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[Rome]



## **We Are Not Going Back: Migrant Music as the New Folk Music of Italy<sup>1</sup>**

**[Nie wracamy - muzyka migrantów jako nowa muzyka ludowa Włoch]**

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### **Abstract**

This article concerns the “Roma Forestiera” project that has been carried out for the last ten years by the independent Circolo Gianni Bosio organization, which is devoted to the study of popular memory, folk song, and oral history. The author describes the experiences gathered while recording witnesses to history on the streets and in the migrant centres.

### **Keywords**

folk music, immigration to Italy, popular memory, urban context, oral history

### **Słowa kluczowe**

muzyka ludowa, napływ imigrantów do Włoch, pamięć ludowa, kontekst miejski, historia mówiona



## Sounds

The lyrics of a classic 1940s Roman song written by Armando Libianchi and Luigi Granozio complain that music had all but vanished from the public space of Rome: “How good were the times when in the streets you could always hear the sound of a barrel organ, arpeggios of guitars and mandolins [...]” The song went on to complain that “Nannina,” the eponymous young woman from the working-class neighborhoods, has forgotten that she is a Roman, no longer sings *stornelli*,<sup>2</sup> and has fallen in love with this newfangled American music. The song’s title was *Roma forestiera*, something like *Rome the Stranger*, *Rome the Foreigner*, or *Rome Estranged*.

Ironically, it is precisely the strangers and foreigners who have come to Rome with the recent waves of immigration – Thami, Abdurrahman, Roxana, Roullah – that have brought music back to the streets, buses, and subways of Rome. Thus, the Circolo Gianni Bosio,<sup>3</sup> an independent organization devoted to the study of popular memory, folk song, oral history, has titled the project on which they have been working for the last ten years, consisting of collecting, archiving, and promoting the music of migrants in Rome and other parts of Italy, “*Roma forestiera*.” The archive, which is housed at the House of Memory and History in the Trastevere neighborhood in Rome, has recently been enriched by contributions from other parts of the country, and today it also includes recordings of music from 37 countries in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

This work has revised some of the traditional concepts of folklore that have been dominant in academic circles for generations. For a long time, the concept

- 1 Some passages of this essay are based on earlier articles: A. Portelli, *Roma forestiera: musiche migranti e nuova musica popolare urbana*, in: C. Lombardi-Diop, C. Romeo (eds.), *L’Italia postcoloniale*, Roma-Firenze 2014, p. 239–248; *eadem*, *Ospiti: tre voci migranti in Italia*, “Archivio Storico dell’immigrazione in Italia,” no. 10, 2014, p. 48–53; *eadem*, *Memorie urbane. Musiche migranti a Roma*, Vicenza–San Marino University 2014; liner notes to *The CD We Are not Going Back. Musiche migranti di resistenza, orgoglio e memoria*, A. Portelli (ed.), produced by the Circolo Gianni Bosio, Nota 2016.
- 2 A *stornello* is a traditional verse, often performed with a display of vocal virtuosity. They are usually combined in strings, or performed “a dispetto” (“in spite”), as a competitive sung dialogue.
- 3 The Circolo Gianni Bosio field work was carried out in a number of different contexts: in the streets; recordings of street musicians; in religious environments (temples, mosques, churches) and schools with a significant presence of migrant or second-generation children (and their parents); and private homes. Wherever possible, musicians and singers were also interviewed about their life histories and musical background. With a few exceptions, all the recordings used digital technology (wav standard). The archive is in the process of being catalogued and indexed; it will eventually be integrated with transcripts and translations of the songs and interviews.

of folklore has been linked to the “uncontaminated” oral traditions of rural communities.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1970s, however, following the teachings of Gianni Bosio and the Antonio Gramsci’s concept of folklore as the heritage of the non-hegemonic classes, the Circolo Gianni Bosio has been working on the transformations of folk and popular music in the urban context, where “contamination” and change are the norm, while different cultural traditions and forms mingle and influence one another.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, many of the cultures from which the immigrants arrive do not recognize the same sharp distinction between “high,” “popular,” and “folk” cultures that, while useful as methodological definitions, do not necessarily correspond to the experience, perceptions, and repertoires of migrant singers, musicians, and just plain folks who know a few songs. In many cases, the loneliness and nostalgia of a migrant may be expressed through a Bollywood song, while the affirmation of one’s dignity in the challenging context of discrimination and prejudice may be stated through a patriotic piece from Afghanistan or a rebel song from Kurdistan.

Furthermore, while folklore is often represented as a somewhat impersonal collective cultural heritage, it is kept alive, preserved, and changed through the creative work of individual musicians and singers within their own communities. This is especially true in the context of diasporic migration, where “community” must be reconstructed under changed and difficult circumstances in a new country. While many of the voices we have recorded gave us songs that the migrants remembered from their own countries (sometimes changed and adapted to the new environment), in many cases migrants had to find new words to express new experiences; thus, some of the most important musical samples in our archives are not traditional or popular songs, but new compositions by individual artists.<sup>6</sup>

### Artists

Thami Zmazma is 44 and lives in Tivoli, near Rome. He was born in Rabat, Morocco, and has lived in Italy for twenty years. He holds a degree from Rabat’s Royal

4 For a critical discussion, see: M. Squillacico [et al.], *Lo studio del folklore in Italia*, Milano, Stampatori 1976.

5 Gianni Bosio, *Li’ intellettuale rovesciato*, Milan 1975.

6 The Circolo Gianni Bosio Archive includes 780 oral history interviews and 1,200 hours of music recordings. The “Roma forestiera” project includes recordings from 85 musicians and groups from 34 countries. All the Rome Forestiera recordings were recorded digitally, with either a Maatz or a Zoom recorder. A few, collected occasionally by other contributors to the archive, were recorded on iPhone devices (none of these are being referred to in the selection discussed in this article). Whenever possible, interviews include music and conversation, including life stories. The succession between narration and musical performance varies according to circumstances and to the preferences of the interviewees. All encounters were based on openness and flexibility.

Music School and is a virtuoso of the oud<sup>7</sup>, performing all the different variants of the classic Berber, Andalus, and Arabic styles. One of the songs he performs is the chant of Berber women on the occasion of their husband's death or their departure for war. He makes a living in Tivoli as an electrician.<sup>8</sup>

Abdurrahman Ozel is 56. He is a political refugee from war-torn Kurdistan. Housebound because of serious problems with his eyes, he has become a master of the saz.<sup>9</sup> His comrades at the Ararat Kurdish cultural center in Rome call him "Mamoste," or maestro. One of the songs he composed contains the lyrics: "As long as we live, the beauties of my country shall be our lullaby, our pain, our memory."<sup>10</sup>

Roxana Ene is in her early twenties. Born in Romania and having come to Rome at the age of nine, she is a typical young woman from one of Rome's working-class peripheries. She started singing in Iqbal Masih elementary school, one of the most culturally diverse schools in Rome, when two extraordinary teachers created a multicultural children's choir. Roxana knows and sings all the classic songs associated with her Romanian heritage but is starting a professional career singing the vernacular songs of the Roman tradition. Meanwhile, she directs the multi-ethnic *Romolo Balzani* choir created by the Circolo Gianni Bosio.

Roullah Tahavi is in his mid-thirties. He is a political refugee from Afghanistan who arrived in Italy by hiding under a truck on the Adriatic crossing from Greece. He now lives in Piadena, Lombardy. He holds a nursing degree from his country, but it is not recognized in Italy, so he works in construction. He has married an Italian girl from Piadena. After having immigrated to Italy, he built his own instrument, a damborà.<sup>11</sup> He writes his own songs: "Exile is hard even if you are a prince; I am a prisoner of this world, and I wish I was a bird so I could fly back to my hometown and be near my mother."

Geedi Yusuf was in his mid-twenties when we met him through the Asinitas School of Italian for migrants. He worked odd jobs; the last time we heard before we lost track of him, he was a night watchman at a construction site. He composes

7 The oud is a long-necked string instrument, similar to the European lute, used in traditional music throughout the Middle East.

8 Interview recorded by Luciana Manca and Alessandro Portelli, Tivoli (Rome), 30.05.2017. All recordings are collected in the Roma Forestiera Fund at the "Franco Coggiola" Sound Archive of the Circolo Gianni Bosio in Rome and can be consulted upon request.

9 The saz is a plucked string instrument. Popular in Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Kurdistan and the Balkan countries.

10 Abdurrahman Ozel is featured on the CD *Ez Kurdistan im. Musica dal Kurdistan in Italia*, H. Dilara, A. Portelli (eds.), produced by the Circolo Gianni Bosio, Nota, 2016. The Persian term *saz* (in Turkey *bağlama*) refers to a family of plucked long-necked lutes used from Eastern Mediterranean to present-day Iran.

11 The damborà is a long-necked string instrument used, in many related variants, in Kazakhstan and Afghanistan.

and sings poems about the migrant experience. One is a dialogue between an immigrant and the wife he has left at home. Another is called *Istaraniyeri*, his pronunciation of the Italian word *stranieri* (“foreigners”), and another still contains the lyrics: “I am a refugee from arm-bearing animals. I am no longer African; I am not European; I’m only a guest in this country.”

Jagjit Raj Mehta is from Punjab, India. He lives in Piadena, Lombardy, and works as a stable hand on a dairy farm. His wife works in the local hospital, while his daughter is studying medicine in Naples and his son works with him on the farm. They have Italian citizenship. Jagjit is active in the Piadena Culture League, an internationally renowned, radical grassroots cultural organization that has been the focus of folk music and culture. Following the example of his friends in the League, he makes up songs that use traditional religious tunes from his native country with lyrics in Italian: “I come from faraway, I am not going away, I am not homesick, I have no nostalgia; this is my home.”<sup>12</sup>

Ismail Swati is from Pakistan and temporarily lives as a “guest” at the Migrant Center at Gradisca d’Isonzo, in Veneto, Northeast Italy. He plays Pashtun music, from the Pakistan-Iraq border, on the rabab, a traditional string instrument. As a musician, he is competent, but not necessarily great. However, he reminds us that there is life and culture in these unconstitutional detention centers.

Altogether, these examples (only a few of those gathered in our collection) demonstrate the variety of musical cultures that can be heard in contemporary Italy, as well as the wealth of musical talent at work in the streets, religious centers, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods of what is quickly becoming a multi-cultural pluralistic democracy. Those that follow in the next section focus on the hybridization and change that music undergoes because of the process of migration and adaptation to a new environment.

## **Borders**

On the boulders by the shore at Ventimiglia, on the French-Italian border, African migrants camp out waiting for a chance to enter France. Improvising percussion instruments with anything at hand, they chant in the African antiphonal style: “We are not going back.” Like Jagjit, these migrants are not going away; they are here to stay. This is why Geedi’s use of the Italian word *ospite* (“guest”) is so ironic. As he explains:

12 Geedi Yusuf and Roullah Tahavi are featured on the CD *We Are Not Going Back. Musiche migranti di resistenza, orgoglio e memoria*, A. Portelli (ed.), produced by the Circolo Gianni Bosio, Nota 2016.

When I arrived here, I didn't understand the language, and I kept hearing this word, *stanier*, *stranier*, and I didn't know what it means and what the people who addressed me by this word meant. I was wondering what it meant, and I thought it must be an insult; it must mean 'stupid' or something like that. After I had been here three months and come to the school, I understood what it meant, that people did not accept these foreigners, and that they turned their heads as soon as they heard this word, as if in disapproval. At that point, I understood that it was a word that was used for refugees, for people who came from outside, to designate the people who were not part of this country, of this place. In fact, in the first verse I also say *ospite* ('guest'). I learned this word when I received my *permesso di soggiorno* ('temporary residence permit'). *Permesso di soggiorno* is a permit to remain for *giorni* ('days'). Somalis have no recognized passport; we were asked to pay to have a *titolo di viaggio* ('travel permit') to move. But it's no use; you can only travel inside Italy, so it's like a one-season metro ticket. It's all here: *permesso di soggiorno*, *titolo di viaggio*. These three things - the word *straniero*, the *permesso di soggiorno*, the *titolo di viaggio* - made me understand that I have no law that makes me an equal here, but I am only a guest.<sup>13</sup>

The subversive core of Geedi's song is the word *osbitaan*, a word that does not exist in his language but is a migrant's (mis)pronunciation of *ospite* ("guest") in the chorus repeated after each verse. *Ospite* is one of the hypocritical words of our paternalistic benevolence (just as *Gastarbeiter* applied to Italian migrants in Germany or Switzerland). Native Italians feel good and generous because we allow the "visitors" into our country. As a young Somali migrant explained: "A newborn baby needs time, food, care, and education. Here, we have no parents; we are guests; and this country doesn't help us, not even psychologically, let alone economically."<sup>14</sup>

However, as Geedi explains so well, if someone is a guest, it means that he or she can only stay "for days," not forever. If they call you a guest, it means that this is not your home and you are only welcome temporarily as a sojourner: the temporary residence permit that migrants simply call *soggiorno* must be renewed every year and to some extent depends on the whim of the police authorities and on the political climate of the moment. It is not a right, but a concession: "When I came, I believed that Italy would become my second homeland and that we would be granted documents that would make me equal to the people who live here," Geedi says. Here, then, are words - guest, sojourn, title - that change not only the sound but also meaning of what is said by a migrant who arrives here bringing another culture of hospitality ("In Somalia, hospitality means something else; guests are

13 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Rome, Asinitas School of Italian for Foreigners, 16.02.2010. The interview has been transcribed and translated by Cristina Ali Farah, who also interpreted the interview.

14 Interview recorded with Abubakar, Somali migrant by Dagam Ymeri, Castelnuovo di Porto, migrant shelter - *Lo straniero*, 26.02.2014.

treated better”) and the memory of colonialism: “In Somalia, Italians were not guests – the guests were the others.” The Italian language has one word – *ospite* – for both “guest” and for “host.” A capsule definition of colonialism might be that of a relationship in which the roles of host and guest are reversed.

### **Worship**

Some of the contexts in which music takes on a communal significance are religious spaces such as churches, temples, and mosques. Italy has represented itself historically as a homogenously Catholic country. This was never completely true, but immigration has introduced a myriad of varieties of religious experience. The village of Pessina, in the Cremona province of Lombardy, has perhaps 500 permanent inhabitants. Every Sunday, it is swamped by at least 2,000 Sikhs from all over Northern Italy, gathering at the largest gurudwara<sup>15</sup> in Europe; the locals are pleased, and relations are friendly and hospitable on both sides.

Closer to Rome, near the beach resort of Ladispoli, we were received in a house called Daur Salaam, “the house of peace”: a community center and mosque for the Murid brotherhood, a Senegalese variant of Islam. The faithful chant the verses written by its founder, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba. Their voices rise in sudden bursts of sound: harsh, devout, and passionate. The sound seems to come from the deep heart of Africa, but we are only in the cellar of a house in a farming village and seaside resort twenty miles from Rome. Before the ritual begins, I talk to a twelve-year-old child. He plays soccer and roots for Rome.<sup>16</sup>

St. Thomas’s Church is in Parione, a central Rome neighborhood. Since the mid-1970s, Eritrean migrants have made this their main place of worship. Mass is held according to the Ethiopian Catholic ritual, and the language used is the sacred Ge’ez tongue.<sup>17</sup> The central nave is filled with middle-aged and elderly women wrapped in white shawls. The priest and his assistant wear heavy golden mantles; they sing the hieratic. However, once in a while the assistant sheds his gilded mantle, remains in his shirt and jeans, moves to the side nave, stands at the keyboard, and accompanies the lively singing and almost dancing of a choir of teenagers clad in jeans.<sup>18</sup>

15 Gurudwara is a general term for a Sikh temple.

16 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Ladispoli (Rome), 16.05.2010.

17 Language from the Ethiopian (Ethiosemitic) group, spoken and written in the kingdom of Aksum since the 4th century. Between the 11th and 19th centuries it was a literary language, now it is only the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. See more: J. Fellman, *The First Grammar of an African Tongue*, “African Studies,” vol. 44, (2/1985), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00020188508707643> (accessed: 08.12.2020).

18 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Rome, 12.08.2012.

Meanwhile, Santa Maria in Trastevere is an ancient, mosaic-studded church amidst a rowdy nightlife and milling tourists. Inside, the Brazilian community celebrates the feast of Santa Maria Aparecida, the patron saint of Brazil. This is just a normal Catholic Mass in Portuguese, with prayers and preaching, greetings from city officials to the community, and some hymns accompanied by guitars. Towards the end of the Mass, an elderly nun named Sister Teresa from Belem do Parà raises her lighting voice to lead the faithful into a final anthem of praise in Portuguese.<sup>19</sup>

*Igreja ni Cristo* is a Filipino Protestant Church and community center perched on the very edge of town, on a hill at Casal del Marmo overlooking the Raccordo Anulare, the beltway around the city. The service is patterned after that of Evangelical churches everywhere, with long sermons (in Tagalog<sup>20</sup> with excerpts in English and Italian), communal prayers, and hymns performed by a robed mixed choir of sixty singers (with no participation from the congregation). Hymns are sung in Tagalog at the 7 AM Sunday service and in awkward Italian at 10 PM; bilingual hymnals are provided in the pews.<sup>21</sup>

The religious or spiritual dimension is not limited to communal or ritual context but can also surface in individual performances. One day, at the occupied space where the Circolo Gianni Bosio carried out its musical projects (before we had to leave in 2017), the plumbing failed. We looked for a plumber we could afford, and of course we found an immigrant. He is 52 and has been in Italy since 1978; once again, he prefers not to give his full name, lest his family has trouble back home. When he finds out what it is that we do there, he tells us that he, too, sings. And he gives us ancient *kazal*<sup>22</sup> by classical poets like Omar Khayyam and Hafez. This immigrant talks about the multiplicity of peoples and cultures in Iran and explains Zoroastrism, Sufi, and Darwish spirituality; the seven steps to becoming a Sufi; and compares the path towards the truth to emigration.<sup>23</sup>

On the steps of the Monteporzio Catone post office on the Roman Hills sits Crissy, a 42-year-old from Benin City, Nigeria, who prefers not to give her full name

19 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Rome, 10.11.2015.

20 Tagalog, spoken in the Philippines, is a member of the Austronesian group of languages. It has a unique status among the more than 100 indigenous languages of the Philippines in that it is the national language alongside English. See more: J.U. Wulff, *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics (Second Edition)*, K. Brown (ed.), Elsevier 2006, p. 472-475, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/02141-6> (accessed: 08.12.2020).

21 Interview recorded by Scilla Finetti and Alessandro Portelli, Rome, 27.06.2010.

22 Phonetic notation of *ghazal* which is a form of amatory poem or ode, originating in Arabic poetry; may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of love in spite of that pain.

23 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Rome, 11.03.2012.



tries to sell socks to passersby. Giovanna Marini, Italy's great folk singer and vanguard musician, had heard her sing, so we looked her up and sat there, recording her songs. She is a Protestant, and all her songs are religious anthems in Beninese or English. After a while, someone comes out of the post office and tells her to shut up; her melodious voice is a disturbance of the peace.<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes, the result is an intriguing form of syncretism. As the procession of the Virgen del Quinche, the patron saint of Ecuador, marched along the busy via Merulana, one could see the sense of estrangement and surprise in the eyes of the Italian onlookers. On the one hand, a Catholic procession is a familiar, if perhaps old-fashioned sight steeped in Italy's Catholic tradition;<sup>25</sup> on the other, it was bedecked with unfamiliar signs, such as Ecuadorian flags displaying unusual images of the Virgin, and the procession prayed, chanted, and sang in a foreign language. It was a very symbolic moment in which a migrant community appeared to the general population as both "like us" (they are Catholic, they march in a procession) and "not like us" (they bear different colors, sing in a different language, and observe rituals we modern urbanites have left behind). Onlookers seemed at a loss as to whether to identify with them or distance themselves.

Syncretism culminated as the procession reached Piazza della Repubblica and entered the basilica. The Mass was accompanied by communal singing led by a guitar band composed mainly of women. Most of the songs (the texts of which were distributed among the congregation) were clearly of clerical rather than folk origin and expressed the standard, rather tame religious sentiments and themes of standard Catholics everywhere. The tunes, however, came from a globalized stock of mainly North American music: the Our Father was sung in Spanish to the tune of Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence*, while other songs used the tunes of *Red River Valley* and *When the Saints Go Marching In*.<sup>26</sup>

### Street Music

The main space for musical performance, however, remains the street. For many migrants, street music is a way of earning a living. Lucy Rabo from Nigeria (who says she is 80 but looks much younger) sits by the steps of the Piazza Bologna post office, not far from the university. She is also a well-known sight in the more central Largo Argentina, close to Rome's most important public theater. She carries a sign in Italian and English that says "I am poor but happy" on one side and "I am

24 Interview recorded by Giovanna Marini and Alessandro Portelli, Monteporzio Catone (Rome), 02.09.2016.

25 Religious processions, however, are hardly ever seen in the center of Rome, so this scene looked like something from an older, deeply familiar but almost forgotten time and place.

26 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Rome, 11.02.2009.

happy but poor” on the other. Once in a while she stands up, dances around, and sings. She says she used to be a dancer back home and has left six children there and is trying to send them some money. Part of it is gospel, while part is improvised: “I wonder why nobody loves me,” she adlibs, expressing the solitude of the exile, the vagrant, the migrant, and the outcast.<sup>27</sup>

On a *campo* (“migrant center”) in Venice, Szabolcs Szöke from Hungary is playing his *gadulka*, the Hungarian violin. When I stumble upon him, I have no recorder, and my cell phone’s batteries are down. Fortunately, I run into him again the next day and record him on the cell phone. He is more a commuter than a migrant: Budapest is only a few hours away from Venice, and he can go home in one day. He is an accomplished professional musician, and today he is here with his group to perform at a concert tonight, but he does not mind playing in the streets to raise a little extra money. I buy his CD, which is very good.<sup>28</sup>

Kostel Budescu plays the accordion on a street corner near the university in Padua. When I arrive there to give a lecture on Bruce Springsteen at the university, I am introduced to him. He was born in Istanbul to a Turkish father and Romanian mother and plays a variety of Turkish, Romanian, and Bulgarian love songs and dance tunes. My colleagues have the weird idea of asking him to listen to a Bruce Springsteen song (*The River*) and improvise upon it for the students, which he does with intriguing results. Later, we record his music in the university recording lab and sound archive.<sup>29</sup>

Kostel Dumitrache plays the hammer cymbals by a main bus hub in front of the windows of Rome’s most popular bookstore in Largo Argentina. At other times, he stands across the street from the Coliseum, for the myriad tourists that gather around the monument. Like most street musicians, he plays music that he thinks his transient audience will recognize: French and American standards as well as a spirited version of Beethoven’s *Elise*. He is from Transylvania, the Romanian region that used to belong to Hungary, and at first he says he is Hungarian. When asked, he also beautifully plays a couple of Romanian *doinai*.<sup>30</sup> I buy his CD.

The whole project took shape when I met Janeth Chiliquina and Sergio Cadenas, natives of Ecuador, at the Piazza Esedra subway station. They beautifully played all the Latin American repertoire from Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, and so on but were enthusiastic when I asked them whether there was also

27 See the CD *Istarianiyeri. Musiche migranti a Roma*, E. Grammaroli, A. Portelli (eds.), Roe Provincial Administration and the Circolo Gianni Bosio 2011.

28 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Venice, 05.06.2016.

29 Interview recorded by Stefania Ficacci, Andrea Colbacchini, and Alessandro Portelli, Padua, 14.03.2016.

30 The *doina* is a Romanian musical tune style, possibly with Middle Eastern roots, customary in Romanian peasant music.

an Ecuadorian tradition. They were working as housekeepers for an elderly lady and became regulars at our concerts and we published a CD of their Ecuadorian music just before they returned to Ecuador after losing the job when the lady they had worked for passed away. Legal constraints make it impossible for them to return.<sup>31</sup> Janeth recalls:

I worked from Friday nights to Monday mornings assisting a lady who had Alzheimer's disease. It was the first job I found here, and it frightened me. It was only from Friday night to Monday morning, and it was almost driving me out of my mind. I met with Sergio to play music, and at that moment I sang to free myself of all that stress, all that negative stuff that I had felt in those days, and this made me value what I was doing even more. One day, I called my mother, and she was crying over the phone. She said: 'Janeth, come home, you have a bite to eat here and you have a place to sleep; what you doing there, begging?' I said: 'No, mama. I am not begging. I am making music.' And this, what I am doing, is beautiful, because people like it. But I don't beg for money; I perform my music and they give me money. And I am happy, I am proud of what I do, because it makes me feel important. And it's a wonderful feeling.<sup>32</sup>

The "Roma Forestiera" project was conceived when we began to realize that the streets, subways, trams, and buses in Rome were brimming with music. Tram number 8, from the northeastern suburbs to the central Piazza Venezia, was at the time a true academy of migrant, especially Romanian, music. I ran into a Romanian guitar player who performed *Vagabondo*, a song by pop singer Nicola Di Bari. To its author, the song is a sort of romantic evocation of the free life of the vagabond, Gypsy, or drifter. Coming from the lips of someone who really is a Gypsy and a migrant, the word "vagabond" becomes something else entirely. Just as in that case of Geedi's *ospite*, our own words change meaning when they come from the mouths of the migrants.<sup>33</sup>

So does our sense of what is authentic and what is not. Someone told us we ought to meet Violeta Joana, a marvelous singer who could be heard in the A subway line. Violeta is a Roma from Romania and was 38 years old and had five children, some back home and some living with her in the Ponte Galeria Roma camp, when we met her. Violeta would not sing and let us record her without the usual gear: a microphone, amp, and computer with prerecorded tracks downloaded from the internet. Unlike Janeth, she does not think of her subway music as a personal and

31 *You Soy el descendiente. Musica tradizionale dall'Ecuador a Roma*, produced by the Lazio Regional Administration and the Circolo Gianni Bosio, 2014.

32 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Rome, 14.12.2011. The interview to be listened to: CD *Istaraniyeri*. See: note 15.

33 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Rome, 03.09.2007. See: Nicola Di Bari's performance, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHU3TH\\_ryI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHU3TH_ryI) (accessed: 07.06.2017).

cultural expression but as work, as a means of support for her family back home. After each song, she would say “thank you” as if we had given her money, because this is what she does on the subway. She, too, sings mainly Italian, Spanish, and American standards (a marvelous soulful version of *O Sole Mio*); she claims she did not know any Romanian songs, but we managed to get her to sing a couple of fragments without her usual equipment (of course, she has no prerecorded tracks for Romanian folk songs), although I then realized that, far from accessing a deep “authenticity” of her folk heritage, we were violating her real, current authenticity, which includes the microphone, the computer, Paul Anka, Edith Piaf, and the Neapolitan classics; that is, the authenticity of the relationship between her music and her life, here and now.<sup>34</sup>

### Gender

The examples of Janeth Chiliquinga and Violeta Joana indicate that gender is an important element. While women appear in the public space of the street and the church, much of migrant heritage is transmitted by women in the home or at schools. Joana Flores is the mother of Valentina, a student at the Iqbal Masih elementary school. Before they returned to Colombia, Valentina sang in the children’s multi-ethnic choir and Joanna joined the multi-ethnic Romolo Balzani group (she later left it to join the parish choir, which better fit her religious attitude). We met at the home of one of the teachers, and they sang children’s songs, and Christmas songs. I recall the cruelest Christmas song I have ever heard: in it, the child asks the mother why he did not get any presents from the Infant Jesus. She answers that: “You did something bad, so the Infant heard about it and brought you nothing”.<sup>35</sup>

Sushmita Sultana from Bangladesh also lives in Torpignattara, the largest Bangladeshi community in Europe. She holds a degree in music and dance from the University of Kolkata. She came to Italy to join her husband, also a graduate in graphic art, who was eking out a living by selling used clothes before he landed a job at the Bangladeshi embassy. She sings the songs of Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, accompanying them by playing the harmonium. She has created a school of traditional music and dance for the Bangladeshi children of Torpignattara, some of whom are just as Roman as Roxana Ene but, like her, will not let go of their heritage. She also teaches them the Bengali version of *We Shall Overcome* and songs from their new country – the partisan *Bella ciao* and the old anarchist anthem, *Nostra patria è il mondo intero* (*Our Homeland Is the World*).<sup>36</sup>

34 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli and Sara Modigliani, Rome, 03.11.2010, 18.04.2010. Violeta is featured in the CD *Romeni romani*, F. Lepadatu, L. Stan, A. Portelli (eds.), Nota Edizioni 2017.

35 See: *Istaranyieri*, note 15.

36 Sushmita Sultana is featured both in *Istaranyieri* and, together with her children, in: *We Are not Going Back*.

Chen Lisao, from China, is 38 and had been in Italy for ten years when we met at the children's school: the Pisacane elementary school, a school with over 30 percent foreign-born children or children born in Italy to non-Italian parents. With the help of one of the teachers, we gathered some of the mothers to record the songs and games they had brought with them from home. One of the songs Chen Lisao sang was a traditional children's New Year tune. The words were in Chinese. The tune, however, was *Oh My Darling Clementine*. Music, like migrants, knows no borders.<sup>37</sup>

### **Roots and Wings**

When we speak of folk music, we often think in terms of "roots," as if music ways bound to stay forever in the same place. We ought to speak, instead, of wings and feet. Music is incorporeal; it cannot be stopped by political, geographic, or cultural borders; it crosses seas and deserts on the heels of migrants, refugees, exiles, travelers. The music of Thami, Abdurrahman, Roxana, Roullah, Geedi, Jagjit, Ismail, Crissy, Lucy, Szabolcs, the two Kostels, Sister Teresa, Janeth, Sergio, Violeta, Joana, Valentina, Chen Lisao, and Sushmita; the music of tram no. 8 and the A subway line, of St. Tomas' at Parione, Daur es Salaam, Santa Maria in Trastevere, Igreja ni Cristo; the songs of Iqbal Masih and the Pisacane school - this music is not the roots of the past, but seeds blowing in the wind. This is the folk music of Italy today: Kurdish, Romanian, Indian, Senegalese, Filipino, Bangla, Ecuadorian, Afghan, Nigerian. This is the music that tells us what we are and what we will be.

37 Interview recorded by Alessandro Portelli, Rome, 03.06.2012.



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**Summary**

This article concerns the “Roma Forestiera” project that has been carried out for the last ten years by the independent Circolo Gianni Bosio organization, which is devoted to the study of popular memory, folk song, and oral history. The purpose of the project was to promote the art of immigrants who have recently come to Italy and brought music back to the streets, buses, and subways. The conclusions of this project have necessitated a revision of some of the traditional concepts of folklore in the urban context that have been dominant in academic circles for generations, where “contamination” and change are the norm, while different cultural traditions and forms mingle and influence one another. The author describes experiences gathered while recording witnesses to history on the streets and in the migrant centers, exposing the human stories behind the songs that they brought from their countries of origin as well as presenting the hybridization and change that music undergoes as a result of the process of migration and adaptation to a new environment.