

Of Blood Oranges and Golden Fruit: A Sacred Context for the “Rosarno Events”

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What objects, places, or occasions awaken in me that mixture of fear and attachment, that ambiguous attitude caused by the approach of something simultaneously attractive and dangerous, prestigious and outcast—that combination of respect, desire, and terror that we take as the psychological sign of the sacred?
Michel Leiris, “The Sacred in Everyday Life” (1938)

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen Italy transformed from a land of emigration, both internal and external, into a land of immigration. Some attention has been given in recent years to the tragic shipwrecks off the coast of the island of Lampedusa and the survivors’ traumatic entry into Italian territory. For those who do make it alive to this rocky Italian outpost, landing is just the beginning of a difficult journey that in some cases does not get much farther than Italy’s southern tip, with its ever-present need for underpaid farmhands. Thus, many African migrants find work in those citrus groves of Sicily and Calabria that, just a few decades ago, had employed the most desperate of Italians. The plight of the Italian orange pickers in the first half of the twentieth century was briefly and effectively captured in Elio Vittorini’s literary classic, *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1938-1939), where he writes: “Nessuno ne vuole... Nessuno ne vuole... Come se avessero il tossico... Maledette arance” (“No one wants them... No one wants them... As if they were poisoned... Damned oranges!”).¹ These are the last words the narrating protagonist hears from an orange picker he has just met on the ferry linking Sicily and Calabria. Vittorini’s book is solidly secular, but its oranges are not: they are literally cursed (“maledette”) and believed to be—at least metaphorically—poisoned (“come se avessero il tossico”). Nevertheless, they are eaten and offered to his young wife, in desperation, by the orange picker, whose pay—and therefore diet—consists of oranges alone: “Se uno non vende le arance, non c’è il pane... e bisogna mangiare le arance... Così, vedete?” (“If we don’t sell our oranges, there’s no bread. And then we have to eat the oranges... Like this, you see?”).² Likewise, about today’s immigrant orange pickers, it has been written that “[t]hey work every day from dawn to sunset in inhuman conditions, taking jobs that Italians don’t want to do, eating nothing more than oranges for days.”³

With an adjective that underlines his cultural and economic privilege, Vittorini’s narrator reassuringly describes the reviled oranges his companion is ferrying as “very nutritious” and—to the orange picker’s surprise and eager delight—offers to buy some. The dual nature of oranges in this passage, poisonous and life-giving at once, necessary yet dangerous, and thus what we may call their “quality of mysterious and awesome power,” suggests an understanding of this fruit as

¹ Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, in *Le opere narrative*, ed. Maria Corti (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), 582; *Conversations in Sicily*, trans. Alane Salierno Mason (New York: New Directions, 2000), 13.

² Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, 581; *Conversations in Sicily*, 15.

³ Arije Antinori, “The Italian Mafia and Migrant Smuggling,” in *Global Environment of Policing*, ed. Darren Palmer, Michael M. Berlin, and Dilip K. Das (Boca Raton, Florida: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 232.

a sacred object or a *pharmakon* of sorts, cure and poison at once.⁴ This is a fruit, after all, on which the economy of Southern Italy has long relied but which has not always delivered on its promises of well-being, be it physical or social. To borrow ethnographer Michel Leiris's influential characterization cited in my epigraph, oranges qualify as "something simultaneously attractive and dangerous, prestigious and outcast."⁵ For at least a century and a half, in texts about Italy's far south, oranges have been regularly represented as both a solution and a problem, and even, occasionally, as a metaphor for this very land.⁶ This ambivalent characterization, with its sacred overtones, returns in contemporary discourse—both verbal and visual, literary and journalistic—about the production of oranges in Calabria.

Vittorini's literary orange pickers, in the first half of the twentieth century, were Italian: "scuri in faccia" ("their faces dark"), yes, and exotic for the narrator in many ways, but nevertheless Italian.⁷ In Italy's southernmost plains—it is the Rosarno area in Calabria that has received the most attention from the media, its geography and agriculture (that of the plain of Gioia Tauro) comparable to the equally fertile plain of Catania—today's orange pickers are African, hailing from countries such as Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and more. The best-known among "i fatti di Rosarno," "the Rosarno events" (as they are usually referred to in the media), are as follows: between January 7 and January 9, 2010, several agricultural workers from countries including Togo, Morocco, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast, on their way back from the orange groves where they worked, were shot and wounded by groups of unidentified locals. These initial attacks led to protests on the part of the victims' fellow workers with over two thousand immigrants marching into Rosarno a few days later. The protesters clashed with the local police, eventually backed by an armed local population, in a conflict that led to bloodshed on both sides, and to the departure of many of the African workers involved (over eight hundred were deported and a few hundred more left the area).⁸ It is in reading of "i fatti di Rosarno," and the issues that continue to beleaguer their protagonists, that I encountered more than once uncannily pertinent references to Vittorini's poignant words from some eighty years ago. The orange pickers of Rosarno and the surrounding countryside, most of them from Sub-Saharan Africa, are paid under the table, or "in nero," 20-25 euros per long day, in slave-like conditions. Five euros of their meager daily earnings are spent for transportation, they have no recourse if

⁴ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 26. In his discussion of sacrifice and the sacred, René Girard remarks that "the word *pharmakon* in classical Greek means both poison and the antidote for poison, both sickness and cure—in short, any substance capable of perpetrating a very good or very bad action, according to the circumstances and the dosage." René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 95.

⁵ Michel Leiris, "The Sacred in Everyday Life," in *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 24. Michael Taussig aptly describes Leiris's and, more generally, the College of Sociology's dedication "to sacred sociology" when he writes that, for them, "the sacred pointed to a replay of a pagan world vibrant with spirit-forces thought to be long since obliterated by what had come to be called the disenchantment of the world." Michael Taussig, "What Color is the Sacred?" *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2006): 41.

⁶ In July 1860, when the Count of Cavour informs his Ambassador to France about the current state of military and political affairs, his telegram reads: "Les macaronis ne sont pas encore cuits, mais quant aux oranges qui sont déjà sur notre table, nous sommes bien décidés à les manger" ("The macaroni are not cooked yet, but as for the oranges that are already on our table, we are quite ready to eat them"), in Denis Mack Smith, *Cavour and Garibaldi 1860: A Study in Political Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 100. The macaroni stand for Naples, not yet reached by northern soldiers, whereas the oranges are Sicily, already conquered by Garibaldi's troops. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

⁷ Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, 576; *Conversations in Sicily*, 9.

⁸ Mostaccio, *La guerra delle arance*, 69-74.

the boss refuses to pay them, and they are the regular target of violent actions such as beatings, shootings, *gambizzazioni*, and *sportellate* (the main road has no sidewalk and passing cars, in sport, hit the walking workers by slamming open the passenger door against them).⁹ “Home” for these workers typically consists of abandoned buildings with no electricity or running water. Their health conditions are precarious, with problems including dermatitis caused by farm chemicals and gastralgia brought on by the fact that “durante la raccolta degli agrumi mangiavano fino a 10 arance o mandarini al giorno. Il loro unico cibo che, in quelle dosi quotidiane e con il suo succo acido ovviamente non può che produrre problemi” (“during the citrus harvest they ate up to ten orange or mandarins a day. This was their only food, and, in those daily doses and given its acidic juice, it obviously could only lead to problems”).¹⁰ These workers’ plight continues to bring to the public’s attention the issues of undocumented migration, the exploitation of manual labor, and the role played in the local economy by the local organized crime, the Calabrian *‘ndrangheta*.¹¹ These are political and social issues and many would call them strictly secular ones, but the terms with which they are evoked in the media, even in the most secular of publications, are often drawn from the vocabulary of the sacred; the context in which the presence of oranges places these issues, as well, harks back to the dual, kratophanous qualities of the sacred—dangerous and life-giving at once.

Contemporary definitions of the sacred do not necessarily include the presence of organized religion, although a certain supernatural element is usually involved at some level. Peter Berger’s useful 1967 description of the sacred, in his book *The Sacred Canopy*, as that “quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience,” partly cited earlier in this essay, refers back, like most other modern descriptions of the sacred, to Émile Durkheim’s classic definition of “*sacred things* [...as] *things set apart and forbidden*.”¹² As well as to Durkheim’s seminal definition, contemporary critics often refer to Rudolf Otto’s—the German theologian who repeatedly describes the holy as “‘wholly other,’ something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one”¹³—and to Mircea Eliade’s. Like Durkheim and Otto, Eliade stresses “[t]he abyss that divides the two modalities of experience—sacred and profane.”¹⁴ Echoes of these influential early and mid-twentieth century theories may be heard in such contemporary descriptions of the sacred as “that powerful feeling of awe and fascination [...] described as closely linked to the sense of standing in the presence of the mysteriously other

⁹ Ironically, many of the employers of today’s migrant agricultural workers are the children and grandchildren of the Italian farmhands who had to fight for their basic labor rights in the 1950s. Francesco Di Bartolo, “Dalle lotte sociali alla globalizzazione delle rivolte: il movimento bracciantile nelle zone capitalistiche del Mezzogiorno,” *Meridiana* 77 (2013): 201.

¹⁰ Rosaria Marina Arena and Francesca Chirico, *Dossier Radici/Rosarno: Monitoraggio Autunno-Inverno 2011-12* (Reggio Calabria: Radici, 2012), 118.

¹¹ The extent of the *‘ndrangheta*’s involvement, and even whether it is involved at all, is the subject of much controversy; see, for example, Stopdrangheta.it and associazione da Sud, *Arance insanguinate – Dossier Rosarno* (2010), last accessed June 6, 2014, http://www.stopndrangheta.it/file/stopndrangheta_875.pdf vs. Fabio Mostaccio, *La guerra delle arance*, intro. Tonino Perna (Soveria Mannelli, Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 2012), vii.

¹² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 224; Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Anthony Giddens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 224, Durkheim’s emphasis.

¹³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 29.

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 14.

and the really real.”¹⁵ “The sense of the sacred” may also be defined, more pragmatically, “as an apprehension of a kind of objective moral fact”¹⁶ or, “by what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meanings and conduct of human life.”¹⁷ Finally and famously, for René Girard “[t]he sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man’s effort to master them [...] Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.”¹⁸ In what follows, I hope to show how sacred texts of myth and scriptures, magical narratives from folklore and literature, the sacralization effected by advertising, and the religiously inspired language of the popular press—both books and newspaper articles—shape and are, in turn, shaped by a certain representation of oranges as desirable and dangerous at once, and as ultimately belonging to a dimension experienced as separate from everyday life and bound both to moral imperatives and to looming, if not actualized, violence.

Themselves separated into sections enclosed and guarded from each other by a resilient membrane, oranges are grown in gardens—enclosures or guarded places that are, as their very name suggests and their etymology confirms, separated from the rest of the world and everyday life. The name commonly given to orange groves or orchards, in Southern Italy, is “giardino,” a word that in standard Italian simply means garden—specifically, a pleasure garden, not a vegetable garden (for which the word “orto” is instead used; before becoming a cash crop, oranges were grown in ornamental gardens attached to aristocratic homes). In Vittorini’s *Conversazione in Sicilia*, for example, the orange picker insists that, despite their poverty, he and his co-workers are not unemployed—on the contrary: “Lavoriamo... Nei giardini... Lavoriamo” (“We work... In the orchards... We work”).¹⁹ More recently, we read: “Come vivono le 5 mila famiglie di Rosarno? Da sempre grazie ai ‘giardini,’ i piccoli agrumeti che colorano la piana” (“How do the five thousand Rosarno families live? They have always lived thanks to the ‘gardens,’ the small citrus orchards that color the plain”).²⁰ Oranges are relatively new fruits in Europe: the oranges available to the wealthy since the Middle Ages were bitter oranges, also known as Seville oranges (used today to make marmalade and liqueurs), and it was not until the Renaissance that sweet oranges such as those grown in Rosarno were first cultivated in Italy.

The exotic nature of oranges in Renaissance Italy linked them to other mysterious fruits that were also only vaguely known at that time but that were thought to resemble oranges—notably, the golden apples picked by Hercules from the Garden of the Hesperides for his eleventh labor. That these golden apples may in fact have been oranges is sometimes alluded to in ancient literature, but it is only in the Italian Renaissance that the identification between oranges and the golden apples of the Hesperides became so popular as to eventually be taken for granted: the first full-length treatise on oranges, published by the Jesuit scholar Giovan Battista Ferrari in 1646, is titled *Hesperides sive de malorum aureorum cultura et usu* (*Hesperides, or On the Cultivation*

¹⁵ Eugene Webb, *Worldview and Mind: Religious Thought and Psychological Development* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 5.

¹⁶ Robert Merrihew Adams, “Moral Horror and the Sacred,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23, no. 2 (1995): 214.

¹⁷ Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 29.

¹⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 31.

¹⁹ Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, 580; *Conversations in Sicily*, 13.

²⁰ Giuseppe Salvaggiolo, “Le arance di carta di Rosarno,” *La Stampa*, January 12, 2010, last accessed June 6, 2014, <http://www.lastampa.it/2010/01/12/italia/cronache/le-arance-di-carta-di-rosarno/fygXKhBsTDj0mp844ktl/pagina.html>.

and Uses of the Golden Apples).²¹ This identification with the fruit of the Hesperides gave oranges their sacred status as the forbidden fruits of Hera's garden, protected by three nymphs and by a sleepless, hundred-headed dragon; it is an identification that eventually led to the scientific classification of citrus fruit as "Hesperidia."²² The golden apples of mythology were both sacred objects in Hera's garden and objects of exchange, commodities, once in Hercules's hands. Thus, Hercules gave the golden apples to Eurystheus in return for immortality. It was also one of the golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides that was eventually awarded to Venus by Paris, in the course of his famous judgment, in exchange for the love of the most beautiful woman in the world.

A walled garden such as that of the Hesperides is also, etymologically, a "paradise." The combination of untouchability and sexuality links the golden apples of Greek mythology to another famous sacred apple, in another sacred garden: the Garden of Eden, called in the Septuagint Greek *paradeisos*. According to a Renaissance reading of the biblical tale, the fruit known as Adam's apple was a small orange, a citrus fruit (Adam's apple was later associated with the cartilaginous protuberance on men's throat, representing a chunk of the forbidden fruit that got stuck in the first man's esophagus). A detail on Jan Van Eyck's celebrated Ghent Altarpiece of 1432, *The Altar of Adam and Eve*, may be the earliest representation of this small, yellow, and bumpy citrus, descriptions of which are regularly found in herbals from the following centuries (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

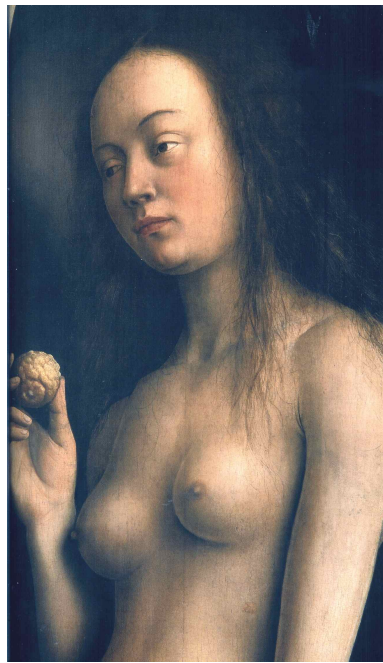


Fig.1: Jan Van Eyck, detail from *The Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432

²¹ Baptistae Senensis Ferrari, *Hesperides sive de malorum aureorum cultura et usu: libri quatuor* (Rome: Sumptibus Hermanni Scheus, 1646).

²² In the Oxford English Dictionary, under "Hesperides," we read: "The name given by Endlicher to one of his classes of plants, containing the orange family (Aurantiaceæ) and some related orders. The name Hesperideæ was given by Linnæus to one of his natural orders, containing the genus Citrus and some others. Based on an identification of the orange, citron, etc., with the golden apples of the mythical Hesperides." *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Hesperides," accessed October 10, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/86389?redirectedFrom=hesperides%23eid>.

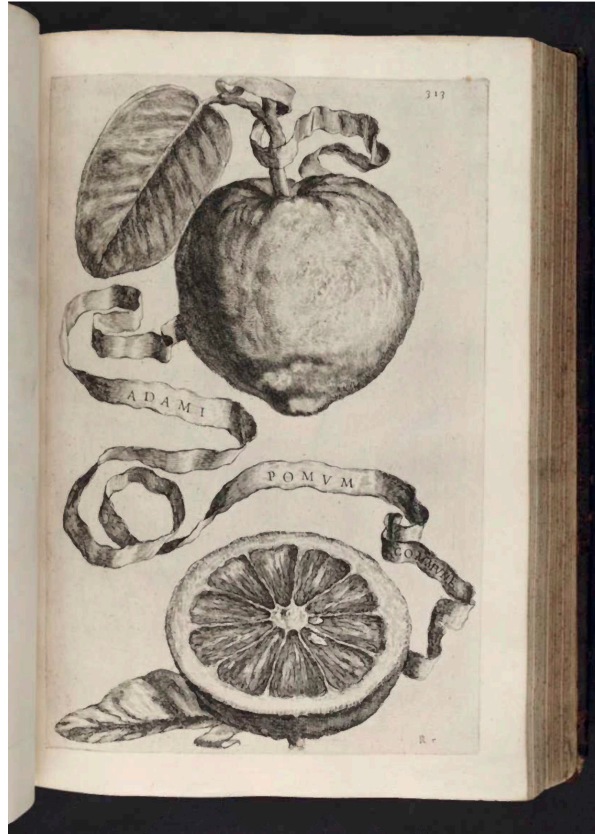


Fig. 2: Giovan Battista Ferrari, “Pomum Adami,” from *Hesperides*, 1646

The *pomum Adami* tasted, we are told, as sharp as a lemon; it sported a thick and rough skin with a pale-yellow coloring, and an indentation supposedly left there from Adam’s own bite:²³ “What more appropriate fruit could there be for the Fall? It is at one and the same time an apple, a citrus, and an exotic fruit of the Garden of Paradise. It was the very apple of Adam.”²⁴ Van Eyck was able to represent the sacred status of citrus fruit in Eve’s hand—set apart because exotic and expensive as well as desirable and yet dangerous—but also its status as commodity in another work of his: the oranges on the windowsill of Van Eyck’s celebrated *Arnolfini Marriage* signify the high social rank of the subjects of his painting, able to afford a pricey delicacy as the botanical symbol of their sexual union.

The combination of sexuality and citrus fruit reappears in Italian tradition during the following century, in Giovan Battista Basile’s literary fairy tale, “The Three Citrons,” the last in the 1634-36 collection *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*.²⁵ These title fruits enclose three fairies, the last of whom becomes the royal protagonist’s longed-for wife; although these are citrons rather than oranges, citrus fruits in early modern Europe were often confused with one another, and Basile’s fairy tale is the oldest printed version of what became known as

²³ David Freedberg, “Ferrari on the Classification of Oranges and Lemons,” *Documentary Culture: Florence and Rome from Grand-Duke Ferdinand I to Pope Alexander VII*, ed. Elizabeth Cropper, Giovanna Perini, and Francesco Solinas (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1992), 288.

²⁴ James Snyder, “Jan Van Eyck and Adam’s Apple,” *The Art Bulletin* 58, no. 4 (1976): 515.

²⁵ Giambattista (Giovan Battista) Basile, “Li tre cetra,” in *Lo cunto de li cunti*, ed. Michele Rak (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), http://www.letteraturaitaliana.net/pdf/Volume_6/t133.pdf; Basile, “The Three Citrons,” in *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007).

“The Three Oranges” tale type, number 408 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther folklore index. Basile’s tale brings together the desirability of citrus fruit, their magic—if not quite sacred—status, travels to distant lands (the prince must go to the New World to obtain the fruit), and even a reflection on skin color and national origin: the protagonist seeks a wife with a skin as white as ricotta and red as blood and finds her in the third green citron; but the white-and-red fairy is killed by a dark-skinned impostor, a foreign black servant who dupes the protagonist into marrying her—and burns at the end when her deception is discovered.²⁶

Since their introduction to Europe in the early modern period, citrus fruit and, especially, sweet oranges continued to be a sign of desire, wealth, and of the ability to acquire exotic objects; it is only in the twentieth century that fruits such as those cultivated in Rosarno have become so inexpensive as to make their production economically unviable without the use of underpaid, exploitative labor.²⁷ Moving in time and space closer to Vittorini’s famished orange pickers and the “Rosarno events” that inspired this essay, we find once more the dual role of oranges—as economic and sacred capital at once, and as both holy and damning—in the folklore narratives collected in the late nineteenth century by the Sicilian ethnographer Giuseppe Pitre (1841-1916). In his 1889 *Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi del popolo siciliano* (*Habits and Customs, Beliefs and Prejudices of the Sicilian People*), Pitre tells of mysterious, supernatural fairs taking place on June 24, the Eve of Saint John, and on other magico-religious holidays; these fairs offered, for just pennies, priceless objects such as fruit made of solid gold.²⁸ At one of these fairs, sacred oranges grow in an enchanted orchard that is explicitly compared to the mythological Garden of the Hesperides; in this Sicilian orchard, a female magical being guards and distributes the fruit—but to no avail: their intrinsic separateness and untouchability make these oranges self-destructive as soon as they come into contact with the profane world. “Benché incolto, quel colle trasformatosi per incanto in un giardino di Esperidi: piante per tutto cariche di be’ frutti d’oro. Guardiania e dispensiera di esse è una fata, che ne dà a chi ne vuole: ma sventuratamente non prima si toccano che svaniscono” (“Although fallow, that hill is transformed by magic into a Garden of Hesperides: its plants are fully laden with beautiful golden fruit; their guardian and dispenser is a fairy who gives them to whoever wants them; but unfortunately no sooner are they touched than they disappear”).²⁹

Somewhat less ephemeral golden oranges may be purchased at other Sicilian fairs, Pitre tells us, but these, too, are sacred, heterogeneous with respect to the profane world; as a consequence, not always does their monetary value survive human handling and its ensuing contamination. At “the fair of enchantments” taking place inside a mountain that splits open for the occasion, for

²⁶ More about this tale may be read in my forthcoming article, “The Fruit of Love in Giambattista Basile’s ‘The Three Citrons,’” *Marvels & Tales* 29, no. 2 (2015).

²⁷ There are objections to the charge of exploitation, of course: “Venticinque euro è il minimo salariale: è una paga misera, ma questa è un’economia misera. C’è miseria, non sfruttamento [...] il prezzo di mercato è sceso al di sotto del costo di produzione” (“Twenty five euros is the minimum wage; it is a poor pay, but this is a poor economy. There is poverty, not exploitation. [...] Market prices are now lower than production costs.”) Arena and Chirico, *Dossier Radici/Rosarno*, 141. “In other places, \$30 is not a living wage. But this is one of the poorest parts of Italy, and many local people do not earn much more, even if most will not pick fruit.” Rachel Donadio, “Looking Past the Façade of Italian City After Riots,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/13/world/europe/13italy.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

²⁸ Because it coincides with the summer solstice, the Eve of Saint John is an important feast in any syncretic understanding of the Christian sacred; see, for example, James Mooney, “The Holiday Customs of Ireland,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 26, no. 130 (1889): 400-4.

²⁹ Giuseppe Pitre, *Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi*, Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane (Palermo: Lauriel, 1889), 4: 376.

example, an intelligent goatherd (“un capraio di grosso cervello”) was beckoned inside by mysterious white figures; within the mountain, he met lemon and orange sellers speaking an incomprehensible tongue and selling him, for two pennies, large quantities of their solid-gold oranges. When, after a night spent passed out in fear, he goes and tells his master everything that he has experienced, the master uses the pretext of having the oranges blessed in order to take them away from the goatherd, in exchange for an insignificant sum; but the golden oranges, once in the master’s larcenous hands, turn into worthless snail shells. Whereas the goatherd’s reverent awe kept him within the sacrosanct realm of the oranges, the tale implies, the master’s greed polluted the sacred fruit.³⁰

Pitrè’s orange folklore clearly inspired his friend Luigi Capuana’s literary fairy tale, “Le arance d’oro” (“The Golden Oranges,” 1882).³¹ Much like Pitrè’s legends and their representation of oranges as the ambivalent object of financial hope for the impoverished and of the economic exploitation for the wealthy, Capuana’s tale is uncannily reminiscent of the orange workers’ plight in today’s Rosarno: Calabrian oranges beckon the disenfranchised from another continent with their hope for a better future, while economic giants such as Coca Cola—the company that purchases most of the Rosarno oranges to use, as juice concentrate, in their Fanta orange soft drinks—reap the actual benefits of the fruit (though one might claim that the transformation of the delicious Rosarno oranges into this industrial orange beverage resembles their turning into snail shells). In Capuana’s tale, the royal protagonist’s golden oranges keep getting magically stolen from his garden. After a peasant, who is actually a foreign king in disguise, repeatedly restores them to him, the king does not make good on his promise to give the peasant his daughter’s hand in marriage as compensation; this violation of a pact made over sacred oranges and involving a sexual exchange profanes the fruit and causes it to rot and lose its value as commodity. It is only at the end of the tale, when the king abides by his promise, that his oranges are restored to their original golden and precious state.

In these folk and literary tales, sacred objects such as oranges do not let themselves be turned into commodities, into objects of economic exchange—not always, at least, and not right away. The proper rites need to be observed (e.g.: awe experienced, property respected, promises kept) if the sacred fruit is to preserve its value. The story of citrus offers, in more recent times as well, examples of a reverse metamorphosis, namely the transformation of oranges from commodities into sacred objects through an emphasis on their “quintessence” and the process known as “singularization.”³²

A television commercial for Sicilian blood oranges, known as “Arancia rossa di Sicilia IGP,” exemplifies the quintessence, singularization, and resulting sacralization of an agricultural

³⁰ Ibid., 408.

³¹ Luigi Capuana, “Le arance d’oro,” in *C’era una volta... Fiabe* (Milan: Treves, 1885), 58-73; “The Golden Oranges,” trans. Santi Buscemi, *Journal of Italian Translation* 1, no. 2 (2006): 64-77.

³² Consumer research teaches us that the attribution of quintessence to a commodity (the most “orangey” of all oranges, for example), comes with a degree of sacredness, and is “achieved over a long period of time” as well as being “bound up with authenticity.” Russell Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John F. Sherry, Jr., “The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, no. 1 (1989): 16. Singularization is what separates a commodity from others of its kind and makes it a unique, singular object. Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 73-74. Marx’s own concept of “commodity fetishism” borrows its second term from the pre-Freudian language of religion, where a fetish is an inanimate object endowed with magical powers and thus worthy of worship; an in-depth reading and critique of Marx’s use of the term “fetishism” may be found in Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1981).

commodity. In this thirty-second video, the extreme close up of an enormous bright orange fruit—only part of it fits the left side of the screen—with its bumps and shine magnified by the HD resolution, slowly revolves against a flat, black background. Gentle piano notes accompany this visual display as a suave male voice slowly speaks to the orange itself (or, one is tempted to say, to the orange *herself*): “Amo il mondo che sei. Con vigore difendi il tuo rosso segreto. In te virtù e memorie antiche: l’Etna, il sole, ricordi della terra. Tu sapore, tu colore, tu meraviglia della natura. Delizia per il mio palato” (“I love the world that you are. With great energy you defend your red secret. In you are ancient virtues and memories: Etna, the sun, recollections of the earth. You are flavor, you are color, you are a marvel of nature. You are a delight for my palate”).³³ Quintessential because red and Sicilian (“IGP” stands “Indicazione Geografica Protetta,” “Protected Geographic Indication”), and singularized and set apart from all other oranges because addressed directly and individually by the speaker, this orange is anthropomorphized as well as feminized—thanks also to the maleness of the voice and the grammatically feminine gender of oranges in Italian. In this, the commercial is uniquely reminiscent of Basile’s fairy tale “The Three Citrons,” where the female object of desire is also embodied in a citrus fruit. Even as its status as commodity is implied by the fact that it is being advertised, the quintessential and singular orange in this commercial is bathed in an aura perfectly captured in Walter Benjamin’s 1931 definition as “[a] strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be.”³⁴ Benjamin’s distance in closeness—the orange is viewed in extreme close-up, and yet it is from Sicily, and it is secretive—is the space of the sacred, the very space of cult and ritual that, according to Benjamin, originally gave art its aura: that distant sacred space of which the orange, as the voiceover unequivocally states, physically preserves the memory.

The sacred overtones of this television commercial for the red oranges of Sicily return regularly in discourse about other oranges—not only in folklore and fairy tales, but also in the articles, essays, and books about the oranges of Calabria and the Rosarno events. In his introduction to Fabio Mostaccio’s 2012 book *La guerra delle arance* (*The War of the Oranges*), economic sociologist Tonino Perna writes about the Rosarno area: “Tra il verde intenso della piana, durante il periodo autunno-inverno, spicca il colore delle arance, come palle colorate di un immenso albero di Natale” (“Among the intense green of the plain, during the fall and winter period, the bright oranges stand out, like colorful ornaments on an immense Christmas tree”).³⁵ Perna provides an optimistic description of Calabria as the second largest producer of oranges in Italy, but this author promptly corrects the image of feasting and abundance his sentences evoke by noting, with a reference to Vittorini’s oranges, that, “[e]d è proprio intorno alle arance, a questo frutto prezioso e maledetto, che s’intreccia la storia sociale di quest’area” (“It is precisely around oranges, around this precious and cursed fruit, that the social history of this area is woven”).³⁶ The joyful religious ritual of a decorated Christmas tree is juxtaposed with the more ambivalent “precious” and “cursed” sacredness of oranges: “Arancia, frutto dorato e ricco di preziosi elementi, pregno di vitamina C, antiossidante, una panacea per la prevenzione di molte malattie, eppure frutto maledetto per chi lo produce e lo raccoglie” (“Oranges, golden fruits rich

³³ Simone Di Stefano, “Arancia rossa di Sicilia IGP,” YouTube video, 0:30, posted by “bulbhead,” February 27, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Xk2c2KCKos>.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), 3:104–105.

³⁵ Tonino Perna, “Introduzione,” in Fabio Mostaccio, *La guerra delle arance*, x.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

in precious elements, full of vitamin C, antioxidant, a panacea for the prevention of many illnesses, are nevertheless cursed fruits for those who produce and pick them”).³⁷ Perna remains hopeful, however, and concludes his introduction with words that call up the other side of the kratophanous sacred, namely the benevolent side: “Speriamo che un giorno non lontano si possa dire: benedette arance” (“Let’s hope that someday, not too far from now, we will be able to say: blessed oranges”).³⁸

That the discourse about the Rosarno oranges should regularly refer to the vocabulary of the sacred cannot be read as casual or coincidental in a context that conjures up curses steeped in ancient religion and folklore—curses that seem to have materialized in the horror of the orange workers’ present conditions. The language drawn from the realm of the sacred to refer to oranges and orange pickers in the popular press focuses on the social and physical violence of which these young men are the victims (they are almost all men, with an average age of twenty-nine), evoking the moral horror born from witnessing the violation of something sacred³⁹—for the sacred indeed presents “normative claims over the meanings and conduct of human life.”⁴⁰ In the first sentence of his Marxist analysis of the Rosarno struggles, Antonio Catalano, a frequent contributor to the website “Comunismo e comunità,” calls the rebellion of Rosarno’s immigrants “*sacrosanta*,” “*sacrosanct*”: a redoubled description of sacredness—sacred *and* holy—which the author italicizes for further emphasis.⁴¹ The same powerful word, “*sacrosanct*,” returns twice in Arena and Chirico’s *Dossier Radici/Rosarno*, a collection of both original and reprinted articles.⁴² Antonello Mangano’s book of essays is titled *Gli africani salveranno Rosarno* (*Africans Will Save Rosarno*)—with the verb “salvare” referring, in Italian, to both physical safety and spiritual salvation. An article from the Communist daily *Il Manifesto* describes the reporter’s African cultural mediator in Rosarno as “il mio cocchiere in quest’anticamera di purgatorio i cui ospiti sognavano il paradiso occidentale ma confinano pericolosamente con l’inferno” (“my coachman in this antechamber of purgatory whose guests dreamed of a western paradise but border perilously on hell”).⁴³ That Rosarno is experienced by its migrant workers as “un inferno” is a recurring metaphor in numerous newspaper articles—starting with Magro’s 2006 “Un inferno chiamato Rosarno” (“A Hell Called Rosarno”), also published in *Il Manifesto*.⁴⁴ Eugenio Scalfari’s 2010 editorial in *La Repubblica*, “L’inferno di Rosarno e i suoi responsabili” (“The Hell of Rosarno and Those Responsible for It”) repeatedly echoes this sentiment with words such as “inferno,” “purgatorio,” and even “il giudizio universale,” and “l’apocalisse” (“hell,” “purgatory,” “the last judgment,” and the “apocalypse”).⁴⁵ Those who

³⁷ Ibid., XI.

³⁸ Ibid., XII.

³⁹ Adams, “Moral Horror and the Sacred,” 205.

⁴⁰ Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World*, 29.

⁴¹ Antonio Catalano, “Rosarno, tra rivolta e lotta di classe: quando la lotta dei lavoratori immigrati riguarda tutti i lavoratori,” April 2014, <http://www.comunismoecomunita.org/?p=836%20>.

⁴² Arena and Chirico, *Dossier Radici/Rosarno*, 20, 91.

⁴³ Angelo Mastrandrea, “Tra i dimenticati delle arance,” *Il Manifesto*, October 27, 2013, <http://www.lasinistraquotidiana.it/wordpress/tra-i-dimenticati-delle-arance/>.

⁴⁴ Alessio Magro, “Un inferno chiamato Rosarno,” *Il Manifesto*, December 20, 2006, <http://www.meltingpot.org/Un-inferno-chiamato-Rosarno.html>

⁴⁵ Eugenio Scalfari, “L’inferno di Rosarno e i suoi responsabili,” *La Repubblica*, January 10, 2010, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2010/01/10/inferno-di-rosarno-suoi-responsabili.html?ref=search>.

come to pick oranges become “invisibili” (“invisible”), “fantasmi” (“ghosts”), whose situation is experienced by Rosarno as a “ferita” (“wound”).⁴⁶

On the other side of hell, in this sacred geography of oranges, is heaven, for the most memorable slogan of the movement supporting the African orange pickers of Rosarno derives its power from the dual meaning of the word “cielo”: the Italian word refers to both the physical sky and a metaphysical heaven.⁴⁷ The slogan reads, “[I]e arance non cadono dal cielo, ma sono delle mani che le raccolgono” (“Oranges do not fall from the sky—nor from heaven—but belong instead to the hands that pick them”).



Fig. 3: Flyer, “Le arance non cadono dal cielo,” 2011, <http://primaveraromana.wordpress.com/primavera-romana-2010/agroculture-nomadi/agro-nomadismo/> (reproduced with permission)

Things that fall from the sky are obtained with great ease; but the expression is used mostly in negative clauses and indicates, through hyperbole as well as metaphor, that good things—oranges, in this case—are not a gift from heaven that falls from on high into our lap through no effort of our own. The slogan was widely disseminated in January 2011, including on a banner placed in front of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food, and Forestry Policies, on Rome’s orange-tree-lined Via XX Settembre. It was the refrain of a campaign intended to memorialize the events of the previous January 2010, when the best-known among the “Rosarno events” took place. Among other initiatives, the 2011 campaign of remembrance involved a collective picking of

⁴⁶ Arena and Chirico, *Dossier Radici/Rosarno*, 8, 50, 12, etc. (“invisibili”), 61 (“fantasmi”), 68, 71, 72, 140 (“ferita”).

⁴⁷ In Vittorini’s text, the narrator surmises that America represents for the orange picker “una sua idea di regno dei cieli sulla terra.” *Conversazione in Sicilia*, 580; (“his own idea of the kingdom of heaven on earth.”) *Conversations in Sicily*, 14.

oranges in Rome from private and public gardens. Out of these oranges, participants squeezed juice and prepared marmalade to sell to passersby, with proceeds to benefit the orange pickers of Calabria. The label used on the jars read, “Arance amare” (“bitter oranges”): words that describe Seville oranges, of course (the most common oranges in Rome, in fact, because harder than their sweet equivalent), but also—metaphorically and far more poignantly—words that point to the sorrowful stories of those picking oranges in Italy today and to their bitter cup of suffering.⁴⁸



Fig. 4: Label, “Arance amare,” 2011, <http://primaveraromana.wordpress.com/primavera-romana-2010/agroculture-nomadi/agro-nomadismo/> (reproduced with permission)

In illustrating this slogan, reminiscent of the sky-fallen and heaven-sent manna of the Hebrew Scriptures, the flyers from the 2011 campaign made ample use of the complementary colors blue, for the sky, and orange, of course, for the oranges (there is also great emphasis on the blackness of the hands and arms stretched towards the blue sky and the oranges within it). In English as in Italian, orange is a fruit as well as a color, and it is from this fruit that the mixture of yellow and red takes its name, “orange.” So it is literally an oxymoron to advertise Sicilian oranges as “arancia rossa di Sicilia”—as in the TV commercial described earlier. But the connection of oranges with the color red, with the color of blood, is a multifaceted one. The red orange of Sicily is also grown in Calabria; it is commonly known in the English-speaking world as blood orange, for of the different kinds of red oranges grown in Southern Italy the oldest one is called “sanguinello”—its name clearly derived from “sanguine,” blood. In Italy, they are more commonly called red oranges, “arance rosse.” But the Rosarno events have associated the word “blood” with oranges in ways that go well beyond the fruit’s natural and paradoxically red color and that involve violence, sacrifice, and even sacrament—given that, in Catholic belief, the wine of the Eucharist becomes blood.

“Cara Kyenge: Blocchi le arance rosse di sangue” (“Dear Kyenge: Block the Oranges Red with Blood”) is the title of a 2014 newspaper article in *L’Unità* addressed to Cécile Kyenge, then

⁴⁸ The metaphor of bitterness has been used to criticize the controversial immigration law known as Bossi-Fini: “Rosarno è diventata forse il luogo dove la Bossi-Fini ha dato i suoi frutti più amari. Un fallimento totale” (“Rosarno has perhaps become the place where the Bossi-Fini law has produced its most bitter fruit. A total failure.”) Last access date June 6, 2014, http://www.stopndrangheta.it/file/stopndrangheta_875.pdf, *Arance insanguinate – Dossier Rosarno*, 30.

Italian Minister of Integration, by Calabrian writer Angela Bubba.⁴⁹ Bubba writes about Rosarno as a situation, “che da tempo insanguina un territorio stremato” (“which for a long time has been staining in blood an exhausted land”), and refers to the 2010 events as a time when some African workers preferred to hang themselves and the survivors had “facce spiritate” (“possessed faces”). With her title, Bubba implies that these workers’ blood has contaminated the oranges we eat (or, more likely, drink, for Fanta is where most of the Rosarno oranges end up), and made them sacred, untouchable, produced in areas that are described as “purgatori osceni” (“obscene purgatories”) and as in need of “preghiere” (“prayers”). Blood, in this article, is the sign of a scapegoating violence, and violence, as René Girard reminds us, “is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.”⁵⁰ In her 2010 book, *MaliNati*, the first part of which is dedicated to the citrus pickers of Calabria, Bubba had already condemned the violence of the sacred Rosarno oranges, culminating in a long reference to the 1939 jazz classic, “Strange Fruit”—a song made famous by Billie Holiday’s interpretation.⁵¹

E gli immigrati aspettano allora, guardano gli aranci, perché c’è Billie Holiday che canta sotto gli aranci di Rosarno. [...] dice che da quegli aranci penzola uno strano frutto, così fa la sua canzone, che gli alberi di questo Sud danno uno strano frutto. C’è sangue sulle foglie e sangue sulle radici. Un corpo nero si agita nella brezza di questo Sud. Nel luogo in cui sono nata cresce uno strano frutto.⁵²

(And the migrants wait, then, looking at the orange trees, because Billie Holiday is singing under the orange trees of Rosarno. [...] she says that from those orange trees hangs a strange fruit, this is what her song says, that the trees of this South produce a strange fruit. There is blood on the leaves and blood on the roots. A black body swings in the breeze of this South. In the place where I was born grows a strange fruit.)

Bubba’s words are reprised on the back of the book, where a single sentence breaks the flat orange-colored cover: “In questo Sud, nel mio Sud, cresce uno strano frutto” (“In this South, in my South, a strange fruit grows”). The young Calabrian writer’s words echo those of the song inspired by the lynching of African Americans, with its comparison of two Souths, the Italian South and the South of the United States; of hanging black bodies (whether lynched or compelled to suicide) and hanging fruit (metaphorical, yes, but also as literal, for Bubba, as an orange); and of the blood soaking every part of the tree—a poplar in “Strange Fruit,” a more vivid and naturally fruit-laden orange tree in *MaliNati*.

Bubba’s image of contamination by blood, aided by the redness of Southern Italian oranges, conveys both metaphorical and literal meanings. A strictly literal take on blood oranges informs the protest of January 2010, when actual bloodied oranges were brought to the Palazzo del

⁴⁹ Angela Bubba, “Cara Kyenge: blocchi le arance rosse di sangue,” *L’Unità*, January 11, 2014, <http://www.unita.it/immigrazione/carro-ministro-kyenge-br-basta-arance-di-sangue-1.544297>.

⁵⁰ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 31.

⁵¹ Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit,” Commodore Recording, 1939.

⁵² Angela Bubba, *MaliNati* (Milan: Bompiani, 2012), 35.

Senato and nearby Piazza Navona, in Rome's historic center, as a shocking reminder of the orange pickers' plight. The initiative gives the name as well to the 2010 collection of essays, *Arance insanguinate – Dossier Rosarno*, which begins as follows:

Il sangue sulle arance che abbiamo portato in piazza a Roma il 12 gennaio scorso per indicare che Rosarno è un caso nazionale, è sangue rappreso. Sangue vecchio. Scorre da anni, senza sporcare le coscienze. Il dossier "Arance insanguinate" prova a ricostruirne il tragitto e lo scopre per niente sommerso: da dicembre a marzo, in concomitanza con la stagione della raccolta, quel sangue scorre puntualmente e alla luce del sole tra fabbriche abbandonate, rifugi lerci e la via Nazionale dei 'caporali' e delle ingiurie.⁵³

(The blood on the oranges that we brought to the piazza in Rome last January 12, to show that Rosarno is a national problem, is clotted blood. Old blood. It has been flowing for years, without dirtying anyone's conscience. The dossier "Bloodied oranges" tries to reconstruct its itinerary and finds that it is not submerged in the least: from December until March, at the same time as the harvest season, that blood flows on a regular basis and in the light of day among abandoned factories, filthy shelters, and the Main street of "foremen" and insults.)

The symbolic significance of blood in this excerpt is both political and sacred: the blood on these oranges draws from a sacred dimension its political power. Indeed blood, because of its dual significance of life and death, of health and illness, of wholeness and brokenness, has traditionally been seen as the most sacred of all fluids: "Blood impresses the imagination. Its loss means weakness and death. It can, therefore, easily be identified with strength. But blood also arouses fear and repulsion. It can be a sign of illness and death."⁵⁴ The ambiguity of blood is indispensable to its sacredness: "Blood signifies both violent death and the continued life of generations—in warrior blood, menstrual blood, medical blood; it is characterized by purity and impurity, disproportion and dissolution, and associated with the flowering and fertility of the earth and the abundant gift of sacrifice, particularly powerfully with that of Christ."⁵⁵ A cartoon that circulated on the internet in connection to the bloodied oranges brought to Rome in 2010 depicts a case of bloody oranges, with a caption reading, "A-grumi": "agrumi" means "citrus fruit," whereas "a grumi" means "in clots."⁵⁶ Blood, according to this cartoon, is intrinsic to the oranges themselves, and is part of what they are: citrus fruit, clotting fruit, blood oranges. Placed on sweet oranges, oranges meant to be eaten, blood contaminates and transforms a delicacy and icon of good health into something disgusting and untouchable: the bloodied oranges are a physical accusation against the Calabrian citrus industry of having irrigated its gardens with the most sacred of human fluids.

Mangano's book *Gli africani salveranno Rosarno* holds the hope that, as for the nearby

⁵³ Last access date June 6, 2014, http://www.stopndrangheta.it/file/stopndrangheta_875.pdf, *Arance insanguinate – Dossier Rosarno*, 9.

⁵⁴ Dennis McCarthy, "The Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88, no. 2 (1969): 166.

⁵⁵ Rebecca Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 33.

⁵⁶ <http://www.insertosatirico.com/2010/01/arance-amare.html>, accessed October 10 2014.

Calabrian town of Riace (a place where the integration of African immigrants has been beneficial to residents both old and new—as Wim Wenders captured in his 2010 short film *Il volo* (The Flight), immigrant young people will indeed save the town whose socio-economic problems well precede their arrival from afar. The sacred properties of local oranges, by turns damning and redeeming, fatal and life-giving, have for centuries affected the lives of those who touch them; the recent shedding of immigrant blood for their production is just the latest chapter of this story, so often tinged with sacred elements. If Mangano's prediction is correct, the African orange pickers would not be the first black people to save this area, and the racism of some of Rosarno's most vocal or violent residents should not be extended to the local population as a whole, with its history of devotion to dark-skinned beings: "Rosarno non può essere razzista perché viene da una Madonna nera" ("Rosarno cannot be racist because it comes from a Black Madonna").⁵⁷ We are reminded, with this sentence, that the beloved protectress of Rosarno is the Black Madonna of Pathmos, a powerful, miracle-working wooden statue found on the Rosarno beach over six hundred years ago.⁵⁸ Like the African workers of Rosarno, this Madonna, too, escaped the dangers of another land and crossed the sea to find refuge and a new home in Calabria—where the color of her skin set her apart from the local population and gave her special powers: Black Madonnas are miracle-working Madonnas.⁵⁹ In Calabria, as well, her name was changed from Mary of Pathmos to Mary of the Spasms, Our Lady of Violent Suffering (in the Calabrian meaning of the word "spasimi"). For what defines the sacred nature of this Black Madonna today, and what names her, is not where she may have come from—the island of Pathmos, on the other side of the sea—nor the foreignness inscribed in the color of her skin. Rather, what identifies this sacred being and names her is the violent suffering that she has endured and the violent suffering that she, and others like her, help to relieve through the energy and the renewal of their presence.

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⁵⁷ Last access date June 6, 2014, http://www.stopndrangheta.it/file/stopndrangheta_875.pdf, *Arance insanguinate – Dossier Rosarno*, 106.

⁵⁸ Believed to have been worshipped by the followers of Saint John the Evangelist on Patmos and to have been smuggled out of that island during the Turkish invasions of the fourteenth century, this black Madonna is a Byzantine image of the enthroned Virgin Mary holding, in her left arm, a baby Jesus. The Greek inscription on its pedestal used to read "Saint Mary of Patmos" but was changed to "Saint Mary of the Spasms" during a restoration, because of the many miracles with which this statue has been credited. Giuseppe Lacquaniti, *Storia di Rosarno da Medma ai nostri giorni* (Oppido Mamertina, Reggio Calabria: Barbaro Editore, 1980), 2:481-93. A book-length study of Black Madonnas in Italy (though not about the Rosarno one specifically) may be found in Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

⁵⁹ Leonard Moss and Stephen Cappannari, "The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing," *The Scientific Monthly* 76, no. 6 (1953): 320.

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Illustrations

Fig.1: Jan Van Eyck, detail from *The Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432.

Fig.2: Giovan Battista Ferrari, “Pomum Adami,” from *Hesperides*, 1646.

Fig.3: Flyer, “Le arance non cadono dal cielo,” 2011,

<http://primaveraromana.wordpress.com/primavera-romana-2010/agroculture-nomadi/agro-nomadismo/> (reproduced with permission).

Fig.4: Label, “Arance amare,” 2011, <http://primaveraromana.wordpress.com/primavera-romana-2010/agroculture-nomadi/agro-nomadismo/> (reproduced with permission).