

Monografica

From Auto-Ethnography to Global Politics: a Personal Journey through the Italian Diaspora

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Apolitical Intellectuals

One day
the apolitical intellectuals
of our land
will be interrogated
by the poorest of people.
They will be asked what they did
while their community
was extinguished,
like a sweet fire, small and alone.
[...]
“What did you do when the poor
suffered, when tenderness and
life burned out in them?”
Apolitical intellectuals,
you will not be able to answer.
A vulture of silence
will eat at your guts. Your own misery
will pick at your soul.
And you will be mute
in your shame. (by Otto René Castillo 1965)

1. Introduction: Discovering the Political Promise in Italian Diaspora Studies

When I first discovered the fields of folkloristics and oral history, I immedia-

tely sensed them to be both oppositional and deeply ethical disciplines, although it would not be until I had actively engaged with the practices of folklore, ethnology, and oral history, that I could imagine just to what degree, and how perfectly they would align and integrate my personal history, my professional and political convictions, and my spiritual aspirations. My work in the world, has largely come *through* these disciplines. They have taught me to listen deeply and have come to form a spiritual practice for me, as I have written elsewhere (Del Giudice 2009). As a first-generation scholar from a peasant/immigrant background, I was finding my way in the foreign territory of academia, learning its language and rules, first encountered in the study of literature. My first act of scholarly resistance was to insist on a dissertation examining Italian oral balladry (rather than Dante), despite opposition from my professor of Italian Renaissance Literature. Only after I left my dissertation director and Italian Literature behind, could I complete my research in Italian folk culture within an elite academic department, and would come to better understand the liberating promise of this road taken, in phases, in an altogether organic way, as I delved into my own Italian culture, seeking out the rarely-heard voices of my own peasant class, decidedly at the bottom of a historically (and still) hierarchic Italian society. Indeed, I sought to record and understand the openly derided in much of the literary history I had been studying.

My journey of discovery has meandered through such topics as folksong, beliefs, celebrations, food, women, healers, architecture, art, local history – all viewed from the triangulated perspective of a transnational, and all coming to foster a steadily emerging sense of social and political advocacy. My position outside of the traditional academy¹ likely provided the freedom to explore – and perhaps even to create – my readerships and audiences, helping me to establish a commitment to public service and public audiences, beyond the university. Exclusion from the academy contextualizes my 3-decade-long scholarly engagement with diaspora studies, as they became more emboldened and politically conscious with each ethnographic project I completed, leading to an awakening sense of global citizenship and global politics. This essay recounts part of that journey, while it concludes with my growing awareness of the limits of political action and advocacy, as I consider the impasse I seem to have reached, and explore a tentative path forward.

¹ Given the autobiographical nature of this essay, works cited will largely focus on my own production and will not span the field more broadly.

2. My path through Italian diaspora studies: integrating the personal, professional, and political

My ethnographic journey begins with traditional essays on lullabies, ballad variants collected and contextualized, extending to food, wine, and architecture among Italian immigrants in Toronto, thence to the history of pasta, gastronomic utopias (*Cuccagna*), Sicilian food altars (St. Joseph's Tables) in Los Angeles, family faith healers, and so forth. I surveyed Italian folklife in Los Angeles for the City, and sought to create visibility for the local community, its culture and history, helping to galvanize community around a virtual piazza (Del Giudice 2004) in www.ItalianLosAngeles.org. I curated Tables in mainstream museums, taught oral history methodologies ("Collecting and Connecting") for the general public, always aiming for public education. I also disseminated (with the Istituto Italiano di Cultura) an anthology of traditional Italian music, translating dialect texts into English and providing the actual sounds via cassette-tape compilations. As a means of enabling the study of Italian oral culture, my dialectologist husband (Edward F. Tuttle) and I donated our entire Italian folk music collection to the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive. After having recovered knowledge of Italian folklife for myself and my family, and having integrated it into my own deeply transformative process of self-knowledge, most of what followed was an act (a mission actually) of public service, sharing that cultural tradition more widely, creating space for it wherever possible, and seeking to give voice to the silenced and visibility to the erased. Public programs needed to be compelling. My approach was to combine the academic together with the public educational, as the work of the non-profit, the IOHI (Italian Oral History Institute), which I founded and directed for ten years, encouraged expansiveness, openness, and boundary-crossing. We produced conferences, festivals, exhibitions, workshops, concerts – all of which presented and advocated for Italian oral culture and history. It was supported by the Italian Cultural Institute, and the Consulate in Los Angeles, the City, museums, several universities, and even religious institutions. (This work earned me a knighthood from the Italian government, of which I am proud).

These early studies and programs meandered through the byways of Italian folklife in many of its forms, presenting regional Italian, diasporic, and Mediterranean culture, highlighting class and regional divides within Italy, some of which were carried over to the diaspora. Such work also helped clarify certain tensions between the Italian diaspora and central, mainstream Italian culture, as well as to focus my own goals as a scholar in the world. I had become a cultural and political advocate on several fronts. Therefore, mine was not only the goal of "making

dead bones sing” (that is, recovering the knowledge of the ancestors), but also of helping to broaden consciousness, increase socio-political awareness and political engagement, committing to this specific worldview and mission. Such advocacy gradually became more confident and intentional. Some of my writing even began to explicitly use the word “politics”². I further realized that to remain within the Italian “box”, was not enough. It had become restrictive, and so I sought ways of crossing boundaries wherever possible, creating common ground, sharing goals and connecting within wider networks of solidarity. I encouraged the act of embracing others, acts of compassion and open-heartedness, and may have sounded to some, to be preaching – and I was. My tendency was to seek the universal in the specific, to broaden the contexts of whatever I was studying, to encourage Italians to create bridges: e.g., *tarantismo* within its Mediterranean context (*Performing Ecstasies: Music, Dance, and Ritual in the Mediterranean*); Italians within a diverse nation of various religious persuasions (*Italian Jews: Memory, Music, Celebration*); and finally, towards cross-racial alliances, as in the Watts Towers Common Ground Initiative (www.WattsTowersCommonGround.org), and with the No-Columbus Day campaign (<https://nocolumbusday.wordpress.com/about/>). My goal was to place Italian diaspora studies at the service of better global citizenship, even across ethnic, racial, religious, and other divides – locally, nationally, and internationally. I sought to expand our view in a range of directions, and at many levels: Italians within the local municipality, nationally, and internationally. What could we offer the world from our own cultural and historic perspective, which might prove of great value at this particular moment in time?

I wish to review some of the projects in my career as an activist scholar, in no particular order, and hope that this episodic approach will not prove a disjointed narrative. Here follow some highlights of my ethnographic scholarship, my scholarly activism, and my social advocacy. The descriptions of discrete topics: e.g., folk revival, food justice (St. Joseph’s Tables, Cuccagna), cross-racial alliances (Watts Towers, No Columbus campaign), WWII concentration camps (Italian Military Internees), are followed by a series of observations on the characteristics of my approach to scholarship and public programs, as well as some general conclusions regarding their possible merits, together with their personal and political relevance.

² E.g., “Costantino Nigra: Le chant populaire, la politique régionaliste et nationale” (Del Giudice 1999); “The Political Ideology of Sabato Rodia: A ‘Natural Anarchist’?” (2018); “Feeding the Poor? Welcoming the Stranger: The Watts Towers Common Ground Initiative and St. Joseph’s Communal Tables in Watts”, in *Political Meals* (2014); “Beating the Drum: Italian Traditional Music Advocacy in the Diaspora” (2019).

3. Folksong and folk revival

Folksong provided my first access to a cultural and political underground which helped me understand Italian historic and cultural class dynamics. It was literally a way to hear the voices from the margins, and from the erased, the local, the obscured, and bring them to the attention of many. I discovered Italian folksong from northern to southern, and in diasporic settings, along with other various expressions of folklife in its multifaceted forms (including ritual culture often obscured by overlaid Catholicism). I also discovered a centuries-long embedded craving for justice and its sung protests for a more egalitarian society. Archival materials, together with direct fieldwork, made folksong study compelling and life-changing. Ultimately, it shaped my cultural politics and much more besides. I sought to listen but also to reclaim and restore these voices from the margins. Involvement in the Italian folk music revival in Italy and in the Italian diaspora, has yielded many scholarly publications in my curriculum vitae, on lullabies, ballads, dance songs, *neo-tarantismo*, to name but a few. Each individual essay was not necessarily making a political statement, but taken together, pointed in a similar political direction.

In *Essential Salento: Festival of Salentine Culture* (1998), followed by *Performing Ecstasies: Music, Dance, and Ritual in the Mediterranean* (2000), both IOHI conference/programs, both academic and public, we presented astounding aspects of southern Italian folk culture from an impoverished past of subsistence, contextualized in its various Mediterranean settings, and offered concerts, exhibitions, workshops, films, as well as conferences and publications. Folk music revivals, whenever they occur in modern times, do not merely present music from the past, but embed it in discourses of political emancipation of the Left – although, of course, they have also served nativist and nationalistic ideologies, which I need not elaborate here. The Salentine folk revival brought similarly motivated world music movements and networks to my attention, and in solidarity, I sought to work for cultural and political equity for all those on the margins of ours and other societies. It was part of a grander scheme to align the transnational Italian diaspora with a global South movement.

4. St. Joseph's tables, gastronomic utopias, and food justice

The Sicilian practice of making food altars such as St. Joseph's Tables (Del Giudice 2010, 2014), may be found wherever Sicilians migrated. It was, in the diaspora, both a means of celebrating one's culinary and religious heritage, remembering the hardships of displacement, as well acknowledging an ongoing need to feed

the hungry and welcome the stranger. In a place such as multiethnic Los Angeles, I have tried to mediate the extension of this practice to welcome recent (sometimes undocumented, and certainly non-Italian) migrants, as well as the homeless in our midst, engaging compassion across ethnic boundaries and immigration status. Couldn't our own historic experience of exclusion help us heal these wounds for others (cfr. Del Giudice 2014)? First in 1998, we created a Table in a mainstream museum (UCLA Armand Hammer Museum), in conjunction with the Sicilian community, as a means of making this local tradition more visible to a general audience. But then, in 2011, while curating the Watts Towers Common Ground Initiative, I devised the plan to create a Table in a local church in Watts (where there are no Italians), as a means of encouraging solidarity across ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries, by literally sitting around and sharing a common table. The second Table was the more challenging project of political and cultural activism.

Food studies led me to food justice programs, which eventually evolved beyond ethnic discourse altogether. Now my goal is to connect with the poor through more direct assistance, e.g., by coordinating meal preparation for the residents of PATH (People Assisting The Homeless), as formerly it was to engage with the homeless beyond providing food, in the area of spiritual direction³. It is not surprising that food became for me, a particularly fertile means of advocating for the poor, and engaging in political actions of hospitality (as with DACA—"Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" students, with refugees, and with the homeless). Documenting food practices led to broadening audiences and widening uses of our traditions, in service of a greater good. My political creed today is clear: we *must* feed the poor, and we *must* welcome the stranger. Find a way to do it. Open your arms wider. Make your politicians pay attention.

But before St. Joseph's Tables and traditions of food redistribution, I was captivated by the myth of *Cuccagna* (the mythic Land of Plenty) and other gastronomic utopias, partially embedded in the food altar tradition as well. Centuries of hardship, poverty, and hunger made the imagined state of *Cuccagna* evergreen in Italian oral and print tradition through the centuries, because it embodied a collective dream of the hungry masses. The search for a land of plenty, where one was not overworked and underfed, where basic needs could be abundantly met, was a dream that endured wherever there was a real experience of deprivation. It propelled Italian migrations toward the Promised Land (America) in waves, over

³ Cfr. other homeless programs such as New Directions (homeless women veterans), with which I was involved for two years as a group spiritual director.

more than a century. It propelled other European migration toward the Americas and wherever else they could seek an improved living, globally. But this is a more widely shared dream and the mass movements of those in need did not end with *La 'Merica*. Today, there are still many peoples around the world who continue to search for the possible (and impossible) lands of wellbeing, right up to today's refugees (economic, political, religious) in Mediterranean waters, where they wash up on Italian shores almost weekly, searching for *their* "Cuccagna"⁴.

5. Watts Towers, Black Lives Matter, and Political Solidarity

A particularly poignant example of expanding discourses, while departing from Italian folk culture, may be found in the case of the Watts Towers, a monument I have been involved with since 2003. The Watts Towers ("*Nuestro Pueblo*") are a local monument built by a visionary Italian immigrant laborer/artist, Sabato (Simon) Rodia, beginning in the early 1920s, working within his southern Italian cultural tradition, in an economically-depressed and marginalized area of Los Angeles. His structures later became a beacon of hope for a predominantly non-Italian community, offering a brilliant example of how creativity could transform broken lives and transcend ethnic boundaries. Little could he have imagined, when he decided to build something big "something they never got 'em in the world," that they would become a state and national historic landmark, and eventually be proposed as a UNESCO World Heritage site – an effort I conceived and led for several years. Just how had my Watts Towers work and trajectory begun? In the late 1980's I had surveyed Italian folklife for the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department (*A Preliminary Survey of Italian Folklife in Los Angeles*). Then, more than a decade later, in 2003, I was looking for Italian sites on the landscape of Los Angeles to include in a festival I was producing, *Italian Los Angeles: Celebrating Italian Life, Local History, and the Arts in Southern California* (2005). It was then I remembered the Italian artist and his Towers. First and foremost, he was a notable local Italian, but secondly, he had chosen to work, with open arms, in a multiracial backwater of Los Angeles. Why? What was he hoping to achieve with his magnum opus? Rodia was an early, 20th-century immigrant who turned his own exclusion and suffering into a landscape of Italian exceptionalism, as well as a place of welcome and exchange. It was a gift to others. This symbolic place spoke to the cultural wealth of immigrants (Italians and others), their power of creativity, and the possibilities we all had to

⁴ Cfr. Del Giudice lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dntRSSIF9RA>.

engage with and contribute to community building. It is the narrative I continue to advance in my own writings about the Towers.

But more remained to be done and the Watts Towers could help us do it. I was determined to do my part to further foster recognition of the monument within its own community and within the Civil Rights Movement, as those before me had done. E.g., the Towers played a key role at the heart of Black Los Angeles and its Black Arts Movement, and so I needed to listen to and learn that history, if we were to engage in any meaningful action of working toward “common ground” around the monument. Conversely, I and other Italian diaspora scholars offered our own information, which previously had not been fully available – for a more complete understanding of the artist’s Italian cultural and historic background, which Rodia brought to bear on his work. We helped clarify what he was trying to achieve and the message he was trying to convey. I sought only to *add to*, never to displace or replace the community that had claimed the monument as their own in earlier years. We sought partnerships and collaboration around a monument that was significant to many communities and I believed that this multiplicity could only enhance its standing with the City and its funding dollars. For my part, I was also attempting to get local Italians to pay greater attention to, and to value more appropriately, this extraordinary landmark on the Los Angeles cultural map – something they had largely failed to do, until very recently, and only largely as a result of our efforts. We brought Italian Consuls and one Ambassador (for the first time ever) to appreciate the Towers, to offer their help, affirm solidarity, and even provide financial support for programs.

Two international conferences (2009, University of Genova, and 2010, University of California, Los Angeles), and a Los Angeles-based festival led to greater municipal attention and care for the monument and its immediate community. A Mayor’s Task Force (on which I sat for years) was revitalized to improve communication between civic administration and community, as well as to spur growing awareness of the monument’s international standing. Once again, only political activism could help safeguard the Towers, as it had first in the 1950’s with the Campaign to Save the Watts Towers from a city-decreed demolition order. Eventually, I spearheaded a UNESCO World Heritage candidacy for the monument, beginning in 2016, as the next logical step in landmarking for the monument. From my perspective, serving on the Mayor’s Task Force helped me understand where political power lay and how it could be wielded for or against the community and the monument, as well as various avenues for challenging that power. The Task Force became the flash point to advocate for the community *and* on behalf of the monument’s artistic integrity, often against the ambitions and the poorly-commu-

nicated plans of the City on both fronts. Over the years I was personally involved, we did battle against a skateboard park at the Watts Towers, and most recently against an encroaching high-rise housing development, which would obscure the Watts Towers and box them in. The jury is still out on this latter score. We have also continued to lobby for increased funding for the programming and staff needs at the Watts Towers Arts Center. Further, I pushed hard for a UNESCO candidacy which required that the “owners” of the monument be fully on board, but was able to only reluctantly, and after public outcry, achieve approval (and a City proposal letter) at the eleventh hour (a day before the submission deadline).

The Watts Towers (and the anti-Trump years, of course) were my school for political activism. I learned to engage in political acts of resistance, to rally community support, to conduct social media campaigns (blocking skateboard parks: <https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2010/10/watts-towers-lacma-skateboarding-tony-hawk-gangs-.html>; and high rise housing: <https://www.wattstowers.org/why-the-development-is-a-bad-idea>), and to advocate on the monument’s and community’s behalf. I could prove, after having consulted with the nominating agency for any U.S. UNESCO site candidacy (the National Parks Service), just how the City had botched any attempt to advance this candidacy, and to say so in a formal letter. I concluded that it was precisely because the City had *not* upheld the best interests of the monument, favoring a massive housing development adjacent to the Watts Towers instead, that the UNESCO candidacy was doomed from the start (since any U.S. UNESCO proposal paid great attention to site access and egress to each and every monument). Such a housing project indeed would dwarf and isolate the Towers, meant instead, from its artist’s conception, to be viewed by rail passengers as they went by. As a result of my futile effort, I concluded that I could no longer lend my support to the Task Force, and so removed myself with a formal letter of protest. Recently, I have stepped away from the Watts Towers, while continuing to only offer expert historic consultation, and letters of support, wherever they may be needed. Having reached the end of what I could do for this beloved place, I ceased attending community or Task Force meetings. After over a decade of closely working with my good friend, Rosie Lee Hooks, director of the WTAC, while mediating relationships with an international Watts Towers community, Italian authorities, and the Parks Service, I decided to stop. Exhausted and discouraged, I began to evaluate where I currently stood, and what came next. I am no longer willing to mediate these relationships, sometimes positive, at other times reluctant, depending upon administrations. And COVID, of course, played its part, in limiting what anyone could do. Although I do sincerely hope in some form of lasting legacy, having labored long to forge a unique partnership between

Italians, the predominantly Black community, and others, around the WTAC, I now trust that my work can be turned over to others, such as the Italian American Italian Museum. The shoulders of an independent scholar can only bear so much, and without active institutional support and good will, even less. As I am still in the process of reviewing and assessing my complex involvement with Watts Towers advocacy, I will say no more here about the matter – but I will conclude that it has been the most important, rewarding, and personally consequential work of my entire professional career.

6. WWII concentration camps: closing the circle

Finally, I close my series of examples of scholarly and political advocacy work, to thereafter make some general observations and conclude this essay, with the case of my research on concentration camps. Ironically, my work on Italian Military Internees – my father among them – and their time in WWII Nazi camps from 1943 to 1945, will likely conclude my research in Italian oral history and ethnography. On the other hand, this concluding essay will certainly be the most politically charged. I envision this essay *in fieri* as closing a circle (opened with my first published essay on Italian lullabies), bidding adieu to my deceased father, to the ancestors, in general, and to ethnographic scholarly work *tout court*. It will also provide a fine example of the extreme value of forgotten diaspora oral histories (recovered during a COVID digitization project), for a national historical narrative, recovering pieces of itself from afar, beyond its value as personal and family history. It is both a most personal and the most political of any of my writing, and I have already made tentative forays at this narration through oral virtual presentations (e.g., for the John D. Calandra Institute and at the 2021 American Folklore Society annual meeting). Further, it demonstrates the power of oral history to address historic silences and injustices – yesterday’s and today’s – as it calls our attention to the dangers of authoritarian, hyper-nationalist ideologies and the violence they produce, of the historic Nazi-Fascism type, as well as neo-varieties (Del Giudice, forthcoming).

7. Independent and institution-free scholarship: challenges and advantages

I wish here to offer a few reflections and observations of a more general nature, about my time as an activist scholar in Italian diaspora studies – some on the

positive, and others on the negative side of the ledger. As an independent scholar for most of my scholarly life, I have learned to collaborate with various institutions, in order to achieve my goals. Further, I have learned how to run a nonprofit institution especially created to further such goals. For the most part, however, I have functioned as a one-woman band, beating my own (advocacy) drum, still dreaming of being welcomed within an academic institution for Italian Studies, yet realizing, in increments, that it was not going to happen, and that I was not going to continue “begging” for acceptance. I’d instead explore and exploit that freedom of “extreme” independence, free to come and go, to not be claimed by anyone, to reach beyond such constrictive environments, sometimes hopelessly retrograde. My choice seemed affirmed by being named a Fellow by the American Folklore Society, and a Cavaliere by the Italian Government (both in 2008). Both honors, alleviated some of that institutional insecurity for me. I had been seen and formally recognized, so I could somewhat ease up on the hyper-activity of a lifetime to produce products that would measure and prove my “worth”. Thank goodness.

Another general tendency and evolution of my work, was to embrace ever-larger perspectives, achieved gradually. In fact, I had begun as a scholar learning about her own “tribe”, to understanding Italians vis-à-vis others, then to understanding my place as a transnational, triangulated scholar (Italy-Canada-USA), and then to broader cross-cultural perspectives within which I might situate Italian diaspora studies. This local to global trajectory though was already implicit in my earliest endeavors. I was the first of my family to leave the nest. Finding the world of Italian Canadiana, beyond my immigrant home, too narrow. I went first to Italy for two years, thence to the US, and thereafter all over the world. The need for such “migrations” have become more urgent (and explicit) in times such as ours. I know that personally too, I must continue to move forward, advancing global consciousness and borderlessness, as a citizen of the world – and not only of Italy, Canada, or the US. Such pluralism and breadth are required, I believe, for the benefit of truer cultural, economic, and political equity – for the climate, for biodiversity, for the sake of the earth’s resources, balance and sustainability. We, in the privileged world, must actually be willing to step back, let go, and not ruin everything by insisting on our own narrow perspective. It means letting go of Columbus – whoever he may have been for Italians of the past (and, with far less valid reason, for some Italians of the present). We “first-world” White folks must let others lead too – the indigenous, the black and brown, the under-represented, the women, the youth; and we must actively shun privilege, colonialism, and white supremacy. The entire house requires a structural retro-fit,

if not a wholesale razing and rebuilding⁵. As we read and learn more about the excluded and oppressed (Native American History, Black History, Refugees), so much new and irrefutable information must be learned and digested and considered – and then *acted* upon. The activism must be *active*.

8. Ethnography and global worldview

My trajectory towards a more global view within my own scholarly discipline, may have been there from the very start. It is what propelled me away from an immigrant cocoon in Toronto, away from my family, towards a broader education and worldwide experience, first in Italy, but outward from there. And a wider reach was again discernible in my move away from the literary fold, into oral traditions, which certainly also deepened my perspective while opening many more horizons. I collected ballads in the north, the south, and in Italy's diaspora; and I continued that work in a region and in a dialect not my own, for the Regione Lombardia. With ballads, I participated regularly in the International Ballad Commission (the KfV, a group of the SIEF), and attended conferences throughout Europe, later becoming a KfV vice-president and then president. These meetings got me accustomed to international travel, when not too many of my Italian diaspora (nor American folklore) colleagues were ranging as far. These meetings in particular, provided the transformative opportunity to directly experience the "global folk" at a capillary level, across a wide geography, as we were granted access to intimate ethnographic milieux wherever we met. I came to realize that I am naturally attracted to and curious about diverse cultures, and earnest about expanding views. This trend for instance may be identified in various projects too: e.g., whereas in 1992, I assembled a bibliography of Italian diaspora folklife, today, I am coordinating an online International Folklore and Ethnology Resource Guide, as a partnership between AFS (American Folklore Society), S.I.E.F. (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et Folklore), as well as the I.S.F.N.R. (International Society for Folk Narrative Re-

⁵ We must all apply ourselves to this task, in whatever way we can, from wherever we can. I have taken this to heart and have tried to devise or contribute to structural change: e.g., as a member of the AFS Fellows and during a 3-yr term on the AFS Executive Board (International Committee Chair) as well as on the Nominating Committee of both, we have sought to rewrite bylaws to ensure a more level playing field, to prioritize diversity and equity in leadership opportunities. You can meet any resistance to change by acting with the proponents of change (which are usually the majority, we have learned), against those who hide behind rules and bylaws and "time-honored" procedures.

search), on behalf of the AFS, whose International Committee I chaired for three years. This later project, conceived in COVID times was a means of spanning the globe while sitting still, so that all parts of the globe might be represented, made visible, and be placed in conversation with itself. I have enjoyed many international scholarly encounters, among perhaps the most notable being teaching a graduate course (Oral History, Oral Tradition: Praxis and Theory), in the Ethiopian Studies Department, at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia in 2010. I have travelled to the Northern Mariana Islands to conduct Veterans History Project workshops (2016). I have lectured in the field school for the Elphinstone Institute of Aberdeen, Scotland (2016, 2018). I gave a keynote in Zhoushan, China (at the Island Dynamics conference in 2018).

And the global Italian diaspora itself has become more conscious and more intentionally networked across continents. I relished participation in a recent series of Italian diaspora meetings, in Melbourne, Australia (2018), New York (2018), and was to have attended the 2021 meeting in Buenos Aires as well, which was postponed due to the pandemic. Italian diaspora studies have come a long way as we band together, to give greater density and visibility through meetings, in person and otherwise, to the many scholars in each of the diasporas and as a global entity as well, dispelling isolation, and even making ourselves better known to Italian scholars in Italy – whose attitudes toward the diaspora may perhaps be changing and opening up, as this very volume itself suggests. Further, I have recently contributed to the *Canada* volume in a forthcoming 4-part series of publications on the primary Italian diaspora destinations (USA, Canada, South America, Australia), subvented by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such efforts both strengthen the global Italian diaspora network, as well as give it greater visibility *in Italy*. Italians should no longer ignore us, or so we hope. Italy should pay attention, we believe, and for several reasons, not least of which for reasons which derive from our direct global experience. That is, we have lived in and been educated in multicultural settings (e.g. Canada, USA, Australia), and we have known these complex multiplicities far longer than Italy has, experiencing and learning to negotiate civic discourse in these societies of the future. We have also explored and created some successful paradigms of collaboration across difference in some of the world's most populous metropoli: New York, Los Angeles, Sydney, Toronto. Modestly speaking, we may even have some expertise to offer, should Italians be interested⁶, may even be considered a van-

⁶ I have personally attempted influencing “official” Italians (university, consulate, cultural

guard, modeling a global embrace with all our multifarious *Italianità* intact (even the dialectal and peasant parts, sometimes excluded in Italy itself).

9. Setbacks and moving forward

While it may be true that I have contributed to progressive cultural and political causes, I have also experienced setbacks. E.g., we were not successful in placing the Watts Towers on the U.S. “Tentative List” for a UNESCO World Heritage candidacy; we may not be able to stop development from encroaching on the Watts Towers campus. I no longer serve on the Mayor’s Watts Towers Task Force and do not know what part Italians will play with regard to the monument in the future. On other fronts, I also realize, with dismay, that a segment of the Italian diaspora (the usual suspects) have dug in their heels vis-à-vis Columbus, and despite a clear general mood of deposing offending statues to questionable heroes in America and elsewhere, stubbornly stand against change. They have even succeeded in having the Italian parliament officially ratify Columbus Day as a national holiday for Italian Americans. This is beyond disappointing to me and to many of my politically progressive colleagues. So, where do we go from here? It will take others to carry forth the torches of unsung Italian achievement within progressive discourses and contexts, and I am confident that the next generation of scholars *will*, standing against the tides of nationalist political surges, at ease with cultural border-crossings, more in-tune with the discourse of common ground, and certainly impatient about sustaining the environment and the global human community.

10. Deep listening and repairing the world

A spiritual thread has woven its way throughout my scholarly life, it cannot be denied. Deep ethnographic and spiritual listening are not dissimilar, and listening has always led me towards action:

institute) in the diaspora for decades, attempting to make inroads on various fronts. And I have also sought to contribute an Italian diasporic viewpoint by publishing in Italian publications, by helping to organize international conferences in Italy, giving lectures, presenting books on the diaspora, *in Italy*, connecting via fieldwork, via professional organizations, to the Italian academy – including agreeing to co-edit with my open-minded colleague, Katia Ballacchino – this very issue of the journal, *Voci*.

The practice of **deep listening** – however one practices or names it – inevitably leads us to hearing needy voices of all sorts – the well-articulated as well as the barely audible needs. And the accumulated effect of such listening frequently leads to a tipping point. We hear and begin to ponder ways of alleviating suffering, to the best of our abilities, talents, and resources. Can one hear without being moved to some sort of action? Engaging this ethical response is frequently transformative (Del Giudice 2009: 17).

In our current state of civic affairs, nothing less will do. I have been particularly drawn to issues of poverty, social exclusion, migration and refugees. And I am convinced that never has it been more critical to work better at the interface between us and others, and to work for global sustainability and equity. The history of Watts and the cultural politics surrounding the WTAC have attuned me, at a capillary level, to the injustices inherent in being Black in America. I have worked with many other diaspora Italian colleagues, to dismantle the Columbus narrative, while at the same time advocating for Indigenous Peoples' Day (even participating on a panel in the Los Angeles City Council on its first IPD in 2018). It was one of my proudest moments. The No-Columbus Day campaign has led me to better understand the systemic abuse of Indigenous Peoples, the genocide historically practiced on them, and the horrors of colonialism. I have become a voracious follower of podcasts, books, courses, and more, on the history of these two groups in the nation's history. I sincerely sought to better understand the grave injustices they have suffered, and confront the original sins of the nation that have determined the violence at the core of its White culture ever since. We must learn. And we must also learn to be appropriate allies, helping these historically marginalized fellow citizens to achieve equity, while bringing about systemic change and reparation. Even if this mission may entail speaking up and acting against our own ethnic group. It is simply unconscionable, for an Italian (or anyone else), to insist on celebrating a figure such as Christopher Columbus, reviled in his own day, for the excesses of violence and cruelty he practiced on First Peoples. Italians must do better, as must we all. Italian *prominenti* can no longer hold sway and determine Italian diaspora policies, when they are frequently uninformed, socially-retrograde, and self-serving – no matter what degree of prejudice Italians have suffered in the past. We must rise above our own narrow ethnic self-interest, to ensure that greater justice be done.

On occasion however, our own histories of injustice and oppression can lead towards solidarity, if only we could heed the historic lessons we should have lear-

ned. St. Joseph's Tables, for instance, should lead towards solidarity with Latino and other immigrant communities, and foster a determination to undo the harsh exclusions and injustices being practiced upon them today. Our Italian diaspora history has prompted me towards specific social action in favor of UCLA DACA students at the 580 Café (St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Westwood); as well as immigration reform more generally (rallies in favor of immigrants at the Plaza de la Raza, Los Angeles, and elsewhere). Our strength derives precisely from our own experiences on the margins, which help us understand the marginalized and undervalued locally and globally. We should not tolerate – and should act to terminate – the politics of White supremacy (suddenly normalized), anti-migration, the denial of humanitarian aid to refugees. My own experience and trajectory as an immigrant directly awakened this consciousness and shaped my politics.

11. An ethical commitment toward global citizenship

Some may abhor what they see as a betrayal of my Italian “tribe” or even roll their eyes at a “white savior mentality” that is rather naïve and inappropriate, or point out that allyship itself presents its own ethical dilemmas⁷. And some of this may be true, but I am certainly open to adjusting or replacing approaches which no longer serve, as we go along learning more and better in time. I will seek to be guided by evolving best practices. But seeing and acting through the lens of a specific national identity, it seems today, may actually stand in the way of global health and survival, whether we are Italians, diaspora Italians, Americans, or other. My craving for peace, justice, equity goes well beyond the study of Italian ethnography, I confess.

Embracing the globe requires a spiritual, besides political, realignment – one that tends toward questions of human rights, the health of our planet, Mother Earth, shared resources. My own attempt to shift toward global consciousness, and to encourage others to follow suit, means highlighting our vast interwoven reality of the *one* family. And as I learn more about the earth itself (through courses in geology, wilderness spirituality, finding mother trees: cfr. Simard

⁷ For example, I have never felt I actually had the right to speak for others. I've sought to be an ally, but not the storyteller. We listen, hear, respond, and step back. We ask what is needed. Or we help provide tools and then listen to what is made with them (e.g., contributing recording equipment for the students in folklore studies at Addis Ababa University with which ethnographic products could be made).

2021, and more), I realize how many more beings, including non-human species, also belong to the living family. In reconnecting with the earth (cfr. Franciscan “brother sun and sister moon”), the land, and all its creatures, we find our truest mother, our truest home: Earth.

As I reflect on my own evolution of consciousness, and realize that it seems to have been a natural progression: begin by knowing yourself, your family, your village; moving beyond to connect with others, across many boundaries to understand your shared humanity and its goals (the basic right to food, health, shelter, work, security and the ability to flourish on this earth); finally, embracing the entire planet and protecting its right to flourish and survive. The leap I am envisioning is clearly a spiritual one – one that aims for the hearts and minds of scholars and everyone else. We must learn to reconnect with nature, to listen, and to support those who have already understood this great truth, Indigenous Peoples (and our own Italian peasants), among them. Let them show us a way (Kimmer 2015), and suggest what we must do to reinstitute that “Great Conversation” (Loorz 2021). I, for one, am seeking to replace my Italian club card with a Global Entry passport. We must *all* work for humanity, beginning with those most in need, and more broadly, for the planet itself. We’ll have to pitch in, each from our own small corner of the vast world, to advance that change.

It is all personal now. It is all political. It is all collective. It is all in the *doing*. Fewer words, more action. I do not feel that I require the scholarly mediation any longer. The outcome of the 2016 American presidential election screamed, to anyone who was paying attention, the urgent need for us all to take to the streets, to become activists. I heeded the call, and did what I could: e.g., Get Out the Vote (GOV) postcards, phone calls to our politicians and to voters, donations to political parties, and resistance to that criminal and dehumanizing administration, in every way possible, and on so many fronts – fronts on which we *thought* we had made some progress: from Black Lives, MeToo, climate change, food insecurity, the social safety-net, to global issues of human rights, peace, migrations. Throughout those years, I became a loud, louder, loudest possible protester and resister, at first worried about exposing myself publicly, but soon realizing: what had I to lose? The answer was: everything, if I did *not* protest loudly. And so, I protested and spoke out some more, more clearly, never mincing words, never fence-sitting. I did so on Facebook, on the streets, on the Mayor’s Watts Towers Task Force, in my writing, in public speaking. Was I speaking out too much? Was I alienating former friends? Had I descended into a vortex of fear and dread about the future, fueled by the media? Once I took that leap, I was clearly no longer willing to return to armchair scholarship. Too much was at stake. The return of

a civic-minded president has been a relief, mentally and physically, but it is not at all clear, as I write, how this will turn out. Yet, I *have* developed some media-related PTSD, going on long news-fasts, re-evaluating my approaches to life, work in the world, and how I will go forward. I can no longer live on a media-induced psychic cliff.

12. Conclusions

My career has been shaped by a powerful growing moral imperative, which our opening poem addresses, to be an ethical scholar, a culturally-political, and also a political, scholar. My moral sense has blended Christian liberation theology and Leftist socio-economic ideologies, increasingly moving towards the heart of worldwide peace, justice, and sustainability movements. My global beliefs? All life is sacred, treat others accordingly, work for justice, peace, equity always. Engage in tangible acts of compassion, especially towards those unlike yourself, especially those who are most oppressed, excluded, and in need. Feed the poor. Welcome the stranger. Do what you can, even small actions, in your own corner of the world, hoping (perhaps even *knowing*), that such actions can, however minutely, reverberate throughout the entire world. Were we *all* to engage in such actions, and advocacy, we could indeed repair the world. Intellectual “work” cannot be divorced from this overarching imperative to love one’s neighbor.

Finally, I wish to conclude by confessing that I have reached an impasse. Political action and advocacy through my scholarly and public sector work have recently become physically and existentially depleting. Shouting, beating my drum, organizing, protesting in the streets, have come to feel like a vicious circle. Further, once one has been pegged as an “activist,” most will begin ignoring your loud and public voice, so one ceases to be as effective. Further however, a shadow of doubt has been growing, that I am no longer convinced public demonstration and political discourse to be the most effective approach. Let us consider the case of climate change: yes, politicians and environmentalists can argue and negotiate carbon percentages, cap and trade, plastics elimination, *but*, until we control the greed that produces the multiple depredations of our environment, the extractive mentality, and more, I don’t believe we can go far. It will take a change of heart, or a change of generations (i.e., the ascent of those who have already had a change of heart). I feel something analogous may be true for many fields of scholarly work in the world – ethnography, folklore, oral history, but also

medicine, biology, botany, business. We must apply ourselves, with whatever passions engage us, with whatever tools and skills we have, to address the urgent questions and crises of our day, considering their repercussions into the future. We can no longer remain apolitical intellectuals (if ever we could), because the battle for our single and joint futures must engage all of us – whether the issue be: protecting the rights and environments of Amazonians, returning land to First Nations, welcoming refugees and all those in flight from home, as well as all those historically marginalized from society – Italian peasants included. It is why Black Lives Matter, cannot be divorced from Indigenous Land Rights; nor action on behalf of refugees separated from the human rights of global women (“the unfinished business of the 21st century”, according to Hillary Rodham Clinton); not to mention the rights of Mother Nature, upon whom our shared futures depend. There is no other way. To return to the poem with which this essay begins, now directed to my colleagues: how will *you* justify your work, as a member of a privileged minority, when asked: what did you do for humanity?

While I have reached this impasse, and sit with it, I also know, that impasses often prove to be the prelude to a turning point in life, which will require further engagement with spiritual contemplation, as I strive to discern new directions and actions which might come next. As a consequence of the impasse, I have proceeded to close many doors behind me, especially the institutional ones: e.g., the Italian academy, Italian cultural institutes and consulates, municipal administrations, professional organizations, political party organizations, church, and others yet to be named. I am mostly done with words – all sorts of words: religious, political, ethnographic. Part of me is cynical, and realizes that the forces of repression, white supremacy, authoritarianism, will continue to thwart progress, civil rights, human rights, until the end. Darkness never gives in, and finds myriad ways to trip us up. But idealistically, I also believe, that we will not ultimately turn back, and there may come a definitive tipping point, toward all that we have fought for – especially as a fed-up generation ceases to tolerate hate, violence, corruption, greed. I am perfectly aware, as I write these words, that they are utopian. But only hope can keep us alive, hope in a more perfect world, in order for us to get up each day and do the work that requires doing.

You’ll find me increasingly wandering the forest or by the shoreline, contemplating, praying, and imagining this new world into being, trying to figure out how to persuade others to embrace a transformative vision of the future, thereby identifying my role in this project. While the transformation may not happen in my lifetime, I have faith that *some* of the work we have done in the world, will have contributed to that intangible and tangible will to do good for others. On the

other hand, if not in my lifetime, then I'll be one of those ancestors guiding (or hounding) my descendants, towards that path.

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Abstract

From emigration to Toronto, Canada, from Terracina (Latina), Italy in 1956 to the present day, the author has been on a personal and scholarly journey of meaning-making: from attempting to understand family, class, and ethnic history and culture – through the disciplines of oral culture, folklore, and oral history – to a need to contribute to a global politics of migration and human rights. Beginning with university Italian language classes in the 1970s in Toronto, to Medieval Italian Literature in Florence, to the discovery of folklore and ethnomusicology in Los Angeles, the deep journey of discovery has meandered through topics such as folksong, belief, celebration, food, women, architecture, art, local history – all viewed from the triangulated perspective of a transnational. Through academic activity and public sector programming (founding and directing the Italian Oral History Institute for 10 years), and a range of personal (religious, gendered, ethnic), and professional intersections, a growing sense of social and political advocacy has emerged. A 3-decade-long scholarly engagement with diaspora studies, and from the diaspora (largely as an Independent Scholar), has led directly to a profound awakening about global citizenship and global politics. The author even ponders leaving scholarship behind altogether, since it seems to have served its purpose of leading toward more direct action. This essay recounts part of that scholarly and life journey.

Dall'emigrazione a Toronto (Canada) da Terracina (Latina), nel 1956 fino ad oggi, l'autrice prosegue su una pista personale e intellettuale, impegnandosi nello sforzo di comprendere le varie dimensioni della propria famiglia, classe, storia e cultura etnica, attraverso discipline quali l'oralità, tradizioni popolari e storia orale, che hanno contribuito a formarle una coscienza e il bisogno di contribuire a una politica globale della migrazione e dei diritti umani. Cominciando con corsi di lingua italiana a Toronto negli anni 70, corsi di letteratura del Medioevo e del Rinascimento a Firenze, la scoperta del folklore e dell'etnomusicologia a Los Angeles, questa profonda ricerca si è soffermata su temi quali: il canto popolare, la religiosità e la festa, l'alimentazione, la donna, l'architettura, l'arte outsider e la storia locale – analizzati da una prospettiva transnazionale triangolare. Attraverso l'attività accademica, la programmazione pubblica (fondando e dirigendo l'Istituto di storia orale italiana IOHI per 10 anni), e una larga gamma di intersezioni personali (religiose, di genere, di etnia) e professionali, ha sempre più sviluppato una visione sociale e politica del suo lavoro. I tre decenni di impegno negli studi sulla diaspora e dalla diaspora (soprattutto come

Independent Scholar), l'hanno portata a una riflessione sulla cittadinanza globale e sulle politiche globali. L'autrice contempla perfino di lasciare alle spalle la vita da studiosa, che le è servita a raggiungere questa consapevolezza per applicarsi in azioni più dirette. Questo saggio racconta una parte di questo percorso scientifico e umano.

Key words: Italy-Canada-USA, triangulation, Italian Oral History Institute, public sector folklore, advocacy.

Parole chiave: Italia-Canada-USA, triangolazione, Istituto di storia orale italiana, folklore pubblico, impegno politico.