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Beyond the Ghetto: Marina Caffiero on Italian Jewry

This paper is intended as a first review of the vast intellectual production of Professor Marina Caffiero on the history of Jews in Italy, as well as an affectionate homage to a masterful scholar who is, for the author, a constant source of inspiration, shared reflections, admiration, and a lasting friendship.

Recent historiography is in agreement that the fortunes of the Jewish communities of Italy in their various aspects—demographic, social, economic, cultural, and religious—can be well understood if two conditions are taken into account. First and foremost, that these communities are integrated into the picture of a broader European or, better still, global system of Jewish communities and populations. We now know that the history of the assorted Jewish groups in Italy is often deeply rooted in the history of the Jewish populations of other countries. Second—this is one of the most fruitful indications of Marina Caffiero's works on Italian Jewry—that this history should be analyzed from within the dense web of relationships with the non-Jewish surroundings that enveloped the Italian communities.

A system of exchanges and interactions

We owe Marina Caffiero the deconstruction of the customary historiographical interpretative paradigm, long predominant, that postulates the separation and a substantial impossibility of communication between Jewish communities and the prevailing Christian context. As a result of this rigid vision, the tangible and oppressive reality of inequality and persecution had ended up eclipsing the array of encounters/clashes and of quotidian interactions that were not solely adversarial. The works of Caffiero and her school, grounded in abundant archival sources, have questioned the reductive scheme of impermeable boundaries between the two worlds, especially during the Italian Counter-Reformation.

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A complex system of exchanges and interactions were thus discerned in daily life, among neighbors as well as in cultural matters, thanks to a historiographical revision that rejected the traditional model centered upon the juxtaposition of "us and them" and considered instead the continual oscillation between unfamiliar and familiar that characterizes the relations between two societies and cultures. A system of relations continually negotiated, of reciprocal acquaintances and collaborations, of intertwined stories—but also of misunderstandings, of the construction of stereotypes and of more or less hostile images—emerged[1].

Rather than separation, Marina Caffiero enlightened links that were responsible for creating mutual perceptions and discourses about 'the other', including the negative and denigrating ones, in a game of mirrors which reveals differences—but also the existence of similar mental mechanisms. Even hostile representations, accusations, and strife, fit into this system of exchanges. While showing us a history of Jewish-Christian relations as a history in which ethnic minorities are not disconnected islands, Caffiero's books, articles and essays have focused on the early modern and modern era, when the ghettoes were established and operated. The history of the Jewish minority has been examined from a fresh perspective as a history of institutional, social, and cultural interweaving that cannot be disentangled, with new and unexpected results.

In Italy, at least, the long-standing lack of dialogue between the disciplines of Jewish history and general history had meant that the Jews, who lived encapsulated in Christian societies, have long been invisible on the overall historical level (Caffiero, 2011a; Caffiero, Esposito, 2011; Caffiero, Di Nepi, 2017). Alternately, in Marina's work the cross-pollinating study of the data preserved within administrative, notarial, criminal, and inquisitorial sources, along with that of legal sources and treatises, facilitated fully weaving Jewish history into the comprehensive history of early modern and modern Italy and Europe, and into the greater processes of global transformation, insofar as that history is an integral part and fundamental aspect of phenomena of general interest.

The elucidation of heresy; censorship and the banning of dangerous books; the understanding of witchcraft; the history of emotions and of affective and sexual exchanges; the construction of the "lexicon of prejudice" and of discrimination; the discourse of rights and of citizenship: these are all themes that Caffiero's work has touched upon, and on which Marina has made fundamental contributions.

According to her, a history of the Jews of early modern and modern Italy should preliminarily give an account of the modes of interactions within well-defined geographic and spatial contexts, in a comparative portrait of varied situations and backgrounds. A second key is based on ineluctable mobility—besides the emigration imposed by the diaspora—that marks Jewish life, based on close-knit relationships of kin, solidarity, trust, and of cultural, religious, and "national" commonality, no matter how scattered across the world. Lastly, choices and decisions of such groups will be framed within the mechanisms and relational dynamics of networks, individual and familial as much as collective.

Forcing Baptisms

The advent of the ghetto—understood as an area for marginalizing and segregating Jews, reserved for them alone, required by law, planned as permanent, and isolated by means of a physical barrier whose sole openings were entrances surveilled in daylight hours and sealed in nocturnal hours—takes place in sixteenth century Venice. Nevertheless, it was not in fact the Venetian "invention" that inspired the spread in Italy of the system of ghettoes, which was established several decades after the Venetian prototype. That trail was blazed by the papacy. The popes had not adhered to the Iberian strategy of expelling the Jews with their consequent disappearance from the state's own territories. Papal policy was the fruit of a specific theological position in regard to the Jews, tending to preserve the Jewish presence in its State through many forms of restrictions, limitations, and pressures to convert[2].

In the works of Marina Caffiero, the Italian ghetto appears to further those traditional papal choices, which were of both exclusion and inclusion. Jews would be excluded from Christian society and separated physically from it by walls and large gates closed at night, so that they would not "contaminate" that society; yet they would be part of the city, though enclosed in the ghetto[3]. Thus the solution adopted by the papacy to its Jewish problem did not take the form of expulsion, as had occurred in Spain and Portugal, but that of separation and segregation: among other things, this solution made possible and facilitated the most desired outcome, that is, the conversion of the Jews.

Ghettos were supposed to advance conversion: a solution of compromise that would allow the extraction of economic advantages and financial resources from the Jews, with an eye toward political realism and the practical needs of the Italian states, including that of the Church itself.

Marina Caffiero's research shows that—in order to definitively establish and propagate the ghettos system and the very model of the ghetto itself—the direct intervention of the Church of Rome was essential (Caffiero, 2003; 2021b). Denying the historiographical myth according to which the papacy had frequently been a protector of the Jews in the previous centuries, Caffiero has demonstrated that the papal policy had profoundly changed in the course of the sixteenth century, especially with regards to the anti-Protestant battle that the papacy was embarking upon. In all periods of crisis and great hardship for the Roman Church and for Catholicism, the firm will to elevate defenses and suppress internal dissent has always prompted sharper reactions of exclusion and the persecution of every form of dissidence and difference; with Jews paramount among these. Marina Caffiero shows us this phenomenon in action also in successive critical periods and phases for the history of the Roman Church, as in the era of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; but she points out that the heart of this story is in the sixteenth century. The struggle against reformed "heresy", effected through persecution and death sentences by the Inquisition for dissident Christians, could not be conducted while guarantees continued to be offered to the "deicidal" people, the enemy *par excellence* of Christianity. Vigilance against every form of alterity, and the repression thereof, were thus brought about by the Lutheran rupture of the unity of Christendom—enveloping the Jews as well.

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[1] For a first orientation in Caffiero's methodological work on Jewish history in its intertwining with general history, see Caffiero, 2004; Caffiero, Procaccia, 2008; Caffiero, 2009; 2012; 2014; Caffiero, Lirosi, 2020, Caffiero, 2021a.

[2] Her general works on the history of papacy are numerous: one can begin to approach them from Caffiero, 1996; 1997a; 2005; 2022.

[3] Cases of ghettoes have been explored in Caffiero's works (Caffiero, 2017a; Caffiero, Di Nepi, 2017; Caffiero, 2020a).

The obsession to convert the Jews was tinged with eschatological doctrine and was based essentially on the millenarian and messianic concept related to the waiting for the Second Coming of Christ on earth, and therefore the advent of a thousand years of peace and bliss, which would arrive when the world had been unified under the one faith. In order to hasten this moment of universal liberation and unity, the conversion of the Jewish people was seen as a necessary event, to be encouraged in any way and with any means, for the salvation of those very Jews and of all humanity.

In any case, even apart from any doctrinal knowledge, it was a common and widespread idea even among the lower social strata that bringing about the baptism, and thereby the salvation, of a Jew was a good and meritorious deed. And thus Christian childminders, often in good faith but in contradiction of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas who prohibited baptisms against the parents' will, did not hesitate to summarily baptize a Jewish child when they saw, or believed, that child to be in danger of death. With the child out of danger, the nanny would then declare this fact to the authorities, who would intervene to separate the child from the family. This occurred very often both in the early and late modern period: still in 1858 one of the last such cases took place, the *cause célèbre* of Edgardo Mortara, a child in Bologna who was kidnapped and forcibly removed from his parents and taken to Rome after a Christian servant's declaration that she had secretly baptized him the year before.

One of Marina Caffiero's best-known books, *Forced Baptisms* (2012), taught us that besides such baptisms (which can be defined as "clandestine") there existed other types of coercion. Forced baptisms could result from declarations presented to the authorities by Christians or even by Jews, who asserted under oath to have heard a Jew say he wished to convert; or from the so-called "offerings," that derived from the "right" recognized for converts to "offer" to the new faith and to the Church their wives and children over whom they had parental authority plus even other, more distant relatives. The ecclesiastical authorities always accepted these offerings, reaching the point of recognizing the parental authority of the converted grandfather and grandmother over grandchildren even in the absence of the consent of their living parents. This could occur on the basis of the principle of *favor fidei* (that is to say, "in the interest of the faith"): a canonical principle that was used to resolve every kind of difficulty, e.g., the right of guardianship of minors, on the basis of religious necessity, thus surmounting the obstacles posed by natural law or common law or by canon law itself. It was held that the interests of the Catholic religion coincided with those of the offered Jew, who had now passed under the protection and the direct guardianship of the Church. We now know that such interests prevailed over every type of law and induced the ecclesiastical authorities to circumvent and manipulate legislative precepts and natural rights, such as for example that of the guardianship of mothers, above all in order to take possession of children. This practice was even more oppressive when the woman offered was pregnant and the offer included the unborn child as well.

If children were the principal victims of forced conversions, women were no less victimized. Spouses or daughters often had to follow the will of their husbands or fathers, or had to embrace the faith of a baptized child in order to avoid permanent separations. Jewish women were therefore the preferred targets of this policy of conversion and a great number of "offerings" indeed concerned women. Marina Caffiero has shown that Jewish women were in reality less open to conversion than men, yet they were—along with children—the most coveted subjects. For the authorities, one of the strongest motivations for accepting declarations and "offerings" that concerned women was strongly tied to their reproductive ability: converted Jewish women would give birth to Christian offspring (according to the Christians, but not according to the Jews). Converting a young Jewish woman meant therefore assuring Christian children. Widows in particular were the chief victims of this common practice—with their children, "offered" by other converted relatives, snatched away from them. Such was the case in 1702 of Grazia Anticoli of Rome, left widowed by her husband Giuseppe, who had named her guardian of their six children in his will. The children were kidnapped from her following the "offering" of the paternal uncle, who had converted to the Christian faith.

This concentration on female conversions explains the tenacity shown towards the young woman Anna del Monte, who has left us a wonderful diary of her dramatic enclosure in 1749 in Rome's House of Catechumens, edited by Marina Caffiero (Caffiero, Venzo, 2007; Caffiero, 2008). Anna's imprisonment did not result in her conversion, notwithstanding strong psychological and emotional pressure. But she was an exception. It was rare, in fact, that even the most determined and rebellious women did not end up succumbing, above all when they were subjected to a "quarantena", often prolonged multiple times; or if their already baptized children were in the House of Catechumens.

The phenomenon of forced baptisms, which developed in parallel with the revival of secular anti-Jewish stereotypes between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, intensified through the eighteenth century to continue right into the heart of the nineteenth century. Caffiero's works demonstrate that this story was not without consequences and impact on later Italian history, as the case of Edgardo Mortara well demonstrates (Caffiero, 2004); taking place in the height of the Risorgimento, it aroused great international interest and had serious political consequences for the papal State, whose fall it accelerated. An international scandal whose repercussions can still be detected today within the Catholic Church, it still influences the Church's relations with Jewish organizations—for example, the tensions unleashed by the beatification of Pius IX, protagonist in the Mortara case, celebrated in the jubilee year of 2000.

Beyond the Ghetto

In Marina Caffiero's books, the life of the Jews of Rome and of the other cities with ghettoes were established is by no means solely and strictly linked to the reality of the closed "recinto" ("enclosure"), or to the threat of conversion. Indeed, her works (Caffiero, 2005; Boiteux, Caffiero, Marin, 2010; Caffiero, 2019a; 2022) have shown how the imposed separation and exclusion did not succeed in severing linkages to and entanglements with the life of the host cities, and nor even the contacts and relations of friendship or affection between Jews and Christians.

Everywhere and anywhere in Italy, meetings, conversations, and naturally quarrels too, between Jews and Christians unfolded in small shops, private houses, even convents. By bringing to light this world of relations, Caffiero's research has set aside the usual frameworks of victimhood that, in the past, would describe the Jewish situation as one of total relegation, closed off, defensive, facing wholly inwards, lacking contacts with the outside. To remain focused on the prototype of Rome, we now know that places assigned specifically to the Jews existed in the Eternal City even beyond the ghetto: for example, the cemeteries located on the Aventine, in the zone of Porta Portese and Monteverde. Additional spaces existed where Jews were consistently present, and in which encounters and trade with Christians were possible. These spaces were less formal than the ghetto, but habitually visited by Jews.

Since the Jews of Rome earned their livelihood across the whole city, circulating through it as peddlers, they possessed some tables for the sale of merchandise, even at the weekly market in Piazza Navona; and they frequented various hospitals as title-holders of the so-called *fagotto* (bundle), that is the right to take the clothes of the dead to resell in the course of their trade as *straccivendoli* (rag-sellers). They frequented the small shops and even the houses of the neophytes and the Christians, the serious bans on such contact notwithstanding. And there were yet other spaces of occasional meeting, such as the seats of tribunals, stationed in various *rione* neighborhoods including those of the city center; in which Jews would gather or would present themselves spontaneously in order to resolve internal arguments or conflicts with Christians and in order to face criminal charges.

Along with the places where Jews were enduringly or occasionally present, other spaces linked to determined Jewish contingencies or situations have been enumerated by Caffiero. The oratories to which the members of the Jewish community were summoned every Saturday to listen to the obligatory sermons were taken into account by her, such as the chapel of the Chiesa della Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini (Church of the Most Holy Trinity of Pilgrims) and the oratory of the church of Santa Maria del Pianto. Thanks to this research, we have discovered that upon occasion even some churches were involved in such preaching–though excluded as a matter of principle from such activity, to avoid their profanation–, such as that of Sant'Angelo in Pescheria, within the *rione* of Sant'Angelo. Even the House of the Catechumens, with its College of the Initiates, and the monastery of the Santissima Annunziata for neophytes (all buildings situated in a working-class quarter, Monti, known for its strong hostility towards Jews), and likewise the monastery of the Convertite al Corso, fall within this Roman Jewish topography, thanks to their distinguishing features as places destined to host converted Jews of either sex.

A map of Jewish activity and presence can therefore be reconstructed in the host cities, one that is much broader and richer than what was previously believed. The Jews' ongoing participation in the urban ceremonies in which all civic elements were called to take part could be analyzed and documented. The mapping of the widespread presence of the Jews in the urban fabric could extend even to ritual spaces, in which they too would cyclically appear over time, and would acquire public visibility[4].

We have also discovered that the Jewish participation in city life remained very lively even after the establishment of the ghetto. It has been documented that, until the mid-nineteenth century and before the fall of the ghetto, there were always Jewish proprietors of small shops and even of dwellings outside the quarter reserved for them, for example, in the streets around today's Argentina square, the repeated bans notwithstanding. Roman censuses of the 1700s-1800s documented the presence of many proprietors of fabric stores with Christian servants, in disregard of the rigid laws that prohibited Jews from hiring a non-Jewish workforce. In daily life, contacts were always preserved: creating mutual acquaintances, customs, and even friendly sorts of association. The attendance by Christians at the marriages of Jewish acquaintances and friends or at their celebrations, such as those of *Purim*, in defiance of the bans, is documented in various sources (Caffiero, 1990; 1997b; 1998; Boiteux, Caffiero, Marin, 2010; Caffiero, 2011a; Caffiero, Esposito, 2011; Bevilacqua, Caffiero, Sturm, 2018).

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[4] For an overview, see Boiteux, Caffiero, Marin, 2010; Caffiero, Esposito, 2011; Bevilacqua, Caffiero, Sturm, 2018.

Reframing Jewish-Christian cultural relations

Marina Caffiero has studied the self-representation of Jewish identity of the ghetto and its changes over time, partly as a result of contacts with Christian culture. Her scholarship outlines new dynamics of intellectual interaction between the inside and the outside of the ghettos, but with a broad streak of Jewish independence.

The example of the debate over the immortality of the soul that exploded between Sara Copio Sullam and her Christian accuser is inserted by Caffiero into the exchanges and discussions between Jews and gentiles that involved the learned and the ordinary alike. Belief in the immortality of the soul was identified as a matter of faith common to Christians and Jews who, precisely on the basis of such commonality of doctrines, were considered heretics or apostates should they distance themselves from it. Also in Simone Luzzatto's *Discorso circa il stato de gl'hebrei, et in particular dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia* (1638) Marina Caffiero recognizes conceptions of the soul and its destiny, which occupied a considerable role in the intellectual exchanges between Jews and Christians, including those of non-scholarly backgrounds (Caffiero, 2014; 2015a).

In other essays she detects that these ideas were not limited to narrow educated circles. As it is proven, for example, by an inquisitorial trial launched in 1658 in Mantua against a Jew, Simone Loria of Padua, who had been denounced by a co-religionist for having claimed "on the occasion of discussing eternity, that after death both the body and the soul are dead, nor is there anything else". The accused stood firm at his interrogation, first denying having said the incriminating sentence, but then adding that, in any case "it did not seem to him that he had entered into any error that should be punished by this Holy Office, expecting that I was not obliged to believe in the immortality of the soul, whereas this article of faith is not found expressed in the five books of Moses [the Pentateuch], that contain the law of God" and was not mentioned either in the Holy Scripture. The accusation amounted to a serious one of heresy (Caffiero, 2011b; 2012; 2015c).

That the fascination of the *Kabbalah* still lingered a long time is demonstrated (according to other essays by Marina Caffiero [2011b; 2012; 2014; 2015a; 2015c; 2017b; 2019b]) by the belief in demons, which was a matter of faith shared by Christians and Jews–linked to that of the fate of the soul, since the existence of demons also referred to the existence of hell and purgatory. The extent to which Jewish beliefs in demons interested Christians, including the judges of the Holy Office, is demonstrated by a case (studied by Caffiero [2012]) brought against the rabbi Mosè Zamat in 1607 in Ancona, which was soon sent to Rome. From this example, an interesting comparison emerges between the respective beliefs of Jews and Christians in the matter of angels and demons and their mutual perceptions. The case worried and interested the Inquisition: its judges feared that if these same rabbis began to utterly deny the existence of demons and to doubt a series of doctrines set forth for Jews as well as Christians, not only the superstitious and heretical drift of their convictions was to be feared, but also another sort of dangerous result. That is, that a certain "modern" tendency, more rational and less tied to mythological cosmology was gaining ground among the Jews too. And what consequences would ensue for the beliefs of Christians? The Jews therefore had to continue to believe in demons, though in the "correct" way established by Christians.

The inquisitors were interested in Jewish convictions regarding angels and demons since they were aware of their Talmudic and kabbalistic origins, their "superstitious" role, and the uses that were made of such beliefs in magical arts, often in complicity with Christians. Amulets were specially fabricated and sold to cast out demons, as in the example of Leon Modena. Besides, belief in the powers of King Solomon to evoke or ward off demons, as was set forth in the popular work *Clavicula Salomonis* and in similar short books, was common to both groups. Jews, in turn, often sought, for reasons of safety, to reduce the importance of angelology and demonology, though without denying it, and to make their angels and demons resemble as closely as possible those of the Christians.

On these delicate matters we have now–thanks to the 2019 book by Marina, *Il grande mediatore*, translated into French in 2023 – the testimony of a famous physician and rabbi of the early 18th century. Tranquillo Vita Corcos (1660-1730), member of a family of Spanish origin, was the true leader of Roman (and perhaps also Italian) Jewry from the end of the 1600s through the 1730s. Deeply cultured in matters sacred and profane, he was considered the highest rabbinical authority to whom Jews and Christians turned equally, for consultations and decisions on various subjects: as did the Christian authorities with whom he entertained frequent and trusted relations, in keeping with the approach of conciliation and appeasement he always pursued. A rabbi as of 1712, he was the author of a philosophical treatise on the holiday of *Purim* and therefore on the history of the queen Esther, a history very dear to the Jews for its symbolic implications. He also published discourses within the Academy he himself founded in Rome, adopting the Italian language, proof of his attempt to launch a cultural opening within the Roman Jewish community, with moderate, rational reform.

Indefatigable defender of the rights of his community, Corcos produced a great number of written statements, addressed to the ecclesiastical authorities: such as that which in 1699 he wrote in order to reclaim the right of Jews to testify against those who challenged them with the aim of preventing converts from being disinherited. He managed to forestall an accusation of ritual murder, that had led to the arrest in Viterbo in 1705, of five Jews. Corcos wrote two briefs, both addressed to the Christian authorities, in which he proved the unsubstantiated nature of the accusation and produced a series of historical documents relating to that calumny. He was also concerned with Jewish books, drafting in 1727, for the Holy Office, a brief on that theme. His most significant works were however those written in response to the attacks of the convert Paolo Sebastiano Medici, unquestionably a leading figure in those years in the most violent anti-Jewish preaching and publishing in various Italian cities: Leghorn, Pisa, Florence, Bologna, and in the territories subject to the Church (Caffiero, 2015b).

Making himself the mouthpiece for the Italian communities' lively protests, Corcos succeeded in blocking for at least thirty years the publication of a ferociously anti-Jewish work by Medici, *Riti, e costumi degli ebrei confutati* (*Rites, and customs of the Jews refuted*) (1736), presenting in 1697 to the Holy Office a brief that firmly objected to Medici's work. His brief was printed in that same year of 1697 by the printing press of the Apostolic Camera: a rather key point, insofar as it is indicative of the close and positive relations between ecclesiastical authorities and top leaders of Judaism. In his brief, the rabbi set forth the audacious thesis that Judaism and Christianity diverged on one sole doctrinal point: the coming of the Messiah. Overall, he rebutted and contested point by point the representations of Jewish ritual as superstitious and fruit of diabolical inspiration advanced by Medici, with the clear concern of presenting an acceptable, reasonable version, of Jewish customs and rites, free of superstition.

During the eighteenth century, while the cultural climate of the Enlightenment began to seep in even in Rome and the state of the Church–leading at least some minority groups to more open and rational positions than in the Counter Reformation–the notion that there persisted a world of superstitions to combat and debunk was pressing. Sometimes this battle was framed in an invitation to practice a more "rational" and "regulated" pity, like that upheld by Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750). Not by chance, this battle against superstition and for an "illuminated" and modern religion was focused on the Jews, targeting their customs, beliefs, and rites[5].

At the beginning of the modern era, and in the midst of the resurgence of a strongly anti-Jewish climate, dismissing Jewish magical practices as irrelevant or innocuous was no longer possible–at least from the Catholic perspective. The Jewish intellectual approach of the previous century, well symbolized by the works of Leon Modena (1571-1648) and Tranquillo Vita Corcos–both concerned with providing a rational, anti-superstitious, and anti-magical representation of Jewish culture and customs in the attempt to fend off any suspicion of contact and covenant with the devil–was, at that point, no longer credible.

New developments

In her most recent book, Caffiero's research path on the subject of religious minorities has been enriched with an approach that entangle it with the history of slavery: a reality that had a long life in the Papal States, lasting here at least until the mid-nineteenth century. The recent monograph *Gli schiavi del papa* (Caffiero, 2022) in fact explores Muslim life in Rome, outlining a new approach to the history of Christian-Islamic relations in the city in the light of its pluri-ethnic and multicultural physiognomy. Crucial to this operation is a previously unpublished source: a small notebook, the "Book of the Turks", which notes the arrivals at the Roman House of Catechumens of slaves who intended to convert right in the *Urbe*, probably with the hope of being freed. Real people, once again, emerge from the dark thanks to Caffiero's inexhaustible research. They tell us stories of their wanderings throughout Europe, and even to the New World or the East; their daily toil (at the oar in the galleys of Civitavecchia, militia in Castel S. Angelo or service in private homes), and the construction of their new identities after baptism.

Returning to contemporaneity their stories removed and buried in the more distant past, Marina Caffiero offers a new opportunity to question the idea that Italians are, and always have been, European, Catholic, and white. When, instead, the population of the peninsula was formed as a result of the constant ethnic mixing that occurred over the centuries, and which continues today.

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[5] This is a constant theme throughout Caffiero's work, which was particularly highlighted in Caffiero, 1993.

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