hospitality and for safeguarding our cultural and historic Mediterranean heritage.”²⁶⁷ Hospitality and the Mediterranean, in other words, go hand in hand. The *topos* of hospitality, of course, is central to the stereotype of Mediterranean society (see e.g. Herzfeld 1987). Here Orlando reinforces hospitality as a characteristic shared with the rest of this imagined transnational community: both in the sense that it is seen as an inherently ‘Mediterranean’ way of being, and in the sense that Palermo’s hospitality benefits those who arrive there from other parts of the Mediterranean: by welcoming them into its cultural landscape, and by being a “fertile terrain for contamination.”

Esposito explores the etymological roots of *community* in the Latin *cum-munus*, *cum* being the prefix denoting coming or being together, and *munus* denoting a form of gift. Esposito is careful to note that *munus* is not just any old gift – a *donum* – but rather, it is specifically one distinguished by reciprocity or ‘mutuality,’ and by an ‘obligation’ or *impegno* (2010, 5). “In short, this is a gift that one gives because one *must* give and because one *cannot not* give” (ibid.). Orlando frames *accoglienza* in this very same way, as a duty owed by the city and its inhabitants. By linking *accoglienza* to his conception of “positive contamination” however,²⁶⁸ he also interprets the *munus* of hospitality as a gift which, when given, also enriches the giver culturally. This hospitality is a peculiar kind of gift, which simultaneously benefits both giver and receiver.

If we conceive of hospitality as a form of gift, a favor done by the giver for the receiver, there arises a ‘puzzle’ of how, or whether, hospitality complies with Marcel Mauss’ famous schema: the notion that a gift is given with an expectation of eventual reciprocity, directly or otherwise (1925). Julian Pitt-Rivers criticizes the tendency among anthropologists to insist on the logic of contracts and “economic equivalence,” and argues that the giver of a gift, in which we might include the host in a hospitality arrangement, receives grace, that is, gratitude, ‘thanks’ (2017). Julian Pitt-Rivers argued that the ‘gift’ of hospitality cannot be understood without reference to the concept of ‘grace,’ and that Mauss’ schema does not adequately reflect this. Though it has no “legal or material reality” (93), gratitude is in itself, after all, a vehicle of pleasure (297).

Building on Pitt-Rivers’ schema, using Orlando’s association of *accoglienza* with *contaminazione*, I would argue that Orlando conceptualizes the gift of hospitality as something reciprocated not only in the form of grace, i.e. adequate thanks, but also in the giver’s own cultural enrichment, having absorbed or been ‘contaminated’ by the recipient. There are important criticisms of the idea that receiving immigrants is a form of hospitality, Mediterranean or otherwise. As Andrew Shryock notes, “when conceptualized as ‘guests,’ immigrants become outsiders who belong to another place, even if they are born ‘here’” (2009). Ida Danewid argues

²⁶⁶ “La nostra città, da tempi immemorabili e fino ai nostri giorni, è stata esempio di accoglienza e terreno fertile per la contaminazione delle culture del Mediterraneo” (Orlando 25 January 2013).

²⁶⁷ ““La nostra città costituisce ormai un modello di accoglienza e salvaguardia del patrimonio culturale e storico Mediterraneo” (Orlando 4 July 2018).

²⁶⁸ “Contaminazione positiva” (Orlando 16 June 2018).

that calls for hospitality “confirm rather than disturb colonial relations of power,” by “divorc[ing] the contemporary Mediterranean crisis from Europe’s long history of empire and racial violence” (2017, 1679). Like Wendy Brown’s understanding of “tolerance,” hospitality too is a “luxury of power” (2006, 26), as well as “maintaining the otherness of the tolerated element” (28). Nonetheless, *accoglienza* remains the dominant lens through which Orlando articulates pro-immigration arguments. By interrogating the mechanisms behind this rhetoric, we can better understand the thinking that underlies the equation of migration with hospitality, regardless of whether we accept this conclusion.

A broad definition of hospitality that includes welcoming immigrants, not just temporarily but in some cases on a long term or even permanent, multi-generational basis, is ‘reciprocated’ in Orlando’s logic through the *contaminazione culturale* that they return to the original gift-givers, the pre-existing population. The intangible cultural ‘gifts’ that immigrants return to their ‘hosts’ is predicated on immigrants ceasing to be subservient ‘guests,’ a position, which as Pitt-Rivers notes, entails a suspension of social and political rights (1968, 24). The ‘guest’ is never a fully-fledged member of the host society. The gift ‘exchange’ is therefore completed at the moment that guests cease to be guests, i.e. when they have contaminated – become part of, or been absorbed by – the community that initially hosted them. This framework reformulates *accoglienza* as something that culminates in the absorption of the immigrant-guest, rather than being something that requires hosts merely to ‘tolerate’ their temporary presence. The immigrant-guest returns the favor by ceasing to be a guest; by becoming (a part of) the host.

Mixing metaphors: roots and wings

The Italian sociologist Franco Cassano theorizes that a distinctly ‘Southern’ (i.e. Mediterranean) form of thought exists, which he calls *pensiero meridiano* (2011). He argues that this must be cultivated as a “*contrappasso*,” a corrective, to the self-destructive “fundamentalism” of the Atlantic, which represents the “wane of moderation [...] universal uprooting and total nomadism [...] as man becomes a ship always at sea without moorings.”²⁶⁹ Where Orlando valorizes Mediterranean mixity as a model for Europe’s (and the world’s) future, Cassano too writes that “the rediscovery of the South and of the Mediterranean, the transformation of its innate polytheism into a positive value, the flavor of the restraint that comes from this ancient destination at the crossroads of peoples, is possible today: It is the only thing to do. Here and not only here.”²⁷⁰

A central feature of Cassano’s *pensiero meridiano* is what he terms ‘moderation’: a “point of equilibrium” between the “fundamentalism of land” (l) which he describes the “fetishism of one’s own roots” (31), and the “fundamentalism of the sea,” a renunciation of “every home and root” in the service of boundless freedom (17).²⁷¹ Although I have no evidence to suggest that Orlando’s political thought engages directly with Cassano’s work, there is a striking similarity between Cassano’s *pensiero meridiano* and Orlando’s valorization of Mediterranean ‘moderation.’

²⁶⁹ Translation by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (Cassano 2012, 110f). “[I]l tramonto della misura [...] lo sradicamento universale, il nomadismo integrale [...] il fare di ogni uomo una nave in eterna navigazione e senza più ormeggio” (Cassano 1998, 81).

²⁷⁰ Cassano (2012, 115). “Riscoprire il sud, il Mediterraneo, ricondurre a valore il suo innato politeismo, il sapore di una misura che ci viene da questa antica destinazione all’incrocio delle genti, questo oggi è possibile, è l’unica cosa giusta. Qui e non solo qui” (Cassano 1998, 90).

²⁷¹ “[P]unto di equilibrio tra due fondamentalismi di segno opposto, quello della terra e quello del mare” (Cassano 2011, xxx); “feticismo della propria radice” (40); “un mondo che, fondandosi sulla perenne mobilità del mare, è integralmente deterritorializzato e ha rinunciato a qualsiasi casa e radice” (23).

Orlando is particularly fond of a mixed metaphor that juxtaposes ‘roots’ with ‘wings.’²⁷² For example, he writes that under his mayoralty, Palermo is a “city that seeks to conjoin roots with wings,” looking to examples from the past to guide it towards productive possibilities for future innovation.²⁷³

Homer’s Ulysses, a Mediterranean man *par excellence* whose greatness, for Cassano, lies in his ability to wander combined with his *nostos*, his “desire to return” (37), is refigured by Dante as a man of the ‘Atlantic,’ a fundamentalist of the ocean. Dante’s Ulysses pursues endless journeying, beyond the markers of the Mediterranean’s boundary (the Pillars of Hercules) for the journey’s sake alone. He does so without thought for his familial roots, those things that should properly anchor a good *Homo Mediterraneus* at home and make him long to return to Ithaca after his voyage. Thus:

[N]ot tenderness for a son, nor filial duty
toward my agèd father, nor the love I owed
Penelope that would have made her glad,

could overcome the fervor that was mine
to gain experience of the world [...].²⁷⁴

Ulysses instead dedicates (sacrifices) his life, and that of his crew, on the altar of unbridled discovery: “in our mad flight we turned our oars to wings,”²⁷⁵ he tells the pilgrim Dante and his guide Virgil. These are not quite wings *without* roots,²⁷⁶ but at the very least, they are wings that overpower kinship bonds, propelling Ulysses ever further away from the family home.

²⁷² This also resembles a piece of folk wisdom popularized by Vittorio Nisticò (2001, xvi), that there are two essential ‘types’ of Sicilians: *siciliani di scoglio*, that is, ‘Sicilians of the rock,’ and *siciliani di mare aperto*, or ‘Sicilians of the open sea.’ I am grateful to Maggie Neil for spotting the similarities between the two dichotomies (or dialectics, as the case may be).

²⁷³ “[U]na città che cerca di coniugare radici ed ali” (Orlando 10 September 2017); Orlando elsewhere writes of his vision of a city that combines “tradition and innovation,” “tradizione e innovazione” (Orlando 8 November 2016).

²⁷⁴ “[N]é dolcezza di figlio, né la pietà
del vecchio padre, né ’l debito amore
lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,

vincer potero dentro a me l’ardore
ch’i’ ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto [...]” (*Inf.* XXVI, 94–98).

²⁷⁵ “[D]e’ remi facemmo ali al folle volo” (*Inf.* XXVI, 125).

²⁷⁶ Ulysses urges his crew:

“Consider how your souls were sown:
you were not made to live like brutes or beasts,
but to pursue virtue and knowledge” (*Inf.* XXVI, 118–120).

(“Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.”)

This is an appeal to an important “root”: the idea that humans share a purpose, which distinguishes them from other animals. For Dante’s Ulysses, these human roots, and the duties they create, are in conflict with the roots of kinship, and eclipse them in importance.

Cassano traces the “beginnings of a lack of moderation” back to Dante’s Ulysses (2012, 35),²⁷⁷ and with it the marginalization of the Mediterranean’s *pensiero meridiano*. As Cassano seeks to revive this dormant form of thought, inquisitive but respectful of tradition (and crucially, respectful of the land itself), so too is Orlando at pains to emphasize that his pursuit of technological progress is not boundless, and is not detached from his respect for Sicily’s traditional values (its *roots* in the *land*). Conversely, he insists that his invocation of Sicilian history is no mere backward-looking nostalgia. On the contrary, it is conjoined with ‘wings,’ projecting it into the future. Orlando thus uses a dialectic synthesis to insist that he is looking to the past for sustainable models for the twenty-first-century city and beyond.

4. Religious *convivenza*

Although Orlando never explicitly predicates his conception of Palermitan *convivenza* on belonging (or on not belonging) to a religious group, the Abrahamic religions nonetheless occupy a privileged position in his political rhetoric. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the echoes of Américo Castro’s thesis of historic Andalusian *convivencia* (1948) in his celebration of the ‘Arab-Norman’ period, and the importance for Palermo’s cultural memory of what I call *Sigillismo*, as I have described in Part One. Accordingly, I describe some features of Orlando’s portrayal of Islamic and Jewish communities respectively in the contemporary city, before exploring how Orlando suggests that the religious groups represented in Palermo share a common spiritual ‘essence.’

Islam

Orlando writes that “today, the Muslim community is one of the most rooted in our city, of which it is an integral part of every aspect of cultural and social life.”²⁷⁸ The Muslim community is one of a number of “thousand-year-old traditions” that meet in the city of Palermo, an intercultural “meeting place” *par excellence*.²⁷⁹ If Islam is now part of the city’s fabric, this is not a new development, and, *pace* the Islamophobic tone of much Italian public discourse (Burdett 2016), should not be a cause for concern. After all, as Stefano Allievi points out, it is more accurate to speak of Islam’s *return* to Italy than of its *arrival* (2003, 3). This is particularly so in Sicily, where Islam was indeed once a dominant religion.

Explicitly adapting Américo Castro’s scholarship on Spain for the Sicilian context, Leonardo Sciascia argued that Sicily’s inhabitants only “started to behave as Sicilians after the Arab conquest (as indeed was the case for the inhabitants of Spain).”²⁸⁰ Allievi similarly asserts that “Sicily was ‘born,’ in a certain sense, with Islam.”²⁸¹ The Muslim presence in contemporary Palermo, then, is simply an extension of an age-old feature of the city: its “true face,” in Orlando’s

²⁷⁷ “L’Ulisse dantesco che varca le colonne d’Ercole, illustra l’inizio di una dismisura in cui si mette a rischio anche la sopravvivenza perché si è chiamati dal desiderio dell’esplorazione e della scoperta” (Cassano 2011, 44).

²⁷⁸ “La comunità musulmana è oggi una delle più radicate nella nostra città, di cui è parte integrante in ogni aspetto della vita culturale e sociale” (Orlando 11 September 2018).

²⁷⁹ “[L]a Comunità musulmana presente nella nostra città, che mostra ancora una volta il proprio vero volto, aperto, interculturale e quale luogo di incontro fra tradizioni millenarie” (Orlando 1 September 2017).

²⁸⁰ “Abbiamo adattato alla Sicilia questa essenziale proposizione di cui Américo Castro muove il suo vasto ricchissimo e suggestivo studio [...]. Indubbiamente gli abitanti dell’isola di Sicilia cominciano a comportarsi da siciliani dopo la conquista araba (come d’altra parte gli abitanti della Spagna): in un tipo di vita che Castro direbbe *narrabile* [...]” (Sciascia 2004, 1045).

²⁸¹ “La Sicilia ‘nasce’, in un certo senso, con l’islam, o meglio con gli arabi” (Allievi 2003, 3).

words,²⁸² rather than a deviation from an imagined European Christian tradition. The myth that Europe is a continent with an uncomplicatedly Christian identity is, of course, historically reductive everywhere, as well as being a “recent historical development” (Bottici and Challand 2013, 144). In few other places is the myth of Christian Europe less historically accurate, however, than in Sicily, and Orlando seeks to establish this fact as a source of local and regional pride.

Orlando embraces the rhetoric of interreligious dialogue in explicit opposition to both a crusading ‘clash of civilizations’ rhetoric, and to a ‘secular’ insistence on state indifference towards religion, exemplified for Orlando by the *laïque* approach taken by France. As a legal doctrine, *laïcité* on the face of it requires the state’s ‘neutrality’ in matters of religion. Recent critiques have argued that it in fact constitutes part of a “sustained project of governmentality,” which in practice necessitates and facilitates “active state management” of religious affairs (Fernando 2014, 20). Nonetheless, Orlando presents Paris as an example of how the ‘rest of Europe’ approaches, or rather, ignores, Islam. “Do you think the Muslims who live in the peripheries of Paris speak with the mayor?” he asks, rhetorically. The implicit answer, of course, is ‘no.’²⁸³

Orlando, in contrast, writes that he “dialogues with the Muslim community to integrate to the greatest extent the most radical among those who arrive in the city,”²⁸⁴ because “hospitality is the strongest weapon for [achieving] peace.”²⁸⁵ *Prima facie*, Orlando here is distancing himself from a conflictual stance in relation to Islam’s presence in Europe. On closer inspection, however, he has nonetheless conceded ideological ground to what Hussein Agrama calls a globally dominant “national security paradigm” (2012, 223). In its “near-paranoi[a],” this way of thinking is primed to seek and find ulterior motives, and cause for suspicion, in manifestations of (Muslim) religiosity (151). Although it is couched in the rhetoric of *convivenza*, a ‘dialogue’ between a representative of the state, and a religious community that is approached *ab initio* as a threat, is not a discussion between two parties equal in power. It is by no means self-evident that the approach heralded by Orlando as exemplary of Palermo’s enlightened atmosphere in fact represents a radical departure from mainland European or indeed global norms of governance.

Judaism

As Orlando conceptualizes the presence of Muslims in twenty-first century Palermo as an extension of the city’s historic propensity for *convivenza*, so too does he view Jewish culture as an integral part of Palermo’s present and past, “link[ed] with our [i.e. the city’s] community.”²⁸⁶ He calls the Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies a “place and a means for the promotion of the encounter between the various monotheistic religions in an ecumenical perspective, in harmony with the tradition and the history of Palermo and of Sicily.”²⁸⁷ As I note in Part One, this Institute is one of the main catalysts for the increased visibility of Judaism’s historical and contemporary presence in Sicily. Orlando implies that it represents the essence of Palermo in microcosm.

²⁸² “[V]ero volto” (Orlando 1 September 2017).

²⁸³ “I musulmani che vivono nelle periferie parigine parlano forse col sindaco?” (Orlando 13 October 2016).

²⁸⁴ “Per esempio, io dialogo con la comunità musulmana per integrare al meglio i più radicali tra quelli che arrivano in città” (Orlando 13 October 2016).

²⁸⁵ “L’accoglienza è l’arma più potente per la sicurezza” (Orlando 13 October 2016).

²⁸⁶ “Si rende omaggio [...] alla cultura ebraica e ai suoi legami con la nostra comunità [...]” (Orlando 24 January 2018).

²⁸⁷ “[L]uogo e strumento di promozione dell’incontro fra le diverse religioni monoteiste in una prospettiva ecumenica, in sintonia con la tradizione e la storia di Palermo e della Sicilia” (Orlando 30 November 2017).

As Orlando seeks to argue with respect to Islam, for the city's Jewish community, too, the city's propensity for 'dialogue' is not only rhetorically valuable, but also leads to tangible practical results. As Chapter Four has discussed in detail, the plans to convert a disused church into a synagogue are only made possible by the city's Archbishop, whom Orlando praises for his openness in making the site available to the city's Jewish residents.²⁸⁸ This is a concrete example, Orlando implies, of what we might call '*convivenza* in practice'; a demonstration of willingness on the part of Palermo's dominant religious community, which owns so many places of worship that some have fallen into disuse, to help a small but growing religious minority.

A shared religious 'essence'

On his Facebook page, Orlando frequently celebrates events which, though they may be centered on one particular religion, demonstrate cooperation between the city's other religious groups. For instance, on the gathering of "representatives of all [the city's] religious confessions" for the Feast of Saint Rosalia, he writes that "today we are all together here, in the name of one God."²⁸⁹ Setting aside the question of whether Muslims, Jews and Christians do indeed worship the *same* 'one God,' statements such as these obscure the fact that some of the city's religious groups certainly do worship in ways that many practitioners of the Abrahamic religions would regard as incompatible with monotheistic doctrine.

Of particular relevance to the veneration of Saint Rosalia is the admission of the city's patron saint into the "Hindu pantheon" by some Tamil Hindus in Palermo (Burgio 2003, 9). Ethnographic studies have observed members of Palermo's Tamil Hindu community undertaking pilgrimages to the Saint's shrine (Burgio 2013), and placing Saint Rosalia alongside Hindu deities such as Ganesh and Shiva on private altars (ibid.). According to the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, of course, the veneration of saints is emphatically not the same thing as worshipping God.²⁹⁰ At the very least, then, even this syncretic form of Hinduism has a different understanding of the nature of God (and of sainthood) when compared to official Roman Catholic doctrine: a difference elided by equivalences such as the one drawn by Orlando.

Orlando links the ability to embrace the atmosphere of religious *convivenza*, a practice he advocates, to:

[T]he ability to coexist together with the diversity of one's own neighbor and one's own brother, essentially imagining and being capable of *being otherwise*, to feel oneself and *to be* Christians, but also Hindus, Jews, Muslims. To be Italian and Sicilian, but also African, Asian.²⁹¹

The 'way of being' Orlando encourages here goes further than mere empathy, i.e. the ability to imagine oneself in the position of somebody from another religious community. Palermitans must

²⁸⁸ "[Q]uesta è la conferma di un cammino che viene ulteriormente rafforzato dalla prevista apertura di una Sinagoga a Palermo, grazie alla disponibilità dell'Arcivescovo della città" (Orlando 10 September 2017).

²⁸⁹ "Rappresentanti di tutte le Confessioni religiose [...] siamo qui tutti insieme, in nome di un unico Dio" (Orlando 14 July 2017).

²⁹⁰ The official Catechism clarifies that "the honor paid to sacred images is a 'respectful veneration,' not the adoration due to God alone" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, 2132).

²⁹¹ "[L]a capacità di convivere insieme con la diversità del proprio vicino e del proprio fratello, sostanzialmente immaginando ed essendo capaci di *essere altro*, di sentirsi ed *essere* cristiani, ma anche indu, ebrei, musulmani. Di essere italiani e siciliani, ma anche africani, asiatici" (Orlando 14 July 2016, own emphasis).

become the other, rather than simply understanding or sympathizing with them: a notion that implies an essential translatability or equivalency between distinct and sometimes incommensurable doctrines and practices.

Talal Asad notes that the insistence that religion has an “autonomous essence” is rooted in post-Reformation Christianity, and is far from universally applicable across the range of phenomena we habitually group under the label of ‘religion’ (1993). Orlando, in contrast, presupposes a universal equivalency between the ‘world religions’: an ‘essence’ of religiosity that is present across all religions (and perhaps especially shared by the Abrahamic religions). In 2014, a year in which the feast day of Saint Francis coincided with Eid al-Adha and Yom Kippur, Orlando wrote that “all the monotheistic religions are united in this beautiful day.”²⁹² Orlando’s intention here is in one sense admirable: advocating interreligious understanding on the basis that all the Abrahamic religions are ‘the same,’ or ‘similar enough.’ His universalist approach, however, prevents him from having to argue that other ways of life, other forms of religiosity, might be deserving of respect despite being incommensurable with Roman Catholicism, Sicily’s majority religion, or indeed, “inimical to those forms of public sociability that a secular-liberal polity seeks to make normative” (Mahmood 2011, 75). Put differently, he settles on a position that falls short of Anthony Kwame Appiah’s influential description of the cosmopolitan, as an individual who “neither expect[s] nor desire[s] that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life” (2006, xv).

5. Concluding remarks

So far, I have explored the shape of the historical narratives woven in Orlando’s Facebook communications; the various rhetorical strategies he employs in the service of his political project; and his approach to a renewed religious pluralism in the city of Palermo. The following chapter builds upon the foregoing research, by identifying some problems posed by the precise kind of Palermitan identity Orlando seeks to cultivate. It explores how Orlando seeks to resolve these tensions, before evaluating the ways in which Orlando articulates and pursues his political project.

²⁹² “Tutte le religiose [sic] monoteiste sono unite in questa bella giornata” (Orlando 4 October 2014).

Chapter Six

On Creating a Usable *Palermitanità*

Hundreds of thousands of people have disembarked in Sicily, and not one gesture of racism or intolerance has been heard of.

Leoluca Orlando, 2015²⁹³
Facebook

1. Introduction

Having analyzed how Orlando puts forward his vision of *palermitanità*, the task of this chapter is to look more closely at some of the tensions inherent in this conception of local identity. Section 2 asks precisely what kind of *convivenza* Orlando envisages for Palermo. Section 3 suggests that Orlando employs a number of strategies to square his optimistic vision of Palermitan identity with the violent hierarchies that persist in Palermo, as in all European cities, by insisting that instances of *intolerance* represent aberrations which must be distinguished from Palermo's true essence. Section 4 problematizes some elements of Orlando's *convivenza* rhetoric, by interrogating assumptions that underlie some of his formulations, while section 5 demonstrates that Orlando's vision of *palermitanità* is nonetheless employed to bolster a number of practical political positions that would be electorally unpopular elsewhere in Italy. Section 6 concludes both this chapter and Part Two as a whole, with an evaluation of the risks and potential benefits of Orlando's rhetorical approach.

2. *Convivenza* under construction

By insisting on Palermo's inherent tolerance, Orlando sometimes appears to be describing the ideal city he would like to inhabit, rather than the actual city – imperfect, like all cities – of which he is mayor. He writes, for instance, that “the culture of hospitality in Palermo only knows one race: the human race.”²⁹⁴ This move belongs to a broader ideology of colorblindness, which Michelle Alexander describes as the “widespread belief that race no longer matters” (2010, 11). Although Alexander is describing the U.S. context, Rhiannon Welch notes analogously that:

For many years, pervading much intellectual and public discourse was the contention that, prior to the great influx of racialized migrants in the mid-1980s, and with the exception of the Fascist “parenthesis,” there simply was no race (racialized others, racist intolerance, etc.) in Italy (2016, 5).

This contention remains influential in Italian public discourse. Alexander calls colorblindness a “veil” that “maintain[s] our self-image as fair and unbiased people” (2010, 199). In doing so, it shields from critique a system which, unlike previous forms of legal discrimination, “purports to

²⁹³ “Centinaia di migliaia di persone sono sbarcate in Sicilia e non si è mai sentito di un gesto di razzismo o intolleranza” (Orlando 15 April 2015).

²⁹⁴ “La cultura dell'accoglienza a Palermo conosce una sola razza: la razza umana” (Orlando 17 February 2018).

be colorblind,” but nonetheless “creates and maintains racial hierarchy much as earlier systems of control did” (13).

Alexander argues that the very insistence on colorblindness, “though widely touted as the solution, is actually the problem” (227). The assertion that we are “not capable of seeing racial difference” (230), in fact “prevents us from seeing the racial and structural divisions that persist in society” (228). Orlando’s assertion denies the ongoing presence of racial hierarchies and violence in the city, or at the very least, denies that they are based on racialization. As demonstrated both in the previous chapter and later in this section, this denial relies on a distorted vision of the city’s past and present.

Orlando uses one Facebook post to ‘share’ a sort of ode, not written by him, but which, in his words, “captures the sense of Palermo capital of dialogue and of enrichment between cultures.”²⁹⁵ The ode contains illustrative examples of cultural ‘mixture’: churches blended with mosques;²⁹⁶ a Bangladeshi parking attendant who wears the distinctively Sicilian *coppola*, or flat cap. The text celebrates how the city’s immigrant salespeople greet ‘you,’ the implied (Sicilian) reader, as “cuscì”: a term meaning ‘cousin’ in Sicilian dialect but used as a familiar term of affection, comparable, for example, to the non-literal use of “bro” in North American slang.²⁹⁷ It simultaneously praises this example of ‘integration,’ while using the term “*vu’ cumprà*” to describe informal traders, a term which Donald Martin Carter notes is “a kind of slur describing the immigrant as being unfamiliar with Italian” (1997, 74).²⁹⁸ “The expression,” Carter explains, “denotes an assumed lack of education and command of the Italian language meant to demean the migrant” (1997, 74). Though the term is offensive and resisted by many informal traders (ibid.), its use remains widespread in informal Italian. As the ode demonstrates, the term is nonetheless also employed by some who like to see themselves as supportive of immigrants.

The ode betrays a very lack of ‘colorblindness’ in the same breath as insisting that Palermo is a haven of harmonious coexistence between peoples. It should furthermore be noted that the text displays a very particular *kind* of supportiveness to immigrants. This support is implicitly conditional, predicated on an element of ‘assimilation’ into the hegemonic culture, that is, of immigrants adopting traditionally Sicilian characteristics, rather than an encounter between cultures that might change both parties in some way. As Ilaria Giglioli notes, such a framework “places the [...] onus of change on migrants and their descendants” (2018, 8). It does not allow for the possibility that European-ness or *italianità* (and indeed *sicilianità* or *palermitanità*) may itself be a porous identity. Nor does it envisage that Palermitans might be capable of living alongside ‘un-Sicilianized’ migrant others, who are assumed, in Giglioli’s words, to be separated from Sicilians by pre-existing differences “that must then be bridged through Mediterranean interconnection” (ibid.).

In Chapter Five, I implied that the rhetoric Orlando employs in the service of his vision of Palermo relies on an idea that Palermitans, or Sicilians more generally, have an *innate* disposition towards hospitality. In Orlando’s words: “naturally, we are a migrant city [and therefore] so hospitable.”²⁹⁹ This essentialism is in part biological, based on the ethnic ‘mixture’ described

²⁹⁵ “[C]oglie il senso di Palermo capitale del dialogo e dell’arricchimento tra le culture” (Orlando 1 February 2017).

²⁹⁶ This may be a reference to one of the two deconsecrated churches in Palermo now used as mosques, which I discuss extensively in Chapter Three. Equally, however, it could refer to the numerous churches in the city that are popularly thought to have been built in, on or near the site of former medieval mosques.

²⁹⁷ “I ‘vu’ cumprà’ qui ti chiamano ‘cuscì’” (in Orlando 1 February 2017).

²⁹⁸ As Carter notes (1997), *vu’ cumprà* is an imitation of a non-standard Italian way of asking “you buy?” to potential customers, which in standard Italian might be translated as “vuoi comprare?”

²⁹⁹ “[N]aturalmente siamo una città migrante così accogliente” (Orlando 3 December 2016).

earlier, but it is also historically conditioned. In some instances, Orlando does portray *convivenza* as a learned disposition, albeit one with such a long-standing historic pedigree that it is now second nature to the people of Palermo. Palermo is a city that has “traditionally sided with peace and equality,” and there is therefore no reason to believe that it will not do so in the present and continue to do so in future.³⁰⁰

Coexistence is described by Orlando as “historical practice and [part of] daily life, no longer and not merely a plan.”³⁰¹ It is not just a model, but a historical and contemporary reality; Palermo is always already a locus of peaceful coexistence, a ‘mosaic’ of influences from across the Mediterranean and the world. The people of Palermo are told that “the best way of being international is to remain ourselves.”³⁰² According to such a logic, there is little that needs to be done to make Orlando’s vision into reality: some fine tuning, perhaps, but not a complete and radical overhaul.

What Wendy Brown terms “tolerance talk,” which includes asserting one’s own tolerance, operates as an act of “identity production and identity management” (2006, 14). Brown argues that, especially since the late twentieth century, Western liberals have come to view tolerance as a prerequisite for civilization: “that which is inside civilization is tolerable and tolerant; that which is outside is neither” (182). Rhiannon Welch observes that this acquires a particular resonance in Italy, given its perceived “minor” status with respect to Europe’s northern superpowers: “waving the flag of tolerance [...] signals Italy’s long-awaited entrance into (post)colonial nationhood” (2010, 230). Moreover, Sicily in particular has for centuries been denigrated, as I describe elsewhere in this dissertation, as ‘backwards’ and ‘insufficiently European.’ As well as being a central tenet of Orlando’s political vision, therefore, his ‘*convivenza* talk’ positions Palermo as pioneering. If Palermo has been a city of peaceful coexistence since time immemorial, then it is anything but belated; it is the rest of liberal Europe that must ‘catch up’ with Palermo’s example.

Orlando oscillates between assertions that Palermitans are *per se* internationalist, anti-racist, and open to difference, and the occasional acknowledgement that the present-day city falls short of his vision of harmonious *convivenza*. My point is not only that Orlando’s arguments rely on essentialism; as a politician, he is far from alone in this. Rather, I want to emphasize that there is a disconnect between the way Orlando describes the city, and the way its residents experience it: a potential limitation to the political efficacy of his rhetoric. Orlando’s own occasional acknowledgements that racism exists in Palermo demonstrate the apparent inapplicability of his *convivenza* thesis to the present-day reality, or at the very least, its conditional or only partial applicability. As I will show, Orlando nonetheless uses a variety of rhetorical strategies to continue characterizing Palermitans as idealized model citizens.

Palermitani, brava gente

Often directly juxtaposed with assertions that Palermo is inherently cosmopolitan, Orlando acknowledges and condemns individual incidents of racism in his city, particularly those of a violent nature.³⁰³ Orlando exhibits what public relations professionals might call a form of positive

³⁰⁰ “[T]radizionalmente schierata per la pace e l’uguaglianza” (Orlando 27 June 2013).

³⁰¹ “A Palermo la coesistenza è storicamente prassi e quotidianità, non più e non solo progetto” (Orlando 27 November 2017).

³⁰² “Il modo migliore per essere internazionali è di restare noi stessi” (Orlando 15 December 2016a).

³⁰³ See e.g. Orlando (10 June 2012), in which the Mayor condemns a “despicable act of racist aggression” carried out against a young Bengali man (“condanniamo l’ignobile aggressione razzista avvenuta ieri, sull’autobus per Mondello, ai danni di un giovane bengalese”).

‘spin’ in such cases, turning what might have been a story about racism into a story about Palermitans demonstrating solidarity with individuals on the receiving end of racist attacks. He of course condemns a brutal attack on a Gambian boy in the Ballarò area of Palermo, for instance. However, the ‘main story’ becomes the quick work carried out by local authorities to ensure that his parents could travel to Palermo to visit their son, an act that is celebrated as a demonstration of the ‘real’ Palermo. “Palermo confirms that it is a city of hospitality,” Orlando insists, although we might draw quite a different conclusion from the story of the attack itself.³⁰⁴

During the presidency of Donald Trump, a number of U.S. liberal commentators used terms such as “this is not [my] America” to protest what they viewed as the president’s betrayal of the nation’s fundamental values.³⁰⁵ Although well-intentioned, aimed most often at encouraging a ‘return’ to an imagined former decency, this formula obscures and denies the legacies of slavery, settler colonialism, and institutional violence that are in fact component parts of contemporary American life. Analogously, the idea of *italiani, brava gente* (literally, ‘Italians, good people’) – which Lucia Re calls the “proverbial myth of Italian kindness and moral superiority” (2010) – is a cornerstone of post-war Italian national identity and self-representation.³⁰⁶ For Re, the resulting idea that racism must necessarily be “atypical and un-Italian” ignores the “considerable role that various forms of racism have played in the history and even in the formation of Italy as a nation and, indeed, in the creation of the ‘Italian identity’” (2010). Such forms of protest, in other words, do rhetorical ‘work,’ but they do not quite do the kind of work they purport to be doing. Rather than reinforcing a presupposed innate, essential ‘goodness’ in either American-ness or Italian-ness, they instead preclude critical engagement with the reality of racism. The same can be true, I want to argue, for regional and local identities such as *sicilianità* and *palermitanità*.

In the *italiani, brava gente* schema, the Italian colonial project, which far predated Fascism and began in earnest in the decades immediately following unification, is (erroneously) compared favorably to other, supposedly more ‘brutal’ instances of European colonialism.³⁰⁷ Italy is also collectively remembered as a *victim* of Fascism, as a country that produced large-scale anti-Fascist armed resistance, more so than as the country in which Fascism was first devised and put into practice (Fogu 2006). In the latter half of the twentieth century, it became a matter of pride in Italian mainstream politics to profess one’s own anti-racism, often “without defining or justifying [one’s] terms” and without always engaging critically with the racist oppression that persisted within Italy.³⁰⁸

While Jeffrey Cole suggests that Sicily has not necessarily overcome the “obstacle” posed by the *italiani, brava gente* paradigm (2005, 94), it is nonetheless the case that Orlando’s particular vision of *palermitanità* seldom relies specifically on the idea of Palermo as an *Italian* city. He does not feel a need to redeem or make excuses for Italy in order to valorize Palermitan local identity. On the contrary, he often compares Palermo and Sicily favorably *against* the rest of Italy, and particularly, against the ethno-nationalist politics that characterize its political mainstream. Rather than arguing that Orlando *too* relies on the *italiani, brava gente* myth in order to construct a positive vision of his city, I want instead to propose that he employs a specific, localized version of an exculpatory myth that is distinguishable from *italiani, brava gente* in shape, but comparable

³⁰⁴ “Palermo si conferma città dell’accoglienza” (Orlando 21 April 2016).

³⁰⁵ See e.g. Friedman (2017) for a representative example.

³⁰⁶ For an in-depth analysis and sustained critique of the enduring *italiani, brava gente* myth, see Del Boca (2005).

³⁰⁷ For example, see Labanca (2002; 2005) for a discussion of the concentration camps operated by Italy in the Cyrenaica region of Libya, which were “unusually brutal,” “even in comparison with the means of repression adopted by other European powers” (2005, 27).

³⁰⁸ Cole (2005), citing Balbo (1989); Balbo and Manconi (1990).

in effect. Adapting *siciliani, brava gente*, which Gaetano Savatteri uses to describe a literary and cinematographic trend for portraying Sicilians as essentially peaceful and tolerant (2017, 150), I refer to this myth as *palermitani brava gente*: the idea that Palermitans, unlike many other Europeans, and indeed, unlike many other *Italians*, are ‘(the) good guys,’ both historically and in the present moment.

“Neither intolerance nor racism exist in Palermo.”³⁰⁹ “Hundreds of thousands of people have disembarked in Sicily, and not one gesture of racism or intolerance has been heard of.”³¹⁰ Orlando contrasts these extraordinary claims, which, as demonstrated earlier in this section, are easily falsifiable, against the “egoism of Europe,” which limits arrivals from outside the Schengen Area, and against Italian central government, which imposes its restrictive residence permit system.³¹¹

Commentators hostile towards migrants are not the only skeptical voices in Orlando’s audience. On occasion, pro-migration commentators also criticize Orlando’s rhetoric. One, for instance, accuses him of “ignoring the true conditions in which immigrants live,” lamenting that “many rely on voluntary associations for food and assistance.” The state is in no position to celebrate its ‘hospitality’ towards immigrants, this implies, if it cannot step in to assist them materially.

“When anybody asks me how many immigrants there are in Palermo, I respond, ‘none,’ because anyone who lives in Palermo becomes Palermitan, by decision of the mayor.”³¹² Aside from the fact that it might be perfectly possible both to be a Palermitan *and* an immigrant at the same time, even the most basic interrogation of this assertion reveals its platitudinal quality. “There is no difference between Palermitans born in Palermo and those who arrived later on,”³¹³ Orlando asserts. No difference, of course, except for the citizenship that Palermitans born to Italian parents acquire as a birth right; except for the risk of racist violence and discrimination that immigrants face across Europe, from which Palermo is not excepted.

There are instances in which Orlando trivializes elements of the migrant experience in Europe by describing ‘migrant’ as a form of identity, which can be adopted at will. He describes how Palermitans “acknowledge themselves to be, and choose to be, migrants themselves.”³¹⁴ Although many Sicilians will indeed have a family history of migration, this formulation nonetheless again elides the important structural advantages that privileges such as an Italian passport provide. It inaccurately suggests that recently-arrived immigrants and Italians born in the city operate on a level playing field.

It is possible to distinguish between two strains that overlap in Orlando’s political rhetoric. One strain, historically selective though this may be, sees in Sicily’s history and in certain of its local traditions an exemplar of a hospitable society: a practical model for managing the reality of twenty-first-century migration to the island. Another, however, strongly implies that the work here

³⁰⁹ “A Palermo non esistono né intolleranza né razzismo” (Orlando 13 October 2016).

³¹⁰ “Centinaia di migliaia di persone sono sbarcate in Sicilia e non si è mai sentito di un gesto di razzismo o intolleranza” (Orlando 15 April 2015).

³¹¹ “Questo spirito di accoglienza di cui siamo orgogliosi contrasta però con l’egoismo dell’Europa che non ha capito che deve abolire il permesso di soggiorno” (Orlando 15 April 2015).

³¹² “Quando qualcuno mi chiede quanti migranti ci sono a Palermo, io rispondo: ‘nessuno’, perché chi risiede a Palermo diventa Palermitano per decisione del Sindaco” (Orlando 23 October 2017).

³¹³ “Non c’è differenza tra i palermitani nati a Palermo e coloro che vi sono arrivati successivamente” (Orlando 13 October 2016).

³¹⁴ “[N]on soltanto accolgono, ma si riconoscono e scelgono di essere essi stessi migranti” (Orlando 5 December 2015).

has *already been done*: that Sicily cannot possibly be anything other than the hospitable island it already is.

Palermitani, brava gente, though it has specific local characteristics, is similar in effect to its national counterpart, *italiani, brava gente*. Camilla Hawthorne observes that “common assertions about Italy’s status as a *meticcia*, or hybrid/mixed, Mediterranean nation” are prevalent “particularly among white leftists” in Italy (2017, 165). This idea is instrumentalized in the service of the “denial of racism in Italy,” fostering a “romanticized vision of Mediterranean mixing that minimizes the harsh realities of Italian racism” (165). This might suggest one possible answer to Michael Herzfeld’s question: “why does it matter to people to ‘be’ Mediterranean [...]?” (2005b, 51). Some popular understandings of a cosmopolitan Mediterranean identity set a scene against which the existence of racism can be overlooked; they offer, to use Herzfeld’s terminology, a form of “excuse.” Sicily is not the only place where historic mixity is employed in the disavowal of present racism. Orlando’s myth-making is one iteration of a broader, Italy-wide phenomenon, which sits alongside other exculpatory formulae elsewhere in the world too, as the earlier parallel with a U.S. example makes clear. Regardless of the intentions behind it, this phenomenon has pernicious practical consequences, by setting a scene against which the existence of racism can be denied, overlooked, or trivialized.³¹⁵

3. Displacement

How, then, does Orlando resolve the dissonance of a city that is supposed to contain the very essence of harmonious *convivenza*, while simultaneously being a place of racialized violence and hierarchy? His solution, I argue, is to employ forms of ‘displacement,’ which seek to shift the intolerance that persists in his city:

1. onto a ‘dark age’ in the city’s recent past, during which Palermo forgot (or was stripped of) its essence, which is now being restored by Orlando and his supporters (*temporal displacement*);
2. onto an unrepresentative ‘Palermitan minority,’ characterized as insufficiently or deficiently Palermitan and unfaithful to the city’s tradition of hospitality (*demographic displacement*); and
3. onto various ‘elsewheres,’ in mainland Italy and in the rest of Europe, which are the ‘real’ sources of xenophobia, and which are contrasted with the example set by Palermo (*spatial displacement*).

³¹⁵ As Hawthorne argues, racism in Italy is often compared in Italian political discourse with the situation elsewhere, which is seen as incomparably worse. The individuals she mentions in her article employ the example of the United States, a ‘really’ racist country, to deny that Italy could too be racist (2022, 164f). In the words of one of her interlocutors, however, a Ghanaian-Italian medical student, it is instead more accurate to say that, while “Black Americans swim in different waters,” “at the end of the day we [Black Americans and Black people in Italy] are all drowning in the same sea” (157f). On a micro-scale, this schema could also be applied to Palermo. Here, too, the precise contours of racism manifest themselves differently, in comparison to ‘elsewhere’ (the Italian mainland, or continental Europe). Orlando, Palermo’s most prominent politician, does not employ the explicitly racist rhetoric common in political discourse on the national level. Nonetheless, in Palermo too, racism, understood not only as individual or group hostility towards the ‘other’ but, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition (2007, 28), “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death,” is a feature of life for the city’s racialized populations.

In these ways, Palermo is exculpated from its own ‘imperfections.’ Its essential core, at least in theory, can remain unblemished. I say “in theory,” because it is less clear whether these displacements achieve the desired effect; whether Orlando’s resulting descriptions of Palermo resonate with residents in quite the way he might have hoped.

3.1 Temporal displacement

This section argues that Orlando depicts the period immediately before Orlando’s mayoralty, characterized by the Mafia’s dominance of public life, in such a way as to contrast it with the contemporary city. It then demonstrates how Orlando sees himself as bringing Palermo into the ‘modern era,’ before showing how this modernity is nonetheless portrayed as a continuation or a ‘rebirth’ of Palermo’s historic essence.

The Fascist-Mafia parenthesis

Claudio Fogu writes that “the lasting image of Italians as *brava gente* [good people] has been the result of active efforts to purge Fascism of ‘perpetrator’ traits” (2006, 150). One of the main ways in which this is attempted relies on a thesis elaborated by the liberal philosopher Benedetto Croce. Croce characterized the Fascist period as utterly inimical to the general direction of Italian history, which tends towards progress and liberality. He famously compared Italy’s two decades of Fascism to a foreign invasion, calling them a mere “interregnum.”³¹⁶ “What,” he asked rhetorically, “in [comparison to] our history, is a twenty-year parenthesis?”³¹⁷ (ibid.).

When he articulated the parenthesis thesis in 1944, Croce’s intention might have been defended as honorable: encouraging Italians, in the twilight of Fascism, to make a clean break with their country’s recent past. Instead, they ought to pick up where Italy had ‘left off’ in the early 1920s; to return to what liberals such as Croce hoped were Italy’s true roots, and move on from the ‘blip’ of the past twenty years. This attitude paved the way, however, for the legitimization of an historical amnesia; for a collective failure to reckon, in subsequent decades, with the atrocities of Fascism, and indeed, to acknowledge continuities between Fascist Italy and the periods that both preceded it and followed it (see e.g. Re 2010; Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013; Welch 2016).

The idea of historical parentheses or blips is a very powerful one for the construction of *local* identity, as much as it is for the maintenance of a *national* mythology. A tailored version of the ‘parenthesis’ structure is visible too in Orlando’s conception of history, albeit that Palermo’s particular parenthesis lasts somewhat longer than the two decades theorized by Croce. I call this structure a “Fascist-Mafia parenthesis.” It begins, like Croce’s *interregnum*, with Fascism, conceptualized as *per se* inimical to Sicily’s anti-racist traditions. In Orlando’s words, “in Palermo, one breathes the air of a city that has always been anti-Fascist and anti-racist, which is particularly evident today.”³¹⁸ As in Croce’s formula, Fascism for Orlando represents an invasion. This is reinforced, perhaps, by a popular perception in southern Italy that, in the words of Jane and Peter Schneider, Fascism “was a northern Italian political development, with less resonance in the South

³¹⁶ “[I]nterregno fascistico” (Croce 1963, 102).

³¹⁷ “Che cosa è nella nostra storia una parentesi di venti anni?” (Croce 1963, 102).

³¹⁸ “A Palermo si respira l’aria di una città che da sempre è stata antifascista e antirazzista e oggi in particolare evidenza [...]” (Orlando 10 February 2018).

or Sicily” (2003, 50). Its imposition on Sicily is thus characterized as the beginning of an historical ‘blip,’ notwithstanding that not all Sicilians were uniformly against Fascism from its inception.

For Orlando, Palermo’s parenthesis, unlike its Italian national counterpart, did not die with Mussolini. Instead, it bled into Sicily’s post-war decades of so-called ‘Mafia rule’: a period characterized by fear, introversion and intolerance. Fascism and the Mafia are, of course, distinct phenomena, and Fascist policy in Sicily included an iron-fisted campaign against the Mafia. Nonetheless, I argue that Orlando regards both Fascism and the Mafia as inimical to Sicilian values, and as phenomena that similarly thrive on violence and monoculturalism. For Orlando, the Fascist-Mafia parenthesis ended, or rather, began to wane, with the 1980s ‘Palermitan Spring’: with the period of anti-Mafia activity that overlapped with Orlando’s early years as Mayor of Palermo. Consequently, then, the contemporary city is shedding the last vestiges of this *interregnum*. It is undergoing a renaissance in the etymological sense of a re-birth, a return to an imagined golden age.

Fascism, for Croce, represented a perversion or corruption of Italy’s ‘essence.’ Orlando describes the Mafia in strikingly similar terms. “The Sicilian Mafia is born by perverting values like honor, family, friendship and Catholic faith. It is the perversion of an identity. Who is the worst enemy of a Sicilian if not a Mafia boss?”³¹⁹ As groups like ISIS are a corruption of Islam’s true religious essence, Orlando argues, so is the Mafia a corruption of Sicily’s essence: “What is the Mafia, viewed clearly, if not the Sicilian ISIS? And Nazism, if not the German ISIS?”³²⁰

As I have previously noted, the *italiani, brava gente* thesis, relying on the idea of Fascism as a parenthesis, sees Italians as passive *victims* of Fascism, and then as valiant rebels *against* it. In a message condemning the 18 March 2015 attack carried out in the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, Orlando similarly suggests that Sicilians are perhaps especially primed to empathize with the pain of the Tunisian people: “we Sicilians, who have endured the phenomenon of the Mafia, know well what it is like to be an object of violence.”³²¹ The Mafia, therefore, according to this understanding, is not *of* Sicily, despite manifesting itself on Sicilian soil. Instead, Orlando insists that the Mafia is fundamentally opposed to Sicily’s very essence, like Fascism is for Italy according to Croce’s parenthesis thesis. Of course, neither denial tells the whole story, and both serve exculpatory ends.

Deborah Puccio-Den has observed that, since the late 1990s, a shift could be seen in Orlando’s political rhetoric. As she puts it, “once the Mafia had been defeated, the challenge for Palermo was no longer that of fighting a common enemy, but of integrating different ethnicities within a multicultural society.”³²² She cites a declaration by Orlando that, “from the negative contamination of the past, the city must now turn towards the positive contamination of the future.”³²³ This formulation suggests a radical ‘switch’ or *volte-face*. As she describes, *mafiosi* had gone from being characterized as that most Sicilian of things, to being characterized instead as

³¹⁹ “La mafia siciliana nasce pervertendo valori come onore, famiglia, amicizia e fede cattolica. È la perversione di un’identità. Chi è il peggior nemico di un siciliano se non un boss mafioso?” (Orlando 19 November 2015).

³²⁰ “Cos’è la mafia, a ben vedere, se non l’Isis siciliana? Ed il nazismo, se non l’Isis tedesco?” (Orlando 31 July 2016).

³²¹ “Noi siciliani, che abbiamo subito il fenomeno mafioso, sappiamo bene cosa significa essere oggetto di violenza [...]” (Orlando 22 March 2015).

³²² “Dans son discours, une fois la mafia vaincue, le défi de Palerme n’était plus le combat contre un ennemi commun, mais l’intégration des différentes ethnies au sein d’une société multiculturelle” (Puccio-Den 2002, all translations from this text are my own).

³²³ “De la ‘contamination négative’ du passé, déclarait le maire en 1998, la ville doit maintenant se tourner vers la ‘contamination positive’ du futur” (Puccio-Den 2002).

“enemies of Sicily.”³²⁴ They took on the negative stereotypical qualities usually reserved for foreign invaders or plagues: hence Orlando’s use of “negative contamination” to describe them, a more typical use of the word *contaminazione* than the one described earlier in Chapter Five. Counter-intuitively, however, the city is now expected to embrace and assimilate “actual foreigners,” which might be expected to require quite an attitudinal shift.³²⁵

It is my contention, however, that what Puccio-Den portrays as a sort of ‘turn,’ is in fact viewed by Orlando as a *continuation* of his anti-Mafia politics, rather than as a new and distinct political phase. To oppose the Mafia and to embrace immigration, in other words, are two linked and mutually reinforcing actions, which belong quite naturally together. Orlando presents his motivation for opposing the Mafia and for welcoming immigrants as the product of the self-same moral instinct. He draws explicit parallels between watching his friends die at the hands of the Mafia, and meeting children who saw their parents die at sea.³²⁶ Both of these experiences of witnessing injustice, therefore, drive Orlando’s ‘story’ as a politician.

The Mafia, in Orlando’s conception, is not merely a criminal organization, but a symptom of an ideological system that is inimical to Palermo’s ‘natural’ character. During the “time, not long ago, of a suffocating fundamentalist, intolerant Mafia hegemony,” Palermo was a “migrant city that remained without migrants.”³²⁷ The atmosphere of fear maintained by the Mafia prevented Palermo from following its true calling as a ‘migrant city.’ It follows directly, then, that the conspicuous absence of migration should be rectified as the Mafia stronghold over the city is weakened. “Today we are grateful to the many migrants who, by coming and living in Palermo, have restored the harmony between [its] monuments and [its] people,” he continues.³²⁸ As Palermo’s monuments represent the city’s historical multiplicity of influences, so too must its present demographic composition. The alternative is a disharmony between the two.³²⁹ As Eléonore Bully writes, “the theme of heritage is linked in [Orlando’s] discourse to the identity of the city and its inhabitants, who in effect become ‘Arab-Normans’ living in a cosmopolitan city, and thus *de facto* predisposed to hospitality.”³³⁰

According to Orlando’s thesis, to oppose the Mafia is to embrace immigration, and to embrace immigration is to oppose the Mafia. If the Mafia is believed to thrive on a shared code of silence, or *omertà*, then the diversification of the population, and the incorporation of individuals and communities with distinct interests, value systems and social networks, weakens this code.

³²⁴ “Les mafieux, naguère considérés par les autochtones comme les détenteurs de valeurs partagés par tous, d’un “code” commun, voire de la plus authentique culture sicilienne, s’étaient progressivement transformés en ‘ennemis de la Sicile’” (Puccio-Den 2002).

³²⁵ “[L]e rejet des mafieux, ces ennemis intérieurs, ces “étrangers du dedans”, avait été un thème bien plus fédérateur que celui de l’assimilation des véritables étrangers [...]” (Puccio-Den 2002).

³²⁶ “Così come la vita mia e di tanti è cambiata quando abbiamo visto i nostri amici morire per mano mafiosa, ancora una volta la nostra vita è cambiata quando abbiamo incontrato quei ragazzi che hanno raccontato di aver dovuto assistere alla morte dei propri genitori in mare” (Orlando 9 December 2016).

³²⁷ “[U]na città migrante rimasta senza migranti durante un tempo non lontano di soffocante egemonia integralista, intollerante, mafiosa” (Orlando 5 December 2015).

³²⁸ “Oggi siamo grati a tanti migranti che venendo e vivendo a Palermo hanno restituito armonia tra monumenti e persone” (Orlando 5 December 2015).

³²⁹ One cannot help but notice an implicit critique here, by comparison, of Palermo’s post-war architectural reconstruction, much of it planned and executed by the Mafia or organizations and individuals linked to it, replacing many of the city’s (architecturally diverse) monuments with uniform and shoddily-built concrete blocks. On this rapid urban development, often referred to as the “sack of Palermo,” see e.g. Pedone (2019); Scalia (2021).

³³⁰ “[L]e thème du patrimoine est lié dans le discours à celui de l’identité de la ville et de ses habitants, qui de fait seraient des « arabo-normands » vivant dans une ville cosmopolite et donc de facto propice à accueillir” (Bully 2022, 164).

Elsewhere in southern Italy, Roberto Saviano has praised African immigrants who have rebelled against the 'Ndrangheta, for “defending the rights that Italians are too afraid, indifferent or jaded to defend” (Saviano 2010). Orlando makes a similar argument in Palermo: “In Ballarò,” he writes, “immigrant shopkeepers have enabled the arrest of certain Palermitan *mafiosi*, a fact which makes it impossible to keep railing against immigrants.”³³¹

We might note that in seeking to celebrate the presence of immigrants, Orlando occasionally enhances the profile of certain ‘model minorities,’³³² that is, of immigrants who display exceptional qualities such as these shopkeepers. The ‘good immigrant’ narrative,³³³ however, implies the existence of a ‘bad immigrant’ elsewhere. It also suggests that support for immigrants could be conditional upon a certain level of ‘integration,’ or indeed, upon first ‘proving oneself.’ One should not need to put oneself at risk by taking down *mafiosi*, in other words, in order to be welcomed into a city’s social fabric.

The city’s return to its former ‘vibrancy,’ “from capital of the Mafia to capital of hospitality,”³³⁴ is explicitly characterized as a form of renaissance, and of course, every renaissance needs a dark age to precede it. Palermo is “recovering after the terrible period of Mafia governance and recuperating the value of diversity.” Diversity existed in the city before the Mafia, Orlando suggests, and must therefore necessarily be returned to the city thereafter, if it is to move on from the Fascist-Mafia parenthesis once and for all.

Entering modernity

In one Facebook post, Orlando cites a congratulatory message from the Mayor of Vienna, who compliments Orlando for having “turned his birth city into one that can rank on a par with a modern, European metropolis.”³³⁵ Orlando appears to view this as a compliment, which could be criticized as a form of *neo-meridionalismo*: an attempt to valorize the marginalized South by claiming its equivalency to the North: ‘we Southerners are just as modern as you Northerners,’ *neo-meridionalismo* insists.³³⁶ In Roberto Dainotto’s assessment of the nineteenth-century historian Michele Amari, he writes that Amari attempted to measure Sicily’s “degree of civilization on the constitutional standards set by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, and Hume” (2007). Put simply, Amari ‘reclaimed’ European modernity for Sicily, rather than seeking to disrupt the very premises on which that modernity was constructed. This practice is replicated here, too, by Orlando’s acceptance of a compliment worded in such a way by the Mayor of Vienna, *mitteleuropäische capital par excellence*.

According to Orlando’s own analysis, the city of which he became mayor in 2012 was “dying,” and is only now “being reborn,” becoming “more and more of a modern and efficient

³³¹ “A Ballarò, i negozianti immigrati hanno fatto arrestare alcuni mafiosi palermitani, fatto che rende impossibile continuare a inveire contro gli immigrati” (Orlando 13 October 2016).

³³² The term ‘model minority’ was initially coined to describe the characterization of Asian Americans (see e.g. Wong and Halgin 2006). It has been criticized more recently for the unrealistic, stereotyped expectations it creates for Asian Americans, as well as for what it implies about other, supposedly less ‘model’ minoritized groups.

³³³ For an example of the expansion of the ‘model minority’ idea to include other ‘good immigrant’ narratives, see i.a. *The Good Immigrant*, a collection of essays edited by Nikesh Shukla (2016), and especially Wei Ming Kam’s contribution, entitled “Beyond ‘Good’ Immigrants” (Kam 2016).

³³⁴ “[D]a capitale della mafia a capitale dell’accoglienza” (Orlando 4 February 2018).

³³⁵ “Ha fatto sì che la sua città natale si posizionasse al pari di una Metropoli moderna ed europea” (Orlando 9 June 2017).

³³⁶ See Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (in Cassano 2012, xi-xiii), on *neo-meridionalismo* among some Southern European intellectuals, and for a summary of Franco Cassano’s criticisms of this tendency.

city.”³³⁷ He often uses this and similar formulae to describe how Palermo is finally entering ‘modernity,’ aspiring to become “modern and civilized.”³³⁸ What are the ideological implications behind the idea, however, that the Palermo of the recent past was pre-modern and uncivilized? This idea is an example of what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls the “denial of coevalness,” noting that Western anthropologists insist on characterizing the ‘primitive’ object of study as premodern, or backwards in time (2014). They do so despite knowing that this cannot be the case; that the ‘primitives’ in fact occupy the same point in time as the anthropologist’s own society. Johannes Fabian demonstrates convincingly that the denial of coevalness is, at bottom, an ideological practice and an assertion of Western superiority. The temporal discourse of anthropology “was formed decisively under the paradigm of evolutionism,” and “anthropology’s efforts to construct relations with its Other by means of temporal devices implied affirmation of difference as distance” (2014, 16). Put simply, ‘we,’ author and reader, are further ahead than ‘they,’ who remain in a pre-historic or extra-historic position.³³⁹

Orlando, however, is not describing Palermo from the distanced perspective of the Northern European anthropologist, but as a born-and-raised Sicilian. Nonetheless, he appears to have adopted at least some of the hegemonic view of teleological, evolutionary history, which has as its end-point the ‘civilization’ of the paradigmatic European city. As I will show, his position is in fact more nuanced than this, and in his rhetoric Orlando aspires to a city that resembles something closer to a synthesis of Middle-Eastern and European ‘characteristics.’ Nonetheless, he also sometimes implies that Palermo needs to “enter into history,” as the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino put it;³⁴⁰ to “abandon the sterile embrace of the cadavers” of its recent past, that is, of the Fascist-Mafia parenthesis.³⁴¹

A Palermitan renaissance

Orlando by no means sees his modernizing political project as a simple and direct ‘moving on’ from its history. As we have already seen, he does not view *all* of Palermo’s past as equally irredeemable. “I stood as a candidate,” Orlando explained in the run-up to the 2012 mayoral election, “to turn Palermo back into the city it once was.”³⁴² Orlando’s campaign, therefore, is founded on a sort of nostalgia, but of a different kind to the nostalgia we typically expect from a European politician promising a return to the past.

The *topos* of nostalgia in European politics might call to mind former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s revisionist approach towards the Fascist period (see e.g. Gundle 2015); or the U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s longing for the British Empire (see e.g. Valluvan 2019). Alternatively, it might evoke nostalgia for the Soviet period observed in former satellite states, such as so-called “Ostalgie” for the former German Democratic Republic (see e.g. Berdahl 1999; Boyer 2006). Looking backwards, in European politics, often involves looking backwards to a period of greater power, of imagined ethnic ‘purity,’ or of strong, often autocratic rule.

³³⁷ “Nel 2012 Palermo era una città che stava morendo. Oggi per fortuna abbiamo superato la crisi e Palermo sta rinascendo e può tornare ad essere sempre più una città moderna ed efficace [...]” (Orlando 5 June 2017).

³³⁸ “Una città che vuole essere moderna e civile” (Orlando 28 January 2017).

³³⁹ See Fabian (2014) on the interaction between these two subtly distinct iterations of the ‘denial of coevalness.’

³⁴⁰ “Entrare nella storia” (De Martino 1949).

³⁴¹ “Abbandonare lo sterile abbraccio con i cadaveri della loro storia” (De Martino 1959).

³⁴² “Mi sono candidato per far tornare Palermo la città che era” (Orlando 2 May 2012).

As the historian Svetlana Boym argues, however, “nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (2001, xvi). Even fantasies that are sometimes dismissed as mere nostalgia for autocracy, such as so-called “Yugonostalgia” for the Tito period (Boym 2001), often have complicated back stories. In her study of Yugonostalgia, Nicole Lindstrom observes “laments [for] the loss of multicultural diversity, the ‘many-colored carpet’ of Yugoslavia” (Lindstrom 2005, 231). Some proponents of Yugonostalgia contrast this with the period of wars, ethnic cleansings and genocide that followed Yugoslavia’s dissolution, and with constellation of smaller states into which former Yugoslavia became fragmented (Lindstrom 2005, 231). By no means all political nostalgia can be categorized as straightforwardly ‘reactionary.’

Where Boym remains ambivalent towards the double-edged sword of nostalgia, “both a social disease and a creative emotion,” the Calabrian anthropologist Vito Teti explicitly theorizes the possibility of “another nostalgia,” a creative force which “demonstrates that salvation might perhaps be possible precisely by looking backwards.”³⁴³ What he calls a “good” nostalgia might even be capable, under certain conditions, of “setting free authentically innovative, revolutionary, ‘subversive’ dynamics.”³⁴⁴ It is this precise form of nostalgia, I argue, to which Orlando aspires: one that incorporates the dialectic of ‘roots’ and ‘wings’ analyzed in Chapter Five.

Orlando proposes to restore Palermo to its rightful position “at the center of the world.”³⁴⁵ If the bulk of the twentieth century represented a ‘blip’ in Palermo’s linear trajectory, as I suggest it does according to Orlando, his stated mission is to bring the city back on track; to make Palermo great (again). The features of Palermo’s former greatness, in Orlando’s imagination, are not the same as those imagined by many others elsewhere who aspire to return their territory to its former glory. As the foregoing analysis has demonstrated, Palermo’s buried past is imagined as a period of Mediterranean *convivenza*. To return Palermo to the center of the world requires (re-)establishing the Mediterranean as a region of global import, of which Sicily lies in the middle. Naor Ben-Yehoyada identifies a common theme in the discursive history of the idea of the Mediterranean: that it has so often been portrayed as ‘dead’ or ‘dying’ (2017, 9). Any survivals of a previous idealized ‘Mediterranean culture’ are relics from a pre-modern period: only the precise date in which modernity ‘killed’ the Mediterranean is up for discussion. Ben-Yehoyada notes that some historians believe the European ‘discovery’ of the Atlantic was enough to kill the Mediterranean; others place its death as late as the demise of the sea’s cosmopolitan port cities, in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is not my contention that Orlando views the entirety of Sicily’s ‘pre-modern’ past as a model for the future. He condemns the 1492 transformation of the Mediterranean, “which in that time was a sort of ocean of the world, into a peripheral lake of conflicts.”³⁴⁶ Orlando remembers 1492 as the year in which Sicily’s Jewish population was expelled by the island’s Spanish rulers,

³⁴³ “Un’altra nostalgia” (Teti 2020, 14); “la nostalgia mostra che forse la salvezza sarà possibile proprio guardandoci indietro” (15).

³⁴⁴ “Uno stimolo capace di sprigionare, a certe condizioni, dinamiche autenticamente innovative, rivoluzionarie, ‘sovversive’” (Teti 2020, 255); “Quella [nostalgia] ‘buona’ ci riporta ad altri mondi possibili; ci ricorda che il problema della contemporaneità non può essere chiuso nel recinto dell’attualità” (ibid.).

³⁴⁵ “[D]i far tornare questa città al centro del mondo” (Orlando 10 August 2012).

³⁴⁶ “Quell’anno terribile nel quale moriva Lorenzo il Magnifico, un Italiano scopriva l’America e i Reali di Spagna cacciavano Ebrei e Musulmani, trasformando il Mediterraneo – che era una sorta di oceano del mondo di quel tempo – in un lago di conflitti e di periferia” (Orlando 10 September 2017).

putting an end once and for all to its fabled former *convivenza*.³⁴⁷ Ariella Azoulay invokes this event to support her argument that the term “Judeo-Christian” is a “fabricated [...] epistemology” (2020). The very fact of the 1492 expulsion, after all, demonstrates the lack of a “confirmed reality” behind this assumption of a “shared cultural heritage” (ibid.). Orlando’s lament implicitly celebrates the idea of an earlier *Abrahamic* relatedness in the medieval Mediterranean, perhaps hoping, like Azoulay, to stimulate “recollections of shared Judeo-Arab and Euro-African life” (2020).

Orlando also notes that 1492 was the year in which “an Italian discovered America,” that is, the year in which the Mediterranean started to lose significance, for Europeans, when compared to the vast Atlantic. Sylvia Wynter observes that historiographical interpretations of 1492 can broadly be divided into “celebrant” and “dissident” perspectives (1995, 5). When Orlando laments the shifts heralded by 1492, however, he does not do so from the perspective of dissident “intellectuals mainly of indigenous or Native American descent” (ibid.). His, instead, is a perspective from a Mediterranean that has ceased to be at the center of the world. Orlando’s understanding of Mediterranean history tallies remarkably well with the aforementioned narrative described by Ben-Yehoyada: this long-dead sea has an illustrious (and specifically medieval) past, of which only vestiges remain.

Andrew Shryock’s conception of the Mediterranean as a discursive category turns Ben-Yehoyada’s metaphor of death on its head. He instead perceives the Mediterranean as “always returning” (Shryock 2020), a comatose patient constantly on the brink of being ‘revived.’ While Shryock’s focus is on the very *idea* of the Mediterranean as an anthropological category of thought, we might also perceive a distinctly political revivalism in the works of theorists such as Franco Cassano, who, as I have already discussed in Chapter Five, advocates “the rediscovery of the South and of the Mediterranean.”³⁴⁸ A similarly prophetic Mediterranean revivalism, I argue, is present in Orlando’s rhetoric. He calls his project a “path of identity *reappropriation*,” the rediscovery of a city which “for centuries was a crossroads of diverse cultures, a place of encounters and of clashes whose result is a harmonious syncretism between the West and the Middle East.”³⁴⁹

What does this ‘renaissance’ formula mean for the protection of Palermo’s ‘essence’? Orlando’s views renaissance as a process, rather than a *fait accompli*. The city is acquiring “consciousness of the heritage we possess and which in the past was too often suppressed and ignored,”³⁵⁰ but this rediscovery is contingent on the continuation and expansion of Orlando’s project. Orlando describes the Mafia as an organization in retreat but not vanquished.³⁵¹ So too does the contemporary city retain ideological vestiges of former dark ages: of the atmosphere that enabled Orlando’s twin scourges of intolerance and illegality during the period I have termed the Fascist-Mafia parenthesis.

³⁴⁷ It bears emphasizing that the 1492 expulsion was not an isolated instance of antisemitism in Sicily. Eliyahu Ashtor, for instance, notes that there was a “strong anti-Jewish feeling in the Christian population of Palermo” in the fifteenth century (1979, 239).

³⁴⁸ Cassano (2012, 115). “Riscoprire il sud, il Mediterraneo” (Cassano 1998, 90).

³⁴⁹ “La nostra città ha saputo trasformarsi attraverso un percorso di riappropriazione identitaria [...] Palermo è stata per secoli crocevia di diverse culture, luogo d’incontro e di scontro il cui risultato è un armonico sincretismo tra occidente e medioriente” (Orlando 22 January 2018).

³⁵⁰ “Grazie proprio a questa cultura dell’accoglienza, possiamo finalmente avere consapevolezza del patrimonio di cui siamo titolari e che troppo spesso in passato è stato mortificato e ignorato” (Orlando 16 June 2018).

³⁵¹ “Oggi la mafia esiste ma è una tessera deviata, culturalmente marginale nella nostra società, la mafia non governa più Palermo.” (Orlando 29 August 2019).

The paradox of the hospitable city in which intolerance remains present is resolved by means of temporal displacement.

Palermo has always been the city of hospitality and of peaceful *convivenza*, but we still have a lot of work to do in order that the culture of integration might establish itself, first and foremost among the youth, and in order that the fear of the other does not win out.³⁵²

Palermo is fighting a winning battle to rid itself of the fear that characterized the Fascist-Mafia parenthesis, but the battle is not over. The intolerance that remains, in this conception, can safely be dismissed as an aberration, a perversion, a relic from a recent and regrettable period in the city's history, but one which is ever-closer to being eradicated. It is not the 'real' Palermo, the Palermo of the distant past and of the multicultural future.

3.2 Demographic displacement

Tied to the temporal displacement analyzed above, but distinct from it, is another strategy employed to ensure that the 'essence' of Palermo remains untarnished by the city's imperfect reality. What I call 'demographic displacement' refers to the idea that a troublesome minority is attempting to give the city a bad name, and that this minority has nothing to do with Palermo's real character. Again, as in the case of temporal displacement, this minority represents an aberration or a corruption of the city's 'true' self.

Orlando writes:

The behavior of *some individuals* cannot scar the image of Palermo, [...] Palermo is a mosaic made of differently-colored tiles, and deserves to be acknowledged for *what it is*, a place in which everybody can live in a completely free way, without prejudices or fear.³⁵³

On the surface, Orlando appears to be setting up a form of scapegoat here, an individual or set of individuals deemed responsible for the city's ills, who risk tarnishing its reputation and must be dealt with in some way. I contend, however, that he is in fact establishing an unnamed 'constitutive outside,' a non-Palermo against which the real Palermo can be defined, and without which its definition is not possible.³⁵⁴ It is only by defining this 'outside,' which serves a useful illustrative purpose for Orlando, that he can establish and protect his definition of the 'inside,' that is, of a true Palermitan identity.

³⁵² "Palermo è sempre stata la città dell'accoglienza e della pacifica convivenza, ma bisogna ancora lavorare molto affinché si affermi, soprattutto nei ragazzi, la cultura dell'integrazione e non vinca la paura del diverso" (Orlando 10 June 2012).

³⁵³ "Il comportamento dei *singoli* non può sfregiare l'immagine di Palermo [...] Palermo è un mosaico fatto di tessere di diverso colore, e merita di essere riconosciuta per quello che è, un luogo dove tutti possono vivere in maniera assolutamente libera, senza pregiudizi né paura" (Orlando 16 March 2013, own emphasis).

³⁵⁴ Chantal Mouffe, building on her earlier work with Ernesto Laclau, as well as on Henry Staten's work and on themes explored by Jacques Derrida, argues that "politics is concerned with the constitution of a 'we' which can only exist by the demarcation of a 'them'" (Mouffe 2011, 15). She uses "constitutive outside" to describe this 'them,' an outside that "has to be incommensurable with the inside, and at the same time, the condition of emergence of the latter" (Mouffe 2000, 12).

Orlando's notion of an unrepresentative "Palermitan minority" is not restricted to describing those who commit racist acts, but refers more broadly, and more often, to those presumed to be affiliated with the Mafia, and to "uncivilized individuals and criminals" associated with practices such as the illegal dumping of waste.³⁵⁵ Implicit in this characterization is that this minority is not who Palermitans 'really are': the majority remains law-abiding, 'civilized,' and tolerant.

Although Orlando leaves this for the most part unspoken, some commentators in support of his messaging accuse this unspecified minority of betraying Palermo's essential values. In a response to one commentator using a racist slur, another argues that Palermo "is a multi-ethnic and multicultural city, and racist barbarians are not worthy of living there." Under a separate post, a commentator writes that "we Sicilians have never been racist, and those who are, cannot call themselves Sicilians." Indeed, as another still puts it, "racists betray the tradition, the history and the culture of Palermo." If Palermitans are not racist, then racists cannot, by definition, be Palermitan. They must therefore be positively *anti*-Palermitan, or at most, what one commentator calls "pseudo-Palermitan." As with Orlando's characterization of the Mafia described above, they represent a corruption or a distortion of the city's real identity.

As well as protecting the vision of civic identity encouraged by Orlando's rhetoric, the idea that racism is a minority position demonstrates the dominance of one particular definition of racism. This definition understands racism to comprise what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls "vulgar explicit racism," that is, individuals or groups that give voice or action to hostility towards the 'other' (2014, 27). As Bonilla-Silva argues in the U.S. context, however, this is not the only shape racism can take. Indeed, in Italy too, individual xenophobia is not necessarily at the "core of the system and the practices responsible for reproducing racial domination today" (ibid.), though it also remains a central feature of life in both Italy and the United States.

The focus on racism as a form of action carried out by an unrepresentative minority obscures the existence of 'structural' racism. It overlooks the creation and maintenance of "classificatory regimes" (Wolfe 2016, 10), of racialized hierarchies, which constitute a societal phenomenon rather than primarily an individual one. As Bonilla-Silva puts it, "focusing on 'the racists' prevents us from analytically and politically tackling the collective practices, mechanisms, institutions, and behaviors that reproduce racial domination" (2019, 17). In this case, it lets Palermo and Sicily 'off the hook,' despite themselves being constitutive parts of Italy and of Europe, which among other things is a fortress of lethal borders (as Orlando himself acknowledges),³⁵⁶ of inhumane detention centers (see e.g. Hom 2019); and of legalized hierarchies on the basis of citizenship, which in turn, is based in no small part on 'blood' as a determinant of national belonging.

3.3 Spatial displacement

To keep the idea of Palermitan *convivenza* intact requires its opposite to be displaced, as we have seen, onto a different time – the dark ages of the recent past – or onto an unrepresentative minority that is disloyal to the city's values. Additionally, it also requires an opposite that is located 'elsewhere,' just out of reach: a *spatial displacement* onto a constitutive outside that is not, in this

³⁵⁵ "[L]a #minoranzapalermitana di incivili e criminali" (Orlando 18 October 2020).

³⁵⁶ He refers to the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean as an "intolerable genocide" ("insopportabile genocidio"), for example (Orlando 3 June 2021).

case, an enemy within, but rather, one that is genuinely ‘outside’ in a geographical sense, and not merely a metaphorical ‘out-group.’

This subsection explores how Orlando locates intolerance in places other than Palermo. It examines how he characterizes the city as a ‘Middle-Eastern city in Europe,’ and asks how Orlando conceives of the Mediterranean, and of Sicily’s and Palermo’s place within it. It then suggests that Orlando’s conception of regional geographies allows him to ‘immunize’ Palermo against certain undesirable characteristics present ‘elsewhere,’ but which are not properly *of* his own city.

Italian, European, and global elsewheres

In a video interview with the state broadcaster RaiNews24, Orlando condemns a recent spate of ‘Fascist-style’ attacks by far-right groups as part of “a spiral that began in other parts of Italy, which runs the risk of contaminating Palermo[, which] is a stranger to these [kinds of] episodes.”³⁵⁷ To the extent that Palermo is a locus of xenophobia, therefore, it is because it is a ‘host’ to a profoundly foreign tendency. This is a mainland *Italian* tendency that is inimical to Palermo’s (impeccably anti-racist) values.

Elsewhere, Orlando explicitly describes xenophobia as a “derivation of *legghista* extraction,”³⁵⁸ referring to the political party which began life as the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), and which has eschewed its earlier Northern separatism to attract voters throughout Italy. Many politicians in southern Italy, including Orlando, view the ‘rebranded’ *Lega* as a party that remains hostile towards southern Italians and immigrants alike. Consequently, they view the *Lega* as foreign to Sicily’s political traditions, just as many people in Sicily argue that Fascism was inherently ‘un-Sicilian.’³⁵⁹ Compared to the rest of Italy, Orlando portrays Sicily as progressive and forward-thinking. Orlando describes Palermo as being streets ahead of Italy’s national Parliament, for example, which is fueled, like many other European states, by “egoism and stupidity” in its restrictive approach towards immigration.³⁶⁰

Palermo is regularly contrasted with various ‘elsewheres’ not just in Italy, but in the rest of Europe and the rest of the world. “We [in Palermo] send a message of *convivenza* in a time in which walls are being built and there are intolerances,” Orlando wrote in 2016, during the run-up to a U.S. election, in which the soon-to-be President campaigned on an explicit wall-building platform.³⁶¹ Nonetheless, Europe, and particularly the *status quo* maintained by the European Union, also remains a central target of Orlando’s rhetoric.

Europe behaves, in Orlando’s characterization, like Pontius Pilate, “washing his hands in front of these massacres of the innocent.”³⁶² Orlando thus mixes biblical episodes – Herod’s massacre of the innocents, and Pilate’s self-exoneration before handing Christ over to be crucified – in order to decry the preventable deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean. Europe is denying

³⁵⁷ “Una spirale che è partita in altre parti d’Italia che rischia di contaminare Palermo. Palermo è estranea a questi episodi” (Orlando 22 February 2018, video interview posted by Orlando on his Facebook page).

³⁵⁸ “La deriva xenofoba di marca *legghista*” (Orlando 23 September 2019).

³⁵⁹ “They say that the League is no longer ‘Northern.’ That’s what they say...” (“Dicono che la Lega non è più ‘Nord.’ Dicono...” (Orlando 13 June 2019).

³⁶⁰ “Palermo è più avanti del Parlamento nazionale e di tanti Stati europei che sono alimentati dall’egoismo e dalla stupidità” (Orlando 4 October 2017).

³⁶¹ “Noi mandiamo un messaggio di *convivenza* in un tempo nel quale si alzano i muri e ci sono intolleranze” (28 October 2016). As with all U.S. elections, the Italian media followed the 2016 presidential campaign closely.

³⁶² “L’Europa la smetta di comportarsi come Ponzio Pilato e di lavarsi le mani di fronte a queste stragi degli innocenti” (Orlando 19 April 2015).

responsibility for doing the ‘right thing,’ of course, that is, its responsibility to humanity. But Europe is also denying its responsibility to Sicily, which “shoulders” the brunt of immigration across the Mediterranean.³⁶³ We might note in this language a certain ‘concession’ by Orlando to the common anti-immigrant argument that immigration creates a societal burden. This does not tally neatly with his general insistence, visible throughout this study, that immigration represents a public benefit. Nonetheless, it does allow him to locate the root source of a problem experienced in Sicily elsewhere, i.e. in the political machinations of continental Europe. Furthermore, it enables him to locate the problem specifically in the *xenophobia* demonstrated by these machinations: Europe will not help Sicily because it does not want to help immigrants *per se*.

A Middle-Eastern city in Europe

Orlando’s rhetoric takes a characterization that has historically been employed to tarnish Southern Europe as deficient, backwards, or pre-modern, and turns it on its head, reinterpreting this as a thing of value. Sicily has long been portrayed from outside as insufficiently or imperfectly ‘European,’ which according to the hegemonic notion that Europe represents modernity, progress, and civilization, must necessarily be a slur.³⁶⁴ This anti-Southern or *meridionalista* attitude, however, relies on the idea of European superiority. If one does not accept that basic foundation, then there is no reason that to be imperfectly European means to be deficient. If to be European is to be xenophobic, inward-looking, and paranoid, then to be imperfectly European becomes an asset. Orlando, therefore, seeks to ‘reclaim’ an element of un-European-ness as a positive characteristic.

Instead of insisting that Palermo *too* is European, Orlando celebrates Palermo’s “extraordinary Middle-Eastern soul in Europe.”³⁶⁵ This formulation, slightly awkward on a syntactical level, articulates precisely the way in which Orlando conceives of Palermo as being located in the ‘overlap’ between two fields: Europe and the Middle East. He interpellates his Palermitan audience into this understanding of Mediterranean geography using the third-person plural: “we believe ourselves to be a Middle-Eastern city in Europe,”³⁶⁶ he insists. This allows Palermo to divest itself of the worst excesses of hegemonic European-ness, as Orlando perceives them. Consequently, Palermo can without contradiction be called “a city that insists on being classified as neither Italian nor European.”³⁶⁷ At the very least, Orlando suggests, it cannot be so classified straightforwardly, or without qualification.

What are the characteristics, according to Orlando, of this essential ‘Middle-Eastern-ness’? Orlando describes Palermo as:

The most European of the Middle-Eastern cities and the most Middle-Eastern of the European cities [...] not only because of its geographical position, but because

³⁶³ “L’Europa deve assumersi le proprie responsabilità. Non può lasciare quest’emergenza solo sulle spalle della Sicilia e dei siciliani” (Orlando 19 April 2015).

³⁶⁴ See e.g. Schneider (1998); Dainotto (2007).

³⁶⁵ “La conferma della straordinaria anima mediorientale in Europa di Palermo” (Orlando 28 October 2016).

³⁶⁶ “[P]ensiamo di essere una città medio orientale in Europa” (Orlando 22 September 2014).

³⁶⁷ “[U]na città che si ostina a non essere classificata né italiana né europea” (Orlando 22 September 2014).

of our history of relations and exchanges intertwined with all the peoples of the Mediterranean.”³⁶⁸

This fact makes it the “cultural capital of the Euromediterranean.” Interrelatedness, the fact of being a cultural ‘crossroads,’ makes Palermo Middle-Eastern, and distinguishes it from the rest of Europe, which by implication is, or aspires to become, an introspective monoculture. Palermo is a place of “harmonic syncretism between West and Middle East,” a locus of exchange that sits uncomfortably within Fortress Europe.³⁶⁹

For Orlando, the Middle East is a place that, unlike Europe, ‘transcends’ the state. He writes that Palermo’s insistence on being Middle-Eastern, albeit within Europe, allows it to “avoid the cage of [nation] states.”³⁷⁰ This cannot be based on a holistic understanding of Middle-Eastern geopolitics. After all, although there is no direct Middle-Eastern equivalent to the European Union, there are plenty of Middle-Eastern states with brutal border policies comparable with Europe’s.³⁷¹ More likely, this characterization is based on the idea that simultaneous local and transnational-regional self-identification can circumnavigate the nation state’s aspiration to monopolize territorial identity. By feeling oneself to be, variously, Mediterranean, Middle-Eastern, Southern European, Sicilian, Palermitan, one might be able to decenter one’s Italian-ness, and one’s shameful sense of belonging to Fortress Europe, and to begin to prioritize other facets of one’s identity. A number of communities from across the Mediterranean are indeed present in Palermo. Nonetheless, there remains something essentialist, as well as platitudinal, in Orlando’s insistence on Palermo’s Middle-Eastern-ness. It relies on the supposition that the cities of the Middle East share a certain essence, as well as on an implicit idea that there are certain things that a Middle-Eastern city *cannot* be.

Palermo, for Orlando, is “Istanbul, Jerusalem and Beirut [but] with trams and wi-fi.”³⁷² The implicit ‘but’ here is made explicit in a separate post, in which Orlando writes that “we want to remain a Middle-Eastern city in Europe but with wi-fi and trams.”³⁷³ The suggestion is that transport and technology represent the European-ness of Palermo, but that history and culture make it Middle-Eastern. All the Middle-Eastern cities Orlando mentions have internet access, and both Jerusalem and Istanbul have light rail transport systems.³⁷⁴ By relying on Orientalist images of these Middle-Eastern cities – by denying their “coevalness” with modernity, as Johannes Fabian would put it (2014) – Orlando adopts certain assumptions not only about the essence of ‘Europe,’ but also about the essence of the ‘Middle East.’ To elevate Palermo, Orlando feels it necessary to diminish its ‘exotic’ *comparanda*, reinforcing the uneven power relations within the Mediterranean. The result discourages the notion that there are contemporary affinities between Palermo and the Eastern Mediterranean, and undermines Orlando’s own insistence on the commonalities within this transnational region.

³⁶⁸ “[L]a più europea fra le città mediorientali e la più mediorientale fra le città europee [...] Non solo la nostra posizione geografica, ma la nostra storia di relazioni e scambi intrecciati con tutti i popoli del Mediterraneo, fanno di Palermo la Capitale delle culture dell’Euromediterraneo” (Orlando 25 October 2017).

³⁶⁹ “Palermo è stata per secoli crocevia di diverse culture, luogo d’incontro e di scontro il cui risultato è un armonico sincretismo tra occidentale e medioriente” (Orlando 22 January 2018).

³⁷⁰ “[E]vitare quella gabbia degli Stati” (Orlando 22 September 2014).

³⁷¹ Of course, like Europe’s borders, these Middle-Eastern borders are also *de facto* porous, albeit to varying degrees.

³⁷² “Palermo è Istanbul, Gerusalemme, Beirut: Istanbul, Gerusalemme e Beirut con il tram ed il wi-fi” (Orlando 10 September 2017).

³⁷³ “[V]ogliamo restare una città mediorientale in Europa *ma* con il wifi e con il tram” (Orlando 7 December 2017, own emphasis).

³⁷⁴ I have always found Istanbul’s tram system, unsurprisingly, to be every part as efficient as Berlin’s or Milan’s.

Whose Mediterranean?

The idea that Palermo is a dialectical synthesis of the European with its supposed antithesis, the Middle-Eastern, relies on Sicily's geographical position in the center of the Mediterranean, which separates the two transnational regions from one another (or alternatively, joins them together). As the Mediterranean's largest island, Sicily can be conceptualized as the "ideal and natural bridge," in Orlando's words,³⁷⁵ between Europe and the rest of the Mediterranean. Alternatively, Sicily might instead be Europe's final frontier, a reluctant barrier at the edge of Fortress Europe (see e.g. Sorge 2018). It goes without saying that Orlando aspires to inhabit the former iteration of Sicilian identity.

Nonetheless, Orlando cannot escape the twenty-first-century reality in which the Mediterranean has been "*reduced to an unnatural barrier, an out-and-out cemetery of migrants, [which runs] counter to its history and to the history of the peoples who live on its shores.*"³⁷⁶ Orlando's wording here demonstrates his belief that a "true vocation of the Mediterranean" exists.³⁷⁷ Like Palermo, the Mediterranean's true vocation is as a place of peaceful *convivenza*, Orlando suggests, but it is being betrayed by an unnatural perversion of its basic character.

The Mediterranean has been reduced from a great sea to a mere "peripheral lake," in Orlando's words, a place where death wins over life.³⁷⁸ Orlando does not present this aforementioned 'dead' Mediterranean, or perhaps more accurately, its comatose present, as an inevitability. It can be revived, Orlando believes, to become (once again) a "fluid continent," a phrase he attributes to the twentieth-century French historian Fernand Braudel.³⁷⁹ In a startlingly similar way to Franco Cassano, who sees the revival of *pensiero meridiano* as Europe's (and humanity's) best hope, Orlando describes the Mediterranean as "the greatest opportunity in the contemporary world to construct a world of peace [...] in which diversity is not a reason for exclusion but [is acknowledged as] a richness."³⁸⁰

Orlando views the contemporary Mediterranean reality as incompatible with the sea's illustrious history, and equally incompatible with the bright future to which he aspires. By encapsulating the 'true' essence of the Mediterranean, he envisions Palermo as a model for future Mediterranean harmony: a seed whence this Mediterranean might flourish. As Eric Dursteler argues, however, the idea that there are two 'competing' versions of the Mediterranean – a dominant "black legend" of the Mediterranean-as-battlefield, a site of a mighty clash of civilizations, versus an ascendant idea of the Mediterranean as a place of encounter, a bazaar or, in the words of Ugo Tucci, a "sort of universal hug"³⁸¹ – is insufficiently nuanced to be useful as a conceptual framework (Dursteler 2011). The Mediterranean reality is and has always been more

³⁷⁵ "“La nostra città è il ponte ideale e naturale nei rapporti fra l'Europa e l'area del Mediterraneo” (Orlando 21 June 2012).

³⁷⁶ "“Il Mediterraneo è stato ridotto ad una barriera in-naturale, un vero e proprio cimitero di migranti, contro la sua storia e la storia dei popoli che su questo mare si affacciano” (Orlando 8 July 2013b).

³⁷⁷ "[L]a vera vocazione del Mediterraneo" (Orlando 8 July 2013b).

³⁷⁸ "[L]ago di periferia, di morte e di contrasti" (Orlando 17 February 2019).

³⁷⁹ "Per *tornare* ad essere, come voleva Fernand Braudel, un 'continente fluido'" (Orlando 6 October 2016). While accepting that the Mediterranean was in some senses fragmentary, Braudel rejected the idea that the sea was divided along a single religious border (1972).

³⁸⁰ "“Il Mediterraneo è la più grande occasione del mondo contemporaneo per costruire un mondo di pace [...] dove la diversità non sia motivo di esclusione ma di ricchezza” (Orlando 10 September 2019).

³⁸¹ "[U]n incontro senza contrasti che si traduce in un generale affratellamento delle identità singole e di gruppo, una specie di abbraccio universale" (Tucci 2007, 168).

complicated than either reductive version. Patterns and clashes, conflicts and alliances, have always been concurrent features of this sea.

Palermo Redeemed

There is something uneasy, to conclude this section, in Orlando's characterization of Palermo as a place that simultaneously is and is not European; that is and is not Middle-Eastern; that is definitely of the Mediterranean, but not of the Mediterranean that makes headlines today – the Mediterranean of war, of European apathy, and of migrant detention centers – but rather, at the center of the Mediterranean as it 'really is' or could be. This ambivalence allows Palermo to be identified with all that is worthy of celebration, in Orlando's eyes, in the European,³⁸² the Middle-Eastern, and the Mediterranean. The liminality of 'Mediterranean' as an identity allows Palermo to be selectively European, and selectively Middle-Eastern. At the same time, it allows Orlando to 'immunize' Palermo against certain other characteristics present in the contemporary Mediterranean region. It does so by enabling him to disavow these characteristics, to displace them onto the 'other' Europe, the arrogant Europe that views the Mediterranean as *mare nostrum*, a sea to be dominated.³⁸³ Indeed, it also enables him to displace negative characteristics onto the 'other' Middle East, the Middle East that is a locus not of peaceful *convivenza*, as it once was and could once again become, but of war and 'fundamentalism.'³⁸⁴

4. Problematizing *Convivenza* Rhetoric

This study has interrogated some ideological foundations of Orlando's *convivenza* rhetoric. My intention in doing so is not to dismantle Orlando's political positions, many of which are indeed refreshing in comparison to much of Italy and Europe. Nor indeed is my aim to 'expose' or 'debunk' his rhetorical style. After all, Orlando is a remarkably successful and rare example, in the early twenty-first century, of a politician who has been elected mayor of a European regional capital multiple times on an explicitly pro-immigrant platform.³⁸⁵ That he has done so in spite of a national and transnational climate of mainstream anti-immigrant sentiment is noteworthy. Nonetheless, there are areas in which Orlando's political rhetoric appears in some instances to be confused, and in others to be based on prior assumptions that merit further scrutiny.

As Camilla Hawthorne notes, there is both danger and possibility in adopting North American paradigms to describe racism in contemporary Italy (2017). There lies an additional danger in the (mis)rendering of certain terminologies and concepts in the Italian context. Orlando's repeated use of the "All Lives Matter" slogan alongside "Black Lives Matter," sometimes in

³⁸² Orlando does perceive something redeemable even in the European project: he laments how the European Union is "losing the meaning of its *raison d'être*" ("sta smarrendo il senso della sua ragione fondativa") (Orlando 23 February 2016), which implies that this organization too is not inherently flawed, but rather, has strayed from its initial noble purposes.

³⁸³ On the idea of the Mediterranean as 'Europe's sea' (*mare nostrum*), and indeed, for an interesting discussion of its "dystopian obverse" as a *mare aliorum* in the European imagination: a 'sea of others' from which Europe must be protected, see Fogu (2020, 8).

³⁸⁴ "Questo riconoscimento [Palermo's UNESCO World Heritage listing], [...] è ancora più significativo e importante, proprio in un momento in cui il fondamentalismo islamico compie stragi e vorrebbe portarci ad uno scontro di civiltà, perché ci ricorda che culture e religioni diverse, come quella araba, normanna e bizantina, possono convivere insieme [...]" (Orlando 3 July 2015b).

³⁸⁵ In 2012 and 2017, but arguably in his earlier electoral career too, in which immigration was less of a central political focus for Orlando.

English and sometimes in Italian, demonstrates a certain hazard in transatlantic translation.³⁸⁶ The “All Lives Matter” slogan was originally used in the English-speaking world as a *challenge* to the assertion that Black Lives Matter. By insisting that the U.S. is already ‘colorblind,’ it denies that Black Lives Matter is an argument which specifically needs to be made.³⁸⁷ This is most unlikely to be Orlando’s intention. He uses both slogans, sometimes concurrently, in pleading for the lives of migrants to Europe to be valued, many of whom are Black. Nonetheless, his use of All Lives Matter and its Italian equivalent might unwittingly lend credence to the notion that there are not, in Italy as much as in the U.S., racist structures that put *Black* lives at a specifically heightened risk.

Where some of Orlando’s political arguments rely on the non-translation of certain nuances, however, others are based on stereotyped understandings of immigrant communities that cannot be so easily dismissed as missteps. Orlando’s long-standing insistence on ‘lawfulness’ (*legalità*) against ‘illegality’ (*illegalità*) has, of course, particular contours that are rooted in his personal history of anti-Mafia campaigning (Schneider and Schneider 2003, 286f), and in the broader importance of *legalità* in Sicilian political discourse as a consequence of anti-Mafia activism. A key component of Orlando’s attempts to foster a ‘lawful’ culture involves cracking down on so-called ‘informal’ commerce (see e.g. Pecile 2019), at least partly out of a concern that this way of making money plays into the Mafia’s hands. ‘Informal’ commerce involves cash changing hands without many traces, of course, but is also seen by some as encouraging a wider ‘culture’ of illegality, in which it might also become possible to disregard larger-scale examples of informal, i.e. unlawful, business.

Orlando celebrates instances in which “unauthorized itinerant salespeople” are apprehended by state law enforcement.³⁸⁸ A disproportionate number of ‘unauthorized’ workers in Sicily are immigrants, not least by function of a restrictive residence permit system that Orlando himself acknowledges to be discriminatory.³⁸⁹ Orlando’s approach therefore appears incompatible with his campaign for the rights of immigrants in Palermo to a decent life, which must necessarily include the right to earn money, already restricted by laws that penalize those without the relevant documentation. Orlando even seems to acknowledge the role that ‘informal’ commerce plays in some immigrant communities, by planning, according to one of his Facebook posts, a limited exception to the general “prohibition on street selling” for the purposes of “ethnic commerce.”³⁹⁰ The word ‘ethnic’ here appears to imply an irreconcilable difference between Sicilians and immigrant others, in spite of Orlando’s insistence elsewhere that there is no inherent difference between Palermo-born Palermitans and immigrants to the city.³⁹¹ On top of that, however, this announcement also reinforces a nexus in the public consciousness between immigrants and a culture of ‘illegality.’ This is in spite of the fact that southern Italy, like many other places in the Mediterranean, has a time-honored tradition of informal street commerce (Goddard 2020).

A Palermo-based activist and member of an immigrant rights organization expressed ambivalence to me about the Mayor’s political platform for this very reason: how can he claim to be pro-diversity, when his state apparatus threatens many immigrants’ means of survival? This

³⁸⁶ “#alllivesmatter #tuttelevitecontano” (Orlando 4 June 2021).

³⁸⁷ See i.a. Edgar and Johnson (2018) on the contours of this discussion.

³⁸⁸ “Mille chili di prodotti ortofrutticoli sono stati sequestrati [...] ad un ambulante abusivo e devoluti in beneficenza” (Orlando 15 December 2014).

³⁸⁹ (See e.g. Orlando 15 April 2015).

³⁹⁰ “[V]ige il divieto di vendita ambulante. Gli uffici comunali stanno lavorando per individuare un’area apposita da destinare al commercio etnico nei giorni di sabato e domenica” (Orlando 2 July 2013).

³⁹¹ See section 2 of this chapter.

activist drew parallels between the self-immolation in Palermo of the Moroccan street vendor Nouredine Adnane, on 11 February 2011, and the earlier self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid, in central Tunisia, by Mohamed Bouazizi. Bouazizi was also a street vendor, and his self-immolation on 17 December 2010 was also provoked by humiliation at the hands of public officials. It was followed by a number of similar acts across the Middle East. It was also a trigger event for the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, accompanied by waves of anti-government uprisings in much of the Arab world. While Adnane's death did not take place under Orlando's mayoralty, his self-immolation was nonetheless an act of protest against harassment by municipal officials, and against the practice of confiscating informal salespeople's wares (Khosrokhavar 2012, 176), which has continued during Orlando's time in office. The activist suggested to me that Orlando sees parallels between Palermo and the Middle East when it is convenient for him to do so, but overlooks these when they reveal a shared culture of authoritarian policing.

There are instances in which it is strategically beneficial to characterize Palermo as proximate to the Middle East, but other instances in which it is not. This echoes Ilaria Giglioli's proposition that Mazara del Vallo, on the southern coast of Sicily, is undergoing a form of "ethnic packaging" (2018, 52, following Hackworth and Rekers 2005). Ethnic packaging involves the instrumentalization of a city's or a neighborhood's immigrant communities in order to 'brand' them as attractive places for future investments. It is not my contention that this is the *sole* purpose of Orlando's multicultural project in Palermo. This study shows that, whatever its faults, Orlando's *convivenza* rhetoric is employed in the service of a broadly pro-immigrant political platform. It is nonetheless the case that Orlando presents this 'brand' as a felicitous side-effect of his vision for the city. "Our dimension as a city of hospitality," he writes, "is becoming an instrument of cultural promotion."³⁹²

The idea that hospitality can be a 'brand' is by no means new. In 1987, Michael Herzfeld wrote that the anthropological *topos* of hospitality was capable of being "scaled up" (1987, 75). In other words, it could and should be studied not only at the local level but in its "national and regional transformations – as, for example, in the stereotyping of national attitudes to tourists ('our traditional hospitality' and the like)" (75). The hospitality 'brand' takes on interesting contours in the case of Palermo. In the Greek example studied by Herzfeld, and indeed, elsewhere, such as in the Jordanian example observed by Andrew Shryock (2004), it is resolutely hospitality as an *age-old tradition* that is sold to tourists. The fiction, so to speak, is that 'you,' the tourist, can experience how 'we' have 'always done things.' Palermo's 'brand' of hospitality can sit quite comfortably alongside the cultural syncretism emphasized as part of the city's "Arab-Norman brand," which Orlando promotes in connection with Palermo's UNESCO World Heritage listing.³⁹³ Nonetheless, a distinctly contemporary form of hospitality – the welcome extended towards twenty-first-century migrants – also guides Orlando's broader vision for his city's public image.³⁹⁴ This image is tourist-friendly, of course, but it is also aimed at influencing residents' own perceptions of their city, as well as at altering Palermo's reputation on a national and global scale.

5. The Practical Possibilities of *Convivenza*

³⁹² "La nostra dimensione di città dell'accoglienza diventa strumento di promozione culturale" (Orlando 27 April 2017).

³⁹³ "[B]rand arabo-normanno" (Orlando 6 March 2015).

³⁹⁴ Margaret Neil defines the discourse of *accoglienza* in contemporary Palermo as a form of "postmodern hospitality," taking a "concept with deep symbolic and historical resonance in/to the Mediterranean," but "unmoor[ing] it from traditional codes and dynamics" (2024, 2).

Orlando undoubtedly understands that some of his celebrations of ‘multicultural’ Palermo have a symbolic function. His practice of conceding honorary citizenship to immigrants who live in Palermo, for example, provides no concrete advantages, but it works as a spectacle and as a statement of political intent.³⁹⁵ At other times, however, his rhetoric promotes concrete political platforms that aim to improve the material conditions of present and future immigrants to the city.

Orlando mobilizes his vision of the city’s traditions – its hospitable ‘essence’ – in support of his office’s campaign to abolish the residence permit system. A mayor of an Italian city cannot unilaterally rewrite national immigration policy. Orlando can nonetheless attempt to shift or expand the so-called ‘Overton Window,’ a term coined by the policy analyst Joseph Overton to describe the range of ideas deemed acceptable by the public, and which might therefore be considered politically viable (Russell 2006).

Abolishing a foundation of Italy’s immigration system may sound ‘unthinkable,’ but until recently, so did the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States, which is now a reality. From the vantage point of an optimist, therefore, a sustained public discourse that questions the need for residence permits on the basis that this system goes against who ‘we’ ‘really are,’ could conceivably have a similar effect: shifting the Overton Window so that this policy might no longer be seen as beyond the realms of possibility. In support of this policy, Orlando cites the words of Giusto Catania, a commissioner in his mayoral team, calling the proposal a “path which begins in the city of Palermo and which is in line with its history, made of immigration, contamination, cultural stratification, which could lead to the abolition of the residence permit.”³⁹⁶ For Orlando, too, this path is part of Sicily’s and Palermo’s “natural vocation,”³⁹⁷ the inevitable conclusion of its “climate of hospitality [...] in which citizens from diverse cultures and religions live together peacefully.”³⁹⁸

There is a *telos*, in other words, a ‘higher aim,’ towards which Orlando’s *convivenza* rhetoric is projected. A particular understanding of Palermitan history and traditions is instrumentalized with the specific purpose of mobilizing popular support for policy positions such as these. In part, Orlando has seized an opportunity offered by the broader re-evaluation of Palermo’s multicultural heritage. Claims about local identity invoking UNESCO’s celebration of ‘Arab-Norman’ Palermo, for example, provided Orlando with rhetorical support for stances such as his refusal to give effect, in Palermo, to the provision of a 2018 national law that prohibited asylum seekers from registering at an Italian registry office (the provision was later declared unconstitutional).³⁹⁹

³⁹⁵ See Hawthorne (2022) for an incisive critique of a similar spectacle: Prime Minister Enrico Letta’s declaration of “posthumous citizenship” for at least 359 asylum seekers killed in a shipwreck on 7 October 2013. “While the dead were awarded posthumous citizenship, what of the 155 asylum seekers who were rescued? [...] These survivors were shunted into overcrowded detention centers and faced deportation [...]”

³⁹⁶ “[U]n percorso, che parte dalla città di Palermo e che è in linea con la sua storia fatta di immigrazioni, contaminazione, stratificazione di culture, che possa portare ad abolire il permesso di soggiorno” (Orlando 9 March 2015).

³⁹⁷ “[V]ocazione naturale della Sicilia e di Palermo ad essere ‘Ponti fra le culture del Mediterraneo’, [...] per l’abolizione del permesso di soggiorno” (Orlando 8 July 2013a).

³⁹⁸ “[C]lima d’accoglienza della nostra città, dove cittadini di diverse culture e religioni vivono insieme pacificamente e dove abbiamo approvato la Carta di Palermo, che prevede l’abolizione del permesso di soggiorno, strumento di schiavitù dei nostri giorni” (Orlando 9 July 2015).

³⁹⁹ The provision in question was part of a “decree-law” (*Decreto-Legge* 113, 4 October 2018), converted into law (*Legge* 132, 1 December 2018); the Constitutional Court’s judgment is in *Sentenza* (“Sentence”) 9 N. 186 (31 July 2020).

Italy's racist citizenship laws are incompatible with Sicily's very essence, Orlando argues, and it is natural that they will be opposed vigorously by Palermitans. "A city like Palermo," he writes, "cannot be anything but outraged" by Italy's current system, based as it is on *ius sanguinis*, that is, on Italian ancestry, rather than simply one's presence on Italian soil (*ius soli*).⁴⁰⁰ Again, this is not an area in which Orlando has the power to dictate Italian law. Nonetheless, he can operate within the limits of a present restrictive legal framework to encourage as many immigrants as are eligible to apply for citizenship.

Upon election in 2012, Orlando declared:

Palermo is the city of hospitality, a multi-ethnic city, and is the meeting point between diverse cultures and traditions, [therefore] our administration has chosen to launch a citizenship campaign, because we deem the current law to be out of step with our times.⁴⁰¹

In fewer than three years, Italian citizenship was conferred on one thousand individuals in Palermo, in spite of what Orlando calls the "obstacle course" applicants are expected to negotiate in order to prove their eligibility.⁴⁰² This does, of course, come with significant benefits for the new recipients of Italian citizenship. Orlando repeatedly justifies the campaign, and positions like it, with reference to Palermo's historical and traditional culture of 'hospitality.'

While Matteo Salvini and other Italian politicians sought to criminalize the provision of assistance, including life-saving assistance, to migrants making the often-deadly journey across the Mediterranean (Carney 2021, 2), Orlando insisted that Palermo's port was prepared to host boats involved in migrant rescue efforts. He reasoned that the city's name derives from the Greek Πάνορμος, 'Panormos,' meaning something like 'universal port,' or in Orlando's rendering, "all one port."⁴⁰³ It is natural, he suggests – in keeping with the city's foundational purpose – that Palermo should take an active role in migrant rescue efforts. As the traditional stereotyped image of Mediterranean hospitality dictates that guests should feel "as in [their] own house" (Herzfeld 1987), so too does Palermo's vocation for hospitality carry the obligation to make recent immigrants feel "at home," as Orlando puts it.⁴⁰⁴

6. Concluding Part Two

This study has shown that there are instances in which Orlando's narrative – a long arc of Sicilian history, which bends towards peaceful *convivenza* – might be mobilized towards self-congratulatory or exculpatory ends. Nonetheless, it is also clear that this narrative can, in other circumstances, encourage an expansive vision of local identity and belonging, though this too comes with caveats, as I have already mentioned. This narrative can even be instrumentalized in the service of pro-immigration arguments that are far from universally popular in Italy as a whole.

⁴⁰⁰ "Una città come Palermo... non può non essere indignata per... lo Jus Sanguinis" (Orlando 25 June 2013).

⁴⁰¹ "Palermo è la città dell'accoglienza, una città multiethnica ed è il luogo del confronto fra diverse culture e tradizioni, la nostra amministrazione ha scelto di svolgere una campagna per la cittadinanza perché riteniamo la legge attuale inadeguata e non al passo con i tempi" (Orlando 19 June 2012).

⁴⁰² "[L]a millesima cittadinanza italiana"; "percorso ad ostacoli" (Orlando 27 February 2015).

⁴⁰³ "[L]a città che a partire del proprio nome è 'tutta un porto'" (Orlando 10 June 2018); *ορμος* (*ormos*) being a port, and the prefix *πάν* (*pan*) meaning 'involving everyone,' 'all-embracing' or 'universal,' just as a *pandemic* affects all the *δῆμος* (*demos*) or people.

⁴⁰⁴ "[A] casa propria" (Orlando 28 April 2017).

I have already suggested that a form of essentialism is at play in Orlando's characterization of Palermo as a hospitable city *per se*. We might note that this is based on an assumption that such a thing as 'local character' exists in the first place. Dorothy Louise Zinn makes a similar observation in respect of Franco Cassano, whose celebration of *pensiero meridiano* bears more than a passing resemblance to Orlando's valorization of *palermitanità*, as we have seen. Zinn echoes Berardino Palumbo's concern that the "essentializing rhetoric" of Cassano and others – and we might now add Orlando to this list – "naturalizes and de-historicizes an identity somehow held to be 'authentic'" (Zinn 2007, 202, citing Palumbo 2001). The risk here is that, as Zinn puts it, "such forms of identity can be open to political manipulation" (ibid.), not least, I would suggest, in the service of myths such as those put forward by the '*brava gente*' conception of local or national identity. Essentialized forms of identity are based on shaky epistemological foundations. As Deborah Puccio-Den puts it: "some have criticized [Orlando's] politics as being nothing more than a trick, an artifice, a bluff."⁴⁰⁵

Puccio-Den goes on to ask, however: "is the manipulation of the symbolic not a characteristic of politics?"⁴⁰⁶ Echoing Zinn's description of Cassano's work, I argue that Orlando's teleological approach engages a form of "strategic essentialism," a tactic advocated (but later abandoned) by Gayatri Spivak, among other subaltern studies theorists (Eide 2016, citing Spivak 1996). Although strategic essentialists know that essentialism lacks theoretical backing, scholars of subalternity nonetheless inherit stereotyped or essentializing discourses imposed from elsewhere. They can choose either to waste time arguing against this essentialism, or to embrace elements of it, and manipulate them to the subaltern's own political advantage.

So, too, has Orlando inherited a set of assumptions about southern Italy's supposed 'character,' constructed over centuries. Some of these assumptions originate from outside, but they have also been advanced by southern Italian thinkers themselves (Schneider 1998). Why bother arguing that Sicilians are *not*, for example, any more 'mixed' in heritage than other Italians; that they have *not* inherited an age-old Mediterranean vocation for hospitality; that they are *not*, in summary, any better equipped to deal with the realities of twenty-first-century immigration than any other group of people? All of these characteristics can be reclaimed as assets, and can be employed for political purposes. Such rhetoric might make tactical sense for a politician in Orlando's position.

As we can observe from analyzing public reactions to Orlando's rhetoric, appeals to this historically-rooted, deeply emotional vision of innate local identity can be very affectively powerful. Even from an outside vantage point, a person of cosmopolitan sympathies, critical of contemporary anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe, might look for a glimmer of hope in 'counterhistories' such as these. Michel Foucault describes 'counterhistory' as a "history of the deciphering, the detection of the secret, of the outwitting of the ruse, and of the reappropriation of a knowledge that has been distorted or buried."⁴⁰⁷ Charles Hirschkind sees in what he calls *Andalucismo* just such a narrative form, "more prophetic than documentary" (2021, 6). *Siqillismo*, too, shares this characteristic: a search for a 'usable' hidden past, against the grain of hegemonic narratives of European secular-Christian modernity. The counterhistories put forward by Orlando promise political benefits. They also, however, carry risks discussed in the foregoing chapters,

⁴⁰⁵ "[O]n a reproché à sa politique de n'être qu'une tromperie, un artifice, un bluff" (Puccio-Den 2002, 25).

⁴⁰⁶ "Mais n'est ce pas le propre du politique – et pas seulement celui de Leoluca Orlando – que de manipuler le symbolique?" (Puccio-Den 2002, 25).

⁴⁰⁷ Foucault (2003), cited in Hirschkind (2021, 6).

including the risk of precluding a sustained critical engagement with the realities of contemporary racism, in Sicily and elsewhere in Europe and the Mediterranean.

Ilaria Giglioli observes that the rhetoric of ‘Mediterraneanism’ in Sicily tends to focus on “simply celebrating hybridity and interconnection,” rather than on “challenging uneven power relations across the Mediterranean” or “challeng[ing] the assumption that the boundaries of European-ness are ‘given’ and immutable” (2018, 5). Nonetheless, she stops short of dismissing Mediterraneanism *per se* as a potential “means to advocate for more just and equitable cross-Mediterranean relations,” or as a “counter-narrative to ideas of the Mediterranean as a ‘fault line’ in the clash of civilizations” (ibid.). Just because such narratives are not, at present, used primarily in this way, it does not mean that they might not be applied to emancipatory ends in future.

It is not my intention to ask whether or not, in the end, Orlando’s cosmopolitan rhetoric is a ‘good thing.’ Does it primarily argue for an inclusive vision of local identity? Or is it instead self-congratulatory, or even exculpatory, proclaiming a uniquely Sicilian embrace of diversity, while obscuring the intolerance that nonetheless persists on the island? It is indeed quite possible that it does both things at the same time. To borrow a framework used by Clifford Geertz (1993, 93), the *convivenza* narrative in Palermo is constructed both as a “model *of*” and a “model *for*” the city. This narrative may be an imperfect model *of* the city; it does not tell the city’s whole story. Whether it can become a sufficient model *for* the city is a separate question entirely.

Many seeking to divert Europe from its present trajectory – to tear down the barbed wire along its militarized frontiers – are looking for stories, usable histories, imaginable futures, which articulate a cosmopolitan vision for the continent. These stories do not have to look perforce like the narratives told by Orlando. Nonetheless, local and transnational narratives like the ones analyzed in Part Two, with all their contingencies and imperfections, are otherwise rare in the European political mainstream. Rarer still are vocally pro-immigration politicians who, like Orlando, have enjoyed considerable electoral success in the twenty-first century.

The 74-year-old Orlando did not stand in the 2022 mayoral elections. On 12 June 2022, Palermo elected Roberto Lagalla as its new mayor, supported by a ‘centre-right’ coalition. The absence of a successor who shares Orlando’s vision for Palermo indicates another limit to the electoral resonance of his political rhetoric. Liberals do not have a monopoly on ‘Mediterraneanism’ in Sicily, and Lagalla has also described the Mediterranean as a “bridge of exchange.”⁴⁰⁸ However, he consciously breaks with Orlando’s emphasis on heritage, encouraging Palermitans to “ward off the temptations of dark appeals to the past.”⁴⁰⁹ Whereas Orlando celebrated Palermo’s “Middle-Eastern” characteristics (see e.g. 22 January 2018), Lagalla accuses street vendors of turning the city centre “into a suq” (Ditta 2022). This restates the centuries-old Orientalist (and sometimes, auto-Orientalist) fear that Sicily is insufficiently European (Schneider 1998, 287); that, as Auguste Creuzé de Lesser put it at the start of the nineteenth century, the island “belongs to Africa” (cited in Moe 2002, 37). Nonetheless, Orlando was not the first to claim Sicily’s proximity to the Middle East and North Africa as an asset, and will not be the last. *Sigillismo* will continue to be articulated, reshaped and contested over the coming decades, whether or not elected representatives continue to play an active role in promoting it.

⁴⁰⁸ “Ponte di interscambio” (*Palermo Today* 2023).

⁴⁰⁹ “Teniamo lontane le tentazioni che vengono da bui richiami al passato” (*Live Sicilia* 2023).

Conclusion

This conclusion first summarizes my findings, and the academic contributions this dissertation has made. I then reflect on the circumstances under which I carried out this project, as well as on potential future directions in which this research might be taken, before making some brief final remarks.

Findings and contributions

This section begins by summarizing the chapter-by-chapter findings of this dissertation, before synthesizing this new knowledge on a thematic basis. In doing so, I demonstrate some of the key contributions that my research makes to pre-existing methodological approaches; to the academic study of Sicily; to the study of nostalgia, heritage, and cultural memory; and to the study of cosmopolitanism and the Mediterranean.

Chapters One and Two

The revival of interest in ‘things Jewish’ (Gruber 2002) has been studied elsewhere in Sicily: notably in Syracuse, where Jewish heritage sites are more visible and receive more tourist attention (Corsale and Krakover 2019). Chapters One and Two represent the first attempt to study the development in Palermo of various Jewish sites of memory, and to examine these sites holistically, in relation one another. They not only draw attention to the very existence of Jewish heritage in Palermo, by focusing on inchoate or emerging ‘heritage sites,’ rather than the established canon of UNESCO-recognized monuments. They are also unique in doing so from a perspective that is not historical, archaeological or philological – some such studies of individual sites already exist – but rather, anthropological, and through the lens of cultural memory.

In Chapters One and Two, I ask what it means to ‘uncover’ Palermo’s ‘buried’ Jewish history. I show that the recent attention to Jewish heritage in Sicily resonates to some extent with international trends, including the wider ‘memory boom’ (Winter 2001); the growth of Jewish archaeology; and a contemporary emphasis on the practice of commemoration. But I also demonstrate that this phenomenon has local contours that are specific to Palermo. Specifically, the ‘rediscovery’ of Jewish Palermo contributes to a wider, long-standing narrative about Sicily’s cosmopolitan ‘essence,’ which I define as *Siqillismo*.

I argue that subtly altering the texture of the urban environment, as well as altering the way it is interpreted – which includes the production of new ‘local knowledge,’ such as the ‘discovery’ of the possible *miqweh* – encourages a sense of continuity between medieval Palermo and the multicultural present. This, in turn, feeds into what I identify as a form of ‘banal cosmopolitanism’: the articulation of a political identity narrative through apparently neutral ‘heritage’ schemes.

If the Mediterranean as an object of anthropological study is indeed “always returning,” as Andrew Shryock maintains (2020), then Chapters One and Two exemplify how a certain *idea* of the Mediterranean, as a locus of *convivenza* between the Abrahamic religions, is also constructed as a ‘revival’ in local discourse. Palermo’s Jewish ‘essence’ is perceived as having been rekindled from its embers, which were never quite extinguished. This then echoes assertions such as Leoluca Orlando’s, analyzed in Part Two, that the Mediterranean has a ‘vocation’ as a locus of *convivenza*, which it once embodied in the distant past; has betrayed in the more recent past; but can once again realize in the present and future.

Chapters Three and Four

In Chapters Three and Four, I interrogate an idea that is so often reiterated in contemporary Palermo that it has become a sort of local common sense: the image of the city as a site of architectural conversion, and as a religious palimpsest. I do not do so to ‘debunk’ this idea from an historical perspective. Rather, I ask how this narrative interacts with three buildings that, in spite of their importance for contemporary religious practice in the city, have received little scholarly attention, even in scholarship on contemporary migration to Palermo. I show that these new-old places of worship – two mosques, in Chapter Three, and a planned future synagogue, in Chapter Four – are central to Palermo’s contemporary identity as a ‘multicultural’ city.

I demonstrate that, far from being *ex novo* developments in Palermo’s architectural landscape, these two present mosques and the planned synagogue, all in former Roman Catholic churches, are interpreted by some as the latest steps in a long history of shifting religious practices in the city. In the case of the mosques studied in Chapter Three, the buildings’ Christian histories can be pragmatic in intention – Palermo has plenty of disused churches, and it is easier simply to repurpose one than to build a new mosque from scratch – but still nonetheless symbolic in practice. In the case of the synagogue, however, my research demonstrates that much of the symbolism of the ‘donation’ to Palermo’s Jewish community is intentional on the part of the Church.

The synagogue project itself, I argue, is at least latently a site of ‘conciliatory heritage’ (Lehrer 2010): both a way of addressing the Church’s historic role in the persecution of Jews in Sicily, and a way of facilitating contact between Christians and Jews in contemporary Palermo. The results of Chapter Four do not just argue that Sicily’s Jewish *history* is important for its identity in the twenty-first century. They also demonstrate the uniqueness of its inchoate contemporary ‘revival’: a topic deserving of greater scholarly attention than it has thus far received, not least given the unusual role of the Church in this process.

My research provides an insight into the different meanings that ‘echoes’ of Palermo’s Muslim and Jewish past have for Islam and Judaism in the city today. Whereas the tentative ‘rebirth’ of Jewish religious practice in Palermo is rarely narrated without reference to the fifteenth-century expulsion, and to the Jewish minority that lived there before it, this is less prevalent in discussions about mosques in contemporary Palermo, although Islam too can be conceptualized as ‘returning’ to Sicily (Allievi 2003). Nonetheless, the Imams I interview in Chapter Three assert the relevance of this historic ‘thread,’ in a way that argues that these mosques, and therefore Muslims, also belong naturally to Palermo’s Mediterranean ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 2006).

The narrative I identify as *Siqillismo* plays a crucial role in constructing a sense of Mediterranean kinship. As I emphasize, and as the anthropologist Naor Ben-Yehoyada also notes, this kinship need not necessarily be understood as a platitudinal ‘brotherhood,’ but can also incorporate an element of difference. Nonetheless, *Siqillismo* partly relies on the idea that Judaism and Islam are foundational for contemporary *sicilianità*, or Sicilian-ness. It relies on an idea of relatedness, and is far from a universalist philosophy. The way *Siqillismo* is invoked in discussions of contemporary religious practice suggests that some in Sicily – Muslims and Jews, but also Christians and those with no religious affiliations – perceive in *Siqillismo* at least a potential tool for building or reinforcing interreligious solidarities, although not all communities living in Palermo are evenly incorporated into this ‘Mediterranean’ identity.

Chapter Five

In Chapter Five, I show that the image of the ‘Arab-Norman’ period as a Sicilian golden age, and the idea that Palermo is experiencing a cosmopolitan ‘renaissance,’ are intimately linked in contemporary liberal political rhetoric. This is especially true for Palermo’s recent former mayor, Leoluca Orlando. I demonstrate that ideas about the city’s multicultural heritage, explored in Part One, also have uses in explicitly political messaging: distinguishing Sicily from its European neighbors, and depicting its cultural ‘mixture’ not as a weakness, but as its greatest strength.

Chapter Five also demonstrates that this particular form of cosmopolitanism has characteristics specific to its local context. Rhetorically, Orlando’s vision of Palermitan identity incorporates local histories and traditions – artistic techniques, saints, and even languages – and employs metaphors that make particular sense in the city, such as the comparison of Palermo to a ‘mosaic.’ Orlando articulates one particular *kind* of cosmopolitanism: engaging popular understandings of a supposedly Mediterranean ‘character’; recent and historic representations of southern Italy; and philosophical ideas like Franco Cassano’s *pensiero meridiano* (2011), developed for and within this context.

The idea that Palermo is ‘mixed,’ ‘tolerant,’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ is so central to both casual conversations and political discourse in the city, that it can be tempting to take it as a given. However, Chapter Five trains a critical eye on the kind of cosmopolitan vision Orlando articulates for Palermo. It identifies areas of tension, such as disagreements among Orlando’s audience about what conclusions should be drawn from Sicilian history. It also identifies some pitfalls in his political project: a selective use of history that risks overlooking shameful episodes in Sicily’s and Europe’s past and present, and a construction of Palermitan identity that relies on a form of essentialism.

Chapter Six

Chapter Six builds on an observation from the previous Chapter – that Orlando views Palermo as having a certain ‘essence’ or vocation – and identifies the risks this entails. The idea Orlando articulates, that Palermo “only knows one race: the human race” (17 February 2018), is platitudinal, but it also serves self-exculpatory purposes. I argue that it depicts Palermo as already ‘colorblind’ – devoid of racism – in spite of evidence to the contrary. I compare this idea to a powerful narrative that exists on the national level, known as *italiani, brava gente*. I coin the term *palermitani, brava gente* to describe an idea Orlando articulates, which is also perceptible elsewhere in local discourse. The *palermitani, brava gente* narrative argues that Palermitans – perhaps *unlike* other Italians, or other Europeans – are essentially ‘good guys’: peaceful, hospitable, and even *per se* anti-racist.

In Chapter Six, I use the results of my digital ethnography to show that Orlando’s rhetoric poses a problem. Orlando must resolve the dissonance of a city that is already supposed to be a site of peaceful *convivenza*, whereas in practice it falls short of this utopian ideal. I argue that he ‘displaces’ what he sees as the city’s imperfections onto various ‘elsewheres.’ Firstly, he displaces them onto a recent ‘dark age,’ which I call the ‘Fascist-Mafia parenthesis.’ The idea of a ‘parenthesis’ describes an idea prevalent in mainstream Italian discourse: that Fascism was a mere blip, and an aberration from the progressive arc of Italian history. I adapt this ‘parenthesis’ construction and apply it to the Palermitan context, where Orlando, among others, claims that this atmosphere of insularity, intolerance and suspicion continued at least until the anti-Mafia

‘Palermitan Spring’ of the 1980s. Secondly, Orlando displaces intolerance onto a ‘constitutive outside’ (Mouffe 2000). In Orlando’s case, this ‘outside’ is an unnamed demographic minority that has betrayed Palermo’s essence, and is therefore imperfectly or deficiently ‘Palermitan.’ Thirdly, he uses the idea that Sicily is selectively European, and selectively Middle-Eastern, as a tool for what I call ‘spatial displacement.’ Distancing Palermo from mainland Europe, in particular, allows him to argue that any xenophobia that does exist in Palermo is a foreign import, extraneous to Sicilian identity.

Despite all these shortcomings, Orlando uses his vision of a cosmopolitan Palermo to argue for some pro-immigrant policies that are unpopular elsewhere in Italy and in Europe. I use the term ‘strategic essentialism’ to describe his approach: an idea developed in the sphere of subaltern studies, that emancipatory ends justify essentializing means. Finally, I argue that the narrative articulated by *Siqillismo* will outlive Orlando’s tenure as mayor, which ended in June 2022. It is likely to take on new meanings, and perhaps unpredictable ones, as its various proponents in Sicilian civic society continue to debate and develop it, adapting it to the contingencies of the future.

Methodological contributions

Part Two advances the emerging field of digital anthropology, by demonstrating the possibilities of social media analysis as a productive tool for studying contemporary Italian political discourse and identity formation. Many of the remarks I analyze in Part Two are prevalent in casual discussion in Palermo, but it can be difficult to seize on their significance in the context of in-person ethnographic fieldwork. This is because they often go unnoticed or uninterrogated, serving the function of cursory assertions of identity. They form part of Palermitan ‘common sense,’ in the same way that a New Yorker might say that “New York is a city of immigrants.” The basis of such assertions, or what precisely they say about the city’s identity, is seldom analyzed in detail. When a politician repeatedly uses such ‘common sense’ formulations to assert a shared identity, and when these assertions are collated in text form, their importance as an object of study becomes more readily apparent.

This dissertation also demonstrates that blending digital and in-person research with discourse analysis can provide a more holistic understanding of a political narrative than either method could achieve on its own. Focusing on various ways of looking at history has made it important to carry out textual analyses of historical sources, and to observe the built environment from geographical perspectives. This interdisciplinary approach also offers a potential model for negotiating anthropology in cases where the level of access to the field site is changeable at short notice.

As a sociocultural anthropologist and cultural studies researcher, based in an Italian Studies department, my project argues for the importance of thinking and researching anthropologically in a field that has historically been rooted in the study of literary and visual culture, but increasingly aspires to be interdisciplinary. My training in Italian Studies, with its close attention to both language and historical context, has enabled me to spot patterns, such as the links many Sicilians draw between the island’s mediaeval past and its present experience of immigration, which often remain in the background in contemporary anthropological studies. In short, I hope that my work demonstrates the potential of anthropological approaches for invigorating Italian Studies, and the potential of an Italian Studies training as a foundation for anthropological research.

My research tests the applicability to Palermo of theories developed in other Mediterranean contexts, especially in Andalusia, which has under-explored points of comparison with Sicily. It demonstrates that Sicily is home to historical and political identity narratives that are every part as rich and complex as those in Andalusia. Sicily's iteration of the *convivenza* narrative cannot therefore be glossed as merely a 'minor' equivalent to what Charles Hirschkind calls *Andalucismo* (2021).

There are, of course, differences between *Andalucismo* and *Siqillismo*, which should not be downplayed. Although only a comparative study could assess this with certainty, the idea of *convivencia* plays if anything a greater role in local identity narratives than the Sicilian analogue. Andalusia's Islamic and Jewish heritage is also far more visible than Sicily's. The importance of the 'hidden,' then – the idea that *Siqillismo* involves the 'uncovering' of something latent – is paramount in the Sicilian context. The historical timelines in Andalusia and Sicily are also different. *Andalucismo* refers specifically to al-Andalus – the medieval period of Muslim rule – whereas, as I have shown, there is a temporal ambiguity to *Siqillismo*. At times, it gestures, sometimes vaguely, to Sicily's earlier Emirate period, but at other times it celebrates the *Arabo-Normanno*: somewhat of a misnomer, which in practice is used primarily to refer to Norman rule. *Siqillismo* is therefore interesting for its malleability, capable of articulating different things in the hands of different speakers.

It nonetheless makes a great deal of sense to take inspiration from the vast scholarship on Andalusia and the disputed *convivencia* narrative when studying in Sicily. Both places are subject to similar stereotypes within their own countries. Mikaela Rogozen-Soltar's Andalusian ethnography describes "tropes of backwardness that chalk marginality up to southerners' 'semi-Arab' character" (2017, 31). Word-for-word, this also accurately describes *meridionalista* attitudes within Italy, which characterize the South as a 'problem' to be 'solved.' This dissertation also proposes that the idea that Sicily is 'mixed' – historically viewed from the hegemonic European perspective as a weakness – has become a source of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 2005), a bond between (some) Sicilians, and a characteristic that has in certain cases come to be embraced, even 'reclaimed,' rather than disavowed. Anthropological studies have also observed this phenomenon in Andalusia (see esp. Rogozen-Soltar 2017).

By developing *Siqillismo* as a shorthand to describe a number of nuanced attitudes to Sicilian history and identity, I hope to provide a way of talking about the *convivenza* narrative without dismissing it wholesale as utopian, or as a so-called "invented tradition" (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983): a novel formation based on a selective use of history. My approach acknowledges that this vision of *sicilianità* is often sincerely felt, and important to many Sicilians' sense of self. Nonetheless, I am attentive to its ambiguities, and its openness to political instrumentalization. I hope to circumnavigate the long-standing debate about whether the very idea of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism is 'good' or 'bad,' 'true' or 'false,' which seldom bears much fruit. I have concentrated, instead, on how and why this idea is constructed, and to what ends. *Siqillismo* exists, in other words, as a discursive formation, and I have demonstrated that it has considerable potential as a topic of future study.

My work builds upon recent transnational approaches to the study of Sicily (see e.g. Ben-Yehoyada 2017), and drives forward efforts to 'de-center' the national level as the dominant lens of Italian Studies (Burdett 2018). My approach to anthropological research, employing a critical analysis of heritage and political rhetoric, enriches the study of Sicily, where anthropology has

more often focused on themes such as family, the Mafia (see e.g. Schneider and Schneider 2003), folklore, and ‘modernization.’ More recently, anthropologists have studied the island’s recent importance as a point of arrival for immigrants (see e.g. Sorge 2018; 2021; Carney 2021), but rarely in a way that foregrounds its historical context across the *longue durée*.

Contributions to the study of nostalgia, heritage, and cultural memory

I seek neither to celebrate my object of study, nor to dismiss it out of hand. I stop short of valorizing what Vito Teti calls “good nostalgia” (2020, 255), but my results resonate with Teti’s observation that “those who have a point of departure to return to with their memory are capable of starting a journey in search of new points of arrival and of departure” (258). Plans for a future synagogue, for example, or the proposal to pursue Palermo’s ‘historic vocation’ as a port city that embraces migration, do not propose a backwards destination of travel, despite their underpinnings in a rhetoric that is grounded in the past. Instead, they instigate twenty-first-century developments that incorporate ideas of the past. Put simply, they “produce” heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995).

The narratives of *Siqillismo* use a “set of heterogeneous elements,” which Claude Lévi-Strauss recognizes as the basic component of myth-making.⁴¹⁰ Like *bricolage*, Lévi-Strauss observes, mythical thought “must make use of this set, no matter what task it is carrying out, since it has nothing else left to hand.”⁴¹¹ In the case of *Siqillismo*, which in essence is a form of storytelling, the resulting formations take elements that we might perceive as ‘nostalgic,’ and direct them towards the needs of the present moment. I demonstrate that new basic elements are being added to the *bricoleurs*’ repertoire, such as the disputed ‘discovery’ of the Palazzo Marchesi *miqweh*. I have also shown that new permutations, such as the ‘thread’ linking historic *convivenza* to contemporary *accoglienza*, i.e. migrant reception, are constantly taking shape in local discourse. Such forms of “relational linkage” (Bond 2022, 280) are a central feature of transnational narratives, which create “new meaning from existing parts” (281). The narratives of *Siqillismo* epitomize this description, tying the border crossings that enabled Palermo’s medieval cultural synthesis to the multicultural ‘mosaic’ which, according to some Palermitans, characterizes the twenty-first-century city.

The kinds of nostalgia I focus on in this dissertation must be distinguished from the nostalgia that Svetlana Boym identifies as a yearning for “the time of our childhood” (2001, xv). When *nostos* implies a ‘homecoming’ to the distant and unremembered past, nostalgia necessarily relies on a form of cultural memory, an imagined reconstruction of that past. I show that subtle changes in Palermo’s urban landscape and the way it is ‘read,’ when taken as a whole, help to formulate such a cultural memory. They enable those inclined to do so to look backwards in time, for traces of medieval *convivenza* between the Abrahamic religions in the city’s historic center. Although this *convivenza* is often described in Palermo as ‘forgotten,’ it is more accurate to say that it is *constructed* as forgotten by the rhetoric of historical discourse. This, in turn, sets the scene for its rediscovery to be framed as a ‘renaissance’ or a ‘revival,’ even though the idea that Sicily’s medieval history is just on the brink of being uncovered is nothing new.

It is more accurate to say that different ideas of Sicilian *convivenza* are ‘revitalized’ or reiterated at various times and in various contexts. The present ‘rebirth’ is the most recent in a long

⁴¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss (2021, 20). “Or, le propre de la pensée mythique est de s’exprimer à l’aide d’un répertoire dont la composition est hétéroclite et qui, bien qu’étendu, reste tout de même limité” (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 26).

⁴¹¹ Lévi-Strauss (2021, 20). “[I]l faut qu’elle s’en serve, quelque soit la tâche qu’elle s’assigne, car elle n’a rien d’autre sous la main” (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 26).

series. Where the earlier work of nineteenth-century historian Michele Amari encouraged a cultural memory of Muslim Sicily in the service of Sicilian separatism, the *Siqillisti* of the twenty-first century are also ‘rediscovering’ Sicily’s Jewish history. They are doing so in the context of their island’s renewed religious pluralism, which in turn is largely a result of Mediterranean migration.

The recent heritage work of ‘remembering’ the ‘Arab-Norman’ – including through UNESCO recognition in 2015, but also through clear and constant political messaging, as Part Two has shown – has cemented the idea of the ‘Arab-Norman’ in Palermo’s cultural memory. This is in spite of the fact that the ‘Arab-Norman’ is only one framework for understanding Sicily’s medieval history, and as Chapter Five emphasizes, is both an arbitrary and a selective one. Whatever its pitfalls, the moniker appears to be sticking. In central Palermo, the ‘Arab-Norman’ is everywhere. As a shorthand, it is memorable and evocative. Not coincidentally, it is a convenient way of presenting Sicilian heritage to a tourist audience. It offers an historically-inflected variety of ‘ethnic packaging’ (Hackworth and Rekers 2005), branding the city with exoticizing ‘almost-Arab’ characteristics, which many visitors hope to find at the southern edge of Europe. The way a city presents itself to the outside world inevitably impacts how its inhabitants understand their own identities, although not necessarily in a straightforward or linear way.

Contributions to the study of cosmopolitanism and the Mediterranean

I seek to examine the idea of the Mediterranean critically, without presupposing that there *are* essentially ‘Mediterranean’ characteristics. Equally, however, I do not assume *ab initio* that there could not possibly exist a feeling of transnational Mediterranean identity among some in Sicily. Indeed, my research demonstrates that a number of the phenomena I study contribute to what Naor Ben-Yehoyada calls the “segmentary process of region formation in the central Mediterranean” (2017, 149). The ‘Mediterranean’ that results from such processes is not an ideologically neutral, geographical sea. On the contrary, it signifies a number of meanings, some of which are in conflict with one another.

Palermo’s Jewish heritage sites – including the Garden of the Righteous, and even the synagogue restoration project – are in some cases used as opportunities to strengthen ties with Israeli academics and diplomats. The Sicilian Institute of Jewish Studies, for example, plays a role in inviting Israeli cultural figures to events in Palermo. But a dispute is visible in Palermo’s urban landscape over what ‘Mediterranean values’ mean. In my Introduction I observe signs of institutional and artistic links with Palestine, which invoke episodes and individuals from the history of Palestinian exile and resistance. Many faces of the Mediterranean, in other words, are on display in Palermo. Such tensions in Palermo’s landscape are one visible example of just how aspirational the fraught idea of a cosmopolitan Mediterranean is. Orlando calls the Mediterranean “the greatest opportunity in the contemporary world to construct a world of peace” (10 September 2019). This demonstrates a Mediterranean essentialism – an idea that the Mediterranean has a ‘vocation’ – but Orlando’s wording also acknowledges that the present Mediterranean is anything but utopian.

Nonetheless, I show that an idea of Sicily’s historic *convivenza* is constantly invoked in the service of what I would call a Mediterranean ‘revivalism,’ visible in Franco Cassano’s plea for the “rediscovery of the South and of the Mediterranean [...] this ancient destination at the crossroads of peoples” (2012, 115). Looking backwards for sustainable models of coexistence is constructed as an essential Mediterranean value. This sense of identity is performed and reiterated

in Palermo through its inchoate sites of memory; through rhetoric invoking its contemporary religious pluralism; and through cosmopolitan political messaging.

As I note at various points, the idea of ‘hospitality’ as a Mediterranean characteristic has been discussed, challenged, and refined across the history of anthropological scholarship in the region. Whether Palermo, Sicily, or the Mediterranean at large has a ‘hospitality culture’ in practice is not a question I ask in this dissertation. Instead, I am more interested in how some Palermitans *understand* their city to be essentially ‘hospitable.’ I argue that Palermo’s dominant political rhetoric perpetuates a problematic idea that immigrants are ‘guests’ (Shryock 2009). I also suggest, however, that the idea of the Mediterranean as a site of encounter also encourages an embrace of what Orlando calls ‘cultural contamination.’ In Chapter Five, I theorize that Orlando and his supporters view migrants’ contributions to the city’s cultural ‘mosaic’ as a ‘gift.’ Migrants are seen as giving this gift to the city in exchange for hospitality, I argue, when they cease to be temporary guests.

In my Introduction, I address the problem of defining cosmopolitanism. The results of my research are a salient demonstration that, whatever cosmopolitanism is, it is not an “attainment,” a state that can be reached or that has been implemented perfectly anywhere (Appiah 2006). Sheldon Pollock et al. propose the idea of “cosmopolitanisms” in the plural (2002, 7), and I endeavor to show that the particular *kind* of cosmopolitanism invoked in Palermitan discourse has local contours that are specific to its context. It is, in other words, a “rooted” cosmopolitanism, “with its own cultural particularities” (Appiah 1997, 618). But what *are* the “cultural particularities” of the cosmopolitanism I study here? They include a focus on *convivenza*, specifically between the Abrahamic religions, which has its foundations in nostalgic invocations of the medieval Mediterranean. This idea of *convivenza* may have analogues elsewhere, but it will certainly not be a characteristic of cosmopolitanisms in places where this idea does not form part of the local lexicon, or is not perceived as a solution to any local challenges. Another cultural particularity is the strong nexus drawn between cosmopolitanism and Sicilian exceptionalism: the idea that Sicily’s cosmopolitan ‘values’ distinguish it from the Italian and European mainland. This form of cosmopolitanism is used as an identity marker, as well as being a political *credo*. The context in which cosmopolitan rhetoric is developing in twenty-first-century Palermo – Sicily’s history of migratory flows, and its present as a point of arrival for Mediterranean migration – also plays a role in determining its particular ‘flavor.’

If we think of cosmopolitanism and its opposite as a spectrum, not a binary, then we can come much closer to understanding its invocations in Palermitan discourse. I share many of the reservations expressed about ‘Mediterraneanism’ in recent anthropological scholarship on migration in Sicily. Ilaria Giglioli is right to be skeptical of the ability of what I identify as ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ to transcend power dynamics across the Mediterranean (2018). Agatha Palma also makes the crucial point that a sense of *Mediterranean* kinship also functions to exclude the many migrants to Palermo who are not perceived as normatively Mediterranean (2021). Expanding the in-group does little to help those who are left in the out-group. Whatever Mediterraneanism *is* in theory, it is not universalist, nor always especially radical, in practice.

There are certainly instances in which the *Siqillismo* I study, and the cozy narrative of Mediterranean *convivenza*, serve banal or platitudinal functions, and there are instances, too, as Part Two demonstrates, where they are self-exculpatory. Nonetheless, *Siqillismo* also has the potential to be a powerful affective disposition, with transformative effects on the solidarities that it *does* encourage. The idea of extending the ‘thread’ of Jewish Sicily into the future; of integrating Palermo’s contemporary mosques into its rich history of religious pluralism; of opposing Italy’s

restrictive immigration laws on the specific basis of Palermo's supposed 'vocation,' all build on this particular identity narrative. That is not to say that Palermo could not have mosques, a synagogue, or migrant rights activism, without *Siqillismo*. I maintain, however, that the *Siqillismo* that *does* exist in Palermitan discourse is crucial for understanding how the city's present political, cultural, and even architectural landscape is changing.

Reflections and future directions

In spring 2020 I was settling into my first year at the University of California, Berkeley. I was beginning a journey towards exciting anthropological territory that was new to me. The spontaneous things that enrich academic life – discussing books in cafés; chance meetings in corridors – were abruptly interrupted as the university, and much of the world, 'went online.' All research, for me and for many others, became remote; all fieldwork plans became tentative and uncertain. When I flew home to the U.K. to be closer to friends and family, I left my books in a cardboard box in North Berkeley. I thought I would be reunited with them in a few months' time; over four years on, they are still there.

In many ways, however, I was also fortunate. I had not yet already made irreversible fieldwork plans, and I was privileged not to experience directly the additional challenges that rendered the pandemic even more difficult for many of my fellow scholars. My dissertation plan became an ever-shifting document, constantly revised in light of travel restrictions and public health measures. In the end, I spent some five intense months of research in Italy during my fieldwork year (2021–2022), which has informed the bulk of this dissertation. This was less than I would have liked, but more than I had expected at many moments during the planning phase. I have had the good fortune of returning to Sicily since, but primarily to follow up with interviewees, to check details, and to explore ideas for future research. This would have been much more of a straightforward ethnography without the complication of a pandemic.

Although my first preference was to spend more time in the field, I also became conscious that, just as there are some stimuli that can only be provided by in-person research, there are other benefits to carrying out research digitally: not least the ability to study how a discourse develops over a long period of time. In Palermo, as in much of the world, technologies like Facebook, WhatsApp and Zoom are not just part of a separate 'digital sphere.' They are so integrated into people's lives – especially in the wake of a series of lockdowns – that the idea of a digital/analogue divide appears limited and limiting. My time as a doctoral student coincided with a rethinking of anthropology that was already in motion before 2020, but was accelerated by the pandemic: a belated acknowledgement that in-person access to fieldwork sites has never been available to all anthropologists equally, and that a long period of in-person fieldwork is neither the only nor always the best way of pursuing anthropological knowledge. The methodologies I have blended in this research – cultural studies; architectural history; discourse analysis; and ethnography, both in-person and digital – have made my work more interdisciplinary than the project I initially planned to undertake. I hope that this interdisciplinarity has benefitted the resulting dissertation, although readers with an opposite perspective might interpret it as a limitation.

There are a number of ways in which the foregoing research could be taken further, and one of these could be a comparative approach. I have already built on research into phenomena that are analogous to my object of study, but not identical. A comparative study of "rooted cosmopolitanisms" (Appiah 1997), with Sicily as one of its focal points, would further our

understanding of locally situated attempts, successful or otherwise, to expand the sphere of solidarity beyond arbitrary national, ethnic, or religious borders.

I have emphasized that Sicily is not Andalusia: their histories are very different, and so are their presents. But in what precise ways are they different? To what extent is Andalusian nostalgia for *convivencia* distinct from Sicilian nostalgia for *convivenza*? How might contemporary *Andalucismo* and *Siqillismo* have been shaped by the aftermaths of Fascism in Spain and Italy, and by their economic positions within Europe? As I have mentioned, similar narratives, albeit with different contours, can be heard both within and outside the Euro-Mediterranean. I have suggested some ways in which *Siqillismo* is distinct from *Andalucismo*, but a detailed analysis of commonalities and differences between these two case studies could be a good way of building on the exciting transnational research that has been carried out in Sicily in recent years: including, for example, between Sicily and Tunisia (see e.g. Melfa 2008; Ben-Yehoyada 2017; Giglioli 2018).

Charles Hirschkind observes that a “positive valorization of the sensorium in relation to historical ways of knowing” is a cornerstone of *Andalucismo*, the disposition at the center of his research in Spain (2021, 24). A dissertation felt enormous when I first contemplated producing one, but it is in fact a finite space. With more time and resources, an analysis that does not foreground the visual – and instead focuses on the soundscape, or the construction of ‘Mediterranean’ taste in Sicily, for example – would undoubtedly enrich this kind of research.

The same constraints inherent to the dissertation genre have meant that my research has mainly focused on one site: Palermo. This has given a distinct urban ‘flavor’ to my results, which cannot necessarily be scaled up in discussions of Sicilian politics or Sicilian culture as a whole. I partly chose Palermo as my base because it is so rich in terms of the phenomena I wanted to study. In some senses, Palermo it is an exceptional case rather than exemplary one, and a multi-sited ethnography would provide a fuller picture. Similarly, analyzing data from other sites in southern Italy could ask how unique Sicily’s particular kind of ‘Mediterraneanism’ is to the island. How might it compare, for example, to ideas of Mediterranean belonging in Calabria or Apulia?

Final remarks

Some of my interviewees in Sicily, and indeed some of my fellow scholars elsewhere in Italy, and in the U.K. and U.S., have asked about the wider ‘applicability’ of my research. I am cautious about generalizing, and I hope to have emphasized throughout this work that the phenomena I have observed here have characteristics that will not necessarily be replicated elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is my hope that a critical analysis of *a* cosmopolitan discourse – imperfect, selective, and reflective of its context as all cosmopolitanisms are – might also help us to reflect on other cosmopolitanisms.

Where do the boundaries of ‘hospitality’ lie, and why? How do geographical, historical and political contexts determine the kind of cosmopolitanisms that are articulated in a particular place? What, in the end, does cosmopolitanism as a political discourse *do*? A project the length of a dissertation can only scratch the surface of these questions, and my research has focused on one field site alone. I hope, nonetheless, that this work might serve as a catalyst for a closer consideration of these questions in Sicilian, Italian, European, and Mediterranean contexts, and indeed, might offer points of comparison for research into cosmopolitanisms rooted elsewhere. If cosmopolitanism does not describe a state but a “challenge” (Appiah 2006), then that challenge is not going anywhere. It therefore feels urgent to look closely at the many ways of approaching, thinking about, and constructing *convivenza*.

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Appendix 1

Trilingual Street Signs in Palermo (photos taken April 2022)

1. Via Calderai



2. Via dei Cartari



3. Via Divisi



4. Via Giardinaccio



5. Via Lampionelli



6. Via Lattarini



7. Piazzetta Meschita



8. Via Meschita



9. Vicolo Meschita



10. Piazza Ponticello



11. Vicolo Ponticello



12. Piazza SS. 40 Martiri



Appendix 2

Methodology for Part Two

In devising the qualitative study in Part Two, I chose to use only data that are fully publicly accessible, i.e. data which all internet users are free to access, with or without a Facebook account. The data in question were collected on a computer that was not signed into Facebook, so that no private or semi-private information could inadvertently become included. This is an important step: as well as containing publicly-available Facebook updates by a well-known political figure, Orlando's Facebook page, like almost all public figures' pages, contains 'comments' by other Facebook users, i.e. private individuals, underneath many of his posts. Each individual is free to set their own privacy settings. Only those users who have not restricted public access to their comments on this public page are made visible to a user who is not signed into a Facebook account. All stages of this research were carried out manually, that is, without the assistance of 'scraping' software, artificial intelligence or automatic 'big data' analysis tools (Snelson 2016).

In order to use the minimum storage and processing capacity necessary to collect the data, I accessed Orlando's public Facebook page via the most basic, 'mobile-friendly' version of the site.⁴¹² Facebook lists posts in reverse chronological order, with the most recent posts appearing at the top of the page. On Orlando's Facebook homepage, therefore, I scrolled to the very bottom, i.e. down to and including Orlando's first post on 30 March 2012. I then used my web browser to download the entirety of Orlando's posts, up to and including 8 July 2021, the 'reference date' for this data set. At this stage, the download did not include other users' comments on those posts, which must first be 'expanded,' by clicking on them, in order to be read. A total of 5,709 individual posts by Orlando were downloaded at this stage.

Although many of Orlando's posts contain multimedia, i.e. embedded videos or photographs, I initially downloaded the data set as plain text, to facilitate manual 'sorting' using a spreadsheet. I read through this data set to identify Orlando's posts on the topics of Sicilian and Palermitan history, migration, tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and religious life, 'flagging' potentially relevant posts. I identified 498 posts as potentially relevant at this stage. These 498 posts were then considered in closer detail, with reference to the specific research question of this project: how does Orlando seek to promote an understanding of Palermitan local identity as tolerant and open to external influences, on the basis of its history and its geographical position in the Mediterranean? On this second reading I identified 169 posts as highly relevant.

In order to read these highly relevant posts in their full context, i.e. with the images and videos embedded, and with the publicly available comments from other Facebook users underneath them in chronological order, I accessed these 169 posts individually and downloaded them in full, each one in PDF format, with the comments section below them 'expanded.' On this third reading, which I carried out using these PDF documents, I identified a number of dominant themes, patterns and tensions. These form the basis of my analysis, which references a total of 91 individual posts by Orlando.

Ethical Considerations

⁴¹² m.facebook.com, rather than www.facebook.com. Orlando's page, facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo, lists him as a "politician," and he has a "verified badge," which in Facebook's words "confirms that this is an authentic Page for this public figure, media company or brand."

The decision to take public comments into consideration in this research affects both the genre of this work and the kinds of ethical concerns that accompany it. Within the field of Internet-Mediated Research, of which social media research forms a part, there are “blurred boundaries that can emerge between observation and document analysis methods,” rather than a neat division between the two (Hewson et al., 2015).

On one hand, the data retrieved from Orlando’s statements alone are as public as newspaper articles. A mayor using a public Facebook page to communicate to his electorate (and to a wider audience) has no “expectation of privacy” (Schultze and Mason 2012), and can properly be categorized, in research of this nature, as the author of a text, as opposed to a ‘human subject’ in the ethnographic sense. After all, Orlando’s Facebook posts frequently form the basis of local news stories about the mayor. For a politician, publicity is, in a sense, ‘the point’ of using Facebook.

On the other hand, the position of other Facebook users commenting on Orlando’s posts is less clear-cut. All of the comments considered in this research are historic, and are fully public; none are the result of any researcher interaction or intervention whatsoever. *Prima facie*, these are therefore “comparable to observational research in a public space” (Willis 2019). As well as considering the technical accessibility of Facebook comments, however, a second definition of publicness and privacy must also be considered: “how users perceive the level of publicness of their [...] posts to be” (Willis 2019, citing Whiteman 2010; 2012).

Roxana Willis notes that “even when information is openly public, and not restricted to friends by a user, there is evidence that sometimes users may still feel that their privacy has been violated. As such, further thought is warranted when researchers are handling even public or semi-public data online” (Willis 2019). Other researchers have expressed concerns that the existence of ever more sophisticated internet search and data mining tools might “enable the re-identification of an individual via triangulation” by others, especially if they are quoted word-for-word, and even if explicit identifiers are not included in the research results (Eynon et al. 2017).

These are not new problems created by digital anthropology; rather, they are considerations that should be at the center of all ethnographic research. As Roxana Willis notes, observational fieldwork in a public square is not entirely unlike research into public Facebook activity (2019). Taking paraphrased field notes, and anonymizing these, is one standard ethnographic research practice in the field, and can just as readily be applied to the digital sphere. David Wilkinson and Mike Thelwall, like many internet researchers, also advocate paraphrasing rather than direct quotation in instances where the expectation of privacy is ambiguous (2011). This, in turn, makes the text “less likely to be traceable back to source” (Hewson et al. 2015).

Accordingly, I take the following approach in this research:

(i) From Orlando’s public Facebook posts themselves, I use direct quotations both in English translation and in the original Italian, given the complete lack of any expectation of privacy as far as these posts are concerned.

(ii) From public comments on Orlando’s posts, on the other hand, I have translated quotations from Italian to English, without citing the Italian original, and have also paraphrased these, using non-cognate synonyms to the greatest extent possible without obscuring the meaning of the text. Additionally, whereas I have cited Orlando’s posts themselves by date, in accordance with standard textual research practices, I have not cited public comments in this way, for the reasons discussed above. I do not reveal the date or details of the original post by Orlando under which

a public comment appears, to ensure greater anonymity for individual Facebook users.

It could, of course, be argued that Facebook users commenting publicly on the freely accessible page of a well-known politician are well aware of the public nature of their activities. When compared to the gamut of Internet-Mediated Research, some of which involves intensely private and sensitive topics, this study is indeed toward the public and non-sensitive end of the spectrum. Nonetheless, I have adopted a careful approach out of an abundance of caution, and out of an acknowledgement that “the dichotomy of private and public sometimes may not be appropriate, and communities may lie in between” (Eysenbach and Till 2001).

Categorizing the study

The qualitative research presented in Part Two falls under the growing field of social media research (Snelson 2016). This study has involved neither “active analysis,” in which researchers interact with research participants over social media, nor “research self-identification,” in which researchers use social media as a recruitment tool (Eysenbach and Till 2001). Instead, the “study of information patterns observed on Facebook,” which neatly describes my research, can be categorized as “passive analysis” (Franz et al. 2019).

Much of the research presented in Part Two consists of textual analysis. Indeed, social media research has been compared to archival work (see e.g. Geismar 2017). Public posts are in some cases “considered worth archiving parallel to depositing newspapers in [the] pre-digital age” (Fielding et al. 2017), although a systematic approach to archiving social media has not yet been established (Fondren and McCune 2018). To the extent that social media research can be considered archival work, therefore, it is akin to rummaging through a “very messy kind of archive” (Geismar 2017, citing Jiménez and Estalella 2014), one that is “unruly and instant” (Geismar 2017), and in constant flux – as well as being at constant risk of being tampered with, added to at will, or even deleted.

Additionally, this research is a form of digital ethnography, defined by the sociologist Dhiraj Murthy as work that is centered on “data-gathering methods [...] mediated by computer-mediated communication” (2011, 159). Digital ethnography is an established category of research, and its use requires no ‘justification’ *per se*. After all, “there are certain situations in which we can learn more by following a Facebook exchange about a local issue [...] than if we had been there at the time” (Pink et al., 2015). Digital ethnography can allow for valuable retrospective analysis. Furthermore, as the distinctions between digital and physical ‘lives’ become less meaningful, ignoring digital elements in ethnographic work, or reducing them to a ‘second best’ choice for those unable to spend time in the field, would be mistaken (Postill 2017).

Sarah Pink et al. make a convincing case for de-centering the “digital” in digital ethnography. Put simply, rather than prefacing projects with the idea of needing to use digital methods, one should instead design methodologies “specifically in relation to the particular research questions being asked” (2015). Accordingly, I conceptualized this research with reference to analogous research projects in adjacent fields.

Jane and Peter Schneider make extensive use of newspaper journalism in their study of Sicily’s anti-mafia movement (2003), demonstrating one possibility of mass-media analysis as a research tool in the Sicilian context. More recently, Facebook is becoming a fruitful site of communications analysis in Italian politics: an analysis of the criminalization of sea-rescue NGOs,

through the lens of Matteo Salvini's Facebook communication (Berti 2021), asks questions on a similar 'scale' to those explored by my research. The quantitative element of Carlo Berti's research (systematically 'coding' each post under various categories, e.g. "nationalist reference"; "criminalization of migrants") was of limited relevance to my project, for which I have instead chosen to focus on close qualitative analysis. Like Berti, I focus on the politician's posts themselves, but I have additionally chosen to include analyses of public comments, in instances where these demonstrate how Orlando's political messaging has been interpreted once published.⁴¹³

Roberto Bracciale and Antonio Martella use social media analysis in an attempt to "define the populist political communication style" in Italy (2017). Their comparative approach, analyzing numerous influential political figures, is less applicable to my research question. There is no other politician in Palermo with a public recognition comparable to Orlando's, and certainly no well-known politician there so closely associated with support for immigration and cosmopolitanism. Nonetheless, Bracciale and Martella's close attention to the relationship between communication style and ideology is reflected in my research.

⁴¹³ For an example of an analysis incorporating user comments as well as posts by politicians, see Bene (2017) on social media in the 2014 Hungarian election. Unlike Bene's quantitative approach, Stetka et al. analyze the "tonality" of Facebook comments on political discussions (2019), an approach closer to the one I have taken.

Appendix 3

Posts Cited from Leoluca Orlando's Facebook Page (all accessed 2 March 2024)

2 May 2012	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/451656724849896/
10 June 2012	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/479346522080916
19 June 2012	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/484959051519663/
21 June 2012	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/486258018056433/
24 June 2012	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/488399894508912
10 August 2012	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/509989725683262/
25 January 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/589850641030503/
16 March 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/620068134675420/
11 May 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/646472015368365/
4 June 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/658940660788167
11 June 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/662655940416639
25 June 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/671036319578601/
27 June 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/672231036125796/
2 July 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/674934849188748
8 July 2013a	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/678705605478339

8 July 2013b	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/678389255509974
8 August 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/697049323643967
20 September 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/723908484291384
21 September 2013	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/724234084258824
25 June 2014	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/899328720082692/
22 September 2014	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/952181181464112/
4 October 2014	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/959326744082889/
15 December 2014	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1005738856108344
27 February 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1053173081364921/
6 March 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1056944710987758/
9 March 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1059386864076876
22 March 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1067915083224054
15 April 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/videos/1082606291754933/
19 April 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1084854461530116
28 June 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1125111657504396
3 July 2015a	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1128171160531779

3 July 2015b	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1128072920541603/
9 July 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1131652630183632/
12 July 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1133314806684081
28 July 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1142122979136597
23 October 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1190889240926637
19 November 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1204191042929790
5 December 2015	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1215173288498232
23 February 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1265459376802956
26 February 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1267727886576105
21 April 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1314627985219428
1 July 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1366233936725499/
14 July 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1376257479056478
31 July 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1390171324331760
14 September 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1433750833307142
20 September 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1439685322713693
6 October 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1456432354372323

13 October 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1463618083653750
14 October 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/videos/1464870946861797
28 October 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1480518205297071
29 October 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1481691981846360
8 November 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1493057874043104/
2 December 2016	https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1520983607917197
3 December 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1522866654395559
9 December 2016	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1532500276765530/
15 December 2016a	https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1541288715886686
15 December 2016b	https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1541164845899073
28 January 2017	https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1601001473248743
1 February 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1605400049475552
3 April 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/1673238936024996
27 April 2017	https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1878470979031677
28 April 2017	https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1706955445986678
5 June 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1748974381784784/

9 June 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1756763164339239/
14 July 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/photos/a.422899234392312/1800508843298004/
1 September 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1855948804420674
10 September 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1864890770193144
4 October 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1888090717873149
23 October 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1907665115915709
25 October 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1909534102395477
27 November 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1945118558837031
30 November 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1948896908459196
7 December 2017	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/1957392950942925
22 January 2018	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2008503609165192
24 January 2018	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2011006892248197
29 January 2018	https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2016233825058837&set=a.422632724418963
4 February 2018	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2022253924456827
10 February 2018	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/videos/2029978453684374
17 February 2018	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2037956556219897

22 February 2018	https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2044326235582929
10 June 2018	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2171431362872415
16 June 2018	https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=2180158705333014
4 July 2018	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2210023515679866
11 September 2018	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2324907504191466
17 February 2019	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2564821170200097
13 June 2019	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2758907657458113
29 August 2019	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2904587149556829
10 September 2019	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2927784493903761
23 September 2019	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/2954376424577901
18 October 2020	https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1624163191097737
3 June 2021	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/4658918470790346
4 June 2021	https://www.facebook.com/leolucaorlandopalermo/posts/4661633700518823