

## Places and Stages: Narrating and Performing the City in Milan, Italy

Cristina Moretti

*"Theatre is an itinerary in hope" (Mohamed Ba, March 2005)*

When I started my ethnographic fieldwork in Italy, I had expected to learn mostly about public spaces and how different people participate in them. Using guided city walks, unstructured conversations, and interviews,<sup>1</sup> I wanted to explore how individuals and groups use, lose, or appropriate Milanese spaces, and how they see, remember, and narrate them (Dines; Guano 2003; Low). My encounter with Mohamed Ba, however, taught me not only about public space, but also about the role of performance and imagination in urban life. My interlocutor, a community educator and theater writer, showed me that performative engagements with the city can transform a simple

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**Cristina Moretti** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University. A special thank you to Mohamed Ba who shared his insights on the city with me; to Dara Culhane without whom this research and article would not have been possible; and to my family who helped me in this process. I would also like to thank Daniel Makagon and the reviewers of *Liminalities*, Carlo Giorgi and *Terre di Mezzo*, Rima Noureddine, Stacy Leigh Pigg, and Nick Blomley for their contributions to the research and/or their comments on this article. Thank you to Enrica Sacconi for photographing the signs in Piazza Fontana and for drawing the maps in Scene II, and to Andrea Moretti and Junas Adhikary for technical assistance. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the doctoral grant that supported this research.

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork for this article was conducted for six months in Milan in 2004/5, during which I asked women and men of different ages, classes, and nationalities to walk me through "their" city and to help me produce a visual representation of their itineraries. My research also included participant observation of city locales, unstructured conversations, and in-depth interviews.

walk through the streets into a way to connect continents, express dreams, and create spaces for differently positioned speakers to talk about the city. This article examines one of these actual and imaginative journeys, a walk and commentary in which Mohamed guided me. I found his intervention especially precious given the context of contemporary Milan, a metropolis struggling with deepening inequalities, an uneasy multiculturalism, and contradictory historical memories.

As Aalbers (2007), Ginsborg (2003), and Foot (2001) describe, Milan has experienced profound economic and social changes in the past decades. In the fifties and sixties the city saw a “miraculous” industrial boom, accompanied by a significant migration of Southern Italians. By the 1980s, however, the factories were closing, leaving vast abandoned areas in the fabric of the city and a tertiary economy largely centered on the fashion and design businesses. This was also accompanied by changes in the employment structure. More and more people in contemporary Milan are “atypical” workers with temporary contracts. This includes many young people employed part time, many immigrants in the service industry, and also many workers in the fashion system. Politically, the city was the theatre of intense conflicts for most of the last century (Foot 2001), including the one between fascism and the resistance, and later the struggles of the union and student movements. The end of the Sixties and the Seventies were a particularly troubled time for Milan, which saw escalating social and political tensions culminating in occasional violence.

Another important factor affecting city spaces in the last fifty years has been the immigration from North Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America (see Cologna 2003; 1999). While the newcomers have contributed to render Milan more diverse and more cosmopolitan, many Italian-born Milanese feel that immigrants are changing the familiar landscapes of their city. As Maritano (2004; 2002) describes for the city of Turin, immigrants are often confronted with stereotypes that cast them as radically different from Italian residents (see also Dines; Krause; Merrill; Murer). This way of thinking maintains a conceptual and practical divide between immigrants and Italians and can serve to legitimize a “struggle to

exclude the migrants, who are [seen as] ‘taking over’ the buildings, the neighbourhood and the city” (Maritano 69). Many new immigrants, moreover, depending on their resources and connections, have trouble finding a home in a city where housing is scarce and expensive, and/or find themselves working jobs which are often strenuous, underpaid, and seldom correspond to their skills or education (Migrantes-Caritas).

At the same time as a pervasive sense of crisis looms large over many of its inhabitants, contemporary Milan has become the stage of sweeping and prestigious urban renewals (Aalbers, 2007). Private investors, usually in collaboration with the region’s municipalities, are converting many of the vacant industrial premises (and often also the working class neighbourhoods located nearby) into elegant and expensive areas, making the city even less affordable for many segments of the populations. Other ‘dismissed areas,’ in the meantime, remain abandoned and are used as homes by immigrants who cannot find a better accommodation—and/or are ‘occupied’ by activists groups who convert them into autonomous Social Centres, from where social and political action can be initiated (Modu).

These stark—and growing—social disparities also affect people’s relationships with public spaces. During my research in Milan, I found that it is harder for less-privileged residents to claim streets and plazas than upper- and middle-class white Italians. These privileged Italians often speak to their own right to the city’s streets while casting other city dwellers as foreigners (or nationals, but living in the peripheries), intruders, and “not really” Milanese. Conversely, many immigrants talk about public space as a vital place for work, sociality, and recreation—a resource however, for which they have to struggle actively and continuously (Dines). In spite and because of this, public space emerges as an important arena for social debate and for creative re-imaginings of Milanese histories and identities.

The words of Mohamed Ba that I present in this paper emerge in these contexts and reflect some of these issues. During my fieldwork I had asked him to show me “his” Milan, and the following itinerary, journey, and images are the results of this walk we did together. When Mohamed arrived in Italy several years ago from Senegal, he

worked with the street newspaper *Terre di Mezzo*,<sup>2</sup> both as a vendor and as a liaison person between the vendors and the editorial board. His tour and perspective on the city centre reflects this experience. For one, he describes how a recent immigrant who works as a street seller might navigate his way through Milan's centre. For the other, Mohamed talks about the streets themselves as an avenue for knowledge, sociability, and ultimately hope, as the vendors and bypassers (typically immigrants and Italians) use the potential of public space to meet and learn about each other.

Mohamed's itinerary, however, encompasses much more than a description of a newcomer's experience of the city. One of the aspects that interests me most is its starkly theatrical character. Mohamed crafted a wonderfully elaborate and art-full monologue that included proverbs, poetic verses, choruses, and even a song, and that moved effortlessly from one plaza and/or street to another. During the tour, I was both a spectator of and a participant in a complex story that re-presented the city through changing and interlinked scenes. Similarly to Freeman's description of Buenos Aires, the city itself emerged as a "mise-en-scene," and its very locations as stages for performance. In this paper, I argue that the performative sense of his tour is particularly important in constructing alternative notions of "belonging" to the city, and in modeling public space as a creative site for social transformation. Following Dolan's argument that theatre can help us experience utopian moments in the present, I look at how Mohamed's play enacts the ideal of public space, and, in doing so, makes room for differently positioned Milanese to claim spaces in the city.

The spatial and social imagination enabled by performance is a crucial tool in his project. By engaging the landscapes of Milan as stages, Mohamed's itinerary interweaves urban landscapes, real and imagined life stories, and a multitude of speaking positions. By adopting at the same time the perspectives of a long time Milanese resident and a new immigrant in precarious conditions, he problematizes easy categories of "insiders" and "outsiders" to the city. Nor are these two positions the only ones that inform his tale.

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<sup>2</sup> More information on *Terre di Mezzo* can be found at <http://www.terre.it>

During the tour, Mohamed becomes a time traveler, moving through the past and into the future; an elder and a young man; a scriptwriter, narrator and performer/actor; a teacher and a questioning student. Because his narration and itinerary constructs such a complex position for a cultural commentator, it challenges assumptions that there is only one category of Milanese—or of Senegalese, or of migrant—and that only people who were born in a city can truly know and understand it.

In attending to Mohamed's tour as a theatrical act, I find Bauman and Briggs' discussion of performance particularly useful. They point out that performances have to be seen as deeply tied to contexts, such as discourses, situations, relationships, and/or other performances, which follow or precede them. At the same time, however, performances are also particularly apt at transcending those very contexts and thus creating "memorable text[s]", which "can be lifted out of [their ...] interactional setting[s]" and can then again play a role in other situations (Bauman & Briggs 73). Indeed, the performative form of Mohamed's tour ensures that his audience (including myself) experiences and remembers it as a "memorable" and authoritative text on the city and its history. The tour is not simply a walk through the city; rather, it is a moment of teaching—a commentary which aims at reframing landscapes and experiences so as to foster understanding. According to Mohamed's words below, the chance to do just that, to talk about the city and act as a guide, is a powerful way to show that he belongs to the city and that the city also belongs to him. To say it differently, "[p]erformance puts the act of speaking on display" (Bauman & Briggs 73). As such, it emphasizes that, in the context of Milan's emergent multiculturalism, the very act of talking about the city by a speaker positioned from between and within cultures and places (see Tsing) is a significant political and pedagogical praxis.

Because the performative form of Mohamed's itinerary seemed to me to be so important, I chose to represent it as a theatre play (I found Madison's text very inspiring in this regard). In order to do so, I present long passages from Mohamed's narration, and link the excerpts to the urban "stages" Mohamed used. I quote Mohamed at length so as to show the movement between different speaking

positions. Most important, however, I am interested in creating a space for Mohamed's intervention as a critical, counter-commentary on Milanese public space, an important "back talk" in relation to contemporary discourses on immigration and multiculturalism in the city. Following Stewart, I am attempting to use "the possibilities of narrative itself to fashion a gap in the order of things" (3).

I represent the setting both through pictures (frames from the video recording of the tour) and words (the stage directions) because the location in and journey through actual city spaces was an important referent for Mohamed's tale. It is important here to note that the images and the written descriptions do not always match. While the pictures make visible to the reader the places (albeit not all of them) where Mohamed told me about 'his' Milan, my descriptions adapt those settings to a possible theatre stage. They also introduce the following elements which were not part of our walk: the choruses (in most scenes); two men with masks; and five characters in the shadow (in scene III); and the typewriter, chair, table, canvas, and board (in scenes I-III), with its associated actions of creating and sharing texts and maps.<sup>3</sup>

The discrepancies between the pictures and the stage directions thus reflect the particular status of this text, which is neither (or both) a verbatim transcription nor (and) a fictional writing. All of the lines of Mohamed (and my few brief comments within it) are translated quotes from the transcript. The itinerary presented in the play largely corresponds to the route we took through the city (I indicate in the text when the two differ from each other). The street seller, the woman with an accordion, the passersby with shopping bags, and the sound of the church bells were all present in our tour through Milan. However, I added fictional moments and used a theatre script genre because I believe that this form might evoke, better than a regular academic discussion, the movements through the city, the sights and

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<sup>3</sup> While the stage directions are in this sense fictional, we cannot say that the pictures are necessarily more "real," transparent, or authentic representations. As Pink (2001) and others remind us, photographs are selected, framed, edited, etc. Indeed, the double representation of the setting is meant to remind the reader about the role of narration – both Mohamed's during the tour, and mine in this chapter – to construct frameworks and contexts for cultural commentary.

sounds, and the creation of affect that are so central in Mohamed's commentary. As Thrift (2003) points out, these are aspects that are lost in usual scholarly discussions, although they are constituent parts of all our interaction with the world and with others.

In the text below, I also inscribed myself as a participant in the play and not merely as a commentator. In doing so I wanted to point out how Mohamed's intervention created a significant space for an audience. Mohamed's very description of theatre in Senegal underlines that the spectator is always an active and fundamental part of the play: "the theatre is not that spectacle where there are on one side actors and on the other side the public. No, because [...] the public who listens or follows the story becomes automatically the protagonist of the story it listens to." Although I say very little throughout Mohamed's narration, and could hardly be called a protagonist, I still felt that I had a specific role in the play: to witness the story and be transformed by it. In this sense, performing can put not only "the act of speaking on display" (Bauman & Briggs 73) but also the one of listening. As Dolan suggests, theatre can intensify the act of listening to another person, with the aim of "model[ing] a hopeful method for living near others with respect and affection" (88). It is important here to note that this itinerary is a version of a walking tour that Mohamed prepared and performed for a group of *Terre di Mezzogiorno* readers a couple of years before. It was part of a small series of guided tours, which aimed to show Milan from a range of different perspectives to interested city residents (mostly Italians). As such, this project was meant to be transformative while directly involving its listeners as the protagonist of this change.

Indeed, during the tour, I was changed. Surprised that Mohamed knew so much about the history of Milan, and that he knew expressions in Milanese dialect that I had only heard from older, Milanese-born residents, I had to confront my own stereotypes about who knows what about the city. But that was not all. The stories Mohammed told me, and their rhythm, sounds, sights, and sense of directions and movements moved me, affectively, to imagine what public space could be like. As Dolan argues, performance can be a unique tool for social critique and transformation, in that it allows audiences to experience "what utopia could feel like" (Dyer, qtd in

Dolan 39). What I learned from Mohamed, in turn, also allowed me to look differently at other moments of urban life, such as the events I describe in the second part of this essay.<sup>4</sup>

There, I use Mohamed's text as a frame of reference for looking at a series of rallies and two epitaphs installations that happened in the centre of Milan in 2006. My goal in doing this is twofold. First, following Mohamed's insights, I want to draw attention to other acts of performance that often characterize people's involvements with urban locales. Although a guided tour of the city seems at first sight to be not comparable to "city wars," as the rallies were dubbed in the press, Mohamed's carefully crafted tale of fluid identities remind us that practices of staging, representing, and spectatorship are important loci for the creation of political and social identities. Second, I felt that by juxtaposing Mohamed's tale to events that appear so intensely political and conflictual we could better appreciate the subtle strength of performative stories in ordinary life. To say it simply, after having walked with Mohamed, I was struck by how his words could both address contested realities and hegemonic discourses in Milan, and work towards creating better possibilities. By imaginatively placing sociality, cultural creativity, and hope as part of public space, Mohamed's commentary can become one of those memories we can "seize hold of [...] as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 257).

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<sup>4</sup> This is a second way in which I act as a 'participant' audience. As Bauman and Briggs write, "Even when audience members say or do practically nothing at the time of the performance, their role becomes active when they serve as speakers in subsequent entextualizations of the topic at hand" (Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 69). Writing myself as a character in the play is then also a way for me to remind the reader of my own activities of "entextualization" (presenting Mohamed's walk as a detachable text) and especially of "recontextualization" (using this text as a new frame of reference for another series of events/performances).

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## **A Tour of the City**

### **Scene I.**

#### **The Duomo cathedral**



*The Duomo is projected on a canvas upstage. People and pigeons are walking on the square. Mohamed Ba/the tour guide and Cristina/the anthropologist are standing in front of the Duomo. To the side of the plaza are a chair and a table with a typewriter on it. The typewriter, chair, table, and canvas remain there until the end of Scene III.*

Mohamed/the tour guide (*standing facing the Duomo, and occasionally pointing to it*):

The immigrants today see the Duomo as being so majestic (...) But in reality it is nothing other than (...) the realization of a very long and tiresome itinerary which has involved the city of Milan for centuries and centuries. (...)

So anyone who arrives often looks for the centre of the city in order to orient him/herself, because often, by searching for the centre of the city, s/he will be able to move: s/he enters and exits. And the one who follows well the history of Milan will understand that it [the city] has a belt: the Navigli canals.

So the immigrant<sup>5</sup> [from Sub-Saharan Africa] who arrives in Italy is often welcomed by his/her conationals (...) [S/he] already has a

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<sup>5</sup> The use of different subjects for a recent Senegalese immigrant (such as “s/he,” “one,” “the immigrant,” “our friend,” “we”/”us,” and “I”) during the narration

point of reference, a point of approach, that will be The House. And when s/he comes to that House s/he will often be struck by its aspect, because one always expects to see houses perhaps very beautiful, with a room for each member, and so on, and one finds oneself in a one-room apartment with fifteen-twenty people, forced to sleeping in turns.

That impact with the reality is often embarrassing, but one does not have the right to look back. So already who leaves leaves and the adventure starts from there. But

*(voices from back stage join Mohamed's voice, creating a chorus)*

the adventure passes also through knowledge: until we know, we won't be able to respect or (...) to appreciate,

*(end chorus)*

because usually one recognizes oneself in the positive values of all cultures.

So our poor immigrant friend from Senegal or from [another] part of Africa, finds her/himself in Italy, s/he finds her/his friends who the next day go and buy a roll of film, and where do they bring her/him?

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presented here is particularly interesting, as it often shows a switch between different "voices." In this particular scene, for example, Mohamed's switch from "the immigrants" to "the immigrant" to "s/he," "one," and "our poor immigrant friend" also signals a movement from a more detached to a more intimate perspective. What I represent here as "s/he" and "one" are important mediums of these shifts, because they do not indicate who the subject really is, but leave it open to the listener's interpretation. They often seem to beg the questions: how close is this "friend"? Is "one" just any-one or one-self? This is especially so with "s/he." In Italian, subjects are not always required: although it is always possible, and sometimes necessary, to specify it, the subject is included in the conjugated verb form (e.g., *arriva* means [he? she?] arrives). Many of Mohamed's sentences have such 'absent'/unspecified subjects, and I translate them as "s/he." Additionally, I translate them as "s/he" even when the use of pronouns earlier in a particular passage suggests that it is a male character.

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Here, in the centre of Milan. S/he sees this majestic [Duomo] that seems from far away a porcupine.

Cristina/the anthropologist (*laughs*)

Mohamed/the tour guide:

It is a symbol of a city.

So, the pigeons that fly for us have become banal, familiar.<sup>6</sup> But for who arrives: s/he has her/his mouth watering, why?

Because they are eaten in our side [of the world] and s/he already imagines a barbeque with many pigeons, and so on.

Cristina/the anthropologist (*laughs*)

Mohamed/the tour guide:

And s/he is told: no, no, no, one does not touch them, one does not eat them. So resignation sets in. So s/he tries to pose her/himself questions:

But this city was always like this?

How come it became like this?

This plaza, what does it represent to the citizens?

But unfortunately his conationals are not able to explain. The explanation that s/he is told is that here is the meeting point: when the Milan [soccer team] wins the tournament one meets here, at New Year's Eve one meets here, perhaps even in the past one assembled

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<sup>6</sup> The ambiguity of the subject in this passage is another example of the alternating and interweaving of speaking positions: While "us" refers to the people who have lived in Milan for a long time, thus distancing the speaker from the "s/he" "who arrives," the "our" in the line "they are eaten in our side [of the world]" denotes a speaker who is very close and familiar to the "s/he" who "is told: no, no, no, one does not touch them, one does not eat them." So here again: who is "s/he"? And who is "one"?

here. So another itinerary begins, through the belt of Milan that is the belt of the Navigli [canals].<sup>7</sup>

The majority of countries of Sub-Saharan Africa suffer from drought; it is a zone where it rarely rains. [In Senegal] colonization introduced an industrial monoculture of peanuts. (...) The earth has suffered. At the end there is an advancing of the desert (...) and the farmers have been forced to go to the urban centers. (...) And then [to] Europe, following a dream, legitimate even, to have a better life, to have the flexibility to get up in the morning and to start to dream. But a Europe particularly rooted in our habits and customs because through colonization we acquired a double cultural identity (...).

And so one closes one's eyes and leaves. One throws oneself, one throws oneself in this city: big, majestic. And when one finds oneself here to snap 78 photographs that one sends home the next day, with pigeons, this gives a bit of serenity to the family that was anxious for her/his departure (...).

But this is only the first step. Slowly s/he follows the course of the water and s/he asks her/himself: but water [here] is so sterile, nothing moves, it seems almost in winter sleep. Why? Why? Because fortunately water is not something lacking on this side [of the world], but on the other side, where water is alive, everyone (...) animals, caravaneers, everyone meets around the water (...).

Following the course of the water, s/he realizes that it becomes a belt, a belt that suddenly ends behind here,<sup>8</sup> (...) and s/he tells

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<sup>7</sup> Here is an example of several itineraries/paths intersecting: the course of the canals, the exploring paths of a newcomer through the city, international migrations, the tour of Mohamed and me through the city.

<sup>8</sup> This is another interesting example for the coexistence of several "voices." It could be re-written like this:

Narrator: Following the course of the water, s/he realizes that it becomes a belt, a belt that suddenly ends behind here (...).

The Friend: but how come [we] ended [here], in a street which on the other side is called Via Laghetto [Little Lake Street]? (...) It is strange, because here there isn't any water!

The Voice of History: But yes, there was water: water underneath. (...)

Narrator: So s/he continues her/his tour and cannot see another way than the Duomo.

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her/himself, but how come s/he ended in a street which on the other side is called Via Laghetto [Little Lake Street].

So s/he poses her/himself the question: (...) Via Laghetto? It is strange, because here there isn't any water.

But yes, there was water: water underneath.

But what was that water used for?

So s/he continues her/his tour and looks and cannot see another way then the Duomo.<sup>9</sup> (...)

The Duomo is a factory which never ends. If one in Milan is taking a really long time to do something, often one tells him: you are slow like the works of the Duomo. Because from the remote times, when the work began, the constructions are never ending (...).

Cristina/the anthropologist

*(walks away from the Duomo square, as the lights go out from it. She sits in front of the typewriter, and starts writing this text. The text is projected onto the white canvas hanging behind her)*

“Landscapes, journeys, and voices”

### ***Landscapes***

Mohamed's description and reflections remind me that we can think of landscapes as the interweaving of the visible and the occult, the “given-to-be-seen” (Taylor, 1997: 122) and the hidden, the details that are present and what is absent. In his words, and in the journeys

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<sup>9</sup> The water, reaching Laghetto Street (Via Laghetto) and the Little Lake of Santo Stefano (Laghetto di Santo Stefano), carried boats with building materials for the construction of the Duomo. According to the association Friends of the Navigli ([www.amicideinavigli.org](http://www.amicideinavigli.org)), navigation to carry marmor for the Duomo started in 1387. Leonardo Da Vinci is also associated with the Navigli waterways, because he designed its lift locks (the Chiuse di Leonardo; see the map in Scene II). The part of the Navigli canals closer to the city centre, called *cerchia interna*, was entirely covered in the thirties. Some of the canals that were further from the centre (such as parts of the Naviglio Grande and Naviglio Pavese) are still visible today. The construction of the Duomo lasted from 1386 to the nineteenth century, earning the cathedral a reputation of a neverending work in progress.

of an unknown (or perhaps even too-well-known) friend, the web of the Navigli canals shine through the city floor behind the cathedral, while the Sforza Castle (see Scene IV, p. 26) becomes opaque, forever closed, and incomprehensible. Listening to him while looking at the Duomo, I notice that the cover, more than concealing the face of the cathedral, makes starkly visible its history and reputation as a never-ending factory and construction zone. Animals come to the foreground, from the pigeons imagined on a barbeque (a theme developed also by Calvino's fiction<sup>10</sup>) to the half-wooled pig that Mohamed talks about below.

What comes to be on which side of the divide between visible and invisible, present and absent, depends in important ways on the position of the person watching, moving, and being within a landscape. Mohamed points out that the perspective of a viewer is itself never simple. On the one hand, it encompasses multiple, sometimes even contradictory visions (see for example Rose). It includes not only what we see, but also what we are supposed to see. It includes "the shape" of the "absence" (Gordon 6) of what could be there, and as such lives in the space of dreams, wishes, or hauntings. The "house perhaps very beautiful," the pictures of the Duomo, the pigeons, the water: they all lend themselves to being seen at least twice, from different perspectives. They look different for different social actors, because they occupy different places in people's experiences, expectations, and daily lives.

On the other hand, it is by moving through the city and following its routes that a particular vision becomes possible. For the recent immigrant, the waterscape of the Navigli, now mostly covered by asphalt, emerges through a journey of discovery of the new city s/he finds her/himself in. In this manner, a way of looking connects several itineraries and stories. The walk through the city started, in a sense, from his/her departure from Senegal, and is thus deeply connected to colonization, to the history of Sub-Saharan Africa and its waterways. In turn, the way in which "our friend" walks through the city and what s/he sees uncovers other journeys and perspectives

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<sup>10</sup> In Calvino's novel, *Marcolando*, he writes about a city dweller trying to catch pigeons to prepare a tasty meal.

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of city spaces. It is perhaps in this sense that the Duomo and its square are “the realization of a very long and tiresome itinerary” by a multitude of people “which has involved the city of Milan for centuries and centuries.”

Mohamed’s use of vision is not coincidental. In Milan, visibility is a crucial way in which many migrants enter the public sphere and negotiate their claims to the city. Public space is one of the sites where some of the people who think of themselves as “Milanese” perceive some residents to be “others” both because they look differently, and because they use public spaces noticeably differently than Italians do. These perceptions are themselves tied to complex practices of looking and of self-representation. They beg the questions: who does the noticing, from which points of view, and in which contexts? Here, practices of “seeing” and “being seen” do not simply refer to the way one looks like, but rather the way in which vision links one’s presence to the seeing body of others (Pinney), who are themselves a representing, socially situated, and dynamic part of the urban landscape. Mohamed suggests that it is by “looking twice” and adopting different points of view that we can, for a moment, be different subjects within the landscape.

*(End of scene I. Lights off.)*

**Scene II.**  
**The name of the city**



*Mohamed/the tour guide and Cristina/the anthropologist are back in the Duomo plaza. This time, the Duomo is in the corner of the stage, and next to it there is a crowded street, leading to a low brick and stone building with arches. On the other side of the stage, there is still the typewriter, chair, table, and canvas.*

Mohamed/the tour guide (*still standing in the Duomo square, but facing away from the cathedral*):

But the name of the city, where was it born [where does it come from]? So there are many myths and many legends, one of which narrates that there was a tribal chief called Bellovoso, who passed the Alps and came to Milan, and so everyone asked him what the name of the city was. Not knowing what to answer he asked his councilors (...)

*(starting to walk away from the square, through a crowded street; Cristina/the anthropologist follows him. People on the street are walking in the opposite direction toward them.)*

So his councilors went on a retreat for some days—the legend narrates that these days were five. And that is why the number five became important for the city of Milan, because [for example] to liberate this city

Cristina/the student anthropologist: Yes!

Mohamed/the tour guide:

The battle lasted five days, so that's why [there is a] Plaza Five Days, but that is a recent story. So he was told that (...) the city had a name and a symbol, and that (...) the name of the city figured in the symbol, that was a little animal. (...)

So they went around in the city to look for that animal, and it was hard to find, because you can imagine how the city was then, with all these streets always full of people (...)

*(indicating the street they are walking on with ample gestures)*

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And the legend narrates that they took this street that is called Via Dante which is by Piazza Mercanti (...), so they came under this palace. And there, where there are the stairs, they found a particular animal (...) it was (...) the female of the pig, but it was particular because it had half [of its body covered by] wool—from Latin *media lanuta*, which later became *Mediolanum* and Milano of our days. And in fact the symbol of that small animal, the pig, can be found right here.

*(stopping under the brick and stone building, and pointing up to one of the arches, where there is a small carved animal figure)*

Cristina/the student anthropologist: Ah, that one!

Mohamed/the tour guide:

(...) This is why the history of such a big city as Milan becomes difficult to understand, because one usually expects to see a symbol (...) which would be visible to all. But the pig is here, stuck in this way. So the people ask: but if I have to look for the symbol of Milan, where do I go to look for it? So the symbol was chosen that would be visible to all (...) that is the one of the Madonnina.

*(pointing to the Duomo in the distance, and starting to sing the song “O Mia Bela Madunina”).<sup>11</sup>*

Cristina/the anthropologist

*(returns to her typewriter, while Mohamed/the tourguide continues singing “O Mia Bela Madunina”. When the song ends, the lights go out on the crowded street and the building with arches, and Cristina/the anthropologist starts again writing her text, which is projected on the white canvas).*

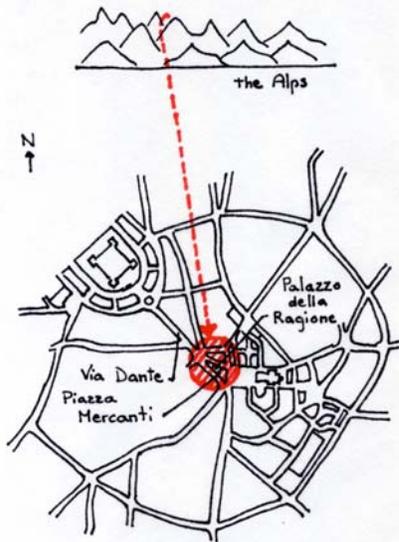
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<sup>11</sup> The Madonnina (literally: little Madonna) is the golden statue of Mary placed on the pinnacle of the Duomo. “O Mia Bela Madunina” is a very popular old song in Milanese dialect.

*Journeys*

Just like the water of the Navigli, Mohamed's words create a belt, an intricate net of itineraries through Milan. These are some of the paths which emerge from his descriptions:

*(Cristina/the anthropologist gets up and starts unrolling the following maps, which she pins to a board behind her. The maps are made of transparent paper and as she pins them one over the other the drawn-in itineraries of each map overlap and add to each other.)*

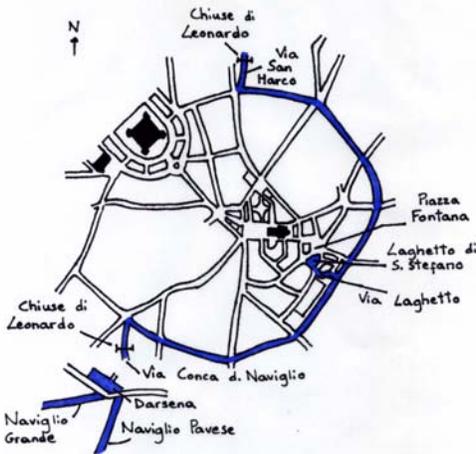


*Map of Bellovoso's journey*

Cristina Moretti



Map of a street seller's journey



Map of the Navigli canals



*Map of Mohamed/ the tour guide and Cristina/ the student anthropologist*

*(Cristina/ the anthropologist returns to her typewriter and continues writing.)*

These itineraries are not only physical journeys through city streets and plazas, they span continents, languages, and times. Suddenly it is not so straightforward to tell the history (official or otherwise) and stories of Milan—and we might start to suspect that it never was. To understand it, to tell it, it is necessary to talk about colonization in Africa, as well as about the fascination for Leonardo by European tourists, the legend of Bellovoso, and more. In a way, Mohamed’s narration makes space for “ghosts”: people, events, and places that are not visible, yet still have effects in present daily life (Gordon, 1997). His comment on the history of Milan being so difficult to understand because it is hidden, “stuck in this way,” can be read as an illuminating description of the problem of historical memories stuck between the thick arches of power.

Milan is indeed a city of ghosts, unsolved puzzles, and contradictory memories. Just a few minutes walk away from where we stand, is Piazza Fontana, where a bomb killed 16 people in 1969. Still nobody knows who planted the bomb near a busy bank. It is generally believed that it was far-right forces, in a “strategy of

*Cristina Moretti*

tension” aimed at keeping the left from power. But who exactly was involved? Until now the courts have been trying to follow an elusive, never-to-be-found truth. And how did Pinelli die, the anarchist who was being questioned by police about the bombing? Did he really just trip and accidentally fall from a window while in police custody (Fo)?

One of the interesting things about itineraries, is that, if a walking tour through the city can evoke stories, events, and relationships, the opposite is also true: words, tales, and performances conjure up streets and places, and make it possible for us to see, know, and ultimately move through the city. In Mohamed’s text, questions—such as: “This city was always like this?”; “This plaza, what does it represent to the citizens?”; “Why Via Laghetto?”; “Why is the city called Milano?”; “Where do I look for [the symbol of the city]?”—are the centerpieces of the narration. These questions, however, are also always tentative directions, steps in an itinerary, literally the beginning of streets. Just like the course of the Naviglio tells a story, the story of migration of a person traces a journey in city spaces.

*(End of scene II. Lights out.)*

### **Scene III.**

#### **Piazza Mercanti/Palazzo della Ragione**



*Mohamed/ the tour guide and Cristina/ the anthropologist are standing in a quite, old courtyard, with what looks like a brick and stone well in the middle. Leaning on one side of the well, there are two young men wearing masks (one mask is*

*black and the other is white), and playing several musical instruments. On the side of the courtyard, there is still the typewriter, chair, table, and canvas.*

Mohamed/the tour guide:

Here was also the place where (...) people came to be judged. In those times bankruptcy was a shame, not only for the artisan but also for his whole family. (...) So we find some analogies with the African tradition where honor needs to be defended at all costs. (...) If one failed his duty he was not put in prison but brought in a plaza and the elders hit him with words where even the most powerful war tank could not touch him: in his honor, in his dignity. (...) But also in Milan when one failed, he was brought to this plaza.

The one who arrives here thinks to have found a well, but in reality it is not a well, because inside there is no water, inside there is a stone. (...)

Cristina/the student anthropologist: *(surprised)* A stone?

Mohamed/the tour guide:

Inside there is a stone called the stone of the beaten. Why? Like in the African tradition, the one who went bankrupt was brought here, naked, and had to hit his bottom on the stone three times to be shamed in public. And so, you see,

*(voices from back stage join Mohamed's voice, creating a chorus)*

even if the world seems so old, the beginning of the future emerges always from the past

*(end chorus)*

(...) One is very sorry if s/he lives in a city and cannot be the flag carrier of this city when s/he leaves. Because my Milanese-ness did not detract anything from my African-ness, it has confirmed it, even.

*Cristina Moretti*

(...) So we are convinced that the world goes how it does because we have forgotten the weight of culture, (...)

*(voices from back stage join Mohamed's voice, creating a chorus)*

culture is the only thing that is left to a person, even if everything is taken away from him (...).

*(end chorus)*<sup>12</sup>

But my grandfather told me, “When you will happen to go to another country, with other people, if you see that everyone runs after the having, let them go and run after the knowing because sooner or later it will be you who will have to manage what they will have found.” And doing the touristic guide today in Milan for me is a payment; my richness and my treasure are to know this city, to appreciate it, in [its] symbolic and its imaginary places.

Because it is a city that was always been contested—in the Middle Ages as well as after; but also in our days, because the foreign communities divide among themselves the Duomo Plaza. There is a corner where only Peruvians meet, on the other side only Africans—when the good weather arrives they go to play drums, bongos, and so on—on the other side Latin-Americans, and so on. And the Italians find themselves there, easily consumed [i.e., eaten] by the artistic and cultural expression of those who arrive. Because when I arrive with my *djembe*, with my drum that I start to play, often the young Italian guy who looks at me gets excited and wants to do what I do. And with desire and passion he will even succeed, but he will forget that he himself has the *tarantella*, the *pizzica*, the *Tammurriata Nera*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In our actual tour, at this point Mohamed walked away from the courtyard, returned to Dante Street (where we were in the previous scene), and started again walking away from the Duomo. He headed towards the Sforza Castle, which is about a 10-minute walk away.

<sup>13</sup> These are types of music from South Italy. The *Tammurriata Nera* is an old song from Napoli. The *pizzica* and the *tarantella* are types of traditional music and dance from the regions of Puglia and Basilicata. They are linked to *tarantismo*, a system of trance-inducing curing rituals for people who have been bitten by Tarantula

So in that context immigration becomes a problem, not a phenomenon, because it will confirm the uprooting of the Italian people from the foundations of its culture, its history, and it is a problem to face. But if the Italian who comes to see me is conscious of having the *tarantella* and the *Tammurriata Nera*, it will be enough to bring it around the table and together we can do intercultural. But we can't think about integration by asking one to do exactly what the other does in order to count [that is, to matter in society], otherwise (...) that becomes assimilation.

Cristina/the student anthropologist

*(Returns to her typewriter to the side of the setting, as the lights go out on the courtyard. She continues writing her text, while the music continues)*

### *Voices*

What particularly strikes me in Mohamed's play is his use of different voices or perspectives within one tale. I can imagine all of these characters here around me, as I try to distinguish them and to make their acquaintance.

*(Cristina/the anthropologist gets up, takes a piece of paper with the text of Mohamed/the guide's narration, and cuts it with a scissor in five sections. In the meantime, five figures appear standing in the shadows, on the side of the typewriter. She gives one piece of paper to each section to each of them, as she greets them, one by one).*

Cristina/the student anthropologist:

*(addressing the first figure)* You are the narrator?

*(addressing the next figure)* The voice of history?

*(addressing the next figure)* Our friend!

*(addressing the next figure)* Grandfather?

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spiders. Appropriately, the examples Mohamed uses for cultural identity and difference are musical, something which is very processual, and performative.

*Cristina Moretti*

*(addressing the next figure, but the audience cannot hear what she says) ...*

*(Then she returns to the typewriter, and continues to write her text. The five personages disappear in the darkness)*

Steedly points out how the author of a story always writes him/herself in it as a “figure in the carpet” (Steedly 20). I find this image helpful while I re-listen and re-write Mohamed’s tale. Although Mohamed’s telling seems at first sight a linear description and a monologue, part of its performative aspect comes from the fact that it includes several characters that he places in a dialogue with each other. Sometimes this dialogue erupts in the open, creating small vignettes, but often the interaction of these voices is similar to the subtle weaving together of several strands and colours. For this reason, to continue with the analogy, it is often difficult to distinguish exactly one thread and/or pattern from the other. It seems to me that this entanglement is one of the strengths of his performative commentary. By being many and interlinked figures in the carpet of the narration, Mohamed then addresses the ways in which these differently positioned social actors co-inhabit a city like Milan, and how their being together in public spaces creates both tensions and possibilities.

One of the most powerful “doings” of a tale is often the creation of personages which are too slippery for dominant tropes and discourses to anchor themselves on them (Tsing). Although Mohamed talks about Senegalese and Italians, he carefully presents them as much more complex categories than the ones often imagined in the media and daily discourses. A Senegalese can be a wise grandfather, can be a recent immigrant, can be a person with “a double cultural identity.” Similarly, an Italian can be a racist, can be the youth who “forgets” her/his Italian-ness, can be somebody who changes and learns by engaging in dialogue. Both can be a Milanese: somebody who lives in the city, regardless of his nationality and/or color. Indeed, I find that the strength of his story comes not so much from the fact that it includes many points of view, but in the way in which they shift, mingle, and sometimes become one another.

By talking about identity as several dresses, speaking positions, and intersecting itineraries, he points out that “Milanese-ness” does not preclude “African-ness” and vice versa. This also becomes a comment on the very character of urban spaces. The use of Piazza del Duomo by members of different communities is consistent with its history as a meeting place, with the geographical and historical position of Milan as a middle space between trading routes. And again, for “the one who follows well the history of Milan,” its thick layer of histories becomes a resource, a “richness” and a “treasure” and a way to become a “flag carrier of a city.”

*(End of scene III. Lights out).*

**Scene IV.  
The Sforza Castle**



*Mohamed/ the tour guide and Cristina/ the anthropologist are walking on another crowded street. The street is lined with shops. Many of the people walking by carry plastic shopping bags. On one side of the street a black man wearing a heavy jacket and a woolen hat is trying to sell books to passersby. At the end of the street, in the distance, there is the Sforza Castle. The side where the typewriter was placed in the previous scenes is now in the darkness.*

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Mohamed/the tour guide:

(...) Our immigrant friend will (...) need a minimum of eight or nine months for her/him to be able to move around alone. S/he will ask passersbys, (...) s/he will get explanations, but not for everything. Why? First, time is short, and the second reason is that the one who leaves one's country can have on his/her shoulders more than forty mouths to feed. Thus the time for discovery cannot be too long, and everything s/he will know will be reduced to the necessary minimum (...)

So our friend (...) will be entrusted to somebody else who will act as his/her tutor, from the same household where s/he resides. And this person will have the task to help him grow in her/his work. Everyone who arrives does not speak the language, perhaps does not even have documents and so forth, the only thing that s/he can do is to sell. Sell what? (...) The first day [in the house] s/he will have to meet everyone, explain how relatives are, and so forth, and then there is a collection. Every member of the household gives him something, perhaps a packet of CDs, (...) some t-shirts to sell. (...) The next day s/he will be assigned to a tutor who will bring him/her along when s/he goes out selling. Perhaps s/he will put him/her a hundred meters from the fixed location where s/he stays, perhaps in a parking lot, or in front of the stadium, or here in the centre. So for a month, for a month s/he will not have to pay anything. (...) This will give him/her the time to sell and to put away money, and construct his/her capital. From the second month s/he will have the responsibility to do exactly what the other people in the house do and s/he will become a complete member of the household in every respect.

So from the Duomo looking at this road, Via Dante, that brings us directly to the Castle. (...) [Our immigrant friend] passes by the Piccolo Theatre, but s/he does not even look at it, because (...) the theatre how it is understood in Africa has nothing to do with the Piccolo Theatre, or La Scala; no, let's forget about it. Because for us the theatre has to give us again the joy of living, the theatre has to be a moment of freedom, of artistic expression, the theatre is not that spectacle where there are on one side actors and on the other side the

public. No, because the public also has to interact, the public who listens or follows the story becomes automatically the protagonist of the story it listens to. (...)

And so I remember well the first theatrical performance I did in Italy, with a very good producer of the Teatro Officina. (...) He asked me for the script.

And I said: Which script?

But, the script of the performance!

But no, there is no need to write it, it is *my* performance.

Yes, I know it is yours, but I need to know how it will be.

If you want I can narrate it to you.

No, no, you do not need to tell it, you need to write it.

(...)

So I was not ready to do interculture because I had not understood his reality. (...) So from there I understood that leaving my country I would have had to borrow a new dress and that it should not at all be tight for me. I just had to realize that I was borrowing it. And this to make better my permanence in Italy. Because we will never be able to communicate if we are speaking different languages. (...)

*(A woman playing music on an accordion appears on stage/on the street. She plays a slow, and repetitive music while Mohamed/the tour guide continues to talk. While playing she crosses the stage until she exits on the other side).*

This is helpful for me in order to – why not? – learn the positive aspects on this side and perhaps bring them to the other side that I left and see them also grow with a new dress, that they will not have borrowed, it will be always theirs, but it will change a bit their point of view.

*(voices from back stage join Mohamed's voice, creating a chorus)*

Because only the one who sleeps, who passes his life sleeping, will not evolve

*(end chorus)*

*Cristina Moretti*

and there is never an exclusive culture in the world.  
Every culture is daughter of sub- and micro-cultures,  
every culture is a witness to a lived time,  
is an experience,  
every culture is a page of an encounter,  
of a journey,  
of a line of a poem,  
of a relation.  
Every culture is a witness to a lived time,  
but not of the time to live,  
because we cannot anticipate the culture that will come.

We know nothing about that, because certainly the Milanese culture of 3000 will have nothing to do with this. It is clear that it will draw some positive aspects that *we* would have left them but they will not have to move necessarily how we move [today]. (...)

*(Music ends as the woman with the accordion exits the stage.)*

[Our immigrant friend] (...) will meet many people and offer her/his articles [moving between two train stations and the city centre]. (...) There are some times in which s/he really succeeds in selling and making money, but there are also worse moments in which s/he cannot even sell one product. (...) S/he will try in any case and in every way *not only* to sell her/his articles but s/he will also try to educate her/himself through her/his job, because there is not the necessary and sufficient time to go to school and learn the language. And so her/his school becomes the street. And if her/his school is the street, the people s/he meets in the road become, so to speak, her/his teachers. For this reason it is not uncommon to see one insisting to sell a CD. S/he does not care (...) if the person in front of him/her likes music or not. (...) The important thing is that there is that dialogue which enables her/him to understand the tenses, the accents, since Italian grammar is something that scares everyone. (...)

So s/he takes this direction and follows the crowd and finds her/himself in front of the Castle.

*Lights go out, and when they come back on, only the right side of the stage is in the spotlight. Instead of the typewriter, there is the Sforza Castle. Mohamed/the tour guide and Cristina/the anthropologist are standing in front of it.*

Mohamed/the tour guide:

But s/he [our immigrant friend] is much more interested in the history of Piazza Mercanti than the one of the Castle. Because the Castle is yes, is a witness of the life and of the inheritance of famous personages like Leonardo and so forth, but it has little relevance for somebody who arrived in the city. Because in our part [of the world] a castle is lived like a fort, where inside (...) there are the very rich who have everything and outside the ones who are starving. That figure strikes his/her sensibility and so s/he confronts that reality differently [than, for example, a tourist]. (...)

[Different European cultures and languages] are some of the things that he starts to understand by coming to the Castle, because it is a crossroad of cultures and traditions, of languages, because all the tourists, especially European, are fascinated by the Castle because [of] the name of (...) Leonardo [da Vinci] (...).

Except for our friend, who sees this Castle with diffidence. (...) I personally entered only once in the Castle and I have been here since 6 years (...).

[Our friend] finds himself in two conditions which are often contradictory, right? Wanting to know and to learn, but also wanting to survive. One lives only through work, so to combine the two things is not always easy (...) It always happens that (...) at a certain moment s/he receives a phone call from a parent who is not well and s/he feels on his shoulder the duty to respond to those needs. He is in a *precarious* situation and so what does he do? He makes violence to himself to help them. It could be that he is not well, but he will never tell them (...) also because he is cheated by the pictures that he sent to his country the day after he arrived to Milan. It is all an itinerary that will always shape his permanence in Italy, especially in the city of Milan, where there is a very strong and beautiful cultural heredity. (...)

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*(voices from back stage join Mohamed's voice, creating a chorus)*

Culture is the only thing that is left to a person even when everything is taken away from her/him.

*(end chorus).*

Take everything away from me, but not my culture. (...)

*(A church bell sounds)*

So, returning to the itinerary of our friend, following the footsteps of people who flow to the Cadorna station<sup>14</sup> (...), there s/he will see another dimension of the city, because for sure s/he will have more refusals than [there are] days in the year.<sup>15</sup> (...) S/he sells but s/he will also need information. Perhaps s/he is hungry, or there is something s/he needs, s/he (...) uses the languages s/he knows, but often s/he gets ridiculous answers. (...) The prejudice is very rooted from both sides (...) probably everyone has seen in him the potential *vuccumpra*<sup>16</sup> (...). Doing interculture would mean to challenge this taboo: look guys, it is not like that. (...) Every individual has her/his own story, her/his own experiences, we cannot use labels, (...) then all Italians would be potential mafia members and all Africans potential *vuccumpras*. So in the end (...) he understands that his permanence in Italy will not always be a *mousse au chocolat*.

(...)

[Sometimes a person] finds her/himself with our friend potential *vuccumpra* who wants to sell her/him a CD. So s/he refuses rudely.

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<sup>14</sup> In our actual itinerary, here Mohamed started to go towards the nearby Cadorna train station, where the rest of the narration took place.

<sup>15</sup> In this part of his narration, Mohamed also describes how a vendor goes from one train station (Cadorna) to the other (Central Station) to sell his/her merchandise, following the commuters into and out of Milan.

<sup>16</sup> *Vuccumpra* means literally: “wannabuy”? It is a derogatory expression to refer to a street seller, and has been used to designate North African immigrants in general.

Yes, but in the end (...) s/he walks ten steps and then comes back, and says: “Sorry, I did not mean it.”

This establishes a connection, a relationship: (...) “Sorry, I did not mean it, this is not a day”.

So the human reaction [of the CD vendor] would be “But why it is not a day? The sun has risen, and it will set in a little while. Why it is not a day?” (...)

“No, (...) it is not a day, because of a personal situation, (...) because I am going through unhappy times.”

So there one starts to do intercultural, because in our part [of the world] is always necessary to enjoy life – why? Because there is the knowledge that

*(voices from back stage join Mohamed's voice, creating a chorus)*

whatever we have, someone else desires it very much and lives it like a distant dream.

*(end chorus)*

(...) In Milan one would say *ciappo la vita come la ven* [in Milanese dialect], which means to look at the positive aspects of life—which is what our immigrant friend was saying after all. And so,

*(voices from back stage join Mohamed's voice, creating a chorus)*

even if the world seems so old, the beginning of the future emerges always from the past.

*(end chorus)*

So this will bring our [presumably Italian] friend to reflect: (...) he who leaves his land, his country, his loved ones, (...) perhaps coming here from a place where there is no winter, where is always warm, and finds himself here in a cold, grey, country (...) he still finds the strength to smile at me and to tell me: come on, don't give

*Cristina Moretti*

up, you can do it (...). [This] will bring this other friend of his [the Italian] to confront her/his problems.

All the encounters, all the relations, are born from this itinerary. That [Italian] friend the next day will spontaneously pass by, (...) only because s/he will want to chat some more. There begins that voyage of encounter that sooner or later will cause her/him to say: "But you, do you like doing this work?"

And the automatic response: "I have no choice."

So [the Italian] will (...) look among his friends and (...) relatives for anyone who could help. (...) The majority of us who have found a job have found it this way. They are relationship which last our whole lives. And most of us have a child whose Italian name, how to say it? The choice of that name is given from that experience. Thus, here [the street] is not only a crossroad of cultures, of people who come and go, here life stories are born. Here are born more positive aspects than negative. (...) Until there is life, there is hope. The hope of each of us is to be able one day to give to this city what we have in our heart, that is our knowledge that

*(voices from back stage join Mohamed's voice, creating a chorus)*

whatever we have, someone else desires it very much, and lives it like a distant dream.

*(end chorus)*

Here ends our itinerary.



## **City Wars**

And here ends also our play. One of the many things that I learned from Mohamed's performance is that perhaps we could come to appreciate public space as what could make it possible for us to switch between positions, to follow other people's itineraries, and to at least fleetingly participate in each other's lives and identities. This

does not mean that we are all positioned equally in the city. Mohamed is very aware of the constraints facing less privileged residents of Milan and the deep inequalities that structure Milanese society. He talks very clearly of immigrants' experiences of cramped, unaffordable housing, of daily discrimination and labeling, of the hardships they encounter when work is slow. He explains that it is very difficult to find a job different than selling in the street, and that it is necessary to know somebody even to be considered for employment. He also shows how vendors' experience of the city is marked by tiring daily journeys, especially in winter when it is very cold and they have to stay long hours outdoors. Yet his narration and journey through the city highlights both the limitations and possibilities of sociality in public space. It poses the question: What if? What if differently positioned people could encounter each other in public space? What if they/we could engage in "interculture"?

The performative structure of his talk is important for the creation of this imaginary. By using streets and plazas as stages, Mohamed establishes a complex correspondence between speaking and moving, walking and telling—the itinerary and the story. One is created by the other. By tracing parallel journeys and maps through the city, he crafts an open text, where the listener can move and imagine different voices, experiences, and positionalities, and see with different eyes. In this way, I felt that Mohamed called me to witness the very possibility and power of the imagination. As both Fabian (1990) and Thrift point out, performance in this case can "expand the existing pool of alternatives" (Thrift 2021) and the repertoire of ideas, dreams, and memories available to us.

This is no small feat, if we consider, as Dolan does, that imagination might be the necessary bridge towards utopia. According to her, theatre is a public practice through which the "field of the possible is [...] opened beyond that of the actual" (Ricoeur qtd in Dolan 89). Glancing alternative possibilities to the status quo helps us see utopia not as a fixed state that can never be reached, but as a process, a desire, and an affect, which emerge in particular moments in our daily lives.

In the context of urban space, the experience of this imagination might encourage us to search for those moments in which public

space is created through extraordinary, everyday encounters—as the one enacted by Mohamed in his concluding vignette. The word “enacted” is crucial here. Mohamed’s tour, rather than talking about public space, creates a framework in which it can fleetingly exist. By performing streets and plazas as complex journeys of hope, sociality, and discovery, he fashions a place and time in which people and positionalities that might otherwise not interact with one another, can confront and add to each other. To borrow Mohamed’s beautiful metaphors, he offers an ephemeral moment in which they can make music together or try on new dresses, while always being aware of the gap between notes, or of the subtle distance between bodies and garments.<sup>17</sup>

Placed somewhere between a formal theatre play and an unstructured, daily walk in the city, Mohamed’s intervention could then be a provocative companion to Dolan’s question:

How can performance model civic engagement in participatory democracy? How might performance let us rehearse truly democratic public practices through a kind of social mimesis? That is, instead of art imitating life, how might we bend life to imitate theater, with its necessity for attentive listening, for dialogic reciprocity, for the company (and kindness) of strangers? (Dolan 90)

Mohamed’s walk suggests that streets and plazas can sometimes provide answers to these questions. Utopian public space, “with its necessity for attentive listening, for dialogic reciprocity, for the company (and kindness) of strangers,” and for vision as an embodied witnessing and a critical act of representation, can at times “model civic engagement in participatory democracy” (*ibid.*). This idea appears particularly precious in a city where history has left deep marks in plazas and streets. For one, Mohamed’s words remind us that memory and performance have powerful implications when they come to life in the streets. For the other, he suggests that while this performativity helps constitute the urban terrain as an unresolved site

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<sup>17</sup> See Thrift for a discussion on the methodological and theoretical importance of the “depth of the now” (Thrift 2021).

of struggle, it can also encourage the social creativity needed to realize public space as a hopeful possibility.

Mohamed's narration might then be helpful in illuminating a series of events which happened in Milan almost one year after the walking tour represented above. On Saturday morning, March 11, 2006, a demonstration took place in one of the major shopping avenues, Corso Buenos Aires. It was unauthorized by the city and organized—so it was reported—by people associated with the Milanese Social Centres.<sup>18</sup> This rally was a counter-demonstration to a fascist parade that had been planned by Fiamma Tricolore (Italy's far-right and anti-immigration political party) for that afternoon, and that had been authorized by the municipality.

For reasons and mechanisms unknown, during the morning rally a group of young demonstrators started burning cars, smashing shop windows, and injuring a group of policemen. About 20 to 30 people were arrested for this action. In an additional surprising turn, bystanders charged the demonstrators who had been held up by the police, who then found themselves in the ironic position of having to defend their own captives. This is how *Ansa Italy* reported the events:

The demonstration of the social centers, at noon, started within a very tense climate. About 200 youths, many of them with helmets, their faces covered with balaclavas, with wooden sticks in their hands, marched from the Lima Plaza to Porta Venezia [also a plaza], where there was a numerous anti-riot police force [waiting] for the non-authorized rally.

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<sup>18</sup> Social centres are autonomous community centres, serving as venues for political, social and counter-cultural grassroot activism. Although they can be said to constitute a movement (Membretti), the sentence “people from the social centers” is such a broad category to be almost meaningless. It is a very heterogeneous, “segmented” and “policephalous” body (Membretti 79), as the different centres are organized differently from each other, focus on a variety of goals and actions, and relate in different ways to the communities in which they are located (see Membretti 72ff). Milanese social centres have played a particular role in the city since the 1970s by fostering an on-going, though largely silenced, discussion on urban spaces. Their influence can also be seen in the fact that many people visit them on a regular basis, and in their ability to mobilize a large number of people for events and demonstrations in very short periods of time (see Mudu; Membretti). The *Leoncavallo* is the oldest and largest of all Milanese social centres.

There was a dense throwing of stones and firecrackers [...] against the police. The demonstrators from the social centres also set wood bundles and garbage cans on fire close to the *caselli* [two little buildings that were once part of the historic city wall] of Porta Venezia]. The police [literally: “the forces of public order”] threw tear gas while the firefighters succeeded in extinguishing a fire from a scooter and a newspaper stand; the firefighters could not however come close to some cars which were also engulfed from the flames. [...] The shocked mass of bystanders turned their anger against the 2-300 demonstrators who had unleashed the disorders, when the latter were held by the police. Just barely, in fact, could the agents save them [the demonstrators they had arrested] from a real lynching: large groups of people were beating them, shouting ‘kill them!’ while the police was hardly managing to load them into the vans.

A store, close to the corner of Corso Buenos Aires and Viale Regina Giovanna, went up in flames, like two cars that were close by [...]. The flames were cordoned off by firefighters, who also evacuated many apartments of the building, invaded by the smoke. (“Centri Sociali”).

Meanwhile, in the afternoon, the authorized right wing manifestation took place undisturbed, following the same route as the morning rally. A couple of hundred people, escorted by police, paraded invoking the name of Mussolini, shouting fascist slogans, displaying Italian and Fiamma Tricolore party flags, and performing the “Roman salute.”

These two rallies and their dynamic sparked yet another public display. The following Thursday, March 16, the business owners of the area (Corso Buenos Aires) organized a torchlight demonstration against the violence of the Saturday morning rally—thus becoming a rally against a rally against a rally. According to *Corriere della Sera*, about 5,000 people participated, including several political parties (but carrying no political party flags or signs):

The torchlight rally started a few minutes after 8 pm [...]. Many [are] the Milanese and Italian flags that are being carried by the demonstrators in Corso Buenos Aires, where [...] the windows and awnings of shops have remained lit in sign of protest. [...] A

placard with the writing “the city that lives wins” opens [that is: is carried by the front row of] the rally (“Prodi e Fassino”).

Reading the above descriptions from the papers (unfortunately I was not in Italy at the time, so I could not be part of those events), just after re-listening to Mohamed’s commentary, I was struck by how these reports themselves sounded like stage directions. I could not help but rethink the comment by Pasolini, one of Italy’s major theatre writers and film directors: “[t]he archetype of the theatre occurs before our eyes every day in the street, at home, in public meeting places, etc. In this sense, social reality is itself a performance that is not entirely unaware of its being such and has, therefore, its own code” (Pasolini qtd in Van Watson 23).

In Corso Buenos Aires, the burning cars in the morning, the Roman greetings in the afternoon, and the torches of the evening created a very complex urban choreography. By this I do not mean that it was not serious business; rather, the very chain effect of these public displays confirms once more how the streets can, and often are, highly contested and important locales for cultural, economic, and ideological warfare, and for the negotiation of social realities. Although this can be said for many cities around the world, it is especially true for Milan. Demonstrations and public conflicts, be they large or small, quiet or intense, are not an unusual sight in the city—now, as well as in the past. After all, the “five days” of Milan that Mohamed was talking about earlier refers to an 1848 battle (more precisely from March 18 to 22 of that year) in which the residents of the city built barricades in streets and plazas to free their town from Austrian rule. And in April 2007, one year after the Corso Buenos Aires events that I describe in these pages, almost twenty people were injured in another “street war” (“Guerra di strada”)—this time between police forces and residents of the Milanese “Chinatown.” The violent clashes happened both before and during a rally in which three hundred people protested against police and city authorities, sparking in turn right-wing street meetings and public displays.

Especially fascist and left-wing forces have historically engaged in conflicts which marked the urban environment and the memory of city places (e.g., see Foot 14). It is perhaps telling in this respect that

the two women over 80 years old whom I talked to during my research remembered the end of fascism as that day in April 1945 in which Mussolini's and his fiancé's body were hung on one of the central Plaza of Milano, Piazzale Loreto. Coincidentally, and perhaps ironically, this very same plaza is also one of the end points of Corso Buenos Aires, and thus was one of the locations for the March demonstrations.

Mohamed's tour suggests that one of the reasons why streets and plazas are such an important locale for struggles, for the negotiation of social realities, and the constitution of political identities might be because they are open to the very possibility of performance and performativity (see also Freeman; Fleetwood). To say it simply, people routinely appropriate streets and plazas to represent, embody, and reinterpret identities and spaces, thus participating in on-going debates on public histories and meanings. This, of course, can be as easily progressive as it can be conservative, repressive, or totalitarian (as the events in Corso Buenos Aires remind us).

A large body of literature on performance in the context of everyday life to bring attention to speech and language "as social action" (Bauman & Briggs 62). Rather than isolating and privileging the content of what people say, a performative framework helps us consider "to [and with] whom, when, how, and why" (Fabian 8) people engage in acts of telling, retelling, listening, and remembering. Scholars who attend to how people enact identities, spaces, and social relations seek in this way to analyze both the social constructed-ness of the world and the ways in which people add new twists and meanings to discourses, systems and situations. To say it with Gregson and Rose, the notion of performativity helps us look at the "creativity ... and uncertainty" of daily life (434). This creativity, as noted by Thrift is politically significant, as it includes the ways in which people often interfere, so-to-speak, with the script.

Public spaces work well as informal stages for a variety of reasons. As Fleetwood points out regarding public transit, public spaces present a mix of anonymity and spectatorship. Although to a lesser degree than when riding buses, by being together in busy streets and plazas, people are "forced to bear witness" (Fleetwood 37) to others' appearances, words, and movements. There is no place

outside of the stage. Being confronted with other people's realities, ideas, and experiences is after all, what makes public space so important for participatory democracy (Caldeira)—and what renders vision in the city not a transparent perceiving of a reality out there, but a complex negotiation of who should figure in the city and how. As Mohamed exemplifies, public spaces are also replete with layers of meanings, events, and memories. The traces of these stories can be harnessed to perform other ones and in so doing to reinterpret the past and the future. Moreover, because “identity is not a state of being but one of doing” (Fleetwood 40), public space serves as one of the arenas where our iterative gestures, poses, words and movements crystallize who we are both for ourselves and for others (see also Guano 2007; Del Negro).

Mohamed's walk suggests that we look at public space as an assembly of stages framed by particular publics, interests, viewpoints, events, and stories. Public memory is particularly apt at being displayed, performed, or obliterated in public urban locales. Signs, monuments, expositions, parades, and murals are just some examples of the many ways in which collective recollections are made, maintained, and reframed. Yet memory, like vision, is not simple, transparent, or fixed. Remembering Mohamed's play with what can and cannot be seen, we may ask: how does the violence of burning cars become much more visible and understandable than the violence of enacting a certain type of remembrance? For whom and in which “regime of the visual” (Guano 2002, 305) is one clearer than the other?

Interestingly, the social centre Leoncavallo responded to the accusation that youth from the social centres participated violently in the morning rally by reminding the city of the tragic disappearances and forgettings which mark the history of Milan. These include the murder of Dax, one of the youth from the social centres whose death (in 2003) anniversary falls on March 16, and the killing of Fausto and Iaiò on March 18, 1978. The latter case has been recently archived without finding out who shot the two young members of the Leoncavallo, but many believe that it was “a political murder against the left” (Faustoeiaio) and that it happened because Fausto and Iaiò were involved in an anti-drug campaign (see Membretti, 2003: 92).

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According to the Leoncavallo, it is important to understand and evaluate the current events as part of wider conflicts between fascist and progressive forces which have involved urban spaces in Milan at least since the late sixties and which have direct linkages to political elections and governance. (That the rallies happened some weeks before the municipal elections adds another dimension to all this).

Mohamed's words and the comments of Leoncavallo help us understand some of the links between space and memory that emerged during that week. The situation indeed became also a conflict about the public memory of violence. On March 18, just two days after the third rally, in a night blitz, municipal officers replaced an epitaph in Piazza Fontana, the theatre of the 1969 bombing by yet unknown perpetrators. The sign that commemorated Giuseppe Pinelli, the anarchist who lost his life in police custody in conjunction with the bombing, suddenly declared that Pinelli "died" instead of "being killed." A few days later, on March 23, the anarchist association Ponte Della Ghisolfa re-placed the sign that had been in Piazza Fontana since 1978. This is thus how the plaza and the two signs looked like in March 2006:



*The sign to the left reads: "To Giuseppe Pinelli anarchic railway man killed innocent in the rooms of the police of Milan on 16/12/1969. The students and the democratic people of Milan." The sign to the right reads: "Municipality of Milan. To Giuseppe Pinelli anarchic railway man innocent who died tragically in the rooms of the police of Milan on 15/12/1969."*

By telling the truth twice but differently, these signs create a place for an audience as an active onlooker who cannot but question “what really happened” in 1969. Like the demonstrations, they are not just responses to facts or the recalling of something that has simply taken place. Rather, they are ways of making history matter and of constituting public space as the very medium and result of those struggles. Considering the rallies and placards after having walked with Mohamed, we can then see that they too, albeit in a different way, use plazas and streets as stages in order to tell the history of Milan—a history that always looks different from different perspectives.

Although Mohamed’s tour seems at first sight “just a story,” and these rallies and events as “real” conflicts, their juxtaposition highlights the power of performance and the performative aspect of power. As Taylor (1997) and Guano (2002) have described for Argentina, oppositional as well as hegemonic forces often use theatrical tactics, staging and spectacles to uphold and/or challenge the status quo. This includes casting protagonists, interpellating audiences, as well as framing “modalities of seeing, displaying, watching, and being seen” (Guano 303) that are so central to political life and to the creation of its subjects (Taylor).

In turn, the events of March 2006 provide evidence once more that Mohammed’s words are not simply a story about Milan. Because streets and plazas are crucial political sites—“arenas where agentive participation can be established through [...] critical spectatorship and performative action” (Guano 306)—his journey is an act of engagement that helps shape the city itself, its landscapes, and identities. In other words, the significance of Mohamed’s itinerary lies not only in what he tells us about Milan, but also and particularly in the way it seeks to intervene in the very shaping of its places, realities, and discourses in and through the city terrain. By being also “just a walk,” moreover, it points out that performative practices and commentaries matter not only amid crisis and dramatic events, but also in people’s everyday life, as they imagine, remember, narrate, move through and use city spaces.

## Conclusion

I juxtaposed Mohamed's tale with the March 2006 rallies because, as Thrift writes, often performances and poetics are thought of as apolitical (2021). As Thrift discusses, they are often seen as "arty stuff" (ibid.) detached from social engagement. After all—some may say—what difference does it make to the everyday conflicts and debates in the city, if we imagine with Mohamed different musicians playing together, or travel with Bellovoso and his councilors? Here I would like to suggest otherwise. Look at what happens with the streets: they are seething with mysteries of which we are always a part. They demand of us that we look twice, because, just like the two signs for Pinelli, public spaces harbour two kinds of truth. On the one hand, they are sites of exclusion, in which people of colour, women, and less-privileged city-dwellers are not as welcome as others (see Guano, 2003; Mitchell; Dines; Razack). On the other hand, public spaces constitute a necessary ideal, without which "inequality" might become "an organizing value" (Caldeira 4) of city life.

Or again, look at the placards in Piazza Fontana. In a way, these signs do not just commemorate Pinelli. They themselves are strikingly similar to ghosts. Their significance as part of a controversy works in the same way as a "specter": "it *begins by coming back*" (Derrida qtd in Taylor 30, emphasis in original).<sup>19</sup> Like ghosts, these signs tell us that seeing is not sufficient. In fact, they literally *show* us that looking is not enough. By representing a contradictory message, they seem to mimic the "seeing double" of when we do not see very well. By enacting for us a double-truth and double-vision, these placards suggest that all urban landscapes might be like Piazza Fontana: unruly characters in a dynamic relationship with the play through which they are made, undone, unraveled, reorganized and reinterpreted.

Considering just how complex, contested, absurd, surprising, and even outright violent the life of public spaces can be, what other tool

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor writes: "Derrida [...] highlights the reiterative nature of haunting, for phantoms always represent a repetition: 'A specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*' (30, emphasis in Derrida's original).

do we have but performance to comment on it and imagine better possibilities? What other strategy but to engage people's imagination, "affect", and the "immediacy of the now" (Thrift 2020)? By locating hopes, creative intervention, and utopian moments in everyday encounters and common public spaces, Mohamed's performative walk opens a dynamic space in which we can move, live and learn.

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