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"Cut and Sew":

Migration, Crisis, and Belonging in an Italian Fast-Fashion Zone

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## **Introduction**

What it means to "belong" in Europe can best be understood through local-global dynamics, especially those related to population movement, economic structures, racial formation along with race-troubled politics, and even kinship idioms. The social fabric of one European city, renown as Europe's "most diverse" due to its concentration of migrants, inspires this chapter's ethnographic investigation into the theme of difference and belonging in Europe.

The factory-city of Prato in greater metropolitan Tuscany is known for its postwar population boom, transnational migration, and births to foreign women. Chinese migrants occupy a formidable niche in the Made in Italy sector. These non-citizen entrepreneurs own and manage more than 5,200 small family firms, mostly in the

fast-fashion sector just north of the Renaissance city of Florence. Together, Chinese and Italian protagonists reveal themselves as desiring subjects of a global capitalism that is surprisingly heterogeneous. Their stories make tangible the diverse ways in which crisis and transformation manifest in modes of belonging. They reveal how individuals encounter global forces resulting from different trajectories yet structural similarities vis-à-vis migration and demographic shifts.

This chapter draws on a transnational collaborative research project in greater metropolitan Tuscany.<sup>1</sup> I spent 220 days across seven trips between 2012–2015 as the project's principal investigator conducting urban ethnographic research at various sites and events across the city, its industrial district, and connected townships. Prato and its sprawling province, which cuts across postwar industrial districts and picturesque hilltowns, serves as a laboratory of globalization. Ethnographic data derive largely from two different types: unstructured, in the form of participant observation and socially occurring discourse, and semi-structured, in the form of interviews with Chinese as well as Italian participants.

Against a demographic dynamic of lowest-low fertility and mass migration, this chapter revives the concept of *crisis of presence* (De Martino 1977) as it places into dialogue three different migratory trajectories: regional, national, and

transnational (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2009). Each of these phases of migration brought new residents into a historic textile urban area. The new arrivals had dialects, habits, and dreams that differed from the locals who identified Prato as their home. Belonging was not automatic. Newcomers historically were more attached to their towns of origin than to their regions. Establishing roots and a sense of belonging took time and came with conflict as well as a recognition that the world had significantly transformed: first with the fall of fascism, next with the economic miracle, and still later with globalization and its new forms of economic crisis and possibility.<sup>2</sup>

### **Setting: Migration, Demographic Dynamics, and Racism**

A controversial *New York Times* article in December 2019 used the case of Prato to explain Italy's current lurch to the political right: "The Chinese Roots of Italy's Far-Right Rage" (Goodman and Bubola 2019). A tagline noted that Italy's current political dynamic is "often attributed to anger over migrants" but then suggested that the "story begins decades ago, when China first targeted small textile towns." The article's dateline was Prato, indicating that the reporters gathered the bulk of their information there. In a public letter, Prato's mayor objected to placing the blame for national voting trends on Chinese migrants. He called the article's us-them characterization of Prato as

"desueto," or obsolete (Biffoni 2019). Among its most glaring omission were the results of the city's two recent mayoral elections in which the center left beat out the far right. Prato has gone against the national election trends.

In summer 2019, anti-fascist protesters clashed with riot police and expressed opposition to far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini, a trafficker in selfies that soften his hardline anti-immigrant politics of fear and hate. Salvini's party, the League, enjoyed tremendous success in 2018 and 2019 both in European Parliamentary and local administrative elections. Analysts characterized Salvini as a populist and a neo-fascist. He was steadfast in his policy forbidding rescue ships carrying refugees to land in Italian ports and in fact a new security decree would impose fines on rescue boats that bring migrants to Italy—"a declaration of war against the NGOs who are saving lives at sea" (*The Guardian*, June 15, 2019). A security law cracked down on third-sector organizations helping the most vulnerable of refugees and asylum seekers.

In Prato, Salvini made an appearance at the Emperor's Castle, no less, just three days before the mayoral election in June 2019, to lend his support to a candidate in a high-stakes run off. The closely followed race pitted the incumbent from the Democratic Party (PD) against a candidate supported by the right-wing coalition. The run-off was required because neither won more than

50% of a vote involving eight candidates from across the political spectrum.

The tone of the two camps offered a study in contrasts: a politics of hate vs. a politics of love. Mayor Matteo Biffoni's motto: *con tutto l'amore che c'è*. On Sunday, June 9, Biffoni was re-elected to a second five-year term. The tally was 56 percent. Love won. The supporters' mood was nothing short of jubilant. A good crowd showed up in a city park to celebrate the win.

Prato's race was especially noteworthy because of its demographic profile. Prato ranks as Italy's most diverse province. This bears out in terms of the portion of transnational migrants to total residents. In the most recent census, in 2011, the city's total resident population reached 185,456, of which 28,518, or 15.4 percent, were classified as *stranieri*, or foreigners. Meanwhile, the Province of Prato boasted a total population of 248,477, of which 36,834, or 14.8 percent, were foreign residents. These numbers compare with the rate of 6.8 percent of foreign residents in Italy nationwide (Istat n.d.). In terms of the Chinese presence, estimates vary wildly since the situation is very fluid and a large percentage begin their stay as undocumented and thus unregistered. In our research project, 75 percent of participants reported having been undocumented at one point during their stay in Italy. Registered Chinese migrants yield numbers of around 40 percent of official resident foreigners. When only

Chinese individuals with residency permits are included, estimates hover around 15,000 migrants; when those who are undocumented are included, estimates often double to a total of 30,000 or more.

These numbers have won the city various popular designations, such as Europe's number one multicultural city (Brandi and Sabatini 2012); (Office of Statistics 2013); (Istat 2011). It ranks first in Italian provinces in terms of the ratio of Italian to registered foreign residents. Non-Italians have migrated from 118 different countries. That said, the most notable non-Italian residents in Prato carry Chinese passports. The transnational migrants are the most recent in seven decades of migration.

The first phase of migration occurred after the devastation of world war as Tuscan peasants abandoned the countryside for the city. Many peasants from the rural hinterlands had been politicized as partisans in the resistance against Italian fascism and the Nazi occupation of Tuscany. Nationalism left a bad taste by the end of World War II. During the two decades of greatest growth, 1951- 71, Prato witnessed a doubling of its population from 77,631 to 143,232 residents. Many former peasants brought with them a desire for autonomy. The new arrivals left behind the *mezzadria* system of sharecropping with its hierarchical family and agricultural organization. They traded the rigid system for the promise of an urban lifestyle of factory work or industrial artisanship and the relative autonomy it promised. Work in an

informal economy spread as labor struggles heated up and in turn as small family firms proliferated. A peasant ethos persisted-- visceral yet mixed memories of the soil, of patron-client relations, of generational, conflict, and of reciprocity (Barbagli 1984) (Becattini 1986) (Blim 1990) (Cento Bull and Corner 1993) (Gaggio 2007) (Snowden 1989).

A second phase of migration, in the 1960s, witnessed the arrival of residents from the deep south. They left behind diverse peasant agriculture. People of southern Italian heritage suffered quasi Jim Crow-style discrimination as they sought housing and employment in their new city. Southern Italians were long stigmatized in the Italian imagination as inferior--a status and a trope that Italian state formation reinforced, Cesare Lombroso's criminal anthropology underwrote, and Edward Banfield's "amoral familism" reinscribed (Gramsci 1971) (Banfield 1958) (Silverman 1968). In Prato, Southerners settled in parts of the urban center, such as San Paolo, that were later dubbed Little Italy. They also found outlying semi-rural municipalities to be welcoming with their abandoned farmhouses especially as some landowners refused to rent to Southerners. A set of these municipalities in 1992 split from the Province of Florence and became incorporated into the Province of Prato. (Municipalities include Prato, Montemurlo, Carmignano, Vaiano, Poggio A Caiano, Vernio, and Cantagallo. Vaiano is the birthplace of the famous actor Roberto Benigni.)



In a third phase, especially since the 1990s, transnational migrants began moving into the area. By far the most numerous of these non-citizen residents have their origins in China, with most born in Wenzhou of the southeastern coastal province of Zhejiang and some from Fujian. Scholars estimate 90 percent of Chinese in Tuscany have origins in Wenzhou (Tomba 1999:281). Among the 41 migrants who participated in our research, 34 were from Zhejiang Province, 1 from Hunan, and 3 from Fujian (another 2 were born in Italy and 1 did not respond). These migrants view southern Europe as a "frontier of highly developed economies," a place "where they . . . face little competition from established Chinese communities" (Pieke et al. 2004).

Protagonists of these migrations offer perspectives that illuminate senses of existential despair and possibilities of transcendence born out of economic crisis of a global scale that unfold at the local level. Stories span local, regional, and transnational histories. They expose a dialectic of "presence in the world" and "the world which presents itself" (Saunders 1993:883). This dialectic has the potential to energize our thinking particularly in relation to belonging. The backdrop of ongoing economic crisis reveals how the hegemony of global supply chains (Tsing 2015) has transformed not only local production systems (Becattini 2015) but also social worlds that reveal an unexpected mutuality of belonging. Protagonists voice a world

unhinged, using metaphors such as “one world ends, another one begins,” “cut and sew,” and “a world undone.”

Migration and families have long been intertwined in producing the Made in Italy brand. After the labor struggles of the 1960s, much production was outsourced to family firms. In the 1980s onward, small sweater firms dominated the landscape. In the 2000s, transnational migrants came to occupy a formidable niche. By 2015, Chinese entrepreneurs in Prato owned and managed more than 5,200 small enterprises, mostly in the Made in Italy fast-fashion sector, totaling 45% of manufacturing activity.

Prato offers a living laboratory of globalization. The experiment has not been so smooth. Challenges that plague globalization intensify. Once a darling of postwar flexibility, the city can hardly be called a crown jewel of globalization. A prolonged economic crisis has hit both the mainstream Italian economy and coexisting immigrant one hard (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2011). Indeed, the author of the popular and unconventional travel book *Non ti riconosco* (I Don't Recognize You) describes Prato as having transformed from an Italian miracle into a symptom of a global illness (Revelli 2016).

Metaphors of pathology have become commonplace to describe cultural and demographic dynamics. Mainstream demographers' from the 1990s educated the public about the so-called demographic

malaise of low fertility, its "true and real 'mutation,'" with the power to "unhinge the whole social and economic structure of the country" (Golini 1994:8). This extended to characterizations of a veritable national "anorexia" (Livi-Bacci 1994) (Krause 2001). I argued that the expert advice constructed a sort of *social Viagra*, pushing a patriarchal variety of pronatalism to counter the "danger" of low fertility and revitalize normative Italian family-making (Krause and Marchesi 2007). Recently, in 2016, a National Fertility Day campaign to provoke citizens to procreate was so controversial for conjuring the ghost of fascist pronatalism that, similar to a national act of *coitus interruptus*, it was immediately withdrawn (Krause 2018a).

### **Encounter Ethnography**

I conceptualized encounter ethnography as a methodological strategy to guide transnational collaboration. Encounter ethnography is both a way of conducting research and an approach to enriching analysis. Many anthropologists have written about encounters in the legacy of ethnographic research. The concept emphasizes experiences or processes that are at odds with one another, as in the phrases "colonial encounter" (Asad 1973), "development encounter" (Escobar 1991), "intercultural encounter" (Sahlins 2000), "clinical encounter" (Ferzacca 2000), "activist

encounters" (Razsa 2015), "fieldwork encounters" (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009) and even "unpredictable encounters" (Tsing 2015).

Rather than leave encounters to the realm of common sense, I have nurtured *encounter ethnography* as a theoretically informed framework. The orientation places encounters as points of interpenetration and mediation at the center of investigation, one that lends itself to be carried out on a local level yet with global sensibilities. Here, *encounter ethnography* takes particular inspiration from Eric Wolf's (Wolf 1982) billiard ball critique of the culture concept, Anna Tsing's (Tsing 2015) call for the arts of noticing, and Ernesto De Martino's (De Martino 1977) insights related to analytic categories and observational paradoxes.

The approach offers value for understanding the big picture of relationships between immigrants, majority populations, and global systems. How do the ways in which people are entangled in global supply chains bind people together? How do these systems underwrite or undermine belonging? Such bindings and belongings are often rendered invisible through urban segregation patterns, heightened security, and xenophobic discourses. In this sense, I see *encounter ethnography* as a methodological positioning that works and writes against the sorts of divisions and separatist backlash coursing through many societies the world over.

### **Crisis of presence**

A "crisis of presence" was palpable while I conducted field research for *Tight Knit* (Krause 2018b). I borrow from De Martino's *crisi della presenza* to describe a sense of existential despair akin to an individual standing at the edge of the earth, precarious and disoriented, as when a Southern Italian peasant once left his town and lost view of his bell tower. De Martino's work represented an ongoing dialogue with the antifascist Antonio Gramsci, and he was drawn to illuminate how subaltern practices occurred in relation to hegemonic systems.

De Martino drew from subaltern ontologies as well as philosophers and political theorists to develop a way of thinking about the relationship between selves and the outside world: a dialectic of "presence in the world" and "the world which presents itself." The first speaks to experiences of internal being, whereas the second points to perceptions of an external reality.

Reviving De Martino's work helps make sense of the kind of melancholic mood that I frequently encountered in Prato. The world as people knew it seemed to be spinning out of control. Intense immigration combined with lowest-low fertility has manifested in a rising tide of demographic nationalism.

Protagonists revealed existential despair along with possibilities of transcendence born out of economic crisis of a local-global scale. Stories span local, regional, and transnational histories. They expose a process in which "recognizing the other is

fraught with the danger of losing one's own center, . . . of losing one's own presence" (Giordano 2014:54) (Saunders 1993). Protagonists voice a world unhinged as well as possibilities for a world re-made. Four brief cases illustrate how the crisis of presence is lived. Three of these encounters were the result of long-term relationships dating back to my fieldwork in 1995-1997 and my work in a family sweater finishing firm where I worked for six months attaching buttons in a workshop with two other retired Italians.

***"One world ends, another one begins"***

Letizia was rooted in place, culturally and politically from the left, pushed to the right of late, angry and full of fear, adamant that she and her town had been subject to a hostile takeover.<sup>3</sup> She was a longtime Tuscan native and prominent art and public works advocate whose frustrations with the new immigrants manifested in concerns for beauty and the environment. She agreed with a popular journalist who framed the Chinese migration to Prato as a siege. She asserted her roots, saying that her ancestors had always been Tuscans, proudly noting that her grandmother was from Vinci, home of Leonardo, and that her father, a contractor with communist sensibilities, had initiated a cooperative-style of financing during Prato's boom years, in the burgeoning San Paolo neighborhood, in which dwellers could pay

rent and eventually own their houses without the burdens of an official mortgage.

Born in 1941, Letizia grew up during the transformations of the postwar. She watched her town transition from agriculture to industry: "One world ends and another one begins." She repeated the phrase like the refrain to a song.

In the mid-1990s, Letizia and her husband, a retired state railway employee who had migrated to Tuscan from the south, operated a sweater finishing firm out of a room of their house. In the 2000s, as her town registered a 400% increase in immigrant residents, she voiced the dominant and resentful sentiment that the Chinese refused to integrate into Italian society, that they isolated themselves, and that of Italians or Italian culture they could give a damn.

"Our equilibrium is very delicate; it's been thrown into crisis by many things," she said, reflecting on her values to foster democracy and art. "You can't live without beauty; otherwise, we are really just brutes." It was difficult to reconcile the changing world with the one she sought to foster.

### ***"Cut and sew"***

What can be done about the crisis? That question opened a public Democratic Festival. Among the speakers was Wang, an entrepreneur who claims to have the longest business activity of

any Chinese person in Prato. His journey from undocumented migrant to leader of a local business association reveals the "spiritual insistence" of many migrants from Wenzhou. His firm specialized in sewing yarns, providing materials to cut-and-sew firms.

Following the tragic Teresa Moda factory fire of 2013, Wang sought to recruit Chinese firms to respect safety regulations. He drew on the cut-and-sew metaphor to make the point that good city leaders must study the situation, then keep the good and cut out the bad. "How do you cut with scissors?" he asked, rhetorically. The Chinese who use fake names just to escape paying any taxes, for example, they should be cut out, he said. But like with sharp scissors, leaders need to cut with care. "Scissors must cut well," he said. His approach shows respect for the migrant spiritual insistence and carves out space to cultivate entrepreneurial activity. He added, "Yes, yes, cut and sew, yes, cut and sew."

### ***"A world undone"***

The world was pushing up against a precipice.

Antonio and Aurora sold their sweater-weaving looms, tore down their workshop, and built condominiums around 2004. I knew them well and my husband and I became close with them back when her mother was our landlady. Antonio and Aurora did not have children of their own and they developed a kin-like relationship of aunt and uncle to my daughter, who attended preschool and first



grade in the local schools. We watched as they shifted from production to real estate, which was a common strategy among subcontractors. There was no longer any money to be made as a sweater artisan. When I came to visit them, during 2012-15, instead of furiously finishing sweater orders, they'd spend their days doing errands, making and keeping medical appointments, and smoking a lot. Antonio drew a pension. Aurora got furious every time the government raised the age for pension eligibility. The welfare state has been cut back. They seemed unsettled, even anxious. Many times, face to face and over the phone, she ranted about the situation: "This is an inhumane crisis."

Both Antonio and Aurora were born in the 1950s and migrated with their families to Prato in the years of the postwar boom. Aurora moved from Calabria in the south. Antonio from Maremma in rural Tuscany. Nowadays, everyone seemed to have only their own interests at heart. Too much "progress" had taken people back.

"I see a world *tutto disfatto*, completely undone, very aggressive, very violent," Aurora said. To illustrate her point, she told me about a grizzly double murder-suicide reported as the planned outcome of an economically distressed couple whose bodies were discovered in the next town over after two months in their house. The case stimulated conversations of people pushed to the brink in times of economic hardship and institutional abandonment. Austerity takes a toll and has a price.

Aurora also told me an ordinary personal story of what it meant to live in an undone world. One day, she arrived at the farm where she regularly went to buy local peasant wine. She noticed an abundance of strawberries growing in pots. "Y'know, we like sweets," she said. The woman told her to look at all the strawberries "down there" but did not offer her a single berry--a sample as a small gift. For Aurora, the experience stood out as a parable. With the economic crisis, people had become selfish. Relationships based on reciprocity were withering away. It troubled her. To give away one strawberry, would not be "the end of the world." She spoke about a different sort of world-ending, one which she characterized as a world undone.

### ***"We are the Chinese"***

Antonio participated in the heated labor struggles of 1968. He was of the generation of artisans that some 10 years later opened up small shops and bought their own machines. The idea of an eight-hour workday became a distant notion as the phases of sweater production moved outside of factories. For subcontracting artisans, a fixed workday didn't exist. "We subcontractors are the flexible ones." Antonio explained that a regular worker cannot compare in terms of flexibility. "In the moments when there's a lot of work, we manage to do it; we work Saturday and Sunday,

twenty hours, eighteen hours, sixteen hours. *I cinesi siamo noi*,  
We are the Chinese.”

To say, “We are the Chinese” is a powerful metaphor. It speaks to the similar structural positions that Italian internal migrants then share with Chinese transnational immigrants now.

### **Conclusion: Crisis, Transformation, and Belonging**

Each of these desiring subjects makes tangible diverse ways in which crisis and transformation manifest. They suggest how individuals encounter global forces resulting from different trajectories vis-à-vis migration and demographic shifts. Each protagonist faces a changing world, encounters alterity, and confronts it differently. Letizia’s “one world ends and another begins,” Wang’s “cut and sew,” Aurora’s “world completely undone” and Antonio’s “We are the Chinese,” together reveal worlds that are changing, being remade, with endings and beginnings. They have thought deeply about the changes. In varying degrees, each makes the world anew through actions.

I take seriously these ethnographically generated metaphors. On the one hand, they call attention to local ways of understanding how one belongs to the present often in comparison with memories with a past; on the other hand, they provoke thinking about the future of the craft of ethnography and the value of ethnographic knowledge. Such thoughts bring to mind our

own endeavors of doing and writing ethnography as well as the future social worlds that we might encounter as ethnographers.

De Martino observed that the challenge of culture is to suture inner and outer worlds together. Do we agree? If so, the purpose of "culture" is also to provide subjects with tools for everyday making of meaning. In addition, this kind of suturing stands for another way to conceptualize belonging. With each stitch, mutual incommensurabilities may become less incommensurable. Through quotidian experiences and encounters, feelings of difference and distance may give way to shared sensibilities. Different histories may give way to realizations of structural similarities: A good number of Italian sweatermakers and textile workers have come to realize that they occupied a niche very similar to their transnational migrant counterparts.

Ethnography suggests that integration may happen organically across time and within place. It may be deeply connected to global structures, displacements, and tensions, and it may be profoundly encouraged or disrupted by certain political and racial regimes. When it comes to difference and belonging, nothing is guaranteed. The subject may or may not be able to handle internal or external "realities" that go hand in hand with economic, social, and cultural change and feelings about their place in the world. The bell tower may slip out of view as quickly as it may come back into view.

The bell tower stands for a certain kind of belonging, one whose scale is graspable and tied to a particular place, with specific histories, and precise relationships. This sort of scale brings to mind something that Marshall Sahlins said not long ago in the book-length essay, *What Kinship Is--And What It Is Not* (Sahlins 2013:ix). Sahlins's essay highlights the multiple ways in which being and belonging can be realized. What resonated with me in that essay was his idea that kinship has to do with "mutual relations of being" and "participation in one another's existence." The idea is that to be part of a family means that family members have a desire to be part of each others' lives, to share in one anothers' milestone moments: births, marriages, deaths; sickness and healing; suffering and joy. Family members make memories together. They share feelings about their lives whether they live close to one another in the same town or far away in different cities. Indeed, there's something profound in this concept of kinship in terms of a sensibility of belonging.

Kinship itself can serve as a way to help us understand belonging. The most basic unit in which many people feel a sense of belonging is family. Here we can understand in its most fundamental way what belonging is: it is perhaps more than anything a desire to be part of one's life, and even one's death. I remember when my mother-in-law died. We had been in the field during fall 2002 and as soon as we returned, my husband learned

his mother was doing poorly. He quickly booked a flight and traveled back to Missouri. His mother passed ten minutes before he arrived. Somehow, missing out on her final breath made the death all the more tragic. The funeral conflicted with the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, and I kept my obligation to present on a panel. I was pre-tenure and worried about breaking my commitment. Family members said my mother-in-law would have wanted me to keep my work commitment. It was a terrible decision. I suffered terribly for missing this moment. There is a sense that close family members should be present for key moments, including milestones such as birth and death or remembering a life. This represents belonging at its most intimate.

We can extend these notions of belonging to social belonging. Belonging does not often come easy even in families. Conflicts and tensions are as common as sentiments of love and intimacy. After more than 25 years working in Prato, my relationship with my fieldsite can be understood through this idiom of kinship. I work on sustaining the relationships. Some are harder than others. Some come easier than others. Some feel highly tenuous whereas others feel profoundly durable. It is through these relationships and my history with the place that I have a sense of belonging--despite not having citizenship or residency.

As anthropologists, we often experience a form of kinship in our belonging to social worlds. I have come to know my fieldsite

with great intimacy over the course of more than two decades of research. I experience a great deal of personal satisfaction when I happen to be in the field for certain milestones, such as the recent re-election of the mayor who beat out the right-wing candidate.

Policies may foster belonging, but ethnographic research suggests that belonging comes from relationships and a mutuality of being. As much as anything, belonging has to do with presence of place. It has to do with shared struggles, wins and losses, and relationships with others, with territories, and with economic and political ups and downs over time.

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<sup>2</sup> If the fall of Mussolini's fascism can be marked with a date of 1944, and the postwar boom with the two decades that followed, current dynamics in globalization can be framed with the unraveling of Europe's Multi Fibre Agreement in 1994 and China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001.

<sup>3</sup> I follow ethnographic conventions and use of pseudonyms.