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This harkening back to an imagined homeland, where local scholars may act as gatekeepers, can be conceptualized as a para-religious cult of heritage consistent with identitarian claims.<sup>75</sup> Similarities can be drawn to the naturalization of Homer as Reggio's illustrious ancestor and the local Grecanici's canonization of the Anonymous Bovese, the author of a manuscript that mythologizes Bova's roots and places them in ancient Hellas. There is, indeed, a quasi-scriptural process in how the *Odyssey* is made into an *ur*-text almost as if relating truths in allegorical ways through the patron 'saint' Homer, the hero of a chosen *demos*.<sup>76</sup> While I am not claiming that such mythistorical narratives<sup>77</sup> equate with religious experience, gatekeeping practices related to Greater Greece in the territory are at least conceptually comparable to religious practice, and sustained by subscriptions to absolute truths by agents such as publishers and communities, or even otherwise markedly secular and non-religious thinkers like Franco Mosino. Besides, in Scilla, signifiers of Greek mythology rub elbows with Christian churches and sanctuaries. Some like to fancy that Poseidon controls the sea in much the same way others more seriously believe that the Holy Mary and the Saints oversee mariners and drivers. Distinct in the way they provide meaning and cultural capital to different social groups, and yet sharing urban spaces, they pertain to different spheres but sustain a sense of belonging. Profane in subject but sometimes para-religious in its eliciting of emotion, and often framed via a positivist faith in pre-emptively established historical or geographical facts, the Strait is almost a Homeric equivalent of Jerusalem for

those invested in the idea that, as countless people have told me, ‘we come from the Greeks.’<sup>78</sup>

#### 7.4 Banal identitarianism: Hellas and contested politics

The landscape of memory constructed by Homeric geographies in the region is also populated, both physically and symbolically, by outstanding heritage items including the superlative Bronze Warriors of Riace. Canonized in postcards, books, regional histories and items of all sorts in addition to reproductions that punctuate various seaside localities, the statues have become part of the visual, cultural [Figure 8.2] and even ethnic repertoire of Calabrese typicality alongside historically less recent markers such as Scylla and Charybdis or the Bronze Warriors. Regrettably, the latter have even been made to align with ethnocentric receptions of ancient history and to equate to the local masculine body, in opposition to racialized Others.

The comic book history of Reggio discussed earlier in this chapter<sup>79</sup> showed how the Bronzes’ are used both as graphical signifiers of Greater Greece heritage and as symbols of a purportedly ‘pure’ ethnicity wherein the time between past and present is collapsed. Reggio’s comic book history further illustrated how the Bronzes are firmly entangled in political fields of discussion, converging with evocations of xenophobic fears and responses to the ongoing migrant ‘crisis’ as seen from Italy as a confine of fortress Europe.<sup>80</sup> By suggesting that the Reggini were the heirs of the Greeks and presenting the Bronzes as heroes ‘returning’ to defend the homeland from new barbaric hordes, Reggio’s comic book history reflected what Laroux called the ‘autochthonous dream.’ It also echoed Tuan’s warning about patriotism feeding on ‘the rhetoric of the classical period.’<sup>81</sup>

This process has also been supported by an implicitly white-centric and Occidentalist tradition that perpetuates itself under the moniker of the ‘classical’ through formal education and institutions in Italy. Formal education in Italy and the institution of the Liceo Classico have certainly played a key role within a larger process of accumulating and intruding on discourses generated at the intersection of ‘classics’ with public histories, dominant historiographies, European philhellenism and the ‘Western’ canon.<sup>82</sup> Such factors have produced the nation-wide canonization of Graeco-Roman cultural, philosophical, artistic and literary traditions. This underpins the very fabric of the construction of national identity and political unification – as well as of other moments, such as Renaissance, that are instrumental for its modern rediscovery of Greece.<sup>83</sup>

Deeply rooted in Italian culture and public institutions, the Graeco-Roman tradition has been made to match ‘high culture’ as an essential element of national consciousness as much as the colonial experience has been erased from public memory.<sup>84</sup>

Since the South has been made to align with this tradition as the area preserving most of the physical remains of Hellas, it has become the ‘setting par excellence’ for this part of the national canon, whereas Calabria is otherwise ‘systematically marginalised’ in national historical discourses.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, Hellas is ‘still perceived as essential and defining for this region’ both at a national and local level.<sup>86</sup> The comic book history of the Bronzes as ‘Us’ in contrast to ‘Them’, the ‘rabble’, exemplifies how this historical process underpins the transformation of the statues into racialized signifiers.

In a historically symbolic coincidence, the Bronze Warriors were retrieved from the sea in front of Riace, a small town in Calabria that recently attempted to formulate a model of social inclusion for migrants attempting to reach Italy through the Mediterranean.<sup>87</sup> Yet, scholars, political parties and the public have fetishized the figures and made them metonymically stand for the local masculine body. Often hailed in everyday discourses as the ‘sun-tanned’ epitome of Mediterranean Western-ness, the Bronzes have been marshalled to idealize symbols of the region that also signalled a particular complexion – perhaps as a variant of the ‘classical’ appropriation of other, conveniently whitewashed



**Figure 7.1** Postcards of the Bronze Warriors in Reggio Calabria’s Archaeological Museum. Photo by author.

ancient statues. As a result, they have been contrasted by some against the body of Othered migrants, and fiercely protected against any perceived threat to engrained and fragile notions of gender, identity and ethnicity.

This has been the case with an informant of mine, whom I shall call Giuseppe. In my informer's words, the 'tanned' Bronzes emerged in the midst of a discussion over their value as distinct from both a perceived 'Northern pastiness' and from blackness. As a 'Southerner', Giuseppe aligned himself with the Bronze's 'tan' to recount how 'Northerners' had instead defined 'us from the South' as Africans – a term sadly used in the country as a derogatory, racialized slur.<sup>88</sup> Asked what he thought about this, he explained to me that maybe he was 'a little' but certainly not like 'those others', proceeding to enumerate a list of xenophobic stereotypes. Aligning all the time with the Southern 'tan' supposedly embodied by the Bronzes, Antonio could take the racial slur as an insult or half re-appropriate it into a form of positive Southernism, but this never happened past the level of irony. The 'Southerner' then reaffirmed his distance from the racialized, Othered black migrant, firmly realigning with whiteness (albeit a 'bronze' one) and its claim to legitimacy.<sup>89</sup> The self-appointed 'Mediterranean' switched conveniently and hypocritically from appropriating the attribution to distancing himself from it, both wearing a tan and preserving his white mask.<sup>90</sup>

Giuseppe (and other locals) ironically ascribed me to a Northern-'tainted' pastiness. Aligning with the Bronze's 'tan', they reclaimed his local, Southern identity against a supra-regional one. Blackness remained utterly othered and stigmatized in their account. It is worthwhile noting that while contrasted to the 'pasty Northerners', Giuseppe's tanned ideal of a Mediterranean type partly and complacently self-ascribed to whiteness as a putative shade or variant of the latter. For him, the Bronzes thus stood distinctively for 'Southern' beauty and complexion while not giving up racism. This colourist formulation of identity took place in a country steeped as much in Hellenicist fantasies of washed-out Greek statues as in a systemic erasure of its colonial past and structural legitimization of racism. Yet in the same country, the narrative of opposing 'North' and 'South' sides to the nation has often characterized the Italian Southerner as the country's Other.<sup>91</sup> So, the racialization of migrants by my informant occurred despite the way 'Southerners' have fallen victim to racialization by 'Northerners' within a series of nested racialized discourses involving different others, both internal and external.<sup>92</sup>

The history of whitewashing Greek art must have certainly played a role in shaping Giuseppe's internalization of a 'white other' complex and the reception of the Bronzes as a Mediterranean complexion type. His adverse characterization

of migrants can also be associated with a broader background wherein symbols of the Graeco-Roman past are mobilized to support white supremacist ideas beyond any historically or philologically sound level of accuracy.<sup>93</sup> Among such examples, which are far too numerous for comprehensive analysis,<sup>94</sup> are far-right, xenophobic groups such as *Generazione Identitaria*. This group employs the stylized ancient Greek lambda, a sign said to have been painted on the shields of the Spartan soldiers at Thermopylae. Similarly, the logo of far-right political party *Casa Pound* draws inspiration from the Roman 'testudo' formation, and its leader runs a music label named after the Tarpeian Rock in a clear appropriation and decontextualization of a fantasized ethnic continuity with antiquity. For a long time, this alignment with received ideas of Spartan prowess and the Roman military machine has fed on far-right fantasies of ancient history in a masculinist and xenophobic key. These fantasies are rekindled in films such as *300*, which presented an attractive and highly recognizable – in fact, globalized – set of memorable scenes.<sup>95</sup>

In addition to such cases, it is not uncommon to find representations of the Bronzes on social media pages from Reggio, its province, and other areas in Calabria as symbols of 'roots.' Such mobilizations are consistent with how far-right groups all across Europe employ Graeco-Roman symbols to invoke ideas of white racial heritage and simultaneously utilize fascist-era racist caricatures of black people that portray them as barbaric, animalistic and unwanted.<sup>96</sup> Among such groups, ideas about 'Western culture' are entrenched in white supremacy and racist views of Europeans and 'Westerners.' Symbols traditionally associated with Europe's heritage thus amount to distinctions between 'Us' and 'Them.'

Xenophobia and racism should also be seen in relation to dominant views of gender. The machismo of *300*, and its constant pitting of normate male bodies against the Othered, effeminate or monstrous ones of the Persian multitude (starting with Xerxes) is consistent with the Bronzes' reception in Reggio as symbols of heteronormative masculinity. In August 2014, French photographer Gerald Bruneau queered the Bronzes in a photoshoot by dressing them up in veils and fuchsia feather boas. His subversion was met with fierce media and popular backlash against an alleged defacement of the icons. On the internet and social media, violent reactions ranged from condemnations of an act deemed barbaric, shameful and shocking to incitements to mob violence. Save for a performance *pièce de résistance* by collective *Je Suis Gerald Bruneau*, animated by artists Angela Pellicanò and Ninni Donato, the perceived 'defacing' of the Bronzes was equal to, in the eyes of a dangerous many, defacing a presumed masculinist Calabrian identity.<sup>97</sup>

Perceived as ‘natural’, the constructed cisgender masculinity of the Bronzes stood metonymically for an entire ethnos – actively symbolizing identity in contrast to Scylla’s traditional embodiment of Otherness or the Sirens’ passive, sexualized femininity. Turned into carriers of toxic masculinity, the Bronzes provided disgruntled and embittered local elements with the embodied, heteronormative, just-about-right-coloured manifestation of what they could see as their elective homeland and citizenship – a citizenship whose dark shadow is projected onto the excluded and the marginalized.

While based on an observation of Calabria, the conceptual takeaways here could be applied to other contexts. The Strait could be considered a laboratory for examining ethnocentrism, intersectional aspects of normative and exclusionary structures, and toxic identitarianism in fortress Europe.<sup>98</sup> Evidencing the impact of mythologies of the past on everyday ideological and political structures, the region is particularly significant for Europe in light of how Greece – and by extension Greater Greece – has been long conceptualized as the cradle of the ‘West’. Right-wing alignments with these perceptions of ancient Greece, the mythologies of a direct ethnic relation with imagined ancestors, the sanctification of Homer as a lost ‘father’ and the essentialization of a mythical geotoponymy represent a highly local ideological field, which converges with broader, supralocal views of antiquity to create a powerful, local and global mythistory.<sup>99</sup>

Yet, while exclusionary and xenophobic appropriations of antiquity represent a long-standing issue in Italy and elsewhere,<sup>100</sup> they do not encompass the entire political spectrum of the reception of Hellas in the Strait. The far-right coaxes history to underpin a blissful disregard for diversity and to serve a segregationist rhetoric that erects barriers, walls and borders even as left-leaning discourse summons Greek antiquity to exalt hybridity and admixtures of cultures past and present. Indeed studies such as that by Consolo remind the reader that ‘were our Strait a time machine, a photographic plate bearing the impressions of all of the shapes it has seen, we would see in it countless boats, sails of every shape and kind, soldiers and merchants of all races – we would read an infinite story’.<sup>101</sup> Likewise, for Caterina Pastura, Editor-in-Chief at Messina-based publishing house Mesogea, the Sea-between-Lands should not divide. Rather, it should bring people from those lands together.

I met Caterina in Messina at the publisher’s headquarters, which was housed in apartments replete with high-reliefs, pictures, symbols of the *Trinacria* and Sicily, and editions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* alongside essays and contemporary fiction from the broader Mediterranean. For Caterina, the geography of this sea

is able to both divide and unite. The Strait has been, in Caterina's words, 'generated by a primordial fracture, a cataclysm in an orographic system' that separated areas of a continent while not precluding 'the ability to let flow, to open a passage'.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the Mediterranean had to be reconceived as 'a pluriverse' made up of a multitude of cultures deriving from the Arab world to the Balkans and beyond. Such views were also maintained by Giacomo, one of the convenors of the Horcynus Orca centre. Giacomo believed in the ability of the Strait to act as a catalyst for a transregionally and transnationally interconnected Mediterranean. In front of the palm-lined Messina harbour and then from the 'Charybdis side' of Cape Pelorus, facing Scilla in Calabria, Giacomo described the meeting of the two seas as a possible symbol of positively chaotic turmoil and vibrant intermixing. For Giacomo, geo-cultural dynamics brought down distinctions between the two sides. 'If you live here, you always go back and forth, both physically and psychologically', he observed, allowing one to conceive of the sea not as a separator but as a bridge between peoples.<sup>103</sup>

Another more 'centrist' appropriation of Greekness includes the provincial branch of the political party Partito Democratico (PD). At the time, the PD included as part of their visual branding the profiles of the Bronzes and Athena Promachos, whose statue [Figure 7.2] is displayed on the city's seafront walk alongside wind turbines and other signifiers of industrial and tourist development. In this light, the PD – as well as the mayor of Reggio Calabria, Giuseppe Falcomatà – conceived of Greekness as both cultural and economic capital – a prestigious moment in national and European history that also entailed its use as an asset. The opposite perspective sides with the region as the neglected 'South' of Italy, framing it within what looked like an 'anti-Atlanticist' or Mediterraneanist geopolitical order. For representatives of Reggio's local Club UNESCO branch, Greekness did not define the Strait in the way a 'classicist' might think. In their view (mirrored in their club's pamphlet), their hometown Reggio aspired to reclaim a central role in the Mediterranean as 'a bridge between Europe and North Africa' – albeit not through 'European culture as having its origins in Greece'.

As these informants noted, they did not mean to undermine the importance of Europe. Rather, they intended to shift emphasis to 'a Mediterranean pride'. While steeped in a parochial exaltation of their hometown, such views recall Mediterraneanist perspectives on the need for the 'South' to unshackle itself from the cultural and economic subjection and negative, Orientalist portrayals to which it is relegated by 'Atlanticist' or Eurocentric geopolitics and discourses.<sup>104</sup> Reframing the Graeco-Roman canon within a different perspective and seeing



the Mediterranean as a place of intermingling and multi-ethnic enrichment, such views might have displayed what sounded to me like a peculiar form of *parochial cosmopolitanism* that aligned with a self-centred Mediterraneanist appropriation.<sup>105</sup> In this frame of value, the Graeco-Roman record is an element of an 'Atlanticist' order that stands in the way of the Strait's multi-ethnic history and future.

Overall, the variety of these examples illustrates the importance of Graeco-Roman tradition in the landscape of political appropriations of the past within the area of the Strait, while also serving a specific agenda of political identity and positioning. Prestige associated with the symbols of Greater Greece, while varying in degree and scope (and whether positively received or defied in different discourses) might still be understood as a banal form of identitarianism due to its pervasiveness in any political discourse, regardless of the value assigned to Magna Graecia.

### 7.5 Heirs of Homer: Local hide, global pride

The Graeco-Roman landscape of memory in the Strait has provided different elements of society with narratives of historical legitimacy, establishing views of what and whose past should be remembered. Landscapes of memory thus work as a form of social and cultural capital, reinforcing the particular historiographical viewpoints of those who seek to align with it. In response, specialized scholarship can provide neglected histories with public acknowledgement and visibility, especially in light of how the quasi-religious canonization of Greekness in the region and its misconstruction as a monolithic, 'pure' ethnos has led to trivialization of historical complexity and to appropriation by reactionary elements and exclusionary ideologies.

As a geopolitical entity, the regions of the Strait are contested as the site of origin for Europe or the 'West', or, vice versa, repositioned as the rediscovered navel of a multi-ethnic Mediterranean. Yet another level of complication unfolds in how everyday forms of philhellenic identitarianism in the region intersect with the broader process of the reception of Graeco-Roman antiquity in Italy – a country so steeped in this tradition that references to the former provide a constant platform for political analogies, journalistic refrains, and everyday sayings either to signify traditions or to elicit the status and literary penchant of a speaker. Philhellenism in the Strait seems therefore ambiguously but firmly nested in a 'daily plebiscite', as Ernest Renan worded it, to discuss the nation.<sup>106</sup>