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Playing in the Camps: Performative Practices in the Migrant Camps of Southern Italy

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Abstract: The article addresses the role of performative practices in the informal camps and shanty-towns in southern Italy, where many sub-Saharan migrants live. In these settlements, creation and performative expressions take various forms: an organic and unplanned one, which gives shape to multiple improvised languages; one supported, sustained, and often directed and managed by associations; and finally, one produced by non-migrant artists who see the camps as a challenging field of research to situate their works. These three forms (of/with/on) bring several critical issues concerning the role played by migrants, the dynamics of appropriation and agency, and the power relations with local associations, professional artists, and political activists, which intersect in complex ways. The article addresses these different artistic experiences, considering strategies of self-representation, artistic legitimacy, and authorship. Finally, it analyses how performative practices become a primary political tool for facing spatial segregation and racial discrimination.

Keywords: arts in camps; performance and refugees; performing arts and migrants



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1. Playing in the Camps

Among the spaces that Performance Studies rarely delve into, there are some that are rapidly expanding due to enhanced bordering practices: these are refugee camps, governmental first reception centres, transit centres, hotspots, repatriation centres, transient encampments, and makeshift shantytowns.

These liminal places (Turner 1987) share a consistent set of characteristics and functions which impact the dwellers, forcing them into a legal and temporal interstitial space (Mubi Brighenti 2013) where every element is uncertain and constantly moving. The condition of spatial and temporal precariousness exacerbates vulnerability (Griffiths 2014), while the constant turnover of dwellers makes social and political organisation difficult. However, taking a critical stance on Agamben's (1998) approach that considers camps as spaces of exception and refugees' existences as expressions of pure bare life, recent scholarship addresses these spaces as contemporary laboratories of "ordinary cosmopolitanism" (Agier 2016). In camps and centres, multiple strategies of resistance and collective agency are developed, often taking shape through performing actions and artistic languages. Music and performance emerge as a dynamic and political language among transiting migrants, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes in organised ways. Songs, dances, and improvisations are frequent even on the rescue boats of the Mediterranean Sea. Despite the intensity of this widespread phenomenon, few studies directly address the role of performative practices in transit places (Balfour 2013), while an increasing literature is turning to Performance, Theatre and Migration (Meerzon 2020; Cox 2014; Wilmer 2018).

Indeed, these performative expressions differ from those of settled immigrants, as they involve other audiences, other actors, and other objectives. In these threshold spaces, the creative framework is deeply shaped by spatial and temporal precariousness, as all the crucial elements are shifting. Consequently, the artistic actions are improvisational, impromptu, and not aimed at a structured elaboration. The condition of instability is reflected in language, and so is vulnerability in the aesthetics.

As indicated by Hikmet Ögüt (2015), with regard to ethnomusicology, the study of artistic practices in transit migration¹ requires the application of new theoretical approaches and methodologies more adapted to these contexts.

This article aims to contribute to this emerging field of research by applying an interdisciplinary approach that allies Performance Studies, Social Sciences, and the spatial perspectives that consider camps as adaptive spaces of agency (Sigona 2015; Martin 2015; Lussault 2017), in order to analyse the relations between space, migrants' performative practices, and their strategies of resistance.²

The research focuses on a particular type of transit place where many migrants³ live in Southern Italy: informal camps and shantytowns. These settlements are present throughout the country, especially in agricultural areas. A census is approximate since these camps are periodically dismantled by the authorities and rebuilt elsewhere. Over the past four decades, their number has increased, and some have evolved from temporary shelters to permanent slums housing thousands of dwellers (Cremaschi 2020).⁴ The population is mainly made up of young sub-Saharan who live in conditions of administrative irregularity and are employed in the surrounding agricultural fields. They live by constantly moving from one slum to another, searching for subsistence strategies and following harvest seasons, waiting for an opportunity to move north to another EU country (Cordova 2021). At least 10,000 sub-Saharan migrants live in makeshift settlements in Southern Italy,⁵ deprived of their fundamental rights, exploited as day labourers, and subordinated to gangmasters (*caporali*) who manage their work, housing, and movements in a context of extra-legal governance. The expanding phenomenon of ghettos is closely linked to the connivance of the market, landowners, and multinational corporations, which take advantage of it to increase agricultural production, contributing to reproducing one of the most extreme manifestations of segregation in Europe. Lacking infrastructures and essential services, the overpopulated ghettos are segregated and often inaccessible to the inhabitants of the surrounding area, as if they were part of another geographical and social territory, despite being the hub of the local and national economy.

Although the harsh living conditions limit sociality and increase isolation, migrants manage to realise adaptation practices and autonomy strategies that challenge the hierarchical structures created by gangmasters to control daily life, including informal trade, health, and basic needs. The attempts to develop forms of political organisation and self-representation often articulate through performative languages and practices.

In camps, creation takes various forms: one organic and unplanned, which takes shape through multiple improvisational languages; one supported and often managed by associations; and one produced in collaboration with non-migrant artists who see the camps as a challenging research field. These three forms (of/with/about) involve different critical issues concerning migrants' authorship, agency, and power relations, which often intersect in complex forms.

This article addresses these different artistic experiences, considering the role played by migrants, the dynamics of appropriation and agency, and their relationship with local associations, professional artists, and political activists. The study analyses the artistic tendency to use camps and transit places as producers of images of marginality and aestheticised political backdrops. It focuses on migrants' rejection of the stereotypical frames in which they are often forced, and their strategies to avoid them, such as affirming invisibility as a form of resistance. By addressing the ambiguities concerning representation and artistic legitimacy, this study analyses some examples of languages (improvisational music and radio) used by migrants in Southern Italy.⁶ Here, performative practices become a primary common ground for thinking and reacting to spatial segregation, racial discrimination, and labour exploitation.

1.1. A Premise: Who Has the Right to Sing?

In the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was flooded with videos and images of Italian citizens forced home by the lockdown, singing and playing music

from their windows. These actions were presented and shared as virtuous examples of hope and resilience, as acts of civic commitment. Yet, the same creative reaction was considered despicable if performed by migrants. In those months, in fact, many videos showing migrants dancing in reception centres or rescue boats were circulated online as evidence of incivility and well-being incompatible with an asylum application. The narrative offered by political and sovereign leaders, fired by social media and the press, portrayed these musical and artistic performances as proof of falseness: the people who sing joyfully cannot be “true refugees” but rather “migrants” who exploit the welfare. Even singing is not a right for everyone.

While the manipulation carried out by xenophobic propaganda is not surprising, the public indignation against these acts is striking. During the national lockdown, condemnation of migrants singing or dancing in quarantine ships and centres spreads not only on social media. An example is the violent reaction against a rap music video shot and uploaded to YouTube by an Algerian singer hosted in the reception centre of Monastir, in Sardinia. As the Italian press gave wide coverage to the amateur video, the then deputy Eugenio Zoffili, coordinator of the Party Lega in Sardinia, declared: “While we decent citizens respect the rules and are forced to stay indoors, the illegal immigrants in the Monastir reception centre do not care. Besides escaping, stealing, harassing minors, fighting, occupying, attacking the police, getting drunk, and more, they also shot a rap video.”⁷ The scandal raised by some politicians of the Lega, the Italian xenophobic party, and shared massively on social media, ended up to the attention of the Cagliari Public Prosecutor’s Office, which launched an investigation into the migrants involved in the video.

Is singing a crime or a symbol of resilience? It depends on who does it. Those who sing crossing the Mediterranean prove they are not “needy”⁸ because they are “joyful and smiling.”⁹ Those who sing and dance when they disembark in Italy show they are not “true asylum seekers” because they are “strong and carefree”. Those who dance on rescue ships are cheating and exploiting Europe by turning ships into “dance clubs.”¹⁰ Those who sing in reception centres even risk being charged with a crime.

In the ambiguous narrative related to migration, art may become a territory of discrimination and racialisation. Therefore, when we analyse the phenomenon of artistic practices in transit migration, we should consider the issue of racial stigmatisation, since these practices themselves become a cause of discrimination. This criticism also results in decreased documentation, as some migrants prefer to hide these practices out of a certain reserve.

Scientific attention to this phenomenon can contribute to clarifying the process of political repression, stigmatisation, and criminalisation of all forms of migrants’ claims, which turn institutional racism into popular racism (Perocco and Pasqualetto 2021). It is therefore crucial to highlight the character of resistance of these practices, especially when they appear during the journey in conditions of increased vulnerability or during protests and mobilisations to demand regular status.

1.2. A General Look: Art in Camps

The Nazi concentration camp Theresienstadt is well known to those who study arts in marginal contexts (Karas 1990; Distaso and Taradel 2014). In this ghetto, Jewish prisoners, many of them fine musicians, developed a feverish musical and theatrical activity during the hours free from work, at the risk of their own lives. The case of Terezin’s artistic production has often been regarded as an iconic example of resistance that opposes art to violence and creation to death.

It is, therefore, not surprising that nowadays, within the camps where millions of migrants are confined, art is not only present but is often the primary language used for political affirmation. However, despite the richness of their forms, these practices become visible and publicly represented only when managed and reorganised by national or international associations, local artists, or groups, making them legitimate in the eyes of the public, the critics, and the market.

The French encampment of Calais, known as “the Jungle”¹¹, offers an exemplary case of this process of legitimisation and mediatisation. Its varied, spontaneous, and unorganised artistic activities attracted many artists and researchers. They developed multiple projects, including founding the first official theatre in a refugee camp, the *Good Chance Theatre*. The initiative had a broad resonance, thanks to the support of a vast network of internationally renowned institutions.¹² This artistic attention, in turn, stimulated the interest of scientific studies: from Ed Emery’s practice-led music research with the collaboration of SOAS University of London (Emery 2017),¹³ to the studies on graffiti and visual art produced in tents¹⁴, to the participatory research on *Good Chance*’s theatrical practices (Ruffini 2019).

If the case of Calais is unique in its mediatic and mediagenic echo,¹⁵ there are many other artistic projects in camps and refugee centres. Several theatre groups and independent artists are working in this field, experimenting with intercultural performative languages with migrants in transit, in the Balkan routes, in Greek camps, and in the reception centres of Italy, France, and Germany. Sometimes, these experiences are organised in collaboration with humanitarian and voluntary associations. Nonetheless, these are not projects of “applied theatre”¹⁶ with social, educational, or health purposes, but artistic experimentations aimed at creating innovative languages in cultural interstices (Bhabha 1994) that can impact contemporary artistic debates. Political commitment is also crucial since these artistic experimentations are reversing the role of the centre and the margins, pushing towards new paradigms to reimagine the study of arts and culture from its margins.

As the camps have become a crucial site for political artistic research and practice, attracting the interest of renowned artists, the critical point is the risk of exploitation. Many projects that present themselves as art with/by refugees merely include some refugees (or, more often, some settled immigrants) in productions addressed to show business (concerts, performances), reproducing a set of representational stereotypes, and receiving funding for inclusion projects. The camps in Southern Italy are one of the main areas in which these projects take place, sometimes turning into aestheticised backdrops for art, sometimes working as laboratories of creative resistance.

2. Ghetto Italia

2.1. Nardò: Struggling and Representing

Over the last few years in Italy, migrants and asylum seekers have led several episodes of protest and mobilisation, campaigns, pickets, and marches. Although there is no unified movement, and the struggles are often silenced or only reported in the local press, the thrusts of activism and self-affirmation are strong. Slowly but progressively, collective actions claim their rights through coordinated actions on the ground.¹⁷

A relevant case of struggle was the uprising of Nardò (Lecce), organised by a collective of sub-Saharan migrants and local activists who lived in or frequented the Masseria Boncuri, an old farmhouse managed by the non-profit organisation *Finis Terrae*. In September 2011, they organised the first strike of labourers against the *caporalato*. Three hundred and fifty workers from the Masseria protested for two weeks, erecting a roadblock and carrying out actions and assemblies in the area to create a solid reception network for harvest labourers. Despite the numerous death threats suffered by the strike leaders, the revolt led the District Anti-Mafia Prosecutor’s Office of Lecce to launch an investigation into the issue of the *caporalato*. As a result, the first Italian trial for “enslavement” was held, and the Lecce Assize Court sentenced 11 people to 11 years of imprisonment.

One of the keys to the Nardò strike was the housing stability of migrants who live in the Masseria Boncuri, not isolated in precarious shantytowns. This strongly influenced their ability to create a solid network between migrants, local anti-racist associations, trade unionists, and grassroots activists. The strike sparked many hopes: in the following months, many initiatives were undertaken to build mutualistic and sustainable agro-food chains and organisational forms that could support labourers in obtaining better working and housing conditions, such as the *No Cap* association.¹⁸ Moreover, Nardò’s activism inspired the local artistic milieu, which supported the struggle with actions intersecting civil and

political rights. The first act was a concert that brought together many Apulian musicians and inhabitants of the camps to give visibility to the struggle against the *caporalato*, with the collaboration of *No Cap*.

The world of documentary cinema was also fascinated by Nardò's experience and tried to represent it, involving migrants.¹⁹ One of the leaders of the struggle, the Cameroonian political activist Yvan Sagnet,²⁰ took part in two successful film projects: *Jululu* by Michele Cinque, which won the MigrArti prize for direction at the 74th Venice International Film Festival in 2017, and *The New Gospel* (2020)²¹ by the renowned Swiss director Milo Rau.²² As Sagnet says, "Cinema is a fundamental tool to communicate the issues related to *caporalato* and agricultural exploitation. I hope that with this work, public opinion will become more aware of what is happening in the agricultural fields in Italy."²³

Sagnet's wishes seem to be fulfilled by his second film: *The New Gospel*, a Passion of Christ reinterpreted by migrants and citizens of Matera. The film is an avowed reference to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (filmed in Matera in 1964) and was a success thanks to the fame of its director, Rau, known for his politically committed projects. The script plays between fiction (the story of Jesus) and reality (life in ghettos), between aesthetics and politics, inserting clips and interviews with migrants into the plot. "We are not a fucking movie. I am organising the struggle! I cannot bother organising this film while the world changes every two minutes", declares one of them, addressing the camera.

For this project, Rau involved many local organisations of sub-Saharan workers living in ghettos, such as *No Cap*, *AgricoLa Leggera*, and *Ghetto Out-Casa Sankara* in San Severo.²⁴ According to the director's intentions, the film does not stop at the artistic fact, aiming to have a broader impact on the territory through "the revolt of dignity", a series of actions that included the creation of a place to support migrants in their autonomy and self-determination (*the Houses of dignity*), and the production of the *Food of the Revolt* free from land, humans, and animal exploitation. A series of artists and intellectuals signed the *Manifest* created by Rau for freedom of movement.²⁵ The media coverage brought these themes to the attention of the general public, making some of the activists visible and sought after by the press. However, the real impact of the action and related projects was rather limited. Rau's work is a clear example of an artistic product that convenes activism into an attractive and aesthetic film frame, encouraging the sale and distribution of the work in the name of a political and engaged project.

Nowadays, many artists are fascinated by the case of sub-Saharan ghettos in Southern Italy, eager to disclose and portray the living condition of migrants through documentary, narrative, figurative and participatory works. At the same time, there is also growing disapproval of this kind of project shown by some migrants: they refuse to be photographed, filmed, and "used" as testimonials of pornography of exploitation not dissimilar to the political pornography of pain (Sontag 2003) represented in Lampedusa. The exhibition of the degraded places where they are forced to live, and the testimonial narrative of their dramatic lives are increasingly widespread practices, even in arts. Such representations often overuse tragic tropes and multiply cultural stereotypes.

Tired of becoming the object of further victimisation, many migrants decline to meet artists, researchers, and journalists who film their settlements or record their stories. The ambiguous nuances of the spectacularisation of migrants' bodies, objects, and places are still underreported, despite the warnings raised by some Performance Studies scholars (Meerzon 2020) on the exploitation of precarious bodies by performance activists and their theatrical representation. As Meerzon says (Meerzon 2020, p. 25), "specifically when the body of a migrant emerges as a guarantee of theatrical truth and the authenticity of suffering".

Many recent projects conceived by associations and migrants in Southern Italy problematise this concern for representation. Some of them emphasise the relationship between the observer and the observed, such as the short film festival *Rosarno Film Festival, fuori dal ghetto*, created in October 2022 in Rosarno (Reggio Calabria), an area of ghettos, agri-

cultural exploitation, and mafia.²⁶ To reverse gazes, perspectives, and roles, part of the public meetings and movie projections took place in the shantytown of San Ferdinando, transforming it into a shared cultural space and avoiding using it as a location for dramatic artworks. The project cost just a few hundred euros. It was carried out by local activists and supported by the patronage of director Ken Loach. The festival's jury was composed exclusively of migrant labourers. As one of the organisers explained, "It is a festival where the gaze of the jury is that of the labourers. The gaze of the most exploited part of the value chain. This gaze of labourers, who have experienced exploitation in the ghetto, forces us to a new vision that can show how colonial the culture of the West is. [...] The labourers have always been used for something. They are filmed, interviewed, and exhibited. They are sold. If in Lampedusa we find the pornography of pain, here in Gioia Tauro there is the pornography of exploitation".²⁷

This assumption underlies most of the artistic practices of migrants who contest the aesthetics of pain and victimisation. Because of these concerns, they favour performative languages that avoid images and narrative frames, such as music. In the context of hyper-visibility inherent in the refugee condition, their quest for strategic invisibility becomes a disruptive act of resistance and agency (Haile 2020).

2.2. *Slamming the Camp*

Besides the visual representation of camps, in recent decades, a number of performative projects with/about migrants have adopted the rhetoric of "giving voice" to migrants through witnessing. These practises force the newcomer into the role of the teller of their story, preferably a tragic one, encouraging sympathy and compassion. Refugees are only as good as their history of suffering or overcoming, according to a criterion that recalls the interview for the asylum application process (Ruffini 2022). This testimonial imperative (Jeffers 2012) raises problematic aspects relating to representation, violence, and trauma voyeurism. Following the path opened by anthropological studies on the dangers of narrative injunction in asylum practices (Eastmond 2007; Cabot 2016), a growing scholarly literature in Theatre and Performance Studies is developing a critical approach to the use of refugees' stories, highlighting how these practices risk reproducing victimisation stereotypes and silencing the critical activism of subjects (Meerzon 2020; Jeffers 2012).

Among migrants living in camps, the willingness to escape these visual sets and narrative tropes often leads towards two tendencies: the refusal to participate in projects, and the desire to develop self-representational strategies which imply non-visual languages. Improvisational music is the most widely used, although its practice is strongly discouraged, to the point of being legally prosecuted as a crime in places of the first arrival (ports, ships, reception centres). In camps, music is dissuaded or even forbidden by the gangmasters to prevent gatherings and demonstrations. However, even when silenced, the musical experience does not disappear but resists as a secret language of the imagination, a symbolic bond of belonging to home, a projection of desires. As studies and fieldworks report (Caruso 2018, 2019), during transit migration, migrants often listen to music individually through devices (mobile phones and earbuds). This practice is common, particularly in refugee centres and CAS (Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria) for unaccompanied minors.²⁸ Even when performed in isolation, these listening practices are creative acts that open an "infinite space" (Small 1998) and provide a resource for mental health and well-being (Lenette et al. 2016). As stated by the musicologist Small, any expression of "musicking", from composing, to dancing, to listening on a walkman or singing alone, is not "an individual matter [...] that takes place in a social vacuum" (Small 1998, p. 6) but a social and even political act; all the more so in contexts of annihilating precarity and vulnerability, such as the camps of Southern Italy.

In these places, musical expression emerges as a multiple system of relationships around which traditions and cultural imaginaries meet. The performing acts are occasional, temporary, and unstructured but are characterised by dynamic creativity, improvisational skills, and dialogical competencies. Apart from rare cases, few professional artists and

musicians live in the camps, since they often migrate by more privileged routes, thanks to the solidarity of colleagues or institutions. However, most sub-Saharan migrants possess amateur musical skills acquired in their countries of origin, where performed and improvised music plays a vital role in societies and is a customary practice. Their ability in improvisational languages is revealed during the performances in a context characterised by the precariousness of spaces, the variation of partners, and the lack of musical instrumentation. Music is performed with makeshift percussion or guitars and, more frequently, with mobile phones that provide rhythms and melodies. The telephone, an indispensable tool along the migration route to connect with the country of origin, becomes a means of creation through recorded audio tracks, music samples, video soundtracks, and clips. Their playlists provide the bases for singing, dancing, performing and improvising. Rap, hip hop, and freestyle variations, with or without instrumental beats, are the preferred languages in camps. As programmatic forms of musical protest, born in Black American ghettos (Rose 1994), these musical forms are the reference for many young migrants. Open, immediate, and profoundly adaptable to the contexts in which they are performed, rap and freestyle are released from the need for musical instruments, specific frameworks, or structured skills.²⁹ Lyrics are recited impromptu, in rhythmised speech. Serving as both entertainment and social claim, these languages leave room for authorship and creation, individually or collectively. Contests and rhythmised dialogues between performers become spaces of shared creation.

Through rapid interactions between multiplicities of voices, the improvised practices (music, poetry, spoken word, or dance) open an ephemeral common space of enunciation (Bhabha 1994) that cannot be planned a priori, nor structured a posteriori. It exists only in the instant of the action. This process of continuous negotiation between the actors contributes to the elaboration of a shared imaginary, in a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic environment. The plurality also resonates in the multilingualism that traverses the freestyle rhyming. The languages of the former colonies, French and English, combine with the languages of belonging, such as Dioula, Bambara, Wolof, Arabic, and with Italian, dialects, slang French, or broken English. Multilingualism is accompanied by polyrhythms that shift according to the group's composition and the spatial and temporal conditions. The ensembles are ephemeral organisms composed of variable members, in a fluctuation that reflects the conditions of transit spaces.

Sometimes, these spontaneous creations become more structured through collaboration with associations rooted in the local context. As in other cases of self-organised actions by migrants and asylum seekers, the support of associations produces a change in the nature and methods of agency, enhancing their visibility and, on the other hand, limiting their independence by delegating their interests to associations (Perocco and Pasqualetto 2021). Frequently these collaborations involve artists and associations that deal with sustainable agricultural production and agricultural labourers' rights. Some projects aim at the artistic professionalisation of participants, such as the initiative *In Campo! Senza Caporale*, led by the environmental association *Terra!*. After selecting some labourers with a passion for rap living in the ghetto of Borgo Mezzanone³⁰, they integrated them into a music school led by professional Italian rappers. They then developed the project by creating a musical band, the *Orchestra dei Braccianti*, founded in 2018 and composed of musicians and sub-Saharan labourers living in this ghetto. The project was realised to "raise awareness among institutions and public opinion about the conditions of day labourers".³¹ While presenting itself as a lever of professionalisation that is attentive to the wage and contractual aspect of employment,³² the *Orchestra* risks reproposing some stereotypes about refugees and migrants. In interviews and press releases, the emphasis on the "redemption" of "refugee lives" is accompanied by all the biographical elements suitable for welcoming them as "refugees", such as detention in Libyan camps, arrival by boat in Italy, and settlement in camps. As stated by Ivana Galli, National Secretary of Flai CGIL, the national trade union that collaborated with the project: "It is an experience born in the name of multiculturalism with people who come from different parts of the world and find themselves in music,

to tell about the work, the struggles, the countries they cross, the battles for dignity and against exploitation. Only music, with its artistic power, can go beyond mere words, telling the story of redemption through profound moments of participation.”³³

In the liberating parable of this artistic-humanitarian project, the newcomers play the role of “refugees”. Even their communication policies present migrant musicians in the generic role of refugees, at best mentioned by their first names, adopting a practice of racialised infantilisation. Sometimes referred to as “boys”, these musicians play a secondary role compared to the other musicians who are instead defined as “professionals” and mentioned by their full name, instrument played, and expertise. This tendency is prevalent in many musical (and theatrical) projects that ally artists and migrants or immigrants, denoting an artistic approach that replicates the stereotype of the migrant needing guidance to integrate. Since press releases use this vocabulary, media also routinely disseminate this stigmatised approach.

Although within artistic projects led by non-migrant professional musicians, there are profound differences in objectives and structures,³⁴ in most cases, the sub-Saharan migrants are forced into an entertainment profile to be better accepted by the music market. Moreover, many groups in which the role of Italian musicians is predominant convey a comforting message of multicultural coexistence and peace, avoiding denouncing abuses and inequalities. At other times, they present the tragic narrative of the refugee, who has to be accepted because of the hardships he or she has experienced. In some rarer cases, these ambiguities are also accompanied by precarious contracts and unfair wage conditions that expose migrants to exploitative dynamics.

Among the examples of equal and horizontal collaboration is the reggae hip-hop group *Kalifoo Ground Music System*. This band was founded by a former Comboni priest and three sub-Saharan migrants, with the support of the self-managed social centre Ex-Canapificio of Caserta. The project was born as a reaction to the Camorra’s racial massacre of immigrants in Castel Volturno in 2008³⁵. Their militant stance is professed right from their name: “Kalifoo” is the term used in Libya to label migrants in transit, meaning “day slave”, while “Kalifoo Ground” indicates the place where Kalifoos go to be selected by the gangmasters. Their multi-linguistic texts (English, Italian, French, Twi, Dioula, and broken language) deal with illegal hiring, labour exploitation, migration, and Italian politics. The band collaborated on Andrea Segre’s documentary *Il Sangue Verde* (2010), which chronicles the riots in Rosarno.³⁶ As one activist and band member says, “For us, music is an experiment but, above all, a political struggle. We are the artistic expression of a movement of immigrants fighting for their rights.”³⁷ Too radical and unattractive to the music market, the *Kalifoo* have carried on their craft with difficulty. Some of them abandoned the project because of incompatibility with their work.³⁸

In *Kalifoos*’s case, the collaboration with politicised groups and activists from Caserta’s self-managed social centres³⁹ played an essential role in giving rise to a militant project that tackled the fight for rights head-on. As in other such projects, the struggles of undocumented and racialised labourers intersect with the criminal and mafia system of territorial control. Therefore, migrant resistance is also an anti-Mafia struggle since labour exploitation is predominantly managed by Mafia criminal syndicates embedded in the institutions. Their battle is twofold.

2.3. *Radio Ghetto: Performing Sounds of Resistance*

In camps where spatial segregation and racial discrimination are fierce, many collective projects create alliances of activism that operate on different levels and conduct innovative experiments in claims, shaping vibrant creative forms. The political activism associated with migrants’ reluctance towards representational traps often results in the use of non-visual languages.

Radio is one of the emerging tools used in camps to confront these questions and create alternative frames of expression. As a functional language for sharing information among dwellers, radio is also a helpful instrument for social and political claims.

Historically, this medium has played a leading role in cultural resistance by developing counter-testimony to dominant histories (Hill 2013). According to Western (2023), participatory radio programmes can realise collective methods of voicing that can unmake colonial hierarchies, boundary politics, and citizenship regimes. Present in several camps around the world, such as the vast Za'atari camp in northern Jordan⁴⁰ or the Eko camp in Greece,⁴¹ radio operates as a tool of relational resistance through sound and speech, affirming an agency free of images and representations.

In the shantytowns of Borgo Mezzanone and Rignano Garganico, inhabited by sub-Saharan labourers, a participatory radio was born in 2012. *Radio Ghetto* was a radio project conceived as a generative space for artistic struggles, capable of transcending the confines of the camp, reaching a wide audience, and uniting the aspirations of migrants and immigrants in Italy and abroad. Although the radio was created with the support of the Italian activist group *Rete Campagne in Lotta*, it was run by the camp inhabitants.

The activists brought all the necessary equipment to start broadcasting and trained the dwellers in radio mechanics and electrical engineering. The improvised public microphone station was transformed into a shared space where voices were not mediated, filtered, or appropriated. Radio programming was curated by migrants with music, sound, and words, hosting many voices together and offering a polyphony of visions. Broadcasts included self-produced radio news, debates on labour exploitation, music programmes, performances, improvised poetry, freestyle and hip-hop. Concerts and live competitions were organised, as well as other activities.⁴²

In the beginning, *Radio Ghetto* broadcast only within the shantytown, by using different languages (Wolof, Bambara, Dioulà, French) to reach out to the non-Italian-speaking labourers and inform them about their rights. Over the years, the project expanded with *Radio Ghetto Italia*, a weekly extract of programmes broadcast by small radio stations located in different Italian regions and on the web. Finally, they opened *Radio Ghetto Africa*, a half-hour programme in French, broadcast in Morocco, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Senegal, connecting voices over the borders.

After the destruction of the ghetto by the Italian police in March 2017, *Radio Ghetto* became itinerant through a mobile station in Borgo Mezzanone (Foggia), moving to other ghettos in this area, to the CARA (centre for asylum seekers), and within the near village. This militant radio station became a space to debate, share common references, and plan alternatives to exploitation and isolation. Its organisational and militant strength is an example of deconstructing the victimisation stereotypes attributed to people living on the margins.

The numerous recordings made in different contexts have been collected in a sound archive of thousands of hours of documentation. This archive became, in turn, a source for further artistic works that reprocess the material and multiply the scope of the project. Working on the radio recordings of the archive, the artist Alessandra Ferrini created the video *Radio Ghetto Relay*, which avoids any mimetic representation (Abdelkarim and Ferrini 2019). Another example of this regenerative process is the audio-theatre performance *Radio Ghetto-Voci libere dai ghetti di Foggia* built on the sound archive, and composed of conversations, environmental noises and music. This work is curated by *Collettivo Radio Ghetto*, a group of people who have been involved in the project since 2012. The choice to focus on audio theatre is, even in this case, a conscious rejection of visual frames representing migrants. In the words of the *Collectivo*: "Our intent was not to show the ghetto directly. The image we wanted to emerge could not come through the photographs or the few existing videos. Photography is rough. You have no idea how hated it is in there [in the ghetto]."⁴³

These two examples show how migrants' predilection for non-visual languages can, in turn, become a dynamic resource for rethinking artistic approaches. The absence of bodies and biographical testimonies proposed by these experiences invites a critical reflection on the communication of struggle, violence, and rights. The denial of refugee iconography manifested in *Radio Ghetto* project seems to confirm Western's (2020) assertion: "Sound

is a tool of asserting belonging in the face of asylum regimes, racialised persecution, and border politics that play out in urban space.”

3. Conclusions: The Power of Vulnerable Creations

Informal encampments are proliferating in Europe as a product of enhanced bordering practices. Despite the civic and social aphasia structured by governmental or extra-governmental controls, an expressive reaction is emerging in these transit places. Music, dance, performed poetry and orality are the languages chosen by migrants to react. These languages affirm improvisation as a form of agency, and practise invisibility as a survival strategy, challenging the frames of hypervisibility in which migrants are often confined by artistic and media production. These dynamic and ephemeral practices of creation are profoundly adapted to the precariousness inherent in the camps. To approach their study, therefore, it is crucial to consider the close concordance between aesthetic, political, and spatial aspects that generate them. As the growing field of Camp Studies shows, transit places impose new approaches (Martin et al. 2020) since their characteristics simultaneously generate methodologies (Weima and Brankamp 2022). By entering this field of studies, this article confirms the variety of adaptation practices and the need to open new interpretative perspectives in research. Through an interdisciplinary approach that links Performance Studies, Social Studies, and Space Studies, this research affirms the political and aesthetical impact of improvisational artistic practices. Moving beyond the narrative of pain and the iconography of marginality, the study avoids focusing on the notion of camp as a dispositive of annihilation (Agamben 1998) and excavates the interstitial spaces that generate frictions and open up autonomy (Fontanari and Ambrosini 2018), challenging the ambiguity of migrants’ representation.

The article argues that camps’ liminality (Turner 1987) and in-betweenness (Bhabha 1994) provide the condition for creating linguistic and performative experimentations that are reshaped by and through everyday interactions. In this perspective, the vulnerability of precariousness is a creative resource and a political statement (Butler 2004). In conclusion, these practices stand out as complex and vital dynamics of political resistance, which are paradigmatic of our time.

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Notes

- ¹ Transit migration is a critical phenomenon within EU countries (Collyer et al. 2014). Governmental migration policies are increasing the number of migrants who are forced to live in a continuous state of non-arrival.
- ² This article is a partial outcome of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie project *Playing at the Gateways of Europe: theatrical languages and performative practices in Migrant Reception Centres of the Mediterranean Area*. The research addresses the use of theatrical languages and performative practices in reception centres and camps, focusing on two crucial transit countries of the Mediterranean migratory route: Italy and Morocco.
- ³ In this article, the term “migrant” is used to refer to a person who is not permanently settled, including asylum seekers, refugees, residence permit applicants, and undocumented people. The contexts mentioned in the article (centres and camps) are crossed by people with different legal statuses, who often pass from one to another.

- 4 The decree approved by the Council of Ministers in October 2018 (so-called Salvini Decree) abolished the “temporary residence permits for humanitarian needs” and closed the secondary reception centres (SPRAR). As a result, the number of migrants without legal status has increased. Many of them have been excluded from the reception centres, and so a number of makeshift camps have sprung up near reception centres.
- 5 Report ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipalities), *Le condizioni abitative dei migranti che lavorano nel settore agro-alimentare*, July 2022.
- 6 The research data were collected from the press, social networks, official and unofficial records of associations and social cooperatives, and from a series of non-directive interviews with artists, researchers, and participants involved in artistic, musical, and performative practices in camps.
- 7 See Giannini, Chiara. 2020. Il video anti-italiano del rapper clandestino: pronto a mozzare teste. November 22. Available online: <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/video-anti-italiano-rapper-clandestino-pronto-mozzare-teste-1904853.html> (accessed on 8 August 2022).
- 8 See Migranti, dalla Tunisia sul barcone cantano e ballano come turisti, schiaffo al Viminale. *Libero*, 17 November 2020. Available online <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/video/italia/25259375/migranti-tunisia-sbarchi-barcone-balli-canti-come-turisti-immigrazione-lampedusa-viminale.html> (accessed on 7 September 2022).
- 9 The Italian politician Matteo Salvini shared on Instagram the video of a woman singing on a boat crossing the Mediterranean, commenting: “During the clandestine crossing on an irregular boat, this Tunisian influencer publishes Instagram stories and photos, joyful and smiling”. (Instagram Matteo Salvini 23 November 2021). A long series of comments followed condemning the act of singing as proof of “false refugee condition”. The Italian press reported the news. See *L’influencer canta sul barcone dei migranti: duro post di Salvini*. *Notizie*, 13 November 2021. Available online <https://www.notizie.com/2021/11/23/linfluencer-canta-barcone-migranti-salvini-durissimo/> (accessed on 7 September 2022).
- 10 See Della Costa, Marino. 2020. Nave trasformata in discoteca, clandestini in festa a spese degli italiani. Il web in rivolta, *Secolo d'Italia*, September 5. Available online <https://www.secoloditalia.it/2020/09/nave-trasformata-in-discoteca-clandestini-in-festa-a-spesa-degli-italiani-il-web-in-rivolta-video/> (accessed on 7 September 2022).
- 11 In 2015, the “Jungle” of Calais was the largest unofficial migrant camp in Europe, where up to 8000 migrants lived in makeshift tents until the final evacuation in October 2016.
- 12 *Good Chance* was founded in 2015 by two playwrights, Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, who established a temporary geodesic dome in the migrant camp of Calais. The dome provided a “safe space” for creative activities ranging from theatre, music, visual art, and cinema. The involvement of numerous professional artists in this project has offered better chances for migrants to pursue an artistic career. See <https://www.goodchance.org.uk/> (accessed on 18 October 2022).
- 13 The Music Room was a project aimed at providing a music hub for refugees. The project involved humanitarian organisations in developing the concept of music, song, and dance as fundamental human rights.
- 14 Graffiti and visual art have been studied by Alexandra Galitzine-Loumpet and the research team Liminal (Linguistic and Intercultural Mediations in a context of International Migrations). See [Galitzine-Loumpet and Saglio-Yatzimirsky \(2022\)](#).
- 15 On the issue of the imaginaries of the Calais camp in the media and activist sectors, see [Galitzine-Loumpet \(2018\)](#).
- 16 The term “applied theatre” defines a series of theatrical practices explicitly aimed at achieving educational, health, or environmental objectives. Usually, these projects are funded by international programs.
- 17 On the struggles of asylum seekers in reception centres, see [Perocco and Pasqualetto \(2021\)](#), p. 223: “From 2011 to 2017, we count around 390 occasional protests, mainly temporary actions lasting for a couple of hours, or a couple of days.”
- 18 *NO CAP* is managed by a group of activists and volunteers, including agronomists, journalists, lawyers, and engineers.
- 19 Among the docufilms on this subject, we also mention *One day One day* by Olmo Parenti (2022) and *Mediterranea* (2015) by Jonas Carpignano.
- 20 Yvan Sagnet founded the *No Cap* association, which fights against the exploitation of day labourers by the agricultural industry and promotes the commercialisation of ethically produced goods. Sagnet is the author of two books: *Ghetto Italia. I braccianti stranieri tra capolarato e sfruttamento* (2015) and *Ama il tuo sogno. Vita e rivolta nella terra dell’oro rosso* (2017).
- 21 Acclaimed at the prestigious Venice Film Festival, the film was also presented at the International Theatre Festival of Venice in 2022. In this film, Sagnet plays the role of Jesus.
- 22 The Swiss director Rau founded the IIPM, International Institute of Political Murder, based in Switzerland and Germany. His productions have appeared at major international festivals.
- 23 Sagnet quoted in Manna, Luciano. 2017. Mostra del Cinema: Yvan nel film *Jululu*, *La gazzetta del Meridione*, 5 September.
- 24 Founded and managed by Papa Latyr Faye and Mbaye Ndiaye, Casa Sankara in San Severo offers self-managed accommodation to 500 migrants. According to [Manfreda \(2021\)](#), this association is a concrete example of autonomy and agency, which opposes a counter-narrative to the prejudices of the needy migrant, incapable of self-organisation.
- 25 See the website <https://rivolta-della-dignita.com/manifest/> (accessed on 23 September 2022).

- 26 On 7 January 2010, an uprising of migrant workers broke out in Rosarno. After a gun attack against two African labourers returning from work, the migrants reacted by leaving the shantytown and protesting in the streets. A counterreaction from the local population followed. After two days of clashes and “black hunts” (*caccia u niguru*) initiated by the ‘ndrangheta (local mafia), the Italian army intervened. As a result, between 1000 and 2000 workers were transferred to other Italian cities. The then Minister of the Interior, Roberto Maroni, attributed the cause of the clashes to excessive tolerance of irregular immigration. These dramatic events raised public awareness about the working conditions of migrants. *Caporalato* and *ghettos* became the subject of various investigations and debates.
- 27 Post Facebook “Rosarno Filmfestival-Fuori dal ghetto”, 4 October 2022.
- 28 The situation in the reception centres is different from that in the agricultural shantytowns, particularly with regard to time management: whereas in the slum, time is almost entirely dedicated to work, with exhausting shifts and even long journeys to reach the work areas, in the reception centres the migrants spend their time without doing any activities. Work is forbidden. Migrants can only perform certain activities for a few hours per week. Therefore, people in the centres live in suspended time, waiting and trying to fill it with social media and listening to music. However, the number of musical experiences in the reception centres, both spontaneous and organised, testifies to the vital role of music in transit migration.
- 29 Born in the New York ghettos in the late seventies as a disc jockey technique, rap quickly became a manifesto of counter-cultural pride in young black culture and urban politics (Spencer 1991).
- 30 Borgo Mezzanone, near Foggia, is one of the largest informal settlements of Sub-Saharan agricultural labourers and homeless migrants.
- 31 See Dall’Africa alla Capitanata, dai campi di pomodoro ai teatri, *Foggia Today*, Novembre 10, 2018. Available online <https://www.foggiatoday.it/attualita/orchestra-dei-braccianti.html> (accessed on 23 September 2022).
- 32 See the interview with the curator of the project, Giulia Anita Bari, in Ghebreigziabiher, Alessandro. 2020. L’Orchestra dei braccianti: combattere il caporalato con la musica, *Melting Pot Europa*, July 6. Available online <https://www.meltingpot.org/2020/07/orchestra-dei-braccianti-combattere-il-caporalato-con-la-musica/> (accessed on 23 September 2022).
- 33 Dall’Africa alla Capitanata, *Foggia Today*, Novembre 10, 2018.
- 34 In Italy, there are several music bands involving migrants and asylum seekers who live in reception centres or camps. An interesting example is the band *Stregoni*, founded in 2016 by two Italian underground musicians. This case study has been extensively analysed by Della *Della Puppa and Storato* (2021).
- 35 On 18 September 2008, the Casalesi Camorra clan fired 150 Kalashnikov shots at a group of immigrants and killed six of them.
- 36 See <https://www.zalab.org/en/projects/green-blood/> (accessed on 6 September 2022).
- 37 *Kalifoo Ground Music System*, Castel Volturno 2011. YouTube Video. Available online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p19VihHUFzg> (accessed on 6 September 2022).
- 38 Unlike other bands, the musicians are still day labourers (and not ex-labourers), so their musical activity is often fragmentary.
- 39 In Italy, self-managed social centres exist in many cities as spaces for social activism and activities such as concerts, exhibitions, and markets. They are part of different left-wing political networks, including anarchist, communist, socialist, and autonomist.
- 40 Za’atari is currently the largest camp in the world: at its peak, it housed around 150,000 Syrian refugees. Here, radio is used to organise and communicate with refugees about health and disease prevention.
- 41 *No Border Radio* was founded in the Eko camp by Davide Agnolaccia, an activist of the self-managed social centre Macao in Milan. The radio broadcast on FM and streamed on the internet daily, leaving the floor to the dwellers of the camp. One of the songs performed by a young Sirian migrant became a video clip shot in camp, available online https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=pjqQZjBx3v4&feature=emb_logo (accessed on 8 August 2022). See also Confortin. E. 2016. Hussein Ibrahim: storia rap di un migrante siriano, *Indika*, July 15.
- 42 See the website <https://radioghetto.vocilibere.wordpress.com/> (accessed on 8 August 2022).
- 43 See Raciti, Valeria. 2019. Radio Ghetto. Archivi viventi di resistenze, *Teatro e critica*, Novembre 23. Available on <https://www.teatroecritica.net/2019/11/intervista-a-radio-ghetto-archivi-viventi-di-resistenze/> (accessed on 8 August 2022).

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