Hospitality as Emergency Response

Outside the migrant reception center in Campobasso, there was a sense of anticipation. It was dark out, the June heat finally relenting a bit, and staff and residents stood on the patio of this repurposed hotel in the city's periphery, waiting for the buses—two buses, to be precise, transporting just over one hundred people who had disembarked five hundred kilometers away in the Calabrian coastal city of Crotone. Following their identification and initial processing by border officials, these asylum seekers were now being brought to live in the Molise region while awaiting a decision on their claims for protection. Staff from several area reception centers told me they had spent the afternoon figuring out room arrangements based on each center's available beds and which structures could accommodate families, women, or unaccompanied minors. Now they waited, eager to get everyone sorted. Current residents waited outside, too, hoping to see someone from their country among the new arrivals.

Having the buses arrive after dark was intentional: less visible, fewer local witnesses. In 2017, buses bringing newcomers to town weren't an anomaly, a fact that continued to alarm locals. Arrivals by sea remained high. While other major arrival countries like Greece built large camps on islands and remote areas, starting in 2014 Italy had instead opted to "distribute" migrants (the official word) throughout the country utilizing a new kind of structure for "extraordinary reception," abbreviated in Italian as CAS (*Centro di accoglienza straordinaria*).[1] Newcomers thus entered a reception system transformed through emergency response approaches to migration, including these structures. Intended to house asylum seekers temporarily, for two to three months, CAS instead became a main accommodation, at times housing more than 80 percent of asylum seekers, often for two

years or more.[2] This meant that several of the people I interviewed in 2017 were still at the CAS when I returned the following year—waiting. In Molise, a region on the southeastern side of Italy's boot, CAS like this one remained at capacity, and new centers regularly opened. What was often framed in national media as an *emergenza immigrazione* at the nation's external borders had become the subject of everyday local concern and fraught debate. Meanwhile, these "extraordinary" structures became the norm.

That June evening, the buses were an hour or so late, and while the passengers might not have known the schedule or destination, surely they felt the hours. More than six hours in the bus from Crotone—after traversing the Sahara, after fleeing Libya, after crossing the sea, after being fingerprinted and filing their request for asylum in Italy. Men, women, and children stepped off the bus slowly, each person wearing flip flops they'd received upon disembarkation and carrying a plastic bag containing a plastic water bottle and whatever few belongings had survived the journey with them. They filed into the building, into a large room where they sat in rows of chairs while waiting to be summoned. One by one, as staff called out countries, people rose and walked to the front, where they were paired with the CAS where they would reside throughout the asylum process. It was the end of a long day and an even longer voyage. For these newcomers it was also, in one sense, just the beginning.

Italy's reception system is framed by the language of hospitality. The Italian word for reception, *accoglienza*, means both welcoming and hospitality. *Accogliere* is to welcome, to receive a guest. In the context of immigration, *accoglienza* refers to the system of migrant reception established throughout the country, indicating both official, bureaucratic reception procedures and the structures themselves: *centri di accoglienza* (reception centers). In addition, *accoglienza* also refers to the formal and informal practices of hospitality and welcoming that take place alongside official processes, from activities organized with local communities, to certificate programs that prepare migrants for future employment, to conversations that help newcomers orient to the reception center or city. These multiple meanings blur structures, systems, and social practices, creating ambiguity that feeds the emergency apparatus, which thrives on confusion.

As a site of emergency, Italy's reception system is a site of contested witnessing. Testimony is a crucial part of accoglienza: in witnessing acts that transpire within reception centers, and in broader terms because an individual's testimony at their *commissione* (asylum hearing) itself looms over the reception period, effectively a testimonial transaction stretched across time until officials issue a decision on the person's claim. Potential witnessing between newcomers and local communities also shapes these realities: the centers on which I focus here (CAS) are not meant to be widely witnessed by publics, yet they are ubiquitous, present in every Italian region and virtually every city. Developed as temporary holding spaces,

not permanent structures, for many locals the CAS are just as visible as they are unknowable.

This chapter argues that Italy's reception system is a key site of emergency where the limits of witnessing reveal *paradoxes of proximity* that hold migrants in limbo and shape life in these emergency structures. I identify and elaborate these paradoxes as a way of describing migrants' positions in relation to Italian communities and institutions, and to their own stories. In doing so, I reframe accoglienza as an emergency response strategy that establishes the expectation that asylum seekers should prepare for life in Italy yet holds them at the legal, social, and geographical margins of Italian society. Purportedly concerned with welcoming and hospitality, accoglienza reifies difference. Through testimony as method, including interviews I conducted with center residents and observations of Italian language classes in CAS, I describe how "hospitality" as an emergency response strategy perpetuates migrant precarity. I show how practices of witnessing within accoglienza reveal the paradoxical logics at the heart of the emergency apparatus. By recognizing reception structures as themselves a product of the decades-long public and political framing of migrants in emergency terms, this chapter redefines reception not as a space or process for "welcoming" newcomers but as a site where foreignness is constantly being negotiated.

Reception centers and related spaces of detention and deportation are key sites of emergency throughout the global north, reflecting emergency imaginaries of foreignness as a structuring mechanism of border and migration governance. These logics cross political administrations, though they are also exacerbated by political shifts. In Italy, their paradoxical operations within the emergency apparatus were especially salient in CAS in 2017–2019, during key shifts in migratory and political trends. CAS operated at or over capacity despite fluctuating sea crossings; right-wing leaders rose to power on anti-immigrant platforms; and anti-Black racism gained political legitimacy through exclusionary policies, including as Italian border management shifted from facilitating rescue to blocking arrivals from Africa—trends that have continued.

I am driven to look at paradoxes of proximity by comments made in interviews with people who articulated a particular challenge in their experiences in the Italian reception system: that they do not feel welcome and yet are expected to "integrate." In other words, they confront the impossibility of genuine accoglienza. They navigate *conditional* welcome, or what Derrida calls "hostipitality," blending hospitality and hostility to suggest that, for "hosts" to maintain their sovereign role in the home (or in a country), any welcoming of guests (foreigners) is necessarily conditional, or selective.[3] In the context of migrant reception, encounters between migrants and locals, whether actual or anticipated, embody the conditional welcome in stark ways: these encounters are almost inevitably "strange encounters," to use Sara Ahmed's term, or meetings that affirm the migrant as an outsider.[4] For many reception center residents, marginalization and racialization are salient,

everyday aspects of accoglienza.[5] Pervasive crisis and emergency framings of migration amplify a dissonance between the concerns of the Italian public at large, which generally expects the government to handle and process arriving migrants with minimal disruption to daily life, and the possibilities available to recently arrived migrants, who look to establish lives in Italy or other European countries yet are held in an ongoing state of transit, or nonarrival.[6] Likewise, scholarship on integration often glosses the role that the reception period itself plays in shaping relations between migrants and locals, and in perpetuating emergency imaginaries of migration.

Like the films, writings, and other cultural texts I discuss throughout this book, the oral histories produced through my interviews with asylum seekers offer a critical and underrepresented perspective on how "emergency" affects people's lives. These testimonies in and of transit "mediat[e] between personal memory and the social world" in contexts of extreme uncertainty.[7] Here I first offer an overview of Italy's emergency-response approach to reception, and of the Campobasso context. I then describe life in the CAS via the limits of witnessing, turning to a series of testimonies by asylum seekers. I close the chapter by reflecting on how reception relies on problematic ideas of integration. While I use "migrant" as an umbrella term to avoid legal status connotations, it is important to recognize that the stories I share in this chapter come from people who were seeking asylum at the time.

ITALY'S EMERGENCY-RESPONSE RECEPTION SYSTEM

Some people enter Italy with refugee status; others avoid registering in the country in hopes of seeking asylum elsewhere; still others are funneled immediately into deportation centers (CIE or CPR; see table 3, appendix), despite that this violates the right to claim asylum. But most people who arrive by sea claim asylum upon entry, testifying in written or oral form to their need for protection, and entering the formal reception system. There they await the commissione, where they present their claims about their fear of violence or persecution in their country of origin and their need for asylum or another form of humanitarian protection. Then they wait for officials' assessment of their claim or to appeal a rejection.

EU member states govern migration both collectively, through EU-level policies and international agreements, and also at a national level, especially when it comes to reception. Broadly speaking, Italy's reception system operates through two scopes. In *prima accoglienza*, or primary reception, migrants are identified, fingerprinted, and registered, and their applications for asylum or other forms of humanitarian protection are filed. *Seconda accoglienza*, or secondary reception, initiates integration processes through extended stays in centers where staff support legal and cultural aspects of integration into life in Italy (table 3, appendix).[8] Both prima and seconda accoglienza occur in government-funded centers

throughout the country, with locally hired staff responsible for providing room and board and ensuring that residents can access legal and medical aid.[9] This system was nationalized in 2002 through the Bossi-Fini Law and implemented during yet another state of emergency for immigration declared that year. It has been regularly adapted since, including multiple changes since 2014. For migrants, this means navigating a system in flux.

While the paradoxes and limits of reception are significant, I want to underscore that the accoglienza system represents a range of experiences. Forms of seconda accoglienza like the SPRAR (*Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati*, or System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), and its subsequent iterations SIPROIMI (*Sistema di protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e per minori stranieri non accompagnati*, or System of Protection for Beneficiaries of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors) and SAI (*Sistema di accoglienza e integrazione*, or Reception and Integration System) sometimes utilize local apartments to house their residents, offering more independence via apartment housing alongside Italian neighbors and support in transitioning to independent living. Despite their establishment via the controversial and otherwise restrictive Bossi-Fini Law, the SPRAR was celebrated as a promising model. In some small towns, SPRAR made a significant difference in the local economy, employing young people who would otherwise have left for larger cities. Locals I spoke with in towns in Molise and Calabria often commented that having a SPRAR meant that schools reopened, thanks to the presence of young Italian and foreign parents.

At a SPRAR I visited in the Calabrian village of Acquaformosa, tucked into the slopes of the mountainous Pollino National Park, locals celebrated accoglienza practices as part of a long tradition. This town and several neighboring villages were founded by Albanian migrants some five hundred years ago, a heritage story that remains vivid in the town's celebrations and traditional costume, as well as in the Arbëresche language spoken by many locals. At the pizzeria where I had dinner with my Italian bed and breakfast hosts, a local family originally from Nigeria dined at the next table and caught up with my hosts after we ordered. This scene should not have struck me as anything but normal, but it gave me pause because it was, in my experience, quite rare. In town, I met migrant parents who had come through the SPRAR, learned Italian, and now left their kids with *le nonne* (grandmothers), older Italian women who looked after the children while their parents went to sell wares in nearby Cosenza or work in the SPRAR offices. A young man who had crossed from Libya spoke with me about his experience living in the local center for unaccompanied minors, obtaining papers, turning eighteen, and being hired as a cultural mediator. SPRAR staff foregrounded the village's immigrant founding as shaping their commitment to helping newcomers integrate into Italian life while holding onto their own cultural traditions.

Of course, Acquaformosa is no paradise: it is a relatively remote village in one of Italy's poorest regions, and many migrants move elsewhere to find work once

they obtain their documents. Racism and resentment live alongside experiences of harmony. Reception staff feel the pressures of constant "crisis" invocations. As Isabella, a social worker there, told me, "You can't talk for years about emergency."[10] Still, as I encountered it, the town was, in general, committed to remaining a positive example of reception, and to a large extent, what I witnessed in this mountain village is the way migrant reception in Italy is supposed to work.

Most migrants arriving after 2014, however, would never see a SPRAR but would remain in a CAS, which functions somewhere between prima and seconda accoglienza, and which many migrants refer to not as a centro di accoglienza, but simply as *il campo*. Calling the CAS a camp reflects migrants' understanding of accoglienza as part of a longer trajectory, linking their time in official and unofficial camps in Africa and in Libyan detention centers with their experience of European reception. It also links these official centers to the informal settlements I discuss in the next chapter, and to the official and unofficial reception spaces that opened throughout Europe in response to increased arrivals in the last decade. As emergency structures, and as *campi*, the CAS perform what Shahram Khosravi has described as the "spatial stretching of waiting," postponing arrival itself through an undefined limbo.[11] While they ostensibly enable people to initiate processes of "integration" into Italian society, residents' deportability—the possibility of being denied protection and sent away or left undocumented—imbues the space with collective and very personally felt anxiety.

The CAS was itself a revision of past forms that, together, show how Italian reception has developed in relation to the country's role as a gatekeeper for Fortress Europe, and has long functioned through emergency logics. While a limited number of "assistance centers" existed in the 1970s and 1980s, the government established reception procedures and centers in the early 1990s as the country received people fleeing conflicts and turmoil in Albania, the Balkans, and Somalia.[12] What were initially labeled *interventi straordinari* (extraordinary interventions) became established modes of housing, processing, and responding to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. Reception structures have been consistently funded and regulated under declarations and repeated extensions of a *stato di emergenza immigrazione*, and it is no surprise that they differentiate and marginalize those seeking protection and legal residency. While it can support people's adjustment to life in Italy, accoglienza is inextricable from emergency as a primary strategy through which the Italian government manages migration from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Emergency modifications and the regular revamping of Italy's accoglienza system also affect relations between migrants and local communities and point to how the emergency apparatus reinvents forms of control without laying groundwork for longer-term community well-being. During the period of my fieldwork, while locals managed both CAS and SPRAR, the SPRAR sites were opened at the request of the local community, with local cooperatives proposing a budget and applying for government funds to run these programs. Instead, opening a CAS was

a top-down decision, determined at a national level and (through 2018) based on a formula designed to balance the ratio of locals to migrants throughout the country, and funded with a nation-wide budget based on €35 per migrant, per day, representing all operating expenses and including €2.50 in daily "pocket money" per migrant.[13] Following state requirements, the local prefect would solicit applications for a team that would provide the site and staff the center, which often meant that local property owners collaborated with cultural organizations on proposals.[14]

At the CAS, extreme uncertainty about the future is metered out in the mundane routine of each day: meals, class, a trip to the store to recharge a cell phone or send money home. In standard set-ups, residents can choose to join daily Italian lessons; they have access to three basic meals per day, offered at set times; and they are free to come and go as they please, so long as they sign in each day in person. It is nearly impossible for migrants to obtain legal employment while awaiting documents, and reception includes a significant amount of downtime, which residents at the Campobasso CAS spent largely in their shared rooms, watching films or football matches or chatting with friends and family back home. In the city center, they might be accused of loitering, presumed to be begging, or, at a minimum, viewed with suspicion. As the site in which migrants confronted so many unknowns, the CAS fostered a mood of collective boredom and anxiety.

Formal, or official, reception embodies the paradoxical relationship between local and foreigner, host and guest, hospitality and hostility, welcome and control. This is a particularly vexed limbo for those housed in CAS. Salvatore, a CAS director in Campobasso, explained to me that when a migrant arrives to a SPRAR (or other seconda accoglienza), they sign a contract with management that stipulates the planned length of stay and outlines the requirements to which they must adhere—for example, attending language classes:

> In the SPRAR, the reception contract has a start date and an end date. At the CAS we can only write the start date, because we don't know the end date. . . . If you send me a migrant and you have me put only the start date, but I don't know when the person will leave the CAS, you give me no possibilities to use, so to speak, reward and punishment.[15]

In other words, there are no incentives, no ways to plan an individual trajectory, and no sense of consequences, positive or negative. Instead, time in the CAS is left undefined and, with few exceptions, unaccounted for.

PARADOXES OF PROXIMITY IN CAMPOBASSO

From 2014 to 2019, most asylum seekers in the city of Campobasso were housed in CAS located in the *zona industriale* (industrial zone), just over three kilometers from the center of town (figure 7). While the city center is filled with parks, shops, and pedestrian-only areas, the industrial zone is home to a pasta factory, warehouses, corporate offices, a small shopping mall, and a multiplex

FIGURE 7. Campobasso industrial zone, near RAI offices and multilplex cinema, 2017. Photo by the author.

cinema, and is navigable via wide roads and parking lots. Living on the edge of town with restricted options for legal work, migrants' interactions with campobassani are limited. These realities became more apparent to me through interviews with CAS residents, and as I myself witnessed the frictions or the absence of such interactions.

One afternoon, on a walk I took in the city center with Sulayman, from Guinea, and Bakary, from Côte d'Ivoire (pseudonyms), both of whom were living at a CAS in the zona industriale, the men recounted multiple incidents that had made them feel generally unwelcome in Campobasso, despite their efforts to learn the language and meet locals. In fact, we held many of these interviews in Italian, as many migrants had lived in the country long enough to feel comfortable describing their experiences in the language. They expressed a sense that CAS staff are an exception; other Italians did not like foreigners and did not want Africans in the city. When Bakary went to ask for a job at a local shop, he was told, "Vai nel tuo paese!" *Go back to your country!* They said that if only migrants were waiting at the bus stop, the bus driver often passed on by. They recounted a range of incidents, from microaggressions to overt hostility.

At a certain point, Sulayman said, essentially, look, they see us as foreigners, and they see the presence of foreigners as a problem. So we try to get closer to them and to their culture, but they refuse us. I asked him to say more: "Dite che vi trattano cosí male, ma dite anche che ci volete rimanere." *How is it that if you get treated badly, you want to stay here?* And Sulayman responded, "Ma mi hanno anche salvato la vita." *But they also saved my life.*

He was describing a kind of *proximal distance* that both links and separates migrants and local communities, fostering a nearness without extended interaction and without mutual belonging. In this case, it facilitates not integration but racialization and the reification of the migrant as stranger, including through the presumption that Black subjects in the city center are out of place. When migrants are associated with crisis, terrorism, and fear of drastic cultural change, that recognition produces "the migrant" as a fetishized figure, an abstraction onto which desires and fears are projected. As Ahmed explains, "the stranger only comes to be recognised as such by coming *too close* to home."[16] The figure of the stranger is, for Baldwin, produced through the "luxury" of such projection, a kind of white or colonial seeing that merely reinforces dominant racial logics.[17] In turn, there is violence in expecting people to integrate into a society that continues to exclude nonwhite subjects. "You are asking me to be an accomplice to my own murder," Baldwin says about the idea that Black Americans should be "integrated" into US society.[18] In Italy, the dynamics of proximal distance differ between cities with larger diasporic communities and small-to-mid-size towns, but in general, the rapid expansion of emergency structures in response to "crisis" segregated populations and perpetuated the racist presumption that Black Africans are undeserving economic migrants. In this culture of suspicion, those awaiting protection—who may or may not want to stay in Italy—are then expected to integrate, to live Italian lives.[19]

The culture of suspicion regarding migrants and the limited interactions around which it grew were palpable upon my own first encounters with asylum seekers in Campobasso. For me, since I first visited the city in 2005, it has always been the place where my in-laws live and where my partner grew up. Campobasso is the small regional capital of Molise, which has a largely agricultural economy built through a long tradition of small farms. It is a region rich in culinary and musical traditions, with three principal cities: Isernia and Campobasso, the two provincial capitals, and Termoli on the Adriatic coast. Joined with neighboring Abruzzo until the two regions were split in 1970, it is now Italy's second smallest region and among its poorest.[20] Like other southern regions, Molise saw postwar out-migration to northern Italy and abroad. Several local towns have monuments to the emigrant—the one who left. My partner and many of his childhood friends, too, have left. In recent years, as younger generations have moved elsewhere to study or find work, Molise's numerous mountain villages have become home to aging populations; community life there often centers around holiday festivals that draw home those who have moved away. And so Molise is, in one sense, a place all too familiar with departures.

Immigration into the region did not begin in 2014: Campobasso has been home to a small Chinese community since the early 2000s, and a Romani community has lived for decades in a neighborhood west of the old city center. Molise has been a destination for Albanian and Romanian immigrants who have worked in

domestic care or construction since the 1990s. Yet until 2014, immigration there was only sporadically addressed by media and politicians. When national authorities began bussing hundreds of migrants into Molise's main cities in 2014, the difference was of both scale and spectacle. Discourses of a migration crisis or a Mediterranean emergency no longer only referred to Greek islands, Sicilian coasts, or politics in Rome but suddenly seemed to describe situations in Molise as well.

This scenario may sound familiar to readers elsewhere, including in the United States where, in recent years, hotels housing asylum seekers have become an increasingly familiar sight. These situations are, however, notably distinct in ways that reflect how the politicization of migration management is tied to dynamics of (in)visibility. In the United States, this emergency response tactic is not a nationwide plan but a political stunt initiated in 2022 as Republican governors in southern border states began bussing migrants to "liberal" states like New York and Massachusetts. While in places like Molise, arrivals were arranged to be noticed as little as possible, in the United States, transporting migrants across state lines is intended to be hypervisible.[21] Still, in both cases, migrants themselves have little to no say in their actual destination.

As is common, emergency migrant reception structures in Molise largely occupy repurposed buildings, in particular former hotels. Like other small and family-owned businesses, hotels in rural and more remote areas of the country have struggled to survive given the rise of remote work and online commerce and following the 2008 global financial crisis. As Campobasso-based cultural mediator Concetta Fornaro explained to me, these shifts meant that hotels outside major cities no longer saw the traffic of traveling businesspeople. The government call for CAS appeared as an opportunity: staying open or reopening for migrant reception let hotel owners retain their property and allowed many employees to retain their positions. As local *prefetture* (judicial districts) solicited proposals, teams applying to open a CAS needed to prove that they could use government funds to support a certain number of staff and beds (given a predetermined ratio of staff to migrants) and connect migrants with legal and health-related services. While some management teams came to CAS work out of interest and experience, in general, staff were not trained in migration, displacement, or trauma-related care (this is still the case). Spaces were transformed into dormitory-like facilities, despite rumors circulating among right-wing groups that migrants were being put up in four-star hotels with VIP treatment. With minor remodeling and new collaborations, the transition could happen relatively quickly.

In the first such transformation in Campobasso, a former three-star hotel whose restaurant had, until recently, hosted birthday parties and formal events, was made to accommodate just over one hundred asylum seekers at a time in shared rooms. It was regularly at capacity, and by 2018, management had opened an additional five structures, including in a former gym and a former office space, all in the zona industriale. These peripheral locations positioned CAS residents in proximal

distance with locals, a fact that might have mattered less had CAS remained sites of rapid transition, quickly sending people on to SPRAR.

In Campobasso, locals would tell you that reaching the industrial zone requires a car, maybe a bus ride. Virtually the only people regularly walking the route between there and the city center are migrants, most of them young Black men. The physical locations of the CAS thus position migrants to be seen as walking through spaces where locals avoid going by foot, meeting stereotypes of migrants as wandering aimlessly or as likely up to no good. For many locals, the CAS are a rupture of the local map, disturbing "the purified space of the community [and] the purified life of the good citizen."[22] For Bakary, Sulayman, and others I spoke with at the daily Italian language classes, their paradoxical proximity to the local community contributed to their anxiety. They felt they were stagnating in this campo.

In recorded interviews, while they addressed their frustration with the waiting period, most of the residents I talked with spoke positively about their experiences in reception and their interactions with locals. Things are generally okay, they said, though they wished it were easier to speak with Italians. Outside of recorded interviews, more concerns rose to the surface: they wanted to get to know the locals, but when they approached people in Italian, locals responded in English. When migrants spoke in English, locals responded in Italian, a move the migrants read as intentionally marking their outsiderness. They felt excluded and observed with suspicion, as if existing outside of "national time."[23]

Rather than marginal spaces or the aftermath of "border crises," the CAS are part of a long history of "black spaces of social control and institutionalized violence"[24] and are critical to the production of unknowable strangers and of "Europe." As migration shapes Europe politically, socially, and demographically, newcomers' experiences of limbo necessarily influence how they later make their way within Italy or elsewhere, with implications for future generations. Yet dependence works both ways: citizens depend on foreigners to define their collective bodies.[25] Emergency discourses heighten this dependence as they underscore homogenized notions of national identity and foreign "otherness." In practical terms, too, communities come to depend on the presence of migrants and on continued arrivals. A CAS for one hundred migrants might employ six to fifteen locals, from administrators to cooks. In town, cell phone vendors and Western Union outlets count migrants among their regular customers. Their fate also comes to depend on the politics of emergency.

CAS test the limits of witnessing, on the one hand by making it difficult to have genuine interactions with locals, and on the other hand by prompting some migrants to try to remain invisible—nearly unwitnessable, unengageable. Partly because of their peripheral location, some migrants rarely leave the CAS and so are hardly seen at all outside the campo. This seemed to be the case for

FIGURE 8. Strollers for communal use at a CAS (Centro di accoglienza straordinaria, or Center for Extraordinary Reception), Molise, 2017. Photo by the author.

women in particular, pointing to gender as a significant factor not only in asylum proceedings[26] but also in reception (figure 8). Women, who comprise a minority of asylum seekers in Italy, navigate a set of invisible obstacles, in and outside of reception centers, related to gendered stereotypes.[27] While Bakary and Sulayman were often assumed to be economic migrants (despite their asylum seeker status), women like Samanta (pseudonym), a Nigerian woman I met in 2018, were treated as either victims or criminals in connection with sex trafficking and sex work.[28] Pregnant when we met, Samanta preferred to stay in her room rather than attend language lessons or hang out in common spaces. When she did venture to the city center, she told me, she only visited a municipal park:

> *Samanta:* If I leave [the CAS] . . . I'm playing in the *villa comunale*. You know the garden? . . . I would just sit down there, be looking at those Italian children playing. After that I will leave there, I'll come back [to the reception center]. . . . I don't know any place other than that.

Samanta, like other Nigerian women I spoke with there, took refuge in invisibility, spending time in communal CAS spaces and outside the CAS only occasionally, to protect her reputation. Their choice to be less seen reflects, on the one hand, the right to opacity (via Glissant). On the other hand, it speaks to invisibility as a kind of "social erasure . . . that shapes the contours of social imagination and relegates the newcomer to the margins."[29] Despite these challenges, beginning in fall 2017, many CAS residents, including several women, undertook the commute from the zona industriale to the city center more regularly to attend courses offered by a local school for adult education.

Invisibility emerges in other forms as well. For those who don't live or work in the CAS, accoglienza remains obscured from view in ways that make global, national, and even local Italian publics only ever partial witnesses to the realities

of hospitality as emergency response. This is exacerbated by a lack of available data. As CAS operators confirmed to me, official records list the number of open CAS and SPRAR, but it's virtually impossible to track how individual migrants move between centers, or to know the average wait for an asylum decision, average length of stay in a CAS or SPRAR, or staffing information for acco-glienza structures. An example of what Ulrike Krause terms "nonknowledge," this set of unknowns renders it difficult to address uncertainties yet "still facili-tates the governance of refugees" and others on the move.[30] This vagueness is a strategic facet of the emergency apparatus. It limits what the public can know or understand about the reception of migrants and the heterogeneity of migrant experiences, implicitly restricting what forms of witnessing are possible, and limiting available narratives of reception to those circulated in media and political discourse.

RECKONING WITH TEMPORALITIES IN THE CAS

Caught up in these paradoxes are questions of temporality, both the undefined limbo of reception itself and the ways a person's past becomes present during that limbo. After all, reception is marked by extreme uncertainty, but it is not empty time. So much happens between the filing of the claim and official status deter-mination: people come and go. Laws change. Other asylum seekers are granted or denied protection. Short-term jobs appear and disappear. Public opinion on immigration shifts. Connections at home, memories of the voyage, and desires for the future all shape how a person experiences reception and the decisions they make while waiting. Rather than a strictly legal limbo, or simply an in-between time, reception is a space in which people's "'capacity to act' is differentially and relationally shaped."[31]

Reception exemplifies the impossibility of inscribing migration within clear temporal markers, and waiting as, paradoxically, a key element of the urgency of "crisis."[32] In its aims to support migrant integration, accoglienza appears forward looking, but for many, its enforced waiting suspends normal time and constrains individual agency, holding hostage the chronologies of those in transit. Yet it is also a period of imminent encounter: the asylum hearing could be announced at any moment. The reception of African migrants in Italy also calls attention to what Mbembe describes as the "multiplicity of times" that coexist and interact in postcolonial contexts.[33] The control of migrants' time reproduces the colonial-era control of bodies and subjectivities. As Khosravi says in *Waiting*, the 2020 short film he made with Dagmawi Yimer, one of these temporalities is a constant belatedness that is also racialized:

> We migrants, we refugees, we foreigners, we are always seen as delayed people. We arrive to the right time and it is always too late. We arrive to a pre-existing world of meanings. A world already shaped in which a nonwhite person is not a subject with a

history and agency, but only an object fixed as a category and imagined in a different temporality.[34]

Migrants' own perceptions and refusals of the temporalities imposed upon them during this period offer an important critique of accoglienza itself. The residents I spoke with saw CAS as spaces of frustration that oscillate between practices of accoglienza and of *abbandono*—abandonment, as one person termed the denial of asylum claims. Time is not linear during reception: while this limbo holds asylum seekers in transit months and even years after they disembark on Italian shores, uncertain futures weigh on their waiting, and the past remains present both in the testimonies they give for asylum and as they (may) reflect on their journeys.

Witnessing haunts the limbo of accoglienza. This suspended time can become a constant encounter with the past, and with the self—or an avoidance of such confrontations. Center residents may revisit the narrative they presented upon arrival, or question how an interpreter translated their account into Italian. Or they may avoid thinking about their testimony, not ready to confront the trauma it recalls. I bring up trauma not to fetishize suffering in the campo, but to reflect on how residents exercise agency and navigate limbo despite these amorphous challenges.[35] For many, going over their initial testimony involves actively questioning the protocols, definitions, and parameters of refugee status determination; these processes are, like any autobiographical act, part of "investigations into and processes of self-knowing."[36] Whether vocalized or internal, it is part of what makes this waiting an active time, and it shapes how people situate their past in relation to their possible futures in Europe.[37]

Revisiting their initial testimonies or preparing for the commissione also often means confronting the disconnect between what people know as their most urgent needs and what asylum officials are likely to recognize as a legitimate asylum claim. In oral history interviews, I told people I was interested in hearing about their time in Italy and asked where they would like to begin their stories. Many chose to retell their story of leaving home and eventually (sometimes after years) reaching Italy, and transit through Libya was a common focus. Most of the people I interviewed were men in their twenties who had left West Africa and reached Libya after months of travel. There, many were imprisoned and tortured prior to crossing the sea. They consistently opted to emphasize their time in Libya, often suggesting that those experiences represented their most pressing need for protection.

Aman (pseudonym) had left the Gambia and, like many, gone to Libya looking for work. Threatened and robbed at gunpoint multiple times, he decided to return to his home country.[38]

> *Aman:* To go to work [in Libya] is a big problem. I am kidnapped three times
> in Libya . . . I want to return back to, . . . but because—there's no money.
> There's no money. And the boss, this Arab man, used to give us work—

his name is [X]. His name is [X]. He used to give us work. So this Arab man is the one who helped me. He said to me, [Aman], you want to go back? I say I want to go back, let me go back. And he tells me, no, you cannot go back. The road is not safe. There's many criminals in the way. So I can help you to go to a place where you are safe. But I didn't think about this Europe here because I didn't think about coming here for a fear of water—I didn't want to go on the water. Only one night the commander takes me and says let's go. I say where are we going? He says let's go. And they take me along, they put me on this boat. They take me to Sabratha [a Libyan port city], they take me on this boat.

Eleanor: They wanted you to pay them?

Aman: No, I didn't pay nothing. I was not thinking to come to Europe.

For many in Aman's position, Libya was a turning point—not a step in a plan, but a point at which plans changed. It wasn't easy to find work. They were robbed, held hostage, tortured, or enslaved. Many wanted to leave Libya and return to their home countries but were unable, for safety or financial reasons. Instead, the only way out was a boat.

I am not repeating the details of Aman's torture here, or the ways that captors demanded ransom, held him at gunpoint, or sold him for labor. Accounts like Aman's are well documented, but despite reporting, humanitarian campaigns, exposés, and testimonials by survivors on social media and in news coverage, EU policies have only further restricted people's safe passage.[39] In this telling, I have tried to honor people's stories while also resisting the ways in which my own reporting of these accounts might produce voyeurs rather than witnesses.[40] Know this: people arrive on the northern shores of the Mediterranean bearing physical and emotional scars that are the traces of only some of what they have experienced. For the purposes of this discussion of emergency and witnessing, it is important to understand that these experiences en route are themselves transformative, revealing transit as not simply movement from departure to destination but a series of encounters that (re)shape a person's journey and how they think about the future.

Aman's account of how he ended up on a boat illustrates how asylum seekers' understandings of their own need for protection are not fixed but are shaped by the changing circumstances in which they live and move. However, this fluctuating understanding, inflected with memory, emotion, and uncertainty about the future, may or may not correspond with the criteria asylum officials use in case adjudication. Official status determination focuses on conditions in a person's country of origin. But in telling their journey outside the context of the court, Aman and others foregrounded these experiences in Libya as central. They were frustrated that more attention wasn't being paid to injustices in Libya, and this appeal for more and different witnessing added to the sense of urgency during the accoglienza period.

Aman's description of his arrival in Italy is a statement of extreme fear; he cites fear of water as the very reason it would not have occurred to him to come to Europe. In his account, this fear proves that he did not intend to come to Italy. It also describes his first months following rescue at sea. Aman described his initial time in Italy as fearful and anxious; he said he did not know much about the country and was not certain he was safe:

> I was thinking maybe they will come and sell me, or they will come and do me something, or—you understand. . . . Because in Libya you always see these people with big guns . . . every time problems. Bombs in your area. Many people run away, but because you are migrants you don't know where to go.

He feared that in Italy he would have to confront a repetition of what he endured in Libya. This fear—this reckoning with the past—haunted his time in reception. He stayed mostly in his shared room at the CAS until he realized that, as he put it, "We are where the pope is. When I know that, I know that this is safe. Because as a Christian place, it's not a problem." And he continued talking about Italy as the home of Christians and of the pope, reiterating that he is Muslim but recognizes Christianity as a peaceful religion and Christian spaces as safe spaces. Aman emphasized danger and suggested that because Italy itself did not initially hold specific meanings for him, he didn't trust his surroundings. In telling his story, he positioned himself as someone who now understands the culture of the host country, and notes that this culture will, in turn, protect him.

For asylum judges, the question is, protect him from what? In one sense, accounts like Aman's push back at established criteria for determining asylum cases that adjudicate based on conditions in one's country of origin and the tendency of officials to listen for prescribed narratives of violence and persecution.[41] Incredible pressure falls on the act of witnessing—on official testimony and on other instances of relating the past—because asylum seekers must decide what part of their story, and of their sense of need, will be recognizable to officials.[42]

Migrants' understandings of the past and their hopes for the future are transformed by their experiences in transit. Their stories of flight remind us that crisis narratives often fetishize Europe's external borders as *the* site of migration, a border spectacle that disregards that for many migrants, crossing the sea to Italy was not their plan when they first left home. Having fled violence, conflict, or extreme precarity in one country, they also have to reckon with what happens to them along the way. This, too, is a paradox of proximity: that a person's immediate experiences might shape them profoundly and must be set aside in the context of asylum, where only some of the past matters.[43]

It is paradoxical, too, to be on the move and to have lost control over time, to have arrived in Europe and find oneself constantly at its margins. Amid this uncertainty, to borrow from Ma Vang's discussion of Hmong refugees, the fugi-

tivity of Mediterranean migrants "unsettles the nation-state, democracy, and liberal empire"—including asylum regimes—"as well as knowledge formation."[44] Accounts like Aman's illustrate how the emergency apparatus operates at the level of the individual and of memory, as limbo becomes, potentially, a site of narrative crisis—processing recent trauma, reflecting on one's official testimony, and watching the political climate shift.

DESERVING HOSPITALITY

In the spring of 2018, anxiety was high at the campo. CAS residents told me that, following a period of few asylum decisions, multiple people had learned that their applications had been rejected. For the men I met in Italian classes, this was not only a rejection of their initial claims but of the commitment they had made to integrating: they had followed the rules, taken initiative, even studied extra, perhaps to no avail. The asylum system seemed increasingly arbitrary. They knew that their cases depended on their accounts of persecution in their countries of origin, but they hoped their efforts to integrate might somehow help their claims be decided more quickly, and favorably. They were also concerned by recent national elections that had brought right-wing parties to power promising harsher migration policies.

Forms of witnessing were a regular feature of language classes, held in the CAS cafeteria (figure 9). Introductory language learning often first orients around self-presentation, enabling a person to describe who they are and where they're from. While these exercises were relatively brief, simple, and of course distinct from official asylum testimony, some residents felt the weight of performing their stories repeatedly and chose not to attend; sitting in class brought up past trauma. For others, learning Italian was a practical choice and a way to pass the time. In general, residents were protective of their actual asylum testimonies; while they speculated together on how their cases would go, they told me they rarely discussed the details of their stories with each other. Likewise, oral and written testimonies produced in the context of a class understandably exemplified a selective and often limited sharing before fellow residents, center staff, and privileged visitors like me. These testimonies seemed at times to be as much exercises in hope as in grammar.

Given my presence as a foreigner now fluent in Italian, students often wanted to talk about how I had learned the language. Some wanted to practice English with me, which they recognized as useful across Europe. Louis (pseudonym), a man in his mid-twenties from Mali, asked me to help him write out the story of another reception center he'd lived in, which officials had recently closed. He had been happy in the previous center and was "afraid of not finding other places like that."[45] Louis described reaching the Campobasso CAS and being encouraged by Salvatore, the manager, that he would be okay. He concluded the piece: "And in these few months, I discovered that it was true. The people . . . are kind and helpful,

FIGURE 9. CAS (Centro di accoglienza straordinaria, or Center for Extraordinary Reception) cafeteria where language classes were held, Molise, 2017. Photo by the author.

and I am doing well here. If you try hard, people will help you find your way." He wrote hope onto his own story, reassuring himself, as much as any reader.

In a short writing assignment in Italian, Sulayman referred to conversations with me and with the Italian instructor: "While [Eleanor and I] were talking, Maestro Luca wrote the title of the day's lesson on the board. Then we spoke with Prof. Luca. I told him how my asylum hearing had gone. Then Prof. Luca began to explain the title of the day's lesson."[46] Sulayman chose to record the fact that they discussed his hearing but not what it involved. In fact, he would remain incredibly anxious about that hearing for the coming months, unsure he had been treated fairly.

While produced for the small audience of the language class, autobiographical texts like these constitute another critical witnessing act. They represent a kind of rehearsal, as their authors practice defining themselves in new languages. They also illustrate the work the residents put into learning languages they hope will help them in Europe. Importantly, they are also performances of deservingness, testimonies produced for audiences—teachers, guests like me, perhaps asylum officials—whom these authors see as potential judges of their merits for remaining in Europe outside the bounds of asylum adjudication. In this sense, such texts also testify to what migrants think is expected of them.

The fraught relationship between precarity, protection, and notions of deservingness emerged in another exchange with Sulayman and Bakary.[47] The two men asked to record an interview and insisted on speaking with me away from the

CAS, saying they wanted me to understand what the wait was like for them. Here deservingness arose as both legal and social entitlement, exceeding the bounds of the asylum court.[48] At a café in the city center, they described their deservingness of visas in terms of their desire to stay in Italy and their efforts to "integrate." Sulayman also justified their deservingness in terms of risk: "In Africa it was too difficult and we took the risk of coming here." We spoke in Italian, which both men had made remarkable efforts to master while living at the CAS.

Sulayman and Bakary did not want to discuss their reasons for leaving their home countries with one another (and therefore also not with me there in the café), but they both addressed the difficulty of adjusting to life in the CAS and presenting a case for asylum while finding ways to deal with their past experiences. We spoke about how their stress regarding visas was mixed with other concerns and psychological issues related to their lives before Italy. I asked Bakary, "What strategies do you have for dealing with the anxieties of this waiting period?" "I try to forget what happened," he replied. But with the undefined wait between arrival, hearing, and potential appeal, forgetting is never a real option.

Sulayman said he was upset at how his recent hearing had gone. His case was based on the account he had given a year earlier, shortly after reaching Italy, a narrative he says he "was not yet ready to tell" at the time. Compounding the problem, he said, the interpreter, from a different region and ethnic group, had not sufficiently translated his story.[49] Afterward, feeling helpless, he turned to the CAS staff, who I know held him in high regard. "[I told them] 'This is my life. And my life . . . without you [CAS staff] I don't know what I'd do.' And they made me believe that 'you have to trust them' [CAS staff]." Staff members had reassured Sulayman that "they would do everything possible" for him.[50] He saw these interactions as a promise of empathy and action.

We also spoke at length about both men's efforts to integrate, which they framed as a testament to their sincerity and as a matter of fairness: they frequented the language class at the CAS; other residents did not.

> *Sulayman:* In any case it's a disaster. Because someone who . . . whoever wanted to stay with you all [Italians], you don't have a vision for him. He must leave your territory. Unfortunately, unfortunately . . . it's difficult.
>
> *Eleanor:* You're both saying that you want to remain in Italy.
>
> *Bakary:* Yes, but it's their decision, not mine.

Sulayman addressed Italians as a collective "you." In his remarks about "your territory," he does not distinguish authorities who decide cases from the general public. In the logic of this conflation, a decision in favor of one's claims suggests not simply a legal recognition but acceptance by the population. Denial, on the other hand, is read as broad rejection.

> *Sulayman:* If our friends who arrive in Italy, if it doesn't work out for them, they head out to go to France or Germany. But we've decided to stay here, to be

> here. Because we waited for the commission, we studied their language.
> . . . What's [happening now], it's too dangerous for us, too difficult.
>
> *Eleanor:* You're also attending the CPIA [school for adults].
>
> *Sulayman:* I go to school every day, Monday to Friday.

Both men divided their time between language classes at the CAS and subject courses at the CPIA, where they were earning an Italian middle school diploma. Their roommates teased them: "Why do you go to school? What's the point?" The general perception among center residents was that fewer asylum seekers were being granted protection and more were receiving *negativi*, the word with which they referred to rejected claims. In our interview, in light of the recent set of negativi for fellow residents, Bakary and Sulayman questioned the commitments they had made to studying.

Language courses exemplify how different ideas of deservingness influence the reception period and migrants' anticipation of post-accoglienza life but not necessarily the outcomes of asylum applications.[51] In multiple CAS I visited, staff lamented the low attendance rate in the Italian classes, which were offered six days per week and were frequented by around 10–15 percent of residents. Some of my visits coincided with Ramadan, during which attendance was notably diminished, as people preferred to rest more while fasting. But outside of Ramadan, too, only a minority of residents ever attended. In my experience, migrants were praised for attending and gently teased or reprimanded for skipping (attendance is not required). In Sulayman's view, his commitment to language learning should have counted in the judgment of his case, perhaps offsetting any problems caused by the interpreter of his original testimony. Instead, he worried his time studying rendered his situation more difficult:

> *Sulayman:* When you're in school you can't have the opportunity to arrange things for yourself better.
>
> *Eleanor:* Why? Instead, if you didn't go to school you'd have this opportunity?
>
> *Sulayman:* There are a lot of people who don't come to school, who work. The people who don't come to school have more opportunities and they have power . . . what's the point, anymore? Now when I think about all this, I get very discouraged. I'm more educated, surely. But the life that we live isn't easy.

I imagine it is difficult not to compare behavior and intent, as Sulayman does here. Living in close quarters, with limited contact with locals or communities in diaspora in larger Italian cities, migrants in Campobasso seemed to hang their hopes on the outcomes of fellow residents. One migrant obtaining papers made others optimistic; a rejection augmented collective anxiety.

Was it worth demonstrating other forms of deservingness? While rare, it's true that migrants are sometimes rewarded with legal residency for their expressions of

good character. In May 2018, Mamoudou Gassama, a Malian young man living in France, scaled the exterior of a building to save a child who was dangling from a balcony rail.[52] This nimble feat garnered the attention of both global media, which dubbed Gassama "Spiderman," and of the French government. Although Gassama had entered France without papers, he was rewarded with a job with the Paris Fire Brigade, as well as the possibility of not only legal residency but French citizenship. In Venice a year later, a Malian migrant was granted residency for being "well integrated" despite not meeting the criteria for political asylum. According to an article in *la Repubblica*, the Venetian court determined that he "had proven optimal familiarity with the Italian language and, thanks to this, a capacity to seriously integrate."[53] The judge cited the man's efforts to work in multiple sectors and his participation in an education program. Wide circulation of such stories illustrates how notions of deservingness travel outside the purview of the asylum court and are ushered into public discourse on migration and brought to the awareness of migrants looking toward their own future.

GUESTS OF EMERGENCY

As a set of emergency structures and practices, the accoglienza system is subject to regular scrutiny and manipulation. In recent years, along with the growing criminalization of migration and humanitarian aid, some celebrated reception models have come under threat. In 2018, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini centered the SPRAR in Riace, on Calabria's Ionian coast, in a campaign to criminalize humanitarian assistance and some forms of accoglienza. Riace was widely recognized as having created a reception program that supported both migrants and local communities. Two years earlier, long-time mayor Domenico "Mimmo" Lucano was named one of the "world's greatest leaders" by *Fortune* magazine for his efforts to rebuild the dying village through job training programs for recently arrived migrants, including by training them in the traditional masonry methods—a literal rebuilding.[54] In late 2018, at Salvini's urging, Lucano was put under house arrest, then exiled from Riace, while authorities investigated him on charges of abuses of power and aiding in illegal immigration by arranging "marriages of convenience."[55] Although charges were eventually dismissed, the process effectively dismantled the Riace SPRAR, and in 2019 Lucano lost his mayoral seat to a candidate from Salvini's Lega party. The undoing of the Riace system shows that even model reception sites do not represent "*the* law of hospitality"[56] but remain susceptible to the fluctuations of emergency politics. (And in yet another turn, in 2024 Lucano was elected mayor once again and became an EU parliamentarian.)

While attacks on the Riace model were clearly political, reception is sometimes also a site of corruption. While many centers are run by employees passionate about migrant rights and well-being (I think of the bike repair area that

staff at a Campobasso CAS set up for residents), CAS management teams work as fairly autonomous entities, their day-to-day operations and use of funds largely unchecked by government authorities. As I heard regularly in interviews, teams sometimes run centers with a minimum of staff, offering a minimum of resources. Some CAS management have been cited or arrested for enabling dangerous and unsanitary conditions, including cases like the 2017 situation in Ostuni of "unpotable water, which is causing skin irritations and allergies, [putting migrants] at risk for salmonella infection."[57] In addition, criminal organizations are known to operate in accoglienza to profit from migrants' presence. This corruption, most noted through the Mafia Capitale investigation in Rome, situates accoglienza as one of many systems in "crisis Italy"[58] implemented without a long-term vision and therefore ripe for exploitation and profiteering.

But even when centers operate as planned—and again, many people do make it through accoglienza and obtain protection—still it is not enough to presume integration as an outcome of reception or, more broadly, as a solution to the "problem" of migration. On the one hand, a migrant's possibilities for participating in and shaping life in Italy change radically depending on whether and how the accoglienza system receives them. On the other hand, accoglienza is only the beginning. Whatever adjustments "integration" stands for require public and long-term dialogue on race, racism, citizenship, communities, workplaces, and schools.

Accoglienza racializes migrants not only in cases of dehumanizing neglect[59] but, more generally, in its dependence on the recognition of the stranger. These processes are exacerbated during so-called crises, as Étienne Balibar observed more than three decades ago in his discussion of crisis racism.[60] The terms used to refer to migrants and to reception processes reflect these problematics. I take up the question of labels at the close of this chapter on accoglienza, paradoxes of proximity, and the limits of witnessing because these terms correspond to available narratives about migration. That is, dominant ideas about reception and integration shape what kinds of stories are tellable about how migrants live and adapt to life in Europe—and therefore what kinds of witnessing are possible in mainstream Italian and European contexts.[61]

Within crisis racism, the common framing of migrants as *ospiti* (guests) enables their continued marginalization instead of facilitating their genuine welcome into contexts of belonging or—still harder to imagine—into processes of collective transformation. Guest language fits the notion of reception centers as "welcome centers" (centri di accoglienza), but in many cases, "the space for guests is cold and inhospitable."[62] Italians working in reception have referred to migrants as "ospiti" since reception structures were expanded in the 1990s.[63] This "humanitarian euphemism" suggests that accoglienza is a relationship of generosity on the part of Italian communities and institutions and implies that migrants stay in centers by choice. It's paternalistic, even if well intended, suggesting that migrants

are indebted to Italian benefactors and should be grateful. These terms also mask or disregard migrants' own perspectives. Across CAS, SPRAR, and informal settlements, I never heard asylum seekers refer to themselves as guests. Moreover, their reference to the centers as "campi" suggests that they see centers as more directly linked to refugee camps than to guest hostels.

Just as "guest worker" suggests the temporary nature of a migrant's stay in a "host" country, so, too, does labeling Mediterranean migrants as guests suggest that they will not make Italy their home.[64] "Ospite/guest" normalizes the transient, temporary aspects of a migrant's presence, affirming their strangerness and erasing their agency. On the contrary, as Stephanie Malia Hom observed in a large deportation center in Rome, "*ospiti* believed in the emancipatory potentials of mobility and they acted on those hopes."[65] Other terms, such as the frequently used *ragazzi* (guys, youth), instead infantilize CAS residents, another kind of racializing practice that recalls white savior paradigms. The common humanitarian category of *beneficiari* or beneficiaries, emphasizes a more transactional relationship between migrants and the state or local organizations and aligns migrants with beneficiari in other social welfare contexts.

It is no surprise that a system developed through emergency response conceives the guest/host relationship within the emergency imaginary and its obsession with the present, positing migrants' arrival as a meeting between strangers who do not share a history—as if displacement between Africa and Europe had no connection to European histories, laws, or practices. These connections are evident in the reception system's configuration as a set of imperial formations, inextricably linked with Italy's historical attempts to control the movements of those deemed outside the national body. As Hom has discussed, contemporary reception and detention sites are among the "messy constellations" of structures, practices, and erasures that link past and present. For instance, in serving the state's policing of *some* mobilities, today's deportation centers are "haunting reminders" of colonial-era concentration camps such as those Italy constructed in Libya.[66]

Although integration is a contentious term, European governments use it, SPRAR managers use it, many migration scholars use it, and migrants use it—but with what assumptions about collective identity and belonging?[67] Migration and critical race scholars in the US context have critiqued how discourses of integration reiterate fixed, generally white, notions of the citizen. Common uses of integration imply that migrants should conform to dominant cultural norms. In the United States, notions of people's "unassimilability" were repeatedly used to justify laws that excluded immigrants based on nationality and ethnicity.[68] In Europe, too, integration is often a racialized term, weaponized against forms of racial and religious otherness that do not fit dominant notions of European bodies as white. Yet because of the challenges of naming race/racism as an issue in Europe, the racialization of migrant strangers is disguised as a matter of foreignness or nationality.[69]

As a term, integration indicates available narratives about belonging in Italy. Yet importantly, integration is also something on which migrants themselves insist. Migrants I spoke with also understood integration as a right and as a process that should connect them with each other and with local communities. Rather than a passive process, it's one that migrants were ready to help define.[70] It's also an undertaking some choose to take into their own hands. Given the extreme uncertainties of limbo, the paradoxical expectations of integration, and in some cases given the despicable conditions of reception centers, it is no surprise that some migrants exit the formal system.

CONCLUSION: ACCOGLIENZA AND ABANDONMENT

Although conceived as a system for managing migrants and migration "emergencies," accoglienza often perpetuates limbo and extreme uncertainty: people seeking better lives in Europe have ended up in holding patterns in its southernmost spaces. Asylum seekers depend on local and state authorities for their very survival. Yet so often these are spaces of abandonment—places where Europe's racialized others are left to wait—to waste—and sites overdetermined by people's deportability, that is, sites where someone is always potentially deported and where many are refused legal recognition.

My conversation with Bakary and Sulayman in the city center was prompted by an asylum rejection. Bakary had received a negativo (formally, a *diniego*) at his commission hearing. Although he was still awaiting the official results of his appeal, he had already gotten word of the decision: on the morning of our interview, when he went to the roster where CAS residents sign in each day, next to his name someone had written the word *dimesso*: dismissed. For Bakary, the message was clear: his appeal had been denied and he was to leave the CAS. No formal deportation, no transfer to another center or escort to the border. When you receive the negativo, they said, you have to leave the camp. Bakary said he was devastated and frightened. He said that he could not return to his home country; he wanted to stay in Italy. But now he found himself undocumented and on his own. We discussed how these rejections affect migrant precarity. Without papers, he had few options for securing housing, aid, or work.

As long as Italy's asylum system remains overwhelmed, insufficiently funded, and regularly revamped, migrants will experience the waiting period as one of extreme uncertainty in which they struggle to understand their place within the system and have limited say in how their cases are heard. This is especially complicated at the appeal stage. One point of confusion for Bakary was that he had been in Italy long enough that the relevant laws had changed. When he first arrived, multiple appeals were possible, and migrants attended their appeals. In 2017, the Minniti-Orlando Law restricted the number of possible appeals to one and allowed officials to judge an appeal based on a video recording of the

original interview—no new testimony required. To Bakary, it seemed absurd that his chances for asylum might change so radically while he awaited a decision. He understood the appeal as, essentially, a second opinion on his original case. Despite all efforts and intentions, how did he ever stand a chance?

Bakary's situation was typical of the migrants I spoke with who feared the new stage of precarity that a denial would usher in. They understood the dimesso as an order to disappear into the growing networks of undocumented, unaccounted-for migrants making their way in Italian cities or across the border into France. Bakary's experience speaks to how the treatment of migration as an emergency produces a growing population of undocumented migrants. Asylum courts in Italy have managed increases in migrant arrivals by alternately stalling or accelerating the review of asylum claims. The CAS cannot legally house migrants whose claims have been rejected, but the government does not arrange detention or deportation for everyone in that category, thus expanding a population of illegalized, deportable subjects. Here, as with reception, counts are likely incomplete, but to offer a sense: In 2017, Italian authorities deported 6,514 migrants; an additional 11,805 were issued "leave" papers and told to exit the country.[71] In 2022, authorities ordered 28,185 people to leave the country but only deported 2,790 people.[72] Given slow processing and low deportation rates, the number of people living without papers continues to grow.

For Bakary and Sulayman, the state's production of deportable subjects ruptured their sense of rights and deservingness. When they first described learning about Bakary's rejected appeal, they did not use the word *dimesso*; perhaps they could not remember it exactly. Instead, they said *abbandonato*: abandoned. This was the word Bakary initially recalled having seen written by his name. He understood both that he had to abandon the CAS and that Italy had, through this rejection, abandoned him. *Abbandono* is also the term the Interior Ministry uses to describe when migrants leave a reception structure before completing their formal period of accoglienza. Abandonment, and the "ban" to which it refers, might recall Agamben's notion of the sovereign ban and how it positions refugees outside the body politic—yet this "abandonment" explicitly rejects even the idea of refugee-ness, instead pushing the migrant into unnamed, unrecognized status, where they may well remain within national borders. Recalling Fanon on colonizers' rejection of the self-determination of the colonized, this is exclusion through invisibilization—a way of rejecting newcomers' self-determination.[73]

The rejection of an asylum claim without the possibility of recourse is a legal witnessing limit that enacts necropolitical border regimes through abandonment: a ban on further testimony, and banishment to illegalized status. Rather than exclude migrants from the life of the nation, these processes of abandonment produce an invisibilized labor force critical to Italy's economy. Accoglienza and abbandono are two sides of the same coin.

Shocked and disheartened, Bakary said he knew no one else in Italy and did not know where to go. Left with no real options, he talked about heading north as his only choice. Without papers and without savings or regular income, he hoped to find work that would pay enough for him to maintain himself and, gradually, to build a life in which he could live safely. The day after our interview, he left the CAS.