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Stefano Barone

Introduction¹

- 1 «It reminded me of Preston. Watch it: it will help you with your research» Riccardo told me, sending me a link to Lina Wertmuller's film *The Lizards* (1963). A 27-year-old Italian employee, Riccardo moved to Preston, a post-industrial city in central Lancashire, when he was 20. There, he worked for years in Italian restaurants before moving to white-collar jobs and, eventually, relocating to the South of England. While living in Preston, Riccardo befriended many young South-Italian migrants; Preston itself became, to some extent, a second home for him: he would visit the city regularly even after leaving it, often spending time in the Italian restaurants in which he had worked, bantering with his ex-colleagues and employers. Still, he was somehow puzzled – and to some extent saddened – by the lifestyles of many of his friends, whom he compared to the youth living in the Lucanian town narrated in *The Lizards*. Riccardo referred, in particular, to the apathy and sameness that permeates the everyday lives of the film's characters, as they waste the day sitting at a café in their hometown in Basilicata. That same apathy ultimately prevents the attempt of Antonio, the film's protagonist, to relocate in Rome and start a new life: he is too attached to the routines of home, which he still despises, to impose a change to his life. While Riccardo's South-Italian friends,

contrarily to Antonio, had actually made a move, migrating to Preston, their *mentality* looked similar in the eyes of Riccardo:

That mentality emigrates when somebody a little more adventurous, but still of parochial origins, makes some experience abroad and finds other guys with the same characteristics and mentality. They immediately get into this simple monotony and decide not to add anything more to their lives. The café banter restarts in the UK, focusing now on the work context, in 90% of cases restaurant-related. All the Italians who worked in Italian restaurants used to meet at Twelve Tellers [a pub in Preston city center, known as a point of encounter for young Italian migrants] competing on how many customers each had served that night.

- 2 Riccardo's ethnographic remark unveils many of the ambiguities linking home, migration, and the Italian "community" in the lives of South-Italian youth living in Northern England. For these youth, "home" could be, at the same time, a place of longing and nostalgia, a fate that they never got rid of, a project to pursue along their migration journey, and a marker of status and accomplishment. Similarly, the group of Italians that they referred to, lived and worked with, befriended and criticized, could be at the same time a proxy for "home" and a space of alterity. It could work as mechanism of embedding in the destination Country while posing limits to such embedding process. In many cases, it took the form of a locus of exploitation.

- 3 This article looks at such ambiguities, exploring the significance of home-making (or *homing*, as we will see below) for the processes of emerging adulthood and migration to Northern England in which South-Italian youth were invested. It responds to the following research questions: how did the construction of home articulate emerging adulthood and differentiated embedding among South-Italian youth relocating in Northern England? How did home mark the accomplishment of adulthood and successful migration? What did such ideas of accomplished adulthood and embedding say about the broader structures framing intra-European migration? Based on a research project that started in 2021, this work taps into several emerging strands of migration research. It looks at the intersection of youth and migration studies, which has gained momentum in the past decade (Cairns 2014; Krzaklewska 2019; Marchetti *et al.* 2022; Moroşanu *et al.* 2019; Robertson *et al.* 2018). Focusing on home-making practices, the article draws on the literature on home in migration, and employs the *homing* framework proposed by Paolo Boccagni (2017), to make sense of home as a flexible and ambivalent construct. Finally, by looking at young Italian migrants, I join the emerging debate on post-2008 intra-European migrations (Pepe 2022; Pratsinakis *et al.* 2020; Varriale 2023) and their close links with the growing inequalities and the crises shaping the past two decades of European and world history. The point is not simply to show that "new" migrant populations are diverse and unequal, but that such inequalities produce regimes of classification and distinction that shape the lives of migrants and serve, to some extent, the broader reorganization of neoliberal Europe. *Coloniality* (Quijano 2000; Franceschelli 2024; Varriale 2021a) is the concept that has recently been adopted by scholars to define such regimes of classification.

- 4 Home is at the center of my argument, albeit not in the strict sense usually linked to "house", but in the broader and more abstract sense of a familiar location of belonging and rootedness: from this point of view, "home" can be a country, a city, a hangout or a group of people. I maintain that the process by which Preston became, to some extent, *casa* marked an accomplishment for young South-Italians relocating in England: as they managed to make home, they could consider themselves adults, and fully integrated

migrants. Vice versa, those who failed at this home-making labor were considered as “failed” adults and “failed” migrants by the *doxa* (Bourdieu 1984) operating within the group of migrants. Such ideas of success and failure were, in turn, linked to ideas of deservingness and meritocracy that were anchored in a specific regime of coloniality shaped by the neoliberal order of UK and Europe.

- 5 The article is structured as follows: In the next sections I present the key debates and theoretical ideas framing my analysis, and provide some context about the city of Preston. Then, I discuss the main homing strategies of young South-Italians in Preston, and I link them to the themes of emerging adulthood and differentiated embedding. I conclude by showing how the link between homing, emerging adulthood, and differentiated embedding served a regime of coloniality, and what were the limits of such a regime and its reach in the lives of migrants.

Literature Review and Theory

- 6 Migration and mobility are essential components of many young people’s life trajectories: in the past decade, scholars have started to build analytical frameworks on this increasingly evident link between youth and migrancy. While the majority of youth in European Countries are not mobile (Salamońska, Czeranowska 2019), the possibility and imaginary of mobility – what David Cairns (2014) defines spatial reflexivity – shape their conception of growth as potentially undetermined by spatial boundaries. The classically intended transitions to adulthood become increasingly mobile in both spatial and conceptual ways: moving into adulthood implies moving through space, for instance putting roots away from one’s birthplace, or treasuring an experience abroad as an influence on one’s project of adult life. Even the metaphorical journey into adulthood becomes more and more complex, with adulthood becoming less of a predetermined destination whose features (such as a stable job and a property house) cannot be taken for granted (Marchetti *et al.* 2022; Robertson *et al.* 2018).
- 7 This trend has been observed by sociologists of youth for a while: the links between school-to-work, domestic and housing transitions, whose coincidence was understood as the norm in pre-neoliberal times, have long loosened: in the past decades, youth studies in the Global North have been witnessing the progressive decoupling, extension, and lesser linearity of such transitions. In other contexts, concepts such as *waithood* (Honwana 2012) and *timepass* (Jeffrey 2010) have captured the difficulty to attain the markers of adulthood in late modernity (see Dwyer, Wyn 2001; Furlong, Cartmel 2007). Migration experiences further complicate these processes: as observed by Moroşanu *et al.* (2019), migration can consolidate some classic accomplishments of adulthood – such as building a career and proceeding into independent living – while freezing others, for instance marriage and children.
- 8 The concept of *emerging adulthood*, coined by psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2004), is a useful framework for navigating such historical changes in the social construction of youth. Emerging adulthood refers to a phase of the life course which is no more youth and is not yet adulthood – or rather, is both and none of them at the same time. Arnett describes emerging adulthood as a condition of in-betweenness: when asked if they felt young or adult, his research participants often claimed to feel both, in different aspects of their lives. Emerging adulthood is characterized by possibilities: it is a moment in life in which options are not yet definitive, which gives emerging adults

the opportunity to experiment – with possible careers, romantic arrangements, and domestic situations among other aspects of their lifestyles. At the same time, emerging adulthood is an unstable condition, marked by uncertainty about the present and the future.

- 9 Arnett's concept has encountered some justified criticisms: in particular, critics have observed how emerging adulthood, as a phase of creative suspension often taking place in one's twenties, is a privilege that most youth around the world cannot afford (see Bynner 2005). While this is true, I deem emerging adulthood a useful framework in describing the stretching and indetermination of "youth" which is often witnessed in the present; moreover, it has the advantage of not considering adulthood as a normative outcome that defines youth retrospectively, as in transitions-based models: emerging adulthood is instead relevant as a present life condition. Moreover, the emerging adulthood framework considers adulthood not as an expectable, normal destination of life: it rather sees it as the variable, unstable outcome of a reflexive life project.
- 10 Home-making can be seen as one of the ambits in which the indetermination of present-day processes of adulting is strongest. Current analyses of home problematize its status as a given, stable existential locus, emphasizing its transient aspects and the forms of violence and exclusion that normative conceptions of home often imply (see Davies 2014). Migration contributes to challenge essentialist ideas of home: for migrants, home is not necessarily stable and unique; it is rather a fragile process that can take different shapes, interacting in diverse ways with the life-course. The concept of *homing* (Boccagni 2017) perfectly photographs the complexities of home-in-migration. For Boccagni, homing «refers to people's evolving potential to attach a sense of home to their life circumstances, in light of their assets and of the external structure of opportunities» (Boccagni 2017: 23). Homing is at the same time a cognitive effort (identifying home), an emotional enterprise (by which certain contexts and situations "feel like home") and a set of practices of home-making. Therefore, it does not reduce home to a physical location, but rather qualifies home as an experience, one conceived as (longing towards) security, familiarity, and control.
- 11 Through this understanding, home becomes less a stable anchorage than a continuous, non-linear aspect of the life course. Rather than considering homing as an ending to emerging adulthood, it can be seen as yet another facet of its experiments and quests, and this is all the more true in the case of migrants, who have to make homes in new places, under new circumstances, and while enduring a constant tension with other home experiences located in other localities and other times. For many of them, home remains a far-away place and an object of nostalgia, something experienced as a loss during their life abroad – home simply ends up being not the preferred place to live (Lam, Yeoh 2004). Others invest emotional labor in managing dual lives and dual homes (Smith 2014; Portes 1997). Yet others attempt to "transport" home through their transnational moves, «reducing home to a mere accumulation of habits or to the elaboration of a lifestyle» (Smith 2014: 117), or reproducing partial, shrunken versions of home abroad (Magat 1999).
- 12 While the housing-related aspects of homing are salient in emerging adulthood, and the housing practices of young South-Italians in Preston deserve research, this article will concentrate on homing as related to national spaces and local contexts. Feeling at home in another nation, and indeed conceiving a nation as home, are processual,

nonlinear, and contradictory practices (Lam, Yeoh 2004; Liu 2014). In some cases, “nation-as-home” (in itself a problematic, politically conflicted similitude) is shunned in favor of identification with specific migrant enclaves (Ralph, Staeheli 2011), or with more complex transnational social fields (Levitt, Glick-Schiller 2004). As we will see, research participants’ homing practices concerned constructing and deconstructing Italy, Southern Italy, and specific regions, cities or locations as home, and at the same time producing the UK and Preston as homes. These practices displayed symbolic and emotional bricolage aimed at selecting aspects of these two societies that could be considered as home.

- 13 The scattered and nonlinear aspects of homing and emerging adulthood have parallels in the process of migrants’ integration in the destination society. Louise Ryan (2018) developed the concept of differentiated embedding to remark how such process is not simply gradual and dynamic, but often diverse and unequal as well: migrants realize different levels of embedding depending on the different places and social ambits in which they spend their social lives. Ryan draws on a categorization proposed by Korinek, Entwistle, and Jampaklay (2005), who identify four dimensions of embedding: household, workplace, neighborhood, and the wider community. Migrants can, for instance, live embedded lives in the workplace, while feeling out of place in their neighborhood. Two aspects of this concept are worth of attention: first of all, there is some overlap between the above-mentioned dimensions of embedding and the transitions classically intended by youth studies literature. In the case of young migrants, it is interesting to observe the dialectics between emerging adulthood and embedding as it takes place in these different ambits: in the house, in the workplace, in the neighborhood and so on. A second, important point is the “placed” character of the process of differentiated embedding. This has strong resonances with homing as a placed enterprise, as a form of emotional labor that exists within places, uses places as building materials, and is invested in placed meaning-making. We will see above how differentiated embedding has a complex, multifaceted relation to home, in which home can be at the same time a condition of embedding and a form of resistance to embedding.
- 14 My research participants belong to the phase of so-called “post-2008” or “crisis” migrants (see King 2018; Pratsinakis *et al.* 2020; Pepe 2022) that transformed the status of intra-European migrations in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. These migrants are often contrasted to the “Eurostars” idealtype famously proposed by Adrian Favell (2008) to identify pre-crisis European movers: skilled, educated and uprooted migrants that shunned stability and national belonging, posing the foundations of a European cosmopolitanism in the making. Compared to this model, post-2008 migrants (together with Eastern-European migrants that moved West following the EU expansion) are less formally educated and skilled, and their migration enterprise is often strongly motivated by economic needs and the lack of jobs experienced in their (generally South-European) departure Countries (King, Pratsinakis 2020). While the crisis triggered such a phase of intra-European migration, scholars agree that it did not “define” them: post-2008 migrants are not simply a rehashing of the classic economic migrant idealtype, determined by their economic needs (see Pratsinakis *et al.* 2020; Varriale 2021b). Rather, they often emphasize how expressive and material dimensions intertwine in their migration careers: they move out of need, but also to discover the world and make new experiences – something often confirmed by my own fieldwork.

- 15 Post-2008 migrants do not generally identify with the established, historical “migrant communities” that developed in the post-war era (see Pepe 2022). In the case of Italian migration in the UK, a wide body of work analyzed such post-war communities and their gradual development². Post-2008 Italian migrants do cross paths with these communities – for example, they are often employed by Italian restaurants founded by entrepreneurs having migrated in the past decades – but they do not share their lifestyles, their «habitual spaces» (Fortier 2000; Zontini 2015), nor their sense of community. Pepe (2021, 2022) defines these new migrants a “disavowed community” in part because of their non-belonging to such established collective identities.
- 16 Another aspect of such “disavowal” of community regards the practices of internal othering that characterize this group of migrants. As a consequence of the de-elitisation (Cacciatore, Pepe 2019) of intra-European migration following 2008, practices and discourses of distinction linked to (un)deservingness, backwardness, and dangerousness have been reproduced from within and without migrant populations. This phenomenon was particularly visible in the UK, where it formed a backbone of the Brexit campaign and informed subsequent migration policies (Antonucci, Varriale 2020; Godin, Sigona 2022). The discourse of deservingness has worked to classify migrants in desirable and undesirable ones, around notions of productivity, meritocracy, and adherence to the neoliberal ethos of Northern Europe³.
- 17 Franceschelli (2024) defines such classificatory mechanism, separating locals from migrants, and discerning among migrants, “transnational boundaries of distinction”. One of the remarkable aspects about these boundaries is their efficacy in reproducing themselves within migrant groups: migrants adhering to the principles of hard work and meritocracy paraded by North-European States sometimes disqualify and other their co-nationals whom they deem lazy, backwards, and parasitic. These fellow migrants are seen to spoil their reputation of their national group, justifying racist sentiments and policies. This phenomenon has been observed among East-European migrants (Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Manolova 2019; Moroşanu *et al.* 2021)) and has recently been studied in the case of South-European (Triandafyllidou, Gropas 2014) and Italian migrants as well (Franceschelli 2024; Varriale 2023). Varriale’s work emphasizes the dynamics of distinction working within Italian migration, showing how class spite and racialization dynamics intersect in casting lower-class, South-Italian migrants as undeserving.
- 18 Both Franceschelli and Varriale draw on the category of coloniality (see Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2013), understood as a logic of power/knowledge that conflates modernity and civilization with West-European whiteness. The logic of coloniality produces a hierarchy of world populations, classifying them as more or less advanced and civilized on the basis of their adherence to the paradigm of colonialist modernity. Varriale proposes the concept of “coloniality of distinction” to show how migrants claim status based on their embrace of a distinct North-European, meritocratic habitus.
- 19 In this article, I employ the notion of coloniality to show how it frames and regulates both the process of emerging adulthood and that of differentiated embedding: one “succeeds” as a functional adult and a well-integrated migrant by embracing a habitus, a lifestyle, and a set of values defining them as work-minded, cosmopolitan yet able to take root, “modern” and ready to embrace a British lifestyle. These values are clearly connected to the discourses and policies classifying migrants from above, and thus working to integrate them within the neoliberal European order. While Varriale partly

relates the coloniality of distinction to the North-South divide in Italy, I show how, in Preston, a form of coloniality was reproduced among South-Italians themselves. Homing works as both a mechanism and a goal in such adjustment process: being able to make home means being worthy of being an adult and a deserving migrant. But this logic of home clashes with many other intimate and relational dimensions of homing: “home” cannot be fully constrained within the logic of coloniality. This is, as we will see, a general feature of how this logic acts in the concrete: the adjustment of one’s habitus to the broader neoliberal coloniality produces ambiguous and contradictory effects, which will be discussed below.

South-Italians in Preston

- 20 South-Italian migrants in Preston do not align with many of the tenets identified by the literature on post-2008 Italian migrants in the UK. Most of such literature focuses on Italians in London (and, secondarily, other big cities)⁴. As a consequence, many research participants tend to be formally skilled and highly educated. This has crucial effects on their lifestyles and experiences of embedding; the deception and even trauma suffered by many such migrants after Brexit is an example of their specific migration trajectories (see Mazzilli, King 2018).
- 21 Preston is significantly different than London. It belongs to an area of Lancashire which is often represented as «lagging behind» (Allmendinger *et al.* 2021), whose productivity and incomes are below national average (Office for National Statistics 2021). In 2023, Preston was the forty-fifth most deprived local authority in England⁵. The city has recently known some economic and social affirmation: the so-called “Preston model”, centered on local investment (Manley, Whyman 2021), has contributed to its development, and Preston was voted the most improved city in the UK in 2018 (Partington 2018). However, it is difficult to fully ascertain the effects of this development at present, and to measure its impact on local migration. As a consequence, while Preston counted some educated, middle- and upper-class Italian migrants, the majority of those moving to the area were not as formally skilled nor as privileged. This was particularly true of South-Italians, who generally gravitated around the local hospitality sector (particularly Italian restaurants).
- 22 South-Italians moving to Preston were, indeed, the protagonists of some chains of migration that revolved around hospitality. One of these chains of migration linked Preston with the Campanian towns of Nocera Superiore and Inferiore, while another concerned Sicilian restaurants in the area. This was initiated by some restaurant owners who graduated from the Hotel Management School (*Istituto Alberghiero*) in the city of Trapani, and contacted the School’s director calling for fresh graduates to join their chain of Sicilian restaurants in the Preston area. The first young migrants, in turn, “passed the word” to their friends, populating Preston with a relevant number of Trapanese migrants.
- 23 These chains of migration have roots in the socioeconomic conditions of Southern Italy. It is one of the most economically and socially deprived areas of Europe (Cuzzocrea *et al.* 2020; Giannetti 2025⁶; SVIMEZ 2024), characterized by high levels of unemployment (Liotti 2020) and by the diffusion of poor, unregulated, and informal work (SVIMEZ 2024). These elements reoccurred in interviews, and were identified by participants as a fundamental push factor motivating their migration enterprise.

- 24 Interviewees also voiced another stereotyped trait of Southern Italy: the prominence of strong ties and familism in the region – an issue which has long been discussed in anthropological work on the South, as exemplified by the debate around the work of Edward Banfield (1958) on amoral familism (see for example Ferragina 2009). This long-debated idea of Southern Italy as a «land of strong ties» (Capello 2008) is today challenged (Trezza 2018); still, research participants often emphasized the relevance of strong bonds in societies of departure (be these bonds familial, amical, or related to their towns of birth). These were seen with affection and nostalgia, as a counterpoint to the perceived coldness on England; at the same time, migrants despised such bonds as instances of social control, and some of them saw their migration as an attempt to break away from a suffocating familial and social life. Another aspect regarding South-Italian social capital – that is, the diffusion of corruption and alleged lack of civic consciousness (see Conti 2015; Zontini 2006) – was also relevant in shaping the feelings of migrants towards their homelands, as we will see below.
- 25 The data discussed in this article come from a multi-method research project that started in 2021. I originally carried out thirty online interviews with South-Italians⁷ aged 18-30 and living or having lived in Preston – fourteen of these identified as male, and sixteen as female. Recruitment took place through snowball sampling and through Facebook groups dedicated to Italians in Preston. Interviews were one-to-two hours long, and took place on Microsoft Teams, to comply with Covid-19 safety requirements. Questions addressed general aspects of participants' backgrounds, life in Italy, reasons for living and dynamics of relocation; and then work, house, leisure, and family careers (see Shildrick, MacDonald 2007), together with participants' views of Preston, the UK, (South) Italy, Britons, and Italians in the UK. Each interview terminated with two more reflexive, open questions about how the participant felt they had changed since they lived in Preston, and whether they felt more like a young person or like an adult, which aspects in their life were more «youthful» and which ones were closer to adult life, and when did one become an adult.
- 26 From the autumn of 2021, I started undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in Preston: this entailed «deep hanging out» (Geertz 1998) with participants at workplaces (mainly Italian restaurants), in cafes and pubs, at city parks and personal homes – places in which differentiated embedding was performed. In the spring of 2022, me and one of the research participants initiated the shooting of a documentary film on South-Italians in Preston. This involved eleven interviews, five with previous participants and six with new contacts recruited through snowball sampling; four of these identified as female and seven as male. The documentary was initially intended as an instrument of research dissemination and popularization, but we soon realized that we were learning new things about participants. While filmed interviews had an obvious performative component, and should thus be taken with a grain of salt (Franceschelli, Galipò 2021), participants' reformulations of their own stories at each film take carried rich meanings and proved an excellent means of thick description. Furthermore, shootings were excellent ethnographic occasions, in which the small troupe and participants could walk through the city together, and interacted with it. The documentary is currently at the montage phase.
- 27 In the spring of 2023, I carried out two focus groups with South-Italians working in restaurants, one at a private house and one in a local pub. Each of these focus groups comprised five young male South Italians working or having worked in two different

Italian restaurant franchises in Preston (as well as in other restaurants). While the main subject of such focus groups was work (and it will be explored in a future publication), many insights on work life and life in Preston consolidated the analyses discussed here.

- 28 In the next section, I will discuss the homing strategies of South-Italian youth in Preston, looking at how these articulated their emerging adulthood and their differentiated embedding. In the following one, I will link homing with coloniality, and with the broader structures that framed participants' adulting and embedding journeys.

Homing, emerging adulthood, embedding

- 29 While homing is a placed activity, its "stuff" is essentially trans-local: it is a construction labor that draws on materials coming from different locations, within both departure and arrival societies. The experience of Marco, a 26-year-old Sicilian chef, is a case in point, particularly as it represents one of the most accomplished efforts at making home that I witnessed among South-Italian youth in Preston:

First off, I have always had the desire to go and make an experience abroad. So this was the first thing... I do not consider myself as somebody attached to his land, his family... [...] From my point of view, that's exactly one of the goals in life. Thinking that I've got to get born, grow up and then die in the same place, without having any experiences, without having experienced the world, without ever meeting people that think differently than me... [...]. Then, it also depends on what you leave behind. My parents are divorced; I was able to take my mom and sister here, so if you ask me «where's home for you» I hardly say «Trapani». Trapani is where I was born, but my life actually started here, in Preston [Marco, translated from Italian].

- 30 Marco left Italy as soon as he finished the Hospitality School in Trapani. His emerging adulthood – his work experiences around Europe as a high-end chef, his party life with friends, his love stories – happened after leaving Italy. When I first met him, Marco was already settling down, albeit in a differentiated fashion: he had gotten married, was trying to gradually shift from the unforgiving restaurant work to a more stable career, and his days of «doing damage» around Preston were a thing of the past. He made home literally, by marrying and buying a house, but he also made home in a broader sense, by blending different homing strategies: he turned Preston into his home, but at the same time «transported» home (Smith 2014) by taking his loved ones with him. Marco's strategies rested on his particular social trajectory: work experiences in Sicily prompted him to leave, while his cultural capital as an Italian chef helped him navigating the restaurant scene in Preston and securing a position in the city.
- 31 Damiano, from the same area in Sicily, was the same age as Marco when I first met him; however, he was at a totally different stage of his emerging adulthood. Damiano left Sicily as he was disgusted by the work contracts his relatives had to wrestle with, but also because his cultural interests would be mocked back home. His identity discourse, interestingly, detached home from belonging:

Indeed, it's not like I've never met people who leave their home country not by necessity, the *basic* necessities, but more for a matter of «I do not feel comfortable in the place where I was born. The place where I was born does not represent my idea of being [the italic in the text represents emphasis in the participant's speech].

- 32 Expressive and self-searching (Kato 2013) motives were thus at the center of Damiano's migrant habitus, strongly resonating with the themes of emerging adulthood. For him, Preston was not home: «I'll never be home here, I will always be an immigrant» – and he did not consider it as the final destination of his wandering. When I met Damiano, he was working in frustrating hospitality jobs, and felt in a state of limbo. He would land on a white-collar job years later, without really considering himself as settled down yet.
- 33 Corrado (22 years old) had an opposite take on his departure society as “home”. Born in Apulia, he moved to Preston with his mother, and studied in a local university preparing himself for a cosmopolitan work career:
- I liked living in Apulia because I was born there. It's my place, my homeland... for an Apulian, for a Southerner, in general, home is everything. I mean, when you're away you miss it... You miss people, too. Living in that place, the warmth it gives you, you immediately feel the difference. If you were born there, if you grew up there, if you have all your friends there, you feel the difference a lot. [...].
- I, for one, would like to work in Apulia, because I love my Country. But... It's impossible! It's impossible not because you don't want to, but because they won't allow you to come back. The premises aren't there. And this situation won't change in the next five, six, seven years [emphasis in the participant's speech].
- 34 Like Chinese-Malaysians in Singapore (Lam, Yeoh 2004), Corrado accepted the idea that home would not be his preferred place to live, nor the place where he would plan to make a living. At the time of our interview, Corrado was indeed setting up his own emerging adulthood, as someone who was embedded in the destination society from an early age.
- 35 As shown by these three examples, homing among South-Italians responded to different configurations, in which South Italy and Northern England played different roles, and different aspects of them were used to construct one's feeling of home. A further example is Beatrice (25 years old), a Sicilian chef who defined Preston as her «second home» and yet claimed that nowadays she «eventually decided to go back [to Sicily] as a tourist, not anymore as a... whatever», perfectly encapsulating the ambiguity of home for migrants.
- 36 While very different, these participants' accounts had elements in common. All of them voiced expressive and material reasons for leaving Southern Italy: Marco, Damiano, and Beatrice told me stories about unpaid jobs and exploitation, while Corrado's words «they won't allow you to come back» referred to the political conditions that make living in Southern Italy impossible for youth – a point that will be discussed below. This coexistence of lifestyle and material needs in migration, is, as seen above, a staple of post-2008 migrations, and entertains a close relation with emerging adulthood: as the age of explorations, this phase of life is particularly suited for experimenting with new living solutions, thus linking place to adulthood. Emerging adulthood, indeed, conjures spatial reflexivity (Cairns 2014).
- 37 Another point that these stories have in common is the problematization and detachment of some facets of home that are commonly associated. For Corrado and Beatrice, longing was separated from belonging: they loved a place that they would not want to live in; they planned a life away from their sense of rooting. For Damiano and Marco, coming from a place did not mean being at home in that place. The “pieces” of their experience that these youth assembled for constructing their sense of home varied on the basis of their personal trajectories – their social backgrounds and

professional careers in particular oriented their embedding, including their ability to make home.

- 38 Most of my research participants linked their South-Italian homes with warmth, including the warm weather whose absence from the UK they routinely mourned. They missed family and friends, food, habits such as spending leisure time outside and the placed sociability of Italian *piazze* [squares]. They longed for some of the routines and the landscapes they had left back. Aspects of home could, at times, be reproduced in the destination society through the filter of the local Italian “community”: spending time with co-nationals meant being able to relive some aspects of their Italian lifestyles, minimizing the elements of the UK that one felt particularly disconnected from. Marco provided an example of this:

I’m a very social type, I get along with everyone. But if you ask me about true friends, there is a difference between the friend you go for coffee with, and the friend who’s like «come home for dinner tonight, I have to tell you what happened to me». [...] For the English, something like «Hey, I’m near your house, I’m passing by for a coffee» is inconceivable! They’re more like «I’ll see you next Tuesday from 3:00 to 4:00 because then I have a something to do».

- 39 Hence, fellow Italians worked, for many of their co-nationals, as more than a functional social network which could help their embedding trajectory: they were also integral to their homing practices.
- 40 Fellow Italians were also important in constructing physical spaces as home. In contrast with previous waves of Italian migration, participants did not seem to gather around formalized «habitual spaces» (Fortier 2000; Zontini 2015) produced by Italian communities in the UK, such as specific churches or clubs. Their habitual spaces were rather “readjusted” Preston places, such as the Twelve Tellers pub, or Nero café on the central Friargate: these were not “intrinsically Italian”, but were rather signified as such, and made habitual by migrants frequenting them. Such spaces offered a form of anchoring, inscribing the sense of a second home in material space (Boccagni 2017). Italy offered material and symbolic elements that assisted homing and embedding strategies, often through the proxy of the local circle of co-nationals. At the same time, my participants actively rejected parts of it, trying to leave them behind both physically, through migration, and symbolically. Corrado’s citation above is a case in point, as he remarked how the Italian situation would not allow him to go back. Corrado’s political dissatisfaction with Italy was echoed by many participants from different class backgrounds. Exploitative work conditions were commonly lamented, and recognized as a feature of the South in particular. The political system, with its corruption, inadequacy, and lack of vision for the future, was usually blamed of spoiling the potential of Italy as a country, and its viability as a possible home.
- 41 Francesca Conti (2012; Conti, King 2015) notices how migrants’ frustration with Italian State structures and with the backward, familist national character is often expressed through a refusal of “Italian mentality”. The complexities of “mentality” foster the ambiguity of (Southern) Italy’s moral connotations, and of its status as a home. Is Italy a beautiful home spoiled by a failing political system? Or are clientelism, intolerance and conservatism embedded in the very social texture of “home”? Clearly, this contested character of Southern Italy as a home echoes the analyses – in particular those proposed by feminist authors – deconstructing the myth of home as a place of warmth and comfort, and emphasizing the connotations of structural violence and social control that home has for women and marginalized subjects (Davies 2014; Young 1997).

It is not a case that female participants were often skeptical about their South-Italian homes. They usually highlighted how every return to their parents' home meant a reactivation of social control, whether it originated from the family or from their fellow citizens. An example of this is Marina (27 years old), from Sicily, who spent two years in Preston working as a waitress:

Not that Preston is a big metropolis, but... This place [her town in Sicily] was starting to fit me too tight. Maybe it's because I've always had an open mentality, and small towns in Sicily have never been that open-minded... Hence, I really needed to evade. And that's why I took that decision. I didn't like people from my town, their mentality, the *curtigghiu* [a word in Sicilian dialect that can be translated as "gossip"] as we call it in Sicily! And family pressures too, sometimes, them asking «What do you want to do, where do you want to get...». Honestly, I couldn't take it anymore.

- 42 Many other participants voiced such a sentiment, like Aurelia (21 years old), from a small town in Molise in which, she said, she felt «trapped» and that everybody hated her; or Francesca (25 years old), from Trapani, who claimed that her neighbors used to criticize her as she chose to work as a waitress instead of helping at her parents' shop. The strength of family ties, and generally of “strong ties” in South Italy and its patriarchal gaze clearly play a role in the moral connotation that Italian homes acquire in these narratives (see Wessendorf 2007). As a consequence, female participants repeatedly described their Preston experience in terms of self-actualization, liberation, and independence. If emerging adulthood is the age of self-focusing and possibilities, then migration activated the potential of emerging adulthood for these young women.
- 43 For my participants, migration acted as “home-transporting” device also in another, less pleasant sense. The negative aspects of Southern Italy participated, ironically, in the trans-nationalization of home, as the detested “Italian mentality” followed migrants on their routes. Accounts of work off-the-book, Italian employers not wanting to pay, cheating with taxes, or exploiting their compatriots (especially newcomers not yet fluent in English) were ubiquitous, particularly in the narratives of hospitality workers, and resonate with literature on migrant work in hospitality (see Alberti 2014). While participants never forgot to mention honest Italian entrepreneurs, these forms of work exploitation seemed to be the flipside to some “home-like” features of work in Italian businesses: the possibility to find work while still in Italy, the role of the employer as a gatekeeper in Preston, the ease of working in Italian-speaking spaces, and the general familiarity of being with fellow Italians at the beginning of one's journey. Work in the Italian migration field seemed to take the form of a moral economy, whose features will be discussed in a future publication.
- 44 In the next section, we will see how these negative aspects of Southern Italy were contrasted with Preston: this assisted the production of Preston as home, and at the same time it fueled a logic of coloniality based on distinguishing oneself from fellow Italians.

The coloniality of home

- 45 Marco was a minority in his decided claim of Preston as home, but more participants stated that they considered Preston their second home, or their home away from home. How did they characterize this home? In some cases, they evaluated it in contrast to other cities such as London or Manchester, praising its ideal size, its blend of relative

tranquility and “human scale” with good connections and city attractions. While these aspects, together with South-Italians’ “habitual spaces” and their homing practices, conferred a potential aura of home to the city of Preston, other, more immaterial values had to do with the whole UK as a potential home: the most cited ones were open-mindedness and meritocracy. A good example of this was provided by Serena (28 years old) from Apulia, who also perfectly exemplified the bricolage of homing and the ambivalence of home:

I don’t wanna say that I feel at home here, because I feel like betraying Italy (laughing). Actually, I feel at home in both places. I simply feel more appreciated and valued here, professionally and personally. I feel at home here because I literally have my home: I got a house and a car, something that I wasn’t able to do in Italy after years and years of work. This sense of freedom, that I can do something, I will do it, I did it! This I never experienced in Italy. Of course I miss my family a lot, but now I have a boyfriend here, whose family is Italian, and with them I feel as if I was in Italy. Me and him have a rule: we always eat together, at the same table, something that English people don’t do. This is an Italian tradition that makes me feel at home.

- 46 Beatrice defined the UK as «the land of the open mind», claiming that nobody, there, really judged others, and one could experiment with lifestyles more openly than in Southern Italy. Antonio (22 years old), a student from Molise, considered the greater awareness about LGBT+ causes and mental health issues as a mark of the more open UK mentality, while Gianna (24 years old), an Apulian employee, felt less judged and shamed about her body in the UK than she was in Italy.
- 47 Trust in UK meritocracy is a common sentiment among post-crisis migrants (Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Morošanu *et al.* 2021; Varriale 2021a): nearly all participants echoed the idea that, to put it with Ilaria (23 years old), «You can go to the UK as a dishwasher, and end up a manager»; that if one worked hard enough, they would succeed, no matter who they were – something that contrasted sharply with the immobility caused by the Italian mentality and social structure. Varriale (2021b, 2023) identifies such a belief in meritocracy as a product of the logic of coloniality constructing and sustaining North-South European relations. Coloniality translates into a doxa: a self-evident, commonsensical notion of how things are supposed to work, justifying the hierarchy between “serious”, rational, hard-working North European countries and the lazy, backwards Southern ones.
- 48 The intersection of coloniality and homing, emerging adulthood, and embedding practices was particularly salient within the “Italian community”. As we saw, fellow Italians were essential to participants’ homing practices, and they often were a first step into embedding in UK. This was hardly an unreflexive condition: participants were often not proud of being part of an ethnic bubble, especially when this contrasted with their desires for exploration and cosmopolitanism. Many lamented how the “Italian circle” (as some called it), and the scene of Italian restaurants, stopped them from becoming proficient in English. Most strikingly, certain habits of fellow Italians were seen as negative examples of migration and, interestingly, construction of adulthood.
- 49 “Other Italians”⁸ were identified with a diverse set of features. Some participants pointed to their lack of work ethic and of commitment to the project of settling down in Preston. Beatrice, for instance:

Living abroad is not for everyone, you have to know how to live away from home, and, unfortunately, I have seen many people come and run away, literally run away

the next day. They arrive, work half a day, and in the evening get their ticket to return. There was a girl who went up and down 800 times, who came, did a few months here, then summer would come and she would be like, «I miss home and I have to go home and I want mum and I want grandma»! I understand everything, I do not judge anyone, I do not dare to, but you must also understand that what you are doing, you are doing it for yourself, for your future. You see that this nation can give you a lot, do not make fun of it.

Or, again, Marco:

The little boy who comes here, who is 18, 19, 20 years old, who is used to staying at home, his mom cooks for him, puts the washing machine for him, all these things; then he comes here and has to do everything by himself, go to work, organize his life as an adult, he finds it a bit difficult. Maybe they find an excuse [to go away], well I don't know if it's an excuse, like «The weather, my friend, this and that...». *Uaglio* [South-Italian word for "boy"] you're here to work, not to...! If you want to go on vacation you take your vacation, if you want to come here to work that's adult life, cut the bullshit! Come here, work, go home, eat, and the next day is the same [Marco, translated from Italian].

50 Beatrice and Marco bore allegiance to the hard-working ethic of “deserving” migrants. It is interesting to consider how their discourses disqualified not only lazy or cheating conducts, but also “legitimate” ones, such as the idea of life abroad as a phase of exploration, or ideas of flexible, liquid migration (Engbersen 2012). They rejected emerging adulthood intended in its more unstable form, as a youthful phase of wandering (Kato 2013), and rather embraced a purposeful construction of adulthood – a commitment to the UK which was also a commitment to the project of adult life.

51 In other cases, criticism of “other Italians” took a harsher form, again blending an ethic of “successful” embedding with an ethic of emerging adulthood. For example, this is what Simone (23 years old), a barman for Calabria, answered when I asked him whether he felt young or an adult:

I'm young, I'm 23. “Adult” perhaps comparing myself with some of my friends who remained... Other people I met around here, who still have a teenager attitude. There is, like, this friend of mine who has been here for three or four years: you came here, and what are you doing? You don't learn English, you don't get anything done, maybe even [applying for] pre-settled status⁹ doesn't bother you, you're always smoking joints ... You do not take care of yourself. A life plan, a motivation... You don't feel motivated by anything. You don't care at all, I don't know how they manage! In a sense theirs too is a skill, a great skill! (laughing heartily). They stagnate, right? As for me, I can't stand still, I have to move.

52 Other participants discussed a practice seen as typical of many Italian immigrants in the UK: that of getting indebted, often for drug-related reasons, and systematically spending more than one earned. The logic of coloniality worked as a normative measure of the accomplishment of both emerging adulthood and embedding. “Other Italians” were at the same time unaccomplished adults and unaccomplished, disembedded migrants. Home, some version of home in the UK, was the mark of accomplishment within both dimensions. Still, such norm was highly ambiguous. “Other Italians” were stigmatized for not being curious enough to embrace the explorative habitus characterizing emerging adulthood; at the same time, the wandering and instability of emerging adulthood had to be put in service of a rather traditional transition into working, functional adulthood. Similarly, migrants did rely on the “Italian circle”, but too much reliance meant a stop in their process of

differentiated embedding. Narratives praising hard work and meritocracy coexisted with the refusal of exploitation; at the same time, it was commonly observed how Italians who “made it” and became entrepreneurs would go on and reproduce exploitation once they started hiring young migrants. Moreover, ethnography among young South-Italians showed how, on many occasions, participants’ representations and their actions diverged, with many of them embracing some of the behaviors that they stigmatized when performed by “other Italians” (on this, see Barone 2025).

- 53 The ambiguities and even contradictions can be seen as faults in the logic of coloniality. This logic produced a form of adjustment between the micro social fields in which participants enacted their homing, emerging adulthood, and embedding projects, and the macro dimensions of the North-South neoliberal order. However, this adjustment was always, to some extent, precarious and approximate. Such precariousness could be seen in the contradictions of homing and differentiated embedding, as participants were suspended between Italian nostalgia and attempts at embracing one’s destiny at a migrant. It could also be seen in the ambivalence of emerging adulthood, as the lives of these migrants needed the coexistence of youthful adventure and “mature” drive towards settlement.

Conclusion

- 54 The experience of post-2008 migrants reveals a profound reorganization of Europe around a neoliberal division of labor (Antonucci, Varriale 2020). South-Italian youth migrating to Northern England are a telling microcosm of such experience and its revelatory power: the life contradictions that they experienced as migrants show the shifting status of South-European youth in a time of crisis. Their expressive, self-searching motivations to migrate reflected their access to the Global North model of emerging adulthood; at the same time, for many of my participants such emerging adulthood had to be “taken seriously”, as a source of potential for establishing a “mature”, hard-working adulthood away from the unemployment and bleak perspectives of Southern Italy. Their homing practices blended elements of South-Italian attachment and nostalgia with enthusiasm for North-European modernity and meritocracy: in their lives, home was at the same time a haven of warmth and belonging, and a project of life in the UK, an aspect of their embedding in the destination society. Homing constructs such as “home away from home”, “second home”, or simply the contradictory status of planning life away from home, feeling uprooted or at home nowhere, could be seen as adjustments between these two competing meanings of home.
- 55 Home was, hence, an instrument for embedding, and so was the company and network of fellow Italians. These, too, acted as a contradictory device, producing a quid of homeliness and embedding while potentially harming further embedding in English society, as too much closeness to “the Italian circle” meant living in an ethnic bubble that was, after all, a surrogate of the positive and negative aspects of South-Italian casa. The stigma towards “other Italians”, their construction as a nemesis of good migration and good, accomplished adulthood, reflected the difficulties to grapple with this double status of living among Italians, as a resource and a burden. It also reflected the complexities of “home” as a transnational construct, that one would carry with themselves in the destination society, both in a symbolic and in a physical sense. The

narrow worldview, backward “mentality” and corruption of Italy simply moved with the other aspects that made one feel (positively) at home: The Lizards lifestyle was back in the UK, away from South-Italian towns one thought they had left. Such contradictions were, at least in part, the product of a logic of coloniality demanding migrants to adjust to a deservingness habitus – be like North-Europeans; be hard workers; be cosmopolitan while being able to set roots; be mature adults. The logic of coloniality sparked such contradictions because it demanded adjustment at the micro level: home, emerging adulthood, and embedding are structures of feeling strongly related to intimacy and personhood. As such, they are to some extent resistant to determinism, and are permeable to hysteresis (Bourdieu 1984).

- 56 South-Italian youth lived in Preston by navigating among these complexities, setting up projects of embedding and adulthood that did not always succeed, and grappling with the stigmatizing demands of neoliberal Europe. Their homing practices linked homes that were distant in space in time, casting them as delicate experiments in stable living within an ever-shifting brutally unstable, social order.

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NOTES

1. Thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers for reading this article and offering their critical feedback.
2. See, among others, Cavallaro (1981); Chezzi (2014); Colpi (1991); Haworth, Rorato (2019); King (1977); Shankland (2014); Ugolini (2013).
3. See Anderson (2013); Varriale (2023).
4. See, for example, Conti (2012); Della Puppa, King (2019); King et al. (2014); Pepe (2022); Procentese et al. (2022); Scotto (2015).
5. www.preston.gov.uk/article/11507.
6. www.eunews.it/en/2025/11/24/calabria.

7. Participants were recruited among migrants from the following regions: Abruzzo, Apulia, Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, Molise, and Sicily.
8. Other work on Italian migrants in the UK has come across the phrase “other Italians”, or, similarly, the “good/bad migrants” dyad, as an emic concept – see Pepe (2022); Zontini, Genova (2022).
9. Here Simone refers to one of the statuses allowing European citizens the right to stay in the UK following Brexit. Pre-settled status gives EU citizens the right to stay in the UK for five years, after which they can apply for indefinite residence.

ABSTRACTS

The article explores the *homing* (home-making) practices of South-Italian youth migrating to Northern England. These youth borrowed aspects – such as places, routines, and values – of both Southern Italy and Northern England to construct a sense of home. Homing, in turn, mediated the processes of emerging adulthood and differentiated embedding in which they were invested, and at the same time worked as a marker of the accomplishment of both processes. South-Italian migrant youth, indeed, linked the ideas of a successful adulthood and successful embedding in the destination country to hard working, the ability to take root and make home, the embrace of meritocracy, and a relative containment of nostalgia towards Southern Italy. This implied othering and despising migrants whom they judged unsuccessful at such processes – unwilling to make home in the UK, unwilling to advance in life, or simply not well-integrated. Such ideas of accomplishment as adults and functionally embedded migrants were strongly influenced by a logic of coloniality, adjusting migrants’ values and practices to the neoliberal organization of Europe and of North-South European relations. According to such logic, success – as an adult and as a migrant – meant adherence to the values of meritocracy and deservingness that oriented such relations and framed the government of migration in England and, more generally, in Europe. However, the adjustment between such broad logic of coloniality and migrants’ own practices and dreams was always imperfect and precarious. Migrants’ understandings of home and adulthood reflected the ambiguities of their own adjustment to the logic of coloniality.

L’articolo analizza le pratiche di *homing* (“fare casa”) dei giovani dell’Italia meridionale che migrano nell’Inghilterra settentrionale. Questi giovani combinano aspetti – luoghi, routine, valori – delle loro esperienze in Italia meridionale e in Inghilterra per costruirsi un’idea di casa. L’*homing* media i processi di transizione alla vita adulta e di integrazione differenziata in cui sono coinvolti, ed è, al contempo, spia della riuscita di questi processi. Le idee di adultità e integrazione “legittime” sono associate dai migranti al duro lavoro, alla capacità di mettere radici e fare casa, all’adesione alla meritocrazia e a un relativo addomesticamento della nostalgia verso l’Italia meridionale: da questo punto di vista, i migranti ritenuti da loro “falliti” in tali processi – non disposti a fare casa nel Regno Unito, non intenzionati a progredire nella vita, o semplicemente non ben integrati – vengono ‘alterizzati’ e disprezzati. L’idea di successo nell’adultità e nella migrazione è, a sua volta, improntata a una logica di colonialità, che adatta i valori e le pratiche di questi migranti all’organizzazione neoliberale dell’Europa e delle relazioni tra Nord e Sud europeo. Secondo tale logica, il successo in quanto adulti migranti deriva dall’adesione ai valori di meritocrazia che orientano tali relazioni, e che danno forma al governo della migrazione in Inghilterra e, più in generale, in Europa. Tuttavia, l’adattamento tra questa

logica di colonialità nel suo senso più ampio, e le pratiche e i sogni dei migranti, è sempre imperfetto e precario: le concezioni di casa e di età adulta dei migranti riflettono le ambiguità del loro adattamento alla logica di colonialità.

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