

“Torna a Surriento”: Return Migration to Southern Italy from 1876 to Today

Venue: Taylor Institution Library, University of Oxford

Dates: 24-25 September 2025

Organised by:

Fanny Clemente (Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, University of Oxford)

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As part of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship, Grant agreement n. 101149130, Project: SAIL – Sicilians dreAmIng Louisiana: Agents of Migration and Labour Recruiters on the Palermo – New Orleans Route (1865-1901) based at the University of Padova, Department of Historical and Geographic Sciences and the Ancient World.

In collaboration with:

Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, University of Oxford

DiSSGeA, University of Padova

MoHu – Mobility and Humanities Centre of Advanced Studies, DiSSGeA, University of Padua

ISO – Italian Studies at Oxford

Migration Oxford Network

Confirmed keynote speakers:

Selena Daly, University College London

Martino Marazzi, University of Milan

As evidenced by the extensive and ever-growing body of literature, historians have persistently examined the various facets of the Italian “many diasporas” (Gabaccia 2000), which follow complex trajectories, including that of the return. For instance, during the Mass migration period (1876-1914), Italians migrants in the US were considered as “birds of passage”, moving back and forth, seeking seasonal work opportunities to enhance their economic status, always keeping in contact with their land through letters and remittances, with the ultimate aspiration of returning to their place of origin (Rinaldetti 2014; Fauri 2015). During this period, 14 million Italians emigrated from the country; a figure that subsequently increased to 26 million by 1976 (Rosoli 1978; Vecoli 1995). After 1901, migration evolved into a predominantly Southern phenomenon, and the period following WWII signified the further *meridionalizzazione* of this trend (Bonifazi 2013). However, it is estimated that 50% of these 26 million migrants, disseminated across Europe, the United States, South America, but also to a lesser extent to Africa and Oceania, eventually returned to Italy (Cerase 2001). Recent statistical analysis covering the period from 1902 to the present days – when mobility has become much easier – confirm an aggregate return rate of 40% (Sanfilippo and Prencipe 2025).

Return migration to Southern Italy is also a notable topic in works of literature, music, cinema, theatre and other forms of creative expression, which explore the practical and emotional complexities that surround the positive or negative experience of going back. The latter may be definitive, as in the instance of return migration, wherein the former emigrant elects to live permanently in their place of origin. This is what happens in Mario Baffico’s film *Terra di nessuno* (1938), describing a traumatic return home full of difficulties and predicaments, and Andrea Camilleri’s *Maruzza Musumeci* (2007), where the protagonist’s return to Sicily takes, instead, the form of a joyous new start. At other times,

the return may be a temporary “visit home” (Baldassar 2001) by a diasporic community member who is just briefly reconnecting with their family or relatives, as in Leonardo Sciascia’s *La zia d’America* (1958) or Olga Campofreda’s *Ragazze perbene* (2023). It may also assume the form of “root tourism” (Tomczewska-Popowycz and Taras 2022), a journey undertaken by Italian descendants to explore their familial heritage, as addressed by Helen Barolini’s historical novel *Umbertina* (1979) and, more recently, in the second season of the popular TV series *The White Lotus* (2022) (Fognani 2024). In several works, returning to one’s place of origin is less motivated by individual, personal factors and, rather, situated within a wider historical and political frame, sometimes bearing nationalistic connotations as in the experiences of emigrants returning as soldiers to fight for their nation depicted in Luisa Macina Gervasio’s short story “I tre ferrovieri” (1915-1916) and Guido Brignone’s film *Passaporto rosso* (1935). The experience of return itself may be represented as not linear and corresponding to complex, at times disorienting, back-and-forth trajectories, as portrayed in Vincenzo Rabito’s autobiographical *Terra matta* (2007) and Claudia Durastanti’s memoir *La straniera* (2019). Other works focus not on the returning emigrants’ experience but on the emotional turmoil of those waiting for their return, as exemplified by Maria Messina’s *Cenerella* (1918) and “La Mèrica” (1911), reflecting the experience of the so-called “white widows” (Reeder 2003). Others yet centre on the nostalgic longing for the return as an idea that, in Marazzi’s words (2023) is “dreamed, contemplated, meticulously planned and/or anticipated by imagination” but not necessarily achieved. This is the main theme of several popular songs from the repertoire of the *canzone napoletana*, from Raffaele Viviani’s *L’emigrante* (1918) to Libero Bovio’s *O paese d’o sole* (1925) to Giambattista De Curtis’s *Torna a Surriento* (1894), which has become an emblematic anthem of the Southern Italian emigrants’ desire of return.

International scholars are increasingly devoting their attention to the topic of return migration (Harper 2012; King and Kuschminder 2022; Oberbichler, Pfanzelter, and Larcher 2024). Nevertheless, after Cerase’s (1971) definition of four type of return migration– failure, conservation, investment and retirement – the Italian case has only sporadically been addressed (Caroli 1973; Cerase 1974; 2001; Corti 2006) or, when examined, has revealed the need of more accurate research (Sanfilippo 1993). Recently, the topic of return has garnered renewed attention thanks to Tirabassi’s works on root tourism (Tirabassi 2022; 2024), to Daly’s studies on emigrant soldiers returning to fight WWI and the impact on their families (Daly 2024; 2025). Pretelli and Izzo (2023) have shown the potentialities of an interdisciplinary approach involving historians, literary critics, geographers and marketing experts to study the return from the US in the 20th century, while Baldo (2019) has analysed the Italian-Canadian case from a linguistic perspective and in relation to the practice of translation.

Aiming to expand the analysis of the topic, ***Torna a Surriento* invites scholarly contributions from the fields of migration history, social history, economic history, literature, music, cinema, theatre and other forms of creative expression that investigate the phenomenon of Italian return migration from 1876 to the present day.** Whereas the focus of the conference is specifically on returns to Southern Italy, where Naples (and Sorrento) are emblematic of the broader Southern cultural imagination and experience, we hope to collect contributions which have resonance with the experience of return from any country across the globe.

We hope to address the topic from multiple perspectives, and areas of interest include (but are not limited to):

- Nostalgia, homesickness, and desire to return
- Failed attempts and obstacles to the return
- Successful strategies of return
- Practical aspects of the return journey

- Traumatic experiences of return and alienation
- Return and transfer of knowledge
- Nationalistic, propagandistic, and political use of return
- Political engagement, persecution, exile, and return
- Returning soldiers and war experiences
- Colonial experiences, decolonisation, and repatriation
- Citizenship and the decision to return
- Generational change and return
- Financial strategies, remittances, and economic impact of return
- Questions of gender and the experience of return
- Waiting for those who return: “white widows” and family members
- Language barriers and return; the language of the returnees

Presentations can be both in Italian and English. All submissions must be sent via email in a single Word document to the email address tornaasurriento2025@gmail.com no later than **30 June 2025** and include the following items:

- an abstract (250 words max)
- a short bio (100 words max)
- full name, email address, and affiliation.

Notifications of acceptance will be sent by 20 July 2025.

Please feel free to contact the organisers Dr Fanny Clemente (frances.clemente@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk) and Dr Alice Gussoni (alice.gussoni@unipd.it) for further information prior to submission.

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