

## Seen and Unseen in the City

Precarious migration in Italy is often treated as a crisis of space. Mainstream news pushes invasion narratives, making it seem as if boats are arriving on all sides of the peninsula, delivering crowds who overwhelm the country. Rome's Mayor Virginia Raggi repeatedly claimed Rome could not tolerate the "continual flow of foreign citizens."<sup>1</sup> In mid-2017, Raggi imposed a moratorium on migrant arrivals to the city and, soon after, approved the eviction of eight hundred to one thousand residents of a building they were occupying near the central area of Piazza dell'Indipendenza (see map 3).<sup>2</sup> Most of the residents were refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea and Ethiopia. On August 17, forced to abandon the building but not given alternative accommodations, they occupied the piazza. On August 19, police dressed in riot gear and armed with hoses dispersed the crowd. Photos of this incident are still used today in articles about Rome's *emergenza abitativa*, or "housing crisis"—a reminder that the emergency apparatus of migration does not operate in isolation. Following the police intervention, authorities offered shelter to only 80 of the building's former residents. At least thirteen migrants required medical treatment for injuries. Unhoused, many made their way to improvised settlements, including Piazzale Maslax.<sup>3</sup>

The building's residents included survivors of the October 3, 2013, wreck that in many ways initiated Europe's recent "migration crisis" period.<sup>4</sup> Following that wreck, which I discuss in chapter 1, global sympathy poured out for Mediterranean migrants, and Italy announced the Mare Nostrum military-humanitarian operation for surveillance and rescue at sea. For survivors, arrival in Italy was the opposite of clandestine: they were contacted by news crews and politicians, and the wreck seemed to mark a turning point in policy and public sentiment.

Still, they had ended up in the occupied building and now, four years later, they were again displaced, treated without concern for their rights, needs, or histories.

Despite that access to housing is crucial for newcomers to develop stability, secure work, and care for loved ones, emergency responses to migration have folded migrant housing into Italy's larger *emergenza abitativa*.<sup>5</sup> The denial of accommodations is perplexing in a country with a famously low birthrate and significant emigration. Recent years have seen, simultaneously, ports closed to migrants from the global south and real estate campaigns hawking €1 homes in small towns to Western tourists. Some cities have promoted a culture of welcoming—Palermo is a good example—but in the capital, the refusal to accommodate more migrants was matched by the simultaneous policing of occupied spaces, as I elaborate in chapter 3 in the case of Baobab Experience. These practices align notions of spatial crisis with discourses of security and cleanliness, suggesting that housing migrants disrupts public decorum.

These violent evictions are framed as crisis solutions but in fact perpetuate conditions of extreme precarity, underscoring how the emergency apparatus leaves migrants in transit, without a stable footing, even years after they have disembarked on European shores. In addition, the Piazza dell'Indipendenza *sgombero* (eviction), like the many *sgomberi* that clear unofficial camps, produced a spectacle that portrays migrants as “illegal” and literally out of place. In other words, the emergency apparatus draws a thick border around the nation and national identity, excluding migrants from former colonies from its “social and symbolic boundaries.”<sup>6</sup> The refusal to accommodate asylum seekers is directly linked to the refusal to consider the stranger as a potential citizen. Upholding the idea that culture and identity are fixed, rather than in flux, these emergency imaginaries also presuppose that non-Christian migrants and nonwhite Italians do not or cannot possess full cultural fluency. That is, their knowledge of Italian spaces is not recognized as having currency, let alone authority.

Yet precarity is also a site of activism. As Maribel Casas-Cortés has discussed in the context of social movements throughout Southern Europe, people operating within precarity are also actively theorizing their circumstances and efforts and challenging dominant discourses that marginalize their experiences.<sup>7</sup> In line with this understanding, this chapter shows how the movements of migrants and G2 Italians (*seconde generazioni*, or second generations), disrupt whitewashed, heteronormative notions of identity and citizenship.<sup>8</sup> As they intersect with the movements of citizens and tourists and draw attention to the longer histories of mobility inscribed into monuments, street names, businesses, and the people who frequent them, they make *transnational* Italy newly visible. By claiming a right to the city, and the right to remain, they also redefine citizenship outside the strict, exclusionary bounds of the national frame.

Citizenship has a fraught place in narratives of precarious migration, as a legal status that reifies the nation whose border governance renders some journeys especially precarious. In Italy, citizenship remains a matter of ongoing political debate and a site where racial politics play out on a national stage.<sup>9</sup> Italy's *jus sanguinis*, or bloodline, stipulation famously allows the grandchildren of Italian emigrants abroad to claim Italian citizenship but makes naturalization for more recent immigrants and their Italian-born children incredibly difficult and sometimes impossible.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, emergency responses to migration treat migrants and their children as here temporarily. Despite their supposed focus on "integration," Italian and EU-level policies offer little in the way of imagining or enabling a long-term future for the country, or for the EU, that genuinely includes those born elsewhere and their Italian-born children and grandchildren.

Yet, as migration and border studies scholars have long noted, citizenship is not an exclusively legal phenomenon but also a collective practice.<sup>11</sup> Engin Isin and Greg Neilsen call this "substantive," as opposed to legal, citizenship, articulated not through a singular person or static identity, but through "acts of citizenship," or "collective or individual deeds that rupture social-historical patterns."<sup>12</sup> This chapter focuses on acts of citizenship that describe belonging in relation to specific urban geographies. I take up witnessing texts and practices through which people marginalized as migrant others or marked as noncitizens claim a right to the city, not only through their presence in it but by establishing forms of authority on its cultural practices and histories. I discuss three cases based in Rome in which migrants and Italians of African descent who are treated as "foreigners in their own country"<sup>13</sup> use forms of witnessing to establish their authority on its spaces, and therefore their right to move within them. The *Guide Invisibili*, or Invisible Guides, is a soundwalk initiative in which migrant narrators lead participants through central neighborhoods, retelling Roman history through their own experiences in the city and in their home countries. I then turn to the work of Somali-Italian author Igiaba Scego, which returns colonial memory to a broad Italian, and increasingly global, readership. And in the city periphery, at the occupied site of Metropoliz, residents claim the right to the city via a politics of survival that includes their transformation of an abandoned space into a museum.

These cases move us between multiple spaces—public, monumental, occupied—and enact belonging in the city through what Michel de Certeau describes as "spatial practices."<sup>14</sup> My engagement of urban sites builds on de Certeau's understanding of the city as constructed through movement, and of places as comprised of "fragmentary and inward-turning histories" and "accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve."<sup>15</sup> Acts of citizenship reenvision the city through narrative and embodied experiences that lift these multiple story fragments and temporalities to the surface.

As with the vendors I discuss in chapter 4, these witnesses are not peripheral figures simply working for their own survival. They are key witnesses of

contemporary Italian life whose spatial practices make apparent the construction of society around (in)visible geographical, legal, cultural, and historical borders. But their translocal, transhistorical narratives and practices also call those same national frames into question. Their testimonies, produced for a range of audiences, exemplify what Isin and Neilsen describe as the normative ruptures that acts of citizenship make possible.

By bearing witness to their experiences in Rome, these guides, narrators, and curators enact substantive citizenship and position audiences to witness the city in ways that disrupt emergency imaginaries of foreignness. In the process, they redefine who curates, who visits, and who possesses the capacity to create cultural sites in a city both celebrated for its art and architecture and constantly battling the so-called crises of housing and migration. They also disrupt the expectation that embracing the right to the city means assimilating into normative life.<sup>16</sup> Aligned with the understanding that identity is “perpetually under construction,”<sup>17</sup> these projects refute the presumption that migrants and outsiders should aspire to assimilate; instead, they suggest that genuine recognition of the right to remain, and freedom of movement within urban space, requires that all residents and visitors reconsider their relationship to its geographies, histories, and ongoing construction. The following examples function on a relatively small scale, and I am interested in the intimacy of these gestures. They are nevertheless critical illustrations of how acts of citizenship invoke a person’s belonging by demonstrating their fluency in a space, including practices by migrants who “actively create a new situation, a new social reality.”<sup>18</sup>

#### LISTENING TO THE CITY

In the soundwalk project *Guide Invisibili* (Invisible Guides), migrants exercise the right to the city by narrating soundwalks through central neighborhoods, flipping the script on assumptions about who can be a tour guide and who possesses cultural fluency in an ancient city like Rome. This grassroots initiative was founded by Italian Marco Stefanelli, himself a transplant to Rome from the Calabria region, along with collaborators at Laboratorio 53, housed in the *centro sociale* (autonomous community center) Città dell’Utopia. The multivocal soundwalks feature guides self-described as “new citizens.” Participants listen to the prerecorded hour-long tours via the intimacy of headphones while moving through the winding cobblestone streets of Trastevere or past vendors near Termini station. Migrant author-narrator-guides direct listeners from place to place, mixing their own stories and memories with historical information about the areas through which the tour passes.

The Invisible Guides soundwalks are acts of citizenship that emerge through acts of witnessing. That is, centering the often-marginalized voices and experiences of migrants, and structuring the recorded narrative around the physical

space through which participants move, these soundwalks bear witness to multiple experiences of belonging and moving in the city, with testimony emerging through the transactions of narrator and listener-participant.<sup>19</sup> This is not simply a case of migrant narrators sharing perspectives on Rome that participants might find interesting; in these soundwalks, narrators position participants to reenvision the city and participants' own places within it. Here sound and movement join in a spatial practice that constructs the city and gives it meaning as participants transit its streets.<sup>20</sup> This is especially significant because, as Black studies scholars have argued, projects that attempt to challenge marginalization by appealing for recognition within given frameworks or grammars—of freedom, or of the nation-state—can reify oppression. Hartman states this directly in a conversation with Frank Wilderson about blackness, subjectivity, and racialized positionality: “So much of our political vocabulary/imaginary/desires have been implicitly integrationist even when we imagine our claims are more radical.” What Hartman elaborates in the US context resonates in the context of Africa-Europe migration: “Ultimately the metanarrative thrust is always towards an integration into the national project, and particularly when that project is in crisis, black people are called upon to affirm it.”<sup>21</sup> To imagine belonging outside emergency imaginaries of foreignness is to disrupt the push for assimilation into the heteronormative nation and the linear, whitewashed narratives of its own development. What other ways of knowing and moving in the city shape its communities and spaces?

Near the beginning of the Monti neighborhood tour, a narrator named Amadou Doumbia from Côte d'Ivoire directs listeners' attention to a door in Via delle Sette Sale. “That's the entrance for the *mensa*,” a cafeteria run by the Caritas charity. He describes how glad he was to learn about this soup kitchen in the city center; otherwise he would have had to stay close to the reception center where he lived, which is ten kilometers away. Tourists—Italian and foreign alike—who may have meandered the streets of Monti to shop the boutiques or in search of a traditional trattoria are unlikely to have realized the significance of this address for Rome's poor and migrant residents. Like other migrant-led tour initiatives across Europe—for instance, Berlin's Refugee Voices walking tours, or Amsterdam's Lampedusa Cruises, canal tours on recovered migrant vessels—the Invisible Guides offer an alternative to the standard city tour, distinguishing themselves for their use of personal testimony and their centering of mobility to make racial and class disparities visible elements of these landscapes.<sup>22</sup> Unlike both standard tours and other migrant-led walks, the Invisible Guides soundwalks play overtly with elements of (in)visibility; via headsets, narrators like Doumbia offer listener-participants an intimate experience in which they are closely guided and in a sense on their own to take in the city—and their place in it—through new perspectives.

Rome thrives on both domestic and international tourism, with more than nine million international visitors per year (pre-COVID-19). The capital city is a key site in “Destination Italy” and the romanticized version of Italian history and

culture it embraces.<sup>23</sup> As participants witness the city through migrants' words, the tour sets in motion a series of testimonial transactions that challenge pervasive racism and xenophobia. They do so by positioning authors not simply as present but as guides in spaces associated with the idealized Italy of *La Dolce Vita* (e.g., the Trevi Fountain) or "authentic" Italian neighborhoods (as in the area of Trastevere)—spaces in which refugees are generally seen as out of place. Although the Guide Invisibili initiative operates at a relatively small scale, it hosted more than two thousand participants in its first two years and continues to reach audiences through six Italian- and English-language tours. Participants include everyone from locals to people visiting Italy for the first time; Italian and foreign school and university groups; even, at least once, a group of police officers.<sup>24</sup>

Many of the invisible guides themselves arrived by sea after 2014, in the years of Europe's recent "migration crisis." Their own journeys inform the soundwalks, but these accounts avoid linear narratives. Instead, they weave memories from childhood, the journey, and life in Italy into the city tour, suggesting resonances across specific places and moments. By engaging space transnationally and translocally, the soundwalks subvert the ways in which, as McKittrick has argued, "the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place."<sup>25</sup> The experiences of tour authors, many of whom are awaiting a decision on their asylum claim when they record, are not generally recognized as part of the social fabric in the historic, central areas where they offer tours. Yet in these tours, they are not only present in the city, they are guides, directing participants through historic spaces. In this way, the Invisible Guides also exemplify one answer to the critical question Vang raises for critical refugee studies scholars: "How can we map refugee presence without relying on the very humanitarian data that present them as objects of rescue?"<sup>26</sup> In the case of these narrators, autobiographical and collectively produced narratives refute migrant categorization and reenvision the city itself.

In some soundwalks, narrators present their familiarity with a particular neighborhood, as in the Monti tour, which begins with several migrant narrators who describe meeting other migrants at the Colle Oppio park by the Colosseum, or sometimes sleeping there. Other tours highlight the division of Rome's public and touristic spaces between locals, tourists, and migrants. In welcoming listener-participants to the Spanish Steps tour, Ghanaian guide Abdul asks participants to notice that the area is filled with "foreigners," but hardly any "migrants like me": "Look around again. Do you see African faces? Do you see any migrants like me? Here the foreigners are tourists: Germans, Americans, Chinese."<sup>27</sup> His comment reflects pervasive perceptions of Black subjects as outsiders in Italian spaces, in ways accentuated by class difference.

At the same time, he also stakes claims on Italian belonging: "How do I know there are rich people here? Because they can leave their countries and come here

to Italy on holidays and go back home. I can't go back. That's why I am Italian by now." Like other narrators, Abdul emphasizes how his position differs from those of tourists and expats. Later in the tour, another narrator, Ali, explains, "But in Europe it is different. Here we often feel rejected for our skin, for our color. Many of us want to become Italian. We want to perceive ourselves as Italian. In the reception center, when someone wins his documents, he says he has become Italian." These claims to Italianness concern the nature of the narrators' mobility, their legal status, and a sense of identity linking them to the physical spaces of the nation. In addition to these direct claims to belonging, narrators' navigation of the city as guides marks their fluency in Italian spaces via their own curiosities and memories. Their authority is a form of substantive citizenship. It is, crucially, also never simply about the singular nation or its borders but about transnational movement and transhistorical memory.

These narratives are always negotiations, as narrators determine what to tell and how to tell it in line with what their potential audiences may find persuasive.<sup>28</sup> In general, migrants' marginal status is reinforced by their association with nonmonumental, nontouristic spaces, including reception centers, tent cities, and occupied buildings in more peripheral locations, or the rural camps where they live while working the harvest.<sup>29</sup> As I discuss in the previous chapter, the popular imagination often recognizes migrants within city centers and touristic spaces only through the figure of the ambulant vendor. The racialization of this figure in the Italian imaginary relegates Black African and South Asian migrants in particular to either unseen or hypervisible status, their presence largely ignored or treated as a nuisance in the dominant cultural landscape. The *Invisible Guides* project subverts these tropes by centering the very invisibility of "new citizens." Present during the tours primarily through the audio recording rather than physically, the guides call attention to how Italian legal and social systems "overdetermine" their otherness and effectively invisibilize them from mainstream society and from dominant ideas about who belongs in the places through which the tour passes.<sup>30</sup>

Participants join a tour by registering in advance and learning when and where to meet up with the guides (figure 20). I myself first heard about the tours from a Roman friend and learned more at the *centro sociale Città dell'Utopia*, where the tours are produced. For the Spanish Steps soundwalk, two guides met our set of about twelve participants by the *Barcaccia* fountain, introduced themselves, handed each of us an iPod, divided us into three smaller groups—I assume for less conspicuous wandering—and then disappeared. I followed the soundwalk with two other women—one Italian, one Argentinian—and as a group, we donned headphones and coordinated hitting the "play" button to begin. We moved slowly through the neighborhood, following the audio directions about where to look, when to stop, what sounds to pay attention to. As we wandered from *Piazza di Spagna* to just past the *Trevi Fountain*, we encountered the guides only a few



# GUIDE INVISIBILI

Passaggiate. Sentire di e con i Nuovi Cittadini



Storie raccontate e ascoltate, settimana dopo settimana, in un laboratorio di narrazione con un gruppo di ragazze e ragazzi migranti, da qui nascono le GUIDE INVISIBILI: passeggiate sonore, guide audio, che accompagnano l'ascoltatore-esploratore in giro per Roma per seguire un filo rosso che si dipana attraverso i racconti di vita, le considerazioni, i riferimenti tradizionali e culturali dei migranti che questa città li abitano quotidianamente. A te non resta che scendere per strada, mettere le cuffie, premere play e lasciarti trasportare dal vortice del racconto su e giù tra i box colorati del mercato Esquilino, tra le comitive di turisti chiososi dei vicoli di Monti o intorno a Piazza di Spagna, nella quiete magica delle piazze di Trastevere e San Lorenzo o nel labirinto di corridoi caotici della stazione Termini.



Week after week stories have been told and listened to in a workshop with young migrant men and women, giving birth to GUIDE INVISIBILI: soundwalks, audio guides, that accompany the listener-explorer around Rome, following a red line that traces the lives, the observations, the cultural background and traditions of the migrants who live the day to day of this city. All you need to do is go out onto the street, put on your headphones, press play and let yourself be carried away by the whirlwind of stories, up and down past the colourful stands of the Esquilino market, past the groups of noisy tourists in the narrow streets near the Spanish Steps and the Monti neighborhood, into the magical stillness of the squares in Trastevere and San Lorenzo, or through the labyrinth of chaotic passageways in Termini station.

PER SCOPRIRE I PROSSIMI APPUNTAMENTI

**FOLLOW**

TO DISCOVER OUR NEW APPOINTMENTS



[guideinvisibili.org/pren](http://guideinvisibili.org/pren)



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[guideinvisibili@gmail.com](mailto:guideinvisibili@gmail.com)



FIGURE 20. Flyer for the Invisible Guides soundwalks. Photo by Ginevra Sammartino for Guide Invisibili. Reproduced with permission.

times: at the beginning; at the end, to collect the iPods and tips and facilitate a brief reflection session; and once in the middle, when my trio got a bit turned around.

Yet multiple guides shaped our walk. As tours proceed, when one narrator finishes their story, they instruct participants where to walk next, and another narrator carries on the tour. Over the course of an hour-long soundwalk, participants hear from six or seven narrators from multiple countries; most are African men, from West Africa in particular, but the soundwalks also include women's voices and narrators from the Middle East. On the Monti tour, for example, two Syrian-Palestinian sisters describe how their experience fleeing the war in Syria made them closer, and how they navigate being young Muslim women in Italy, where many people treat the hijab with suspicion. On all soundwalks, narrators link the spatial and the personal, using neighborhood sites as a cue to present an aspect of their own story, for instance letting participants know why migrants frequent a particular address, or how the detail of a façade reminds them of a structure in the town where they grew up. There is no single formula for these recordings, which narrators produce together with Italian facilitators through a series of oral history, writing, and sound editing workshops.<sup>31</sup> In the Monti soundwalk, narrators focus primarily on details from the history of their home country, recalled as they move down Rome's Via dei Serpenti. The Spanish Steps tour instead includes a significant amount of Roman history.

The tour's enactment via the transaction of recorded tour and individual listener both documents narrators' experiences and perspectives *and* positions listener-participants to reconfigure their own relationship with urban space. It is an act of co-constructing the city, in line with Doreen Massey's notion of place as "woven together out of ongoing stories, as a moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within wider topographies of space, and as in process, as unfinished business."<sup>32</sup> In this way, the soundwalks illustrate understandings of testimony as an intersubjective form that differs for each participant, including that it emerges in relation to the contingency of ambient sounds, the presence of other people, the movement of traffic, despite moving along the "same" route.<sup>33</sup>

Two aspects make this especially salient. First, the soundwalk narrative unfolds via headphones in what Peter Salvatore Petralia terms "headspace,"<sup>34</sup> which blurs the boundaries between participants' thoughts and senses and the space through which they move. Listener-participants simultaneously inhabit the space they see and the space evoked by narrators' words and memories. Second, narrators are not the primary object of attention; rather, via headspace, they help listener-participants see the city. This avoids what could otherwise be a kind of fetishizing exercise, were guides the (visible) focus of the tours.<sup>35</sup> The soundwalks are not an exercise in producing compassion for the (objectified) tour guide, but in repositioning the self through the experience of witnessing the city through multiple voices and memories, constantly aware, too, of one's own position in space. In this way, walkers might engage Rome as a space in flux rather than as the site of

fixed narratives and identities. This matters in creating the conditions of possibility for reconfiguring understandings of belonging and the entanglements of past and present.

In reenvisioning the city, narrators carve out space for themselves as “address-able and response-able” citizen-subjects, and they center belonging as co-constructed and relational, and rights as, in part, participatory processes of social transformation. This makes it important to read the project not in terms of the cultivation of empathy across difference but as an exercise of citizenship and the right to the city. In other words, the guides’ subjectivity and belonging do not come into being because tourists or white Italians “recognize” them. To invoke bell hooks, “We are not looking to that Other for recognition. We are recognizing ourselves and willingly making contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner.”<sup>36</sup> As I learned from a conversation with a guide named Efe, the collaborative process of producing the tours is as important to many guides as the “live” tours themselves.

The resulting recordings narrate Rome through personal and collective histories that inscribe Europe’s colonial past within Roman spaces, for instance when one narrator notes that when Rome’s Galleria Sciarra was constructed, “in those same years, France was occupying my country.” The soundwalks employ oral testimony and aural and visual witnessing to write invisibilized stories into lived, popular, touristic spaces, becoming visible in ways that potentially transform listeners’ engagement with the city, its famous and familiar sites, and its residents. These listening practices recognize migrants’ personal histories, including the journeys that brought them to Italy, without utilizing emergency and crisis frames. For instance, narrators in both the Colle Oppio and Piazza di Spagna tours make multiple references to sea crossing and to traumatic experiences that prompted their initial departure, or that they survived while traveling—but the soundwalks’ focus on Roman neighborhood landmarks refuses to define narrators’ presence in Italy through the experience of arrival. Instead, these testimonies acknowledge that experience but focus on moving through the city itself, as a shared space with multiple overlapping histories.

As asylum seekers, narrators also present an unexpected portrait of refugeeness: not outsidership or exception, and not assimilation, but authority, knowledge, and curation that do not simply recount familiar history but retell and reshape those histories. The cultural authority that migrants perform through their narrations is a form of fluency, both in the sense of expertise and also of fluidity and flow, as the soundwalk produces testimonial transactions.<sup>37</sup> The acts of witnessing that unfold across headphones and physical space construct the city by “enunciating” it<sup>38</sup> through narrators’ and participants’ “chorus” of movement, in de Certeau’s terms.<sup>39</sup> The soundwalks also illustrate invisibility as both a problem and a strategy, as narrators use their imposed invisibility to challenge “conventional boundaries such as citizenship, sovereignty, colonialism, modernity, representational

regimes, identity, and language.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the soundwalks illustrate our relationship with space as constructed through movement and memory, implicitly challenging the notions of cultural and historical fixity that can enable racist, dehistoricized, exclusionary practices. Soundwalks as lived experience make the ubiquity of borderzones visible and audible.<sup>41</sup> They also reveal these borderzones to be both transnational and translocal, enabling “ways of understanding the overlapping place-time(s) in migrants’ everyday lives” as well as a kind of “groundedness” during movement.<sup>42</sup>

In material terms, the soundwalks offer an alternative way of (re)encountering Rome and questioning what belonging there might look—or sound—like. Sometimes this is done by highlighting particular frictions in the urbanscape. The Spanish Steps tour ends, for instance, by moving participants from the Trevi Fountain to wrap up outside the nearby questura office—police headquarters where immigrants register, in an office that tourists might not even notice but that, in practical terms, everyone knows must exist. As Baldwin says of the artist as witness, “You’re bearing witness helplessly to something which everybody knows and nobody wants to face.”<sup>43</sup> These stories are not secrets, but unheard and often unasked for. (Re)centering them is the risk and the point.

#### MAPPING THE CITY

The work of Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego offers another example of testimony that braids histories together to prompt audiences to reenvision their own positions in the city. A “second generation,” or G2, writer born in Rome whose parents fled Somalia in the 1970s, Scego works to combat racism and pushes for changes to Italy’s citizenship laws.<sup>44</sup> Across her oeuvre, encounters with specific monuments and neighborhoods remind readers that G2 and migrant issues are linked and illustrate the set of social and historical entanglements that Camilla Hawthorne describes as “Black Mediterranean diasporic politics.”<sup>45</sup>

Scego focuses on Italian identity itself as heterogeneous, and collective memory is the subject of much of her work, in particular the widespread silence among Italian publics and institutions regarding the country’s colonial past and its influence on the present. While France and Germany have conducted some form of reckoning with the past, however limited, in Italy “instead silence reigned, accompanied by a solid dose of delusion.”<sup>46</sup> This topic is central in *La mia casa è dove sono* (*My Home is Where I Am*, the 2010 memoir that I cite in chapter 1 in the context of a funeral scene). There, she writes,

In many [other countries] after World War Two there was discussion, squabbling, the views exchanged were bitter and impetuous; societies interrogated themselves about imperialism and its crimes; studies were published; the debate influenced literary production, research, film, music. In Italy, instead, silence. As if nothing had happened.<sup>47</sup>

This silence feeds emergency imaginaries, which position the subjects of former colonies as unrecognizable foreigners—strangers whose arrival to Italian coasts is framed in dominant narratives as a question of African vulnerability, African crisis, or African threats. Migrants and Italians of African descent are presumed to have no connection to Europe or Italy, and no relation to national publics, presumed to be a (white) homogeneous collective with a linear history.

At the same time, Scego draws critical connections across these borders, not limiting her appeal in ways that reify nationalisms. Writing for weekly news magazine *Internazionale* during the uprisings of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Scego charged Italian readers to pay attention to the toppling of confederate monuments in the United States: “Fighting for the bodily safety of people of African descent has always been intimately linked to care for the body of the city, and therefore of a country. . . . Urban space is not neutral.”<sup>48</sup>

Today’s arrivals could well prompt a reckoning among Italian publics with the country’s colonial history, but emergency imaginaries mask this past. This colonial aphasia positions publics to view those from former colonies now arriving to Italian shores as if out of nowhere, possessing what El-Tayeb has described as

a flat, one-dimensional existence in which she or he always has just arrived, thus existing only in the present, but like a time traveler simultaneously hailing from a culture that is centuries (or in the case of Africa, millennia) behind, thus making him or her the representative of a past without connection to or influence on the host society’s history.<sup>49</sup>

In *European Others*, El-Tayeb explains the “alternative community building” that emerges from these erasures and exclusions as “queering ethnicity,” and writers like Scego certainly participate in these processes.<sup>50</sup> Scego’s writing reckons with historical erasures and becomes a site “from which to transmit traumatic memory, forge cultural identity, and re-narrate national history.”<sup>51</sup> In both her 2010 memoir *La mia casa è dove sono* and the 2014 collaborative book *Roma negata*, Scego portrays Rome’s historic center as a postcolonial space, moving readers through the city and prompting readers to question their own relationship to particular sites, and their understanding of Italian history. Like the *Guide Invisibili*, Scego’s narrators invite audiences to become witnesses to their place in these histories through a reencounter with urban space. As works of “literary witnessing,”<sup>52</sup> *La mia casa* and *Roma negata* use the possibilities of autobiographical writing to enact the transactions of testimony between narrator, reader, and additional witnesses.

*La mia casa* unfolds as a map; each chapter is built around a key site in Rome that anchors a discussion of entangled history and Scego’s own understanding of self and home.<sup>53</sup> Scego’s life in the Italian capital is shaped by her experiences growing up in its neighborhoods and schools—a reminder that G2 youth are themselves reshaping Italian spaces and notions of belonging, their presence marked in quotidian routines like the route to school, as well as through activist practice. Scego’s life in Rome is also shaped by her family’s relationship with Somalia, by

Italy's colonial relationship with Somalia, and by racism in Italy, which she experiences through encounters in which she is marked as other in the country of her birth. We learn early on that, following Siad Barre's rise to power and his attacks on dissidents in 1969, Scego's parents fled the country in political exile, reaching Rome. Broadly, the book moves from Igiaba's birth in Rome in the mid-1970s to Somalia's civil war in the 1990s (I use "Igiaba" to refer to the narrated persona and "Scego" to the author). Yet the book's memory work is primarily spatial, not chronological: the narrative is organized most overtly around specific sites, moving between Rome and Somalia (primarily Mogadishu) and finds form through their resonances in multiple historical moments. For Igiaba, Rome's colonial and imperial monuments speak loudly, rendering the city a living map of the long histories joining Europe and Africa—an archive of imperial formations that are both physical and psychological, "slash[ing] a scar across a social fabric that differentially affects us all."<sup>54</sup> She writes from within this context of duress that affects all who live there, shaping how white Italians see Scego and how she sees herself.

The memoir is, in one sense, a series of acts of excavation: Scego's narrator moves between physical sites to access her own memories of specific incidents and the intergenerational memory that informs her understanding of the present. As she narrates her long walks through the city, Igiaba essentially educates readers about Italy's presence in Somalia, from colonial rule in the late nineteenth century, to Italy's post-World War II protectorate role leading up to 1960 independence.<sup>55</sup> In addition, she forwards a critical discussion of Italian identity as multivalenced and shifting. Throughout *La mia casa*, Scego utilizes the autobiographical form to "expand the limits of what it means to acknowledge and grieve the losses of history."<sup>56</sup> In testifying to her own experiences as a Black Italian woman, she reveals how the country's lack of reckoning with colonial history and its related emergency imaginaries construe people in positions like hers as foreign in the city of their birth.

Scego's work exemplifies a key cultural turn in twenty-first-century Italy, where writers and artists of African descent have worked to highlight how urban space already contains the histories often displaced from collective historical consciousness. Since the early 2000s, Scego's novels, short stories, essays, and autobiographical writing have illustrated how multiple mobilities and temporalities intersect to construct Italy in transnational terms. In an environment in which work by Italian writers of African descent is forever categorized as "migrant literature," national and international recognition of Scego's work matters. Nominated in 2023 for the prestigious national literary prize Premio Strega for her autobiographical novel *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* (*Cassandra in Mogadishu*), Scego has, together with writers like Ubah Cristina Ali Farah and Gabriella Ghermandi, carved out a place for Italian writers of African descent within mainstream literary circuits both within Italy and abroad.<sup>57</sup> Scego's writing has been translated into at least nine languages. The circulation and reception of her work is understandably different than that of

Bay Mademba, whose small press memoir I discuss in the previous chapter as a testimony shared on a small scale as a physical product supporting the livelihoods of migrant vendors. Of course, Scego's narratives also differ because she writes from her position in the G2 movement; Mademba, instead, emphasizes his foreign birth and upbringing. Where Mademba draws connections across Senegalese and Italian spaces to underscore the coloniality of racial politics, Scego is interested in making readers see Italy itself as a postcolonial space.

*Roma negata* (2014), for which Scego collaborated with photographer Rino Bianchi, is in many ways a visual companion to the memoir, extended to other migrant and G2 subjects. Text by Scego appears alongside Bianchi's portraits of immigrant and G2 Italians with heritage in the Horn of Africa standing before different spaces in Rome, including some of the same sites so critical to *La mia casa*. Scego has described *Roma negata* as creating new living monuments, as it were—posing people in front of these colonial monuments and traces. In the portraits, Italian-Ethiopian model and actor Tezeta Abraham gazes up at the top of the fence that surrounds the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, a building that serves as a monument to “Italian civilization,” erected under Mussolini and inaugurated in 1940. Director Amin Nour stands on a small block of concrete as if a statue on a plinth outside Termini station, in Piazza dei Cinquecento, an area often misremembered and miscited by Italians who assume it is Piazza *del* Cinquecento, or Renaissance Square, rather than the square of the five hundred, named for the Italian victims in the Battle of Dogali. Filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer stands outside the building of the former Ministry of the Colonies. In the accompanying text, Scego narrates these sites through their often untold histories, including that immigration between the Horn of Africa and Italy has been continuous since the 1970s, as today's migrants include large numbers of Somalis and Eritreans.

The now infamous wreck of October 3, 2013, becomes a critical example of how colonial aphasia shapes public responses to migrants' presence in Italy, and to deaths in crossing:

On 3 October 2013, the Mediterranean Sea swallowed 369 Eritreans, women, children, young men. All the dreams of those people shipwrecked in that cold and inhospitable sea. But no major newspaper wrote, “Those boys, those girls, those children are ours.” The historical link between Italy and Eritrea wasn't felt or recognized. Faced with this terrible tragedy, Italy never declared its historic responsibility towards Eritrea. Everything has been silenced, forgotten, erased. And if the asylum seekers of Somalia and Eritrea know about this connection, Italy does not want to know anything about it. . . . In fact, the device of colonial racism in Italy has never been dismantled.<sup>58</sup>

Here the links between history and the present, colonial violence and contemporary border deaths and anti-immigrant racism, could not be clearer. Racism is a colonial device, a technology employed in the present as migrant deaths are ignored and migrants continue to be excluded from the Italian national body.

In her elaboration of the wake, Sharpe describes this violence as “dehumanizing”: not *dehumanizing*, as if an attribute that could be assigned or removed, but *dehumanizing*, as in the removal of the human from a body, a space, a history.<sup>59</sup> With this in mind, we might understand a project like *Roma negata* as *re-humaning*—returning real bodies and lived experiences to accounts of history and to the present. This is what I mean when I refer to Scego’s life writing as an act of citizenship: to underscore the extent to which it disrupts normative notions of belonging.<sup>60</sup>

Embodied in the portraits and spelled out in the text, this retracing of coloniality within present-day spaces, like in *La mia casa*, charges Italian readers to reconsider their own positions in these spaces and in relation to those they presume to be outsiders. Those who, like me, read these works as foreigners with passports that let us come and go with ease are also invited into these processes, to see Rome not only through the romanticized lenses of Destination Italy. While colonial violence may have unfolded largely outside of today’s Italian national borders, the records of those campaigns and their inscription into dominant narratives of identity and race have literally shaped Italian cities. Monuments, street names, and buildings stand as present-day imperial formations. Streets like Viale Libia, Rome’s Quartiere Africano (African neighborhood), monuments to Italians killed in the Battle of Dogali against Ethiopian forces, and language of empire that appears in business names and popular songs all present opportunities to remember the disregarded colonial past and to recognize its continued influence on the present. Yet, as Scego writes in *Roma negata*, “The city’s colonial sites are left in the void (Axum), uncared for (Dogali), misunderstood (African Neighborhood). What’s too uncomfortable is erased. It’s uncomfortable for Italy to admit to having been racist. It’s uncomfortable to admit that today’s racism has strong roots in the racism of the past.”<sup>61</sup>

Here the city of Rome appears as a colonial archive in which people’s daily movements are shaped by encounters with such monuments—and by the modification and erasure of their significance. This is a kind of spatial practice that transfers from the page to lived geographies. Urban space itself is a reminder that multiple Africa-Europe mobilities have shaped Italy as a nation—and that Italy is a transnational space in flux, a site of diaspora, linked to diasporic spaces across borders. Monuments like the Dogali statue have inscribed urban space itself with narratives of “italiani brava gente,” writing colonialism into collective memory as a time of Italian generosity toward those it colonized. Such sites, Scego argues, should not be celebrated but are instead tangible reminders that “Africa has been important not only historically, but in Italian daily life.”<sup>62</sup> In line with this claim, a clear aim of the work is to establish witnessing relations that prompt readers’ reengagement with familiar spaces and a reconsideration of their relationship with or within diasporic communities in Italy, and perhaps their role as “implicated subjects” who, by virtue of various forms of social privilege, “help propagate

the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present.”<sup>63</sup>

Like other wake work that makes the Black Mediterranean present for multiple publics, this memory work is nonlinear and layered. One clear example involves Piazza di Porta Capena, which features in both *La mia casa* and *Roma negata*. This piazza near Rome’s Circus Maximus is a (post)colonial site that links Italy and the Horn of Africa. The Stele of Axum, an obelisk originally from Axum, in modern-day Ethiopia, stood there from 1937 to 2005. It’s one of several monuments that anchor Scego’s portrayal of blackness and African heritage within *italianità*, and of diaspora as reflecting complex histories and multiple emergent identities.<sup>64</sup> The monument was seized by Mussolini’s troops in 1937 and brought to Rome, then returned to Ethiopia nearly seven decades later.

Recounting these movements in *La mia casa*, Scego illustrates a web of relations between Fascist-era colonialism, Rome’s geographies, and her own position as a Black Italian woman. When Italian authorities finally removed the obelisk and returned it to Ethiopia in the early 2000s, following years of negotiations, the empty plinth came to evoke a kind of haunting for the narrator, who both celebrates and mourns its removal and return. The stele belongs in Ethiopia, but its unmarked absence in Rome triggers memories of other absences, namely those of her grandfather and of an uncle who was assassinated in Somalia: “Every time I pass through Piazza di Porta Capena I fear the oblivion.”<sup>65</sup>

Through the stele’s transit across time and space, she also grapples with the legacy of her family’s own relationship to colonial violence, which she poses as a potential complicity that other Italian readers might also confront. Scego’s narrator reflects on her Somali grandfather’s employment as the interpreter for Italian General Rodolfo Graziani. As she explains for readers unaware of this history, Graziani is the same general who in 1937 used poison gas on Ethiopians under direct order by Mussolini.<sup>66</sup> Before leading troops in Ethiopia, he had overseen the construction of concentration camps in Libya. While Grandfather Scego’s employment with Italian forces ties the family still further to Italy, his role in giving voice to the orders of such a notorious, violent figure raises troubling questions: “So was my grandfather a fascist, then? Or better yet, was he a collaborator? Was he guilty of the crimes he had to translate?”<sup>67</sup>

These questions speak to how a culture of colonial aphasia impacts these very personal reckonings. In this case, Igiaba’s grappling with personal and collective histories is itself a layered process affected by a lack of language or discourse that adequately captures the complexities of history. This is another iteration of aphasia, which Stoler observes is marked by “the *irretrievability* of a vocabulary, a limited access to it, a simultaneous presence of a thing and its absence, a presence and a misrecognition of it.”<sup>68</sup> For Scego the problem of irretrievability—troubled or blocked access to history or language—manifests in the stele and appears as a

problem of inheritance across generations: With what words or framings can she make sense of her own positionality, given her grandfather's work? To what extent must she also own the words he voiced as Graziani's interpreter? What does she inherit from her grandfather's body as the "almost white" body that channeled Graziani's orders?<sup>69</sup> Here, imperial formations take hold not only through national institutions and physical structures, but through language and its transmission via the body. Scego's work, too, involves the work of translation—translation as part of the "Second Generation condition."<sup>70</sup> These questions, which Scego says she has "posed [her]self many times," model the kinds of questions that readers who undertake their own mappings might pursue: What is their relationship to the colonial past? How does it shape their perception of themselves and others?

In *Roma negata*, Scego arrives at the Stele of Axum instead through a more recent event: the 2009 dedication of a monument for September 11 across from the grassy area where the stele stood for more than sixty-five years. This newer monument, comprised of two small columns, commemorates

the victims of the attack of New York and Washington on  
September 11, 2001  
the city of Rome for peace against every form of terrorism.

The presence of a September 11 memorial in Rome is, at first glance, unexpected, even bizarre. The new monument reminds us that the space has always been marked by empire and nation: overlooking the Circus Maximus, the columns themselves are ancient; recovered in the Renaissance, they flanked the fountain on the exterior of the pontifical court, which became home to the Italian Parliament. Brought to Porta Capena to represent the fallen Twin Towers, the columns are a palimpsest heralding the post-9/11 world in imperial terms. Nearby, the site of the missing Stele of Axum marks the ruins of colonialism. The columns speak to the 9/11 attacks in global terms but effect additional erasures. Ironically, engraved above the main plaque is George Santayana's line, "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." As the narrator explains in *Roma negata*, in her view the monument adds insult to injury as yet another symbol of Italy's insistence on ignoring colonial history, with a memorial to distant events at a site that long held a colonial monument and where the victims of colonialism have yet to be commemorated.<sup>71</sup>

Who is mourned and who is remembered are questions intimately related to the (in)visibility of those living in Italy's social and legal margins. They are also key challenges for writers, scholars, and artists. As Espiritu posits, reflecting on the charge of critical refugee studies: amid fragmentary and "imperfect" memories, "how do we write about absences? How do we compel others to look for the things that are seemingly not there? How do we imagine beyond the limits of what is already stated to be understandable?" Espiritu invokes Toni Morrison's call to "be mindful that 'invisible things are not necessarily not-there.'"<sup>72</sup> In recovering fragments, partial

testimonies, and displaced memories, work like Scego's rewrites notions of identity and belonging in ways that disrupt the accepted borders of citizenship.

#### TO THE MOON AND BACK

The final example in this chapter takes us from Rome's historic center out to its eastern periphery, and from monumental space to abandoned and occupied space. On March 27, 2009, an unexpected collective occupied a former sausage factory in the Tor Sapienza neighborhood, claiming it as their residency: immigrants and refugees from South America and Africa, along with several Italians, joined a few months later by a group of Roma. United largely through their institutional exclusion from public housing and their social exclusion as members of marginalized, racialized groups, some two hundred people founded the collectively run community now known as Metropoliz.

Amid the industrial ruins at Via Prenestina 913, residents have found shelter and safety in numbers but live with the constant threat of eviction by city authorities. And so, the story goes, in 2011, recognizing that they were unwanted in Italy and on planet Earth, they decided to go to the moon. The moon, they knew, did not discriminate; the moon accepted all arrivals. They studied, built a telescope, and mounted it atop the factory building. Eventually, they constructed a rocket.

Life on the moon was just as they hoped, a kind of utopia. And yet, after some time, looking back at Earth, they realized that they could perhaps make a difference here: change how people think about belonging, model a kind of living to which others might aspire. And so, though moon life was hard to leave, they returned to Earth, and to Metropoliz.

This is the story I learned while on a tour of Metropoliz and the museum that the collective operates there, in collaboration with curators from Rome's MACRO museum organization. MAAM, the Museum of the Other and Elsewhere (Museo dell'Altro e dell'Altrove), is generally open to the public once a week. When I visited on a Saturday morning in the summer of 2019, I joined a couple dozen visitors, including Romans from different neighborhoods and a small group of US students and their instructor. Gianluca Fiorentini, the Italian guide, recounted the collective's history, including the moon expedition, tracing this chronology through a mural painted on the outside the main building (figure 21). He pointed up to the roof, where the telescope still stands. Later, in line for lunch in the resident-run cafeteria, I found myself before a wall decorated in photographs documenting the voyage—residents testing the rocket, donning spacesuits—then bought an abundant plate of rice and vegetables from the residents running the kitchen that day.<sup>73</sup> It felt like wandering through a Calvino story come to life. But I was constantly aware, too, of the dilapidated state of the space in which they had built this world.

The collective curation of the museum is an act of citizenship that claims space and challenges emergency responses to precarious migration. Europe's racialized



FIGURE 21. Rocket on the mural outside of MAAM, which tells the story of the group's moon landing. Photo by the author, 2019.

others are written out of dominant narratives, yet they are not “a people without history.” Rather, they exemplify how, as El-Tayeb argues, “the creation of narratives of identity, both for communities and individuals, is not a linear, affirmative process of authentication, but rather rhizomatic and preliminary instead.”<sup>74</sup> Yet claiming the right to the city often relies on people’s ability to document a history. At MAAM, this history is a co-authored work of speculative fiction, or an aspirational narrative created for engaging with visitors.

This history also materially shapes residents’ routines. Between hearing about the telescope and sharing lunch, I took in a fraction of the more than five hundred artworks that adorn the concrete and brick walls and steel beams of the former sausage factory. Installations weave art throughout the site and are curated for visitors, but galleries and the communal cafeteria are also used as meeting and event spaces for Metropolitiz residents (figure 22). As he walked us through, Fiorentini pointed out highlights of the collection, which includes multiple large installations, many directly related to questions of otherness and borders. Some are dramatic and difficult; not all are signed, though Fiorentini seemed to hold the full catalogue in his head. When I first visited, the most recent addition was an



FIGURE 22. *Rane infinite* ("infinite frogs"). MAAM spaces double as meeting rooms and learning space for young residents. Photo by the author, 2023.

installation (this one signed) by Vittorio Sordi, produced through a performance piece in which participants had donned the shoes of Syrian migrants, stepped in paint, and walked across long scrolls, which now hung next to a crate holding the shoes themselves. Other works are whimsical, such as the alien face painted on an upstairs window that invites visitors to gaze out at the city through alien eyes.

Some works are integrated into the structure. A flight of stairs leading between the main floor and a couple of large upper rooms is stenciled with "MIGRANT 4 LIFE / LIFE 4 MIGRANT." Along the tracks that once ferried hanging swine carcasses for processing, someone has painted a series of bleeding pigs, titled "Cappella porcina: E-MAAMcipation," or "Porcine Chapel: E-MAAM-cipation." Fiorentini pointed to murals by well-known street artists like Alice Pasquini and talked about how museum collaborators and residents determined where to place works. I was especially struck by several boats within MAAM, including a wall of painted wood scraps taken from the remains of migrant vessels that reached Lampedusa; a small boat installed by Sara Bernabucci and "repaired" with drums, or transformed into an instrument via drums inserted into its hull (figure 23); and a small rubber dinghy set up on the floor of a smaller room such that visitors have to navigate around it to cross. On one side of the dinghy sits a cloth mannequin, posed as if a silhouette or a ghost.



FIGURE 23. Inside MAAM, artworks including the boat by Sara Bernabucci. Photo by the author, 2023.

As a third example of acts of citizenship that challenge the coloniality of border regimes, these works index government practices of exclusion and the displacement and unsettling of non-Italians in a space curated by those excluded subjects. This collective exemplifies precarity as a site of action that “flip[s] vulnerability upside down in such a way that experiences of insecurity and dispossession lead to initiatives of collective agency and organized resistance.”<sup>75</sup> One of the attributes uniting Metropolis residents is their exclusion from formal modes of belonging in Italy, both spatial and legal: the collective includes members of marginalized and racialized groups who lack access to housing and, in many cases, lack full citizenship rights. They also represent communities whose struggles for rights recognition often unfold separately, in particular in the case of immigrants and Roma, with Romani communities more often living in separate camps of their own making or designated by local authorities (case in point: the Roma first reached Metropolis after being evicted from their nearby camp). In the former factory, they share a common cause, establishing their right to the city and fighting for housing rights while repurposing the abandoned site as their home. In the public interface they maintain, they play with the idea of the alien gaze in their role as curators, turning the question of outsidership on its head, as migrants and Roma are not unknowable strangers but hosts and curators inviting Italian and other visitors into their space.

In the 1980s, when the Fiorucci sausage company ceased operations in via Prenestina, it was easier for the owners to desert their factory than sell it, and so they abandoned the building, taking their production elsewhere. Fiorucci finally

sold the premises to a developer in the early 2000s, but the buildings remained untouched. Since Metropoliz took up residence in 2009, its longevity has been uncertain. In 2018, the same security decree that criminalized independent rescue ships at sea also increased penalties for the “illegal occupation” of sites and enabled swifter eviction procedures. Eviction was legitimized as a security measure. Metropoliz was determined by a judge to have been occupied illegally but, as of this writing, has avoided being cleared. Campaigns to protect Metropoliz from eviction have featured resident children with lines like, “I live in a museum. Protect my hybrid/mestiza city.”<sup>76</sup>

The collective movement is a fiction, an aspiration, but also a material transformation of space. Still, the structure remains incredibly run down. When I returned with a friend in December 2023, I was struck by how little it had changed, and also by how uncomfortable the winter must be for residents living in apartments configured within the factory’s walls. As is true in other informal settlements, some residents are long term; others come and go. At Metropoliz, not everyone shares the same ideology or participates in the public-facing aspect of this cause with the same enthusiasm. Metropoliz is not a paradise but a site of active struggle that refutes romanticized ideas of migrant realities.

The reality of Metropoliz is also one of friction with the city.<sup>77</sup> Located in Rome’s outskirts, Metropoliz may seem far from political debates and news cycles about border issues and Mediterranean crossings. Yet the exclusion of these residents is intimately tied to the emergency imaginary that fails to envision arriving migrants as future citizens. Those arriving by sea are commonly portrayed in dominant media and political discourses as illegal, defined by clandestine movements.<sup>78</sup> Residents of Metropoliz, the self-dubbed *città meticcica*, or hybrid or mestiza city, confront the same “racializing juridical assemblages”<sup>79</sup> and are held outside of formal and normative recognition within Italy’s capital. “Meticcica” evokes notions of hybridity and constant, ongoing processes of identity formation elaborated by Gloria Anzaldúa and others, and in this spirit, the narratives Metropoliz puts forward are the flip side of those that center national identity as the primary form of collective belonging. The *città meticcica* rejects the colonial gaze and its designation of hierarchies of belonging, or its division of those allowed to move freely through urban spaces, from those seen as mistakenly or criminally present and without a right to the city and its spaces and histories. Residents of the mestiza city offer a version of fugitivity through which they, to borrow from Vang, “imagine ways of being in but not of the nation-state and its ‘official’ history.”<sup>80</sup>

While the collective navigates its own internal frictions and multiple agendas, as might be expected given the pressures of precarious living, they use the former factory as a space for creating and enacting forms of belonging that give them some security and also model alternative conceptions of belonging. The collective presents itself to visitors in ways that subvert strange encounters, with Italy’s racialized and marginalized others as hosts and curators. This is akin to what El-Tayeb

terms the “queering” of ethnicity in that it exemplifies a survival strategy that is “largely invisible in dominant discourses” and should be understood as a form of resistance that functions in part by “a creative (mis)use [of categories], rearranging a variety of concepts and their interrelations, among them time, space, memory, as well as race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality.”<sup>81</sup> The collective’s journey narrative, their repurposing of the former factory, and their insistence on engaging the world outside the factory as a transnational, multigenerational group exemplify this resistance; their curation of the space as a home and museum are forms of cultural production through which they enact their claim to the right to the city. As they described themselves in a 2016 statement (issued in Italian),

We come from Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Italy. Many of us are refugees whom the corrupt accoglienza system didn’t know how to help, or people made homeless when we could no longer pay exorbitantly high rents, or Roma who rebelled against the ghettoization of camps. A complex living reality that is enriched by the presence of MAAM (Museo dell’Altro e dell’Altrove di Metropoli città meticcica), an experience that has consumed residents and the neighborhood, creating another layer of defense for this courageous endeavor.<sup>82</sup>

Their recognition of solidarity across struggles that transgress the categories imposed by legal regimes and hegemonic narratives highlights the conditions in which they fight and speaks to the need for further recognition of the links between refugee and second-generation rights movements.

Looking into the site after my 2019 visit, I learned that the moon expedition and museum were realized in collaboration with Italian artist, anthropologist, and filmmaker Giorgio de Finis, who in 2018 was tapped to run Rome’s MACRO museum organization. That kind of endorsement involves a version of what some have critiqued as the “artification” of Rome’s working-class neighborhoods.<sup>83</sup> But while the reframing of peripheral areas into a kind of off-the-beaten-path tourist destination is certainly relevant for this museum housed in an occupied factory in the eastern part of the city, the transformation of Metropoli is not simply an example of creating alternative tourism schemes. Crucial to the longevity of Metropoli is residents’ curation of the museum, with the support of people like de Finis, both as an interface with non-Metropoli residents and as a strategy to protect their own occupation of the space. According to de Finis and collaborators who continue to work with MAAM, transforming the squat into a museum was a strategy to combat harassment and eviction from police. In an interview with English-language online magazine *Romeing*, collaborator Carlo Gori explained:

Do you know what the police do when they want to kick you out of squatting? The first thing they do is to destroy the walls in order to make the place uninhabitable. So we had to find a way to protect the walls. This is how the museum was born. . . . There are more than 500 artworks between these walls. Some of these walls are worth more than 150.000€. If they destroy them, they become the bad guys.<sup>84</sup>

Metropoliz is “a social experiment that serves as a powerful example of how to remould an industrial wreck into a place of living and a powerful ‘super-object and a subject of collective art.’”<sup>85</sup> Art curation is, in this case, a strategy of survival that transforms urban space and positions publics—museum visitors—to witness that transformation and the way of life it represents. Resident “outsiders” invite nonresident “outsiders” to contribute art and to view their space—an invitation to intimacy, if curated intimacy—and visitors validate the site by donating an entry fee and joining a tour. This does involve a version of artification processes, with Metropoliz residents transforming the occupied factory into a site of cultural heritage, and using the processes and mechanisms of tourism to protect and enable their own citizenship practices. The witnessing transactions that unfold here between residents, visitors, institutions, and municipal authorities disrupt the dominant gazes of the citizen and the tourist alike and establish ethical relations that have, at their core, the possibility of recognition for Metropoliz as a legitimate community and site. In other words, these transactions establish a set of conditions of possibility for recognition of residents’ right to the city. That recognition, however, remains precarious; residents and organizers continue to protest their potential eviction.

I first visited Metropoliz as emergency politics effectively closed Italian borders, stoked racist sentiment, and rendered legal citizenship more difficult to obtain, and the museum appeared to me to illustrate belonging as one of the paradoxes that the emergency apparatus sets in motion: presence as a contested right, community building as a fraught process, and citizenship as a legal and social act always potentially threatened by policies that treat mobility as a problem rather than a way of being. *La città meticcica* enacts citizenship from within the extreme precarity of its position as a city within the city.

#### CONCLUSION: ON CITIZENSHIP

The various claims to ownership of and authority within the city that I have discussed in this chapter emerge via testimonial transactions: migrant narrators position soundwalk listeners as ambulant witnesses to their testimonies; Scego’s life writing bears witness to individual and collective pasts for readers; and Metropoliz residents welcome visitors who will perceive their ongoing struggles through artworks that celebrate migration and challenge abuses of power, and, through their visit, participate in transforming the site itself into a cultural space that resists closure. As acts of citizenship that emerge through acts of witnessing, these texts and practices make space for narratives of belonging that defy emergency framings of migration and foreignness. That is, they disrupt or expand the “available narratives” of foreignness and precarious migration in Italy or, to invoke Shuman, they participate in processes of negotiation concerning “what gets told and what doesn’t” and what stories “become tellable” about belonging in Rome, Italy, or

Europe.<sup>86</sup> With emergency and crisis discourses as the primary modes for representing people on the move, and given the obscuring of the historical movements and ties to Italian and European cultures and communities, there are no readily available narratives for migrant belonging in the everyday life of the city, or through the monuments that celebrate national history or sites of cultural production and exchange. Yet through testimonial transactions and spatial practices, these guides, curators, and citizens create the potential for forms and practices of mutual recognition to emerge that exceed those dictated by state-sanctioned labels or that dominate public discourse.<sup>87</sup>

These are examples of witnessing that begin from Italy's margins, whether literally, in the case of *Metropoliz*, or in social terms, as is the case for the soundwalk narrators who speak from places of legal and social precarity. Scego's work, too, despite international recognition and her Italian citizenship, is often assigned the default label of "migrant literature," suggesting it does not fit within national or European literary canons. Such narratives are especially important in illustrating the limits of traditional citizenship, which may appear to offer the stability that "emergency" precludes. Appeals for more inclusive national narratives often do important work to promote equal rights. As Balibar has observed, it is thanks to the bold resistance of the marginalized and excluded that citizens might grasp the significance of debates around legal and social belonging and the right to remain.<sup>88</sup>

But if the nation is already a problematic frame through which to understand belonging, these appeals face potentially harsh limits. The possibilities that citizenship seems to offer narrow drastically as nationalism and racial politics intersect. As Hawthorne observes in her study of citizenship and race, "in the context of an ethnonationalist resurgence in Italy . . . Black activists are increasingly confronting the limitations of citizenship as a strategy for combatting institutionalized, state racism in Italy."<sup>89</sup> Citizenship, as a project developed through Enlightenment notions of self and nation, legitimizes a disregard for the gaps of history, a lack of reckoning with duress. If the Italian nation has been shaped in part through colonialism and colonial aphasia, then notions of national identity are imperial formations. Including some as citizens always necessarily excludes others: an expanded national citizenship serves the immediate goal of extending rights to those previously excluded, yet it also risks reaffirming normative citizenship and the privileges it bestows.<sup>90</sup> Another model of citizenship might refuse to identify with the national form of the former colonizing power and instead gesture to the postnational or the translocal. As postcolonial and border studies scholars have discussed, these forms could at a minimum acknowledge that national culture emerges through movement rather than fixity or, as Bhabha argues, through liminality and within borderzones rather than from homogeneous centers.<sup>91</sup> Given colonial history, in other words, is it possible for Italian

identity to be truly transnational or translocal? Can a national imaginary possibly invite in the subjects and imaginings of the undercommons, the people who necessarily resist normative borders for their own survival?<sup>92</sup> Does the geographically and socially peripheral space of the città meticcica offer another model of belonging?

Let me turn the question: What happens to the limit case of the refugee when we consider it from the cafeteria at MAAM? What form does the state of exception take within a map that ruptures dominant historical narratives? Within the intimacy of headspace? In *The Universal Machine*, Moten argues that notions of the state of exception developed by Agamben and others (e.g., Santner) potentially reify sovereign power. That is, Agamben's framing presumes an "originary sovereign," but as those always excluded from the sovereign body know well, the foundations of such sovereignty are "originarily disturbed": "To say that the suspension of law in the name of the law's preservation *is* the regular situation is to erect a rickety bridge between forms of life whose historical nonconvergence defies the commerce between them." Put another way, the insider/outsider binary that a state of exception invokes does not encompass the fundamental exclusion of Black subjects. Therefore, Moten refutes the idea that a subject comes into being through recognition by the sovereign power.<sup>93</sup> It is instead in spaces outside the bounds of the nation and the social borders denoted by national identity and citizenship—in "a common underground"—that resistance and imagination can take shape. And it's at the boundary between these spaces—at the literal edge of the city, or at the borders of visibility and invisibility, or where history and the present converge in physical space—that this work becomes possible.

The interventions I have discussed in this chapter reveal the limits of emergency frames, offering alternative ways of recognizing and appreciating how mobility shapes lives. The transactions through which their testimonies emerge function at the intimate scale of the individual encounter, through a set of headphones, engagement with the printed page, or a small group visit to the periphery of Rome. These small-scale exchanges and seemingly small gestures offer their own "stubborn possibilities" as practices that write the future outside the bounds of crisis. By modeling the kinds of work necessary to create new conditions for hearing, these transactions enable what Ahmed discusses as "ethical encounters," or encounters that resist simplistic labels of otherness or strangeness.<sup>94</sup>

As ethical encounters, the testimonial transactions I have discussed here rely on memory and proximity. The racializing assemblages that keep migrants and their children outside of national and European recognition are key to the very notion of nation. Reconfiguring space through narrative, movement, and encounter—to know space as relational—is one way of challenging those borders.<sup>95</sup> As these guides, narrators, and curators demonstrate, witnessing acts can utilize the intimacy of testimony to expand the archive of such stories and, in doing so, to

reconfigure our relationships with the city and its inhabitants, recognizing mobility as central to the making of space and community, and reimagining belonging through interrogations of memory and of space. These movements are also tied to questions of labor, and in the next chapter I turn to the labor precarity migrants confront as they seek to establish more permanent lives in Italy.