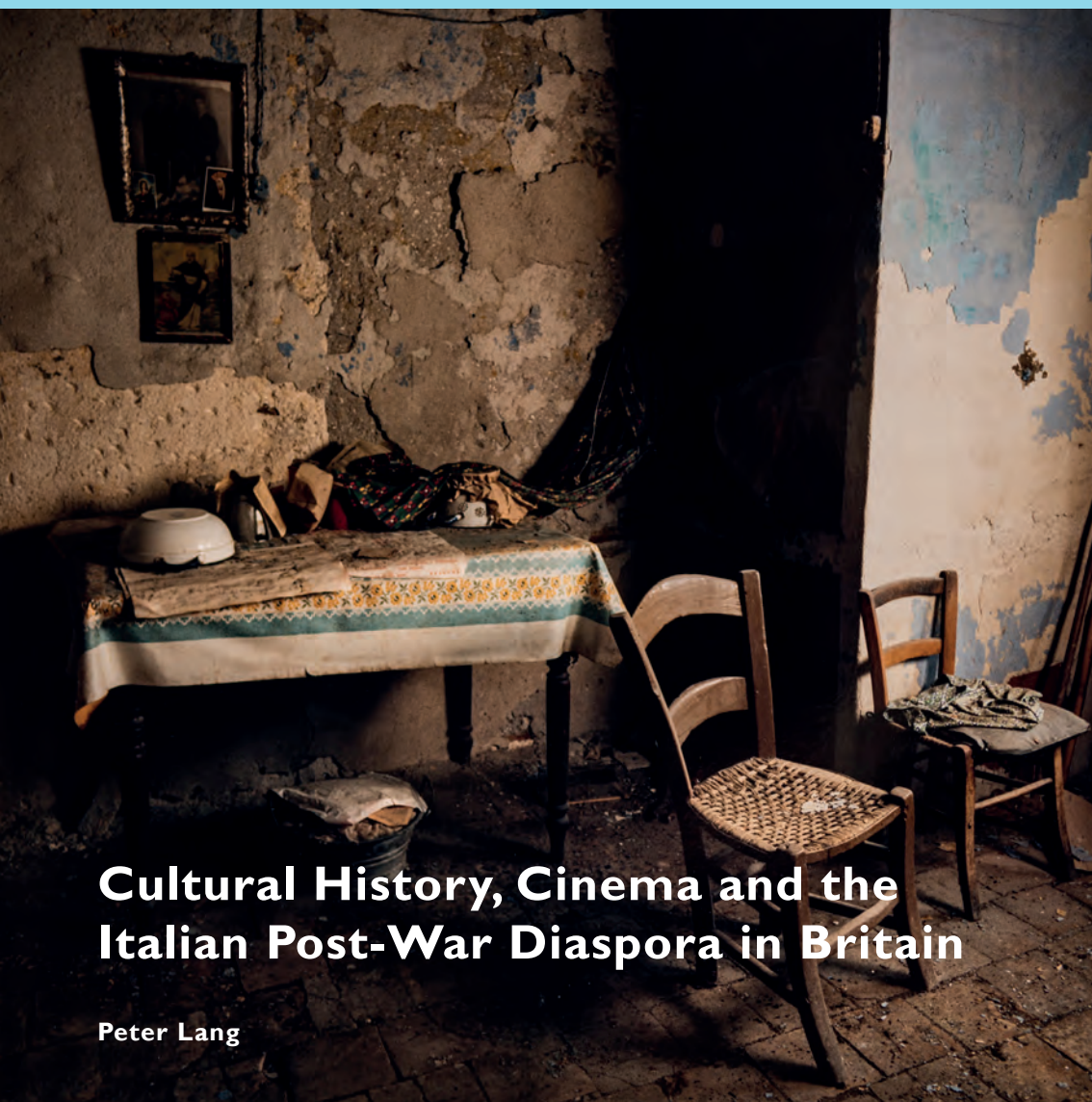


Migrant Memories

Margherita Sprio



**Cultural History, Cinema and the
Italian Post-War Diaspora in Britain**

Peter Lang

CULTURAL MEMORIES

Migrant Memories provides an innovative perspective on the power of cultural memory and the influence of cinema on the Italian diaspora in Britain. Based on extensive interviews with Southern Italian migrants and their children, this study offers a fresh understanding of the migrants' journey from Italy to Britain since the early 1950s. The volume examines how the experience of contemporary Italian identity has been mediated through film, photography and popular culture through the generations. Beginning with an analysis of the films of Frank Capra and Anthony Minghella, the book goes on to address the popular melodramas of Raffaello Matarazzo and ultimately argues that cinema, and the memory of it, had a significant influence on the identity formation of first-generation Italians in Britain. Coupled with this analysis of cinema's relationship to migration, the cultural memory of the Italian diaspora is explored through traditions of education, religion, marriage and cuisine. The volume highlights the complexities of cultural history and migration at a time when debates about immigration in Britain have become politically and culturally urgent.

Margherita Sprio is Senior Lecturer in Film History and Theory at the University of Westminster. She studied Fine Art at Goldsmiths (University of London) and the Slade School of Art (University College London) and then worked as an artist internationally before completing her PhD at Goldsmiths. She works on film practice and theory as well as the relationship of film theory to photography, contemporary art and philosophy. Her particular research interests relate to the politics of art and the moving image, globalisation and diaspora, cultural/sexual difference and transnationalism.



Migrant Memories

CULTURAL MEMORIES

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PETER LANG

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Per Papa e Mamma

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements | ix |
| Introduction | i |
| CHAPTER 1 | |
| Cultures of Migration | 23 |
| CHAPTER 2 | |
| Historicising the Italian Diaspora in Britain | 51 |
| CHAPTER 3 | |
| Frank Capra and Anthony Minghella – Comparative Links | 77 |
| CHAPTER 4 | |
| Cultural Identity and Assimilation | 105 |
| CHAPTER 5 | |
| Memories and Movies | 173 |
| CHAPTER 6 | |
| Cultural Memory | 195 |
| Conclusion | 215 |

APPENDIX

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Oral Interviews | 229 |
|-----------------|-----|

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Filmography | 245 |
|-------------|-----|

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| Bibliography | 249 |
|--------------|-----|

| | |
|-------|-----|
| Index | 279 |
|-------|-----|

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Introduction

This book is a cultural history of the diasporic Southern Italian communities of the mid-1950s and their experiences of arrival and survival in Britain's Home Counties and London during the latter part of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century. Mass immigration to the South of England from the South of Italy and Sicily in particular occurred between 1952 and 1960. With this mass immigration came memories of home, a transported cinematic experience and a conflicting sense of belonging.¹ The diffused experiences and the role of cinematic consumption during this period of the early 1950s in Italy was in turn continuously transformed through the process of assimilation by the migrants and their children in Britain. The research for this book has involved a variety of methodologies and consists of an interchange between both academic research and my own lived experience as a daughter of Italian (Sicilian) immigrants to Britain. The emotional connection to any research is difficult to assess conclusively, but it is necessary to disclose it here because all research implies some connection with the identity of the researcher. This book is in part a historiography of an immigrant experience and an exploration of how this experience can be understood through an auto-ethnographic gaze. In turn, it is also questioning what can be learnt from this experiential journey (as it has been experienced by a second-generation Italian) and

- 1 For the statistical aspect of the research, I have consulted published literature such as Terri Colpi's *Italians Forward* (London and Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1991) and data from the Italian Consulate in Britain. The most useful sources were the Municipal Offices and the small Aragona Museum, both in Aragona, Sicily. These research trips were conducted between 1998 and 2004. Additionally, the oral interviews helped to provide an overview of dates of entry into Britain, as well as making it possible to complete (first hand account) surveys of actual lists of names of the existing members of the Italian community in Buckinghamshire, and how many were arriving at any given year between 1952 and 1960.

from the first-person oral accounts that are used throughout. The focus of the research is the importance that a range of cultural expressions, and the cinematic experience in particular, can have in helping to construct a sense of trans-national and diasporic identity. In this respect, in a similar vein to Kuhn's work on 1930s British audiences, the research is intended to contribute to a rethinking of theories and models of the relationship between film texts and their spectators.²

The book directly focuses on cultural migration as an experience of identity formation. The approach to the research comes out of a desire to create a historical pathway that enables the subjects to articulate their own sense of themselves and their understanding of which cultural markers influenced their sense of evolving into trans-national subjects. With this in mind, this book sets out to consider cultural experience and identity formation, and in particular, the role and lasting impact of film spectatorship within this construction. Robert McKee Irwin argues that all immigrant groups bring with them notions of their national identity that are then made apparent through cultural expression.³ Irwin cites literature from the late 1950s and 1960s as the chosen cultural form through which the struggles of sons of immigrant families come to understand their heritage, assert their Mexicanness, and assimilate into American society, are acted out. In this case, members from the diasporic group themselves have produced narrative forms which utilise direct records from their experiences.⁴ As this example shows, the role that cultural memory plays in the lives of diasporic communities is multi-faceted and neither linear nor continuous in a chronological sense. What is made apparent from the contents of the oral interviews that were undertaken for this book is that there is no possible

2 Annette Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 237.

3 Robert McKee Irwin, *Mexican Masculinities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). For an important look at the way that Latinos and Mexicans in particular have been portrayed in the media in America, also see Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens and the Nation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

4 Irwin, *Mexican Masculinities*, 216.

single assessment for this role. The narratives presented throughout this book serve to highlight that cultural memory functions in complex and contradictory ways. It is an aim of this book to make visible some of these complexities and contradictions.

The ethnographic aspect of the research in this book includes oral interviews with different generational members of various Italian communities in Britain and in Italy, as well as first-person narration, through my own experience as a second-generation British-Italian. This part of the research resulted in specifically addressing the issues raised by the memories recalled in the oral interviews. At the start of the research process, the centrality of this body of knowledge that would come out of the oral memories could not have been pre-determined. Some of the accounts of the lived experience formulated here are difficult to release and make public to the world. In this regard, the editorial decisions forced some narratives to be privileged above others. The time span involved between conducting, collating, translating and transcribing the oral interviews necessitated a clear structure to the questions being asked. The level and range of analytical questioning involved in considerations implicit to the subject matter of this book has meant that even during the relatively short period of time since commencing this research, other previously unconsidered questions presented themselves. As will become evident during the course of this book, the fluidity of the stories told which help to shape cultural identity continuously shift across time and space. With this in mind, one's thinking about the influences that help to determine cultural formation continuously changes. Ultimately, it is this aspect of the subject matter of this book that makes completion of such a piece of work in itself never-ending, and hence impossible to achieve in a concrete sense. Perhaps all thinking must be seen in the light of constant rethinking. Indeed, it is only through this underlying mythological framework of continuous reconsideration that this constantly evolving narrative has come to fruition at all.

The historical research collated here is also made up of a diversity of sources, which has sometimes led outside of the traditional confines of the academic context. The invisibility of the 'Italian community' and hence my lived reality, which shrouded my own experience growing up in Britain, is one of the significant factors that determined the shape of this book. This led

to my having to broaden the scope of the research. It has proved invaluable to analyse a wide range of visual artefacts, all of which have contributed to this book in a complex variety of ways. Historically, fictionalised memoirs have made an important contribution to our knowledge of cultural history, as experience is used as a filtered translation for a particular cultural space.⁵ For the purposes of this book, my own childhood diaries were a useful reminder of how I actually experienced being an outsider; they additionally serve as a literal record of some of the stories told to me about Italy and 'back home.' My early schoolbooks, when I could not yet fully read or write in English, also provide an insight into how children, as they are developing bi-lingual skills, understand linguistic models. For example, these very early writings (from when I was aged about six or seven) highlight the fact that my skills in both spoken and written Italian (together with Sicilian dialect) are more fully advanced, and this is made apparent through my continuous confusion in the spelling of English words which are interpreted through Italian phonetics.⁶ A range of other original artefacts (both personal and public) were consulted, such as migratory administrative documents from the 1950s, the homemade suitcase used by my father when he left Sicily in 1955, a range of photographs sent from Britain to Italy, family letters, newspaper and television coverage of Italian immigration, parish records held in a variety of museums, churches and other public buildings in both Italy and Britain, ranging from The Pirandello House Museum in Agrigento, Sicily, to the Public Records Office in London.⁷ Significantly, textures of memories

- 5 There are many other examples ranging from fiction to non-fiction from Elizabeth Smart, Eva Hoffman, Jane Gallop, Kathleen Stewart to writers such as Tim Lott, Andrew O' Hagan, Meera Syal, Zadie Smith, and Monica Ali, amongst others.
- 6 My greater proficiency in Italian was a result of the fact that it was the only language that I was surrounded by until compulsory English schooling, since my parents did not speak English and contact with the English language would have been minimal, if not virtually non-existent. Although Sicilian dialect was spoken at home, the rigour of 'Italian School' funded by the Italian government for the children of Italian immigrants, meant that my knowledge of the Italian vocabulary was already more firmly in place, whilst the English equivalent was rudimentary.
- 7 This was taken over by the Region of Sicily in 1952 and is the house where Pirandello was born.

were also unexpectedly elicited from material sources that formed part of the fabric of my childhood – items of clothing worn on the migrants' first journey from Italy to Britain, and both used and unused dowries brought to Britain during the 1950s from Italy, to name but a few, additionally contributed to the body of research for this book.

The personal detailing of the lived experiences shared by so many Italian immigrants in Britain is here both directed by my own actual experience on the one hand, and through the spoken words of those interviewed on the other. There are few shared experiences here, which are to be seen as isolated cases, or representative of a fixed notion of identity. Indeed, in their generic make-up, some of the cultural memories are similar to those that might come from other diasporic communities. However, the role and function of cinema and the importance that Italian film melodramas of the 1950s (and specifically the films by Raffaello Matarazzo) have played within these memories is crucial to the overall framework of the book. The significance of the visual in any migratory experience is not to be underestimated and both the photographic and the moving image are crucial in providing a sense of belonging when displacement is experienced. The role that cinema has played for the first generation of cinema goers in Italy has been sentimentalised through films such as *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988) and its international success runs along parallel lines to the lived importance of cinema for many generations of cinema spectators. British ideas about Italian identity have mainly been shaped by the representations of Italian immigrants in Italian-American cinema and Italian sexuality has in part been imbued with excess often associated with 'Mediterranean sensuality'.

For important reasons, critical writing on post-war migration and its relationship to most British theories of difference have tended to address issues of Black-British identity and in this respect, this book has to some degree been informed by the theoretical writings of the British and American identity politics of the 1980s and 1990s.⁸ The exclusion of other smaller migrant groups within these debates has given strength to

8 I am thinking of the work of Hall, Gilroy, Bhabha and Spivak, to name but a few.

a double invisibility, both in academic discourse and in more widespread politics of 'race relations'. With the idea of what Rosi Braidotti calls 'the me tooism' in contemporary thinking notwithstanding, one's own political consciousness is obviously implicated in the conduct of the research and this book comes out of the shifting debates already cited, as well as a variety of other discourses that cut across disciplines.⁹ Histories of immigration to Britain have been useful to consult and my research has born witness to the minimal acknowledgement of the Italian presence in Britain.¹⁰ Cultural historians, and indeed the primary thinkers on issues of 'race and identity' in Britain, have tended to focus on the larger migrant groups and their writings have often utilised the writers' own experience and black subjectivities in particular.¹¹

It is one of the further aims of this book to foster the development of appropriate methodologies for the analysis of cultural memory and its

- 9 This refers to a personal conversation with Braidotti at Birkbeck College, London where we were discussing the issue of 'minority representation' (17 March 2012).
- 10 For a review of Italian migration in the UK see Marin, U., ed., *Italian in Gran Bretagna* (CSER, Roma: 1979); Palmer, R., *Immigrants Ignored: An Appraisal of the Italians in Britain* (University of Sussex, 1973); Palmer, R., 'The Italians: Patterns of Migration to London,' in *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain*, ed. Watson, J.L. (Oxford: Blackwell's, 1977), 242–268; De Blasio, N., 'Italian Immigration to Britain: An Ignored Discussion,' *European Demographic Information Bulletin* 10, no. 4 (Dec. 1979): 151–158.
- 11 There are many scholars and works that could be listed here but I have limited this note to include only some of the major academics that were influential to my own thinking. The early writings that came out of the Birmingham Cultural Studies Unit in the mid-1980s, spearheaded by Stuart Hall, gave visibility to issues of cultural translation, and pioneered British Cultural Studies. Hall's subsequent writings have been crucial in looking at questions of cultural identity. Other distinct voices emerging during this period were Paul Gilroy, whose influential work, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Hutchinson Press, 1987), is now a classic textbook for the cultural studies student. Lola Young's *Fear of the Dark* (London: Routledge Press, 1996) was key in addressing representations of race and gender in cinema. Another significant voice is Kobena Mercer and his writings on visual cultures, sexuality and race, some of which are collated in *Welcome to the Jungle* (London: Routledge Press, 1994).

role in thinking through identity formation. As Halbwachs has stated, one cannot think about the events of one's past without discoursing upon them and it is for this reason that a single theoretical perspective is not given a primary focus.¹² This is not through casual neglect but comes from considered analysis – many sources have been useful in the completion of this book, and its direction is reflected through a diverse range of academic disciplines. For example, although published in another era, I am sympathetic to Lola Young's claim in her book on 'race' and the cinema that her study was initially undertaken because she felt that conventional film studies had not developed an appropriate critical framework for the detailed study of representations of racial difference in Britain. I would also agree with her that there is no single theoretical framework able to address all of the issues raised by the combination of racial, sexual and gender issues pertinent to historical developments. Young situates herself within a Cultural Studies domain as she feels this allows for a more interdisciplinary perspective.¹³ I too would wish this book to be considered as much, if not more, within this domain or rather a domain of Cultural History, rather than within a more orthodox Film Studies paradigm.¹⁴ For example, the book is historically located within the post-war period of Italian mass migration to Britain, and the films examined are from the era of the mid-1950s in Italy.¹⁵ The films that are analysed, however, are examined within the context of contemporary cultural memory arising from the ethnographic methodology adopted.

12 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 53.

13 Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: 'Race', Gender and Sexuality in Cinema* (London: Routledge Press, 1996), 1–6.

14 Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark*, 4–5.

15 Mass migration took different forms between 1946–1957, with the largest wave of Italians leaving for the Americas (Argentina, Canada and Venezuela in particular) and Australia. Whilst 70% of those who immigrated were from the South of Italy, many went to the North, whilst others went to France, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and Britain. See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943–1988* (London: Penguin, 1990) for useful statistical data concerning mass immigration.

Hence, the thematic divisions of the chapters have evolved out of these diverse methodologies and are to be understood within the framework of a variety of academic disciplines that cut across theories of Visual Culture.¹⁶ The first two chapters, 'Cultures of Migrations' and 'Historicising the Italian Diaspora in Britain' provide an analysis of some of the most relevant academic writing in relation to Italian migration to Britain and the Italian Diaspora, in particular. It is not intended to be completely exhaustive, and once again, the temporal nature of writing and research allows for other references to become significant in both major and minor ways. The scope of the literature addressed reflects the range of issues implicit in the overall subject matter of this book. The variety of forms that this literature takes, from academic texts to popular and specialist interest journals, reflects the breadth of this project. Various cultures of migration have been explored in a multitude of ways and it is hoped that this book will form part of an ongoing dialogue that helps to shape cultural history. The specificity of this book in terms of its cultural framing of Italians and their experiences before and after emigration, together with the initial time period of the 1950s, marks out the focus of the writing. As I go on to investigate some of the most important literature, through looking at the work of Dolci, Gabaccia and others, the role of both cultural memory and the importance of cinema in my own research is key to this ongoing, aforementioned dialogue.

In the third chapter, 'Frank Capra and Anthony Minghella – Comparative Links', the film work of two Italian migrant directors – one who was born in Sicily and grew up in America, Frank Capra, and the other, who was third-generation Italian and grew up in Britain, Anthony Minghella – is investigated. Their various works and mediated cultural experiences are analysed in relation to connection points that rise out of cultural memory – although crossing different timescales, the comparative connections were intentionally overtly driven. Where possible, the directors' own words have been used, partly by way of consistency in relation to the other oral interviews that have been conducted.¹⁷ Additionally, the memories constructed within the words spoken are part of the

16 With particular reference to Cultural Studies, Art History, Film Studies, Post-Colonial Theory and Cultural Geography.

17 I interviewed the late Anthony Minghella in London, 2001.

methodology that is being utilised within this research. I then go on to assess the historical data that is most prevalent within the various theories of immigration to Britain in the 1950s. This assessment utilises the author's first-hand experience and the narrative line within this aspect of the book is an attempt to both re-contextualise and evaluate the question of artistic intention in relation to a migrant audience's reception. As Miriam Hansen states, cinema 'was above all...the single most expansive discursive horizon in which the effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or denied, transmuted or negotiated'.¹⁸

Up until recently, the development of Screen Studies has focused on utilising a variety of methods that use textual readings as the starting point through which to understand how the cinematic experience creates meaning.¹⁹ Important markers in this tradition include the work of Annette Kuhn, who explores the role played by cultural memory in British cinema.²⁰ Through the oral interviews that I have conducted, it became apparent that cinema as an institution is utilised as an object of both fantasy and memory. Whilst providing an insight into cultural displacement, this chapter systematically privileges individual films over the cultural context of how films were both experienced and interpreted in their own time by popular audiences. More importantly, this approach does not allow for the fluidity that is integral to cultural memory and which demarcates film reception and consumption to a multiplicity of levels. The implications imbued in the act of the remembering of film sequences, film stars, film moments, film experiences and film life has proven paramount to an enabling of some understanding of this Italian/British aspect of cultural history.²¹

18 Miriam Hansen, 'America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity,' in *Cinema and the Intervention of Modern Life*, eds, Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 381–382.

19 This term is being used as a generic category through which to encompass a more traditional film studies approach as it developed throughout the 1970s, from the journals *Screen* in Britain and *Cahiers Du Cinema* in France and into the present.

20 Annette Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

21 This is my own brief paraphrasing and translation (from Sicilian to English) of a conversation with my late father, one of those interviewed, in October 2004.

As with all research, this book has been the product of a complicated journey and one that has used oral histories at the heart of its overall process.²² One difficulty has been the reluctant acknowledgment that this book could never actually be all that its author would have originally wished it to be.²³ The fourth chapter, 'Cultural Identity and Assimilation', looks at various aspects of identity formation from the perspective of the second-generation British-born Italian immigrant. In some sense I feel that I have been researching for this book all of my life, since thinking through any visual representation of Italianness as a child set me down the path of all of my subsequent academic thinking. As has already been stated, the methodological approach has allowed for more than one method to be brought to bear on a single research problem. It is hoped that the different aspects of the central part of this book act as moments of remembering and also as markers of past experiences that have coalesced to create a new body of analysis. The momentary spaces between each of the different sub-sections are not to be understood as being final markers of a diasporic experience, but rather part of an ongoing dialogue of cultural translation. As Bergson has argued, my personality is the being to which these actions must be referred.²⁴

The fifth and sixth chapters, 'Memories and Movies' and 'Cultural Memory' look at the role that the cinematic plays in the mapping of subjectivities. Films seen in Italy before the Italian diaspora was formed in Britain are recalled into the present through storytelling and re-enactment and given a life outside of the normative spectatorial experience. The power of speech acts, performative narratives and their relationship

22 220 oral interviews were conducted between 1998 and 2012 (see Appendix).

23 The editorial process of listening and re-listening to the many hours of taped interviews made for a never ending cycle of potential new lines of enquiry concerning previously unexplored paths in relation to subjectivities. The depth and range of stories told through the oral interviews were in themselves a historical document, which should co-exist with the more traditional forms of historiography and Diaspora Studies in particular.

24 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 47.

to cinema and identity formation is one of the most significant elements that frames this book. The transformative power of remembering things that have passed is also held up here as being a method of analysis key to any understanding of cultural history. Pierre Nora's notion of 'sites of memory' is helpful to think through this idea as I explore how cultural expressions of collective memory actualise the making of history.²⁵ It is intended that this book would act as an historical narrative across both time and space, but it is also intended to be a key addition to the existing debates on the history of immigration to Britain and beyond. As the work of Jeremy Harding exposes, never has the issue of immigration been so pertinent as in the contemporary moment.²⁶ Italy, and Sicily in particular, now finds itself as the recipient of mass migration and whilst this book is about an earlier historical moment, it is hoped that the memories and voices heard here would have some impact on thinking about the current arrivals at Lampedusa and elsewhere in the South of Italy and not only in Italy.²⁷ In similar ways to those elements that make up the *mise-en-scene* of any given film image and final film narration, the diverse aspects of this writing aim to coalesce into a coherent whole. This is not intended in a conclusive and final sense; this book can never be the final word on this subject; on the contrary, it is part of a continuing dialogue. This book hopes to address questions and contradictions in relation to cultural identity and its formation, rather than to seek solid solutions. The questioning of the complex interactions between ideologies is fundamental to the purpose and validity of the research undertaken.

The latter part of the book follows through some of the ethnographic work that, in Kuhn's words, 'enhances, deepens, and modifies understandings of the nature and operations of cultural memory'.²⁸ Whilst privileging

25 Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Vol. 1 – Conflicts and Divisions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

26 Jeremy Harding, *Border Vigils: Keeping Migrants Out of the Rich World* (London and New York: Verso 2012).

27 Lampedusa is a small island next to Sicily and is one of the often perilous routes that migrants use to seek entry into Europe.

28 Annette Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger*, 238.

the oral interviews and the ensuing cultural memory as a methodology, this enables an investigation into the cinematic experience of Italian immigrants to Britain. Their relationship to a previously under-studied collection of Italian melodramas of the 1950s forms the textual focus of this part of the book.²⁹ Film history has tended to pay particular attention to the work made in the immediate post-war period in Italy – the Italian Neo-Realists, and the Art Cinema films that followed. As is made apparent in the documentary by Scorsese, *Viaggi in Italia* (2002), a personal journey into film history is only made possible through first-person narration.³⁰ The validity of the canonical works discussed in Scorsese's documentary and the impact of the Neo-Realist work is not under attack here. However, suffice to say that the non-canonical works of Raffaello Matarazzo's melodramas have enabled an otherwise differing perspective on notions of popular cinema history. Whilst putting films aside for one moment, a cinema culture is, in any case, shaped by the context and manner in which films are consumed, and by the people who consume them.³¹ The film narrations, which evolved from the oral histories that were undertaken, helped to determine the line of enquiry, whilst also informing the understanding of the lived experience of a second-generation Italian daughter. The stories also act as a reminder of the cultural treasure that lies in our elders' memories.³² They give a visibility to an otherwise invisible history of Italian migration to Britain, and provide an historical context for this presence.

Conducted between 1996 and 2012, the 220 oral interviews were held in Sicily³³ and in various parts of Britain (Aylesbury, Bedford, London and

29 Those directed by Matarazzo between 1950 and 1956.

30 In this documentary, Scorsese cites the influence that the films of the Neo-Realist era had on his parents and, in turn, on his development as a young adult and subsequent filmmaker.

31 Annette Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger*, 2.

32 Ibid., 239.

33 Aragona, Province of Agrigento, is where my own family is located and where family friends have returned to after having worked in Britain.

Glasgow).³⁴ I either knew the interviewees from the Italian community where I grew up in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, or they were directed to me through friends.³⁵ The category of interviewees who were directed to me through friends was limited to third- and fourth-generation Italians. Given the length of time spent away from this community, it is inevitable that I know so few third- and fourth-generation Italians. Most of these particular interviews were conducted in London and included both men and women who were mainly teenagers but all under twenty years of age.³⁶ The old world tape-recording of the earlier interviews, together with the digital voices of the more recent interviews that make up the ethnographic research has enabled there to be a huge archive of oral material, and the scope of this book has meant that, in actual fact, only a small fragment of it has been used. In order to maintain anonymity, each of the people whose words have been quoted has been given a letter from the alphabet as a way of identifying them. Changes (fictionalised entries) were made whenever any personal names or other personally identifying information was used within the oral interviews. All translations are my own and so I take full responsibility for any errors that may have occurred.

The personal relationship between the interviewees and myself was key to the ethnographic part of this book, since the sharing of experiences and the memories about films would not have otherwise been possible. It soon became apparent that some of the stories told might not be heard again, given the age range of first-generation Italians, all of whom were well over sixty when I spoke with them. The dialects spoken would die with their speakers and their histories will be lost in the few citations about Italian post-war cultural migration to Britain. Those interviewed were not

34 I selected areas that had representative Italian communities. Although 220 oral interviews were conducted, the ones that were utilised in this work were selected in order to be reflective of different parts of Southern Italy.

35 In Aylesbury and London.

36 I interviewed a total of eighteen third-generation Italians, with an equal gender split. The age range was 14–19 years and their family origins were from all over Italy, but with twelve interviewees originating from the South of Italy. Nine of those interviewed had never been to Italy.

used to being listened to; many felt that their stories had never previously been valued: '*Nobody ever cared about us as real people back then (1950s), we were workhorses, that's all.*'³⁷ Additionally, as already mentioned, my own position as an academic has involved some degree of disconnection from the community into which I was born. Some of the particularities of the oral interviews developed by chance rather than direct intention – I would encounter different versions of familiar stories, versions that I could not have known I would be party to. The interviews mainly happened within a domestic context, usually the homes of those being interviewed or my own home.³⁸ Some of those interviewed were immediate family members, whilst others were family friends and *paesani*.³⁹ The issue of the relationship between those interviewed and myself is important to address. Many of those who spoke to me permitted being recorded because they trusted that I would be sensitive to how their words would be made public. Conscious of the interlinking roles of family honour, *la bella figura*⁴⁰ and confidentiality, together with the issue of cultural translation, for the most part, I made the decision to interview participants alone.⁴¹

The performative nature involved in the telling of the stories sometimes left a degree of ambivalence in my role, since I was both academic researcher and British-born Italian daughter.⁴² Some of those interviewed from the first generation found it difficult to reconcile the issue of my role

37 A. Please see the Appendix for details about the interviewees.

38 The interviews were informal and would often be combined with a social visit. It was the lack of formality that elicited the wide range of responses to my questions.

39 This literally means somebody from the same town as you but can also simply mean close or family friends.

40 This loosely translates as the desire to create the best impression (of oneself).

41 Fear of gossip, as it would have originally been experienced in their own villages and towns in Italy, was very much alive during the course of the interviews in the immigrant communities in both contemporary Italy and in England. It was quite common for interviewees to pepper their answers with requests such as, *please don't repeat this* or *don't make me talk about this now, I will do so when the tape recorder is switched off*. Their fear was that other family or community members would know their personal stories.

42 This is discussed in detail in the 'Memories and Movies' chapter.

in their minds and so at times, I had to remind them and gently persuade them to tell me stories that they had once told me when I lived in their community. I would sometimes direct interviewees in remembering a story that I had previously made a note of over two decades earlier, when I was a curious teenager interested in recording their experience as part of my own diary and adolescent writings. The passage of time has meant that although in every case the original story was remembered, at times some interviewees did not now want to repeat the story to me, the professional interviewer.⁴³ Both men and women often volunteered feelings of shame, embarrassment, pained emotions and even anger. It was quite apparent that they had never been asked to remember the element of historical detailing (that makes up all of our identities) which would go on to take them on a particular path of migration and cultural translation. They sometimes asked me not to remind them of their early experiences of poverty and arrival in Britain (*'I feel ashamed and it is difficult to remember and I don't want to remember'*)⁴⁴ or they would make it clear that some topics were too painful to address: *'Don't remind me, don't remind me, please, don't remind me. It was a very difficult time, this is something that our youngsters will never know about or can't understand.'*⁴⁵ One constant pattern of remembering that soon became apparent to me when interviewing the first-generation migrants was that they continuously recalled experiences in their lives through their memories of cinema. This was not exclusively the case but at times other earlier experiences were often interpreted through cinema sequences only half remembered. What was striking about my own role as the interviewer was that I was constantly surprised by how vivid their detailing was, despite some of these memories being over sixty years old.

Each of the interviewees was addressed in their preferred language, which meant that the interviews crossed Italian and Sicilian, together with

43 Usually this response was to stories that involved issues of poverty or prejudice that they had experienced, although if persuaded to retell the story, they were almost exclusively considered in their use of language, for fear of appearing to be critical of English people.

44 A.

45 AB.

a variety of other (mainly Southern) Italian dialects and English. However, other regional dialects were often used by those interviewed, so for example Neapolitan dialect may have been used in response to a question asked by myself in (non-regional) Italian. Interestingly, many regional dialects are now so interwoven (since migrants have mixed together for such a long period of time), with a small smattering of English words, that some interviewees would be adopting speech patterns from regions of Italy that they had never actually visited. Common influences might mean that Sicilian words were mixed with those from a Neapolitan region. Additionally, generic English expressions might be included with the regional Italian spoken, although the interviewee would often cite herself or himself as being a non-English speaker.⁴⁶ It is important to consider that in general terms English was partially understood, but not written or read by the first-generation Italian, and this was exclusively the case for all of those interviewed who were from this generational group.⁴⁷ Equally, although most of the first-generation interviewees understood Italian, they did not speak it themselves since they are generally from a generation when schooling would have been taught in dialect. Also, although this is now changing with satellite television, their exposure to the Italian language would have been limited to passport bureaucracy or airport administrative exchanges.⁴⁸ Some of the Italian language that was used had to be accommodated for

46 Conversational expressions such as '*do you know what I mean?*' or '*anyway*', would often be intermixed with what would otherwise be a conversation entirely in a regional Italian dialect.

47 Compulsory secondary education until the age of 14 was introduced in Italy in 1962, so many of this first generation of immigrants had experienced a partial level of formal education before moving to England.

48 Some of those interviewed voiced their insecurities about these interactions, since they did not feel correctly schooled in 'proper Italian'. It is quite common to use the British-born son or daughter as a 'go-between' in this type of formal interaction, due to their level of literacy and ability to speak English. This is still a common feature of the interaction between any Italian bureaucratic institution, such as the Italian Consulate in London, the assumption being here that the level of English spoken by the Italian bureaucrat will be of a higher level than the first-generation Italian community member, which is not always the case!

those being interviewed.⁴⁹ Often there was evidence of minimal literacy, and illiteracy was a common experience.⁵⁰ This impacted on the range of vocabulary used by both those interviewed and the interviewer. My own level of Sicilian vocabulary is limited to that which was spoken to (and by) my own parents and family.⁵¹ Since Sicilian is a spoken language and no longer a written one, this too further complicated the interviewing process when I was speaking to Sicilians (quite apart from the fact that the regional Sicilian variations of dialects are complex in their differences). Although this is a small point, I was sometimes frustrated by the linguistic models I was forced to adopt; for example, I would ordinarily wish to utilise Italian vocabulary but could not find the appropriate parallel word in Sicilian dialect because it did not exist or would be inappropriate for the interview.

Cultural historians are forever both present and absent in the words that they write. Much in the same way that Norman Lewis, whilst talking about a small town in Sicily, states that 'there is no place in the world that reeks more strongly of the remote past than this',⁵² it is already apparent to me that the ethnographic aspect of the research cited here was formed, in part, by an era that is now very much disappearing. As the writer herself moves further away from the experience that helped to formulate both the

49 I was often in the ambivalent position of using regional Italian expressions, which I would not usually use, in order to make myself understood. Speaking 'proper Italian' was sometimes experienced as being quite alienating by those being interviewed, so I would be quite fluid in my mode of address and speech patterns. Obviously, this is where knowing the interviewees beforehand was useful, as I was pre-prepared.

50 Of the thirty-two first-generation Italians interviewed, seventeen were illiterate, with the remainder of the interviewees having left formal education by the time they were 14 years of age.

51 This is my first language and the one spoken at home during my childhood and currently with my parents. Although understood by most modern Italians in Italy, regional dialect is no longer spoken, since it is the language of the past. The evolutionary process of language is such that Italians from the same generation as those I interviewed spoke a level of *correct Italian*. The first-generation interviewees spoke exclusively in their own regional dialects, thus keeping alive a linguistic model which is particular to the diasporic community.

52 Norman Lewis, *In Sicily* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 73.

ethnographic and historical aspects of this research, the book should not serve simply as a form of nostalgia (although accusations of sentimentality are easily levelled at those that exist between two worlds), but as an investigative tool. In this context, it is intended that this body of work will help to provide an historical insight into a previously invisible and unrecorded experience. With an overarching aim to broaden the previously cited existing debates concerning cultural identity and the role and function of cinema spectatorship within this, it is hoped that the subject matter will provide an additional intervention into the more recent works on cultural memory.⁵³

In conclusion, the invisibility of the Italian immigrant experience to Britain on any representational level has always been difficult to counter in relation to the mediated construct of Italian-Americans. Italian-American identity is universally linked to criminality and the mafia-gangster movie genre in particular. Importantly, the Italian-American identity construct is quite unlike the Italian-born identity construct, and the two identities rarely converge in ways that sit comfortably with one another: '*To me the Italians that came here (to Britain) after the war have lived the life of Neo-Realism and still hold on to this experience. Their ideas of Italy are very stuck in time and are not true of my lived reality. Their experience is completely alien to me and I cannot identify with it on any level.*'⁵⁴ The Sicilian-born Frank Capra reluctantly returned to visit his hometown during middle age, and only once he had become a successful director in America.⁵⁵ It was to be the later grouping of second- and third-generation Italian directors such as Scorsese and Coppola (amongst others) who would go on to utilise their cultural heritage as the emotional centre of their narratives.⁵⁶ Equally, the British-Italian experience is quite unlike the experience of the Italian-American,

53 See Susannah Radstone, ed., *Memory and Methodology* (Berg, 2000), as well as journals such as *Memory Studies* (Sage Publications, 2008–).

54 B.

55 See his autobiography, *The Name Above The Title* (Da Capo Press, 1987).

56 Both directors utilise the autobiographical, their own families, Italian immigrant stories, etc. in their work – in films such as Coppola's collaboration with Mario Puzo in *The Godfather* (parts 1 and 2, 1972 and 1974) and Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990).

and also unlike the recent wave of middle-class, educated migrant Italians who have chosen to come to Britain during the last two decades. Once again, these two types of experiences are impossible to reconcile and have few points of connection. The continuum of lived experience that did not include the trauma of forced emigration allows for a different sense of self as an Italian in Britain in the contemporary era.⁵⁷ It is not uncommon for the more recent Italian immigrant to Britain to have very little understanding of the 1950s migrant Italian identity:

*If ever I go into one of those old Italian cafes in the East End (of London), it feels like I'm in an Italian Neo-Realist film. The sadness, the familial tensions, with children who so obviously don't want to really be working in the family business with their parents. The suffering is felt in every cup of tea they pour and you know that they have felt like this since they arrived in England in the 1950s. Their complexions are so pale, the poor things, and they never seem to be able to enjoy themselves. This is so different to the Italy that I know.*⁵⁸

The celebratory nature of the Italian-American experience, further propelled through the success of others, including the film director Tarantino and entertainers such as Lady Gaga, is still impossible to imagine within a British context.⁵⁹ The romanticism and nostalgia prevalent in the mediated construction which is understood to be Italian-American is noticeably absent when attempting to draw a parallel between this mediation and that of the British-Italian. Apart from the few mediated stereotypes perpetuated in the contemporary British media, the immigrant Italian presence in Britain still remains largely invisible.⁶⁰

57 Sara Marino is an Italian-born, London-based researcher who is currently working on contemporary Italian migrants to Britain and their relationship to new media.

58 AU.

59 Tarantino's (absent) father is Italian-American and his mother is part Irish and part Cherokee. Tarantino has said that he has no interest in meeting his biological father, Tony Tarantino. For an examination of 'Little Q', see *Quentin Tarantino: The Man and The Movies* by Jami Bernard (London: Harper Collins, 1995).

60 The 2003 advertising campaign for the Italian airline Alitalia asks the rhetorical question of whether the viewer would want to go out with an Italian. This typography, which formulates this question, is presented next to the photograph of an archetypal