

The «conspicuous visibility» of Italianness and the «invisibility» of Italian migrants in Ireland: a sociological analysis of a «regime of representation»

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«As you read this, the hill towns of Sant'Andrea and Casalattico and Montattico stand in their winter silence, deserted monuments to a most successful emigration»
(*The Irish Times Magazine*, 2002a)

«So we're foreigners there, we're foreigners here, what the hell are we?»
(My interview with an Italian migrant woman)

The different meanings of Italianness

A primordialist notion of nationhood*, which reifies an idea of essentialized, immutable national identity, has long prevailed in migration studies. Migrant groups have been categorized, more or less unwarily, in generalized and homogenized terms and the boundaries of their collectivities have been taken for granted. In the last decades, social scholars have deconstructed such primordial notions and have reconceptualised national identities, not as «romantic» given but as social constructions, embedded in the contingencies of history, and in the fluidity of modernity¹. However in most discourses about migration, the primordial notion of national identity still remains an unquestioned and unproblematic category of analysis; this seems to be especially the case in Italian migration studies. Discourses about groups of «Italian» migrants and notions of Italianness have only marginally attempted to deconstruct common-sense meanings about national identity. On the contrary, they have to a larger degree been responsible for constructing and reifying the no-

tion of a unique and united Italianness. Numerous accounts of the long history of Italian migration have been functional in constructing from «outside» the same myth of Italianness that they were portraying; the extraordinary and powerful exploits and stories of the mass of migrants departing from Italy through the centuries have been depicted as homogeneous in their «heroism» and «dramatic power», as a homogeneous «Italian» question, and by extension as a question of a *homogenous Italy*².

This article aims at contributing to the deconstruction of such an essentialized notion of Italian identity, proposing a critical analysis of the case of Italian migrants in Ireland, which is interesting in several ways, as I demonstrate in this article. My analysis will not directly reject the idea of Italianness. In fact, it recognizes the power of a unitary *idea* of Italianness, and of the institutions charged with administering it (in and outside Ireland). It aims however to show how this notion of Italianness, interdependent of the actual presence of Italian migrants, is the product of processes of signification (though representations), which are interlinked at various levels (national, diasporic, transnational) but are also firmly anchored in the specific Irish social context (as in any other country of settlement of Italian migrants)³.

In the case of Italian migration to Ireland, the particular historic and social conditions of Ireland as an emerging post-colonial country have strongly influenced how Italianness has been represented, the meanings it has assumed and how it has been experienced and negotiated. In this article, after briefly introducing the history of Italian migration to Ireland (for which I refer to Zanna's article in this issue) I show how these processes took place. My analysis focuses on the underlying meanings of the representations of Italian migrants, as they emerge in Irish media and literature. In particular, as I argue, in the Irish case, a specific representational idiom about Italianness has been functional in reinforcing, by setting boundaries and juxtapositions, a stronger sense of Irish identity. What this article does not take into consideration is how Italian migrants themselves have been influenced and have responded to and resisted hegemonic practices of representation. Obviously the two questions are strictly interrelated. However, I am interested to show here how a «regime of representation» (Hall, 1996) assumes a power of its own, and can independently interact with other social systems to perform different functions.

An historic overview of the presence of Italian migrants in Ireland

The history of Italian emigration to Ireland is linked to their migration to Great Britain, not only because till 1921 Ireland was tied to Great Britain, but also because indeed, it is through Great Britain, and in particular Scotland

and Northern Ireland, that the migration chain to Ireland was originally introduced to Ireland.

In the seventeen and eighteen centuries, early Italian migrants had worked in Ireland as craftspeople of mosaics, stonemasonry, terrazzo work, plasterwork, musicians, and makers of specialized products as looking glasses and barometers (Reynolds, 1993, p. 48). Their works were very influential in the Irish artistic scene and were often taken as a model (Craig, 1980). These early migrants prepared a fertile symbolic terrain for receiving the chain-migration from the Frosinone Province in the late 1800s. The first consistent groups of Italians started to settle in Ireland during the 1880s, when according to the legend, the first «chipper» were opened in the Dublin central area of Pearse street (Reynolds, 1993, p. 46).

Since then, the presence of Italian migrants has been always prominent. Brian Reynolds analyses census figures (the first independent Irish census was taken in 1926; in Italian sources, Ireland is independently listed only from the year 1970) and shows that in 1912 there were approximately 300 Italians in Dublin, something less in Belfast, 50 in Cork, and a further 100 spread in various other counties (Reynolds, 1993, p. 48). In 1936 there were 325 Italian-born registered residents in Dublin. After the Second World War, a steady growth is recorded, although there was no organized recruitment of Italian labour to Ireland (Reynolds, 1993, p. 49), and in 1961, there were 689 Italian-born residents in Dublin. The growth of migration flux has been continuous and in 1981 the number of migrants amounted to 1,351. The 2002 Irish Census reveals 3,770 persons with Italian nationality resident in Ireland, of whom 2,145 are male and 1,625 female (http://www.cso.ie/census/pdfs/pdr_2002.pdf, p. 72). The Italian Embassy list in 2003 however, records 4,965 Italians residents in Ireland, although a more likely estimate is 7,000 (De Tona, 2004). The census figures are quite approximate, because of the «free» movement policy within the European Community and the recognized failure to enforce the right / duty of Italian citizens by Italian Law to register in a foreign country as Italian residents abroad (AIRE)⁴. Contemporary waves of Italian migration are even more diversified than they used to be and are characterized by a very «mobile» population. Young professionals, IT managers, academics and researchers of the Italian «brain-drain», often reside in Dublin for only a few years (before moving to another country). Some high-class professionals are living in Dublin only during the week, as they commute «home» to their families in Italy and other European countries for the weekends. Moreover, the official data in the Embassy lists shows that only 52% of the total population of Italians was born in Italy, while 36% was born in Ireland, and the rest in other countries (among which most prominently emerge Belgium, France, Australia, Usa, Germany); one sixth of Italians registered as residents in Ireland were

subsequently registered as returning to Italy, and one fifth have moved to other countries (De Tona, 2004).

It is beyond the aim of this article to present a quantitative analysis of Italian migration to Ireland; however I am interested to show how the Italian presence has not only always been constant and diversified, but also growing and prominent. It has been so in two distinct exceptional ways. Firstly, it happened during a time when Irish people were migrating en-masse away from Ireland to look for better conditions elsewhere (in this sense the Italian migration was certainly going «against the flow» and proves that even a case of «labour migration» as this one is often described, is never a solely economic phenomenon, and is influenced by many other social factors). Secondly, this migration «against the flow» left Italian migrant groups as an isolated case of migrants settling in Ireland, and it did so for over a century, at least till the late 1980s and the socio-economic changing of the «Celtic Tiger». However, even in this last period of time characterized by the arrival of larger groups of migrants, Italian migrants have remained in a privileged position, often represented as some sort of an «autochthonous foreign» presence, a little more «Irish» than other migrant groups.

Representing Italianness

The chain migration of Italians from the impoverished Apennines areas of the Frosinone province, who became involved in the business of fish and chips shops, has certainly been an interesting aspect of the history of Italian migration to Ireland (Reynolds, 1993). However, the way it has been represented in various discourses (popular culture, Irish media, Italian institutions) has often occluded the different cases of Italian *migrations*, and the diversity within each group of Italian migrants. Their representations have informed a particular notion of Italianness, which thus has acquired a particular «Irish» meaning.

This perspective of analysis resonates with postmodernist theories that grant no access to any reality outside such processes of signification and representation, because as Andaluz claims, «nothing happens in the real world, unless it first happens in the images in our heads» (Andaluz, in Friedman, 1998, p. 73). In this sense representation is understood as more than merely a reproduction of that which it represents: it also contributes to the *construction* of its reality, and in the specific in this context, of identities. Representation refers to the *processes* involved as well as to its *products* and involves not only how identities are *represented* (or rather *constructed*) within various discourses but also how they are constructed in the processes of production (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/s4B>).

Such notion of representation «is a complex business», as it involves complex feelings, attitudes and emotions, especially when dealing with «the other» and the «difference» of migrant minorities (Hall, 1996). In fact, the difference of the migrants is always already marked by an accumulation of meanings across different con-*texts* and their identity is constructed by juxtaposition (Hall, 1996).

Conceptualised in this way, Italianness cannot be considered as a set of fixed characteristics (Catholic, hard-working, «dolce vita», pizza and mafia, etc.), but rather as a «floating signifier» (Hall, 1996), an «emptied» container to be «filled» with adapted meanings, which are collectively produced and validated through regimes of representations. Thus, Italianness can be seen as a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent «signified», which is constructed in the Irish context in relation to its regime of representation. In the next section, I deconstruct some underlying assumptions and meanings of representations of Italianness in Ireland. In the following section, I argue how these representations have been functional to Irish society. I will show how the existence of the notion of Italianness is implicated in the same system of representation in Irish popular culture.

Visibility: Italianness in the media and literature

«I work for a good Irishman, I gave him
a good Italian grandson. When he finds out
he gives me his daughter's hand. A bit late,
I already have the rest of her» (Bolger, 1994)

As many have affirmed, «Italians are well integrated in the Irish community» (Farinella, 1988). In fact, the visibility of Italians in Ireland seems to reflect a smooth and successful integration process. However, I question here what kind of integration have Italian migrants really achieved? Or have been allowed to achieve? And what are the meanings of the representations of such achievements?

Many of the representations of Italian migrants focus on the activity of fish and chips shops which they seemed to have introduced to Ireland and monopolized till recently. For many people in Ireland, fish and chips shops have been the symbols par excellence of Italian migrants, and of Italianness in general. The Dubliner poet of Italian descendant, Vincenzo Caprani, told of when he was growing up in the Dublin of the 1940s and «there were few points of reference – or links with an ancient homeland – for a third generation Italo-Irish schoolboy like (him)self, apart from the treat of an excellent shared “fish and chips” takeaway after our weekly visit to the cinema» (Caprani, 2001). His as-

sociation with fish and chips is a common experience for many Italians in Ireland. When I first moved to Dublin in 1999, I was constantly confronted with this same heritage, and trying to understand why some Irish people were asking me how we cooked fish and chips in my place in Italy, I wondered whether their surprise at learning that we don't cook fish and chips in Italy, was as sincere as mine when hearing such a question. At times, I also wondered whether I was Italian enough: was there somewhere in Italy a place where fish and chips were cooked as a traditional dish, and I simply did not know it?

This kind of experience can be quite puzzling, if one does not come to recognize that Italianness can indeed have many different meanings and it depends very much on where you stand when you look at it and how you have learnt to see it. As a «floating signifier», Italianness can imply different meanings, and sometimes as in the Irish case, even contradictory ones. In Ireland in fact, the Italian presence has occupied both a position of «visibility» and «invisibility», or as I argue below, of an «invisible visibility».

Michael O'Loughlin has portrayed this ambiguous position of Italian migrants, in a poem titled *Exiles*⁵. The poem tells of the «double exile» of Italian migrants from Italy and within Ireland. «You will find the Italian chippers in all the dead ends of Dublin», the poem says, evoking reassuring feelings of shelter and warmth in the imagination of those who have known Irish dark and misty nights, especially in those years, almost until the 1980s, when Italian parlours and fish and chips shops represented the only places open after pub hours (Reynolds, 1993). Indeed, Italian-sounding shops' signs, colourful and full of light, have certainly left an enduring impression on Irish collective memories. However, as the poem continues, they remain «abandoned forgotten consulates of obscure Apennine villages», where the Italian owners (notably men) become «visa dispensers» for Irish people who will never set off to see Italy, «somehow we never go». The old Italian consuls have grown «sardonic», waiting bored behind the counter, their «eyes glint with vendetta»; «sometimes without warning, they all begin to shout in Italian» (O'Loughlin, 1988, p. 51).

The Italian language surprises the Irish wanderer passing in front of the fish and chips shop which s/he associates with Italy: why? Is it because s/he is not used to think of Italy in its diversity? Italian migrant presence is almost invisible, tiresome at times, yet almost visceral, and feeds, from those dead ends of Dublin, the Irish popular collective imaginary. Or is Irish popular imagination feeding it?

Irish literary works provide another example of the power of the representational regime of Italianness and how it creates a position of «invisible visibility» of Italian migrants. We can find numerous examples of the inclusion of Italian (migrant) characters in stories set in Ireland, but their representations remain secondary to the grand-plot, and seem to be included in the sce-

nario as a backcloth. The representation of Italians is vague and generic; nothing seems to matter but their «quite Italianate» profile and body «frames» (Murphy, 1984, p. 11)⁶, which helps on the other hand to mark and enhance, by juxtaposition, a more clear-cut «Irish» profile and identity of the character on the stage.

For example, Peter Sheridan's novel, *44 A Dublin Memoir* portrays the life of a Dubliner family in the 1960s (Sheridan, 1999). The «Irish» father of the protagonist decides to dye his hair. The affair turns out into a disaster, as «Da» does not want too dark a dye. His daughter «took the bottle of dye and the sachet out of the box. Da issued his instructions. – Half of everything. – That's not what it says on the bottle. – *I'm not Italian, I'm Irish. I don't want it too dark*» (Sheridan, 1999, p. 251; my emphasis).

The symbolic imagination behind this narrative, tells us of an «ethnified» (a category of ethnicity based on constructed stereotypical notions) representation of Italians whose hair is *too* dark, from which we also deduce some negativity and aggressiveness. It is irrelevant that this stereotypical image is based on a false or minor difference, as in fact, the hair colour is only half a shade of black away! It is the meaning that marks this difference that matters, and not its reverse.

Dermot Bolger's book, *A Second Life*, can serve as a second example. The novel tells the story of a photographer living in Dublin in search of his origins, after suffering as a consequence of a car accident, of the «numbed, haunted sensation of not knowing who he is» (Bolger, 1994, p. 6). The man recalls his father's story, of working for a company owned by an Italian man, Pezzani.

Pezzani's van was tiny. There was a curtain dividing off the back where something heavy seemed to be stored. The steering wheel was almost between his knees. He drove with the window open. Shouting «*It's my road*» at any motorist who refused to give way before him. «Forty years ago I come to this country» he said as we sped towards Swords, «all the postcards black and white. Trams, trams, trams. You think the whole Dublin one big tram. I work for a good Irishman, I gave him a good Italian grandson. When he finds out he gives me his daughter's hand. A bit late, I already have the rest of her. Now we partners I tell him. No more black and white. Colour, colour, colour. *Because I have the secret of what the Irish love in their postcards*. It is red and it no good in black and white. You like pictures boy? Today I show you the secret of great pictures» (Bolger, 1994, p. 71; my emphasis).

This narrative is a picturesque metaphor of the way Italians occupied their space in Dublin (and in Irish culture), arrogantly in not asking for permission, just moving in and considering the «way» theirs (for the mere reason of travelling along it). They brought colours, or perhaps, just a diverse way of looking at them. Their cultural heritage became so entwined with the Irish one,

that they felt able to express what Irish people like, better than Irish people themselves. In the extracts above, these representations show a familiar, «affectionate» portrayal of the arrogance that the presence of Italian migrants' in Ireland evokes. The actual stories of the Italian migrants are irrelevant, and yet at the same time a strong idea of Italianness is constructed and fixed.

In the Irish media, the accounts of Italian migrants in Ireland also seem to convey a similar meaning. For example, newspaper articles often explore Italian migrants activities in fish and chips shops or restaurants, or activities related to the food business. There is a continuous fascination with Italian food in Ireland, and the people who produce it. Since in the last decades, «more Irish have travelled and become knowledgeable about food» and the «influx of young Italian IT specialists has boosted local demand for “home food”» (*The Irish Times Magazine*, 2001, p. 12), the attention has shifted from fish and chips to restaurants, and the «authenticity» of Italian food, but has not moved completely away.

Apart from the problematic notion of a unique Italian culinary tradition, it is interesting to note that these accounts are speckled with a lot of comforting stories of «grandmother's home cooking» (even when the recipes come from «the special collection of an *uncle*», *ibidem*) and with many Italian women appearing in the forefront of all (*ibidem*; *The Irish Times Magazine*, 2002a; *The Irish Times Magazine*, 2002b). These representations essentialize, while commodifying it, the idea of Italian food and Italian womanhood as well. It is stated, that the new «Italian pizza and pasta joints» opened around Dublin are seen as a manifestation of «a new level of affluence in Ireland, but they also show a new level of confidence in the Italian emigrants» (*The Irish Times Magazine*, 2002b). However, it is also affirmed that Italian migrants «still don't have the confidence to be themselves» because «what is being offered is mostly generic Italian, or even generic Irish-Italian» (*The Irish Times Magazine*, 2002b). This remark is pointed out, even when, just a few lines above in the same article, it is mentioned that one of the Italian interviewees thinks that with Italian restaurants «as in the fish and chips trade, it's a case of giving the Irish punters what they want!» (*The Irish Times Magazine*, 2002b).

One doesn't need to read too carefully between the lines to find some contradictions in this discourse. Italians are represented both as lacking the confidence to express themselves and as confident business people, cunningly sizing opportunities in the Irish market. The contradiction is expressed (and dispersed) in a discursive trope, mostly because it ignores *tout court* the point of view of Italian migrants. Ultimately, once again, it silences their voice and constructs Italianness as a unified notion.

In a issue of the magazine *Ireland of the Welcomes* (a bi-monthly publication of Bord Fáilte, the Irish Tourist Board «portraying Ireland's history, cul-

ture and lifestyles») the history of the Italian «quiet» migration to Ireland is portrayed in the stories of Italian men (*sic*) setting up various businesses over the years, which contributed to the social life of Ireland (*Ireland of Welcomes*, 2001). The stories of these men have now become anecdotal, and you often hear in many other contexts of Carlo Bianconi for example («Brian Cooney» for the people of the Irish county of Tipperary), who built and organized the first Irish transport system in the 1800s, or Luigi Fulgoni who created the once popular Shamrock Leaves perfume, or Giuseppe Nannetti who was Lord Mayor of Dublin in 1906 and was mentioned in James Joyce's *Ulysses (Ireland of Welcomes*, 2001, p. 17). Pictures of Italian migrant men and their business activities are also published. Interestingly, there is only one picture of a woman, described as «a somewhat formidable matron dating back to 1900» (*ibidem*, p. 16). This picture remains mostly unexplained in the article, but the face of an overweight woman with silent piercing eyes gazing out of the picture, her powerful, stark body, covered by a black traditional dress, embodies significantly the solid and somehow ambiguous presence of Italian-ness in Ireland.

The Irish women's magazine, *Image*, in October 2003 published a special issue on «all important Italian things in Ireland: fashion, football, art, places, restaurants» (*Image*, 2003). When it comes to Italian people, it depicts the various employment categories, of professionals (restaurant owner, IT professional, academics and researchers): «Veni, vidi, vici: they came, they saw, they conquered – it's a cliché but a true one. Italians have been making their mark on Irish society for a hundred years» (*ibidem*, p. 43). If there is something true about the fact that the Italian presence has influenced Irish society, it is also true that this discourse on the contrary reinforces further a sense of distance between «Irish» and «Italian» people, «they» and «us», setting up even starker boundaries. It also seems to express an unconscious fear of having somebody «conquering» Ireland, rather than creating and adding to it (which has perhaps a particular resonance in the Irish historical past of colonization subjugation and deprivation).

The fascination with Italian migrants' business qualities has a modernized and updated version in the representations of IT, banker and other professional figures (*The Irish Times*, 2003; *The Irish Times Magazine*, 2004). Many recent newspaper articles highlight how these groups of professional people have brought a modernizing factor in the «Italian migrant community», founding for example the *Club di Dublino*. It is claimed that the members of this club («one of 10 such clubs all around the world»), «unlike *Club Italiano*, set up in the early 1970 by Italian take-away owners»... «are mostly bankers, academics, or other professionals and their mission reflects the changed role of this community in Ireland» (*The Irish Times Magazine*, 2004). These «new

migrants» are represented as raising «the profile of the Italian community», on the basis of their «business presence in Ireland with the likes of Fiat, Ferrero and numerous banking institutions» (*ibidem*). The article highlights how they «raise money for local charities», «organize various social events, such as a dinner to welcome the former Italian prime minister, Giuliano Amato, or former footballer Gianni Rivera and his wife» (*ibidem*).

Obviously, the role of this group of «new migrants» has much wider social implications and raises many other kinds of questions. One issue is the Italian «brain drain» phenomenon linked to it; another is, the condition by which the strong class divides of Italian society are reproduced and reinforced through elite migration. However, for my argument here, it suffices to notice how this kind of representations manage to obscure the heterogeneity of Italian people and construct instead a solid notion of Italianness, even an idea of an «Italian community in Ireland», which do not exist at all. My research shows that different groups of Italian migrants remain most separated from each other, attached and entangled through complex feelings of belonging and communitarian attachments; their clubs, activities, interests, life styles do not meet, as much as they themselves do not meet together. Moreover, among these same professional people there is a great dissatisfaction with the limited representations of Italianness in Ireland: according to my interviews such representation do not include the diverse and multiform elements of Italian culture and politics.

Recent media discourses have started to consider more critically the meanings of the migrant presence of Italians in Ireland. It has been recognized that along with «Irish love of everything Italian, and for the most part Italians, there is also a curious crossover that has occurred in the last few years. Would we have our growing band of artisan producers were it not for our exposure to the Italian way of doing things?» (*The Irish Times*, 2003). Moreover, media coverage points out the Irish fascination with Italy and how for example «apart from being Ireland's 6th largest trading partner, Italy has always been one of the most popular destinations for honeymoons», and «there is many an Irish couple whose first adventure abroad was to the beautiful coasts or cities of Italy» (*ibidem*). More recently accounts of other «crossovers» or more hybrid Italo-Irish stories are emerging, like that of Tamara Gervasoni, who won the Rose of Tralee in 2002, an Irish diasporic beauty competition. She has been described as «an exotic hybrid of Longford, Galway and Milan», although she is reported as saying that she feels exactly like all the other girls her age in Ireland (*The Irish Times Magazine*, 2003). She has been the first ever Italian rose «representing Italy» while her mother hails from the small Irish town of Longford (*ibidem*). Two other women have been portrayed (and elected) to embody and symbolize the Irish-Italian hybridity: Michelle Rocca was voted Miss Ire-

land in 1980, and Alfreda O'Brien became the «proud» Irish representative for Miss Italia in the world competition in the 1980s (www.barbieborza.com/graphics/alfreda.jpg). The meanings of these «crossovers» remain unexplored as yet.

Invisibility: The Irish story of Italianness

«Because I have the secret of what the Irish love in their postcards»
(Bolger, 1994)

Alberto Schepisi, the current Italian ambassador in Ireland, claims that the Irish way of representing Italians shows «a distorted and unreal image» on them (*The Irish Times*, 2003). «The Italian community in Ireland has grown strongly in the last decade and recent immigration includes a wide presence of professionals», Schepisi says, however «when you talk to Irish people about Italy, you invariably hear about a relative's wedding in the Irish college in Rome, a favourite Italian fish and chips shop in Dublin or Toto's Schillaci's goal that sent the republic of Ireland out of Italy '90». Schepisi underlines how these images are very far from the reality of modern Italy and «this is a terrible pity as from my experience, there is an instinctive empathy and sympathy between the Irish and the Italians that is very rare» (*ibidem*).

This same instinctive sympathy can be interpreted as the outcome of the functional interest and representations of Italian migrants in Irish hegemonic discourses, and needs to be further deconstructed. Equally, the notion of an Italian community in Ireland needs to be cautiously considered.

The accounts on Italians discussed in this article can be seen as an outcome of a more general global trendiness of Italianness as a saleable commodified product; at the same time though, they confirm that there is something especially attractive in the Irish culture about certain characteristics of the Italian presence in Ireland, especially their entrepreneurial capacities and the self-made quality of their fortune and success. In part this emphasis can be seen as deriving from the attitude of the original groups of Italian migrants, who first arrived in Ireland. They were coming from impoverished areas and straightened circumstances, and brought with them a strong working class ethos, perpetuating the myth of self-realization through hard work and economic achievements, as a means of struggle for class emancipation. Incidentally, many still follow this model, despite the economic success that they have actually achieved.

The way Italian migrants are represented is ambiguous: on the one hand Italian migrants are seen as both successful and attractive subjects of their history of migration, on the other hand, they are also perceived as holding a

limited capacity to express their cultural diversity (or lacking the confidence to do so). I suggest that this ambiguity is not an innate quality of Italian migrants, but rather derives from the «ethnicised» and «othered» perception of Italians, which doesn't really take into consideration the meanings of actual Italian migrants (rather it silences them, further limiting the spaces for the expression of their diversity, rendering their actual realities invisible).

In the social sciences «othering» refers to the strategic social practice through which (national) identities, are constructed by marking differences with the «other» (any section of the population, which is branded and isolated on the basis of attributed phenotypical or cultural differences, see for example the southern Italians *vis-à-vis* the northern Italians). The «other» serves as the opposite element of «the “positive” meaning of any term – and thus its identity» (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Othering involves «the production of “representations” of the Other's images and beliefs which categorize people in terms of real or attributed differences, when compared with the Self. There is a dialectic between Self and Other in which the attributed characteristic of Other refract contrasting characteristic of Self» (Miles, 1989, p. 11). Representation is a practice of signification; it functions as a mechanism for «the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries and the production of “frontier-effects”» (Hall, 1996, pp. 4-5).

Ronit Lentin notes that in the Irish context, when the argument of Irish identity (and Irish racism) is discussed in relation to the presence of migrant «others» (and its inherent hybridity), «diasporicity» (the relation between the Irish and the other) is «perhaps not about dismantling national culture, but rather, through fear of the other, reinforcing it» (Lentin, 2002, p. 235). Irish nationalism has portrayed the «Irish» nation as culturally, religiously (or even racially) distinct and homogenized, by juxtaposing it against *the other* (Lentin, 2002). Constructed as «a narrow, exclusionary we», Irish nationalistic «instinct has been to expel, to corral or contain, or at least to insist that those who are different should know their place, that is, shut up» (Mac Éinrí, 2002, p. 1).

This process of othering has influenced many minorities and ethnic groups in Ireland (e.g. Travellers, Jewish people), and it has been widely documented (see for references, Lentin and McVeigh, 2002). Even in this respect, Italian migrants seem to hold, an exceptional position. Although they are often ignored in the analyses of othering practices of Ireland, their historic presence seems to have been absorbed as a form of «constitutive outside» (Hall, 1996, p. 4), an Irish «own other» *par excellence* (Cohen, 1996). To a certain extent, they even enacted an Irish *own migrant other*, which had the capacity to revert positively the conflictual relation to Great Britain in the Irish culture, in a double way. In fact, on the one hand, Irish people had to confront the long colonial subjugation to Great Britain. During all the formative stages of Irish na-

tionalism, as Luke Gibbons comments, «Ireland looked at the image of England, it would end up seeing its own distorted reflection – as if in the cracked looking glass of a servant» (Gibbons, 1996, p. 139). On the other hand, Irish migrants also colonized Great Britain's migrant spaces. By assuming and representing Italian migrants as an *own migrant other*, a politically independent Ireland could demonstrate (at least to its own wounded nationalism) it had achieved emancipation and equalled Great Britain. It could thus take a breath of redemption and reconciliation with its painful past.

It is true that Italian migrants have integrated well in certain aspects, and as it has been said that they «were not taking work away from the Irish. Their skills were needed» and «both ethnic groups shared the same religion, an instant, common link intensified because Italians came from the homeland of Catholicism» (*Ireland of Welcomes*, 2001, p. 17). However, all these elements were extremely functional for Irish society, at least at a cultural and symbolic level. Food activities can be taken as an example to illustrate this point. In Irish culture, food represented «a traumatic void» because of the harsh famines and the debilitating colonial exploitation of Irish productive resources (Diner, 2001). Irish culinary traditions have never developed to their fullest potential until recently and very few restaurants and food shops were present in Ireland when Italians started to settle down⁷. Fish and chips activities and the first Italian ice-cream parlour used resources easily accessible in Ireland, such as potatoes, fish and milk, and transformed them into an equally easy available cheap and nutrient food for all Irish social classes. Also at the cultural level, Italian migrants provided Ireland with an alternative, filling the «traumatic» food gap from the outside. It is a bitter joke in the face of historic contingencies, that Italians learnt how to prepare fish and chips in their own diasporic migrancy in Great Britain.

At present, the representations of Italian migrants seem to fill a further function. The celebratory tone of most of these representations seems to add well to the self-celebratory practices of Irish modern, cosmopolitan, and «multicultural» society, which is instead striving hard to keep at bay internal racist and discriminatory tendencies (Lentin, 2002). In a sense, the representations of Italians help portraying a clean folkloristic multicultural history of Ireland, conveying a feeling of social cohesion and the «reassuring generosity of Irish people» (Lentin, 2002). That's maybe why the diffuse interest in Italian things and people in Ireland still persists, and why the fate of the now much more numerous European migrant groups, which have also been in Ireland for a long time (such as German and Dutch people), is very rarely brought up in the Irish media, and attracts much less attention than the Italian presence. Once again, the question here is really *whose* culture are these representations really celebrating and representing?

Conclusions: the invisible visibility

«E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle»
[Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars]
Dante, *Inferno*, xxxiv

Although Italian migrants constitute an exceptional case in Irish society, and with their shops (with Italian-sounding names and colourful flashing signs) have been visible signifiers of the symbolic and urban geography of Ireland, their presence remains invisible in official state discourses and politics, and their voices are hardly audible in the hubbub of representational regimes and flattening discourses of multiculturalism. It is under this regime of representation that a unitary notion of Italianness (and Irishness) may be constructed. The regime of representation is independent from the actual lives and experiences of Italian migrants, having a meaning and a function of its own, as I outline.

Firstly, the regime of representation had an impact on the way the meanings about Italianness have been constructed in Ireland. The accounts and representations about Italian migrants, which I have analysed in this article, show how their presence has been absorbed into the same visceral foundations of Irish daily, popular, instinctual life. As an «ethnicised» and «othered» presence, Italianness has been functional in reinforcing (by being contrasted to and being excluded from) a stronger idea of Irish unity and identity. This has involved, on the one hand, a heightened exposure to a form of conspicuous visibility of Italianness in Ireland (with fish and chips shops and ice-cream parlour, tourism, and Catholicism, etc.), and on the other, a limited view of Italian culture as superficial and stereotypical, which resulted in a paradoxical form of «invisible visibility».

Secondly, the reality of Italians is more variegated than it is represented and many Italians feels «trapped» in stereotypical representations. Historically, for the first generations of migrants this has involved forms of social exclusion and isolation, and for the second and third generations, limited grounds of expression of their diversity and their mixed identities. Many young Italo-Irish people complain that they still find it hard to move out of the catering business, and it is sometimes easier to move away from Ireland altogether. From my research, it also emerges that the «new Italian migrants» often feel trapped in the «banalized» meanings attached to Italianness in Ireland, and seek to move somewhere else in Europe.

This regime of representation has often prevented a full accomodation of Italians into Irish society. Closed in internal self-referential spaces of expression, Italian migrant groups and their organizations, have not sought active social and political inclusion in state policies. Irish state policies on the other side have stressed assimilation rather than integration, and have not promoted

any dynamic and creative confrontation, lacking any real understanding of how to encourage social inclusion of groups of migrants, as well as any sensitive effort to respect cultural heritage (Mac Éinrí, 2002). As a consequence of this, the accomodation of Italians in the Irish society has never been organic and thoroughly. For example, in the early 1980s a state agency offered the *Italian Club* (the oldest migrant organization) a collaboration to open an Italian national school, but the offer was declined (my interview). There was never an Italian national school in Ireland. This is a striking failure in the Irish case where the schooling system remains confessional and exclusionary (Mac Éinrí, 2002). Vincent Caprani portrays the effects that the limitations of the representational regime of Italianness had on him during his school years well. He writes that he «grew bewildered and confused – an unwilling and juvenile ambassador from a country he'd never known to a curriculum he could not quite comprehend» (*Italia Stampa*, 1993). Many stories like this remain invisible and silent in the often too complacent and celebratory representations of «othered» Italians. What happens to the «invisible» Italian migrants who didn't comply with this image of «Catholic hard-working Italian men»? How did other gendered, sexualised, classed groups of Italians experience their diasporic lives⁸?

It is only by understanding how discourses about a fixed homogeneous clear-cut Italianness are embedded in representations, and used to set boundaries and reinforce primordial notions in identity politics, that we can then move on to carefully uncover the diverse, heterogeneous, multivocal and often incoherent meanings and experiences of those who identify with Italianness.

Notes

- * I would like to thank warmly for their support Dr Ronit Lentin of Trinity College Dublin, the Ambassador Alberto Schepisi and Mrs Ester Tossi of the Italian Embassy in Ireland, and all my friends of the world.
- 1 It has been demonstrated how national identities, albeit kneaded with deep emotions of belongingness and nostalgia, are shiftable, multiple, and constantly negotiated at the crossroads of diverse interacting social categories such as gender, class, age, etc. (see e.g. Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989; Hall, 1996; Cohen, 1996).
 - 2 Migrants from Italy settling the world around have united as «Italians» around their common experience of migration, transforming it into an essence of identity. This regime of representation has been to a certain extent functional to tend the symbolic wound open in popular imagination by the experience of mass emigration, portrayed as a painful «internal» haemorrhage of the *nation* (Marchand, 1991).
 - 3 I must here consider how the world «Italian» has a very limited heuristic capacity, being soaked as well into primordialism and essentialism. Language falls be-

hind with my attempt to deconstruct Italianness in Ireland. However, being unable to supersede it, I must continue to use the term «Italian». However, I propose to use it in a broad definition, relating not only to Italy as a geographical space, but also to Italy as a «metaphor» (Brah, 1996). As such, Italy is an administrative entity, regulated by system of citizenship and belonging, as well as a symbolic and ideological site (a space «of the mind and of the heart»), formed by memories, images, expectations, representations and stereotypes, through which one can feel connected to Italy.

- 4 New waves of Italian migrants to Ireland, including students and many professionals, travel to Italy several times a year. It is very difficult to arrive at accurate estimates of the number of Italians living in Ireland. There are cases of Italian families living in Ireland for over 30 years, who, on going to the Italian Consulate to apply for documents, realized only then that they had never registered their children as Italian citizens.
- 5 «In all the dead ends of Dublin / You will find the Italian chippers / Abandoned, forgotten consulates / Of obscure Apennine villages / Whose chocolate-box picture / Sometimes hangs / Above the bubbling friers. / Again and again, / They dispense our visas / Sealed with salt and vinegar / Wrapped in greaseproof paper. / Somehow we never go. / The old consul / Has grown sardonic. / He stares out the steamed-up / Windows at the rain, / The file of bored taximen / Waiting at the rank. / His eyes glint with vendetta. / He lights up another Sweet Afton / Turns to glare at his sons / Who have mastered the local dialect, / Leaning across the counter / To chat with their friends. / Sometimes, without warning / They all begin / To shout in Italian / like Joyce and his children» (O'Loughlin, 1988, p. 51).
- 6 «JPW: What did your father do? / MAN: A cobbler. / JPW: Making or mending them? It could be significant. / MAN: He started by making them but factory-made shoes soon put paid to that. / JPW: I see. So he mended them. Where was this? / MAN: Recanati. / JPW: Recan? / MAN: Ati. / JPW: What country is that in? / MAN: Recanati is in Italy. / JPW: Italian born? / MAN: My hair was a lot darker some years ago. / JPW: And your height. / MAN: Yeah. / JPW: And your frame. Quite Italianate. / MAN: Sing us a song, Benimillo, the people used to say. I knew all the pop songs and, as you know, all the famous aria are part of our culture. / JPW: Got your first name. / MAN: It was a pet name. / JPW: Benimillo» (Murphy, 1984, pp. 20-22).
- 7 In the Dublin of 1950s, when one of the Italian participants in my research went to a food market in Dublin asking for rosemary, the saleswoman sent someone to look for a woman called Rosemary (my interview).
- 8 My own research on Italian migrant women seeks to uncover the unheard stories of these doubly othered subjects, who remain too often in a «symbolic and social marginality», typical, of those who do not «make trouble» (Cavallin, 2004, p. 245).

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