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Redefining Italian spaces: Piazza Vittorio and migratory aesthetics

Federica Mazzara

Whoever wants to see the Italy of 2020 or 2050 should go to Piazza Vittorio. There, it's possible to run across a Chinese girl who speaks in Roman dialect, or a Bengali infant dressed in the local football team's jersey¹.

Piazza Vittorio: a multicultural laboratory

This chapter aims to analyse the extent to which recent immigration into Italy has produced new cultural representations, which can help in understanding the everyday practices that are currently transforming and redefining Italian urban spaces.

The particular space I investigate in this chapter is Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II – generally referred to simply as Piazza Vittorio a square and its surrounding neighbourhood which has witnessed significant and often contested physical and cultural changes in the past decades, all of which warrant further exploration. These changes are especially connected to the settlement in and around the square of an ethnically hybrid group of people, immigrants from many different countries, who have gradually affected its urban and cultural landscape.

¹ Amara Lakhous, 'Piazza Vittorio. A cure for homesickness'. *Review: Lliterature and Arts of the Americas*, 42. 1 (2009), 136.

Starting from Certeau's suggestion that 'ordinary practitioners of the city [...] are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it',² this article will follow the migrants as particular kinds of 'walkers' in the city of Rome, a place to which they contribute through re-writing and representing social, aesthetic and cultural acts.

The presence of immigrants has been instrumental in making Piazza Vittorio, and its new practices of urban living, less obscure and more 'readable', through a series of migratory aesthetic performances and everyday practices that this chapter will present and analyse. I borrow the term 'migratory aesthetics' here from Mieke Bal. According to Bal, 'migratory, in this sense, is the fact that migrants (as subjects) and migration (as an act to perform as well as a state to be or live in) are part of any society today, and that their presence is an incontestable source of cultural transformation'³. Aesthetics becomes migratory when such practices (artistic, literary, filmic, architectural and urban) take place in a space made up of people whose lives and performative identities are fused by mobility.

The central suggestion of this chapter is that within the cultural and physical area of Piazza Vittorio, it is possible to trace an 'alternative cartography of social space',⁴ where migrants become empowered subjects who use mass media and aesthetic forms – such as literature, cinema, music and performance art – to claim cultural and social visibility together with a political presence. Seen from this perspective, Piazza Vittorio is a place of cultural

² Michel De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 93

³ Mieke Bal, 'Lost in space, lost in the library', in S. Durrant and C. M. Lord (eds.), *Essays in migratory aesthetics. Cultural practices between migration and art-making* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007), p. 24.

⁴ R.G. Davis, D. Fischer-Hornung, C. Kardux (eds.), "Introduction", in Id. *Aesthetic practices and politics in media, music, and art: Performing migration* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 4.

transformations giving expression to a migratory aesthetics that produces a new urban text, and consequently a new way of looking at immigration as a cultural resource.

Being located next to the Stazione Termini, the main train station in Rome, Piazza Vittorio has always been a place of passage and a point of aggregation, especially after the establishment of the market in 1902.⁵ Its location in the centre of metropolitan networks, has contributed to the popular perception that the square is not safe. As a continuing place of passage Piazza Vittorio is a vulnerable urban location, transitory and opaque; it seems consistently foreign, unintelligible, and its layers of shifting languages, shop fronts, inhabitants and passing visitors render it a somewhat unreadable or “chattering” cityscape.

As in all multiethnic quarters, Piazza Vittorio and the Esquilino present many contradictions and are often seen as examples of social and cultural tensions. On the one hand, Piazza Vittorio has become a kind of emblem of intercultural exchange and solidarity. The square is often the site of demonstrations in favour of immigration and integration, while local associations (e.g. Apollo 11 cultural association, Piazza Vittorio Cricket Club), websites (e.g. Esquilinotizie, Roma Multietnica) performances (e.g. the end of Ramadan, the Chinese and the Bangladeshi New Year, Tai Chi exercises) contribute to promoting the new multiethnic reality of the square – and of the entire city – as a positive aspect of social and cultural evolution, rather

⁵ Piazza Vittorio, located in the Esquilino quarter, is surrounded by arched buildings and is the only square in Rome built in the Piedmontese style – its construction dates from the period when the capital of the Kingdom of Italy, originally centred in Turin, was moved to Rome in 1870. These elegant buildings containing luxurious apartments were originally destined for bureaucrats and public servants. The structure of the square is quite unusual, its huge rectangular space is mostly occupied by a gated garden, in which are the ruins of Villa Palombara (1680), and in particular its main entrance, the Porta Magica (*Magic Gate*), on which alchemical formulas in Hebrew and Latin are inscribed. The Villa was destroyed when the land on which it stood was sold for the development of Rome’s new main railway station in nearby Piazza di Termini in the 1860s. The garden also hosts a compound of ruins dating from ancient Roman times, the remains of a fountain known as the Trofei di Mario (Trophies of Marius). Until a few years ago, Piazza Vittorio was known in particular being the site of Rome’s largest inner-city market, around the garden, which channelled and fed the urban and social life of the square. After the market was moved to an indoor space not far away, the square re-acquired its original nineteenth-century elegance.

than something to be sceptical about, to fear or to reject. On the other hand, the square is also the favourite location of counter-voices that promote the idea that immigration is one of the causes of the social and economic crisis in Italy. In the specific case of Piazza Vittorio, immigrants have been blamed for a perceived 'degeneration' and 'degradation' of the square and for the loss of its 'Italian character'. As a counterbalance to the gradual multiculturalism of the area, political and social actions have been promoted by 'neighbourhood organizations' (often supported by right-wing groups) declaring their intention to 'clean up' the area'⁶.

The fascist social centre, *Casa Pound*, located near Piazza Vittorio in Via Napoleone III, is especially active in this regard. It promotes a xenophobic agenda that often finds its favourite location in Piazza Vittorio.⁷ It especially uses the square as a showcase by posting unauthorized placards that promote a feeling of distrust and fear and encourage violent acts on the walls of surrounding buildings.

⁶ Paolo Favero, 'Italians, the "Good People": Reflections on National Self-Representation in Contemporary Italian Debates on Xenophobia and War'. *Outlines – Critical Practice Studies 2* (2010), 138-153.

⁷ In this regard, it is important to highlight how in Italy the exposure of fascist items or fascist iconography has recently become part of a 'normative' discourse. As part of a process of revisionism, these acts represent an attempt to rewrite contemporary Italian and European history, by relativizing the horrors of Nazism and of the final solution, decriminalizing Fascism and its intelligentsia, delegitimizing the Resistance movement and demonizing Communism. (A. Del Boca, *La storia negata: il revisionismo e il suo uso politico*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2009), p. 9). These voices supported the 2006 election of a self-declared fascist mayor, Gianni Alemanno, who promoted his political programme by stressing his intention to remove from Rome, with strict measures, all those who had violated the law and who were not Italian citizens. In so doing, 'Mr Alemanno's victory marks the arrival in the Italian capital of the politics of paranoia that have already triumphed in much of the rest of the country' (Peter Popham, 'Neo-fascist sweeps in as Rome's mayor'. *The Independent*. Tuesday, 29 April 2008: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/neofascist-sweeps-in-as-romes-mayor-817128.html> [last accessed June 2017]). As a consequence, the ban on immigration has become part of a rhetoric that is influencing the consciousness and the behaviour of Italians in Rome (and beyond), who feel legitimised to express their fear, anger and rejection of the other by a behaviour that in a democratic country should be criminalised as fascist, violent and racist. This process of history rewriting is ultimately leading to the cancellation of the dark history of Fascism from public discourse in order to rehabilitate it as an acceptable, harmless phenomenon. This misleading belief is today the agent of violent acts embedded in a discourse of manipulation of the past and its memory, and protected, as noted by Paolo Favero, 'by the idea that after all, all such things are innocuous given that "we", the Italians, are, "*brava gente*"' (Favero, 'Italians, the "Good People"', 145). This is the social, cultural and political context in which Casa Pound and other Fascist organisations operate, and Piazza Vittorio has become one of the preferred spaces of their interventions.

In this context of social and political tension, Piazza Vittorio functions as a frame through and in which citizens project, display and perform their different cultural values; in other words, the square is used as a contested shop window, which, according to Rachel Bowlby's definition, can be variously a source of pleasure, surprise, dreaming absorption, curiosity, desire, disturbance, and more, in all sorts of combinations.⁸

Many of the places near Piazza Vittorio that are affected by immigration are indeed the sources of diverging feelings. The market, the gardens, the shops and other urban topoi of this area are objects of observation both from sceptics – who reject the idea that Piazza Vittorio, and Italian society in general, is moving toward a gradually more multicultural dimension – and from interested observers who regard the square as a multicultural laboratory, an inspirational source of promising intercultural expression.

Literary voices from the square

A first example of cultural expression sparked by Piazza Vittorio comes from literature. In 2006 the Algerian-Italian writer Amara Lakhous wrote and published a highly successful novel that took inspiration from the Piazza. He had personally experienced its new multicultural atmosphere when he moved, to Rome as a refugee, in 1995 and became a resident of the Piazza. The novel, entitled *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (*Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*) has been translated into several languages, with fourteen editions published in Italy. A film adaptation was released in 2010⁹, contributing to making this book an outstanding literary 'case' in Italy. One reason for its success is Lakhous' ability to

⁸ Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The invention of modern shopping* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 50.

⁹ Isotta Toso, *Scontro di civiltà per un scansare a Piazza Vittorio*, Bolero Film, 2010.

talk about the contradictions that Italians display about immigration from his ‘privileged’ position as a migrant himself, one who, well acquainted with the Italian language, culture and urban spatiality can, through a strategic use of humour affect Italian readers on delicate issues such as immigration, integration and racism.

The novel tells the story of a murder committed in a building near Piazza Vittorio, in which both locals and immigrants live. The murder is merely a pretext for introducing the reader to an extraordinarily varied group of figures who are being questioned by the police about the prime suspect, Ahmed (better known as Amedeo) who mysteriously disappeared after the murder took place. Through these witness statements the reader learns what each of the characters thinks about the square and its multicultural urban life. The Italian characters are presented as dangerously prejudiced: the Neapolitan concierge, Benedetta Esposito, thinks that the immigrants are the real reason for all crimes in Italy, and those living in her building in particular are responsible for the misuse of the elevator, a space she protects; Elisabetta Fabiani believes that those responsible for her missing little dog are the Chinese living in Piazza Vittorio, since she has been told that the Chinese eat dogs. Prejudices and stereotypes are expressed by these characters through a narrative discourse that subtly satirises them, deconstructing their limited ethnic categories.

The most interesting aspect of the novel, for the purpose of this chapter, is the fact that the city of Rome, and in particular Piazza Vittorio and its neighbourhood, acts as a protagonist itself, a complex and contested character. The city in this novel, as Parati has observed, ‘reveals itself as a fluid entity composed of spaces to which migrants want to assign new meanings’.¹⁰

¹⁰ Graziella Parati, ‘Where Do Migrants Live? Amara Lakhous’s Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio’. *Annali d’italianistica. Capital City: Rome 1870–2010* 28 (2010),

The fluidity of the square guides the human characters, especially the immigrants, in search of their personal, intimate spatial dimensions. The migrants (and not exclusively in ethnic or political terms) are the real residents and users of the Piazza (in the novel as in real life), they move around the gardens, the market, the station and other places nearby: the Iranian Parviz likes to feed pigeons in the nearby square of Santa Maria Maggiore in order to recall nostalgically his family in Iran and to forget his present state of exclusion and non-belonging in the host country; in her limited spare time the Peruvian Maria Cristina Gonzáles, who is being exploited in her job as carer for an old lady, walks to the Stazione Termini – a place of encounters, of departures and arrivals, of endings and beginnings – to meet her compatriots. For the migrants all these places become ‘spaces of memory’, within the larger space of the city of Rome and of the Italian nation, where they are mostly trapped in a prison of solitude and marginalization.

These migrants are embodiments of Certeau’s pedestrians for whom walking ‘is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper.’¹¹ The result is a city seen as ‘an immense social experience of lacking a place broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric’¹². These tiny deportations and displacements are daily practices in Piazza Vittorio and in Lakhous’s novel, where people have created and continuously weave their own intercultural urban fabric, find a ‘cure for homesickness’ as Lakhous has stated in relation to his personal experience of the square:

¹¹ Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, p. 103.

¹² *Ibid.*

Piazza Vittorio, with its fountains, its market, and its gardens, cured me of my homesickness. During my early days as an exile, I would wake every night with the same agonizing nightmare: I saw myself walking barefoot, desperate, without a destination, in the midst of an interminable desert, in search of a drop of water. I was thirsty. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I would step outside to confront my fears and to quench my thirst at the fountains of Piazza Vittorio. The water running from those fountains calmed me, but I was not only in need of water: I thirsted for freedom, youth, love, beauty, and above all, life. After a few weeks, the nightmare receded¹³.

Piazza Vittorio, in Lakhous's narrative, is a space 'inflected by otherness'¹⁴ and as such it is subjected to acts of appropriation, redefinition and transgression by migrants whose 'walks' perform and construct a new urban language. An interesting example of a space in the novel that testifies to the possibility for a social mobility is the elevator of the building where most of the characters live and where the murder takes place. This space is the object of constant negotiation and compromise in the novel, not simply between different inhabitants but between different cultures too. Benedetta Esposito, in particular, projects onto the elevator her own worldview, by deciding who is allowed to access it and who is not – typically, the immigrants. As Graziella Parati observes:

Benedetta sees the elevator as an entrance into a culture and a community that she has to monitor as she attempts to control the space other people can appropriate. As an

¹³ Lakhous, 'Piazza Vittorio. A cure for homesickness', 135.

¹⁴ Parati, 'Where do migrants live?', pp. 432.

outsider, she defines her level of belonging by her ability to exclude others from gaining access to movement: to the vertical motion, that is, of the elevator, symbolizing mobility, even social mobility¹⁵.

In her role as the guardian of the elevator, the one with the power to control its social use, Benedetta can express her sense of ‘integration’ and superiority, despite being an immigrant herself from the South of Italy, an ‘internal other’¹⁶ and therefore both a similar and a different kind of immigrant to Parviz, Maria Cristina and Iqbal.

The elevator is also the space around which we encounter all the novel’s characters, who project their fears and hopes into its transitory yet heavily regulated social space. The Italian professor from the north of Italy considers the elevator the epitome of discipline and order, whose use should be restricted to ‘civilized’ people. Parviz likes the elevator because while there he can meditate. Its movement up and down reflects his own life, which has been full of shifts, turns and breakdowns: ‘Now you’re up, now you are down. I was up...in Paradise...in Shiraz, living happily with my wife and children, and now I’m down...in Hell, suffering from homesickness’¹⁷. By contrast, Amedeo/Ahmed avoids using the elevator because of a claustrophobic feeling that brings him back to his past in Algeria, where he lost his fiancée, Bâgia, killed by fundamentalists. For him the elevator represents a space of death – ‘it reminds me of a tomb’, he says¹⁸, ‘a metaphor of memory’¹⁹. The equation of memory and

¹⁵ Parati, ‘Where do migrants live?’, pp. 436-437

¹⁶ Parati, ‘Where do migrants live?’, p. 435.

¹⁷ Lakhous, *Clash of civilizations over an elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (New York: Europa Editions, 2008), pp. 16-17.

¹⁸ Lakhous, *Clash of civilizations*, p. 42.

¹⁹ Parati, ‘Where do migrants live?’, p. 437.

death is ubiquitous in the novel, where all the immigrant characters struggle with a sense of homesickness that they try to overcome by filling the ‘empty’ urban spaces they inhabit with their own stories, cultural practices and memories.

Amedeo, in particular, is the immigrant character who knows the city of Rome better than the locals. Sandro Dandini, the owner of the Bar in Piazza Vittorio, says Amadeo knows the history of Rome and its streets better than he does, ‘in fact better than Riccardo Nardi, who is so proud of his origins, which go back to the ancient Romans. Riccardo drives a taxi and has been going up and down the streets of Rome every day for twenty years’.²⁰ Amedeo’s ability to wander around the centre and the periphery and the knowledge he has of the Italian language and Italian culture have assigned him the ‘privilege’ of being considered a native; nobody believes that Amedeo is in fact Ahmed, and nobody believes he murdered the Gladiator.

Amedeo controls the city by walking, and this has allowed him to perform a new, non-migrant, identity, relieving him of suspicion. His knowledge of the Italian urban cartography has saved him from a dimension of marginality and exclusion, but his real identity is still trapped in a past of sorrow and a sense of guilt. As Parati has observed, for Amedeo/Ahmed the city is divided along two lines: ‘the horizontal explorations that turn him into a *flâneur*, a cosmopolitan mediator between cultures, and the vertical, repetitive up and down, of a metaphorical elevator that traps him into that process of remembering that he needs to escape’.²¹

Amedeo, together with the other immigrants, contributes to making the place of Piazza Vittorio a space, a ‘practiced place’ in Certeau’s words²², by their act of walking and therefore

²⁰ Lakhous, *Clash of civilizations*, p. 95.

²¹ Parati, ‘Where do migrants live?’, p. 442. Amedeo / Ahmed reserves to another space the expression of his most intimate sorrow. It is in the bathroom of his apartment in Piazza Vittorio that he feels free to abandon himself to beastly ‘wailings’ (ululati), his secret confessions, his calls for justice.

²² De Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, p. 117.

by their act of writing an alternative urban text that subverts the order imposed by socio-cultural conventions. In this new cartography the logics and geometry of history imposed by locals collapses and a new hybrid language is inscribed transforming a contested place of transit into a liveable migratory space.

Piazza Vittorio, together with its micro-spaces, mirrors, in Lakhous's novel, the fluid identities of migrants who aim at creating their own alternative, non-linear trajectories, while natives, as Parati argues, tend to obstruct this project with acts of repression and control of spaces they think are rightfully their own.²³

Lakhous is able to read the new urban fabric of Piazza Vittorio as affected by immigration, offering a perspective where migrants create their own 'poetics of space'. Following a Bachelardian intuition, Lakhous realizes that any spatial aesthetics has its own temporal history that is inscribed by the dwellers through intimate acts of recollection, imagination and daydreaming. Amedeo/Ahmed, Parviz, Maria Cristina and even Benedetta find an intimate dimension within Piazza Vittorio and its nearby spaces, a shelter from their sense of displacement.

Another interesting literary example related to Piazza Vittorio that this chapter will consider is a short story, written in Italian, by the Brazilian writer Claudileia Lemes Dias, who, after spending most of her life in Brazil, migrated to Rome in the 1990s. The story is called *Livia e il drago* (*Livia and the dragon*) and it is included in a collection, *Storie di extracomunitaria follia*, 2009 (*Tales of Immigrant Madness*), about migrants living in Rome, told through a tangle of literary realism and striking metaphors that at times create a surreal

²³ Parati, 'Where do migrants live?.'

atmosphere. In this book, Rome is again the protagonist, together with a host of immigrant figures who face the challenge of integrating in a city sometimes charming, sometimes impenetrable and illegible.

Livia e il drago tells the story of a strange encounter between an old lady who lives in Piazza Vittorio and a Chinese dragon, who is hanging around the square waiting for the beginning of the Chinese New Year celebration, where it is expected to perform. In the Chinese New Year celebration in Piazza Vittorio the dance of the dragon is the biggest attraction. In the story, the dragon enters Livia's apartment from the window, and engages her in a bizarre conversation. Livia is not an open-minded and welcoming person when it comes to immigrants in Piazza Vittorio and the description the reader is given of the market from her point of view is exemplary of a prejudiced attitude towards the new arrangement of the square:

It was not easy for a person like her to cope with the market of Piazza Vittorio. She was yanked around by that mixture of nationalities, between vegetables and spices of unknown taste and that psychedelic matching of fruits of captivating colours; it was like doing a physiotherapy session in Hell.²⁴

Until the late 1990s, the market represented the real soul of the square, especially the local food stands. As Lesley Caldwell notes, 'by 1980 its 470 stalls had invaded everything forming a double ring of seven hundred metres round the garden which, enveloped in market

²⁴ C. Lemes Dias, 'Livia e il drago'. In *Storie di extracomunitaria follia* (Napoli: Mangrovie, 2010) p. 69. The translations of Lemes Dias' short story into English are mine.

rubble, was home to a population of down-and-outs.’²⁵ Within a larger project of gentrification, which involved the whole Esquilino district, the market was moved in 2001 inside a building (a former military compound) located just one block away in Via Principe Amedeo, and is now called the Nuovo Mercato Esquilino (*New Esquilino Market*). The new market is remarkable especially for the variety of products on offer, not merely local, not even simply Italian. In the Esquilino market many foreign food products sold by the ‘new’ Italians, mirror the new spirit of the area, in a combination of colours and smells that almost seem to respond to an aesthetic need. Like many other places around Piazza Vittorio, the market is at the centre of public discussion. There are those who think that in its new location the market has lost its traditional atmosphere of a place to find seasonal ‘local’ products, while others think that it is the best compromise between different ethnicities and food traditions, testifying to the present multicultural life of the city. Immigrants have undoubtedly contributed to making the market and the nearby square a richer place, where everything is continuously changed and enlivened by the merging of different cultural realities. The market, like the square, has become an expository window for intercultural performances, an intimate space where the ‘new’ local communities have the opportunity to display aspects of their cultural values and identity in a place where in general, they have only limited space to express their difference.

In Lemes Dias’s short story, for Livia the market represents the epitome of chaos and displacement. She feels rejected in a space that she used to see as familiar and reassuring, a place she felt she owned, that was hers according to social conventions. More precisely, Livia is seized by a sense of the uncanny, in that she suddenly finds herself estranged at home; she

²⁵ L. Caldwell, ‘Piazza Vittorio: Cinematic notes on the evolution of a Piazza’. In D. Caldwell, L. Caldwell (eds.), *Rome: Continuing encounters between past and present* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), p. 185.

projects onto the square the ‘presences of diverse absences’²⁶, but as a deported? Correct word? walker herself she also participates, unwillingly, in the re-inscription of the new urban text of Piazza Vittorio.

What is most irritating for Livia about the process of change in the area where she grew up, is what many people in Rome today refer to as ‘the Chinese invasion’:

Walking around the neighbourhood where she was born and had grown up, Livia couldn’t accept seeing signs written almost exclusively in Chinese. The herbalist, the fishmonger and the wine bar she used to go to till just a few years before had left the space to clothes shops, identical to each other, with items made at the same way and... cheap²⁷.

Livia’s fictional interpretation of the Chinese presence in Piazza Vittorio mirrors a common and more general feeling of the locals who perceive the Chinese, more than anything else, as commercial invaders of the area²⁸. Since the late 1990s shops owned by Chinese immigrants have spread into almost all the streets converging on the square, replacing a greater variety of older shops that had provided important services to the people living nearby. Without any apparent logical planning, their owners have given these shops a new look and function that responds more to an international business rationale than to the actual needs of the inhabitants of Piazza Vittorio. The Chinese, in other words, have reshaped these commercial

²⁶ Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, 108.

²⁷ Lemes Dias, *Livia e il drago*, p. 68.

²⁸ T. Wilkinson, ‘When in Rome, Use Chopsticks’. *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2004: <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/apr/14/world/fg-ciaomein14> [last access October 2015].

spaces according to the specific aesthetic requirements of window shopping: the shops do all look alike, the walls are all made of white panels, from which some cloth items hang and the windows themselves are marked by Chinese writings that appear as incomprehensible signs to non-Mandarin speakers. This unreadable and impenetrable reality of Chinese culture in the urban practices of the Roman square is transformed, in the story by Lemes Dias, into an example of migratory aesthetics through the use of a typical character of Chinese folk culture: the dragon.

The dragon of the story when asked by Livia what it thinks about the demonstration against the Chinese shopkeepers in Piazza Vittorio, which she is going to join that same day, gives a wise and straightforward explanation:

‘I think it’s you who sell off the shops’.

‘Ah! So now it’s our fault?’ Livia, got angry, looking scathingly at him.

‘It’s not a matter of fault! It’s a matter of buying and selling. Why don’t we protest together against the exploitation of workers, both Chinese and Italian?

That’s the real problem!’²⁹.

The dragon challenges the reasons so many Chinese migrants are allowed to take possession of the many shops in and around Piazza Vittorio, while Livia and the other Italians are blinded by xenophobic rage and hostility, since as natives ‘they need to apply a strategy of scapegoating in order to explain any urban problem’³⁰

²⁹ Lemes Dias, *Livia e il drago*, p. 79.

³⁰ Parati, ‘Where migrants live?’, p. 441.

But most importantly the dragon is the symbol of another aspect of the Chinese presence in Piazza Vittorio: the performative dimension that finds its elective space in the gardens of the square. The Chinese New Year's Eve party that is held there annually has become a significant urban cultural event, one of the most impressive examples of the rehabilitation of the gardens that took place after the arrival of immigrants in the area. At the end of the story the dragon hovers above Piazza Vittorio to join its compatriots and celebrate the New Year, with a performance aimed at thanking the ancestors for all the good things received in the past year.

The disjunction between the traditional Chinese performance and its location in the gardens of Piazza Vittorio establishes a migratory aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile, where the Chinese perform acts of memory and nostalgia activated by the past and projected into the 'new' cartography of Piazza Vittorio. Through acts of what Toni Morrison calls 'rememory'³¹, the Chinese immigrants claim a cultural visibility that contrasts with the one imposed by Livia and the locals like her, who clearly limit their view of the Chinese community in Piazza Vittorio to a narrow issue of mere urban invasion by an obscure and otherised cultural presence, in a space they feel they do not belong anymore.

The musical and filmic project of the 'Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio'

The last example of a migratory aesthetics practice³² revolving around Piazza Vittorio that I explore is a project involving at least two forms of artistic media: film and music. I am referring

³¹ T. Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 2007 [1987]), p. 43.

³² There are several other migratory everyday life practices that find in the square of Piazza Vittorio – and in particular inside its gated garden – their ideal location. Among them is the performance of Tai Chi exercises every day at dawn. A Chinese Tai Chi teacher and his students arrive in the garden of the square and start their martial arts exercises; behind them a small group of people, Italians and immigrants, gather and follow their slow motions as if on a stage. The result is a social act that adds a new urban and cultural layer in the palimpsest of the square.

to the 'Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio' founded in 2006 by Agostino Ferrente and Mario Tronco, both Piazza Vittorio dwellers. They decided to create a multicultural orchestra involving musicians from different countries living in the Esquilino district. They found more than thirty musicians, not all necessarily from Piazza Vittorio but, more or less from Rome, who could play at least fifteen different, culturally specific instruments. Behind the orchestra there was another bigger project that unfortunately still remains a dream. With the aim of saving the famous old Apollo Theatre in Via Giolitti, which was about to be turned into a bingo hall, Tronco and Ferrente formed an Association, *Associazione Apollo 11*, composed of local artists as well as the local residents devoted to the multicultural character of the Esquilino quarter. The Association promotes cultural events and is still working to become a more active cultural centre. The main purpose is to involve the immigrants of the neighbourhood both as audience and as producers of cultural events. Because of the lack of interest of the local authorities – they gave the Association permission to open and use the theatre, but did not offer any funding – the Apollo cinema is still a ruin, and is likely to remain so for the Association and for the Esquilino district. The Apollo 11 has, in the meantime, used the basement of a school close to Piazza Vittorio in Via Nino Bixio that has become 'Il Piccolo Apollo', and from it the Association

The garden, and the Piazza around, become 'contact zones', social spaces, where 'cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt 1991: 33). As in Lakhous's and Lemes Dias's texts, here migrants become deliberately the agents of new power relations, projecting the memorised and imaginary representation of their home culture onto a place they remap through acts of 'public' performances that involve an intercultural contact, a contamination between subjects, practices and spaces. It is by acts of memory, personal practices of remembering, that migrants are tied to these places that become the depository of a new text they are in the process of narrating. Another public performative act taking place in the garden of Piazza Vittorio has been brought forward by the Piazza Vittorio Cricket Club, an association spontaneously formed by the young dwellers of the Piazza, all Italian-born and mainly from migrant families. They started using the garden of the square for playing amateur matches with improvised equipment, and now they have formed an ambitious team that has already taken part in some official cricket competitions. Interestingly, the association defined itself as 'the association without permission', to stress the independent and unrecognized initiative, and consequently the lack of interest on the part of the official Italian institutions. As in the case of Tai Chi in the garden, the Cricket Club aims at inscribing an alternative public and social discourse in the space of Piazza Vittorio, where migrants and people of non-Italian origin have the chance to enact their own cultural practices, projecting nostalgia in a space that is not simply Italian or national any more.

continues to organise cultural events, and the orchestra has rehearsed there for many years. The orchestra itself represents the first important, successfully realised project of the Association. While it was taking shape, Agostino Ferrente was documenting every important step with the help of a video camera, and a documentary film, *L'Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio* was the result.

In Ferrente's documusical, we gradually learn about the considerable difficulties involved in getting different musical traditions to work together, as well as in overcoming the troubles facing anyone trying to deal with visas and work permits in a country run on scepticism and resistance towards immigration, especially in the years in which the rumours that Piazza Vittorio's decay was the result of immigration, were at their peak. Each musician brought to the orchestra his or her own instrument and personal background of popular music, creating a fusion of cultures and traditions, old and new sounds, unknown instruments and voices from around the world, though this was not achieved without difficulty.

The musical performances enacted by the immigrant characters in the documentary are all moments of nostalgic recollection; all the people involved in this project are immigrants who were musicians in their own country, but who had to give up once they arrived in Italy, where they became anonymous immigrants with no time, no space, and no right to express their cultural belongings and expressions. Mario Tronco is a musician himself and his project gave the participants the opportunity to gain a voice by performing as artists. In so doing, these people gained a visibility that is not usually accorded to immigrants in Italy and they did it by playing the specific musical instruments that mirrored their own specific culture and by mixing

different musical genres.³³ This has made the orchestra a dynamic multicultural laboratory, where different religions, languages, and customs meet in the name of music, a cultural expression that has been achieved through compromise and re-arrangement. As people migrate, music and song are among the cultural productions that travel with them ‘contributing to the construction of memory and identity as well as bearing to change and transculturation’³⁴.

An interesting aspect that the documentary is able to show is the difficulty that the orchestra has been encountering with the legal aspects of this multicultural project. Making the presence of immigrants legal in Italy, and in Europe in general, is always a complex and long process that involves considerable negotiation and patience and is by no means always successful. Millions of immigrants still live in hiding in Italy, against their will. These bureaucratic obstacles are common practices when it comes to immigration in Italy affecting the freedom these subjects have to express themselves as citizens, as persons and as cultural contributors.

The Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio functions as an ideal global community, where intercultural clashes find their way into a combination of unusual rhythms and combinations of notes. The result is a new experience for everyone, for the audience of course, but first and foremost for the musicians involved, who share their talents by discovering new ways of playing and of performing musical narratives.

Piazza Vittorio, from which the Orchestra takes its name, is once again the stage in which the artists involved project their personal experiences as musicians and as inhabitants of

³³ The musicians involved are from India, Senegal, Tunisia, Morocco, USA, Ecuador, Argentina, Hungary and Italy, and the instruments played include, among others, the tabla (Indian percussion), *oud* (North African guitar), *kora* (harp used in West Africa), and *conga* (Cuban drums).

³⁴ Davis, Fischer-Hornung, Kardux, *Aesthetic practices*, p. 8.

a space in the process of being remapped. The orchestra and the film become occasions for aestheticising the practices of migration, and emphasise their impact on the urban fabric of the Piazza. An early sequence of the film shows the two Italian artists, Mario Tronco and Agostino Ferrente, driving a Vespa around the Equilino district, and in particular around Piazza Vittorio, in search of immigrant musicians. They drive, walk and explore the area tracing unconventional paths, entering the shops of immigrants not as ordinary consumers, but as writers of an alternative text who aim at redefining a chaotic urban chatter as a cultural and aesthetic space for exploring and empowering multiculturalism.

Two scenes, in particular, show the aesthetic impact that migrants have had on this space: an out-take scene presented as an extra in the DVD of the film shows a Chinese couple elegantly dancing an Argentinian tango in the garden of the square. This scene suggests a hybrid encounter that finds in the square its ideal stage, its 'contact zone'. This migratory performance aims at relocating identities in transit in a space that witnesses acts of agency, which also become a political act of urban appropriation. A similar event takes place in the opening scene of Ferrente's documusical, where one of the Indian musicians dressed in traditional garments performs a folk song while an Indian woman dances. In this case the garden of Piazza Vittorio also becomes the stage for a live cultural performance remapping that space through an intercultural, nostalgic act played as if in a street theatre. In these two scenes, migrants invite the viewer to participate in an artistic transformation of urban space where everyone can potentially become a 'displaced walker'.

Conclusion

The migratory aesthetic practices analysed in this paper, from Lakhous's and Lemes Dias's literary examples to the musical and filmic project of the Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio, show

how, rather than simply offering an unreadable, foreign, prosaic otherness, immigration in Italy today provides cultural and aesthetic practices and representations that contribute to the mapping of the fleeting cartography of transitory spaces, such as Piazza Vittorio in Rome.

The aesthetic element of these cultural acts, their ability to make legible a transitory urban space, allows for an alternative discourse around immigration to be opposed to those dominant political, economic and social accounts that tend to treat immigrants as an unauthorised presence in Italy, individuals whose identities are deemed subservient to their migrant roles. The immigrants' ability to express a migratory aesthetics in relation to a specific urban space, empowers their presence in the place and makes them visible. The result is a web of alternative tracks and traces that redefine Italian space creating it with a rich intercultural dimension.

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