SANCTUARY OF SLAVERY
Relocating Race Through Sound in an Alpine Town

GIANPAOLO CHIRIACÒ
UNIVERSITÄT INNSBRUCK

Abstract – *Sanctuary of Slavery* is a performance that took place in Schlanders, in the heart of the South Tyrolean Vinschgau Valley,[1] in September 2018. It showcased the work of musicians and artists of African origin as well as asylum seekers and refugees residing in the region. Besides bringing to central areas of the alpine town individuals who had been marginalised in refugee houses, the performance successfully created, albeit temporarily, what human geographer Heather Merrill describes as 'Black spaces'. Musical sounds and singing voices – resonating in the library, the *Musikpavillon*, and the main streets of Schlanders – relocated the discussion about race to its historical context. Through an ethnographic account and a focus on the role of sound in reshaping meaning, the article explores how the social divide based on race and the institutional separation based on the category of 'linguistic groups' interact with work exploitation and the Italian migration policies.

Keywords: race; soundscape; singing voices; African diaspora; Black spaces.

> *From these enemies, on the borderline*
> *Who'll be the next to fire*
> *Forty-one shots by Diallo's side?*
> (W. Jean "Diallo", 2000).

1. Introduction

Standing in front of a small van while drinking water with ginger, Nana, a rapper and producer from Ghana, Assan, a Senegalese percussionist, and myself, an ethnomusicologist from Southern Italy, were resting after playing some music together. It was nearly the end of August, but the summer temperatures were still high, even more so inside Nana's small van that served both as lodging and recording studio. It was parked in the garden of an old hotel, which – like other similar buildings across Italy – had been

---

[1] South Tyrol (Südtirol in German, Alto Adige in Italian) is a bilingual region in which places are usually identified by names in the two languages (as for example in the city of Bozen/Bolzano). In this article, for the sake of clarity, only German names have been used.

transformed into a temporary camp for asylum seekers. As the conversation shifted to our musical preferences, we identified a point of convergence within our different experiences: "Diallo", a piece from Haitian musician and producer Wyclef Jean.[2]

Nana introduced the topic: "I was teaching in a school when I was still in Ghana, and at the same time I was getting into music. I remember going to school every day, I was paying no attention to people around me, all I had was this song in my mind and my headphones. Getting crazy when it moves from reggae to afrobeat. *Diallo, Diallo, tuye' Diallo*".

"I remember listening to that song in Chicago one specific evening" – I replied – "That day I attended a community event in the South Side, where everyone was talking about the verdict of the trial for the killing of Travyon Martin that had been announced the day before. Once I was back home, I felt well because the event had been energising, but I was depressed for the verdict, so I turned to this song".

"Diallo?" – Assan added – "This might be a Senegalese name. He might be a relative of mine".

The conversation took place during the rehearsals of a performative production that was going to be held four weeks later in a small town in South Tyrol. I use it as an anecdote to highlight the focal point of this article: the existence of Black spaces within an Italian alpine region close to the Austrian border, and the role of music in creating and defining these spaces. The anecdote brings to the forefront another important facet of both the performance and this article: the musical and performative response to violence and discrimination against black bodies. The song "Diallo", a combination of reggae, afrobeat, and recordings of a spoken voice that contextualises the lyrics, articulates a musical critique of the circumstances in which Amadou Diallo, a Liberian citizen based in New York, was killed by 41 shots fired by four policemen (Beth 2009; Diallo, Wolff 2004).

In her analysis of the Italian context, human geographer Heather Merrill affirms that "African and other refugees and migrants are scurried out of sight to the spatial peripheries of towns and cities […] These are black spaces of social control, and moreover, black spaces of social death" (Merrill 2018, p. 59). In her research, Merrill came also across what she defines as Black spaces, "with a capital *B*, where they [first and second generation African Italian subjects] exercise some degree of control over their individual lives and those of their families, knowledge of self and one's social position, and where they build communities that crisscross established ethnic, racial, and sometimes class divisions" (Merrill 2018, pp. 56-57).

---

[2] Rebecca Dirksen (2020) offers a rich analysis of the figure of Wyclef Jean in relation to his attempt to run for the Haitian presidency in 2010.

In this paper, I would like to focus on a specific case study in which I participated both as co-curator and researcher: *Sanctuary of Slavery*, the performative event I curated together with Cincinnati-based vocalist and educator Napoleon Maddox for which Nana, Assan, and I were practicing. It evolved from a piece tailored for a local festival into an attempt to create Black spaces among asylum seekers in South Tyrol.

Choreographer and community organiser Rodney Diverlus defines artivism as "an educational, creative, choreographic, movement-building, performance, and organizing tool" (Diverlus 2016, p. 189). Following his theorisation, we designed *Sanctuary of Slavery* as an artivist tool encompassing these six elements. Besides incorporating *Twice the First Time*, a multimedia production about the true story of two conjoined sisters born in slavery in North Carolina[3] created and performed by Maddox that toured Europe and the United States in 2017, the festival commissioned an additional performance with the aim of contextualising Maddox's show in the area. As soon as conversations about the project started, Maddox and I agreed on a first premise: we did not want to recreate unbalanced power relations through musical representation (Birenbaum Quintero 2019). We were certain we did not want to display the artists as 'migrants' and represent blackness in Italy in any specific way, but rather expose the ways in which asylum seekers of African origins were being represented in the public arena.

More specifically, we wanted to achieve three main objectives: challenge a stereotypical representation of African migrants making music for a white European audience; give space to the voice of the asylum seekers involved in the project; create the condition to generate a sense of community among asylum seekers, refugees, and locals interested in musical expressions and solidarity. The last objective points directly to Merrill's idea of Black spaces. Moreover, Millie-Christine McCoy's story, on which *Twice the First Time* is based, allowed us to elaborate on the concept of slavery, which became both a metaphor for the condition in which many asylum seekers were forced to operate and a conceptual critical lens through which the audience could reshape their understanding of the presence of African Italian individuals and communities in South Tyrolean society.[4]

---

[3] Conjoined sisters Millie-Christine McCoy were born in slavery in North Carolina in 1851. Napoleon Maddox, the son of a niece of one of Millie-Christine's sisters, put together their story by collecting his family's memories and consulting archival documentation. In *Twice the First Time*, he recounts how they were forced to be part of circuses and freak shows since an early age. They were later kidnapped and brought to the United Kingdom, where they learnt to dance, sing, and write. Their creativity brought them success, and they were later able to return to their village in North Carolina and buy the land where they were born. For further details on their lives, see Martell (1999).

[4] Nicole Stuckey (2017) presents an interesting analysis of how linguistic and cultural segregation in South Tyrol affects the local hip hop scene.

Despite our intentions and attempts to focus more on the process than on the event, some difficulties emerged along the way. Among the various issues that we had to face, two were particularly problematic. We were aware that a performance, as powerful as it might be, could not establish permanent changes, but how could we communicate that to the participants without undermining their enthusiasm and motivation? The second issue was related to labour. We wanted to create a discussion around the perception of blackness and the issue of black labour in South Tyrol, but at the same time the artists who wanted to participate in the project had to take time off their jobs. These two questions would reverberate in the preparation of the event and in the performance itself.

2. The event and the festival

The project was hosted by Transart, a renowned festival of contemporary culture that takes place every year in September with the main goal of bringing to South Tyrol new tendencies in the field of music as well as visual and audiovisual arts. It is a much-anticipated event in the wealthy bilingual province as collectors and festival goers alike enjoy high-profile contemporary art and music as if they were in bigger cities like Berlin or London. The festival director is resolute in connecting such new tendencies with the local scenario, bringing adventuresome performances to the small villages and the mountain landscapes the region is famous for.

Within this framework, the director contacted me to curate an event for the 2018 edition with Napoleon Maddox's *Twice the First Time* as its centre and a specific connection with the African residents of the area. Since I moved there some two years before the event, I had been in touch with several asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants from different African countries who were adopting musical expressions to understand their social position and elaborate personal narratives. The project was going to rely on this experience. Schlanders was chosen by the production as the location for the performance. It is a town of about 6,000 inhabitants – strategically positioned in the middle of the famous Vinschgau Valley, halfway from Meran and the Swiss and Austrian border – which serves as the relatively bigger centre in a network of smaller villages. We asked the festival production to bring the event to Schlanders' main streets and most frequented locations in order to question issues of representation and re-centre the life of individuals who had been so often marginalised.

The relative freedom granted by the festival organisers allowed us to build our own strategy to achieve the aforementioned goals. Even though Napoleon was in the United States, we decided to work as co-curators and evaluate together every step of the process. We chose to design a structure

that could incorporate free expressions from the participants, with limited or no control from our part. However, we still wanted to provide the audience with the appropriate tools to understand the critical approach of the project. Therefore, we divided the performance into three sections gravitating around the following concepts: 'Reflections', 'Intersections', 'Redemptions'. Next, we located the right space for each section. 'Reflections', a first section intended as an introductory statement, would be set in the town's 17th-century castle, where institutional offices and the local library were located at the time. It looked like a suitable scenario for solo and a cappella singing. In addition, the small cloister of the castle could be used for different sound installations exploring the intersections of blackness, labour, and slavery. Hence, the cloister looked like the right place to start the conversation: "People need to see us black people" – stated David Odia,[5] who was going to open the event with his poetry, during some rehearsals. The 'Reflections' opening was therefore specifically designed to create the conditions – in the context of Schlanders – for the unfolding of a different perspective on blackness and asylum seekers.

The second section was both more physical and more conceptual. After leaving the castle, a march would bring the audience to the second station, the *Musikpavillon*. This second section was meant to create 'intersections' among people as the audience was going to be invited to march, sing, and play some percussion instruments. It was also conceived as an intersection of meanings as the bandstand, the place where South Tyrolean traditional brass band usually perform, would be transformed into a different kind of setting. A big dark curtain with the phrase "Sanctuary of Slavery" would be hanging at the centre of the stage. Beneath the curtain, a narrow tunnel at the end of which a rapper would be singing. Each visitor coming from the joyful march would then go on stage, walk beneath the curtain, meet the singing rapper face to face, and walk by a table with some chocolate products on it. The march would then start again and continue through the main streets of Schlanders, where several rappers would perform while marching among groups of locals and tourists busy with their shopping activities. The parade would then go back to the library lawn for the final set of 'redemptions' with a collective singing moment, which would then be repeated before Maddox's performance about Millie-Christine McCoy's victorious journey, for which the production had chosen a less central location.

---

[5] For the artists who actively participated in the project, I use the name they provided in the official programme, without any additional information like, for example, their country of origin or place of residence. This is not the case for Nana and Assan, who are well-established performers in the musical scene of the provinces of Trento and Bozen.

The path on which Napoleon and I wanted to embark to get African Italians involved in the project had to focus on the conditions that enabled and generated their movement. Slavery as a historical condition and a century-long trade that affected many of the countries the asylum seekers came from was a theme that could provide a different typology of alliance between the audience and the performers.

In addition, the reference to the term *sanctuary* both underlined the central role of Millie-Christine McCoy's narrative and allowed us as curators to articulate a critique against the ways in which the system of hospitality, although depicted as a charitable act, was designed to provide widely available workforce, whose rights were profoundly undermined by the threat of their asylum application.

By using slavery, we were also drawing from the experiences Napoleon and I built in Chicago. During a symposium organised at the Center for Black Music Research in 2014, we had the chance to work on the sonic memory of slavery and the ways in which recollecting stories of slavery through sounds and voices opens up possibilities to understand emotional connections and historical entanglements (Chiriacò 2018). Sounds and voices were therefore identified as our artivist tools, while slavery as a human condition and systematic exploitation was the main theme.

The structure here described was supposed to work as a frame for artists and participants to express their own viewpoints. Therefore, once the design was completed and approved, I continued to visit South Tyrolean refugee houses[6] in order to involve artists and participants. I will describe how my visits both clarified and challenged the premises of the project, but I will first briefly turn to the representation of migrants in Italy for a better understanding of the conditions in which the project developed.

3. Representing race in contemporary Italy

Sociological analysis, ethnographies, and oral histories dealing with migration in contemporary Italy have mainly focused on journeys (Ciabarri 2013) and borders (Aime 2020). In other words, the presence of migrants, or even the whole discourse regarding the existence of migration, has been spatialised. It has been conceived in form of space, either considering the 'invasion' of southern Europe (Ciabarri 2020) or the creation of (relatively safe) symbolic spaces such as the Black Mediterranean (Di Maio 2015;

---

[6] *Fluchtlingshäuser* [refugee houses] is the common name for houses in South Tyrol that usually host about 25-30 asylum seekers, who live in small apartments or in dormitory-style rooms. I use the word *house* or *refugee house* to refer to this kind of accommodation. Bigger spaces will be referred to as *camps*.

Hawthorne 2022; Proglio 2018) or the Black spaces. While considering the theoretical binary classification of Black/black spaces as particularly useful in this context, I argue that the spatialisation of migration discourse takes us away from subjectivities and history. Similarly, Ida Danewid (2017) warns us that approaches based on grief and empathy, despite encouraging humanity, obnubilate the historical condition that enabled – as well as generated – such movements of people. What Danewid suggests is that the 'safe space' European liberals want to provide migrants with tends to safeguard a European imagination rather than a communal understanding. As underlined in Camilla Hawthorne's book (2022), the Italian context is additionally complicated by the absence of a common language to identify, for example, Italians with an African origin and people who are born and raised in an African country but happen to live in Italy. The political demonstrations and flash mobs organised by networks such as Rete 2G or #ItalianiSenzaCittadinanza, which Hawthorne thoroughly describes, emphasise the focus on spaces but at the same time reveal that – for asylum seekers – the opportunities to obtain a space to convey social messages are extremely limited.

Dal Lago (1999) postulates that migrants are seen as non-humans by the Italian media. Inspired by his work, many cultural studies and postcolonial studies scholars challenge the representations of race and the lack of reflection, within public discourse, on the colonial past and its heritage. Some of these scholars focus on the body of immigrants as a 'battleground' against invisibility, especially when it is mediatised through the work of journalists, photographers, or video artists. Simona Wright (2018) argues that it is even in the absence of the immigrants' bodies, as in Dagmawi Yimer's poignant work *Asmat/Names*, that the battle against invisibility is fought. A reflection on colonialism and its relations to contemporary migration (Ponzanesi, Colpani 2016) leads to a consideration about personal narratives coming both from travellers along the Mediterranean route and their rescuers (Budge 2018). As a middle point between a focus on the bodies of migrants and a focus on personal narratives, *Sanctuary of Slavery* was oriented towards the role of human voices and their political interrelations (Cavarero 2003). The ability of the voice to provide both an orienting tool in an unknown space (Chiriacò 2018) and a tool for building meaningful relationships with a strong political potential became a crucial part of the investigation at the foundation of the project.

As an ethnomusicologist, I constantly reflect on how sound defines the perception of space; therefore, I wished to bring sound into the spatialisation of (the discourse around) migration in order to pay attention to personal and collective narratives. Hence, the main point of *Sanctuary of Slavery* was to define not only a space in which the migrants' voices could be heard but also

a space in which the main orientation – for an audience immersed in a performance across the streets of Schlanders – was the singing voice. To inhabit such a space meant to accept a change in soundmarks through the collective engagement led by artists who at the time of the performance were also asylum seekers. *Soundmark* is the term proposed by pioneer soundscape scholar Raymond Murray Schafer (1994) to identify a 'community sound' with distinctive characteristics. Sound studies has developed Schafer's idea of soundmarks by pinpointing that communities are constantly involved in actively reshaping meaning through sounds. As in the New Orleans jazz funeral processions analysed by Matt Sakakeeny (2010), an exploration of soundscapes entails that "making sound, listening to sound, and discussing sound are meaningful activities that underscore the significance of sound less as a point of consensus than of negotiation" (Sakakeeny 2010, p. 3). This was also the kind of negotiation through sounds – between local communities and African asylum seekers – that we wanted for *Sanctuary of Slavery*.

The use of widely known African American musical styles (rap, spirituals, gospel, etc.) in the wider context of the African diaspora allowed for a specific content through which the use of voice as a tool to build communities could be even more effective. By tapping into shared musical memories, we affirmed the possibility to engage the audience with a more complex discourse about the conditions of asylum seekers in South Tyrol and the several African countries they were from, while at the same time appreciating their performances.

4. The case of South Tyrol

The condition of asylum seekers in 2018 Italy was particularly challenging. The political election that took place in the spring that year was characterised by a strong campaign by the ex-secessionist turned sovereigntist right-wing party Lega and its leader Matteo Salvini, who invariably used the landing of 'migrants' on the Italian coasts to depict a threat on which he built his campaign. A month before the vote, an individual who had also been a candidate for the same party in a previous election, took to the streets of Macerata and shot his handgun several times towards people of African descent. This episode notwithstanding, Salvini's Lega ended up being the first party of the right-wing coalition and formed a government with the populist Five Star Movement. As Home Secretary, Salvini issued a security decree which severely restrained the asylum seekers' conditions by making it more complex for them to obtain the refugee status and by defunding any extra-activities aiming at providing them with appropriate tools.

As an autonomous province with a majority of inhabitants speaking a local variety of German, South Tyrol is a slightly different context for asylum

seekers and migrants in general. Anthropologist Dorothy Zinn has studied migration within South Tyrolean society through the lens of its educational system (Zinn 2018). Although she focuses on a period pre-dating the context of the so-called 'migration crisis', her analysis of the migrant as metaphor is illuminating for the understanding of the exceptionality of South Tyrol. Zinn considers migrants as *metaphors* as their presence tends to re-establish the pre-eminence of the ubiquitous, although often not explicit, separation along the ethno-linguistic line between 'Germans' and 'Italians'. The social changes brought by the movement of people have not challenged such 'hidden frontier' – to use the formula developed in John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf's classic anthropological study (1999). On the contrary, Zinn posits that "the [social] changes did not represent so much the erasure of the hidden frontier, as its transmogrification and upgrade into a *Hidden Frontier 2.0*." (Zinn 2018, p. 14). The hidden frontier continuously shapes the lives of migrants who, following the Dublin Regulation, become part of the Italian system but inhabit an environment in which speaking German represents a strategic advantage. Despite not being at the centre of the *Sanctuary of Slavery* project, for the African asylum seekers I worked with the hidden frontier meant that their workforce status was even more precarious. Besides the social divide between migrants and Europeans, they experienced the linguistic distance between German, which could be useful to obtain a better job position, and Italian, which is needed to submit an asylum application to the Italian courts, which often requires a convincing narrative for the asylum commission.[7]

5. Locating race through sounds and music

The first encounter with the local community of musicians who are also asylum seekers or refugees took place a year and a half before the event. I was teaching a course in ethnomusicology at the Free University of Bozen/Bolzano which gave me the opportunity to organise a workshop with Napoleon Maddox. The workshop, which was planned for students but also open to the public, became a moment for local rappers to get together. That day, I learnt that although they lived in different 'houses', many asylum seekers were involved in music making, especially hip hop, as an expressive form that enabled them to maintain supportive social and artistic ties with their countries of origin and create connections with their new context. In so

[7] Sorgoni (2015) analyses some narratives presented to the commission, which is entitled to decide about the asylum seekers' request, and demonstrates that, rather than tell the true story of the person submitting the request, most of them are tailored to satisfy the expectations of the commissioners.

doing, these artists enabled a "process of counter-racialization *through* rap music and slam poetry" (Frisina, Kyeremeh 2022, p. 4). In addition, for them music functioned as a key tool for social labour. For that reason, many of them saw a seminar at the local university with an African American artist as an opportunity that could not be missed. As they explained in further conversations, what they were looking for was a connection with an American representative of the music they loved and a local acknowledgement of the value of the music they were creating. They transformed an academic seminar into a Black space, paving the way to the Transart Festival project. As a consequence of the workshop, I built a connection with one of the houses with the specific objective of observing how their musical interests, practices, and listening habits were shaping their experience (Chiriacò 2017). There, I met two persons who would be fundamental in the creation of *Sanctuary of Slavery*: Karim Rossi Rusdo and Favour Godstime.

Karim immediately stood out when Badara Seck visited the house the evening before one of his concerts in the area. The Senegalese musician and composer, who has been active in Italy for more than 30 years, has collaborated with some extremely popular musicians and artists and gained a vast experience in cooperating with musicians and artists of different origins and in creating works of art with people with migratory background (Chiriacò 2016; Lombardi-Diop 2009). As soon as he arrived, Badara asked the people in the house: "Does any of you play some instruments or sing?" Karim's response was immediate: "I talk". That short exchange developed into a musical piece in which Badara sang a melody and Karim recounted his story.[8] The audiovisual documentation of that performance inspired the young man to create "Karim's Dream" with the help of local artists, a new videoclip where he looks directly into the camera within the setting of a small theatre while the audio track of the musical performance with Badara's voice and his own narrative is playing.[9] Not only did Karim promote the video on local televisions and online channels but also further developed his own 'signature' – "I talk" – and used it for his own podcast, *Radio Africa Bolzano*. In the show, he employed two smartphones: as one was playing songs from YouTube, the other was used to record voice messages. The ingenious podcast was later sent to his contacts both in Italy and Ivory Coast. After being invited to bring his craft to *Sanctuary of Slavery* in the form he preferred, Karim decided to use his radio platform to broadcast the event via WhatsApp and to produce some interviews about it and share them via the

---

[8] For a video of the musical piece, see Afrovocality (2018).
[9] For a video of the performance, see Rossi Rusdo (2019).

same channel. Furthermore, he chose to screen his video before the *Twice the First Time* performance.

The house Badara Seck visited was also the place where Favour used to live. After I was introduced to her and found out she was interested in singing, we regularly met to sing together. We then realised that she was interested in composing her own songs rather than developing vocal skills, so we engaged in composition together. At first, she wished to write love songs, but short afterwards she turned to gospel. We prepared together a song titled "God, You Are My Saviour", which she sang with Badara Seck's band during his show. Favour played a major role in the *Sanctuary of Slavery* performance as well since hers was the first singing voice to be heard. She was also the main energy catalyser during the march, which she led pulling her daughter's stroller.

My previous experience with Karim and Favour's refugee house led me to think that other houses would have similar responses during the preparation of *Sanctuary of Slavery*, but I was proved otherwise. While preparing the performance, I visited or tried to make contacts with several other houses with little or no success. A social worker in Mals – a village that had been in the news for its community's prompt reaction and widespread voluntary help during the 2015-2016 'refugees welcome' phase – explained to me per e-mail that nobody in Mals could participate in the project because they were either working or looking for a job. Her e-mail underlined two aspects that were ubiquitous in my conversations with musicians, refugees, and social workers at the time of the preparation of the festival performance: the question of labour and the atmosphere after the 'refugees welcome' phase.

The social worker in Mals was not alone in her reasoning as the average response when I visited the refugee houses was that the focus was on 'work' (either actual work or the search of it) rather than on getting involved in artistic projects. Bluntly said, every white person I spoke with, no matter the goodness of their intentions, stated: "If you are black, you need to have a job". In addition to that, the houses – probably as a reaction to the new political climate – started to apply more strict regulations about returning at a certain time in the evening, leaving the house overnight, sleeping over, visits, etc. By visiting and frequenting the houses, it was clear that their written and unwritten regulations limited the freedom of movement and left the complete workload of what David Graeber calls "interpretive labor" (Graeber 2009, p. 516), i.e. the labour needed to understand social rules and find a way to live with them, on the asylum seekers' shoulders. As a response to this approach, I was constantly reminded of what David Odia said: "People need to see us black people".

The Mals social worker's e-mail suggested another theme, i.e. the social environment in which our event was going to take place and the differences between the context of the 'refugees-welcome' response and the atmosphere of the summer 2018. As we were getting ready for the festival, Salvini was particularly active in imposing an immigration invasion rhetoric that increasingly justified – among people and communities across Italy – the need for explicit violence aimed at 'sending them back home'. In Schlanders, I encountered significant frustration for this new atmosphere among the activists and musicians I had made connections with to establish alliances for the event. Activist and video maker Mara Stirner voiced that frustration while explaining to me that "c'è un'atmosfera pesante, la senti anche nei bar, parlando con la gente" [the air around is thick, you can feel it walking into a bar, talking to people].

As I started to feel the thick air myself, notwithstanding the commitment of the artists and activists I encountered along the way, some concerns started to grow. I was not sure that I could keep the different pieces within a coherent performance, a preoccupation that I later realised was at odds with the initial plan of creating an open environment. On a more practical level, a sense of frustration hindered the preparation as planning rehearsals was often very hard. Despite their interests and explicit commitments, it was even difficult to receive a definitive confirmation from the artists involved in the final performance as their entire life was dependent on the response from the asylum commission and the house managers and their coordinators. When I shared my frustration with Napoleon, he was very clear in describing how he conceived the performance: "We should work as community organisers and activists do. They aim at building up the energy in the days that precede the final event".

6. Building up the energy

Napoleon was pushing me to enhance our motivation as participants and as a group of artists rather than give in to the typical worries of an event organiser. He was inviting me to act as an artivist who "must challenge, confront, and resist this otherwise inescapable fate of torture, injustice, and inhumanity" (Asante 2008, p. 203). My response to his suggestion was twofold: a musical one and a curatorial one. On the one hand, I made some musical choices, which I had avoided until that moment, regarding a few elements I wished to incorporate into the performance. I chose to bring into the collective moments small excerpts selected from African American texts like the refrain and the harmonic structure of the song "No Man Stop" by Jamaican artist Brushy One String (Blotta 2013) and the spiritual "This Little Light of Mine" – the latter was suggested by Napoleon. The use of these

excerpts was central in the developing of a black connection across the streets of Schlanders. Moreover, I included bass sounds inspired by basic beatboxing techniques and Brushy One String's distinctive style.

The curatorial response was to look for different environments from the refugee houses I had frequented until that time. This choice brought me to the Ex-Alimarket refugee camp in the industrial district of Bozen. The pattern I found there was different from the one in the refugee houses as social workers were trying to connect with the asylum seekers on a more personal level, besides dealing with the difficult task of helping them go through legal tasks and job applications. Moreover, the camp was an exception to the local policy of hospitality as it was a bigger place with several dozens of (only male) asylum seekers from several countries. This resulted in a different dynamic in terms of power relations as they could create ingroups and alliances, and consequently pay less attention to the directions provided by the house authorities.

That it was a different venue could also be experienced through sound. Its big open space presented a sonosphere in which afro-beat, spiritual songs from Southern Asia, and North African hip hop coexisted with different musical selections coming out from various speakers – each owned by an individual or a small group – and mixing into the air. According to Sakakeeny (2010), the copresence of different sounds can be seen as a form of negotiation for a peaceful coexistence rather than for consensus. Furthermore, the sonosphere was more welcoming than in the other smaller houses, where headphones had to be nearly always used and therefore the individual musical choices were silenced.

The conversation with Napoleon induced me to pay a visit to Nana Motobi in his studio. At the time I first met him, he had been active as a rapper in Italy for six years and was leading the African hip hop scene in Trento, the closest Italian-speaking city to Bozen. He mainly sings in Italian, Pidgin, and English. Like Karima 2G, whose work has been analysed by Annarita Taronna (2016), the 'black English' he uses allows him to convey an effective mixture of humour and political messages. Besides being a rapper, Nana had already worked as a mediator and cooperated with several cultural associations. He had accumulated a number of experiences that he used in his own projects, most notably RapConto, in which he taught several young people the use of rap and hip hop as a personal expression – the neologism *rapconto* ['storapping'] from 'racconto', the Italian word for 'storytelling', is already a marker of Nana's creativity and drive. Not only did he teach young people but also supported them in recording their own songs and in getting, organising, and promoting their own concerts.

Through his work, experiences, and ability to negotiate, Nana had achieved an exceptional position. Although he arrived in Italy from Ghana in

his twenties, in institutional settings he was perceived as someone who could enjoy full Italian citizenship even though he was not a citizen yet. He did not have to fight for citizenship the way the second generation analysed by Hawthorne (2022) did, and he also did not have to struggle for recognition as an asylum seeker. Nana was doubtless using his position and creativity to build a scene from which he could also beneficiate, but the goal of helping people with a similar origin and spreading knowledge about the injustices and discriminations they must suffer is prominent in his work. At that time, he was also studying to become a professional producer, and it is in this role that I contacted him.

I first invited Nana to create his own sound installation for the 'Redemption' section of the performance. The idea was welcomed by the energetic musician, who also suggested we include his RapConto initiative, ask Assan to lead the singing march, and involve young rappers of African descent based in Trento like Wasky and Lif. Moreover, Nana recommended the use of what he calls 'StreetRap tactics'. He had already experienced the temporary occupation of public spaces with a transportable speaker and a couple of microphones so that rappers – mostly coming from his workshops – could participate in the impromptu performance. He became the natural leader of the *Sanctuary of Slavery* sections that included the use of rap: 'Intersections' and 'Redemptions'.

7. The final performance

Two days before the performance in Schlanders, we were finally able to have a meeting at the Ex-Alimarket camp with Napoleon and all the artists, a group of people who were already eager to participate in the workshop activities and in the final event. After we sang together, Napoleon and the participants talked about the meaning the event could have for each of them, and then he directed them in two collective improvisations with musical excerpts from Brushy One String and the spiritual "This Little Light of Mine". The conversations that followed highlighted the spiritual and emotional value attributed to that moment. Ethnomusicologist Fulvia Caruso has noted that asylum seekers in the city of Cremona have difficulties in creating social bonds among themselves. In the workshops and the rehearsal of the two ensembles she has worked with, music elicits a "progressive switch from a passive situation to one based on social action" (Caruso 2018, p. 279). Her words precisely describe the atmosphere we were finally able to create at the dawn of the event.

On September 21, 2018, the date of the performance, we met in Bozen. The festival production had arranged a bus to drive us from Bozen, where all the artists converged, to Schlanders. We were surprised to see 37 artists on

the bus – five more were waiting in Schlanders. Before leaving, we realised that one of them, who had been particularly involved during the meetings and the rehearsal, was not present because a few days before the event he had been abruptly transferred to a different house in another village and had not been authorised to join us.

After a brief general rehearsal, the event began at 6pm. The first part in the cloister went perfectly well, with the voices provided by pre-recorded audio installations (among them, an original piece by Nana) and David's and Favour's fundamental contributions – the latter was particularly appreciated by the audience and critics alike (Groschup 2018). The march came after this first part, with Assan, the percussionist, leading it. The energy that came out was totally different from what we experienced the previous days. We had worked on singing formulas that in the end were totally dismissed and replaced by rhythms provided by Assan and improvised chants led by Favour. Songs, verses, cries, sounds from clapping and objects turned into instruments abruptly joined together. All the involved artists tapped in as the captivating sonic energy constantly raised.

It was impossible to confine the enthusiasm: once we arrived at the *Musikpavillon* for the second section of the performance, it was difficult to stick to the original dramaturgy. However, we did not try to force the flow into any pre-determined direction because it would not be consistent with our artivist approach. Somehow, once Assan's and Favour's music faded away, people walked on the 'Intersections' stage. As many artists who participated in the dancing march did not go on stage, most of them suddenly turned into viewers looking at the people from the 'real' – and mostly white – audience gathering on stage around the table in front of the black curtain with the writing "Sanctuary of Slavery" on it.

After this moment, the march continued with even more energy and split into two streams: one in the front, where Assan's percussion and Favour's voice could still be heard, and one in the back, circling the speaker and the microphone used by the rappers, who in turn were 'rotating the microphone', i.e. singing one song and then passing the microphone along. Walking through the main streets of Schlanders was a particularly energising moment, especially as the march divided into a front and a second line, which is when the performative event became a kind of public demonstration, making the political aspect of *Sanctuary of Slavery* completely explicit. As the march went finally back to the cloister, Nana and another rapper, Moses Michael, performed their last songs. The end of the show was a moment of collective singing led by Napoleon, which brought back to life the emotional meeting at the Ex-Alimarket camp of two days before. Each participant sang the verses created during that workshop in a finale that seemed to embody,

*L*ingue e *L*inguaggi

through a polyvocal celebration, all the meanings of the word *redemption* chosen for this section.

8. Conclusion

The final performance of *Sanctuary of Slavery* was successful insofar as it was incomplete and unperfected. The personal challenge of negotiating between the necessity of doing our job as curators and the strategy of creating an opportunity for the voices of asylum-seeking artists defined our experience throughout the whole process. Nevertheless, the goal of providing a representation of the life of African asylum seekers in South Tyrol that could challenge the dominant narratives and the particular atmosphere of the summer 2018 required both an acceptance of improvised and undetermined contributions and as much distance as possible from our own ambitions as curators.

The level of tension of that summer emerged also in two episodes as the march was proceeding across the main streets of Schlanders. One took place at the front line led by Assan and Favour and another at the second line of street rappers. The marching dance was briefly stopped by Carabinieri, the local gendarmerie, who wanted to question the dancers. However, the intervention of one of the production managers stopped the questioning almost immediately.[10] The line of rappers was instead approached by a male person who at first danced with the artists but then turned confrontational and yelled at them racial slurs and the infamous insult "go back to your country". Both participants and street rappers were not frightened, and the march continued with no significant interruption. Nevertheless, the episodes are interesting as apparently somebody in Schlanders felt threatened by the peaceful unfolding of a cultural performance. As emerged in my conversation about "Diallo" with Nana and Assan, the threat is simultaneously exposed and overcome by the music of African diasporic artists, which was also the case of *Sanctuary of Slavery*.

The Black space created on September 21, 2018, in Schlanders resulted in a strong alliance impermeable to the violence of the surroundings. There is no doubt that one single chance to relocate race through sound within a single event does not establish permanent changes. Nevertheless, it challenged the role of soundmarks in a way that proved permanent. Sounds did create a change in the way Schlanders makes sense of the presence of asylum seekers and provided a different example for the artists and singers of the African

---

[10] For a video of Carabinieri's car approaching the march and the short interruption that followed, see Afrovocality (2020).

diaspora in South Tyrol. It defined a different sound memory that two years later would find new ways of development and expression. As a matter of fact, during the Covid-19 pandemic asylum seekers successfully resisted racialised profiling practices – they were repeatedly tested and confined – and strengthened alliances with activists who organised the local Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Indeed, in 2020 the musical Black space that was created in Schlanders echoed again in the main streets of Bozen and in several refugee houses.

The sound and vocal reflections we built in the construction and unfolding of *Sanctuary of Slavery* reverberated in the participants' experiences as well as in South Tyrolean society at large. It was an artivist response to violence and discrimination against black bodies that would be reactivated in several future occasions. Music and sound will also continue to reverberate whenever they are needed to negotiate issues of race representation in South Tyrol. The potential of the sound memory that *Sanctuary of Slavery* built was well expressed by Napoleon in his final remarks. He made a reference to New Orleans and the legendary birth of jazz within the pagan rituals based on dance and rhythm at Congo Square in the 19th century. Elaborating on the sonic energy brought by black artists in Schlanders despite a social conflict that often discriminated against them, he said: "I guess that's how Congo Square started. Maybe in a hundred years people will ask how it all started in Silandro".

Bionote: Gianpaolo Chiriacò is Senior Post-Doc Researcher at the University of Innsbruck. He earned a fellowship from the University of Chicago (BMRC) and worked for three years at the Center for Black Music Research of the Columbia College Chicago thanks to a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship. His work, which lies at the intersection of ethnomusicology and cultural studies, has been published in a volume and several articles and book chapters. He also teaches Ethnomusicology at the University of Padua.

Author's address: giovanni.chiriaco@uibk.ac.at

Lingue e Linguaggi

References

Afrovocality 2018, *Tadjaboon, Badara Seck e Karim Doumoya* [Vimeo video]. https://vimeo.com/256074993 (5.5.2024).

Afrovocality 2020, *Transart 2018 – 'Sanctuary of Slavery' (03)* [Vimeo video]. https://vimeo.com/489447638 (5.5.2024).

Aime M. 2020, *Classificare, separare, escludere. Razzismi e identità*, Einaudi, Torino.

Asante M.K. Jr. 2008, *It's Bigger than Hip Hop. The Rise of the Post Hip Hop Generation*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

Beth R. 2009, *41 Shots… and Counting. What Amadou Diallo's Story Teaches Us about Policing, Race, and Justice*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse (NY).

Birenbaum Quintero M. 2019, *Rites, Rights and Rhythms. A Genealogy of Musical Meaning in Colombia's Black Pacific*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York.

Blotta L. 2013, *The King of One String* [Documentary], RiseUp Productions.

Budge K. 2018, *Oh Hear Us When We Cry to Thee*, in Odasso L. and Proglio G. (eds.), *Border Lampedusa. Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 52-66.

Caruso F. 2018, *Sperimentare e superare i confini attraverso la musica*, in Calabrò A.R. (a cura di), *Disegnare, attraversare, cancellare i confini. Una prospettiva interdisciplinare*, Giappichelli, Torino, pp. 272-281.

Cavarero A. 2003, *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale*, Feltrinelli, Milano.

Chiriacò G. 2016, *Canto, relitto, memoria. Il Mediterraneo di Badara Seck e Admir Shkurtaj*, in Cazzato L. e Silvestri F. (a cura di), *S/Murare il Mediterraneo. Pensieri critici e artivismo al tempo delle migrazioni*, Pensa, Lecce, pp. 167-181.

Chiriacò G. 2017, *Hip Hop, educazione, inclusione sociale*, in "ATeM" 2, pp. 1-4.

Chiriacò G. 2018, *Voci nere. Storia e antropologia del canto afroamericano*, Mimesis, Milano.

Ciabarri L. 2013, *Oltre la frontiera Europa: ascesa e declino della rotta migratoria Libia-Lampedusa e forme di mobilità dal Corno d'Africa (2000-2009)*, in "Antropologia" 15, pp. 63-83.

Ciabarri L. 2020, *L'imbroglio mediterraneo. Le migrazioni via mare e le politiche della frontiera*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano.

Cole J.W. and Wolf E.R. 1999, *The Hidden Frontier. Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley*, University of California Press, Oakland (CA).

Dal Lago A. 1999, *Non-persone. L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*, Feltrinelli, Milano.

Danewid I. 2017, *White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History*, in "Third World Quarterly" 38 [7], pp. 1674-1689.

Diallo K. and Wolff C. 2004, *My Heart Will Cross This Ocean: My Story, My Son, Amadou*, One World, New York.

Di Maio A. 2013, *Lampedusa und das Schwarze Mittelmeer. Die Migrationsrouten im Jahrtausend der Globalisierung*, in "Zibaldone" 56, pp. 17-31.

Dirksen R. 2020, *After the Dance, the Drums are Heavy: Carnival, Politics, and Musical Engagement in Haiti*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York.

Diverlus R. 2016, *Re/imagining Artivism*, in Elliot D.J., Silverman M. and Bowman W.D. (eds.), *Artistic Citizenship. Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, pp. 189-210.

Frisina A. and Kyeremeh S.A. 2022, *Music and Words Against Racism. A Qualitative Study with Racialized Artists in Italy*, in "Ethnic and Racial Studies" 45 [15], pp. 2913-2933.

Graeber D. 2009, *Direct Action. An Ethnography*, AK Press, Edinburgh.

Groschup H. 2018, *'Singing Black' durch Schlanders*, in "Dolomiten" September 25, p. 23,

Hawthorne C. 2022, *Contesting Race and Citizenship. Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY).

Jean W. 2000, *The Ecleftic (2 Sides II A Book)* [Album], Columbia Records.

Lombardi-Diop C. 2009, *Roma Residence. Senegal, Italy, and Trans-National Hybrid Spaces*, in "Interventions" 11 [3], pp. 400-419.

Martell J. 1999, *Millie-Christine: Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, Blair, Durham.

Merrill H. 2018, *Black Spaces: African Diaspora in Italy*, Routledge, London/New York.

Ponzanesi S. and Colpani G. 2016, *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe: Contexts, Practices and Politics*, Rowman and Littlefield, London.

Proglio G. 2018, *Is the Mediterranean a White Italian-European Sea? The Multiplication of Borders in the Production of Historical Subjectivity*, in "Interventions" 20 [3], pp. 406-427.

Rossi Rusdo K. 2019 [2018], *Il sogno bianco di Karim* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS0PWBq3gn8&t=2s (5.5.2024).

Sakakeeny M. 2010, *Under the Bridge: An Orientation to Soundscapes in New Orleans*, in "Ethnomusicology" 54 [1], pp. 1-27.

Schafer R.M. 1994, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Alfred Knopf, New York.

Sorgoni B. 2015, *Anthropology and Asylum Procedures and Policies in Italy*, in Tauber E. and Zinn D. (eds.), *The Public Value of Anthropology: Engaging Critical Social Issues Through Ethnography*, bu,press, Bozen, pp. 31-60.

Stuckey N. 2017, *'Fick Dich Südtirol': Dissatisfaction and Dissent in South Tyrolean Rap Music*, in "Colloquium: New Philologies" 2 [1], pp. 14-38.

Taronna A. 2016, *Black Englishes. Pratiche linguistiche transfrontaliere Italia-Usa*, Ombre Corte, Milano.

Wright S. 2018, *A Politics of the Body as Body Politics: Rethinking Europe's Worksite of Democracy*, in Odasso L. and Proglio G. (eds.), *Border Lampedusa. Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 87-101.

Zinn D.L. 2018. *Migrants as Metaphor: Institutions and Integration in South Tyrol's Divided Society*, CISU, Rome.