

21st Century W.O.P.s:
Roy Paci, Raiz, and the Cultural Politics of Migration

George De Stefano

EMP Pop Conference:
Shake, Rattle: Music Conflict, and Change
April 11, 2008

“We witness day after day the imbalanced conflict between an Italy that aspires to become European with its head held high...and the forces whose objectives are to become part of the African continent.”

-- Umberto Bossi, Lega Nord (Northern League)

“Italy my new Italy/Made out of India, Morocco, Albania, Colombia and Senegal”

-- Raiz, “W.O.P.”

Italy, a nation that once spawned mass migrations, is becoming a nation of immigrants. New arrivals from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe number 3.7 million, more than six percent of the Italian population. (The European Union average is 5.6 percent.) These are legal immigrants; there are several hundred thousand more, mainly North and sub-Saharan Africans, who are undocumented.¹

The reaction of native Italians to the influx has been both hostile (from the political Right and segments of the Roman Catholic hierarchy) and welcoming (the various parties and movements that make up the Italian Left, as well as grassroots Catholics.) In the midst of the national debates over immigration, two popular, left-wing musicians, Rosario “Roy” Paci and Gennaro Della Volpe, known as Raiz, are articulating a vision of Italian identity that is expansive and inclusive.

It’s no coincidence that both come from Italy’s south, Paci from Sicily, Raiz from Naples. More than a century after Italy became a unified nation, the Mezzogiorno, as the regions below Rome are collectively known, remains an internal Third World, both in socioeconomic terms and in the perceptions of other Italians, as the quote from Northern

¹ “Italy’s Immigration Boom,” *Corriere della Sera*, October 30 2007

League leader Umberto Bossi demonstrates. When Bossi speaks of “forces” that are oriented more towards Africa than Europe, he means southern Italians.

Roy Paci makes politicized party music that mixes southern Italian and Latin idioms, jazz, reggae, ska and hip hop. An accomplished trumpeter who began playing with jazz bands when he was barely a teenager, Paci is an extroverted performer who evokes another rowdy horn player, bandleader and vocalist -- the Sicilian-American Louis Prima. With his brilliantine black quiff, pencil mustache and sharp, if gangster-ish suits, he also recalls 1950s star Fred Buscaglione, one of the first singers to bring Latin music to Italian pop.

On his early recordings Paci sang mainly in Sicilian and Italian, and occasionally *en español*. (Paci lived in Argentina for a number of years, and has traveled throughout Latin America.) His recent lyrics are in a lingo he calls “italoño,” a blend of Sicilian, Italian, Spanish, French, and English. In the notes for his album *SuoNo Global*, Paci makes clear the sociopolitics of this hybrid tongue: “With our Sicilian language, one of the most ancient in the world, rich with Greek, Roman, Arab, French and Spanish influences, we are...creating l’italoño, an idiom that brings us closer to all peoples...”

Paci’s band Aretuska, which he formed in 1999, originally comprised only Sicilian musicians. Since then, the line-up has expanded to include mainland Italians, an African, and a Brazilian. He’s made four albums with Aretuska, the most recent being *SuoNo Global* (2007).

In his politics and aesthetics Paci is close to the Franco-Spanish rocker Manu Chao. He has toured with Chao and played on several of his albums, including *La Radiolina*, his latest, and on *Dimanche à Bamako*, the Chao-produced album by the

Malian duo Amadou and Mariam. Chao, returning the favor, sings on Paci's *SuoNo Global*.

In addition to his work with Aretuska and Manu Chao, Paci organized one of the most exciting “world music” projects in recent years. In the summer of 2006, he, klezmer musician Frank London, and Serbian bandleader Boban Markovic began touring as “Il Terrone, l’Ebreo, and Lo Zingaro.” The “terrone,” a northern Italian term of disparagement for southern Italians, is Paci, “l’ebreo,” the Jew, is London, and “lo zingaro,” the gypsy, is Markovic. The multiethnic trio’s wild but totally right mix of traditional Sicilian music, klezmer, and Serbian dance tunes, has rocked concert halls all over Europe.²

From 1991 to 2003, Gennaro “Raiz” Della Volpe was the lead vocalist of Almamegretta, a groundbreaking band that blended Neapolitan melody and rhythms with reggae, dub, rock, rap, and North African music. The American bassist and producer Bill Laswell, who collaborated with the band (and produced Raiz’s 2007 album, *Uno*) said that the only thing that kept Almamegretta from international stardom was language – their preference for singing in Neapolitan and Italian.

Raiz’s voice is one of the most distinctive in international pop, grainy and plaintive, with a timbre an Italian critic called “antico” – ancient. You can hear in his vocals aspects of southern Italian music that date back to antiquity, such as nasal tonality and an ornamental approach to pitch. He’s also steeped in the rich melodicism of *canzone napoletana*, Neapolitan song. Though Raiz’s singing is thoroughly Neapolitan at its core,

² Videos of their concerts can be viewed at YouTube.

it assimilates influences including Bob Marley, Marvin Gaye, and the Egyptian diva Oum Kalthoum.

Like Roy Paci, Raiz uses language politically, in his case, the dialect of working-class Naples, as a form of cultural resistance to the dominance of Tuscan Italian. He also writes in Italian, and in idiosyncratic English.

Kindred spirits, Raiz and Paci appear on each other's recordings. Raiz contributed "Siente a Mme," a rap in *napoletano*, to Paci's *SuoNo Global*; Paci plays trumpet on Raiz's *Uno*.

Both artists defy the traits stereotypically ascribed to their cultures. Raiz is not an ebullient singing Neapolitan bursting with joyous melody; he's intense, often brooding, with a deep streak of melancholy. Roy Paci is no somber Sicilian burdened by his island's often tragic history; he's a bon vivant with a raucous sense of humor and fine sense of irony. Even his mafioso cum hipster suits and little mustache are ironic.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, politically militant Italian musicians sought to remain outside the corporate music industry, recording for small indie labels and distributing their work through alternative channels. This was particularly true of the hip hop crews associated with the social centers set up by socialists and anarchists in Italian cities.³ (Almamegretta emerged from one of the social centers, Officina 99 in Naples.) Roy Paci and Raiz, however, are not underground artists. Both are pop musicians who aim to reach broad audiences.

Paci records for his own label Etnagigante but his albums are distributed by V2 Music, the company founded by Richard Branson and now owned by Universal. Raiz

³ "Fightin' da Faida: The Italian Posses and Hip Hop in Italy." Tony Mitchell, in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the United States* (Wesleyan University Press, 2001)

records for Universal, which distributes his recordings in Europe and to a limited extent outside the European Union.

If culture is a struggle over meaning, these two artists contest what it means to be an Italian, specifically a southern Italian, in an Italy undergoing demographic change at the same time older social realities not only persist but in fact have worsened. Poor Eastern Europeans, North and sub-Saharan Africans, Arabs, Asians, etc. seek opportunity in an Italy that still denies it to many of its native inhabitants. As the Italian daily *La Repubblica* reported last year, the longstanding economic divide between North and South has worsened, with Milan the nation's richest city and Crotona, in the southern region of Calabria, its poorest.⁴

As elsewhere in Europe, fears of economic competition from newcomers, as well as xenophobia and racism, have triggered violence against immigrants, though far less often in the south than in Rome, where there have been attacks against Romanians and Romanian gypsies, and in the North.

Both Roy Paci and Raiz have deplored anti-immigrant bias, in their public statements and in their music.

Raiz has said that if one of his songs stopped a youth from beating up a Moroccan, he'd feel he had succeeded. Paci, at his website, states that "I try every day with all the means I have at my disposal to fight any form of racism."

As southern Italians, Paci and Raiz are themselves heirs to a historical legacy of colonialism and racist denigration. At the Congress of Vienna in 1814, the Franco-Spanish Bourbons united southern Italy and Sicily into the single Kingdom of Two

⁴ "Milano la più ricca, Crotona la più povera, continua ad aumentare il divario Nord-Sud." *La Repubblica*, June 6, 2007

Sicilies, with Naples as its capital. Prince von Metternich, the defender of the political order established by the Congress, described Sicilians as “half-barbarous, superstitious without limits, fiery and passionate like the Africans.”⁵

The exploitation of the south and the oppression of its peoples drove millions of southerners to immigrate, mainly to the Americas, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The “southern question” that Antonio Gramsci theorized in the 1920s remains unresolved in contemporary Italy.⁶ Poverty, corrupt and incompetent public administration, and organized crime still plague the Mezzogiorno. Though these ills are rooted in political economy, too often they’ve been ascribed to a southern essence. In other words, the problems of Sicily or Naples are due to the nature of Sicilians and Neapolitans.

In today’s Italy, it is not uncommon for southerners to be openly maligned, and not only by northern politicians. A few years ago I heard a comedian on a popular TV variety show tell this joke: “What’s worse, living next to a garbage dump or a Neapolitan family?” Answer: “The Neapolitan family. The garbage dump at least is quiet.”

Raiz and Roy Paci say “vaffanculo” (fuck off) to all this in their music. In “Sudd,” written by Raiz for Almamegretta, he calls southerners a “gente generosa” (generous people) who have been betrayed by both national and local powers. More often, though, the message is in the medium. Both valorize their southern cultures by drawing upon and re-working traditional music, Raiz the canzone napoletana and the tammurriata, a percussive folk dance, Paci folk-based Sicilian popular song and brass band music.

⁵ Dainotto, Roberto. *Europe in Theory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) p. 180

⁶ Gramsci, Antonio. *The Southern Question*. Pasquale Verdicchio, trans. (West Lafayette: Bordighera, 1995)

They strategically deploy their southern ethnicities for self-representation purposes. But they do not homogenize ethnic difference or reduce it to stereotypical criteria. They instead open up the categories of “Sicilian” and “Neapolitan” to new possibilities, new identities. Raiz, for example, welcomes the linguistic innovations that immigration will bring: “It would be great to see, a few years from now, the [Italian-born] children of Senegalese speaking Neapolitan dialect enriched by African vocabulary.”⁷

Both Paci and Rai employ the aesthetic-political strategy called *contaminazione*, a word that in Italian has a positive connotation, signifying enrichment of native idioms through incorporation of foreign elements. On Raiz’s *Uno*, soulful Neapolitan melody and tammurriata beats mix with samba, reggae, and hiphop, a fusion Raiz calls “extremely local and immediately global.”

The politics of *contaminazione* implicitly reject the invidious distinctions xenophobes like Umberto Bossi make between an idealized European Italy and a purportedly backward African one. Paci, Raiz, and other leftist musicians like Naples’ Daniele Sepe and Puglia’s Nidi D’Arac, identify with the dispossessed of the world, whether poor southern Italians or immigrants fleeing poverty, war, and oppression.

Raiz’s song “W.O.P.” explicitly links the southern Italian history of migration to the experiences of other peoples now coming into Italy. He directly challenges Italians unhappy about immigration:

Don’t you remember how years ago
Your relatives left from here to search the world for a little happiness?
You can’t stop him who wants it and doesn’t have it!

⁷ “Raiz, l’ex Almamegretta racconta la Napoli di oggi: ‘un luogo immobile.’” Saverio Grimaldi. *Panorama*. October 9, 2007

The poor southern Italians who made up the mass migrations of the last century were often called “wops,” a slur generally thought to mean “without papers.” As in today’s Italy, many of those immigrants to America were undocumented. But Raiz doesn’t stop at reminding Italians of their immigration history. He welcomes the birth of a new Italy and a new multicultural Italian identity:

Italian I’m Italian
I love this country, there’s no other more beautiful
Italy my new Italy
Made out of India, Morocco, Albania, Colombia and Senegal

Raiz moreover posits southern Italian identity itself as hybrid, a product of mixed bloodlines:

Italian I’m Italian
Born an’ bred
In the sunshine of the Mediterranean
This is a tribute to the mix of the race
To the black to the white you can see in my face

And:

This is what I like the most of being Italian
I’m the meeting point of every culture on the earth
Asia Europe Africa out of many here we are
One blood

Roy Paci works a similar local/global dialectic. Sicilians, having migrated to North and South America, to northern Italy, other European countries and Australia, are a diasporic people. In “Pizza e Sole” (Pizza and Sun) from his 2005 album *Parola d’Onore*, Paci treats this experience humorously: “I left my beloved Sicily,” he intones at the beginning of the song, “to end up in Italy.”

“Gastarbeiter,” from the same album, offers a more pointed perspective. The song’s title is German for “guest worker,” a term that sounds inoffensive, even

welcoming. But in practice, it stigmatized immigrant workers. It said: we need your labor now, but we don't want you to stay here. At best, you're our guests.

Paci recalls when, decades ago, Italians were gastarbeiters in Germany and how they were mocked as “spaghetti-fressers.”

He urges his countrymen to “see ourselves in those who have come to Italy to work...solidarity is needed.”

In “Italiano a Barcelona,” from *SuoNo Global*, Paci, switching between Spanish and Italian, celebrates a “global cultural mix in the same music,” a pan-Latin identity that includes southern Italians, as part of a “raza mestiza.” Paci's claim to Latino or Hispanic identity is no facile identification; it is rooted in Sicily's history as a Spanish colony and the Spanish strain in Sicilian culture.

The double entendre of the title *SuoNo Global* is obvious only when one sees how it's printed on the CD: with the “no” highlighted. Paci proclaims the universality of his music while also associating it with the “No Global” movement against corporate capitalist globalization.

W. H. Auden said that “poetry makes nothing happen” – at least not by itself. The same can be said for pop music. But a cultural politics of resistance can contest the ideological constructions behind socioeconomic inequities.

In today's Italy, the Southern Question, that unresolved problem of structural inequality, now involves more than the people of the Mezzogiorno. It now also an issue of how Italy will accommodate those peoples who have immigrated from the global South. These new arrivals and their children – the Senegalese-Neapolitans, the Tunisian-Sicilians, the Romanian Romans --inevitably will change their adopted homeland.

Roy Paci and Gennaro “Raiz” Della Volpe, sons of Sicily and Naples, not only espouse a cosmopolitan, inclusive, and forward-looking vision of Italian identity. In their locally-based but globally-oriented music, they give voice to that new Italy now being born.