

PART II

The Right To Remain

We . . . are greatly indebted to the “sans-papiers” who, refusing the “clandestineness” ascribed to them, have forcefully posed the question of the right to stay. . . . We owe them . . . for having recreated citizenship among us.

—ÉTIENNE BALIBAR, “WHAT WE OWE THE SANS-PAPIERS”

Street Vendor as Witness

In 2018, the national campaign *Operazione Spiagge Sicure* (Operation Safe Beaches) directed €2.4 million to support seaside communities in policing the beaches during the summer tourism season, clearing out any unauthorized commercial activities. In practice, that meant fining, arresting, or seizing the goods of the immigrant vendors who pace the beaches selling sunglasses, books, jewelry, and toys to locals and vacationers enjoying the seaside.

While Operation Safe Beaches emphasized unauthorized commerce, it was part of a set of anti-immigrant policies rolled out that year by recently appointed Interior Minister Matteo Salvini. Salvini, of the right-wing Lega party, had won support on promises to close Italian ports to rescued migrants and criminalize rescue itself. Now he made clear in rallies that this policy would guarantee beachgoers “*molti meno vu cumprà a rompere le palle*”—using offensive slang associated with African migrants to proclaim that there would be “a lot fewer immigrant street vendors bothering you” during the summer holidays.¹ Celebrating the operation’s success at a press conference that September, Infrastructure Minister Danilo Toninelli commented, “In two months approximately 620,000 square meters of beach were liberated and returned to citizens, the equivalent of more than 100 football fields.”² The idea that Operation Safe Beaches consisted in “liberating” land from migrant vendors and returning it to Italians feeds pervasive associations of migrants with invasion, illegality, uncleanness, and the sense that *these* foreigners have no right to move within Italian spaces.

The migrant vendor remains a figure onto which notions of unknowability, risk, and danger are projected—key affective dimensions of the emergency apparatus. Operation Safe Beaches is just one example of how the figure of the street vendor

returns again and again in popular and political discourse as an object of blame used to catalyze the criminalization and racialization of migration. In Italy, political uses of the migrant vendor to forward narratives of “*emergenza immigrazione*” legitimize crisis racism, or the idea that some foreigners are the bearers of crisis and don’t deserve to live in Italy, let alone receive legal protection. Migrant vendors are an easy mark onto which notions of undeservingness can be projected, especially because their labor necessitates their visibility and mobility in public spaces. In 2018, shifting public focus from national borders to cities and vacation spots was strategic. Arrivals had in fact decreased significantly from the high numbers of 2015 and 2016. Focusing on street vendors reassured publics that the *emergenza immigrazione* was still a problem being managed.

Border and migration “crises” bring questions of foreignness into sharp relief: Whose bodies, movements, and voices are cast as embodying dominant notions of belonging and nonbelonging? These are of course never new issues; they are constitutive of national identity and the images and narratives that uphold it. But the heightened sense of urgency that accompanies crisis discourses moves people to make bold and extreme claims about borders, rights, and identity. In this sense, emergency *appears* as a sudden rupture of normative ways of life and a threat to the nation-state; like crisis, it marks out new time.³ It is, however, better understood as an apparatus whose various discursive, political, and material components continually participate in the production of national belonging by honing emergency imaginaries that “recognize” foreignness in particular settings or encounters.⁴ Part 1 of this book examines circumstances immediately tied to arrivals by sea and the asylum and reception processes that hold the recently arrived in limbo. In Part 2, I consider witnessing practices that challenge the sense of an interminable present that emergency and crisis framings impose by in fact masking continuities, obscuring the longer entangled histories that link Africans and Europeans and shape transit routes today. As Balibar demonstrates in his work on the *sans-papiers* in France, people without citizenship status or other legal recognition “recreat[e] citizenship among us,” having long demonstrated through resistance and solidarity movements, as well as the actions of everyday life, that *belonging* concerns, first and foremost, collective practice and a shared recognition of the right to remain.⁵

In this chapter I take up the figure of the *venditore ambulante*, or street vendor, which illustrates how this masking functions and speaks to how racializing assemblages have produced citizens and others in Italy over time. The vendor holds a major place in Italian imaginaries of foreignness as a cultural icon that has long been the object of racist and gendered stereotypes. While plenty of Italians sell goods in this way, the migrant *venditore*—often a man—is its own archetype, a figure simultaneously visible and invisibilized in everyday and touristic spaces. But vendors are not simply archetypal, imagined others; their labor materially shapes Italian spaces, just as Italian spaces and communities shape their lives. Vendors include newcomers, but many have lived in Italy for years, even

decades, obtained legal residency, and mastered a knowledge of Italian spaces and cultural practices.

The migrant street vendor is also a global figure, representing rural to urban mobilities within countries, international migration the world over, and the trade of goods ranging from art to falafel to designer bags. Migrant vendors' work combines entrepreneurship and cultural exchange, as labor migration scholars have established, and is often a form of precarious labor.⁶ Here I recognize ambulant vendors' labor within a contemporary capitalist context, via Kathleen Millar's framing of precarity as "both the tenuous conditions of neoliberal labor as well as states of anxiety, desperation, unbelonging, and risk experienced by temporary and irregularly employed workers."⁷ Within these constraints, workers also exercise agency and, as I discuss here, strategize about the nature, possibilities, and limits of their labor. While the vendor's reality—and precarity—is shaped by local circumstances, vendors who inhabit the intersections of precarious migration and precarious labor share the experience of having to navigate the risks of working in public spaces, especially if they don't have a vending permit or a visa. Rocío Rosales's observations about the strategies adopted by Mexican *fruteros*, or fruit vendors, in Los Angeles applies to West African and South Asian vendors in Italy: the risks they confront "are met with distinct survival strategies developed by *fruteros* both to minimize risk and to maximize profit. On their street corners, *fruteros* must forge alliances, engender sympathy or solidarity, and establish and maintain trust with their customer base."⁸ Together, these dynamics position the vendor as a witness to the daily life of a city, and as someone whose livelihood depends on the transactions—financial, conversational, testimonial—they carry out with customers.

This chapter recognizes the ambulant vendor as an observer of Italian life and a producer of memories, via souvenirs, conversations, sales, and other interactions in Italy's city centers and tourist destinations. An "emergency" figure that is simultaneously a figure of everyday life, the *venditore ambulante* is also a worker whose livelihood depends on testimonial transactions, as vendors market goods by bearing witness to their own identities, especially when their wares include autobiographical narratives, as I discuss here. The migrant vendor is also a figure of transit: while previous chapters address transit in terms of transnational border crossing and the limbo of reception, here we see emergency in transit in the local, everyday movements of the *venditore ambulante*. Having relocated from another country, and moving continually for work, the vendor's labor is intimately tied to specific geographies. This transit is transnational and translocal, connecting Italian spaces with those where vendors may have learned their trade—many Senegalese migrants worked as or grew up around ambulant vendors in their hometowns, for instance.

Here, I consider the figure of the migrant street vendor as cultural icon and as a heterogeneous group of workers whose precarious labor positions them to be

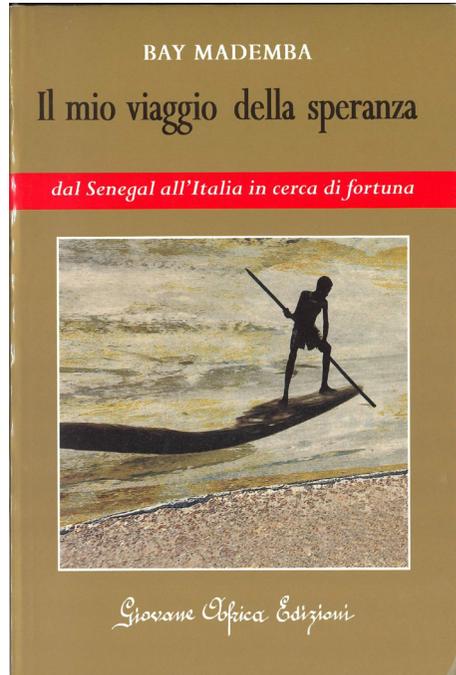


FIGURE 16. Cover of *Il mio viaggio della speranza*, by Bay Mademba.
Photo by the author.

critical witnesses of and participants in everyday Italian life, within and outside of crisis framings. I focus on the work and witnessing of Senegalese vendors in the Tuscany region who sell books, including the 2011 memoir *Il mio viaggio della speranza: dal Senegal all'Italia in cerca di fortuna* (*My Voyage of Hope: From Senegal to Italy in Search of Fortune*), written in Italian by a Senegalese immigrant known as Bay Mademba, in collaboration with an Italian editor (figure 16). Directed at Italian speakers, the testimony presented in *Il mio viaggio* exists in relation to the witnessing exchanges initiated by vendors who hawk the book to potential customers. How does testimony operate in the context of this small-scale circulation? How does it engage with or reject notions of “migration crises”? What visions of Italy and of migration emerge through the nested testimonies of vendors who spend their workdays observing, engaging, and bearing witness within key spaces of Italian cultural heritage?

Unlike more widely celebrated literature about migrants in Italy, such as work by Pap Kouma (addressed later in this chapter), Mademba’s memoir circulates locally, through vendors who often market the book by identifying with its narrative. Thus, while *Il mio viaggio* is an example of Italian literature of migration and can be read within that growing body of work, it remains outside mainstream circuits of consumption and critique. This small-scale movement and the transactions that enable it—testimonial transactions within the narrative and forms

of witnessing that vendors use to sell the book—are the focus of this chapter. Giovane Africa Edizioni, the small Tuscan press that published *Il mio viaggio*, produces writing by Senegalese migrants and provides them with work. Between 2017 and 2019, I visited Florence and the nearby town of Pontedera several times, interviewing press editors and book vendors.

Analyzing Mademba's memoir as a work of migration literature that moves outside standard literary circuits, and drawing on interviews with vendors and editors, this chapter employs testimony as method to trace the racialization of migration and anti-Black sentiment as they manifest in relation to vendors' paradoxical (in)visibility. As I elaborate in the following sections, Mademba presents a narrative that in part aligns with neoliberal, multicultural notions of deserving migrants, and in part subverts those ideas. In what follows, I first present the book and the work of the press. Then I alternate between the two spheres of witnessing that overlap in this case: within the book, and between vendors and potential customers. I close by reflecting on how a focus on the street vendor also illustrates how immigration policies alternately criminalize and legalize African migrants, and how restrictive policies have rendered precarious journeys essentially the only viable means for entering Europe. Recognizing the street vendor as a critical witness of Italian life and the place of the foreigner within it offers a window into understanding mobility outside the strict terms that emergency framings impose.

SITUATING *IL MIO VIAGGIO DELLA SPERANZA* AND THE SCALE OF THE SMALL PRESS

Because ambulant vendors often occupy precarious legal, social, and financial positions, they navigate multiple dimensions of (in)visibility, including the need to be visible (for work) yet remain out of sight of authorities, as well as their erasure within discourses of Italian identity and belonging. Vendors without a permit for setting up their wares have to stay on guard not only for potential customers, but for police who might chase them off, seize their goods, or arrest them. "Selling only brought me fear and anguish because I had to run away from the police an infinite number of times," Khouma writes in his 1990 autobiographical novel *Io, venditore di elefanti: Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano* (*I Was an Elephant Salesman: Adventures between Dakar, Paris, and Milan*), "because they confiscated my merchandise, because I ended up in jail, because people looked at me assuming the worst—that is, when they weren't cursing me for setting up my elephants and necklaces in front of their store."⁹ At the other extreme, Italians and tourists often treat vendors as part of the urban landscape, as if the vendor were functionally invisible to them or to avoid any interaction. For decades now, travel guidebooks and forums have offered tourists techniques for avoiding vendors, bringing them up strictly as a nuisance: likely criminals and people to be avoided. Armed with this knowledge in my own first visits to Italy in the early 2000s, I assumed I was a

potential victim. “Be rude and adamant,” the guidebooks say. “Hold up your hand and walk away.” It’s no surprise that vendors have to be insistent to make a sale.

These entrepreneurs and their suppliers depend on local circulation and individual exchange.¹⁰ This is certainly the case for booksellers who rely on small presses for their stock, and who then market the books by connecting with potential customers about their contents. It is through this local circulation that I first encountered *Il mio viaggio*: I acquired the book and got to know the press by meeting a vendor in 2017 in Florence, where I was attending a seminar. The vendor, originally from Senegal, had arranged a dozen books on a sheet on a sidewalk. When I asked whether he was selling any autobiographies, he showed me *Il mio viaggio* and suggested that if I wanted to know more, I might reach out to the press editors, who were local. I interviewed cofounders Giuseppe Cecconi and Fatou N’Diaye that summer and again in 2019, and I spoke with vendors in Florence during those same visits.

Giovane Africa Edizioni (Young Africa Editions) is a small, independent press that Cecconi and N’Diaye, who are married, run out of their home. On this very small scale, Giovane Africa Edizioni proposes literature for social change, selling books through which press editors aim to stem discrimination and spread awareness of the cultural backgrounds and humanity of Italy’s African residents. Cecconi and N’Diaye have each authored some of the books they produce, and while they don’t focus exclusively on memoirs, their catalog includes several, such as N’Diaye’s *Il cielo sopra Ibrahima: come gli immigrati giudicano gli italiani* (*The Sky Over Ibrahima: How Immigrants Judge Italians*, written under the pseudonym Penda Thiam), and *Il mio viaggio della speranza*. Their children’s books include an illustrated story of Aeneas as a refugee and a collection of African fables; novels include translations of celebrated Senegalese author Mariama Bâ; and they offer several Senegalese cookbooks. Cecconi, a white Italian man and Tuscan native, and N’Diaye, a Senegalese woman who ran a restaurant near Florence before joining forces with Cecconi, have long collaborated with the local Senegalese community. Via the press, they supply the books to Senegalese newcomers, mostly men from their late teens through their thirties, who can then sell them for the cover price (€6–8) or whatever they agree upon with customers. Giovane Africa Edizioni is by no means the only such press in Italy, but they are exemplary of this model of local circulation that supports migrant employment.

Il mio viaggio della speranza participates in this mission as Bay Mademba’s 2011 account of his struggles to reach Italy and his strategies for responding to the anti-Black, anti-immigrant discrimination he faces as he settles in Tuscany. Mademba recounts his own precarious journey, his work as a book vendor for the small press that then published his memoir, and his interactions with white Italians who alternately reject or appreciate his presence in Tuscany. Mademba’s approach is in part didactic, modeling anti-racist behavior for readers. Narrator-Mademba also recognizes his position as a Black African in Italy as necessarily

shaped by colonialism, a message reinforced in the book's second, epilogue-like chapter added by Cecconi (though not marked as such). Where the main chapter recounts Mademba's journey to Europe and his encounters as a bookseller, these final pages situate his experiences within Senegalese migration to Europe more generally, including by observing that travel by boat from Senegal to the Canary Islands is a more typical route and one that has repeatedly proven fatal.

Mademba's memoir is not the first such narrative. Some readers may recall earlier works such as Khouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti*. Indeed, Senegalese-Italian cultural production has made an important mark on Italian literary and cultural studies, from work explicitly about precarious migration and labor, to work on identity and belonging, such as short stories by Aminata Aidara, novels by Cheikh Tidiane Gaye, or more recent essays by Khouma.¹¹ Autobiographical and fictional texts have expanded the counter-archive of works that bear witness to experiences of mobility and belonging from the perspective of those on the move. *Io, venditore di elefanti* is widely recognized as one of the first works of Afro-Italian literature. Like Mademba's *Il mio viaggio*, Khouma authored *Io, venditore di elefanti* "a quattro mani" (with four hands) in collaboration with journalist Oreste Pivetta. The book was published by the major press Garzanti and subsequently translated into English,¹² and it marks witnessing as a key aspect of the vendor's life and a key literary mode for Italian narratives of migration and belonging. "I was a good seller," Khouma writes, "because I was a good observer."¹³

The two texts have had very different reception, especially given their different modes of circulation. Khouma's book, available in English, is taught in North America and was recently featured in an issue of the journal *Transitions* focused on the Black Mediterranean. Mademba's book is available only in its original Italian form and almost exclusively via in-person exchange with a vendor in Italy. Taken together, they nonetheless highlight the ongoing significance of particular themes across more than two decades and, moreover, the choice some migrants make to challenge their marginalization by bearing witness to it through writing, situating their experience in a broader cultural moment. Both authors describe using their personal background to market the "Africanness" of their wares to Italian and foreign customers alike. And both underscore how a vendor's movements expose the vulnerabilities and invisibilities that so many migrants experience when their livelihood depends on the outcomes of overtly precarious legal and social situations.¹⁴

It's important to hold in mind that Mademba's memoir was written not for publication by a major press but in order to be sold by vendors whose stories it represents. This necessarily shapes how narrator-Mademba addresses readers, who are implicitly also customers purchasing books from vendors. It is with a range of reader-customers in mind that Mademba employs multiple strategies for describing and celebrating his work. Most overtly, the novella-length memoir broaches neoliberal ideals of multiculturalism—his wares as objects of cultural exchange that might promote cross-cultural understanding—and of the

productive citizen. Yet just as readily, the narrative subverts those tropes by focusing on Mademba's strategic uses of his own foreignness to make a sale. Given how narrative and material transactions converge in the book, readers who purchase *Il mio viaggio* from a vendor who identifies with the narrative may find it resonates in unexpected ways.

WITNESSING THROUGH THE (POTENTIAL) SALE

As witnesses, vendors use testimony in ways that illustrate its transactional nature: they are, fundamentally, hoping to make a sale. Yet, as transnational and transcultural texts, these testimonies also "mobilize" cultural encounters and postcolonial perspectives, to borrow from Whitlock, in contexts otherwise shaped by emergency imaginaries.¹⁵ As *Il mio viaggio* illustrates, vendors create witnessing platforms where none were available, (re)claiming space and authority as people not simply projected onto but using labor to transform social relations.

Aware that their witnessing authority affirms the product's authenticity, Senegalese book vendors in Florence often foreground their own foreignness to market their wares, even as their own legal and social precarity imbues those transactions with risk. Transactions are frequently both commercial and conversational; the vendor suggests books the consumer might enjoy and may share parts of his own story. Viewed in terms of the pressures to assimilate, this insistence on one's own heritage and nationality could be understood as a form of resistance to narratives that position foreignness as the problem. In *Il mio viaggio*, narrator-Mademba describes himself as proudly Senegalese. He makes no claims to being or becoming Italian but understands Italian culture and can relate to Italians and, it follows, should be able to live a happy, successful life in Italy.

Within the book, like in his work, Mademba centers the individual encounter. "Before selling a book I ask: 'Who are you?'" he writes. He credits his initial success at bookselling to his "excellent idea" to call his customers "fratelli" (brothers). "Thanks to the idea to engage everyone like a brother, I was immediately successful and managed to really invest in my work." He acknowledges this gesture as a Senegalese tradition not necessarily common in Italy, and he describes using his Senegalese background to engage potential customers through familiar salutations that, he recognizes, cross national boundaries: "So I use my culture, my ethics, my spontaneity in dealings with clients."¹⁶ Here the narrator posits his foreignness as a point of connection with Italians, especially given his own capacity for intercultural understanding. He's proud of the relationships he's built with shop owners and locals he meets regularly at a café:

Along the street where I sell books, there are lots of people who love me. Sometimes shopkeepers come to me to change money . . . often they confide their troubles to me; they tell me they were misled by something or that they are unhappy because of this or that. I give them advice and I sense that they trust me.¹⁷

In showcasing his bookselling as (multi)cultural labor, Mademba describes how he began selling books to earn money for himself and to send funds home to his mother and says he was attracted to the work because through these books, he would “help people with a product that is culturally enriching for its customers.”¹⁸

Yet this early account of trust serves primarily to foreground the problem of being treated as a stranger. The mission to “overcome distrust” seems to motivate the telling of his story. “All these acquaintances are often useful for overcoming the distrust of those who don’t know me.”¹⁹ Throughout the main chapter, Mademba reminds readers how dedicated he is to his work, presenting himself as stand-up and trustworthy. In this sense, as a testimonial work of life writing, *Il mio viaggio* reflects how Mademba positions his narrated self to be perceived by white Italian readers. The narrative that emerges envisions a multicultural Italy where foreignness is welcomed and respected, rather than treated as suspect.

For the street vendor, narrative and material possibilities converge in an act of interruption. On the one hand, the interruption is a critical sales move, with a vendor approaching a potential customer, calling out to passersby from wherever they’ve set up their wares, or approaching with a stack of books, asking, “Where are you from?” “Would you like to look at a book about Africa?” On the other hand, vendors are often seen as interrupting space: occupying the corner of a central square or passing through where they are unwanted. These interruptions are necessary aspects of the work. They are also a gesture of potential: an exchange of words, of cultures, a possible sale. The vendor’s interruption insists on a “small and stubborn possibility” for change.²⁰

Texts such as *Il mio viaggio* potentially expand testimonial networks that document migrant experiences. Yet to find “adequate witnesses”—that is, to have even the possibility of meaningful impact—these narratives must themselves transit between readers, across regions, and within different social contexts.²¹ Here transit depends on the street vendor as witness, both within and outside the memoir. In facilitating this transit, the interruption bears not only potential but also risk. It announces foreignness. Like the “transruptions” that Bernor Hesse describes in his critique of postcolonial multiculturalism, the interruption “unsettle[s] social norms and threaten[s] to dismantle hegemonic concepts and practices.” In the convergence of narrative and material transactions, the memoir is “transruptive,” participating in “the recurrent exposure of discrepancies in the post-colonial settlement.”²² The vendor, who depends economically on book sales, also depends socially on the contents of the narrative to shift perceptions of himself from stranger to neighbor as it transits “in search of witnessing publics.” Vendors rely on the power of testimony to move, in Whitlock’s words, “as a social and political force in the public sphere that commands recognition and ethical response from both institutions and individuals.”²³

Migrant vendors who assume this task also face its sometimes violent consequences. This came up in my 2019 interview with Lamine (pseudonym),

a Senegalese vendor who had arrived eight months earlier and was selling *Giovane Africa Edizioni* books in Florence.²⁴ We recorded an interview in Italian while Lamine was on a break in Piazza della Repubblica. As he put it, “When Italians don’t buy these books, we can’t survive in Italy, without working. But this ambulant work is too difficult. You have to learn the language, stop people, chat with them.” A vendor may spend the morning near Florence’s Duomo without a sale; other days he might sell three or four books, bringing in perhaps €20. Nearly every sale depends on the vendor initiating conversation with a potential customer, and therefore making himself especially visible before strangers and as a foreigner. In a political climate increasingly hostile to migrants, those exchanges feel especially risky. Lamine was struggling to make ends meet. “You try to sell,” told me, “but often it’s not so easy. So many people say terrible things to you.”

VENDORS IN TRANSIT, HISTORICALLY AND CULTURALLY

The ambulant vendor is a transhistorical figure, appearing in Renaissance accounts as peddlers whose mobility was critical to their trade—including the selling of print materials—and who were often foreign.²⁵ The vendor’s prominence in contemporary imaginaries of foreignness dates to Italy’s new status as a primarily destination country beginning in the 1970s. As more people arrived from North and West Africa, street selling was (and is) a common trade, including men and women selling art, handmade objects, fabric, and other items. Ambulant trading includes vendors from a diverse set of countries and reflects changing immigration trends. For instance, Moroccan migrants dominated this line of work in the 1980s and 1990s; it’s now also a relatively common sector for people from Bangladesh.²⁶ While undocumented labor, like undocumented migration, is difficult to quantify, economists estimate that informal markets make up at least 14 percent of Italy’s economic output.²⁷ Ambulant trading likely comprises a very small part of that percentage but is viewed as pervasive in part because it is so visible.

Senegal–Italy migration is one of the oldest continuous trends in contemporary Italy, and many traders bring their experience throughout West Africa into Italian spaces. As Carter documents in his study of Senegalese immigrants in Italy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, these newcomers represent diverse backgrounds, with some coming from rural Senegalese communities that were, already thirty years ago, dealing with the consequences of drought and various pressures to relocate to growing cities. Today, some have reached Europe as they realize they cannot survive as traders in Senegal. This was pointedly clear following 2007 demonstrations by vendors in Dakar. As one protestor told reporters, “We are tired. Today, I cannot eat because I haven’t sold anything. . . . That’s why everyone wants to go to Europe.”²⁸

Many are followers of the Mourid Brotherhood, a Sufi order that views travel as part of its adherents' calling.²⁹ Their skills and experience in a range of trades often go unrecognized by potential Italian employers, which, coupled with the complications of work and residency visas, can lead migrants into precarious and exploitative labor. In the case of the Senegalese, many vendors "define themselves as *commerçant* and . . . enter this occupation as their line of work on all official documents."³⁰ At the same time, ambulant work is also a job migrants can readily pick up and abandon if they find something more stable or better paying.

Multiple kinds of transit are at play here, from international border crossing, to travel between towns, to the daily movements along train lines and streets that inscribe a city with meaning.³¹ These movements remind us that precarious migration involves a constant act of translation—between languages, spaces, futures, between the seen and unseen, between those who speak and those who are spoken to. Migrant vendors are simultaneously hypervisible and also made anonymous, their presence generalized as illegal economic migration that threatens Italian institutions and publics. In Carter's words, it is when people are "designated 'superfluous,' imponderable as a human presence, that they become invisible."³²

In my conversations with Senegalese vendors in Florence, they described how crucial their visibility was to making a sale—hence their set-up near the *Duomo* or at major pedestrian intersections. Yet this is a superficial visibility, one that gets construed in public discourse in ways that erase individual identity and uphold a racial order³³ through stereotypes that depict all immigrant vendors as a homogeneous group of undesirable others and use the ambulant vendor as a proxy for all migrants, as the fervor for "cleaning" and "liberating" Italian beaches also demonstrates. In Florence, vendors told me that even as they approached potential customers, they braced themselves for the racist comments they often received in response. Bay Mademba describes his commute from a small town near Florence into the city center as a regular site of racist encounters. As Rosales and others note for migrant vendors more broadly, this (in)visibility is a common issue.³⁴ The Italian case illustrates the extent to which emergency imaginaries of foreignness exploit that (in)visibility, projecting notions of illegality, criminality, and unbelonging onto people whose work is in fact of very little consequence for most Italians.

Like the asylum seekers I discuss in chapter 2 who appear out of place when they leave the reception center and visit the heart of the city, vendors' movements are treated with a mix of suspicion and the invisibilizing gaze of intentional disregard. These workers can rarely afford to live in the areas where they labor. Khouma speaks at length about sharing crowded apartments with a constantly changing set of tenants in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In his study of the same period, Carter describes a house in which 120 Senegalese immigrants live in close quarters in *Barriera di Milano*, an immigrant neighborhood in Torino long neglected by city officials.³⁵ This segregation means that as residents, migrants' lives are fairly invisible

to broader, white, middle- and upper-class publics, but as workers, their labor in touristic urban centers and other vacation destinations is instead hypervisible.

From the 1980s on, this work made some migrants especially visible as foreigners in a moment marked by immigration from outside Europe, and with it, issues related to the language and notions of foreignness. In particular, Moroccan and Senegalese vendors' visible presence positioned these foreigners as *the* foreigners in the Italian imaginary, as illustrated by the confused and problematic colloquialisms for foreignness, including *marocchino*, Moroccan, to mean "African foreigner," or words such as *vu cumprà*, slang for street vendor, to indicate "immigrant." Their visibility made them a familiar figure in everyday Italian life and thus a key icon in Italian imaginaries of foreignness, coming to represent the fears and concerns of Italians as the country grappled with its changing demographics and its role as an immigrant destination. In recent and seemingly readily forgotten memory, Italians emigrated to France and Germany for work and were themselves the marginalized migrant other.³⁶ In today's dominant cultural narratives, the migrant vendor has become synonymous with "illegal migration" and with migrants of color, evident in the very language used to describe foreigners. In reference to Operation Safe Beaches, Salvini's use of *vu cumprà* holds power before his audience because it refers to the conflated figures of "illegal" and "black" in the public consciousness.

The offensive term contains traces of Italy's particular racial history. *Vu cumprà* represents a version of southern dialects for "vuoi comprare?" *Do you want to buy?* The peddling of goods itself becomes a name.³⁷ It also reflects two racist associations: the more overt idea that migrants do not speak "proper" Italian, and the more implicit link between today's African migrants and the Southern Italian migrants of previous decades, who were themselves racialized as other and treated as uneducated, disorderly, and fit only for manual labor. The racialization and stigmatization of the street vendor serves as an important reminder that "current dynamics of anti-Black racism have been developing since the mid-nineteenth century in conjunction with Italians' fragile and liminal racial status."³⁸ Questions of African otherness did not arise with today's sea crossings but have been enfolded into debates about Italian identity and belonging since Unification and colonialism. Negotiating its position in Europe's South, the newly unified Italy relied on Africa to distinguish itself as European.³⁹ From the late-nineteenth-century post-Unification period into the twentieth century, Southern Italians were referred to as "Africans" by Northern leaders and prominent scholars such as criminologist Cesare Lombroso as a way of distinguishing them from the "white" citizens of Northern Italy.⁴⁰

While multidirectional mobilities have always shaped Italian society, today's emergency imaginaries of foreignness reflect the intersections of migration and racial thinking over time. As Italy transitioned from a country defined largely by internal south-north movement and by departures to a destination country,

newcomers from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia occupied the place of the undesirable, threatening “other” in dominant imaginaries. The declarations of emergency that Italian leaders made to control Southern and colonial populations are echoed in emergency discourses that have described contemporary migration from the 1990s through the present, defining foreigners from the global south as embodying crisis and *emergenza*.

Senegalese migrations to Italy are importantly related to colonial-era West Africa–Europe mobilities. The French recruited colonial subjects, including Senegalese men, for their infantry in World War II and, beginning in the 1950s, for their expanding labor force. This recruitment established a migratory route, and numbers increased over time, including through family reunification. As France began to limit these movements, especially via labor immigration restrictions in the 1980s, Italy became a destination.⁴¹ The racialization of certain forms of labor in Italy aligned with the creation of what Nik Theodore terms the “regime of precarious employment” in post-Fordist economies.⁴² In this environment, norms and stereotypes associate particular sectors with specific ethnic groups or with migrants in general.⁴³ Informal economies are multifaceted, and migrants working in the agricultural or domestic labor sectors certainly outnumber ambulant vendors. Yet street vendors’ visibility makes this role a popular icon. As Russell King observed through survey data in the early 1990s, “the predominant picture of immigration . . . is the one represented by the African street vendor, a finding which confirms that the collective imagination is focussed mainly on the more visible side of immigration which is easier to stereotype.”⁴⁴

Italy’s informal economy is robust, for example compared to France,⁴⁵ and for many migrants these jobs remain their only options for earning money. The ensuing racialization of specific lines of work such as ambulant vending also reifies stereotypes about those who “look like” they would work in such jobs.⁴⁶ On the one hand, migrant labor “reshap[es] . . . the metropolitan economy and the development of social struggles.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, the racialization and stigmatization of street vendors extends to encompass anyone who looks like a vendor, reiterating associations of nonwhiteness with undesirable foreignness.

In popular culture, vendors remain “one of the most despised social categories of immigrants,”⁴⁸ and caricatures of migrants use the image of the vendor in ways that recall colonial iconography, representing blackness as buffoonery. A common image of African vendors involves their escape from police; having spread their wares on sheets in city squares or along sidewalks, they can grab everything quickly and run if police approach. This image of pursuit has become a comical trope that reifies racialized and gendered stereotypes through caricatures of Black African men. These stereotypes are compounded by assumptions of illegality; presumed to be in Italy illegally, street vendors take the blame for criminality, even as they supply Italians with beach wares, earrings and sunglasses, and books. But the need to pick up and run is very real: as a vendor, you don’t want to be ticketed for

selling without a permit, and you probably also don't want to be questioned about your papers.

Like Khouma writing twenty years earlier, the work of Mademba illustrates that the precarity migrants experience en route does not end with the crossing of an EU border, where "European apartheid" holds some migrants in the margins.⁴⁹ This came up in my interview with Lamine, who mentioned his frustration at stereotypes he hears about African migrants, including that they are drug dealers. He talked about the insults he hears on a daily basis, and how he chooses not to respond. "It's about dignity," he said. "There are people, the people who do this work [selling books], who don't have anything, but they carry their dignity inside them, and they do this work [as opposed to selling drugs or robbing] because it's cultural work." This cultural work remains a form of precarious labor, even as it positions ambulant vendors as key witnesses of Italian everyday life and shifting politics. Witnessing can place a burden on those narrating their own experiences of trauma and marginalization. As we know from studies of the diaries and other testimonies by formerly enslaved people, and from refugee testimony, witnessing is potentially retraumatizing. As I emphasize in part 1 of this book, witnessing prompts a reckoning between what Hartman describes as "the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator." At the same time, those who do opt to bear witness can use their narrative power strategically and position readers not as voyeurs but as witnesses who might be moved to "confirm the truth" of past and present.⁵⁰

WITNESSING AS COUNTERNARRATIVE ACT

For these reasons, it's significant that Mademba's memoir resists the temptation to portray a simplified view of "the good migrant" or "deserving refugee."⁵¹ This prevalent trope is regularly invoked by well-intentioned journalists, humanitarian workers, and sometimes politicians who challenge the erasure or negative portrayals of migrants by suggesting they are good, productive citizens. In doing so, however, they implicitly invoke what Didier Fassin terms "humanitarian reason" and its "moral sentiment," suggesting a hierarchy in which "good" refugees stand out but are still beneath the citizens able to recognize and cultivate their goodness.⁵² Literature, film, and media can uphold or subvert these hierarchies in their engagement of cultural memory and understandings of belonging and mobility.⁵³

Il mio viaggio may not be the antidote to the problem of erasure, but it illustrates cultural work enacted through the production and circulation of testimonies that go against the grain, on whatever scale those transits and transactions occur. With this in mind, I don't claim to measure the transformative potential of a single text or sale, but to underscore the testimonial ethics at play here: how vendors and narrators position tellers, sellers, and consumers informs the "conditions of possibilities of hearing" that render these testimonies possible, or that delimit their

circulation.⁵⁴ Throughout the book, the narrator tries several approaches, some focused on entrepreneurial success, others foregrounding the journey, and others oriented around confronting discrimination. None of these approaches is framed to cultivate pity or compassion for the narrator.

To be clear, the memoir is not entirely subversive; narrator-Mademba directly posits a vision of an Italy in which people with different backgrounds live alongside one another in harmony. He sees his purpose as at least in part didactic, challenging the notion that, as a migrant, he is necessarily an alien other. “I don’t sell books just to make a little profit,” the narrator says, “but I sell them to get to know people, to teach them what I know, to share what I have in my soul.”⁵⁵ The idea of the book sale as a cultural exchange contrasts importantly with Khouma’s descriptions of selling in *Io, venditore di elefanti*. Khouma’s narrator is a proud vendor, but he is frustrated at having to sell to Italians who exoticize him. Selling “African statues” and jewelry, he laments that “my Africa is for sale.” Instead, Mademba’s narrator foregrounds the sale of goods as potentially transformative—and again, he’s writing this for readers who will have likely acquired the book through just such an exchange and so might see themselves in these transactions.

Still, it’s striking that in presenting this vision, the book doesn’t hinge on a “good refugee” narrative. The story conforms neither to emergency framings nor to deservingness tropes. In that sense, it avoids reinforcing a kind of neoliberal multiculturalism in which *some* foreigners are desirable because of their potential to integrate or to benefit society through entrepreneurship or other economic contributions, on the one hand, or because their vulnerability is seen to represent a kind of innocence that “promises a space of purity,” on the other.⁵⁶ Per his own telling, Mademba did not arrive as a vulnerable refugee. Rather than seek empathy for past suffering, the narrator matter-of-factly recounts details including that along his journey he lied to border authorities and falsified documents.

In this spirit, one way Mademba subverts deservingness tropes is by positing his story not in terms of strict migration categories but as aligned with multiple mobilities. He is inspired to reach Italy by a brother who has lived there for some time, and his own story certainly fits within the longer history of Senegal–Italy migrations. The memoir’s second chapter refers to the number of people who crossed from Senegal to the Canary Islands in the mid-2000s—increasing from fifty-four hundred to twenty-seven thousand between 2005 and 2006—and how many have died trying, estimated between five hundred and three thousand in 2006.⁵⁷ As Carter writes of Senegal–Italy migration in the 1980s, these mobilities “must be seen in the context of African internal and international migration of the past and, in that, of a crisis of West African agriculture, prolonged drought, urbanization, and the fluctuation of international market outlets.”⁵⁸ These patterns of routes and labor were established before Italy implemented formal immigration legislation. Indeed, Mademba’s and Khouma’s memoirs bookend a more than twenty-year period of Senegalese migration to Italy and speak to how that border

crossing changed in response to increasingly restrictive EU and Italian border policies. While Khouma reached Europe by plane, overstayed a visa, and finally received residency through the 1986 amnesty that regularized so many Senegalese migrants, two decades later, Mademba instead had no safe option.

In fact, this precarious journey links Mademba's experience not only with other Senegalese migrations but with the journeys of so many migrants who cross the sea today. Like them, he was unable to secure an EU visa and understood reaching Türkiye and then traveling by boat to be the only feasible way to arrive. Rather than conform to a ready-made narrative of either vulnerability or criminality, the narrator crosses borders to survive, adapts his story as he moves, and aligns his movements with multiple contemporary and historical mobilities, from his invocation of colonialism to his account of crossing from Greece to Italy, which he describes in terms of passengers' diversity. When the motor dies, he says, they "bowed in prayer, each to his own god. Some asked help of Serigne Touba, some of Allah, some of Jesus, some of Buddha."⁵⁹ Descriptions like this portray migration as a global phenomenon, rather than in terms of linear movements between fixed points. He describes his own navigation of borders as a matter of strategy, not merit. In Greece, he allows a friend to speak for him, claiming that they have fled violence in Côte d'Ivoire; they are then granted political asylum. In Italy, he and a friend use fake identity documents and pretend to be French tourists looking for work.

Far from a straightforward deservingness story, the account that Mademba and the press choose to circulate confounds easy categorization, aligning his narrated self with refugees, via his precarious travel by sea; with so-called economic migrants, as he describes his decision to move largely in terms of a need for employment; and with so-called irregular migrants, having crossed multiple national borders without documents or with false documents. In this way, *Il mio viaggio* frustrates the refugee / economic migrant binary—a dichotomy at least as old as the 1951 Refugee Convention that established grounds for determining refugee status and one that operates with particular force in contexts deemed crisis, circulating in public and political discourse with a moral valence.⁶⁰ This dichotomy is part of popular and political discourse; Salvini, for instance, campaigned on promises to expel "economic migrants."⁶¹ As Bohmer and Shuman elaborate in their discussion of the suspicion imposed on asylum seekers, migrants regularly incorporate falsehoods or exaggerations into their asylum narratives to persuade officials of their need for protection.⁶² As awareness of this potential deception has seeped out of the courts and into mainstream discourse, it feeds notions of deservingness among publics generally unaware of refugee realities or asylum processes. By sharing—not confessing or justifying, but simply stating—how he arrived, Mademba's narrator opts out of the deserving/undeserving binary. He regularly refers to his pride at being Senegalese and his expertise at selling: *these* are the reasons he deserves recognition.

That is, in Mademba's view, the point is not whether he has suffered enough to merit residency or financial stability but that he has reached Italy and can now share his story. The memoir's lessons concern racism within Italy, not migration routes or visas. The narrator describes a series of encounters that illustrate how he and other Black migrants are not a threat to Italians but are instead regularly wronged by them. A (presumably white) Italian teenager approaches him for drugs, assuming that because he's Black, he deals. A (white) Italian couple verbally attacks him as they pass on the street, telling him to "go back to your country."⁶³ In both instances, Mademba is calm and patient. Rather than dismissing the teen, he talks with him and convinces him to stop using (another example of the book's didacticism); later the young man returns and buys several books out of gratitude. When the couple yells at him, he does not respond in anger but reflects to himself (and to readers) on xenophobia.

In an especially striking scene at a bar in the Tuscan seaside town of Follonica, where Mademba has gone to sell books, he is verbally attacked by an Albanian man. "He looks at me and says: 'Another black man!'"⁶⁴ Mademba looks to the Italian barista, who calls out, "Ora basta!" (Now that's enough!). It's not clear whether she is defending him or simply quieting the exchange. Of particular interest here is the representation of anti-Black racism by another (white) migrant. The episode illustrates the prevalence of anti-Black racism in Italy. At the same time, it can also be understood to reflect changing understandings of otherness in contemporary Italy. Albanians were the subjects of emergency discourses in the 1990s, when they crossed the Aegean to the Puglia region following the fall of communism. Italian stereotypes of these migrants racialized Albanians as amoral, lazy, and deceitful.⁶⁵ In this account, two decades after those arrivals, the Albanian seems to align himself with whiteness—a reminder of the power of whiteness and that Italy's "racializing assemblages" are not monolithic.⁶⁶

Il mio viaggio also responds to discrimination by situating the vendor's work within the colonial present. This is a Black Mediterranean memoir: Mademba describes racialized encounters in Italy within the duress of colonialism, or, via Stoler, the tangible and intangible ways that the colonial past continues to shape lives, spaces, and temporalities in the present.⁶⁷ As a Senegalese migrant to Italy, colonialism marks his movements in historically and linguistically different terms than it might in France, and his experiences could represent what Teresa Fiore has described as "indirect postcolonialism."⁶⁸ Yet Mademba does not make the claim expressed by some Senegalese migrants, including Kouma, that moving to Italy was an explicit choice *not* to live in the land of the former colonizers. Instead, the longue durée of colonialism readily informs the narrator's understanding of his position in Italy and his encounters with Italians.

Near the end of the main chapter, Mademba recalls the words of a white Italian he met on a train, who spoke up on his behalf when another passenger made racist comments. The man begins to discuss historical Italian emigration and the need

to recognize climate refugees today. “The whole time they were talking,” Mademba says, “I didn’t speak. I listened and thought. I was thinking about Gorée, the island of slaves, from where ships loaded with Africans were taken to labor camps in America.”⁶⁹ He recalls his own visit to Gorée, historically a major point of departure for transatlantic slave ships, and how struck he was by the traces of Europe still present in the architecture there. The short epilogue-like chapter expands this discussion, aligning Mademba’s journey narrative with broader Senegalese migration trends, including that Gorée is now a point of departure for hundreds of Europe-bound migrants at a time. Through these references and his account of his movements to and within Italy, Mademba’s narrative links the colonial present with European racial politics.

Vendors who market this book are offering readers the lessons of the seller-as-change-agent.⁷⁰ Narrator-Mademba addresses Italian publics with the knowledge and authority he’s gained through his travels and work, and speaks to reader-consumers as “implicated subjects” who “occupy positions aligned with privilege and power without being themselves direct agents of harm” and who might therefore be moved to reconsider their positions.⁷¹ In other words, this is not the narrative of how Mademba learned about Italian culture or developed his multicultural outlook but of how his awareness of these issues has empowered him in the role he has assumed of cultural ambassador. While readers may respond to this didactic approach with enthusiasm or skepticism, on a fundamental level, *Il mio viaggio* validates the presence of the people marketing it on Tuscan streets, creating a narrative that explains their movements and that they can also associate themselves with directly.

TESTIMONIAL TRANSACTIONS AND COLLABORATION

The book and its circulation represent multiple interconnected testimonial transactions, from Mademba’s initial oral account given to Cecconi, to the transactions that vendors set in motion as they sell the book to passersby. Production “a quattro mani” has a relatively long tradition in Italy. Khouma’s collaboration with journalist Oreste Pivetta, for instance, involved recording oral accounts that they shaped into the written *Io, venditore di elefanti*, which was published in 1990 and translated into English in 2010, reaching wider readership. These practices often facilitate the print publication of personal narratives before the author has mastery of the Italian language and may enable the entry of migrant-authored texts into Italian literary canons.⁷²

Collaborative processes also raise important questions about whose story is in fact exchanged through the vendor’s labor—that is, to what extent the narrator/protagonist represented in the text corresponds to the migrant narrator’s experiences or the Italian editor’s views. Unlike other books published by Giovane Africa Edizioni, *Il mio viaggio* does not include any acknowledgment of collaboration,

but the process is evident in the sharp shift of tone, focus, and narratorial voice between the book's two chapters, from the personal account of Mademba's journey and interactions, to the broader social and historical context of Senegalese migration to Europe. In our interviews, Cecconi confirmed that he added the brief second chapter to contextualize Mademba's story and also to fill out the requisite number of pages per signature for printing purposes. In focusing on *Il mio viaggio* as part of a web of testimonial transactions that vendors use in their work across Italian urban spaces and tourist destinations, I'm interested in the person the book presents to readers, and I don't presume that the Mademba represented within the book corresponds to a single author named Bay Mademba. On the contrary, the book is itself part of multiple collaborative acts of witnessing and necessarily reflects the aims of the press. Identifying the narrator/editor balance is challenging, if not impossible. For the vendors I spoke with, it's also beside the point.

To vendors, the book is available as both narrative and product, offering an account they use in positioning themselves before potential customers. Cecconi told me that "everyone who sells Bay Mademba's book says, 'I am Bay Mademba. It's my story.'" If they don't assume Mademba's name, they might claim to be the author's cousin or brother. The matter of ownership here exceeds editor-author collaboration. These booksellers know the power of testimony, Cecconi said, and associate their presence as migrant vendors with the narrative recounted in the memoir. In addition, the figure of Mademba as author and narrator reflects shared ownership. Bay Mademba is, in fact, the original author's brother. According to Cecconi, the original author honored his brother and effectively dedicated the book to him via named authorship, in a sense gifting narrative ownership.⁷³ "Mademba" thus refers to at least two subjects, as well as others who claim ownership of the narrative. As a sales technique, claiming ownership through authorship or connections to the author positions the vendor as the one offering testimony. This sense of shared ownership, Cecconi explained, "aligns completely. [The vendors] know what they went through. . . . What they read, they relive, recounted by each other. It's not a problem." These vendors understand that narratives such as Mademba's are tellable because they are not simply individual but speak to shared experiences,⁷⁴ and they know that testimony can be a powerful means of interpersonal connection.

The memoir's collective ownership forms a critical part of the in-person transactions that facilitate the book's circulation as both product and narrative. In Florence, as in other cities, street trading is a forum in which multiple mobilities converge, as immigration, internal migration, tourism, and everyday movements meet on the streets of historic city centers. With a population of less than four hundred thousand, Florence is a relatively small city but a major tourist destination with more than twelve million visitors per year, the home of an important university, and a key site for national corporations and organizations. It also has a high cost of living, and many migrants live on the outskirts or in nearby towns,

reachable via regional trains. Pontedera, where Giovane Africa Edizioni is located, is one such town.

The circulation of *Il mio viaggio*, while in one sense quite limited, is importantly marked by the convergence of the memoir's narrative and material transactions.⁷⁵ In this narrative of transit, about Mademba's journey from Senegal to Italy, Mademba's narrator positions interlocutors within the text and the book's readers as witnesses to the experiences he recounts. The memoir is also a compelling example of a narrative *in transit*, via local circulation that depends on an in-person exchange of conversation, product, and cash, between a migrant vendor and a (usually Italian) passerby.

PRECARITY OUTSIDE THE BOOK

As Italy continues to manage Mediterranean arrivals as an “emergenza,” it makes sense that *Il mio viaggio* has continued to be the press's best-selling book: reader-consumers seeking narratives that help them understand migrant experiences find this story through vendors who themselves made such journeys. Lamine told me that it is popular among migrants, as well, who read it while learning Italian and can recognize their own experiences in its various episodes. Texts like this one expand testimonial networks that document migrant experiences and shape public witnesses.

Yet this is a complicated witnessing role, especially if the ideal customer is someone potentially transformed by Mademba's story—that is, someone in need of persuasion. As anti-immigrant sentiment grew throughout the 2010s, the work of the press and of its vendors became more challenging. When I interviewed press editors in 2017, they were looking for new projects and excited at the prospect of more autobiographical work. By May of 2019, they had temporarily stopped publishing new books. The months between our visits had seen the rise to power of a right-wing, anti-immigrant government and accompanying shifts in public discourse. Cecconi noted that in more than two decades of living in Italy, N'Diaye “always noted this racism, but everyone [Italians/whites] kept it in.” N'Diaye agreed: “They kept it frozen,” she said. But things had changed. “Now . . . it's an everyday dish. . . . Before no one had the courage to say, ‘I'm racist.’ Today, instead, they do, there are people who say, ‘I'm racist.’” The editors were concerned about Salvini's security decree, which would criminalize rescue at sea.⁷⁶ When we spoke, the decree was in its proposal stage; they worried that this criminalization would eventually affect work like theirs, preventing them from helping recently arrived migrants with legal status or employment. Acts of witnessing seemed ever more important and ever riskier.

This climate and a lack of new publications added pressure to vendors' work. The vendors I spoke with said the main challenge was that their customer base does not grow or change very quickly. They market to Italians, and once someone



FIGURE 17. “Uno a caso” (“One at random”), by Mauro Biani (www.maurobiani.it). Reproduced with the artist’s permission.

has bought a book, they are unlikely to acquire a second or third copy. The men sometimes supplemented their offerings with texts from other small presses that print African-authored stories, but it remained hard to pay the bills with book sales. Some days it seemed that despite the crowds, there was no one to approach.

For the *venditore ambulante*, precarity in labor is also precarity of the body.⁷⁷ On March 5, 2018, the day after national elections that would put Salvini and his *La Lega* party in power, fifty-four-year-old Senegalese immigrant Idy Diene was shot to death on the Ponte Vespucci, the bridge in Florence where he was setting up his wares for sale—in his case, objects sold as “African souvenirs.” Diene had lived in Italy since 2001. He was murdered by a white Italian who claimed to have left his house with suicidal plans, only to fire instead “randomly” at Diene (the murderer was later sentenced to thirty years in prison). Political cartoonist Mauro Biani published a panel on March 6 in the nationally circulated newspaper *Il Manifesto* that underscores the impossibility of this claim (figure 17). Depicting a small crowd of people, six white and one black and wearing a cap, words above the figures read “uno a caso” (“one at random”). The incident seems even less random when one



FIGURE 18. Memorial display for Idy Diene on the Ponte Vespucci, July 2018 (four months after his murder). Photo by the author.

considers Diene’s immediate family. For Diene’s widow, Rokhaya Mbengue, this was a second marriage. Her first husband, Samb Modou, was shot in Florence on December 13, 2011, by activists from the neofascist organization CasaPound.⁷⁸ This is not a bizarre coincidence. The men’s visibility as street vendors did not guarantee safety or security.

Given the longer history of Senegal—Italy migration, Diene and Mbengue are not unique in having lived in Italy for nearly two decades. Diene’s death made headlines in the context of the heightened anti-immigrant discourses circulating during Italian elections—and in general within “crisis” debates. Diene, though, was in a relatively stable position. He had his papers in order; his wife had recently become an Italian citizen. Florence’s large Senegalese community, which has grown since the 1990s, rallied after the murder, holding public events and marches to commemorate Diene and also to speak out against racism (figure 18). One demonstrator blamed recent political rhetoric, saying, “Salvini has sold his hate throughout the country, and this is the result.” Diene’s nephew, a high school student in Italy, invoked colonialism in his comments to journalists about racism: “Europeans still treat us like slaves, as they did our ancestors. They consider us inferior when we come to Europe to work. They hate us because we want to live as they do.”⁷⁹ These statements and demonstrations refuse empathy for Diene

or his family as a finite answer and recognize Diene's murder within broader systemic violence.

Vendors' labor exemplifies the paradoxes of proximity that describe their positions in relation to Italian institutions and communities: like reception center residents held in legal limbo yet expected to "integrate," vendors who may have arrived years before move within the same spaces as Italian citizens, yet their presence is often defined by otherness. Diene's murder underscores the extent to which emergency responses to migration erase longer histories of mobility and established diasporic communities, as well as the violence to which vendors are exposed. And while the killer said he shot "someone at random," it's no coincidence that the other person on the bridge that morning was a Senegalese man setting up his wares. As an icon of undesirable foreignness in Italy, the migrant vendor also exemplifies politicized notions of deservingness that posit certain lives as outside normative society, or normative discourses, and therefore expendable. This is a manifestation of the same expendability enacted in borderzones where governments knowingly allow migrants to die in the desert or at sea or neglect them in camps.

CONCLUSION: VENDORS AMID EMERGENCY

While this chapter has focused primarily on Senegalese ambulant vendors in Tuscany, the *venditore ambulante* is a common job for border crossers of many backgrounds and a widely racialized icon of foreignness throughout Italy. Amid ongoing emergency, this work and the forms of fugitive witnessing it involves are a survival strategy for many migrants, and as Operation Safe Beaches showed, it remains a case through which migrants are criminalized.

Vendors might also attend pro-migrant demonstrations to sell their wares to sympathetic crowds. I acquired additional books at such events in Rome until I learned that police were targeting vendors among the crowds of pro-migrant marchers. One especially hot summer afternoon in 2018, after a demonstration in the city center, I made my way back to Tiburtina station and the Piazzale Maslax camp I discuss in chapter 3. The demonstration followed the murder of Malian farmworker and labor union organizer Soumaila Sacko. The crowd was substantial; L'Unione Sindacale di Base, a national union, had brought demonstrators in busses from several other regions (figure 19). We walked from Piazza della Repubblica to Piazza San Giovanni—not an especially long walk but one that, with thousands of marchers stopping to chant and listen to speeches, can take a couple of hours.

Back at Piazzale Maslax, I sat with a few residents near the camp entrance. After a while, three men from Bangladesh showed up and approached us. One of them held out a piece of paper. He didn't live at the camp; the other two had suggested that this might be a place where he could seek help. They asked in English for help reading an Italian document.



FIGURE 19. Demonstration in Rome following the murder of Soumaila Sacko, 2018. Photo by the author.

It turned out that during the demonstration, this man had carted water through the crowd, selling cold bottles for €1—a common-enough sight. He was stopped by police, who asked to see his papers. From what I could make out from our exchange—a kind of telephone chain of interpretation between Bengali, Italian, and English, with some commentary in French from others sitting nearby—the man’s initial asylum claim had already been rejected. He hadn’t known what to do and didn’t have his documents with him at the demonstration—not that they would have made a difference. At the station, they issued him a two-sided document. What does it say? He wanted to know. He was almost hopeful, as they hadn’t arrested him. Did the paper have another court date? A new possibility?

Yousef, seated near me, glanced over the paper but struggled to make sense of it. I took a look and saw that each Italian paragraph was in fact translated into English directly beneath. Still, the Italian and English versions both read like a foreign language—a succession of “whereas” clauses, incredibly difficult to follow. It was the second page, I realized, that mattered: there, at the end of the document, was the order to leave.

I had not held a *foglio di via*, “leave papers,” before then. It seemed such a cruel act: issuing papers demanding that a person vacate a country without bothering to tell him what the papers said. The withholding of language illustrates how emergency responses to migration impose severe limits on witnessing, in this case by masking the very meaning of the document itself. And yet the document still seemed so long, nearly two pages, and was handed without explanation to a person for whom the return home appeared unfathomable. A person who, minutes before, had been selling water on the street in order to afford a meal. We put the

man in touch with lawyers who volunteer with Baobab and who would try to push back against the order.

The street vendor as a racialized symbol of undesirable foreignness has persisted over periods of massive change in immigration policy and bordering practices. The once circular migrations with which migrants came to Italy for seasonal labor, then returned home, are now only possible for European Union residents. Periodic regularization of migrants throughout more than three decades of emergency-response legislation should evince the constructed nature of legal categories, especially given Italy's clear dependence on migrant labor,⁸⁰ but the emphasis on "crisis" as the fault of "economic migrants" prevails. Through witnessing, the vendor participates in reimagining mobility and belonging beyond these binaries, as Mademba's memoir illustrates. Yet the work of reframing and shifting narratives remains challenging.

The Italian context aligns with wider shifts throughout the global north. Tightened borders and criminalizing rhetorics have gradually "fragmented" the figure of the refugee,⁸¹ supplanted by the securitization of borders and the illegalization of migration. The vendor exemplifies how these shifts affect people's everyday movements, regardless of their legal status. In the next chapter, I consider uses of witnessing that center mobility to instead reimagine our relationship to urban spaces.