

## **Displaced by the humanitarian sea? The representation of contemporary migration in Italian maritime-emigration museums**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines and problematizes the place of contemporary migration in the displays and projects of maritime-emigration museums in Genoa and Naples, Italy's two principal ports of embarkation for millions of transatlantic emigrants during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Galata Maritime Museum, opened on Genoa's waterfront in 2004, has a floor dedicated to the history of mass emigration including a permanent section on current migration to Italy. Naples, in contrast, has a longstanding project to open an emigration museum in an 18<sup>th</sup> Century building on the passenger wharf, which over the last decade has also explicitly drawn parallels between past and present flows in its publicity. Since the 1970s, both cities have seen the settlement of different migrant communities, particularly in the historic centres adjacent to the ports; areas that concomitantly have become fulcrums for burgeoning heritage and museum industries. Significantly, none of these migrants arrived in the two cities by sea, while the majority entered Italy via land or air routes.

The paper critically reflects on the production of 'migration heritage' in these two contexts vis-à-vis the presence of international migrants in the surrounding area. In particular, I interrogate three key representational frames: (i) the correlation between emigration and immigration; (ii) the sea as an all-embracing metaphor for mobility; and (iii) the recourse to images of emergency and crisis, such as arrivals on the island of Lampedusa, which – I contend – are underpinned by what Didier Fassin defines as 'humanitarian reason'. Drawing on display/discourse analysis and ethnographic fieldwork in the two cities as well as engaging with recent literature on the representation of migration in European museums (e.g. Whitehead et al. 2015), I argue that the two cases, despite their good intentions, dislocate the local contingencies of immigration and, in doing so, also overlook migrants' contribution to the reshaping of 'indigenous' heritage sites in the historic centres.