

Lying the Truth

Practices of Confession and Recognition

by **Cristiana Giordano**

Italy's 1998 Immigration Law 40 includes Article 18, which allows foreign "victims of human trafficking" the right to temporary residence permits on the condition that they participate in a rehabilitation program. The first step of this program, the act of *denuncia*, is to file criminal charges against exploiters at the police station. However, the resulting testimony cannot be understood through the victim/agent trope of the bureaucratic state, which uses these categories to make the other understandable through a process of what I call "confessional recognition." In this article, I show how, despite the proliferation of biometric technologies to identify foreign others and so control migration flows at borders, confessional practices continue to play a central role in deciding who is admitted legally. Moreover, I illustrate how the question of redemption and expiation is not only a crucial issue for Catholic groups involved in aid programs for foreigners but is also central to Italian state integration policies, thus revealing how juridical norms are deeply influenced by the vocabulary of religious morality and vice versa.

Early on a summer morning in 2004, I went to the police station of a northern Italian city in the Piedmont region. The *questura* (police station) was still closed, and two long lines of people had formed in front of the main gate. It was a familiar scene, one I had seen many times before: one line for foreigners waiting to apply for or collect a new or renewed residency permit or documents for family members, and one for Italian citizens. I was not sure where to stand. I was there for an appointment with Charity,¹ a Nigerian woman in her early twenties who was scheduled to file criminal charges. I had met her through a local Catholic NGO that helps foreign women involved in prostitution networks leave prostitution and enter the state-funded rehabilitation program. The NGO volunteers had approached Charity a week earlier, as she stood on a badly lit road crossing the rice fields on the outskirts of town. They explained to her that she could leave prostitution and apply for papers if she filed charges against her exploiters and went through the state-funded rehabilitation program; she could also benefit from access to medical care and other services. She said she had to think about it. The idea of denouncing her madam frightened her, but she also showed several fresh bruises and scars on her face and arms that spoke of recent violence and abuse. A week later she contacted the association and asked for its support. I had worked for the NGO for a year, volunteering and conducting fieldwork. I mostly collaborated with Promise, a dynamic and

sharp woman from Benin City who worked as a cultural mediator for the NGO and who helped women file criminal charges at the police station.² On that summer morning, Promise was to join us later at the *questura* to translate for Charity.

Not sure of which line to stand in, Charity and I cut them both and proceeded to talk to the police officer at the gate. We had an appointment with Inspector Caccia, we told him, asking, "Could we please be let in so we would not be late?" We walked up the wide stairs of the fascist-style building to reach the second floor, where Inspector Caccia's office was located. On the way, we crossed paths with officers of various ranks, secretaries, and some handcuffed men and women. Inspector Caccia was sitting in front of his computer sipping a cup of coffee. He carelessly greeted us and invited us to take a seat while he continued working at the computer. A few minutes later, Promise arrived, and Inspector Caccia seemed relieved to see her. She was his best cultural mediator, he later explained to me; when she translated for the women, documents were well crafted and got approved by the higher police authority right away. Promise accompanied Charity to the office next door so that she could have her photos and fingerprints taken.

In 1998, Italy passed a law allowing foreign "victims of human trafficking" the right to temporary and renewable residence permits in order to escape from situations of violence

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1. I have changed all names to protect my subjects' identities.
2. Cultural mediators are trained to translate between different languages and to mediate between foreigners and Italians in institutional settings such as hospitals, prisons, schools, shelters, and courtrooms.

and abuse on the condition that they participate in a rehabilitation program. These programs are fully funded by the state, but they are mostly implemented by Catholic groups engaged in fighting criminality and foreign prostitution. For a foreign woman seeking a residency permit in Italy under Article 18, the first step of rehabilitation requires filing criminal charges against her traffickers. Other steps involve living in a shelter (usually run by Catholic nuns); professional training in Italian language, cooking, and housekeeping; elderly care (to enhance employability); and receiving medical examinations. Since the 2002 passing of the Bossi-Fini law, which made regulations on foreign immigration stricter and more exclusionary, the numbers of foreigners appealing for legal documentation as victims of human trafficking and as political refugees have increased strikingly. This is associated with conditions of growing poverty and violence in countries of origin but also with the fact that the Italian state makes only a limited number of categories of recognition available for foreigners to obtain documents. To be recognized as an economic migrant, one must have secured regular contracts with Italian employers before entering the country, a requirement only very few can meet. As a consequence, from the perspective of immigration laws, victimhood and political discrimination travel more effectively than poverty, and people appeal to these causes to access services and rights.

In this article, I focus on the practice of *denuncia* (filing criminal charges), the first step to accessing a rehabilitation program aimed at emancipating so-called victims of human trafficking from exploitation and transforming them into autonomous subjects. In the *denuncia*, the invisible illegal self is translated into the recognized legal self by rendering women's stories in juridical language. I argue that the testimony produced in the *denuncia* cannot be understood through the victim/agent trope of the bureaucratic state, which uses these categories to make the other digestible through a process of what I call "confessional recognition." The state grants legal documents on the condition that women go through a reeducation program that mirrors the religious logic of confession, penance, and redemption. The question of redemption and expiation is not only a crucial issue for Catholic groups involved in aid programs for foreigners, however; it is also central to integration policies promoted by the state.

A second but related point follows, that although Western nation-states increasingly use biometric technologies to identify foreign others and control borders, in Italy confessional technologies and the testimonies they elicit are still effective tools to cross borders and gain legal status. The personal narratives conveyed in *denuncia*—although standardized and made to fit the requirements of bureaucratic and legal categories, such as the "victim of human trafficking"—still function as tools of identification that the state uses to grant recognition. While biometric measures turn the body into codes and images that can be decoded—thus equating identity with fingerprints, photos, and iris scans—biographical testimonies turn memories and the narratives they produce into proof of the authenticity

of the self and its intentions. Both technologies—biometrics and testimonies—carry their illusionary truths in terms of who the other is. Nonetheless, they are powerful practices that affect who we think the human is and how it can reveal itself.

Denuncia: Performing Translation and Betrayal

While the inspector dealt with some computer problems, Promise started the interrogation. Promise came from an area of Nigeria that bordered with Cameroon; she did not speak Yoruba, Charity's mother tongue, nor could Charity speak her language. She thus proceeded in English.

The cultural mediator was completely in charge. She asked a series of questions in English almost without interruption: very precise details about people, journeys, addresses, dates, encounters, places, relationships between people, and money (borrowed, earned, returned, lost, and lent). In the space of a few seconds, she translated Charity's hesitant answers into a polished and ordered Italian text: the *denuncia*. Meanwhile, the inspector had become an anonymous clerk following the orders of a superior who dictated Charity's testimony to him. The interrogation went as follows:

Promise. How were you brought to Italy? Did your madam come to get you in Nigeria?

Charity. . . . No.

Promise. How did it work?

Charity. . . . My godmother, Momy, and her friend Mike.

Promise. Did you know why you were coming to Italy?

Charity. They said I could study in Europe . . . I went to medical school in Nigeria for 1 year.

Promise. Did you know about girls being forced into prostitution in Italy?

Charity. Didn't know.

Promise. When and how did you meet Mike? What did he tell you?

Charity. Don't remember. Momy introduced me. He said he could pay for my travels . . . I could pay him back later . . . when I found a job.

Promise. How much did you have to pay him?

Charity. Don't remember.

The document that Promise dictated to Inspector Caccia, based on this first part of the interrogation, read as follows:

It was my godmother Momy who, after my mother's death and unbeknown to the rest of my family, invited me to her house to tell me that a friend of hers could help me go to Europe to continue my studies. It was the month of February 2002. She added that I should keep her offer a secret. In Nigeria, I completed high school and the first year of medical school in Benin City; I wanted to become a doctor. I affirm that in Nigeria I never heard anything about girls being brought to Europe for work or school who were then

forced into prostitution. In March 2002, Momy introduced me to her friend Mike, who put me at ease and assured me he could help me go to Holland to continue my studies. On that occasion, I told him that my family could not afford the cost of the trip. He replied that it was not a problem because he would take care of it. He added that I would pay him back later. Once in Holland, I could study and look for a part-time job to cover the cost of my journey. He didn't specify what kind of job I could do in my spare time, nor did he say how much the cost amounted to. I didn't ask. He made me believe that the amount was not too high.³

It became clear from the very first moments of the denunciation that Charity's hesitance did not come through in the document. Her broken sentences and confusion were completely erased in the orderly, written text. Yet she was performing the very act that granted her access to services and rights and that would eventually allow her to become a legal subject in Italy.⁴

This ethnographic moment showed me the intricacies of translation at play in this context and how in the process of drafting the denuncia, Charity's story was simultaneously revealed and disguised. The law's goal is to save foreign prostitutes from "victimization," to give them back their agency, and to restore their sense of dignity. But while the language of the state aims to recognize the other, it also dispossesses the subject of his/her stammering voice and fragmented memory. By ordering all the details and anecdotes in a chronological account, the denuncia inscribes the women's experiences in a linguistic form that is not theirs, and it deprives them of the possibility of telling their stories according to the different trajectories of memory that correspond to various experiences. On the one hand, the law—and Catholic groups involved in aid programs for victims—portray the moment when women file charges as one of freedom and redemption from slavery and as a way for the women to regain agency in their lives. In this frame, prostitution is the negation of free will and independence. On the other hand, for the women, filing criminal charges is not necessarily freeing; at times, they see it as yet another form of subjugation that suppresses their own projects of emancipation.⁵ While most of these women

do not identify with the state's categories of inclusion, they do use them in pragmatic ways to access rights and services.

There are interesting parallels between the process of rendering women's stories of victimhood into the juridical language of denuncia and testimonies of human rights abuses. In the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Richard Wilson (2003) notes a strong similarity between a religious ethics of reconciliation and a political understanding of human rights; thus, what stood as rehabilitation and reconciliation overlapped with Christian ideas of forgiveness and redemption. In various national contexts, victims' narratives are presented in genres of suffering and redemption that serve both the nation-state's goal of asserting its own power through rehabilitation and the Church's aim to fight forms of contemporary slavery. The TRC relied on the assumption that giving voice to experiences of violence and discrimination equaled being heard and freed from subjugation. By assuming transparency between communication, clarity of reception, and recognition, the nation-state claimed that through oral testimonies, the truth about the self could be recuperated and dignity restored (Wilson 2003). But in reality, in South Africa as in Italy, the testimonies of victims were homogenized, and the complexity of the stories was reduced to bureaucratic languages of suffering. The testifiers thus often felt alienated from their words, experiencing another loss of voice in the midst of the stories produced and circulated about them (Ross 2003).

My ethnography of denuncia is part of an ongoing conversation in anthropology and political sciences about the relationship, within liberal democracies, between politics of recognition and the categories around which such politics are articulated (Asad 2003; Brown 1995; de la Cadena 2010; Giordano 2014; Merrell 2003; Povinelli 2001, 2002; Taylor 1994). Recognition is often described through the language of tolerance and inclusion. It comprises techniques that aim to make the social world intelligible to the state. Recognizing someone can be a way to disclose or reveal the other's foreignness, but it can also work to appropriate and reduce difference, or at least make it identifiable to the state. The question of identity is central to recognition, which grounds the nation-state's sovereignty in the knowledge of who one is and where one belongs in the larger communities. On the one hand, difference ultimately needs to be translated into categories of identity that the state can know, manage, and protect to some extent. On the other hand, because recognition is also driven by the desire for democratic equality, it can propose a relationship to difference aimed at overcoming it and thus reducing it to sameness. What started as an alternative proposal to assimilation turns into the performance of identity as a fixed category that translates the other into what is familiar.

In medical anthropology, some very productive conversations have revolved around projects of citizen-making where the body and illness become the most effective currencies people have to gain access to rights and state recognition (Nguyen 2010; Petryna 2002; Rose and Novas 2005) to the point that

3. This is a composite of three different denuncia texts in order to ensure the confidentiality and sensitivity of the testimonies.

4. In his work on the scriptural economy, Michel de Certeau reflects on the relationship between the emergence of a scriptural system, modernity, and the destiny of the voice. He argues that there is no "pure" voice, because it is always determined [and codified] by a system" (de Certeau 1984:132), yet there is a degree of pleasure in "being recognized (but one does not know by whom), of becoming an identifiable and legible word in a social language, . . . of being inscribed in a symbolic order that has neither owner nor author" (140).

5. Saba Mahmood's (2005) work on the grassroots women's piety movement in the mosques of Cairo, Egypt, challenges some of the key feminist assumptions about free will, agency, and subjectivity.

political categories such as “asylum seeker” or “refugee” cease to carry the same credibility vis-à-vis the institutions that grant legal inclusion (Fassin 2001; Fassin and d’Halluin 2005; Ong 2003; Ticktin 2011). The category of the “victim”—grounded on a universalistic idea of the subject and of suffering—emerged and proliferated from the mid-1980s onward as central in reflections on trauma (Beneduce 2010; Fassin and Rechman 2009; McKinney 2007; Young 1995) and humanitarian interventions (Kirmayer, Lemelson, and Barad 2007; Pandolfi 2008; Redfield 2006; Summerfield, 1999). As a tool to access recognition, benefits, services, and rights, this category acquires political valence in the ways in which people use it and make it work in their relations to the state. It works as a language that names the foreigner or sufferer and thus positions her within the sphere of those who can speak and be heard (Rancière 1999).

At stake in the practice of filing criminal charges are the various ways in which cultural mediators and the women who file a denuncia work with the bureaucratic language of the state to access services and rights. While the state provides a monolithic idea of the victim, the processes that I describe in this article show how multiple voices, subject positions, and untranslatable experiences influence the production of the final account filed at the police station.

Back in Inspector Caccia’s office, the interrogation continued to the same rhythm of detailed questions and fragmented answers followed by the precise rendition of both into the text of the denuncia.

Promise. And then what happened? You have to tell me nothing but the truth, step by step. Did they do voodoo before you left Nigeria?

Charity. . . . Maybe.

Promise. Did they do it or did they not?!

Charity. Yes.

Promise. How did it work?

Charity. Mike brought me to an old man.

Promise. What did he do to you?

Charity. He said I had to pay my debts.

Promise proceeded to translate into Italian and to dictate the text to Inspector Caccia, who typed it on the computer.

On another occasion, before leaving Nigeria, Mike told me that he would accompany me to a voodoo ritual. I asked him to explain why. He answered that he wanted to make sure that once in Europe I would be safe and also keep my promise to pay him back. Thus, he took me to the house of an older man who performed the rituals. When we entered the room I saw several voodoo statues that scared me. The man made me give him some pubic hairs, my underwear, and some pieces of my nails, and he wrapped them in a piece of fabric on which he wrote my name. He then made me swear that I would pay my debt to Mike. Had I not paid my debt, my family and I would have been endangered.

The interview continued.

Promise. When did you leave Benin City? What day, month, and year? Where did you go after Benin City?

Charity. I don’t remember, maybe March . . . we went to Lagos.

Promise. How many people were traveling with you?

Charity. Mike.

Promise. How many days did you stay in Lagos? Where did you sleep while you were there?

Charity. Two or three nights . . . maybe; stayed in hotel.

Promise. How did it work with passports?

Charity. Fake name.

Promise. Where did you go after Lagos?

Charity. Not sure.

Promise. Try to remember. Maybe Abidjan?

Charity. Umm . . . yes.

Promise. How long did you stay there?

Charity. Maybe 10 days.

Promise. Where did you go after Abidjan?

Charity. I think Casablanca.

Promise. Did you travel by plane or bus?

Charity. Plane.

Promise. Where did you stay in Morocco?

Charity. A village with others waiting to cross.

Promise. Who arranged the trip to Europe?

Charity. A Moroccan man.

Promise. Where did you go after Morocco?

Charity. Spain.

Promise. And then? How did you travel to Italy?

Charity. Paris and Turin by train.

Promise. What is your madam’s name?

Charity. Stella.

The dictated text read:

We left for Lagos by car at the end of March 2002. We spent 2 or 3 days at a hotel, and then we continued by bus toward Abidjan. At checkpoints, I always showed the passport that Mike had prepared for me; it had my photo, but a different name. I never had any problems at borders. We stayed in Abidjan for 10–15 days. Then we went to Casablanca, Morocco, by plane. After a couple of weeks, a Moroccan man joined us, and Mike left me with him. He took me by car to a house still under construction that was located outside the city. We stayed there for about 1 week. In this village, there were many Moroccans and Nigerians waiting to cross into Europe. We left this village to reach Spain by boat. I don’t recall the name of the Spanish city where we arrived. The Moroccan man then took me to Madrid by bus, then to Paris by train, and from there, finally, to Turin, Italy, by train. Around the end of April 2002, I arrived at the Torino

Porta Nuova train station, where the Moroccan man introduced me to Stella, the woman who was to become my madam.

Promise continued her questioning:

- Promise.* And then what happened?
Charity. Moroccan man sold me.
Promise. Did she force you to work as a prostitute?
Charity. Yes, but I didn't want to . . .
Promise. Did she ever beat you? How?
Charity. Yes.
Promise. When did you start to work on the street?
Charity. Day after.
Promise. How much money did you give your madam a day, a week, or a month? How much money did you give her in total since you have been in Italy?
Charity. More or less 400 Euros for post; 250 for rent . . . 50 food . . .
Promise. Did your madam threaten you?
Charity. Yes.

Promise dictated this as follows:

On the day we arrived in Italy, the Moroccan man who accompanied me to Turin sold me to Stella. I spent 2 days at Stella's place. Then, one evening, she gave me a bag where she said she had put everything I needed to work and took me with her to an interstate road. At that point, I understood that I was supposed to work as a prostitute. I refused to do so, and Stella started violently beating me. That night, I refused to meet with any clients, but the following night I had to start. I was too afraid that Stella would beat me up again, and I didn't know who to ask for help. Stella told me that she had had the same experience as me when she first arrived in Italy, but that she had paid her madam back. Now, I had to repay her in the same way. If I didn't want to work as a prostitute, I would have had to ask my family to send me the money to pay my debts; otherwise, I would have died in Italy. I had to pay Stella 450 Euros per month for my street corner, which would be added to the 250 Euros per month in rent, and the 50 Euros per week for food.

Promise then established that there was violence.

- Promise.* Has your madam ever threatened your family?
Charity. Yes.
Promise. Were you mistreated other times?
Charity. Yes, in the street by clients . . . Stella beat me because of the money.

She dictated:

I was assaulted and robbed three times by clients in the area of Borgo Ticino. I tried to defend myself in order to avoid being beaten, and so I gave them the money right away. When I went home without any money, Stella beat me because she didn't believe that I had been robbed. She thought I kept the money all for myself. On those occasions, Stella also sent some people to threaten my family in Nigeria.

In an attempt to reassure Charity and encourage her to say more, Promise then told her, "You don't have to worry, but you must tell me nothing but the truth. I don't ask these questions to put you in jail, but to catch your pimps and put *them* in jail." But Charity's account did not become any less stuttered. The moments of silence and emptiness in her account were quickly filled by Promise's addition of details that she spelled out with the precision of bureaucratic language. Charity was caught in the complex mechanisms of translation that were producing the denuncia. The story further unfolded as Charity provided more details about her shifts on the street, the services that clients requested, the amount of money she was able to send to her family back in Nigeria, and how she eventually escaped from her madam thanks to the NGO's volunteers.

The Magic of Bureaucracy

During my research I visited several police stations in various northern Italian cities. I examined over one hundred denuncia filed through the Catholic NGO between 2000 and 2004 as they were being drafted, proofread, and later filed at the police station. Of these, around 70 were approved in approximately 10 months to 1 year. The numbers of denuncia and victims that apply for documents through this program and their fate once they enter the bureaucratic pact serve as a barometer of Italy's shifting moral practices of recognition.⁶

The document is standardized. It starts with "My name is" and is written in the first person. It unfolds with the descriptions of the denouncer's background in the home country (family structure, class milieu, level of education, date and place of birth), the various phases of her journey to Italy, the story of "betrayal" through which she became a victim, the violence

6. At the national level, 54,559 people reached out to projects of rehabilitation for victims between 2000 and 2007. Of this number, 13,517 filed criminal charges and entered the rehabilitation program. Only 6,435 found employment after finishing the program. Nigerians make up the majority of those served by these programs, followed by Romanians, Moldavians, Albanians, and Ukrainians. Of the number of denuncia filed each year, between 75% and 85% result in residency permits. The number of permits issued tends to increase 2%–10% each year (Alessandra Barberi, "Dati e riflessioni sui progetti di protezione sociale ex art. 18 D. lgs286/98 ed art. 13 Legge 228/2003," Segreteria tecnica della Commissione Interministeriale per il sostegno alle vittime di tratta, violenza e grave sfruttamento, 2008).

of being exploited as a prostitute, and finally the declaration of consciously choosing to file criminal charges and to enter the rehabilitation program.⁷

The text is always drafted—either at the police station or at the Catholic organization—in the presence of a cultural mediator who is fluent in both Italian and one of the languages spoken by the testifier. After cross-checking the information contained in the text, a police officer certifies it with an official stamp and signature. In general, both the mediator and the denouncer share the same mother tongue. For example, in the case of people from Romania, Albania, Moldavia, and Ukraine, the cultural mediator was always a native speaker from their home countries. Nonetheless, as in Charity's case, the mediator and the denouncer sometimes need to resort to yet another language, usually tied to colonial legacies (English, French, or Spanish).⁸

In the process of translation, some women experience ambivalence and unease in denouncing people they may perceive as “benefactors” as well as “exploiters,” insofar as they made it possible for the women to migrate, make money, and help their families. Diana, a young woman from Romania, told me that she denounced her exploiters only because the police caught her. “But I felt horrible,” she said. “They were not so terrible with me, and while I worked for them I made enough money to support my family back home for the rest of their lives.” Edith, a cultural mediator from Nigeria who helps women file criminal charges, once told me, “There are many things from the women's stories that I don't translate, otherwise they would never get the papers. I can't translate that their mothers or sisters helped them make the decision to migrate and that they knew about the prostitution.” Cultural mediators often decide to hide this type of family involvement from the state because it could jeopardize the woman's status as a “victim,” and the state's entire rehabilitation effort would no longer mean anything. Thus, although the state understands the denunciation process as the moment when the truth is revealed, it is the concealing of certain secrets that allows the denuncia to be drafted. Edith also made it clear that she, as a cultural mediator, had the power to craft the story so that a woman could indeed qualify as a state-recognized victim. She added that women decide to make a denuncia not necessarily to abandon prostitution but often to disentangle

7. Asylum seekers applying for refugee status also must depose a testimony at the police station in order to enter the state-funded protection program (Sistema di Protezione Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati). Asylum seekers' testimonies resemble the text of denuncia in the sense that they have to prove, through their life stories, that they were victims of torture, discrimination, persecution, and violence in their home country. Unlike the denuncia of victims of human trafficking, though, the testimonies of asylum seekers are not directly aimed at fighting international criminality but at protecting against political injustice.

8. For Nigerian women, the linguistic dimension of cultural mediation is more complex. Although the majority of women are from Benin City and their mother tongue is Edo, others speak Yoruba or Igbo, and they are not necessarily fluent in English or pidgin English.

themselves from their madams and the monetary obligations they demand. Some women want emancipation from their exploiters but still consider prostitution a quick and easy way to make money and therefore continue to do sex work even after filing charges. This allows them to continue sending some money home and keep the rest for themselves.

In conversations with me, Promise explained that in her extensive experience translating for Nigerian women, she had witnessed many shifts and changes in the kind of stories they would tell her. In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, women were unaware of the kind of work they would be involved in once they arrived in Italy. She thought they were “real victims” back then and that Article 18 was an effective legislative tool that helped women free themselves from prostitution networks. “Nowadays,” she claimed, “women know very well that prostitution is in the picture; I consider them ‘victims’ because I know they have no future in Nigeria. But I know they know, and their parents know as well, that they will work as prostitutes in Italy; but it is fine for their families as long as they send money back home.”

The state cannot account for the fear and sense of guilt provoked by the action of denouncing family members who were involved in the women's migration. To do so, it would have to admit knowing that women are only partially victims. In this sense, the state keeps certain forms of secrecy at the heart of its power and practices (Taussig 1999). Furthermore, the police office is not a space where the fear of going mad, which paralyzes some women, can be heard. When a woman denounces her exploiters, she often sees it as breaking an oath, which is supposed to result in a curse of madness. In Charity's case, her godmother organized her travel to Europe. When I met her at the police station, she admitted that she feared the consequences of denouncing her godmother and her madam. She knew that her family in Nigeria would be threatened with death and that she risked going mad, just as she was told when she underwent the voodoo rituals before leaving for Europe. “If I don't pay my debts in full, bad things can happen to me and my family. I will go crazy!” she stated during the interrogation in a moment that Promise decided not to translate to the inspector. The state cannot recognize this fear of descending into madness; it exceeds its categories and simultaneously reveals the state's lacuna.

The purpose of the denuncia document is to prove that the women are victims; it names their strangeness and thus recognizes it. The state, for its part, provides a frame within which such stories can be told in what appears to be a culturally sensitive manner. Especially when it comes to Nigerian women, the term “voodoo” typically appears in the document and is often a topic of discussion among police officers, care providers, and psychologists. This attempt to make the law culturally appropriate by introducing a term to describe Nigerian women's experience of “swearing oaths” at shrines, either before their departure from Nigeria or upon their arrival in Europe, serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it points to the breaches within the bureaucratic language that allow for

the use of concepts, such as voodoo, that gesture toward cultural sensitivity. On the other hand, in drafting a denuncia, the concept of voodoo is used to other the women and prove their degree of victimhood; they were coerced to obey their exploiters by means of exotic rituals and occult threats.

References to voodoo stand in for a complete loss of the expression of personal desires and choices, something the women know too well when they file criminal charges and decide to adhere to the category of the “victim” regardless of whether it truly applies to their story. They—and the cultural mediators who translate for them—know how to talk about voodoo in the way that police officers use it, and they know how to do things with it. In this context, both denouncers and police officers portray voodoo as a secret that needs to be revealed. The secret being performed for and by the state proves that there is something to be revealed, uprooted, and corrected. Through the telling and inscription of this secret, the state exercises its power.⁹ In a sense, the very act of talking about voodoo is effective, almost as if the power of voodoo continues to produce consequences by simply invoking it, whether in the space of a ritual or in that of the police station. In fact, denuncia itself is a form of initiation, a rite of passage that marks the pact women make with the state. Women know that being a “victim of voodoo” makes them more eligible to qualify for the rehabilitation program.¹⁰ The label of the victim, therefore, has a double function: although it erases the ambivalence and complexities of women’s experiences by translating them into a category defined by the state, it also opens up opportunities that are directly tied to gaining legal status.¹¹

The nuances of what it means to be a “victim” and how that is woven together with the conscious choices of women, who often see prostitution as a necessary step in their mi-

gration experience before they can land on the shores of Europe, do not emerge in the denuncia. This can be read as a contradiction of the therapeutic state that pays attention to emotions and feelings in order to approach foreigners in a culturally appropriate way.¹² In fact, the state only recognizes the range of emotions that can be ascribed to a victim: fear of her exploiters, lack of awareness, and sense of betrayal. The possibility of “choice” and the idea of self-realization through sex work and exploitation remain unthinkable (van Dijk 2001) and untranslatable. Amen, from Benin City, told me, “I kind of knew that I was going to work as a prostitute for a while, and then I would find a normal job, but I never thought it meant working in the streets at night; I needed money to support my siblings in Nigeria after my parents died.”

Promise, like other cultural mediators working in similar institutional contexts, is caught in the conundrum of translating testimony that exceeds the victim/agent dichotomy that the state applies. She explained that today parents and family members in Nigeria also have to take part in voodoo rituals by swearing before a native doctor that their daughters and sisters will pay back their debts. Sometimes, as part of the ritual itself, denuncia is mentioned among the things women (and families) swear they will never do. Along these lines, Promise told me of a young Nigerian woman and her family who had to swear inside a cemetery in Lagos that once in Italy, she would never escape from her madam. If she did, her parents would have to bring her back to Nigeria as a cadaver and bury her. Just as the language of voodoo has made it into official documents produced by the Italian state, denuncia is now becoming an element that could determine whether the voodoo rituals performed upon women’s departure from home will work for or against them. In a way, filing criminal charges itself can be read as a form of voodoo, a ritual that creates a pact between the participants and then initiates a series of consequences in their lives. It creates a tie with the state, and the state, in turn, takes on the power of the sorcerer who, through the act of denuncia, unties the woman from the bondage of voodoo.¹³ The state thus simultaneously invokes magic and exercises its power by fully embodying it. The document of denuncia thus creates specific affects and effects that go beyond the content of the testimony.¹⁴ It creates and reveals secrets simultaneously. This is its performative power.

9. Michael Taussig argues that “knowing what not to know” is a very powerful form of social knowledge at the core of various forms of social power and the knowledges intertwined with those powers. It is a form of public secrecy, of things generally known but that cannot be articulated without undoing the very sovereignty of the state. He claims that there is no such thing as a secret, but that it is an invention, a limit case, an “as if” without which the public secret would evaporate. Borrowing from Elias Canetti, he states that secrecy is the very core of power (Taussig 1999:1–8).

10. Rijk van Dijk (2001) writes about the trafficking of young Nigerian girls for the Dutch sex industry and the role of “voodoo” in the girls’ submission to Dutch male desires. The discovery of this translational trafficking gave rise to what he calls a “voodoo scare,” resulting in a special police task force, the “voodoo team.” For a reflection on how the category of voodoo is used in institutional settings in Italy, see also Taliani (2012).

11. What Annelise Riles (2006) writes about the political effects of bureaucratic classifications based on race, class, gender, or sexual orientation can be extended to the label of the victim that works, in this context, as a political category. Moreover, Riles refers to the work of Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (1999), who argue that the “practical politics” of categories can be seen by digging up the “conflict and multiplicity” that is “buried beneath layers of obscure representation” (1999:45, 47).

12. For a discussion on the specific features of the therapeutic ethic when it takes on institutionalized forms, see Rieff (1966) and Reddy (2002). Renteln Dundes (2004) has written on the use of “cultural defense” in American criminal courts.

13. Historian Carlo Ginzburg has explained how in medieval and early modern European history, the practice of denunciation was closely connected with the uprooting of heresy and witchcraft. The Inquisition primarily relied on denunciations from ordinary people to hunt witches, heretics, and other deviants (Ginzburg 1982).

14. See Reed (2006) for an interesting analysis of documents as actors that by moving through institutional settings produce specific events. Also, see Riles (2006) for an approach to documents as ethnographic sites.

Promise struggled with these stories, but she knew they could not be verbalized in the official document because they would create a different kind of victim. As mentioned above, the woman who migrates in full awareness that she would work as a prostitute is a figure of untranslatability that neither the state nor the Church can comprehend as such. I call it an “indigestible” presence. In this sense, Promise lamented that while the first denuncia she drafted in the early years of her work as a mediator were true stories—or at least truer—now, “it had become fiction,” and the whole rehabilitation program was, in her words, “a market of lies.” Nevertheless, the program is still in place and works through the belief that women carry secrets that, once revealed, prove their victimhood and thus make them recognizable and digestible to the state.

Promise struggled with her own role vis-à-vis the state and the women. Having gone through the rehabilitation program for victims 8 years before she began working for the state, she knew that filing criminal charges put these women in danger, but it was only by entering the program that they could gain legal status in Italy. Furthermore, though the kind of victims the state wanted to redeem were not the victims she encountered in her work, she had to translate one type of victim into another in order to make women fit the category that the state could accept. Thus, she used the category of the victim in a political way that opened up the domain of rights for the denouncer. In a sense, like other cultural mediators who played a similar role in courtrooms and police stations, Promise had become a ventriloquist of the state who voiced a story in the language provided by bureaucracy while making it seem as if it were spoken by someone else, the “I” of the account. As a ventriloquist, however, she did not passively master the state’s language. On the contrary, the bureaucratic language of denuncia compelled her creativity and allowed her to purposefully use it to help women obtain legal status.

The Subject Redeemed

From the point of view of the law, the production of a testimony, in the form of a bureaucratic confession facilitated by someone else’s voice—the cultural mediator’s—allows for a second birth characterized by freedom from subjection and exploitation. The very process of verbalizing a woman’s story in the text of the denuncia represents both the inscription and institution of what the state would like to believe is the truth about the other.¹⁵ After observing and listening to how

15. In the French context, Didier Fassin (2000) compares the process of requesting state budget allocations in support of the unemployed with the renewal of residency permits for migrants by invoking the genre of the *supplique* (plea or petition). It refers to the obligation to tell one’s own story to the state to access services, and it resembles a *confession laïque* (secular confession), through which one’s suffering is exchanged for a residency permit or access to financial aid and services. The applicant has nothing else to trade but his autobiographical account, spelled out in the register of a plea, with the aim to evoke feelings of compassion and piety in those who grant access to rights and documents.

the texts of denuncia took shape in the course of the interrogations, it occurred to me that the story produced in filing criminal charges uncannily resembled the process of religious confession, when sins are formally, but privately, admitted to the priest in order for the sinner to be redeemed. The bureaucratic and confessional discourses overlap and create a diffuse victim discourse while also producing what I call a form of confessional recognition. Redemption and expiation, therefore, are central issues not only for Catholic groups involved in aid programs but also for the integration policies promoted by the state. Just as spiritual redemption is attained only after passing through different phases of purification—including remorse, confession of one’s own sins, penance, acceptance of the consequences of one’s own sins, transformation of oneself through reform, and, finally, the forgiveness of God that washes one clean of those sins—the program of social protection and rehabilitation functions according to a logic of expiation. Filing criminal charges against one’s own exploiters is a form of social and bureaucratic confession strictly connected to the will to pay one’s debt to society through both penance and self-reform. The consequences women have to pay usually entail feeling guilty, ashamed, and being suspended from life in the world—from work, earning money, and mastering their own everydayness. But, in the end, the state’s grace is bestowed in the form of legal recognition, and the testimony of the past can be erased just as sins are washed away by the power of God’s grace. Through the act of confession, the secrets that keep the subject a victim of her own weakness and impurity are revealed, and the subject is freed.

For Michel Foucault (1980), since the Middle Ages, Western societies have established confession as one of the main techniques for the production of truth. A confessional outpouring since the nineteenth century has shaped various fields of knowledge, including justice, medicine, education, and love. Confessional technologies in modern Europe were based on the assumption that truths are hidden within the individual, and further, that revelation is purifying. The history of penance teaches us that by the very act of verbalizing sins, the individual expels them; by naming the transgression, one is cleaned of its consequences.

In a lecture at the Collège de France on Christian rituals of confession, Foucault (2003) sketched the history of the confession of sexuality by surveying the ritual of penance and the role of confession in it. Originally, confession was not part of the ritual of penance; it only became necessary and obligatory in the twelfth century. In early Christianity, the remission of sins was possible only by virtue of the severity of the penalties the individual deliberately and voluntarily inflicted on himself—or were publicly inflicted on him by the bishop—by adopting the status of penitent. The ritual of penance did not require private or public confessions of one’s own transgressions. Starting from the sixth century, a new model of “tariffed” penance emerged. According to this new system of remission of sins—essentially based on a lay, judicial, and penal model—for every type of transgression there was a cat-

alog of obligatory penalties. In order for the priest to apply the appropriate penance, the transgression needed to be stated, described, and recounted in all its detail so that it could be matched with the corresponding “tariff.” While this system of cataloged sins and penances marks the birth of confession as part of the ritual of penance, it also shows the secular and judicial origins of this practice, one that resembles the act of filing charges against oneself, of denouncing oneself as a sinner.

This history of confession, which illustrates the fundamental tie between legalistic approaches and sin and transgression, allows me to argue, in turn, that the religious and moral dimensions of confession (as a penalty that marks the beginning of the process of expiation) reemerge as tools of recognition in the juridical practices of filing criminal charges and of the admission of crimes in the denuncia. While these two practices are not the same, they still resonate with each other: a juridical logic echoes in confession and a confessional logic echoes in denuncia.

The act of denuncia is partly based on a form of confession during which women admit their position as “victims” of larger networks of exploitation. In the story told at the police station, women must emphasize their lack of awareness in getting involved in prostitution. The dimension of “betrayal”—of having been misled by their traffickers—must emerge from the account as a proof of their innocence and unwillingness to work as prostitutes. What counts in order for a denuncia to be effective in obtaining a residency permit is the intention behind the decision to migrate. If, through the narratives produced during the interrogation, a woman can prove that she did not plan to work in the sex industry, she has a higher chance of qualifying as a victim. In the split between the actions performed (prostitution) and the intention behind them, the law can measure the degree of victimhood. Similarly, confession constitutes itself as an internal jurisdiction that evaluates the intentions behind actions—the inner dispositions of the individual rather than her external actions. As Foucault points out, “In the scholastic tradition it was known that not only actions but also intentions and thoughts had to be judged” (Foucault 2003:189). Confession was aimed at stealing the desire for heresy from the subject before she even committed it.

Denuncia only partly resembles the process of confession. Denuncia is about claiming and proving to be a victim, while confession entails admitting one’s own sins. But the two overlap in the sense that the Church needs a confession in order to make a denunciation. What emerges in both genres is the fact that the narrative itself performs the specific task of showing the substance of the person, her real intentions, so that she can be recognized as a victim. This logic is opposite to the logic of biometrics recognition (Maguire 2009), where evidence provided by the body reveals someone’s identity but not the story she may have to offer. The boundaries between confession and denuncia are blurred.

To be recognized as a victim requires proving to be without sins, or at least showing purity of intent. Nonetheless, fil-

ing criminal charges in the context of the rehabilitation program does have a confessional connotation inasmuch as it marks the first step of a process of transformation and self-reform. The whole structure of the rehabilitation program is premised on the idea that women need to be reeducated in order to become “autonomous and independent.” This first step into a new life seems to suggest the redemptive power of the denuncia as a first act of expiation, of the will to expel an impure act from one’s own life: the act of prostituting oneself. Unlike confession in the sixth century, denuncia is not ruled by a set of penalties that meet corresponding criminal actions, primarily because by denouncing, women are not admitting their own crimes but someone else’s criminal actions. In this sense, confession and denuncia are two very different practices. In confession the penitent admits his own sins and takes responsibility for them. The sinner is aware of her wrong doings and confesses them before the priest to receive forgiveness.

In filing criminal charges, women denounce someone else’s wrong doings. As victims, they are exempt from responsibility: they ended up in prostitution because they were forced into it. And yet, in the implementation of the rehabilitation program, there is a tendency to set certain conditions, much like the “penalties” that ruled confession, on the women if they are to gain full access to rights and services. In other words, going through the program is a form of expiation of sins—the price women must pay to be recognized and accepted. Women must demonstrate their full acceptance of the program, show their progress in handling their life away from the street, and show that they will not “relapse” into prostitution. The state, therefore, portrays denuncia as the first step of a process of transformation, redemption, and conversion of one’s lifestyle and comportment. Government officials and Catholic nuns monitor this process and have the power to judge whether it is successful or not.

Denuncia has a performative dimension; it institutes the denouncer as a subject of the law by the very act of crafting the space for a specific “I” to enunciate a story.¹⁶ In adhering to the category of the victim, foreign women are subjected to a set of rules and norms that delimit the field of both what can be said and what exceeds its limits. Certain words make things happen. In confession, too, words have a performative power. According to a confessional logic, by verbalizing sins and transgressions, the individual expels them; by revealing the transgression, one becomes pure and cleaned of its consequences. In this way, truth is reestablished by eliminating any trace of untruthfulness, and redemption is possible. From the point of view of the state, the purpose of collecting accounts of women’s experiences of migration and prostitution is mainly to unveil the “truth” of their stories and thus recognize them as “victims” rather than “prostitutes.” By inscribing women onto the register of “the victim,” the state po-

16. This kind of speech has to do with what Austin (1962) called the “performative.” For a critique of Austin’s theory of performativity, see Bourdieu (1991).

sitions them in a socially acceptable and legally commensurable category, thus making them digestible through translation. In this way, the state produces its own legal truth. One of the main differences between denuncia and confession is that the former starts as an oral testimony but is aimed at becoming a written text. Confession, on the other hand, is merely oral.

Just as sins are redeemed by being verbalized before the confessor, being a prostitute can be translated into victimhood—and thus lead to inclusion and recognition—by being verbalized in an official document. Both confession and denuncia represent a moment of redemption of the victim (and the prostitute) or of what is represented as such in different discursive fields. This redemptive logic at the heart of the victim rehabilitation program is one aspect of the politics of recognition through which the state translates difference into its own intelligible categories and thus redeems the other from her own untranslatable difference.

Conclusion

The denuncia tells a story that can be traded for recognition and inclusion. It is the inscription of a truth and a presence, both partial and in tension with other truths and other ways of being present. It provides a narrative crafted through specific connections and chronological demands aimed ultimately at forging a testimony that the state can hear. In denuncia, the case of victims, the subject of the law, can only be produced in translation. Within the police department, the testimony is received in translation and becomes the pact a woman makes with the state. This pact is the same act of denunciation that citizens were required to perform in early modern Europe as a sign of loyalty to the state and its sovereign functions (Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1996). By means of denuncia, women provide a “bureaucratic confession” that, I argue, leads to a project of “confessional recognition.” Inclusion is granted on the basis of an autobiographical account that performs, for the state, the disclosure of a life that needs reformation to be fully recognized.

In the text of the denuncia, testimonies are “packaged” in victim stories that in turn can be traded for a particular space of life. The state consumes these stories in order to recognize the other, her strangeness. There is almost an ingestion of the other’s stories to produce the counter-gift of inclusion (Mauss 2000) and of access to rights and services. In the process of the objectification of the woman’s story, the violence of denuncia—and of translation—turns women into the social category of the victim and allows them entrance into the grammar of the state.

In Fanon’s analysis of colonialism (1967 [1952]), the colonized struggles against the colonizer’s objectifying gaze and against a sovereign state apparatus, which defines the terms of the fight for recognition. Fanon argues that the colonized are always determined from without, that their identity is the outcome of alienation, of being recognized in terms of something he is not. In other words, struggling to be recog-

nized actually keeps the colonized marginal and alienated. Similarly, the politics of recognition in host countries risk promising equal recognition to all—nationals and nonnationals—while defining the very terms of this inclusion by which the marginalized may be recognized. As Butler (1997) explains, the subject is bound to look for recognition of its own existence in categories that the dominant discourse has created. Such categories provide the individual with an opportunity for social intelligibility but at the price of a new form of subordination. Yet this subordination figures as the condition for the subject’s existence. While the state portrays women who enter the rehabilitation program as victims who come to occupy the position of a sovereign subject, in practice they reoccupy a position assigned to them by a sovereign state that, in some ways, has already alienated them. Within this kind of approval—fixed and defined by the host society—foreigners (cultural mediators and those who report to the police) learn how to move creatively and make it work to their advantage. Sometimes they must manipulate it in order to survive and be included; they occupy the position of the subject who is constantly produced by and producing testimonies and narratives. She is simultaneously creating her own experiences and getting trapped in how others represent her.

Women’s various and complex positions vis-à-vis the language of the rehabilitation program substantiate the state’s discourse of victimhood and simultaneously question the truth claims at its core. The stories that converge in the denuncia are the result of several regimes of truth intersecting with each other; they produce a testimony that, while not entirely truthful, is nevertheless not a lie either. This is the performative power of the confessional.

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