

Emergent Practices of Hospitality in the Camp

Walking through Rome, it can feel like water is everywhere. It flows from centuries-old fountains and from *fontanelle*, street corner spouts where people fill bottles and, on hot days, stop to rinse their faces. But at Piazzale Maslax, an unofficial migrant camp near the city's Tiburtina train station, water wasn't so accessible; it had to be brought in so that camp residents living in tents on the occupied asphalt lot could drink, wash, and cook. Still, in the camp's first months, that wasn't so hard. While visiting in the summer of 2017, I helped residents and volunteers with activist collective Baobab Experience, which operated the camp, ferry large coolers in a grocery cart to a loose hose at the edge of the station. The coolers were cumbersome, but the source was within walking distance. By 2018, the hose had been blocked, and residents depended on volunteers who could drive to collect water at a more distant fountain.¹ The decision by municipal officials to shut off the water source was strategic: it made people's stay on the isolated lot all the more challenging, while temporarily allowing the encampment itself to stay put. Since the city refused to open additional accommodations for its growing population of migrants in transit to or through Rome, Baobab Experience's operations were simultaneously essential and, for officials, uncondonable.

Improvised encampments expanded in both size and number across Europe in the mid-2010s, from "The Jungle" in Calais, France, where people waited for a chance to cross the Channel to England; to camps along the Bosnian border, where crossing meant entry into the EU; to the settlements on Greek islands that grew around overcrowded official camps. In Italy, informal (unofficial) encampments were not new. The camp is a familiar site, associated with farmworkers from Eastern Europe, Africa, and South Asia who have built or been housed in camps

during seasonal labor since the 1980s. Worker camps and dormitories have a longer domestic history, for instance with the *mondine*, Italian women who moved seasonally to work in the rice fields. In addition, Romani and Sinti communities have long lived in settlements throughout the country, either by choice or when local regulations enforce settlement living.² For decades these camps have featured in debates about statelessness, mobility, and the use of space, with their residents subject to discrimination, surveillance, and eviction, or what I recognize in this chapter as *intentional unsettling*. Nonetheless, the expansion of camps as a consequence of emergency responses to Mediterranean migration in the 2010s brought renewed visibility to their existence—and to the precarious legal, social, and working conditions of their residents.³

In Italy's capital, the intersection of local and national politics shone a spotlight on migrant homelessness. In the 2010s, amid widespread acknowledgement of a "refugee crisis" in Europe, Rome remained the only European capital lacking an official plan for *accoglienza*, or migrant reception.⁴ As migrants continued to arrive, the municipal government refused to open additional centers or formally recognize groups providing assistance on a volunteer basis. The NGO Baobab Experience is one such group, a collective born in response to the lack of formal aid available for migrants in transit. The *accoglienza* Baobab offers is unofficial, administered without government funding or support. This term has multiple meanings: as I discuss in the previous chapter, *accoglienza* names official systems and structures of reception; it also refers to practices of welcoming, care, and in this case, solidarity. The support Baobab offers substitutes what migrants would have received at official centers, had there been space for them. For instance, the group coordinates meals, language lessons, and legal and medical services. Other forms of *accoglienza*, like musical and circus events they have organized, represent practices of welcoming that treat migrants not as strangers but as coinhabitants of the city or as friends. Baobab welcomed people who arrived on their own or were evicted from other sites, first at its center in the San Lorenzo neighborhood, then at a series of improvised encampments near the Tiburtina station, including at the lot they named Piazzale Maslax, where they operated an informal settlement from May 2017 to November 2018 (map 3). A core volunteer, herself originally from France, was nearly always at the camp when I visited, serving as a key point of contact. With some regularity, volunteers led small groups to a museum or historical site, and, almost daily, to the *questura* for appointments with immigration officials.

Surrounded by trees, two dilapidated buildings, and a low grassy hill, Piazzale Maslax was largely invisible to the outside, but local, national, and international news of the site and the collective supporting those who lived there brought attention to it. The resulting tensions of visibility and invisibility shaped the life of the camp, which people without access to the formal reception system made their home for anywhere from several days to several months. Baobab volunteers—a



MAP 3. Piazzale Maslax in relation to Rome's Centro Storico. Made by the author with Datawrapper.

transnational group that included local Italians and migrants—referred to camp residents outside of legal status terms as *transitanti*: people in transit. Whether they stayed days or months, everyone was en route to somewhere else or to something more permanent. (I think of Palestinian poet Yousif M. Qasmiyeh's words: "In the camp we arrive not, nor do we remain.")⁵ The *transitanti* at Baobab and camps throughout Europe challenge common conceptualizations of transit migration developed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), that frame transit in terms of the countries people traverse *en route* to the EU. With Baobab, it's clear that Europe *itself* is a site of transit.⁶ They included people in situations like that of Bakary, whose newly undocumented status I discuss in chapter 2; "dublinati" who, thanks to the EU's Dublin Regulation (table 2, appendix), were sent back to Italy from another European country for asylum processing; asylum seekers and refugees who could not find steady work or afford housing; and people who had left formal reception because conditions were intolerable.

Camp residents and volunteers employ a "politics of survival," enacting individual and collective efforts as part of what Abby Wheatley describes as "the process of surviving, subverting, struggling with, and sometimes overcoming the border."⁷ Here I extend this idea to describe the processes at play in people's navigation of the borderzones within a country. Camps like Piazzale Maslax reveal the politics of survival to be often also a politics of (in)visibility. Baobab volunteers and residents—meaning people residing in the camp—navigated the necessity to be seen and heard as they appealed for rights, and, simultaneously, the need to remain out of sight from authorities and locals who viewed their presence as a problem. In the process, Piazzale Maslax became an icon for migrant rights movements and a target for right-wing politicians.



FIGURE 10. Piazzale Maslax entrance after authorities added barricades, 2017. Photo by the author.

Through these frictions, informal settlements like this one are sites where the emergency apparatus takes shape in relation to the limits of witnessing.⁸ They are places where multiple gazes operate with especially high stakes, from the state that watches and regulates the camp; to camp residents themselves, who choose to bear witness (or remain silent) to their experiences of precarity; to volunteers who speak on behalf of the camp before wider publics. In this chapter, reflecting on the camp as a key site of witnessing, and drawing on oral and written testimony, I discuss *emergent* forms of *accoglienza* that residents and volunteers at Piazzale Maslax practiced as they fought against the constant threat of erasure (figure 10). The experiences, negotiations, desires, concerns, tensions, acts of violence, and forms of solidarity that shaped the camp on a daily basis are not only reflected in testimonies *about* it. Witnessing practices themselves shaped the camp, as I illustrate here through a discussion of multiple witnessing acts and testimonials, including voyeuristic gazes that further marginalized residents, oral history interviews I conducted with residents, residents' own testimonial writing, and public testimonials used by organizers in a plea to save the camp from destruction.

Piazzale Maslax continually morphed, depending on who was passing through the city, how recently police had evicted camp residents, and what provisions volunteers were able to offer. When it took shape in spring 2017, the lot housed around seventy migrants of varied legal status in shared tents—mostly single men,



FIGURE 11. Piazzale Maslax, 2018. Photo by the author.

reflecting migration trends and because the group worked to secure spaces for women in local shelters or centers, where there might be one or two beds, but never enough to take in everyone. There was no running water, no chemical toilet, no real protection from rain, heat, or cold. In summer, in the heat of the day, people napped or went to the station or city center. Those staying longer than a few days took language classes or looked for work. For however long they stayed, they also made the camp their home: sharing stories, hosting performances, pulling pranks, cooking over makeshift stoves, laughing at YouTube videos, arguing, and helping each other navigate obstacles (figure 11).

My discussion of this camp through multiple testimonies and witnessing acts contributes to recognition of camps beyond their common framing, via Agamben, as spaces of exception. While camps are, indeed, spaces shaped by bio- (or necro-) political violence, the idea of bare life so central in Agamben's theorization of the camp does not fully capture a place like Piazzale Maslax, where people come and go who inhabit a range of legal positions, and whose collective construction of the camp troubles simple or fixed notions of sovereignty. Recognizing the camp as a site of emergent forms of *accoglienza*, this chapter understands these improvised sites as neither defined by bare life nor existing in opposition to the official reception system. Rather, informal camps are fundamental to that official system. An informal settlement like Piazzale Maslax emerges in response to exclusion. But it survives—so long as it can—driven by an abolitionist politics that is in many ways counter to the migration governance strategies represented in formal *accoglienza*, and emergent practices of *accoglienza* may shape forms of “abolitionist

sanctuary.”⁹ Yet, as people who have lived across these centers and camps know well, they exist in relation to one another and to necropolitical governance and its central impulse to abandon—or, as Bakary put it, make people “abbandonati” (abandoned). That is, Italy’s emergency management of migration produces the need for these camps by creating the legal uncertainties and delays, homelessness, and inefficient systems that leave migrants few options other than occupying abandoned sites. In turn, local and national authorities depend on the camps as part of the broader management of recently arrived migrants, both in controlling their movements and in getting them necessary aid.

While daily life differs significantly between unofficial camps like Piazzale Maslax and official, government-funded reception centers (*centri di accoglienza*) like the CAS I discuss in chapter 2, both kinds of sites comprise the emergency apparatus that shapes and reflects discursive and material understandings of Mediterranean migration to Europe via Italy. CAS residents who referred to the reception center as the *campo* (camp) drew out these connections explicitly. In this blurred role, informal camps are shaped by the frictions of visibility and invisibility, as residents navigate the need for recognition and the risks that come with being seen. They are thus important sites for tracing the relationship between emergency logics, *accoglienza*, and witnessing possibilities.

VOYEURISM AND THE COLONIAL GAZE

The encampments Baobab operates are the collective’s own emergency response strategy. Piazzale Maslax, to date still the group’s most established camp, stood near Rome’s Tiburtina train station between May 2017 and November 2018.¹⁰ During multiple visits throughout this period, I spoke with volunteers and camp residents; helped serve meals prepared and delivered by other volunteers; attended assemblies where residents and volunteers discussed the asylum system, the city’s plans for the camp, or camp dynamics; and participated in several actions and events the collective organized. In June 2017, many residents had escaped civil conflict in the former Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia, or in North or South Sudan. In 2018, the group included more West Africans and a growing Maghrebi community, and some had already been in Italy for several years. Consistently, most residents arrived via the Mediterranean after a journey of a few months or longer, and most hoped not to stay in Italy. The camp offered a modicum of stability during their limbo, though its set-up was precarious and its longevity constantly threatened by local authorities.

As a witness myself to life in the camp during periods of organizing and collective activity as well as downtime, I observed how the Baobab community responded to people’s immediate material needs and also created forums for larger conversations about *accoglienza* and rights. This activism took multiple forms, from coordinating legal and medical services and cultural programming,

to hosting an annual conference, to leading demonstrations, and this was strategic in at least two ways. First, the group garnered broad international support for the plight of unhoused migrants in Rome. Second, being vocal about the struggles of both migrants and the collective as a whole was a way of preventing their erasure: broader awareness of their existence made it harder to ignore the dire circumstances that so many migrants confronted and the lack of response on the part of city government. Invisibility in diaspora can function, as Carter notes, as “a corrosive social erasure.”¹¹ Processes that invisibilize migrants function within the emergency apparatus, enabling a disregard for migrants’ well-being, and even their presence. But visibility also poses risks. Politicians campaigning on anti-immigrant platforms also kept Baobab’s efforts on their radar, making the camp’s visibility both urgent and politically charged.

Informal settlements that garner media attention have a fraught relationship with testimony: acts of witnessing can serve advocacy or enact a kind of voyeurism. Early on, when people were still able to enter the camp by car, many residents told me they felt like zoo animals when journalists or locals stopped by for a quick story or out of sheer curiosity. A couple of times, before the city barricaded the camp’s perimeter, I myself saw cars drive in, slowly circle in front of the tents, and leave again. Already a space of extreme precarity and anxiety, the camp in this sense was also an object of public suspicion and political animosity, and space of crisis voyeurism.

What were people coming to see? In part, I imagine, their curiosity was piqued following news coverage of Baobab’s efforts. The anticipation of a spectacle of suffering holds a fetishizing appeal, especially in the case of Black suffering in spaces defined as white. This can be the case whether coming to gawk or to quickly drop off donated goods—and researchers can be just as complicit. The issue, as residents described it, arose when people passed through to catch a glimpse, without engaging in the actual life of the camp. Like in human rights media that attempt to spread awareness, images of suffering may position viewers as voyeurs rather than people poised to take action.¹²

As several residents pointed out to me, the “zoo” visitors—especially those who came and went midday without interacting with residents—were conspicuously absent during the camp’s calmest moments or didn’t stay long enough to recognize the camp as a site of everyday life. One evening I sat with a few residents, watching a game of football unfold across the asphalt. An Italian dad had brought a couple kids along, and they kicked the ball back and forth with residents. A few migrants stood in line to visit doctors on call with MEDU (*Medici per i Diritti Umani*, Doctors for Human Rights), there with their mobile clinic. A man from Nigeria talked with me about how people came to take pictures, to see “how it is,” and then quickly leave again. How they came looking for evidence of misery. But much of the time, the camp was calm and quiet, with some people napping, some playing games or cutting hair, some at appointments in the city, others accessing

aid there on the asphalt lot, a few Italian volunteers around and others on their way to set up the next meal.

The voyeur's gaze is a colonial gaze, one that sees suffering through processes of "thingification" and erasure (recalling Césaire). The voyeur's observation of otherness reifies difference, producing the camp as a site of strange encounters in which the migrant is "already recognized" as an unknowable or undesirable other.¹³ As George Yancy defines it in the context of historical colonialism, "the white colonial gaze . . . constructs the Black body into its own colonial imaginary."¹⁴ Media coverage risks reproducing this gaze, depicting migrants through an "alien" world . . . filtered in" through photographs described as representing crisis.¹⁵ Saidiya Hartman calls out this challenge directly. In *Scenes of Subjection*, examining representations of experienced, observed, or imagined violence against enslaved people in the United States, she asks: "Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and suffering?"¹⁶ In other words, the voyeur is a witness capable of reproducing only problematic narratives that sensationalize suffering and reify difference. Voyeurism marks the failures of empathy to lead to real change.¹⁷

Integral to emergency imaginaries, the colonial gaze disregards the past and perceives the (formerly) colonized as objects out of context, out of history.¹⁸ The colonial imaginary that shaped ideas of foreignness in Europe continues to shape the present, in racialized notions of belonging and in the simultaneously widespread refusal, in dominant discourses, to recognize race and racism as persistent issues.¹⁹ It's a gaze legitimized in a city like Rome through imperial formations such as colonial-era monuments and streets named after colonized territories, as well as in the fleeting encounter of the car passing through the camp.²⁰ The mix of curiosity and suspicion, violence and solidarity that shaped the relationship between the Piazzale Maslax camp and the surrounding city reflects the colonial gaze and its production of Europe's so-called refugee crisis as a spectacle where Black lives are rendered disposable not in secret but in everyday media coverage, in national and international policies, and in public discourse. Despite that residents were free to come and go, Piazzale Maslax and the migrants who stayed there remained under the eye of the state, and so even the autonomously run camp was a space of limited freedom of movement.

What does it take to upend abandonment or dismantle the zoo? In Brand's contemplation of grammar in *The Blue Clerk*, the author-narrator talks about being trapped inside a zoo in which she must always perform and is always dissected by the gaze of others. "The vocabulary of what is called resistance," writes Brand, "you will notice later only reinforces the zoo."²¹ Disrupting the colonial gaze requires not simply recognition but the creation of new means of bearing witness to one's presence and experience. In relation to Brand's search for a new

grammar, uses of witnessing in the camp that trouble voyeurism, abandonment, and the violence of unsettling can be understood as attempts to articulate a new language—of belonging, of solidarity, of the right to be present.

Baobab Experience and Piazzale Maslax residents regularly challenged their enforced precarity, including in the protest with which I open this book, when migrants stood on the steps of the Campidoglio holding a banner that read, “We are not dangerous, we are in danger.” Their public testimony illustrates their sense of shared belonging, a kind of “campzenship,” a concept Nando Sigona develops in the context of Italy’s Romani encampments to describe “the specific and situated form of membership produced in and by the camp.”²² Campzenship and the forms of political solidarity that the collective employs themselves rely on testimony and witnessing—that is, on bearing witness and bringing visibility to migrants’ plight. As such, they foster a politics of survival that speaks back to the coloniality of the camp and of residents’ marginalization.

Given the pervasive treatment of migrants as emergency figures, the camp may appear to be a contemporary “contact zone,” a space of encounter between “disparate cultures.”²³ Yet for the objects of the colonial gaze, shared histories and the entanglements of camp and colony stand in plain view. For camp residents, and for many African migrants and Italians of African descent, Italy palpably represents the colonial present. This was clear in my conversations with a group of Eritreans at Piazzale Maslax. Several of these men, when they introduced themselves to me, also immediately invoked Eritrea’s colonial ties to Italy. Two men cited the specific years of colonial rule: “We’re from Eritrea. You know Eritrea, it was an Italian colony from 1890 to 1941.” Another man opened his palms, touching the pinky side of his hands together and saying, “Italy and Eritrea are like this”: Italy and Eritrea are connected. One Sunday, I accompanied the group to a nearby boxing gym where owners opened their doors so migrants could shower. Walking there through the station and the San Lorenzo neighborhood, we continued to talk about these connections, including words that bear the mark of Italian rule. Eritreans often count with *uno due tre*, they told me, and the Tigrigna words for some household objects come directly from Italian.

The men’s familiarity with Italy and the Italian language was unlikely to lend favor to their cases for asylum.²⁴ By emphasizing these connections, they did not underscore the immediate reasons they had fled Eritrea. Instead, they marked their position within Italian spaces through historical ties that link them to Italy, but that also recall Italy’s racial logics and violent conquest of the Horn of Africa. Marked as unrecognizable “strangers” by emergency discourses and their colonial gaze, and living in extreme legal, physical, and social precarity, they claimed a *right to be present* in Italy, inscribing their presence through colonial relations.

Their appeal to history defines their mobility beyond the immediate emergency terms of Italy’s migration management and inscribes the camp as a site of colonial memory. Their positioning also speaks to how improvised settlements

coalesce around claims about the right to stay, including the right to occupy particular spaces and not be continually displaced. While not every camp resident claimed ties to Italy as directly as these Eritreans, there was a collective sense there that people's right to have rights, and their right to be present, were under constant threat of erasure: Italian authorities failed to respond to their need for aid and protection, and police repeatedly cleared the camp. In addition, locals complained about their presence, projecting stereotypes of criminality and chaos onto this group whose occupation of an asphalt lot was a consequence of emergency responses to migration, not a cause of *emergenza*. Activists and residents at Piazzale Maslax created space to recognize those histories and combat how their erasure has enabled racialized, ahistorical discourses about identity and foreignness that do not account for Italy's own colonial campaigns in Libya and the Horn of Africa, or Europe's colonial presence across the countries from which many migrants today have fled. Testimony by camp residents responds to the need to counter imminent and ongoing erasure with acts of imagining otherwise, making the camp a space for understanding border crossing outside dominant emergency discourses.

CHOOSING THE CAMP

The Piazzale Maslax camp grew through word of mouth. While it existed because of the insufficiencies of the Italian system, it was also a place migrants actively chose over official centers, either because they were in transit to other European countries or because conditions in the CAS were unacceptable, as people repeatedly told me. In interviews, the way that camp residents positioned themselves in relation to sites and practices of reception underscores the informal settlement as a key site within the emergency apparatus and also a space where alternative possibilities emerge. Emmanuel (pseudonym), a man in his mid-twenties from Côte d'Ivoire, had come through a reception center in rural Sicily, where he found conditions to be so poor that he opted to live on the streets:

Emmanuel: I was in Italy [in] January. And I live in [a center in Sicily] one month. . . . But it was a prison. Because we cannot go outside, we cannot see nothing, and we are sleeping there and they give you some cigarettes to get money.²⁵ If you smoke or you don't smoke, they give you the cigarettes to sell to get money.

After one month they threw me outside, to live in Italy. I don't have anywhere to go. I was asking them, do you save me? You know I don't have anybody else. . . . They was asking me, inside/outside, what do you think? I say, okay, no problem, I prefer to stay outside because it's my god who helped me to come here, and if God said I'm going to sleep in the streets forever, I will stay there, but if God said I'm not supposed to sleep in the streets, but I'm going to move, I move.²⁶

Emmanuel, whose story I return to later in this chapter, struggled for weeks to file an asylum claim in Rome. While he framed his arrival in Rome as a kind of destiny ordered by God, his position at the camp was anything but passive. He was outspoken about his own needs and his anger about repeated police raids at the camp. He argued with volunteers and also celebrated with them, and he became a vocal spokesperson, taking the megaphone at demonstrations and leading a petition effort to request that the mayor grant Baobab Experience a building. One week he joined a group of US volunteers who visited the camp to offer Bible study; he also regularly interpreted for other French speakers at camp assemblies. While not everyone assumed such an active role in camp activities, Emmanuel's account of his arrival to Baobab and his participation there exemplify how rights claims were tied to ongoing practices of hospitality that included both official aid and legal procedures, as well as collective efforts to create the forms of hospitality missing from formal and public reception of migrants—that is, *accoglienza* as a set of practices of survival and care.

Emmanuel's account also illustrates camps and official centers as together comprising a complex network of reception sites—and more broadly, as fundamental sites within the emergency apparatus that shapes the legal and social realities of precarious migration in Italy. Because informal settlements take shape without explicit government consent, they are often discussed by authorities and publics alike as existing outside the official system, and therefore as abusive or criminal. Scholarship on informal settlements has challenged their framing as sites of exception, recognizing that they emerge as a consequence of state neglect but are also sites of collective action and agency.²⁷ Yet this work still tends to treat unofficial (unsanctioned) camps as wholly distinct from formal structures.

Instead, in our conversations, residents described Piazzale Maslax as one camp among several where they had spent time, including formal *accoglienza* structures like the CAS and SPRAR I describe in chapter 2. Some of the people I met at Piazzale Maslax in fact resided in centers but came to Baobab regularly for solidarity and to socialize. While informal camps are defined by their residents' strategic decision-making, they are also rendered necessary and shaped by local- and state-led migration governance that sorts migrants into hierarchies of deservingness and polices their mobility long after they have crossed a national border.²⁸ At the same time, these sites are spaces of possibility: people's futures depend on what happens during *accoglienza*. I highlight connections between formal centers and informal settlements to underscore that migrants advocating for the right to keep their tents in Piazzale Maslax were not simply claiming the right to live in the margins; they were claiming a place within formal systems of recognition, just as they inscribed the camp with broader, more heterogeneous understandings of mobility and collective belonging.

At Piazzale Maslax, migrants lived within a major neighborhood of a European capital yet legally and socially just outside Italy, just outside Europe, in

proximal distance from local communities, like with the CAS. Baobab's location meant that migrants passed through Tiburtina Station regularly. They took advantage of its cooler public spaces in the summer (or winter heating) and its Wi-Fi connection. While the camp was a site of solidarity, life there wasn't easy; people were struggling to survive. Many had suffered severe trauma and loss. It didn't help that locals complained, projecting neighborhood issues onto the camp and its residents. Such complaints are easy to circulate within a broader context that sees migration as a problem or threat. After a knifing incident involving two Italians near Tiburtina Station, for example, media covered locals' concerns for the area's degeneration. One piece quotes a representative of the Comitato Cittadini Stazione Tiburtina (Citizens' Commission of Tiburtina Station) who complained about a lack of security and blamed groups like Baobab for "the illegal administration of food and drink to stragglers," claiming

most of the participants at these gatherings are *clandestini*, drunks, illegal squatters, Roma, and every other type of problematic person. We have asked again and again to the authorities, including the Prefecture, the questura [police headquarters], and city government to prohibit the passing out of meals and drinks on the street by these little unofficial groups.²⁹

Here migrants are termed only "clandestini," slang for illegal or undocumented immigrants, used here as if synonymous with drunkards. The list implicitly distinguishes upright citizens from "every other type of problematic person," associating behavior with legal status. The representative cites illegality as a character trait to be condemned rather than a condition produced by the policing of mobility and borders. Associations of legal status with moral character position locals and migrants in a never-ending strange encounter in which the migrant "other" is always already unknowable and undesirable in the community.³⁰ Regular police raids and the city's refusal to provide adequate accommodations only fed these associations.

Meanwhile, the asphalt lot baked or flooded. Days there were often monotonous, and despite regular opportunities for classes, training, and cultural activities, the wait was long and heavy. Collective living required collective rulemaking. There were moments of shared celebration, from breaking fast at dusk during Ramadan, to artist performances, but fights also sometimes broke out, for instance when people cut in line for meals or attempted to take extra items from a clothing donation bin. Baobab paid a few migrants for extra help with meals or maintaining order in the camp, but volunteers struggled with how to respond, for example, when those residents showed up late for a shift. As word got out about Piazzale Maslax, organized groups of volunteers came to serve lunch for a week, for example, or to lead an activity with residents. I met groups of US college students and a French volunteer organization, each there to help for a few days. The volunteers were appreciated, but with such variability in the amount and nature of help they'd have on any given day, it was also challenging to maintain consistency.

At the same time, as an autonomously run site, the camp was a space of community and exchange, shaped also for instance by humor. In the tense summer of 2018, following the rise of La Lega party in national elections, there was a contrast in energy between the CAS and the camp. The camp felt like a space where humor was more possible; this was also, perhaps, a survival tactic. As national elections neared, people ridiculed politicians, especially populist leaders Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio. They'd knock on someone's tent: "Excuse me! Can you give me asylum?" "Get out, get out!" the tent resident would shout. "Get out" as in, get away from my tent, and also, get out of Italy. They poked fun by calling one another Salvini or Di Maio. Joking, teasing, and being teased were part of my own interactions with residents, as we sat in the shade or shared food, and they were tactics people adopted to create camaraderie—and to be themselves—in this space where survival depended on the will of the community.³¹ Still, the anxieties and frustrations of waiting lingered between tents, between meals, into the morning.

Piazzale Maslax was both a refuge and a site of friction, and I don't mean to romanticize the camp or the efforts of volunteers. As a grassroots movement, Baobab Experience is also comprised of myriad challenges, tensions, and losses. As the camp grew, volunteers and residents disagreed on how to negotiate with authorities, how to support families with young children, how to carry out the constant battle for donations, and whether to remain open to truly anyone who needed a place to sleep. They debated how to deal with violence in the camp, where, on principle, they ID'd no one. The group's own expansion and their increased public visibility also brought questions of reach, and not everyone stayed with the group. In 2020 and 2021, when they operated near the Verano cemetery, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged their efforts, as they sought to uphold safety protocols, support unhoused migrants without ready access to care, and continue this work during Italy's severe lockdown restrictions. In this period, some organizers kept working with migrants in Rome through Baobab or other organizations; others instead traveled, taking Baobab Experience to Bosnia and other EU borderzones to document pushbacks and assist people on the move. In early 2022, they went to Moldova to help people fleeing Ukraine. They continued offering meals to transit migrants in Rome. These multiple efforts reflect the complexity of the work of *accoglienza* outside formal systems—unfolding in opposition to state violence, but not reducible to a simple binary.

Here the overlapping meanings of *accoglienza*, from reception structures to practices of welcoming, are significant. As Ida Danewid points out in a foundational essay on the Black Mediterranean, "hospitality" can uphold a citizen/non-citizen binary and the nation-state as the dominant frame for understanding identity. That is, attention to racial politics and the colonial present point us away from practices that welcome "the other" in ways that reify difference. With this in mind, Danewid calls for "abolition, not hospitality."³² Drawing on lessons from Piazzale Maslax, I want to suggest that such a politics does not require the eradication of



FIGURE 12. Tea at Piazzale Maslax, 2018. Photo by the author.

hospitality, but its reconceptualization. The informal camp teaches us that abolition and hospitality are not strictly oppositional, and that alternative practices of hospitality that do not align with official modes can upend borders and create spaces of sanctuary. Forms of witnessing are especially significant within the camp, from facilitating individual testimony to enabling wider recognition of the obstacles people in transit face, especially in a site often framed in dominant narratives as a singularly abject and anonymous experience. I see these practices as pointing us toward what Danewid describes as “a transfigurative and abolitionist politics that rearticulates the struggle for migrant justice as a struggle against racial capitalism and state violence.”³³

Beyond official and volunteer-driven forms of aid and assistance, multiple conceptualizations of hospitality circulated in the camp, including practices people brought from their home countries and communities, such as the Senegalese notion of *teraanga*. Loosely translated as generous hospitality, *teraanga* is widely understood as a way of life, a practice of solidarity and respect.³⁴ Unlike the CAS, the camp was a space migrants themselves built and managed, and with a culture of “hosting”—tea brewed over a makeshift coal stove, rice and chicken cooked on a small fire, and invitations to escape the heat under someone’s tarp (figure 12). These seemingly small gestures are significant; they shape daily life and relations within a space that residents are aware could be cleared at any moment.

They nurture possibilities for what A. Naomi Paik calls an “abolitionist sanctuary” that works in solidarity with migrants “with the deep envisioning and building of a new society where we . . . not only fight systemic oppression but also advance shared liberation.”³⁵

FROM CULTURAL CENTER TO IMPROVISED CAMP

How Baobab Experience ended up operating the Piazzale Maslax camp is, in part, a story about housing and mobility issues that affect poor and marginalized communities throughout Italy, and, in part, a story about how corruption and exploitation drive the emergency apparatus of migration. Baobab Experience formed in 2015 while operating an unofficial reception center in a former glass workshop in the San Lorenzo neighborhood where Rome’s original Baobab center served in particular African communities since the early 2000s. As a cultural center and, in the 2010s, as a reception center, Baobab hosted translation services, musical events, a restaurant that served “*cucina africana*” (African cuisine), and a dormitory. The center was closed at a crucial moment in its operations, however, as part of Mafia Capitale investigations that uncovered how an organized crime syndicate enlisted politicians to profit from contracts in migrant reception and waste management in Rome and elsewhere. It came to light that the owner of the cooperative overseeing the cultural center—not directly running it—was Salvatore Buzzi, a key figure in Mafia Capitale who was famously recorded telling an associate, “Do you have any idea how much we make from immigrants? Drugs bring in less.”³⁶ When investigators determined that Buzzi was using his cooperative to take advantage of migration funds, they closed the Baobab reception center.³⁷

Following its closure as an official center, volunteers—including Italians and migrants—transformed the center into an autonomously run space, without state funding. They expanded the dormitory and coordinated legal and medical aid for the transitanti who stopped by for meals or stayed a few days before continuing their journeys north. Volunteers’ efforts were tolerated by authorities; at the time, given concerns about Italy’s capacity for hosting increasing numbers of asylum seekers, migrants were sometimes encouraged to move on without registering in Italy.³⁸ But as the center accommodated more people, its relationship with the municipal government grew tenuous. In fact, Baobab expanded in part because of the city’s ongoing *sgomberi*, or evictions, elsewhere.³⁹ The last straw for authorities came after Baobab welcomed migrants whom police had evicted from a camp in the Ponte Mammolo neighborhood, nearly doubling the center’s nightly capacity of 150–200.⁴⁰ In December 2015, citing overcrowding and complaints from the neighbors, the city closed the center, promising that an official aid structure would shortly be opened. It never was.

In the meantime, with the timeline for the promised center unclear, volunteers erected a camp in the street outside, which has the ironic name of Via Cupa, or

“gloomy street.” For the next nine months, a group of approximately forty regular volunteers arranged tents, mattresses, and seven chemical toilets.⁴¹ They continued to provide meals and coordinate medical and legal counseling, and to lobby for government aid. Despite not having a permanent physical space, they organized football tournaments, concerts, and tours of ancient Roman sites, activities that brought migrants and locals together.

Informal settlements are sites of “violent inaction” by authorities and regular *unsettling*, via evictions, and while Baobab vied for an official center, police cleared the Via Cupa camp three times, blocking the street and removing the tents, mattresses, and other items. Meanwhile, as volunteer Francesca Del Giudice explained to me, Baobab volunteers sent proposals to city government officials and issued press releases updating the public on the lack of adequate response.⁴² In these communications, the group highlighted the distinction between *accoglienza* and *assistenza* (assistance/aid) and their commitment to offering both hospitality and specific forms of assistance, for instance in this April 2016 blog post (originally in Italian) laying out their vision:

Our project does not offer simple assistance, but a complete reception that involves the necessary professional figures necessary in the medical, psychological and legal fields, and that has among its objectives the spread of a cooperative, community-based culture, through the creation of a museum of migration and the involvement of schools in educational activities.⁴³

While the collective continued to offer hospitality and build community among transiti and locals, a mix of active unsettlement and violent inaction on the part of municipal and national governments kept the group moving. In the two years following Via Cupa, Baobab residents were evicted from encampments more than twenty times. Police conducted additional raids and document inspections as well, including during the occupation of Piazzale Maslax.

PIAZZALE MASLAX AND ACCOGLIENZA AGAINST ERASURE

The collective named the asphalt lot they occupied near Tiburtina Station beginning in May 2017 after Maslax, a young Somali who stayed with Baobab in Via Cupa. He then made his way to Belgium, where he was caught and sent back as a “dublinato,” having first entered the EU via Italy and registered with authorities there. Maslax died by suicide near Rome in 2017 around the time Baobab occupied the lot.⁴⁴ I didn’t meet him, but his loss, and the risk of repeated loss, was present in the camp in those first months. Far from the strange grief of state memorials and tokenizing references to migrant deaths, Piazzale Maslax gave a name to the haunting that shaped the solidarity work and struggles unfolding there. On Google Maps, “Piazzale Maslax” still directs users to wherever the collective is

operating, a trace of the encampment and a symbol of its transformation of local spaces, despite that authorities cleared the camp multiple times and permanently closed it in November 2018.

Before that November, local authorities tolerated the settlement but didn't allow it to develop any semblance of permanence, for instance by limiting access to water. The camp was, after all, handling problems the city refused to address. Yet the threat of erasure was constant, and tensions between the camp and officials remained high. In 2018, tightened national borders within Europe meant that migrants who would have preferred to move on to another country instead stayed longer in Italy, and with Baobab. Municipal officials and police used evictions and document inspections as tools to manage camp residents. During evictions, police rounded up residents, seizing their belongings (regardless of their legal status), and taking some residents to the questura, the local police headquarters that handles initial asylum claims. Evictions were especially unsettling for asylum seekers awaiting word on their status while processing traumatic experiences from their journeys or their home countries. And to unsettle is, of course, the point. The camp, like the colony, "is marked by unsettledness, and forced migration."⁴⁵ Official and unofficial migrant camps populate an "imperial network" that includes multiple forms of detention, and even an improvised camp reflects colonial dynamics of control.⁴⁶

These realities underscore camps like this one as "more-than-camps," connected to other spaces and times.⁴⁷ Like the emergency frame itself, this period of Mediterranean migration was not the first time Italian authorities resorted to *sgomberi* to police people's mobility and hold their rights hostage. In recent memory, the Berlusconi administration declared an *emergenza nomadi* or "nomad emergency" in 2008 to close multiple Romani and Sinti settlements in several Italian regions. As Hom reminds us, these evictions, too, recall colonial-era displacement practices.⁴⁸ Hom links the "emergenza nomadi" to the uprooting by Italian forces of nomadic communities in Libya in the 1930s. In this way, emergency logics link people with distinct histories—in these examples, Bedouins in North Africa, Romani and Sinti in Italy, and today's African immigrants—via narratives that posit these groups as criminal and threatening, and their mobility and use of space as part of the problem. Containing and controlling their movements through *sgomberi* is justified as a solution. In the "emergenza nomadi," the uprooting and destruction of Romani and Sinti settlements included census, increased surveillance, some camp closures, and some deportations. Until it was declared unconstitutional by Italian courts in 2011, this decree displaced and unhoused thousands of people and exacerbated tensions between local Italian and Romani communities.⁴⁹ A common political tactic, *sgomberi* maintain appearances of order and control while keeping people already living at "Italy's margins" in precarious positions.⁵⁰

These evictions are often spectacular in nature, a display of control of "unwanted others." Like other instances of border spectacle, they attract media attention but

are fundamentally acts of erasure. Evictions are orchestrated events that attempt to create public witnesses who will see the state as taking action against a “migrant problem,” and by criminalizing the evicted, seizing their belongings, and withholding resources, they also restrict the possibilities for those affected to bear witness to their circumstances. The violence of evictions thus shows how the limits of witnessing are entangled in broader understandings of the limits of the human—that is, of whose lives count.⁵¹

In interviews, camp residents’ oral testimonies underscored the contradictions of these practices. As Emmanuel, the man who had left an official center in Sicily, explained, the sgomberi functioned to create insecurity and uncertainty. They made clear to migrants that their movements remained under the control of authorities who were also actively working to keep Africans out of Italy. When Emmanuel and I spoke, the group was, it turned out, between evictions. Through Baobab, Emmanuel had been able to meet with lawyers and apply for asylum, a process that repeatedly brought him to the questura. Yet it was also police who raided the camp and, more than once, took his paperwork.

Emmanuel: When I was sleeping in the street, every time when the police was coming, or we go to them, every time—I was in the questura seven times—and they never give me nothing, no place to stay. They leave you in the streets.

Eleanor: Had you applied for asylum yet?

Emmanuel: Yes, and I applied to stay here [in Italy] because I don’t have anywhere to go. They’re supposed to take my fingerprints but they never ask and they give you some appointment, for next month, this month, the twentieth.

After that, I was sleeping here [at Piazzale Maslax] when they come last week. And everything we get to go to questura, like appointment [documents], they took everything. They give you some contact [information], to talk to see their lawyer. And when I was meeting them they say they cannot do nothing. I say, Why? Even in my country when you lose some documents you’re supposed to go to the police station. After that you go to see God, because it’s him who will make you have your documents.

Eleanor: So your documents were in the tent.

Emmanuel: Yeah, and they took the tent. And they threw everything. On Tuesday.

Eleanor: And what did you have in there?

Emmanuel: I have my money. . . . And my shoes and my clothes, everything important for me . . . yeah, everything, they throw it. Now they say they cannot do nothing. [I’m] supposed to start again to get another appointment. And I ask them, how am I supposed to start again? See my condition, I am living here three months. Do you want me to stay here maybe seven months?

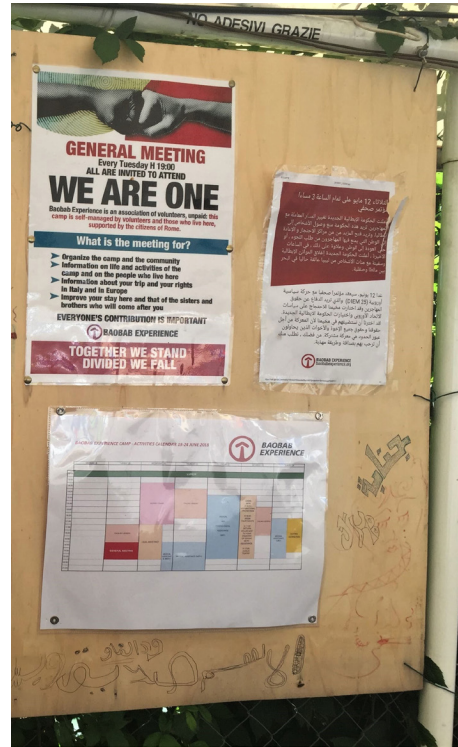


FIGURE 13. Signs at Piazzale Maslax about the regular camp assembly, 2018.
Photo by the author.

Emmanuel calls attention to the temporal, spatial, and legal precarity he has experienced since arriving in Italy, a limbo he recounts as a form of abandonment. His experience of formal accoglienza was procedural and disruptive, hindering his potential integration. He describes his transition out of prima accoglienza as being “thrown outside . . . to live in Italy.” He came to seek protection in Italy and yet was abandoned to it, in it, by it. In Rome, his life in Baobab’s informal settlement was the result of being “left in the streets.” He was thrown out, and his belongings, too, were thrown out. For authorities, Emmanuel’s presence at the camp is a symptom of the emergency overwhelming the country, and therefore a problem to be dealt with by removal, or at least by repeated disruption. For Emmanuel, instead, these interventions render his personal situation an emergency and exacerbate his already precarious situation.

The hospitality Emmanuel found and participated in with Baobab was made necessary by gaps in the official system, and also exceeded what official accoglienza offered. An emergent set of collective practices of care anchored people like Emmanuel to this transient site. One such example was the regular camp-wide assemblies that Baobab coordinators held to convey important information to residents and facilitate collective decision-making (figure 13). Founding member Andrea Costa would call everyone together, saying, “We have some things to

tell you, and then we want to hear from you—you tell us what you think.” He called out information in English, turning every few sentences to translate into Italian to an Eritrean resident, who called out the information in Tigrigna. Emmanuel and another volunteer translated from English into French, and other volunteers interpreted for Arabic speakers.

At one such meeting, Italian volunteers shared their concerns about a statement made by Mayor Raggi that the city would be closed to new arrivals. In addition, since police had raided the camp less than a week before and seized the tents, they had to be careful. That said, there were new donated tents. They were large and would make the camp more visible, which meant risking additional disruption. Did residents want the tents? Yes, they quickly decided; it was worth the risk.

Here *accoglienza* involves emergency response, meeting people’s immediate and urgent needs, but it does so through collective action and adaptation. Hospitality practices at Piazzale Maslax encompassed challenging the group’s repeated displacements and working to make the camp not a site of abandonment but an active community space and a node in a larger network. To this point, as the camp gained international recognition, politicians and activists including former Greek economic minister Yanis Varoufakis and French-Beninese writer and pan-Africanist activist Kémi Séba visited, meeting with camp residents and, with them, hosting conversations about freedom of movement that were open to the public. This is *accoglienza* as radical hospitality, to invoke Paik—*accoglienza* that both provides aid and works to eradicate borders. Like in other makeshift camps and collectives that provide this kind of hospitality, such practices can “enable residents . . . to escape the camp’s limiting and dehumanizing conditions.”⁵² These practices of *accoglienza* are emergent, taking shape within an evolving vision of solidarity that produces the camp as a space where claims to history, to presence, to work, and to autonomy of movement might be heard.

COLLECTIVE TESTIMONY AS HOSPITALITY

The camp swelled and shrank: in winter, fewer people cross the sea; in spring, arrivals increase. When I met Emmanuel, Baobab was home to approximately 150 migrants, most of them single young men. Because of the constant threat of eviction, there were few tents up; residents slept in the open, on mattresses or blankets. By the summer of 2018, the camp had doubled in size, becoming home to three hundred people, including several families with women and young children and a couple of Italians. Many residents no longer lived in simple donated tents but had built more elaborate structures with the intention of staying longer. Fethi, for instance (pseudonym), a Tunisian I met that June, had set up an old TV on a plastic crate.

Through Fethi I encountered yet another form of emergent hospitality. When I explained my project, he brought me to his tent to share the book he kept, a kind of collective diary by camp residents and volunteers. He had titled it *La vie des*

immigration (*Immigration Life* or *The Life of Immigration*). At the top of each page, he had saved space for a note by writing the name of a country. By some countries, he had listed the names of other Baobab residents. By others, residents and volunteers had themselves written a note about their journey or their experience at the camp, in their own language. There were pages for Afghanistan, Germany, Italy, Côte d'Ivoire, Palestine, Senegal, and many others, with notes in nearly that many languages. Some countries were repeated; some pages remained to be filled (figure 14a).

The notebook is simultaneously a documentation of struggle and a celebration, and in this way, it exemplifies the forms of *accoglienza* that emerged within the camp to create space within “crisis” for claiming rights and belonging. Turning the pages, Fethi proudly noted the number of places and languages it represented. A man from Bangladesh wrote in Italian:

I've been here almost a week. I live with friends from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Morocco, Senegal, etc. Here I've found a different world. I have really kind friends and there are more than 400 people here. Like a real family. Here no one asks you for money. Here they ask you only for kindness. Thanks my friend [Fethi].

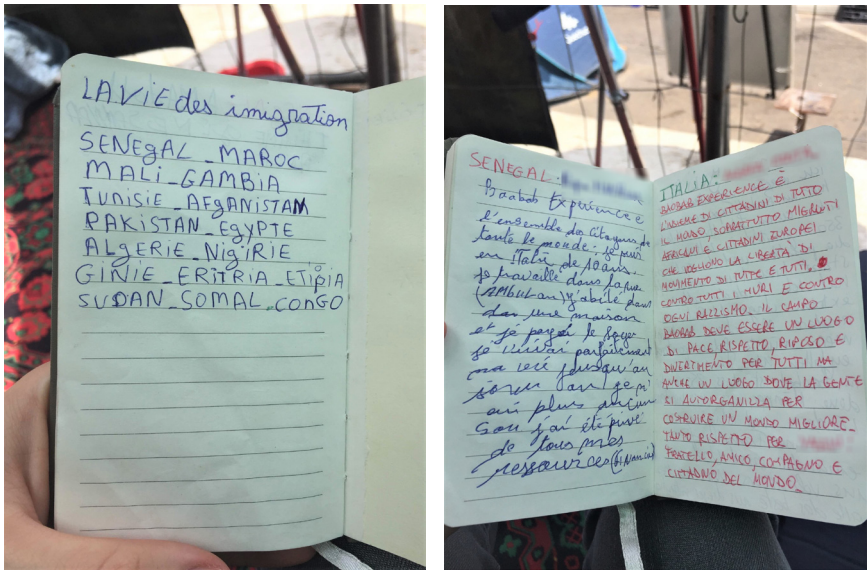
While a shared notebook could be circulated in reception centers, too, this set of testimonies reflected the ethos of self-built community and freedom of movement so fundamental to the approaches to *accoglienza* at Piazzale Maslax. As this author's entry illustrates, the notebook's collective testimony reflected the camp as a transnational community in ways that countered depictions of such sites as homogeneous spaces of exception or as reproducing an us/them binary. As such, the notebook, while not a work of literature in the traditional sense, intervenes in dominant discourse in ways aligned with the “creative critique” of autobiographical literary and filmic works produced and circulated for broad audiences, speaking back to monolithic crisis narratives.⁵³

Still, the book also includes passages that recall the bare life so often ascribed to camps. An Italian volunteer wrote:

Baobab is a piece of asphalt that holds the world. Here I've seen incredible smiles despite suffering. Here, more than any other time or place, I've understood what freedom means and what people are capable of doing to obtain it. Here I've learned what a person becomes when they no longer have anything to lose. Here I've seen people punch each other and then shortly after help each other out.

Here I've cried, gotten angry, gotten upset, I've laughed, I've done my part to fight because I don't want world peace, which is utopia, but I want Baobab to exist here and elsewhere.

Here the camp is a space where people have reached absolute loss, yet it is not defined by that loss but by the paradoxes and tensions enacted through and around it.



FIGURES 14a and 14b. *La vie des immigration*. Photo by the author, with permission.

The notebook also documents how the camp expanded beyond its original transit population or changed what *transitante* indicated. By mid-2018, many residents were still navigating initial asylum procedures or hoping to head north, but multiple residents had arrived several years before. Fethi himself had reached Italy seven years earlier. This was a sign of the city's larger housing insecurity issue, which affects migrants and citizens alike, and which emergency-response approaches to migration exacerbated. When the city stopped offering beds to newcomers, they abandoned a growing number of people to the streets.

The notebook also speaks to Baobab as a community people chose (figure 14b). As a Senegalese resident noted in Fethi's book (translated from French):

Baobab Experience is all the cities of the world. I've been in Italy for ten years, working as an ambulant vendor. I lived in a house and I paid my rent. I lived my life perfectly. But over the years I was deprived of all my resources.

Describing Baobab as “all the cities of the world” seems to gesture both to global community and to the problems of big cities. Page after page, writers define this space and community for Fethi and for each other. The witnessing relations here are primarily internal: residents and volunteers share mutual appreciation and mark this community as it existed, knowing it was fleeting. As a collective record of the camp, the notebook also illustrates the importance of testimony as a form for enacting community.

What is the life of such a book, and what do its testimonies enact? It was produced for Fethi, who had the impulse to document the diversity of experiences represented in Piazzale Maslax, and also for everyone at the camp who turned the pages of the book while deciding what to write in it themselves. Perhaps most striking about *La vie des immigration* is that it bears witness to the camp on residents' own terms—not in response to police raids, not for crowds at a public demonstration, but for one another. While many authors addressed Fethi directly in their entries, they wrote in languages that Fethi and other authors (me included) might or might not read. And so they wrote especially for themselves, signing their presence in ink, not knowing who would read it, and perhaps never seeing the completed version—if such a book could ever be completed.

The “analog” notebook, as opposed to something people might access through their cell phones, for example, is a perhaps fleeting record that people held in their hands within the limbo of the camp. In this sense, I posit, the passing of the book from person to person is itself a practice of reception, or *accoglienza*—a practice of hospitality created within settings where people had lost access to official reception spaces and a transnational practice that contrasts explicitly with more widely circulating narratives and images produced in global media. The practice of writing itself and of sharing the book was a way of facilitating solidarity and care with those present and those who had passed through and would still arrive.

As individual testimonies literally bound together, Fethi's notebook offers reader-witnesses a sense of the heterogeneous and collective experiences of the camp. It also illustrates how, in contexts of precarious migration, testimony itself transits: changing form and finding new audiences, differing in this case from the testimony residents were required to give about their past and present circumstances repeatedly to police. With the camp and its residents constantly under threat, the notebook can be read as an act of resistance, an attempt to inscribe these experiences in a way that might outlive the camp itself. As Whitlock observes, asylum seeker testimony that emerges from situations of extreme hardship may “impa[ct] thinking about citizenship, obligation, and responsibility in the community of the nation.”⁵⁴ As the notebook illustrates, the politics of survival in the camp were a constant exercise in articulating the right to be present and the “right to have rights.”⁵⁵

As an Italian member of the collective wrote in Fethi's notebook (figure 14b),

Baobab Experience is a community of citizens from all over the world, above all African migrants and European citizens who want freedom of movement for all. Against all walls and against all racism. The Baobab camp should be a place of peace, respect, rest, and enjoyment for all, but also a place where people self-organize to build a better world. Much respect for [Fethi]: brother, friend, comrade and citizen of the world.

The first line echoes the Senegalese street vendor's entry cited above, describing Baobab as "all the cities of the world." The call to self-organization signals the ethos of hospitality that distinguishes this camp from official centers, despite their entanglements within Italy's migration governance regime.

The *accoglienza* produced through the notebook concerns the intimate attention of testimonial exchange. In this way, it contrasts with the high-stakes testimonial transactions of the asylum court, or even with the public-facing testimonies given by Baobab residents and volunteers before the press or at demonstrations. The book and these practices constitute a form of *accoglienza* that enables a form of ethical communication, which, thinking with Ahmed, concerns "holding proximity and distance together. . . . It is through getting closer, rather than remaining at a distance, that the impossibility of pure proximity can be put to work, or made to work."⁵⁶ That is, it is not through stasis but through movement, and movement together, or toward one another, that a more ethical communication becomes possible.⁵⁷ The notebook is a reminder that cultivating these practices within the camp is as important as facilitating ethical communication between camp residents and outsiders.

If the *accoglienza* administered in official centers like the CAS is, essentially, an exercise in reproducing national sovereignty, this notebook represents forms of *accoglienza* that cultivate the kinds of individual and collective sovereignty that abolitionist sanctuary works to realize. The informal settlement is, in this way, both an object of necropolitical violence and a site where hospitality and resistance might be reimagined and practiced together.

TESTIMONIAL ETHICS AS ACCOGLIENZA

Baobab has turned to witnessing practices not only to document the lived realities of the camp but also as a strategy to counter the increasing criminalization of migration. This trend became especially marked in Italy with the retreat of Italian and EU-sponsored rescue missions at sea following the end of *Mare Nostrum*. It includes, for example, security decrees that threaten the viability of independent rescue operations, Italy's deals with Libya and Tunisia to prevent migrants from attempting to cross the sea, and documented pushbacks across the Mediterranean. Baobab Experience has been a kind of public testing ground for these efforts through regular threats to shut down the group's operations and even criminal charges brought against core organizers.⁵⁸

The group's survival depends in part on people seeing and recognizing it on its own terms, without projecting other notions of migration or deservingness onto it. In this vein, the group's activism necessarily involves the search for "an adequate witness," or one who, in Leigh Gilmore's words, "receives testimony without deforming it by doubt, or substituting different terms of value than the ones

offered by the witness themselves.”⁵⁹ For questions of group survival, the adequate witness is often a public witness—not a public that exerts a colonial gaze on the camp but one that recognizes and might even be moved to speak for the rights of camp residents and, by extension, of migrants everywhere—that is, witnessing not for empathy that condemns suffering yet reifies difference but as a call for structural change. Through social media—including regular posts and stories on Twitter/X, Instagram, and Facebook—and demonstrations in the city center, the group’s strategic uses of testimony attempt to create “social connections to the public sphere,” influencing debates about migrant rights and housing rights. These testimonial transactions allow the camp to “emerge as a ‘house of witness,’” rather than a space defined by abandonment.⁶⁰

Another genre the group regularly employs is the press conference, utilizing this form in a testimonial way to bear witness to their own experiences of transit and accoglienza as ways of challenging the criminalization of migration. One such example dates to the early days of Salvini’s #PortiChiusi (Closed Ports) campaign, in which the newly appointed interior minister repeatedly blocked rescue ships from docking and disembarking at Italian ports—a practice that continued after his tenure and that has reinforced an anti-immigrant agenda.⁶¹ In late August 2018, the *Diciotti*, an Italian Coast Guard ship, remained docked in Catania with 157 rescued migrants on board. Despite that most of the migrants were Eritrean and were therefore likely to be granted asylum, they were not allowed to disembark or file asylum claims but were kept on the ship for ten days, in view of Italy but not allowed to set foot there, their appeals for help treated instead as threats.⁶²

Salvini was later charged with kidnapping for this incident. At the time, however, there was little recourse. Once the migrants finally disembarked, they were sent to a CAS south of Rome. Unsurprisingly, some opted to stay clear of official Italian structures and made their way to Piazzale Maslax instead. Rumors and debates circulated about Baobab’s role in providing shelter for them. On September 7, police arrived in riot gear at Piazzale Maslax with “4 armored vehicles, a bus, and 7 DIGOS [special operations] military cars.”⁶³ At the time, a number of people were waiting for appointments with Doctors Without Borders at the organization’s mobile clinic. Pulling people out of line, agents took sixteen people presumed but not confirmed to have been on the *Diciotti* to the questura. The militarized border operated in the heart of the capital city.

Baobab organizers turned to testimony as a way to take control of the *Diciotti* narrative.⁶⁴ In a press conference (held in Italian) a few days after the incident with police, representatives from medical NGO MEDU read testimonial accounts of several Eritrean men who had been aboard the *Diciotti*. Before they took the floor, Andrea Costa addressed the need for Baobab to share its testimony, “to tell our own version.”⁶⁵ He justified the group’s choice to drive migrants to Ventimiglia, a site known as a transit point for people heading to France but still within national borders.⁶⁶ And he framed the press conference as an act of counter-witnessing:

We decided to convene this press conference to say our part, to tell our version, compared to what we read in too many newspapers, heard across too many media, about the fact that there was allegedly a brilliant police operation that intercepted a bus full of migrants headed to France with Baobab Experience, which was thus complicit in an illegal act. None of this; we are unfortunately forced to take credit instead for a very simple gesture, that is to say, to have rented a bus to bring forty-eight migrants . . . to accompany them as was their wish, to the Red Cross camp in Ventimiglia, a camp managed by the operators of the Red Cross, a camp considered official [governmental], with law enforcement at the entrance . . .

Why did we do it? We did it for a number of reasons. First, for the protection of these people . . . especially those of the *Diciotti* . . . they were in a truly difficult situation, they were still tired from the long journey from the Horn of Africa to here, from the sequester/detention they had to suffer on board the *Diciotti* ship in the port of Catania. . . . We also wanted to protect them from the media [reporters] that had begun to appear with increasing frequency at the camp, stopping anyone who looks like they might be from the Horn of Africa, asking where are you from, how did you get here, why did you escape.

Costa's words verge on the confessional, though he underscores that the group committed no crime. I cite him at length because of how he uses the press conference to articulate migrant rights and Baobab's work: he explains that movement within Italy is within the rights of asylum seekers and that the collective violated no laws by renting a bus, and he describes migrants as moving in a state of fugitivity, a constant escape. He also highlights how multiple gazes converge on the camp—of the state, journalists, migrants, and activists.

Costa uses the phrase “a very simple gesture” to summarize the group's approach to *accoglienza*: working to meet people's basic needs by listening to them. I want to suggest, in the simple gesture, a resonance with the “small and stubborn possibility” that Baldwin posits as the possibility for a different future, and of witnessing as a practice of desire for that future: “I wish to be a witness to this small and stubborn possibility.”⁶⁷ In Costa's immediate framing, the small and simple gesture is a defense. Might it also signal possibility, an opening?

Of course, the gesture Costa calls simple is also symbolic, as the group models forms of *accoglienza* outside state-sanctioned protocols. The drive to Ventimiglia served immediate needs and made a point about freedom of movement, countering the idea that migrants should be detained or confined in centers.⁶⁸ This is *accoglienza* geared toward abolitionist sanctuary, practices of hospitality that disrupt state-sanctioned violence and enact alternative visions of mobility—in this case, refuting the idea that a person held captive by the state must continue to seek the state's permission to move.

Testimony is not inherently good; it can appeal to anti-immigrant stances, just as it can reify notions of migrant vulnerability or innocence.⁶⁹ But acts of witnessing can also be an important tool for the radical work necessary to create spaces of sanctuary through the work of “tearing down structures of oppression and

creating a just, equitable society.”⁷⁰ Baobab organizers position their testimonial acts as part and parcel of the group’s *accoglienza* practices: as articulated in Fethi’s notebook, to create a space of self-organization that works toward realizing freedom of movement. Because testimony also depends on reaching an audience “who will register and witness its truth,”⁷¹ addressing multiple publics is also part of this work. The drive to the border demonstrates hospitality as an enactment of rights.

CONCLUSION: ENCLOSURES

This case is also a reminder of the ways that freedom of movement is regulated, surveilled, and controlled across many stages of a migration journey, especially for those seen as undesirable outsiders. While press conferences and demonstrations established Baobab’s perspective on events, they did not protect the camp from political scrutiny. In November 2018, police raided the camp one final time, pushing everyone out and destroying what was left in Piazzale Maslax. They erected a high steel and concrete barricade, outlining the space where the camp had been (figure 15). The group relocated multiple times and at the time of writing now serves meals near the Verano Cemetery but does not operate a camp there.

When I returned in the summer of 2019, several months after the barricade went up, I arranged to meet Yousef, a former Piazzale Maslax resident from the Gambia, at the station. He was living outside the city by then but stayed in touch with Baobab and returned fairly regularly to hang out and help. We walked together between benches where people tried to sleep through the afternoon heat, winding our way down the road to the former encampment. The enclosure loomed before us, marking Piazzale Maslax for passersby with striking visibility, both for the concrete barriers and metal fence, and for the banners that, now seven months after the eviction, still hung from what is effectively a border wall. One read “FREEDOM” and another “MIGRATION IS NOT.” It should have read, “MIGRATION IS NOT A CRIME,” but the last two words had fallen off in the intervening months, and the wall now attested to blocked border crossing.⁷² The fence made the former camp even more visible than when it was in operation, materializing legality/illegality via “the tactile border.”⁷³ Ironically, the barricade had placed migrants on the same side as locals. As I write this, it still stands, though the banners have disappeared.

In its more than eighteen months, the Piazzale Maslax camp was home to tens of thousands of transitanti. If the final closure of the camp is an emboldened attempt at erasure, these signs are a reminder that experiences of transit, recognition of the rights of transitanti, and representation of these issues are not a foregone conclusion, but one constantly negotiated through a range of witnessing acts. The traces of the camp that lingered in signs and fragments are reminders that the forms of hospitality that shaped this space emerged in response to the constraints placed on witnessing—the limits of (self-)representation in such precarity. They illustrate once again how emergency responses to migration operate through the



FIGURE 15. Piazzale Maslax entrance after its final closure, 2019. Photo by the author.

control of people's movements and of witnessing possibilities. At the same time, those very controls prompt testimonial practices that speak back to this violence and offer alternative forms of hospitality—however temporary, fraught, or precarious they may be.

In the following chapters, I consider how emergency imaginaries of foreignness and emergency responses to migration affect migrants outside the parameters of arrival to Italy, in their daily routines and relationships to labor and to urban space whether they have arrived two months ago, or twenty years.