

**Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty  
Fellows Sample proposal from previous awardee**

This document contains selected portions of an application previously awarded support through the Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellows program. We share this not as a model, but as one example of how to organize a successful proposal. The projects supported through the Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellows program represent a wide range of methodologies, subjects, time periods, and geographies. Individual submissions will therefore take up an array of formats, as unique as the proposals themselves.

Please note: this document represents only the five-page narrative proposal and does not include the project timeline with budget estimates; for additional guidance please consult our timeline and budget sample which can be found on the program page here: <https://www.acls.org/Competitions-and-Deadlines/Mellon-ACLS-Community-College-Faculty-Fellowships>

Project Title: "War, Prison, and Artistry: Creative Expression and Material Culture of Italian Prisoners of War During World War II"

Awardee Name: Dr. Laura Ruberto

Institution: Berkeley City College, Berkeley, California

## Introduction

A 1943 *New York Times* article about Italian prisoners of war in New York State noted that “officers assigned to look after the Italians were enthusiastic over what these prisoners achieved with native stone and rock—little shrines, statuettes ... buried under the snow on the little lawns outside the barracks.”

This brief reference to the vernacular construction of space points to a central goal of my project: to study the material culture created by Italian POWs during World War II so as to consider how meaning is ascribed to the material world, especially in a time of war and extreme duress. That is, how do individuals and communities use the creation and construction of objects to mediate their lives and inform the present, past, and future? My project, divided into three interrelated parts, seeks to document and analyze the role creativity played for these men and to consider connections with related studies on creativity among other war-related interned individuals. What can a more nuanced understanding of these past experiences tell us for their ongoing meaning in our contemporary moment? How might unpacking the complexities of an Italian identity in midcentury United States reflect current discussions regarding minority cultures, military presence, and networks of mobility?

Through my own research as well as (already established) collaborations with the *NAME REDACTED Museum (Museum)* and the Veterans Resource Center at Berkeley City College I will complete a scholarly article, an online exhibit, and curriculum for a new course (tentatively titled, “War, Trauma, and Art”). The article and compendium online exhibit will offer a critical overview of the art created and the architecture built by Italian military personnel held by the United States during World War II. The new General Education Humanities course will extend the topic of the research/exhibit project to other historical and contemporary sites.

## Historical and Theoretical Background

This project builds off of other work about prisoners, wartime, and creativity, such as that of Gillian Carr and H.C. Mytum who note that “artistic production” for POWs “was more than just a way to pass the

tedium of interned life” (2012, pg. 2). While Italian POWs share many experiences with other interned individuals, my analysis highlights their Italian positionality while being mindful that war-time imprisonment and internment is a broad experience.

During World War II, Allied forces held over a million Italian POWs, captured mainly in North Africa and moved to prison camps in Australia, India, Scotland, the United States and elsewhere. Over 50,000 Italian military men were brought to the United States as prisoners beginning in late 1942, often housed near Japanese and German prisoners of war. Italians, however, enjoyed a politically and socially unique position, given Italy’s changing involvement in the global conflict, as well as the presence of millions of Italian Americans. After the Armistice between the Allies and Italy was signed in 1943 over 34,000 Italian POWs in the United States renounced Fascism and became members of still-detained Italian Service Units, or ISUs. Both groups remained detained until after the end of the war, at which point most were repatriated to Italy.

Throughout those years, Italian POWs and ISU members (here collectively referred to as POWs) crafted objects and built structures from found, salvaged, or donated materials—from small items such as jewelry crafted out of toothbrushes, to large-scale, collectively built structures, such as chapels and dance halls. These constructions reflect POWs’ personal characteristics as well as their differing degrees of confinement, ambiguous political circumstances, and complicated relationships to communities beyond the borders of the camps. My article and online exhibit focus on such examples, specifically from the Italian military personnel imprisoned in the United States; my proposed new course would extend this topic thematically, moving beyond the World War II and the relationships between Italy and the United States.

For Italian POWs, arriving in the United States might have been an experience that echoed that of their immigrant cousins, many of whom would have arrived previously through Ellis Island. Those millions of Italian Americans had their own complex position vis-à-vis the war. On the one hand, over 500,000 Italian Americans served in the U.S. Armed Forces. Yet, when Italian prisoners first arrived on U.S. soil restrictions against Italian resident enemy aliens were still in place. Those arrests and restrictions

were less severe and widespread than the large-scale actions taken against the more than 120,000 Japanese American men, women, and children who faced powerful acts of persecution. These various trajectories of outsider identities on U.S. soil (prisoner, enemy alien, immigrant, war hero) all inform and reflect one another even as the circumstances for the Japanese and German POWs were unlike that of the Italians, a point my project also develops.

This project sits at the junction of Italian diaspora studies, material culture studies, and studies on war and captivity. Given my disciplinary expertise in Italian migration and the study of material culture, my approach highlights the significance of vernacular constructions and the role of identity in creative expressions. I use the terms “Italian diaspora” and “Italian mobilities” in reference to the movement of people related to Italy, given that such unfixed terms allow scholars to examine more standard migration patterns (Italian immigrants to the United States) alongside itinerant communities not captured within conventional migration narratives (Italian POWs, Italian colonial subjects in Africa, refugees to Italy). Doing so allows me to bring together some of the nuances of what it meant to be Italian in the United States during the war years, an era when Italian American identities were in flux: influenced by the role of Fascism and continued racialized anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments even as views of Italian Americans were changing (e.g., the growing popularity of figures such as Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra).

#### Methodology and Research plan

I am well positioned to complete this project. I have presented on the topic numerous times—from an invited talk for a special exhibit on the art of Alberto Burri at the Santa Monica Museum of Art to a number of academic conference presentations and public talks. I have collected examples of Italian POW art and other creative constructions through archival and library work, field research, and even eBay purchases. These examples include period-specific photographs, samples of the constructed objects themselves, oral stories and journalistic printed interviews describing such constructions, and contemporary photographs of still-existing sites I have taken during research field visits. My research has

brought me to the National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD) as well as historical societies and local archives throughout California (San Francisco, Oakland, and smaller towns along the coast) as well in Montana and Massachusetts.

With this grant I plan to visit three other former POW sites: murals in Douglas, WY, a chapel at Camp Atterbury, IN, and an altar near Ogden, UT. These field studies will complement my other research and allow me to analyze further a larger practice of creativity of interned Italian men during wartime. These examples can be used as illustrations of known Italian POW-constructed sites that, however, no longer exist (e.g., chapels in New Jersey, Arkansas, and Hawaii). I have communicated with individuals at local historical centers in all three planned field research sites who have committed to helping me.

I will also continue reading in the fields of Italian diaspora studies, material culture, vernacular architecture, and internment/imprisonment, especially during war time. I will especially focus on expanding my knowledge base of scholarship on the relationships between captivity and art during wartime, with a particular look at comparative work on interned Japanese Americans as well as other U.S.-captured/held foreign military (German and Japanese POWs in the U.S., Guantanamo Bay, etc.). In each of these cases considering the relationships between individuals and objects (what Arjun Appadurai refers to as the “social life of things”) can be a strategy to help recover stories and experiences not well documented in the primary sources traditionally examined by scholars.

My field research and reading will inform the completion, during the grant period, of three related projects. First, I will revise and submit to a peer-reviewed journal an article on the topic (a conference paper version I gave can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjLFdla-m90>). Then, in collaboration with the *Museum*, I will create a small online exhibit of some of the objects/structures made by Italian POWs in the United States. (The *Museum*, with whom I have worked with in the past, has agreed to collaborate on the online exhibit.) Finally, in conjunction with the Veterans Resource Center at Berkeley City College, I will develop a General Education Humanities course to introduce students to the role of creativity and human expression around the theme of military presence and internment/imprisonment historically through a study of literature, visual art, and philosophy. I will hold

informal meetings with current Berkeley City College veteran students for input on how such a course might best serve their community. I will submit the course for approval after the grant period is over and teach it within the following academic year—my department supports the implementation of this new course, which would also be part of our current A.A. degree in Arts and Humanities.

### Conclusion

Some research on Italian POWs exists, including a few scholarly books, numerous localized, community publications and documentary films. These other projects mainly offer factual overviews, oral stories, political observations and descriptions of the men's lives and experiences as POWs. The few instances of research specifically on Italian POW art/architecture in the United States are limited to single-case studies (e.g., structures at Hereford, TX and Chambersburg, PA). No project exists that explores in depth the specifics of creativity, art, and constructed space that I will document. This study examines the creativity of individuals and how their constructions and activities express identity, community, and the complexities of a unique interned experience while also reflecting on other kinds of creative expressions of war internment and imprisonment.

A Mellon/ACLS fellowship would afford me time to complete a project I have worked on for many years and to build new connections between my teaching and scholarship. This project is the culmination of many years of research completed in between other large research projects (e.g., one authored book, multiple edited collections, conference papers), other grants (notably a Fulbright Scholar grant to Italy), a heavy teaching load (fifteen years with a 5-5 teaching load), institutional service (co-chairing a multi-disciplinary department, committee work, curricular development, student mentoring), and service in my field (co-editing a Fordham University Press book series, sitting on editorial boards).

After the grant period, I will present my research, the online exhibit, and the new course across various platforms: the *NAME REDACTED Museum*, various academic conferences (e.g., the Italian American Studies Association, the American Folklore Society), and other public outlets. My published article will further disseminate my new research. I thank you for your consideration.