

RACISM, RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

RACE TALK

**Languages of racism and resistance
in Neapolitan street markets**



ANTONIA LUCIA DAWES

RACE TALK

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RACISM, RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Race talk

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Neapolitan street markets

Antonia Lucia Dawes

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Series editors' foreword

John Solomos, Satnam Virdee, Aaron Winter

THE STUDY OF race, racism and ethnicity has expanded greatly since the end of the twentieth century. This expansion has coincided with a growing awareness of the continuing role that these issues play in contemporary societies all over the globe. *Racism, Resistance and Social Change* is a new series of books that seeks to make a substantial contribution to this flourishing field of scholarship and research. We are committed to providing a forum for the publication of the highest quality scholarship on race, racism, anti-racism and ethnic relations. As editors of this series we would like to publish both theoretically driven books and texts with an empirical frame that seek to further develop our understanding of the origins, development and contemporary forms of racisms, racial inequalities and racial and ethnic relations. We welcome work from a range of theoretical and political perspectives, and as the series develops we ideally want to encourage a conversation that goes beyond specific national or geopolitical environments. While we are aware that there are important differences between national and regional research traditions, we hope that scholars from a variety of disciplines and multidisciplinary frames will take the opportunity to include their research work in the series.

As the title of the series highlights, we also welcome texts that can address issues about resistance and anti-racism as well as the role of political and policy interventions in this rapidly evolving discipline. The changing forms of racist mobilisation and expression that have come to the fore in recent years have highlighted the need for more reflection and research on the role of political and civil society mobilisations in this field.

We are committed to building on theoretical advances by providing an arena for new and challenging theoretical and empirical studies on the changing morphology of race and racism in contemporary societies.

Research participants

THIS IS NOT an exhaustive list of all the people who appear in the book. It introduces the key biographical details of the main research participants I worked with in Napoli. Their lives and experiences are told in richer detail throughout the chapters. With the exception of Omar, Ciro and Titty, all names used are pseudonyms.

Via Bologna market

Gennaro: a middle-aged Neapolitan man who sold socks and underwear from his stall on Via Bologna. He had run a stall in the Piazza Garibaldi area since the early 1990s, and prior to that he owned a shop. He was politically active in local movements for the unemployed.

Alfonso: He had a knick-knack stall next to Gennaro's stall. He was also an activist.

Comfort: She was a middle-aged Nigerian woman who had been running a market stall in the Piazza Garibaldi area since the 1990s and had known Gennaro for a long time. Her stall used to sell wax cloth but, when I met her, she mostly sold Chinese-manufactured clothing. She was also an activist.

Elage: A middle-aged Senegalese man. His stall sold Kola Nuts, tea and toiletries for an African clientele.

Moussa: A young Malian man who was friends with Gennaro. He shared Gennaro's storage depot with him.

Riccardo: A middle-aged Neapolitan man who owned a souvenir shop on Via Bologna.

Serigne: A middle-aged Senegalese man who ran a stall at the market and was its informal market manager. He used to work for Riccardo and had maintained a strong friendship with him.

Sohna: She was Serigne's wife. She ran a mobile food stall that sold sandwiches to stall holders and market customers. The stall was based outside Riccardo's shop.

Omar: A Senegalese cultural mediator and activist who introduced me to the vendors at Via Bologna and on irregular pitches across the city.

Ibra: A Senegalese man in his early thirties who sold Italian designer hats from a cloth on the pavement on one of the main roads in the city centre.

Giovanni: He owned the grocery shop behind Ibra's stall. The two men were good friends.

Salvatore: A Neapolitan man in his thirties. He worked as a doorman for the apartment block next to Ibra's stall.

Modou: A Senegalese man in his early thirties. His stall sold contraband designer handbags and wallets. He also shipped packages abroad to Northern Italy and France.

Carlo: A Neapolitan man in his early sixties. He lived in the area and had been friends with Modou since he first put his pitch on the street.

Ku: A Chinese man in his late twenties. He ran an electronics stall on one of the major roads in the city centre. He was married and had two children. His family (including wife and mother- and father-in-law) ran a shop in Pompei, also selling electronic goods.

Poggioreale market

Eddy Pell stall

Ciro and Titti: They were a married Neapolitan couple that ran a business called Eddy Pell, selling Italian designer branded bags and purses. They had a market stall at Poggioreale, and a shop in the Piazza Mercato neighbourhood of Napoli.

Peppe's Bags stall

Alessandro: A Neapolitan man in his thirties who owned this stall with his dad, Peppe. They stall sold Italian designer bags as well as Chinese imports.

Peppe: He was Alessandro's dad. The stall was part of a family business, with a shop in the city centre.

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I am immensely grateful to all the people who welcomed me onto their market stalls and shared their working day with me, in good times and bad: Gennaro, Alfonso, Serigne, Riccardo, Sohna, Elage, Moussa, Comfort, Ibra, Salvatore, Giovanni, Modou, Ciro, Titti, Alessandro, Giuseppe, Peppe, Christopher and Ku.

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A very special thanks to my parents Luigia and Bill, my grandparents Mario, Lucrezia, Ken and Doris, my godmother Amanda, and all my family in Italy for their unfailing support and encouragement. Thanks to my late Nonna Lucrezia for her stories and the excellent example she provided with a life that, in the end, was well lived and totally brilliant, despite the external limitations placed upon her. Thanks to Zia Carmela for reading drafts and correcting my Neapolitan spelling. Extraordinary thanks to Joanna and Dario.

And, finally, this is for Malle, who is on every page; and for Seynabou, who arrived a bit later on to help me finish the job.

Note on the text

THE FOLLOWING TYPOGRAPHIC conventions are followed in all recorded field-work dialogue in the book.

Italics: Neapolitan. Most usually a Neapolitanised Italian or an Italianised Neapolitan, depending on who was speaking and to whom they were speaking. Very few people I encountered in my research spoke a dialect that was completely unmediated by Italian or by a different first language, such as Wolof. For some this was a natural way of speaking. For others, using something that could loosely be recognised as Neapolitan indicated something more significant about their interactions with other people.

Normal: Italian. Most usually an accented, regional Italian. Many of my Neapolitan research participants made the effort to speak predominantly in a local or regional Italian around migrant interlocutors and me, as they wanted to ease comprehension. My research participants were speaking Italian as a second language and often had not had the opportunity to study the language formally, so they made occasional syntactical and grammatical errors.

Underlined: transcription of words in the original language, not translated.

Bold: descriptions of the scene.

I refer to Napoli, as opposed to Naples, the English version of the city's name. I have left other words in their original language when their meaning is obvious.

Introduction

NAPOLI IS A city that has always been described as both ordinary and unique. Ordinary in the way it has been swept up by the unequally ebbing tide of enlightenment modernity. Ordinary in its commonalities with the rhythms, bureaucracies, informalities, convivialities and conflicts present in other cities in the so-called Global North and South. But unique because it has also been claimed as a place outside time; a place where, because of its complex and porous geography, architecture and social relations, particular things are possible that cannot happen elsewhere; a place that both welcomes and repudiates, is nurturing and neglectful, eluding definition.

Many people have written about Napoli, although it is somewhere that is difficult to write about. Various ways of capturing the essence of the city have been richly explored in travel writing, scholarship, journalism and fiction dating back at least to the sixteenth century. Napoli often appeared in the travel memoirs of wealthy Northern Europeans and Americans who undertook the Grand Tour, and was described as somewhere both exotically and grotesquely fascinating.¹ A number of classic academic texts have also sought to capture the spirit of the city from a variety of more critical angles (Allum 1973; Benjamin and Lacis 1978; Belmonte 1979; Snowden 1995; Goddard 1996; Biondi *et al.* 2000; Chambers 2008; Dines 2012; Pine 2012; Frascani 2017). From the early 2000s, the massive global popularity of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels (2011–2015) and Roberto Saviano's *Gomorrah* (2006) – which became theatrical, TV and film franchises – testified to Napoli's ongoing appeal as somewhere seemingly both universal and fascinatingly unique: somewhere that can only fleetingly be glimpsed, always moving slightly out of view, remaining contingent and opaque.

In trying to resolve the dilemma of how to write about Napoli, as somewhere both universal and culturally specific, I have turned to the work of postcolonial anthropologist Anna Tsing. In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*,

she examined the ways in which global forces were negotiated by both local and global interactions. She sought to locate the global, or the universal, by examining the unequal, unstable and creative interconnections or ‘friction’ that emerged in particular places, suggesting that the universal might be better understood as a series of ‘sticky engagements’ (Tsing 2005: 1–6). The idea that it might be possible to comment upon global issues from the messy, immersive and sticky depths of an ethnographic study is something that has always been important to me. I have also been influenced by Achille Mbembe when he explained, in the first chapter of *Necropolitics*, that he wrote ‘from Africa, where I live and work (but also from the rest of the world, which I have not stopped surveying)’ (Mbembe 2019: 9). Thus, my invitation to the reader is that they might adopt the sensibility of looking out from Napoli *but also* from the rest of the world. Napoli is not an urban conglomerate from which theorising is generally thought to happen. But, perhaps, it is possible to use the unstable, unequal, sticky interconnections that are present there in order to think about the current state of things.

Looking out from Napoli

In Napoli some things never change and some things change all the time. One key way in which geopolitical and economic changes have configured the book relates to local, national and international political narratives and policy-making around migration into Europe. The Arab Spring, which began at the end of 2010, and the collapse of the migration pact that Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi made with Italy shortly before his death in October 2011, led to the arrival in Italy of around 50,000 people fleeing political upheaval in the region, primarily nationals of Tunisia, Nigeria and countries in the Horn of Africa. In February 2011 politicians in Italy declared a ‘state of emergency’. However, the situation with migrant arrivals was nothing new. Italy had declared ‘migration emergencies’ almost every year in the previous decade. This had justified temporary measures to address the issue – including the issuing of six-month ‘humanitarian visas’, holding people for many months in reception centres and illegal expulsions at sea – instead of necessitating long-term solutions for the core problem that there were no legal ways for people to enter Europe and claim their right to sanctuary (Perkowski 2012).

In the six years since I finished my fieldwork and started writing up my findings, the question of migrant arrivals have become a matter of international contention and debate. In April 2015, over the course of a matter of weeks, five boats capsized in the central Mediterranean, leading to the death of about 1,200

people. Even though migrants had been dying whilst trying to reach Europe for at least twenty-five years, with the deaths numbered in the tens of thousands (McIntyre and Rice-Oxley 2018), this was the start of the so-called ‘European migrant crisis’. Dines, Montagna and Vacchelli have argued that, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the idea of crisis in relation to migration came to be used as a ‘powerful descriptive device’ that structured knowledge about migration and shaped policies. This politicisation accelerated hugely from 2015, in concatenation with the austerity measures that were rolled out across Europe in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse (McIntyre and Rice-Oxley 2018: 441–442).

In 2017, Italy reactivated its immigration pact with Libya. This pact enabled Italian and other European authorities to work with the Libyan coastguard to return refugees to Libya despite its being well known that Libyan local militias imprisoned migrants in inhumane conditions in detention centres where they faced torture and were sold into slavery (Meaney 2019, 2; Issak 2018; Elbagir *et al.* 2017). The Sahel became the key location for new European technologies and strategies, deployed by humanitarian agencies, corporations and militaries, to stop African movement into Europe (Meaney 2019: 1). Despite this, people continued to attempt the Mediterranean crossing (Sigona and McMahon 2018). It was calculated that, in 2019, nearly 750 people died trying to reach Italy by boat (IOM 2019).² However, from 2018 the European bloc stopped sending out sea patrols to save boats of migrants who ran into trouble crossing the Mediterranean. In May 2019 Italy’s interior minister, Matteo Salvini, pushed through an amendment to the country’s immigration legislation, the *Decreto sicurezza bis*, which included provisions for fining NGO vessels huge amounts of money for rescuing migrants, and prohibiting them from transiting through Italian territorial waters. As a result, Italy was able to block port to vessels carrying refugees, and prosecute those sailing them (Global Detention Project 2019: 6–9).

Local responses to the migrant presence in Napoli have also changed over the decade in which I have been working on this book. This relates particularly to episodes of racist violence. Across Europe, racialised social conflicts have historically been connected to postwar migration from the continent’s former colonies. In Italy, migration started to be configured as a problem from the 1980s. Napoli has always been described, and promoted officially, as a city that is welcoming to new arrivals. However, it has witnessed its fair share of brutality along with the rest of Italy. Across the country, black migrant men have often been the targets of racist rage, from the murder of South African fruit picker and activist Jerry Essan Masslo in Villa Literno (near Napoli) in 1989, to that of Senegalese street vendor

Idy Diene in Florence in 2018. In 2018, the media started to talk about a virulent epidemic of antiblack violence – ‘una caccia al nero’, or veritable hunt of black people – spreading across the country. The election of Matteo Salvini, leader of far-right party Lega Nord, to the position of interior and deputy prime minister, legitimised a resurgence in antimigrant, fascistic vigilantism, that continued after he was pushed out of power in 2019 (Affricot 2018; Mascia 2018; O’Grady 2018; Crimaldi 2019). This extremist resurgence was mirrored across many national contexts as a result of the mainstreaming of far-right ideologies that focused particularly on the idea of migration as something that was out of control and a threat to European citizens or, more explicitly, a threat to a normatively white European culture (Bjørge and Mareš 2019).

Another key dimension of change in the book relates to the impact of austerity measures in a city that had faced long-term economic decline. In May 2011, just before I started fieldwork, a new mayor had been elected, Luigi de Magistris, who began a campaign for urban regeneration and legality to promote tourism in the city (Chetta 2012; Sannino 2012). As part of this, a combined shopping centre and metro station was built in the centre of Piazza Garibaldi. Migrant and Neapolitan street vendors lost their licensed spots across the city, either because the spaces they worked in were destined for redevelopment, or because they didn’t have valid vendor licences, or because of accusations that they were breaking the law by selling contraband. In particular, migrant street vendors were subjected to intensified policing measures and municipal crackdowns. Despite repeatedly stating that he was pro-migrant rights, migrant vendors experienced the same scrutiny under de Magistris’ administration that they had historically, revealing the potency of historic associations between urban decline, criminality and the presence of migrants in Italy (Dines 2012: 190–194). At the same time, from November 2011, Mario Monti’s technocratic cabinet brought in austerity measures that had a dramatic effect on small businesses across Italy, helping to precipitate tensions already stretched to breaking point. These national and local political processes had a devastating effect on the livelihoods of unlicensed and undocumented market and street traders, for whom market vending was their sole chance of making a living. Until the 2000s people were scared to visit Napoli because of violence associated with organised crime and rubbish mismanagement. But, whilst I was doing the research, huge amounts of money were invested to transform the city into a popular tourist location. By the time I finished writing, nearly a decade after I had first started working there, the street markets around the main railway station no longer existed, or had significantly shrunk as a result of these processes of urban transformation.

This book is based on ethnographic research that I carried out in 2012 in those heterogeneous, ethnically diverse and multilingual street markets around the Vasto and Poggioreale neighbourhoods, which are next to the city's main railway station. I spent nine months on licensed and unlicensed market stalls on Via Bologna; along the main arteries leading away from Piazza Garibaldi (the square in front of the station entrance); and in Poggioreale market, which was a ten-minute journey from Piazza Garibaldi by tram. I worked with people who had been born in Napoli, and people who had arrived in the city as migrants from Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, Egypt and China. Some had visas and some were undocumented. Mostly the stalls were run by men, but there were also women working as street vendors. Many different languages were regularly spoken around the street markets: Italian, Neapolitan, English, French, Wolof, Pidgin, Bambara, Mandarin and Arabic, to name but a few of the ones I could understand or came to recognise.

In the street markets, where I was doing research, there was much talk about the arrival of refugees who had been placed in reception centres across Italy. A number of these new arrivals were housed in hotels around Piazza Garibaldi whilst they awaited the result of asylum applications. Some had set up unlicensed street market stalls in the same streets where I was doing research and, given the pressure that street vendors were facing at the time, this added to the undercurrent of tension. One key event that has stayed with me took place on 21 March 2012, when a Nigerian man was stabbed in the leg at the Kristall Hotel in Piazza Garibaldi. Fortunately the wound wasn't fatal, and the victim was sent to recover in hospital. Following the arrest of the perpetrator, a Neapolitan man who worked on the hotel reception, it emerged that he had apparently stabbed the victim because he was talking too loudly on the phone.³

On the day the stabbing took place, I was doing fieldwork at a street market on Via Bologna. This market had originally been designated for migrant street vendors, but in 2012 there were a number of Neapolitan street vendors setting up stalls there as they had lost their vendor licences in nearby Piazza Garibaldi. As the news spread along the line of market stalls, the people I was working with inevitably positioned themselves, and those around them, within the texture of the event's narrative. A Nigerian lady I knew spoke to me in English about it and told me, aggrieved, 'they have wounded our brother!' Meanwhile, over on Gennaro and Alfonso's market stalls, an argument ensued, in a mix of Italian and Neapolitan, between the two Neapolitan vendors and Omar – a Senegalese cultural mediator – about whether the Nigerian man had provoked his aggressor. 'No one deserves something like that', clarified Gennaro, 'but when you're in your

own house you behave one way and when you're in someone else's house you behave another way'. The implication was that the victim had somehow deserved what happened to him. Alternative and competing meanings of responsibility, belonging, entitlement and togetherness emerged in the various articulations and deliberations. The stabbing was a dramatic example of the routine and difficult processes through which people contested and negotiated a complex and painful knowledge of difference in everyday life in Napoli. It erupted out of escalating tensions over speaking, difference and power, and the multilingual talk that took place across transcultural boundaries in the wake of the event showed the centrality of language use to meaning-making processes about difference, belonging and entitlement.

Multilingual talk and racism

The book looks at Napoli's street markets to reflect upon the state of contemporary racism and contribute imaginative strategies for overcoming it. In order to do this, I focus on different kinds of multilingual talk – such as in the episode recounted above – that I saw taking place in street markets whilst I was in the field. In taking this path, I have been guided by Edouard Glissant's argument that multiethnic, heterogeneous and diverse transcultural encounters – what he calls 'Relation' – are guided by a fraught, linguistic principle (Glissant 1981, 1997). In particular, the book has been focused by his assertion that monolingualism was something that was imposed by colonial expansion and the attendant oppression, degradation or annihilation of indigenous cultures and languages (1997: 794). However, he argued that novel forms of multilingualism had emerged despite, and because of, the oppression and unfreedom of colonialism as a 'violent sign of [the] *consensual, not imposed*, sharing' of different cultures and languages (1997: 34, my emphasis). For Glissant, multilingualism was not about simply speaking many languages but about a desire to accept and understand your neighbour. Multilingual *métissage* (miscegenation) created a transcultural dynamic – a 'Relation' – that opposed imperialism by reconquering the memory of common oppression (1997: 794).

At the beginning of *Poetics of Discourse*, Glissant used the story about the Tower of Babel and the resulting curse of linguistic confusion placed upon mankind by God in the biblical book of Genesis to explain the creative and emancipatory potential of the multilingual element of postcolonial transcultural interactions:

On the other side of the bitter struggles against domination and for the liberation of the imagination, there opens up a multiply dispersed zone in which we are gripped by vertigo. But this is not the vertigo preceding apocalypse and Babel's fall. It is the shiver of a beginning, confronted with extreme possibility. It is possible to build the Tower – *in every language*. (1997: 9, italics in original)

Babel has been a powerful metaphor through which I have sought to weave together the transcultural, multilingual heteroglossia I narrate in this book. It unites three motifs – language, difference and the city – that tell a complex story of power and how it can be mitigated by struggle: language and difference because the story of the Tower of Babel can be read as an etiology of linguistic and cultural difference; the city because Babylon, where it is commonly believed that the Babel event took place (*Britannica* 2020), embodies an urban referent that signifies decadence, corruption and destructiveness. In particular, the idea of Babylon acts to place race and talk at the centre of our understandings of modernity. In Rastafari, to 'chant down Babylon' invokes the core struggle against western domination and cultural imperialism that is part of the movement in religious terms, as a state of awareness and as a concrete politics (Murrell 1998: 1–4). Babylon, and the critical consciousness offered by roots culture about the insidious effects of racism, were important influences for the urgent contribution provided by the writers of *The Empire Strikes Back* (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982) in their analysis of British racial politics in the 1970s. As Paul Gilroy noted in the book's concluding chapter, 'Steppin' out of Babylon – race class and autonomy', they were writing at a time of populist, right-wing resurgence, economic downturn and structural unemployment (Gilroy 1982: 275–276). At the close of the second decade of the twenty-first century we are at another such historical conjuncture.

The events that unfolded in the street markets around Napoli's main railway station in 2012 spoke to the dynamics of precarious and marginalised urban sites globally, where practices of improvised endurance, and liminal entrepreneurship, have helped people to manage and redeem difficult lives (Hall 2012; Simone 2018). They also situated Napoli as somewhere on the marginal edge of Europe, looking out over the Mediterranean, where Europe's unequal entanglements with others become particularly discernible. This brings the Mediterranean into view as a necropolitical space, where human movement is being cut short even as it proliferates, with the worsening of economic, environmental and political conditions. Mbembe has introduced the idea of necropolitics to describe

‘contemporary forms of subjection of life to the power of death’ (2019: 92). Necropower operates through sovereign states that have taken on the capacity to decide who is disposable and, therefore, who can be killed if not needed (80). Whether or not we are physically on the edge of this space of exception, as Napoli is geographically facing the Mediterranean, we are all clearly complicit in the production of disposable people therein.

Multilingual talk is important in the context of necropolitics because of the refusal of reciprocity and, thus, the radical incommunicability that is inherent in it. In the Mediterranean, sovereign European powers have imposed a politics wherein death appears to be the only context in which the migrant’s subjectivity can be articulated and mourned. Language has been an important point of enquiry for a number of people occupied in making sense of the dynamics of other spaces of exception, such as slave plantations and camps. Speaking of his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, Primo Levi noted that those who arrived unable to speak any Germanic languages died much more quickly than the other detainees. Their first experiences of the camp were of noise, but no words, with a joke going around one camp that the cane used to beat the detainees was called ‘the interpreter’. In turn, he described the German used by the guards in the camp as a truncated and rudimentary *Lagerjargon*, noting that where you do violence to humans you can see violence done to language (Levi 1986: 69–79). Similarly, Paul Gilroy has shown how, in the context of plantation slavery, no patterns of communication existed that might enable reciprocal exchange between the master and mistress and their human chattels. In *The Black Atlantic* he wrote that:

The extreme patterns of communication defined by the institution of plantation slavery dictate that we recognize the anti-discursive and extra-linguistic ramifications of power at work in shaping communicative acts. There may, after all, be no reciprocity on the plantation outside of the possibilities of rebellion and suicide, flight and silent mourning, and there is certainly no grammatical unity of speech to mediate communicative reason. (1993: 57)

In the street markets where I did my fieldwork, talk was almost always possible, even if fraught and cut through with ambiguities, ambivalence and inequalities. However, the possibilities of talk were constantly mediated by, and infused with, the proximal existence of the necropolitics being enacted in the Mediterranean. This book is about the coming together of desperate, heterogeneous, intrepid and

brave people who, faced with this spectre of disposability and death, revealed the redemptive power of multilingual race talk in shaping transcultural interaction and struggle. This power could be perceived in the edginess of their talk. In the book I use edginess to define processes of transcultural negotiation that were precarious, risky, occasionally frightening – but also exhilarating, sometimes funny and related to the possibility of survival. I propose that multilingual edginess will ultimately animate a transformative politics that is capable of attending to the complexity of ever-diversifying processes of human movement and transcultural intertwining.

Outline of the book

In [Chapter 1](#) I present a history of culture and communication in Napoli. I explore the significance of multilingual talk in everyday interactions in Neapolitan street markets as a result of overlapping histories of foreign domination, cultural hybridisation, Italian nation-building, fascism, wounded local pride and migration. I then introduce the cultural and linguistic particularities of the street markets where I did most of the fieldwork for the book.

In [Chapter 2](#) I develop the project's conceptual and methodological framework. To do this I place theoretical work on language use, ideologies and practices in conversation with some of the key debates in critical race and postcolonial studies. This allows me to attend to the practical and epistemological question of how I conducted a multilingual ethnography in the transcultural street markets around Piazza Garibaldi.

In [Chapter 3](#) I explore how my research participants described their use of language in relationship to ideas about difference. I argue that this talk about talking was an important way in which both Neapolitans and those newer to the city dialogically negotiated contested ideas about difference in daily interactions with each other in street markets and other public spaces across the city.

[Chapter 4](#) looks at the forms of banter and catcalling that were such a banal and regular feature of street market life whilst I was doing fieldwork. This sexualised and darkly humorous language was invoked on pavements as part of a performance of locally hegemonic masculinities and in response to paranoias about racial intimacy. These racist and patriarchal paranoias had a historical precedent in the memory of biracial war children born to black GIs during the Allied occupation of the city that had been awakened by the arrival of black African street vendors.

[Chapter 5](#) explores everyday life in Neapolitan street markets by examining them as sites of precarious money-making for internally stratified and subaltern

groups of people in Napoli. Multilingual market cries – greetings, humour and bartering, predominantly in English, in Italian and in Neapolitan – formed a kind of dynamic market know-how through which vendors drummed up business and legitimised their presence on the crowded and contested spaces of the pavement.

In [Chapter 6](#) I move away from the everyday transcultural negotiations of the previous chapters, which mostly took place between street vendors and their customers, to explore the threat to livelihood faced by my research participants during 2012. The chapter opens with an examination of the widespread racist formulae through which black street vendors were framed as a threat in Napoli. I then focus on joking practices of transcultural masculine solidarity against the police as an infrapolitical talk, which both subverted and reinforced hegemonic ideas about black masculinity, migrants, entitlement and belonging.

[Chapter 7](#) builds upon the previous chapter's discussion about infrapolitical transcultural solidarities by exploring the ways in which people in street markets actively organised to resist attempts by the State to take away their livelihoods. The chapter looks at the antihegemonic talk through which improvisational and ambiguous forms of solidarity emerged across cultural and linguistic boundaries in the moments when people had to work together and speak back to power. I argue that the multilingual nature of the street vendors' organisation was central to their struggle and the political transformation they achieved.

In the concluding chapter I return to Glissant's reflections about linguistic confusion and the Tower of Babel, where multilingualism can be configured as a provisional politics of liberation from racialised power and domination. I examine the humorous and resilient aspects of multilingual edginess that took place throughout my research as a way to think about what that politics looks like on the ground.

Notes

- 1 For example, see Chapter 29 of Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (2010 [1869]).
- 2 The Missing Migrants Project has been monitoring the level of fatalities, as a result of migration, by region. In 2019, the central Mediterranean remained the most perilous crossing point for migrants in the Mediterranean region.
- 3 I have tried on a number of occasions to discover the name of the victim through my contacts in anti-racism in Napoli. It doesn't appear that a case ever went to court and there is no record of the people involved in the incident.

1

Mapping culture and communication

NAPOLI HAS BEEN a significant location for arrivals and departures throughout history. Everyone from holidaying European nobility to foreign invaders and emigrating southern Italian peasantry has settled or passed through the city and left their mark there. In *Mediterranean Crossings*, Iain Chambers argued that the city's 'creolised past' complicates the narratives of Italian nation-building that emerged over the course of the nineteenth century because Napoli's political, economic and geographical culture continued to be infused by a Greek, Byzantine, Spanish, Saracen and Norman heritage in such a way that denies any neat separation of East and West, or centre and periphery (Chambers 2008: 83–88). Language has always been an important optic through which these overlapping histories of domination and cultural intertwining have been expressed and worked through, and through which new social changes have been addressed and dealt with. Struggles around language – around what language to use, and when, in order to garner respect or ensure material survival; around being able to talk, being silent or being silenced, and thus powerful or powerless; around language use that was associated with subaltern status and either pride or shame – were central to the processes of cultural meaning-making that I was observing, and part of, in Napoli. People's pride and self-protectiveness were often predicated on being able to talk, with a consciousness that, historically, talk had been a fraught question. At the same time, Napoli had always been a globalised, multicultural and multilingual reality so cultural protectiveness and closure had always coexisted with open processes of translation and communicative incompleteness.

Napoli's position on the edge of the Mediterranean – in the shadow of a necropolitics that called for people deemed disposable to be placed at risk of death – generated a creative and sticky friction between this particular local context of culture, language and difference and the wider geopolitical scenario of politicised mass migration and global austerity (Mbembe 2019; Tsing 2005). As I argued in the introduction, multilingual talk shaped transcultural negotiations

in a context where localised historic inequalities and power dynamics were encountering an ever-increasing complexity of human movement, global heterogeneity and attendant racist responses. In order to examine this more closely, the chapter connects histories of culture and communication in the city to the contemporary, multilingual dynamics of the ever-evolving street markets where I did my fieldwork. This is, of necessity, a selective account that considers social and political histories of the city as they relate to the question of talk and language use.

Unification and colonialism: forging an Italian language and people

Antonio Gramsci argued that the Italian Unification (1780–1870) should be understood as a ‘historical fetish’: a transformation of different historical processes of creolisation into one eternal fantasy of the nation (2010: 44–45). It was a semicolonial conquest, justified through ideological paradigms about civilising the noble and violent southern savage, and carried out by the troops of the royalist Piedmontese State in the north (Gramsci 2010: 4; Gribaudi 1997: 88).¹ The economic and spiritual effects of Unification were devastating for the Italian south. Changes to customs and tax laws, and the failure to introduce effective farming reforms, severely damaged southern agriculture and resulted in a violently suppressed peasant revolt and mass emigration (Allum 1973: 21–22; Verdicchio 1997: 24). Napoli lost the privileges it had previously enjoyed as one of the two capital cities of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, alongside Palermo. It no longer drew in massive taxes from the surrounding countryside and ceased to be the State’s preferred city for investment in new industries and technologies (Chambers 2008: 76, 112).

The resulting economic deprivation came to be described by Italian politicians as the ‘Southern Question’ from the early 1870s. From the beginning, pre-existing tropes of southern racial and cultural inferiority were invoked to explain the causes of the problem (Schneider 1998: 10–11; Verdicchio 1997: 21–29). As Gramsci explained:

The poverty of the Mezzogiorno was historically incomprehensible for the popular masses of the North; they could not comprehend that national unity was not achieved on the basis of equality, but as the result of the hegemony of the North on the Mezzogiorno ... the North was an ‘octopus’ that enriched itself at the cost of the South, its industrial and economic

progress was in a direct relationship to the impoverishment of southern industry and agriculture. (Gramsci, cited in Chambers 2008: 111)

Instead, southern marginalisation was explained away as a result of a dysfunctional biological and cultural make-up, with southern Italian masculinity being stereotyped as possessive and violent, and southern femininity as submissive (Capussotti 2013: 270). These tropes were then given scientific authority through the work of positivist ethnologists such as Alfredo Niceforo, Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Ferri, who measured southern Italian skulls and decreed that southerners were of African descent and so less civilised than their Aryan co-nationals in the north (Schneider 1998: 11; Verdicchio 1997: 30).

These racialised images of the Italian south circulated globally. From the seventeenth century to the nineteenth, Napoli was an important stopping point for wealthy Northern Europeans and Americans who undertook the Grand Tour. Their travel memoirs abounded with gruesome and mawkish stories about a city overrun with prostitutes and people whose skin had permanently yellowed from repeated malaria infections. For example, this comment from a seventeenth-century travel memoir – ‘Europe ends at Naples and ends badly[;] Calabria, Sicily and all the rest belong to Africa’ – evoked orientalist and racialised ideas about southern Europe that were complemented by the nationalist narratives about the ‘Southern Question’ as a result of racialised inferiority (Gribaudo 1997: 97). Napoli came to be configured in the global imaginary as somewhere that was chaotic, ungovernable and stuck in the past.

At the same time, the Southern Question needs to be considered as a historical construct of the south as it assumes a standard of northern, Italian or European modernisation and progress against which the south must be measured as inferior, and it homogenises what is actually a much more complex picture of the Italian peninsula (Dickie 1999: 11–14; Gribaudo 1997: 83). This doesn’t mean that this story of impoverishment and subordination is not significant in people’s lives. Chambers (2008: 122) has argued that in Napoli it had been reworked into a ‘provincial rage’ that explained the racist treatment of migrants by a people who, themselves, had experienced racism both from their co-nationals and as emigrants abroad. He went on to reason that southern Italian poverty was actually the result of wider global-historical processes of competition and domination. For example, in the seventeenth century it was English mercantile hegemony in the Mediterranean that took trade away from the port of Napoli, so the city’s economy was already in crisis before the Unification period (2008: 112–113). This reading of Napoli’s history connects it more explicitly to

the wider history of Enlightenment modernity and frames the city within a more global set of problems about difference, belonging and entitlement. Its problems of overcrowding, underdevelopment, unemployment and precariousness are not simply ‘local economic and cultural particularities’ but ‘a deep-seated inheritance that today would be considered part and parcel of the processes of “globalisation”’ (2008: 111).

The first Italian imperial forays into Africa began at the same time as the annexation of southern Italy and the Unification period. Eritrea was first invaded in 1885, the same year as the campaign against Sicilian peasant resistance groups, or ‘fasci’. The massacres and summary executions that accompanied this invasion, as well as the creation of the infamous prison camp in Nocera, were also typical features of the war against the fasci in the Italian south (Del Boca 2005: 55–81; Verdicchio 1997: 27). It is important to emphasise that Italian Unification and Italian imperialism were all part of the same nationalist project to enrich the north (Del Boca 2005: 303–15; Gramsci 2010: 24; Verdicchio 1997: 2). The forced labour camps along the Webi Shabeelle River in Somalia in the 1920s and 1930s; or the dumping of thousands of tons of chemical bombs over Ethiopia in 1935–1937; or even the attempted genocide in Dalmatia, Montenegro and Slovenia towards the end of the Second World War found their correspondence in the 1938 race laws that marked the start of Italy’s active involvement in the Holocaust and the extreme violence that characterised the Resistance and civil war of 1943–1945 (Del Boca 2005). Italy gave up its colonial territories to the Allied forces when the fascist regime fell and, into the twenty-first century, public discourse about Italian colonialism continued to be largely characterised by outright denial or underplayed as simply a feature of the fascist period.²

Although liberal and fascist Italy cannot be disentangled as separate nation-building projects, Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop have argued that the fascist period was marked by a different approach to conceptualising race in the Italian peninsula. During this period there was an attempt to reforge all Italians as a mighty Mediterranean and Roman race. Italians were taught to define their own whiteness in relation to the black colonised Other, and not in relation to their own internal differences (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013). In particular, the colonies were seen as the crucible of an Italian or Mediterranean masculinity that, through war-making, became something both exotically and erotically virile and patriarchally familial (Giuliani 2013: 63; Sabelli 2013: 88). This marks a moment where the racial status of southern Italians within the nation was transformed. Fascist racist action was organised on three fronts: externally in the newly conquered African colonies, and internally amongst both Italy’s

Jewish population and through eugenics (Poidimani 2009: 9–16). In Napoli and the surrounding province, as dictated at national level by the fascist race laws, all Jewish residents were subjected to a census in 1938. All those without citizenship, or who had acquired Italian citizenship after 1919, were expelled from the country and many ended up in the Nazi death camps. In 1942, those who were Italian citizens were sent to a forced work camp in a small village north of Napoli (Gribaudi 2005: 445–472).

Language ideologies and practices have historically divided Italians along classed and racialised lines that mirrored the forms of internal stratification and hierarchy that predated, but were cemented by, the Unification period and then fascism. The cultural imperialism that accompanied the economic and political changes I have been describing often centred on the question of language, as the emerging official language of the new Italian State, which was supposed to unify the peninsula and create an Italian ‘people’, relegated all other spoken and written linguistic norms, and particularly southern ones, to the inferior status of dialect (Verdicchio 1997: 7). So-called ‘dialects’ such as Neapolitan continued to be viewed by outsiders as inferior, uneducated and uncivilised languages that associated the speaker with excessive emotion and irrationality (Dickie 1999: 20).

The process of ‘Italianification’, through the imposition of a standard Italian, did not happen quickly or smoothly. ‘Italian’, as historians of language have shown, came about as a written norm that was basically homogeneous and developed by scholars over the course of a number of centuries. It spread slowly across the Italian region to end up in the mouths of a limited group of literate Italians from the Renaissance onwards. This language was not the same one actually spoken by the Florentine majority, but a literary one used by a cosmopolitan elite. By the seventeenth century, *parlar toscano* (speaking Tuscan) became a key sign of prestige amongst Napoli’s aristocratic class (Tesi 2005: 105–109). However, the spoken norm across all social classes in Napoli remained Neapolitan from the eighteenth into the early nineteenth century. This is because rich and poor have historically lived in the same neighbourhood with the rich people living on the top floors and the poor on the bottom floors. This close cohabitation should not be misunderstood as interclass solidarity but as a particular form of vertical hierarchy reflected in the design of the city (De Blasi 2002: 25).

Across the peninsula the majority of working-class people continued to speak their local language from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century until the question of forming a unitary national language – through obligatory schooling and literacy programmes, as well as by regulating institutional and media languages – was taken up more enthusiastically by the fascist regime in the 1920s

and 1930s (Tesi 2005: 199–201). As Gramsci noted in his writing about grammar, a State-led, explicit and regulated language acquisition policy is one of the key features of a totalitarian regime (Tesi 2005: 211). In his work, Edouard Glissant reflected upon the processes of racialised hierarchisation that happened in the Caribbean around the use of Creole as countries achieved greater autonomy and moved towards self-government. Following Unification, and more emphatically under fascism, Napoli also became the site of what Glissant termed a wounded and ‘diglot’ linguistic history, whereby one State-sponsored language (Italian) had historically tried to dominate and undermine the spoken language in the streets (Glissant 1997: 106–107).

Foreign occupation, trade and industry: the heterogeneous languages of the everyday

Popular stereotypes of Napoli as unruly and backward were only amplified by the Allied occupation of the city from October 1944 until 1946. Italy surrendered to the Allied forces at the Armistice of Cassibile in September 1943, after which the Italian peninsula was occupied by the Germans. The experience of extreme poverty, hunger and disease in occupied and postwar Napoli has been memorialised in many books and films, with a focus on begging children, prostitution, and the epidemic of sexually transmitted disease that took hold there affecting predominantly Neapolitan women and Allied soldiers (Patti 2011: 204–19). One of the most famous of these is a book called *La pelle* by Curzio Malaparte (1952). Formerly an outspoken fascist, Malaparte spent time in the city working with the Allied forces from 1943. In his book he talked about the lengths that desperate Neapolitans were prepared to go to in order to get food. In one chapter, called ‘The Plague’, he focused on what he saw as the horrors of the birth of biracial war children to Neapolitan women and black GIs. In other chapters he talked about Neapolitans auctioning off their female family members to soldiers.

Napoli actually liberated itself from German occupation as the result of a popular uprising from 28 September to 1 October 1943 known as the ‘Quattro Giornate’ (‘Four Days’), when town folk joined up with members of the Resistance to end the bombing and looting, and, above all, halt the forced removal of the city’s menfolk to labour camps. Following fierce fighting and heavy losses the uprising eventually ejected the Nazi-fascist troops from the city. However, as Gribaudo has noted, Napoli was excluded from postwar accounts of an honourable Italian resistance to fascism because it was then subjected to the Allied Occupation, and so the narrative grew that they had been liberated from the

Germans by the Allies (GriAUDI 1997: 86). Against a common argument that the Four Days had no political content, she has argued it was evidence of a conscious and organised antifascist and democratic political voice amongst the Neapolitan people (GriAUDI 2003, 2005: 174–308).

These grotesque wartime stories of Neapolitan depravity and misery, and the suppressed history of Neapolitan antifascism and resistance, have also obscured its history as a major Fordist city and site of proletarian struggle in the postwar period. Evidence of industry in the city actually goes back to the pre-Unification period, after which a lack of organisation and connectedness made it difficult for enterprises to keep up with the national and global markets (De Falco 2018: 3). The damage caused by bombing raids on the city during the Second World War destroyed much of this infrastructure but, after the war, the Marshall Plan, tax breaks, and a public fund called 'La Cassa per il Mezzogiorno' worked to revive southern industry and guard it against frequent economic crises that had an impact on the city in the decades following the economic boom and war reconstruction. By 1951 a little over 5 per cent of people in Napoli worked in industry, against 25 per cent in the north (De Falco 2018: 5). From the 1960s a number of State industries – Finmeccanica, Italtubi, Lepetit – arrived in the city along with private companies such as Fiat. After the downturn in 1964 Italsider opened a massive steelworks in nearby Bagnoli – leading to local economic growth but significant environmental destruction – along with national and global companies such as Pirelli and Coca Cola. The Alfasud automotive plant opened in 1968 in Pomigliano D'Arco with 6,000 workers. However, after 1978 a further economic downturn led to the downsizing and decommissioning of many of these activities (De Falco 2018: 8–9). Initially industrialists were attracted to the region because of its reputation for being apolitical, and so the strikes that started up around the Alfasud plant in the 1970s came as a surprise (Abbruzzese 1985: 475). An important workers' movement also grew up around these factories. From Masaniello's revolt in 1647 – when a fisherman organised a popular uprising against a tax imposed on fruit, which was the main food of the city's poor – to the Quattro Giornate and the workers' movements, the connections between Neapolitan workers and their political consciousness and aspirations have repeatedly been disavowed and underplayed.

This history of popular struggle – in the street and in the factory – changed language use in the city. On the one hand this related to local sociodemographic shifts, in particular the effect of peasants moving into urban industrial occupations until the 1970s, and of people fleeing devastated towns and villages in rural Irpinia following a devastating earthquake in 1981. On the other hand this also related

to transnational, interethnic and north–south encounters that occurred as a result of foreign troops (some of whom were black Americans) and, later, northern industrialists coming to the city. As a result, you could still tell what neighbourhood people were from in Napoli from the way they spoke, but these processes of talk were repeatedly subjected to interference and transformation by new arrivals (Marcato and De Blasi 2005). Socio-linguistic work has shown that what passes for ‘Neapolitan’ in Napoli is actually a multiplicity of speaking practices that are fluid, mobile and creolising. These practices predate the period of military occupation and postwar economic boom, and persisted alongside attempts to forge a national language and people from the Unification onwards. The spoken norm in Napoli’s streets was never the same thing as the official written language of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (Marcato and De Blasi 2005: 19). This speaks to the idea of Napoli as a historic port city where experiences of work, occupation and organised resistance have created a particular language that is more evidence of encounters across classed, national, ethnic and religious boundaries than reflective of local State power.

At the same time, Italy’s economic boom – which brought televisions into ordinary people’s living rooms – acted as a transmitter of values about language use and class hierarchies in the Italian peninsula. What the fascist regime was unable to achieve through top-down language acquisition initiatives was eventually achieved as a result of Napoli’s entry into global markets and capitalist forms of consumption. The use of so-called ‘dialect’ came to be strongly linked to social marginalisation and low-class status because people who grew up in areas with high levels of incomplete education and unemployment were more likely to speak only Neapolitan (De Blasi 2002: 133–135). This reflects a taking on board of stereotypes about Neapolitan backwardness that were expressed through negative language attitudes. Middle-class Neapolitans have been shown to connect the speaking of Neapolitan with base and criminal behaviour that is believed to originate in these impoverished neighbourhoods (131, 139). As Pine has noted in his ethnographic work, being able to deploy rapid Neapolitan in the street came to be associated with a *guappo* identity. The *guappo* is a historic figure in Napoli, ambiguously connected to the personage of the *camorrista* and representing the idea of a man of honour who knows how to defend himself – if necessary with violence – if offence is caused to him on his home turf (Pine 2012: 133–135).

As a result, the numbers of people speaking both Italian and so-called dialect, or exclusively Italian, have steadily increased since the 1950s (Tesi 2005: 219). Data collected in 2000 suggested that, whilst people born from the 1980s onwards

may have been able to speak both Italian and some form of local or regional language, they are less likely to have transmitted this to their children as their parents taught them to speak Italian in the home as well as at school (Tesi 2005: 214–216). The formalisation of the work environment – as people moved away from agricultural and artisanal work to factories and, later, service industries, which were national companies and where the managers often came from elsewhere – contributed to the creation of a technical and specialised spoken Italian spoken in work environments (222–226).

Migration and its new linguistic norms

As recounted in the last section, Napoli's history as a port and key maritime location for trade and human movement reveals much about how it has absorbed and incorporated foreign elements within a wider context of racialised, nationalist closures against human movement. This can be examined in more detail by looking closely, firstly, at the effect on language of Italians migrating out of the Italian south to Northern Europe, Australia, the American Continent and northern Italy; and, secondly, at the effect on language of migrants coming from the so-called Global South to reside in the city since the 1980s.

Southern Italians were doubly implicated as both victims and perpetrators in the colonial projects of Italian modernity. Having been annexed from their own land in Italy, they were offered opportunities to settle on territories that were being annexed in north and east Africa (Gramsci 2010: 73; Verdicchio 1997: 48–49). Emigration – to Italian colonies and other settlements in South America and Africa but, more commonly, to the United States, Australia and Northern Europe – was one of the few options available to the southern Italian masses following Unification. Emigration has been described as both a southern revolution and part of the Italian nationalist and imperialist venture (Verdicchio 1997: 7). In two-thirds of cases, the idea to emigrate was manufactured through trade agreements that exchanged Italy's labour surplus for beneficial trade and shipping agreements (Gabaccia 2000: 156–157; Snowden 1995: 69). Many emigrants settled in their country of arrival and many also returned after a number of years. Culture shock around questions of language use has generated highly stigmatised, hybrid emigrant Italian languages and has been an important way in which people have described these cyclical processes of departure and return in oral histories and popular culture (Signorelli 1986; Niederer 1977). Additionally, the enviable glamour associated with speaking English in southern Italy stems

from the kinds of admiration received by returnee migrants from America who were seen to be more sophisticated and successful (Dawes 2016).

Twenty-five million people left Italy between 1876 and 1976, many from the port of Napoli, which was the main point of departure (Chambers 2008: 24; Verdicchio 1997: 7). In 1913, at the peak of this exodus, 200,000 people are recorded to have boarded ships leaving from the city. Peasants, who had been forced off the land by the economic policies of the new Italian State, made up 90 per cent of the departures (Gabaccia 2003: 8; Verdicchio 1997: 7). At least 50 per cent of these emigrants started returning from the 1930s onwards, answering calls from the fascist State to return and build the nation. The question of what language these returnees spoke was important to a regime that was trying to build an ethnically pure Italian cultural identity: the returnees didn't speak Italian and also didn't feel that they were Italian (Poidimani 2009: 17).

After the Second World War, a massive internal migration of southern Italians to the industrialising north started. Emigration to factories in the north, particularly in Turin from the 1950s, led to rapid linguistic integration and mixed language use on the part of southerners who arrived from Bari, Foggia and Reggio Calabria, particularly amongst the children of those internal migrants. In return, northern cities lost many of their specific local traits in their language use. Language use in Rome was also re-southernised by this mass movement, even at the level of State communications (Tesi 2005: 217–219).

Italians have continued to emigrate internally and externally in their thousands into the twenty-first century, even though globalised migration has also transformed Italy into a country that has received migrants since the 1980s. If Italy later became a country of immigration, it still remained very much one of emigration, particularly from the impoverished south, as predominantly highly educated young Italians left their home regions to seek employment in northern Italy and abroad (Pugliese 2002: 141, 151–156). Data from 2014 suggests that the number of Italians living abroad grew by 155,000, whilst the number of migrants residing in Italy grew by 92,000. The total number of Italians residing abroad was a little over 4.6 million and the total number of foreigners (EU and non-EU) residing in Italy was about 5 million (Letizia 2014).

The first waves of migration *to* Italy hark back to the mid-1930s, although it is only from the 1960s that immigration came to be tied to Italy's colonial legacy, with the arrival of Eritrean and Somali refugees. As I have said previously, this initial period of migration was also marked by a steady stream of millions of returning Italian emigrants, though little is known about this. The sketchy data for both these migratory flows are a testament to the State's willing participation

in a collective reluctance to remember the nationalist and colonial past that links these people in a shared history (Amato *et al.* 2009: 98–99; Chambers 2008: 27). This period between the end of the Second World War and the start of more intensified migration to Italy in the 1970s is also the site of another repressed history: that of the children born to Italian women and African American allied forces during the war, as well as to colonial settlers and African women in the Horn of Africa (Pezzarossa 2013). The picture became steadily more complicated from the 1970s, with the arrival of Cape Verdian and Dominican women, and predominantly Ghanaian and Nigerian men. But it was in the 1980s and 1990s, with the arrival of Senegalese, Egyptian, Algerian, Philippino, Chinese, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, ‘Eastern European’ and Albanian people, that immigration came to be perceived publicly as a problem and immigration policies started to be devised (Colombo and Sciortino 2004: 27–29; Russo Krauss 2005: 85–87).

Italy’s immigration policies have largely followed European policies in coming into alignment with the Schengen Agreement. The 1993 Turco-Napolitano Law (Law 40/98), which brought Italy fully into line with Schengen, contained a number of progressive provisions – such as the right to health and education for all migrants – alongside more repressive measures. The Bossi-Fini Law (Law 89/02) in 2002 was produced in response to populist pressure and reversed many of the more liberal sections of the Turco-Napolitano, introducing further repressive measures such as increased deportations, the doubling of detention time and the tying of residence permits to employment (Schuster 2005: 760–761). In 2017 the Minniti-Orlando Decree (Law 46/2017) introduced new immigration and asylum measures that included expanding the network of detention centres in Italy. In 2018, Italy’s Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, pushed through an amendment to this law, known as the ‘Decreto Sicurezza’, that would attempt to curb immigration by increasing maximum detention times from 90 to 180 days, creating legal justifications for detaining asylum seekers and presenting new grounds for the revocation or denial of international protection. In May 2019 Salvini’s second amendment to the law, the ‘Decreto Sicurezza Bis’, contained provisions for fining NGO vessels over €5,000 for every rescued person and preventing the transit of these vessels through Italian territorial waters (Global Detention Project 2019: 6–9). The coalition Government, which included Salvini, collapsed in September 2019, but the Decreto Sicurezza was not immediately dismantled.

This historic increase in migration flows to Italy reflects the fact that Italy came to share, although belatedly by comparison, many common features with the other receiving countries across Europe – such as economic prosperity, State

welfare provision and a relative salary structure (Colombo and Sciortino 2004: 5). Data from 2018 documented that the non-EU migrant population in Italy was a little over 5.1 million, or around 8.5 per cent of the total population, with the largest groups being Romanian, Albanian and Moroccan nationals (Tuttitalia 2018). These figures were similar to those across Europe. In 2018, there were a little over 50,000 non-EU migrants regularly residing in Napoli and the surrounding provinces, with the largest communities being Sri Lankan, Ukrainian and Chinese (Tuttitalia 2018). The number of irregular and undocumented migrants can only be guessed at. Until the 1990s Napoli figured as a point of entry and short stay before people moved on to jobs in northern Italy and elsewhere in Europe; but the figures show that this situation started stabilising from the 2000s, with 14 per cent of all migrants residing in the south as part of a growing population due in large part to births and the reuniting of families (Amato 2006: 66).

As already stated, Napoli's history as a port city means it has always been a meeting place of many different people, all speaking different languages (De Blasi 2002: 37; Marcato and De Blasi 2005: 118–120). On the other hand, a whole new vocabulary emerged around migration to Italy from the 1980s onwards that entered into popular usage on the streets of Napoli and across the country, revealing the connections between antimigrant politics and the history of modern racial thought (Faloppa 2011). Migrants started to be described in terms of an emergent technical language that denoted their legal status (such as *clandestino* – undocumented migrant) and that was racialised and connected migration with a whole host of social problems, in particular criminality (Colombo and Sciortino 2004: 102–113). Such apparently neutral terminology made it possible to circumvent shameful accusations of racism whilst still establishing the otherness of migrants (Dines 2012: 213–214). The reality of these everyday linguistic violences was denied on the justification of the stereotype of *italiani brava gente* (good Italians), whereby Italians were claimed to be naturally friendly and welcoming. In the case of southern Italians this was supposed to be particularly true because they had suffered their own history of mass emigration and prejudice (Dines 2012: 193, 202).

Some sociolinguistic work has looked at language use amongst migrants in urban scenarios in Italy. It found that, whilst migrants had a blurred conceptualisation of the distinction between so-called dialect and Italian, they had fully digested the notion that regional languages such as Neapolitan were held to be inferior but also key to forming friendships and making claims for belonging in informal situations (Bagna *et al.* 2002: 210–211; Guerini 2002). In particular markets were described as important sites of encounter across transcultural

boundaries where the mixing of so-called dialect and Italian was a key feature of interaction between migrants and Italians (D'Agostino *et al.* 2002: 67). Some of my research participants who were migrants spoke of using Neapolitan with both distaste and humour, admitting that they enjoyed using it and that sometimes they felt they had no choice but to do so. Migrants working on street markets were also found to be using particular forms of greeting that were not considered polite enough for other working situations. These included laughing and calling out fake names to passers-by, as well as using so-called dialect, in order to cement their position and encourage sales (Tucciarone 2002). In turn, Schmid's study (2002) on Italian 'foreigner talk' recorded that not only did Italians attempt to make themselves understood to migrants by raising their voices and exaggerating their intonation, as in other countries; they also switched into languages such as English and French.

The street markets and the market personalities

Piazza Garibaldi, the area in Napoli where the book is mostly situated, occupies a particular symbolic importance in the Neapolitan popular imaginary. It has historically been a nodal transport point, with connections by underground, train and bus spreading out across the city, through the rest of the region, the country and internationally. It has also witnessed the city's most intense economic activity, in the form of markets, and wholesalers.

These characteristics were transformed dramatically because of changes in global manufacturing industries and intensified migration and settlement in Italy from the 1980s. Neapolitan wholesalers, who had been based in Piazza Garibaldi and sold goods that bore the 'Made in Italy' merchandise mark,³ moved out to larger spaces in the surrounding region and were replaced by Chinese wholesalers selling items manufactured in China. Most of the Neapolitan and migrant street vendors who historically had sold, respectively, 'Made in Italy' products and artisanal products from their country of origin, started to sell goods that had been manufactured in China they bought wholesale in the city. This reflected a global shift, starting in the mid-1980s, where China came to dominate the market for, amongst other things, footwear, clothing, electronics and toys. Some street vendors also, or exclusively, sold contraband versions of designer bags and CDs that were produced in factories in the city (D'Alessandro 2008: 58; Schmoll 2003).

Street vending – licensed and unlicensed – had historically been a solution for unemployed Neapolitans, and had also provided important economic opportunities for migrants who had been able to insert themselves into this sector to

work with, and alongside, locals.⁴ It had always been viewed in Napoli, with pride, as part of the local *arte di arrangiarsi* (art of getting by) in a context of high levels of unemployment. The participation of migrants in commercial activities was also frequently described approvingly by Neapolitans as their knowing how to *arrangiare* (Dines 2002: 78). As such, the street markets, cafés and pavements around Piazza Garibaldi became important and visible sites of transcultural encounter and collaboration, despite the differential rights, legal statuses and life possibilities of migrants and those with Italian nationality.

At the same time, *l'arte di arrangiarsi* was clearly organised according to racialised hierarchies that influenced decision-making about who took the greatest risks in these collaborative business activities. Designer goods were imported by the Chinese into the port, or made in factories in the city. Labels were sewn on by Italians in the urban outskirts and then the newly branded items were sold by Senegalese and Bangladeshi men in the historic centre (Dines 2002: 78; Schmoll 2003, 6). Migrants who were caught selling contraband items would get a criminal record that denied them the chance of finding legal work and getting a visa. The split labour market created by these laws forced migrant men into a grey zone where their labour could be extracted illegally by the mafias and other actors in the submerged economy (Venturini 2013). Migrants ended up working in particular niches – such as Senegalese men who often sold contraband bags – that had been assigned to them by people making decisions based on race and language (Grappi and Sacchetto 2013: 18). Those migrant men, who were essentially obliged to sell fake items if they wanted to work, ended up taking the most risks, and paying the highest price, in the contraband trade, as they were out on the streets and in clear view of police raids. Furthermore, migrants and Neapolitans had traditionally been offered licensed market spots in different parts of the city, with migrant vendors often being segregated in the most obscure spots away from the majority of the public footfall. This can be seen as part of what Roediger and Esch (2014) have termed ‘race management’, where City Hall offered out market spaces and opportunities for work on a nationally and racially differential basis. So, while street markets opened up the possibility of survival and dignity, they were also sites of further marginalisation and domination, both through the influence of the Camorra and through that of local government.

Local government has historically considered Piazza Garibaldi to be a problem neighbourhood, and attempts to regenerate the area go back to the latter part of the nineteenth century. From the 1980s, Neapolitan street markets were reconfigured in public discourse as emblematic of urban decay and an impediment to security and the tourist industry. Migrant vendors, whether documented

or undocumented, and working with or without vendor licenses, were targeted as key problem-makers (Dines 2012: 185–194). The markets around Piazza Garibaldi were subjected to repeated crackdowns, closures and struggles to reopen them that involved street vendors working together with the city's anti-racist movement to approach and appeal to the administration. As such, street markets became highly visible sites in which to observe the improvisational and ambiguous interplay between inclusion and exclusion in Napoli.

The interactions between migrants and Neapolitans in street markets also shed light on the ways in which the Camorra made use of migrants in its commercial activities. The increasing State deregulation of commercial activities from the 1980s made space for organised crime to take even greater control of the local economy, particularly in light of endemic unemployment and desperation for work (D'Alessandro 2008: 83). The Camorra showed itself to be flexible and reactive in its pursuit of profit, intervening in everything from the circulation of goods to the spaces of sale, as well as continuing the tradition of demanding protection money (184, 229). It was present at every layer of commerce, extracting protection money from producers and vendors as well as intervening in the process of manufacture itself (260–261). It acted *upon* it parasitically, through practices of extortion, usury or robbery, as well as *within* commerce, by investing directly in the production and distribution of merchandise. Production and distribution related to both 'Made in Italy' products and designer contraband. The lines between what was legal and what was illegal were so blurred that no legal judgment had ever been made that connected the activities of the Camorra to the commercial practices involving either 'Made in Italy' or contraband items (D'Alessandro 2009).

Amongst the markets that I worked on around Piazza Garibaldi was Via Bologna market, which spread out along a side street leading off the piazza and got its trading licence in 1998 (see Figure 1). The regular traders – mainly first-generation Senegalese, Malian, Guinean and Nigerian men and women migrants (predominantly men and predominantly Senegalese) – were given this space on the grounds that they only sell African artisanal items, such as West African fabric, wooden statues, and household objects made out of raffia and cloth, from between 80 and 120 stalls along the road. However, most stalls were selling Chinese-made clothing and accessories instead of wax cloth and wooden sculptures when I arrived. There were also a number of stalls along Via Bologna selling the kinds of domestic product that West African customers look for, such as bags of kola nuts; green tea to make Senegalese tea (*attaya*); Carotene skin-lightening soaps; and rough, brightly coloured flannels for use in the shower.



1 Via Bologna market (photo by Serigne)

Following the election of Mayor de Magistris, and the eviction of a number of Neapolitan street traders from Piazza Garibaldi, there were also three or four of these Neapolitan vendors setting up informally on Via Bologna when I started the research. The official plan was to integrate them into a rejuvenated and redeveloped Via Bologna market that was to be called ‘Napoliamo Road’, although this never actually happened (Zagaria 2011). The shops that ran along the two sides of the street were predominantly small Chinese wholesalers, but there was also an Italian-run grocery which had diversified to sell plantain, cassava, okra and yam for a predominantly West African clientele. The main language of transcultural trade on the street markets around Piazza Garibaldi seemed to be Italian, or a Neapolitanised Italian with a few foreign words sprinkled in. Many of the migrants working there had settled in the area for a number of years and had learnt Italian. I also heard many other languages being spoken, including French, Wolof, Nigerian Pidgin, Arabic and Mandarin.

The organisational hub of the market centred around the entrance to an Italian-owned wholesaler of Neapolitan souvenirs. The owner, Riccardo, used to employ Serigne, a middle-aged Senegalese man who had now become the informal manager of Via Bologna market. Serigne’s wife, Sohna, set up a food trolley outside the entrance to the shop and Senegalese people tended to congregate there, to socialise, eat and have open meetings about the future of the

market. Serigne and Sohna (and myself while I was there) were allowed to use the toilet at the back of the shop, although the other traders had to find different solutions. The market day started at about 7 a.m. and extended, occasionally, until 5 p.m., although later on in my research this was shortened to 3 p.m. The street became a pedestrian zone during those hours, although this was frequently disrespected by the people needing to move through the area, particularly as the police officer meant to enforce the rule often didn't show up.

I mainly spent time on three stalls there. The first was Elage's (see Figure 2), which sold kola nuts, soap, T-shirts, tea etc., as I have outlined. Elage was usually surrounded by at least four other middle-aged Senegalese men, including Serigne, with whom I chatted in a mixture of Italian and French.

The second was Comfort's stall. Comfort was a middle-aged Nigerian woman who had been trading in and around Via Bologna since she had arrived in Italy twenty years previously, except for a short period when she owned an internet café and call centre further up Via Bologna. Her stall sold Chinese-manufactured 'urban' or 'hip-hop' style clothing, although she used to sell wax cloth. Comfort asked me not to photograph her stall. We spoke in Italian and English. She was often surrounded by a group of Nigerian girlfriends who came to greet her and pass the time of day. They were all mainly from the Benin area of Nigeria and



2 Elage's stall

often spoke in Nigerian Pidgin and their local Itsekiri dialect. The third stall belonged to Gennaro, a middle-aged Neapolitan man who was one of the historic traders banned from the main square. He sold Italian-manufactured socks and underwear, and set up next to his cousin, Alfonso, who had a knick-knack stall selling things such as watches, tissues, lighters and plastic passport sleeves. Gennaro used to own a shop but had felt compelled to close it following a number of violent robberies, one of which saw his father held at gunpoint until he emptied the till. After that he set up an unlicensed stall in Piazza Garibaldi in 1993 and had subsequently paid to regularise his presence there, until he was evicted in August 2011. He was a keen participant in the various political groups in Napoli that were fighting for job creation and urban renewal, and his stall became the focus of many passionate debates about solidarity and action while I was there. He and Alfonso were happy for me to photograph their stalls (see Figures 3 and 4), but didn't want to be included in the pictures. We spoke in Italian and Neapolitan.

All these people were introduced to me by Omar, a cultural mediator and anti-racist activist of Senegalese origin who later became the president of Napoli's Senegalese Association. I was introduced to Omar through other contacts on the city's anti-racist scene. He features in the book mainly in the moments where Via Bologna market was at risk of closure. There were many other people who had something to do with Via Bologna while I was there, not least those members of the anti-racist movement who worked at migrant charities and joined the traders in solidarity when the market was being closed down.

I also spent a lot of time on three unlicensed market stalls that were often set up in the same spots along the major roads of the city leading out of Piazza Garibaldi. These pitches were subjected to intense police scrutiny and frequent evictions whilst I was there. This is part of a history of City Hall trying to limit this unregulated selling with police intervention. I was introduced to Ibra by a woman who had previously conducted fieldwork in Napoli and had connections to the anti-racist scene. He sold Italian-manufactured hats from a sheet on the pavement outside an Italian grocery shop along the road locals call the 'Rettifilo', otherwise known as Corso Umberto (see Figure 5). As well as being one of the main arteries of the city, the Rettifilo is important to the history of urban renewal projects that have been inefficiently implemented around Piazza Garibaldi. It was built in the 1880s as part of a redevelopment, or *risanamento*, project designed to protect the city's poor from further devastation through multiple cholera epidemics. In practice the luxurious and unaffordable apartment blocks that populate the length of the road were where the renewal project ended. They simply served to hide the overcrowded and poorly ventilated housing that was



3 Gennaro's stall

there before. These conditions persisted into the twentieth century, exacerbated by the 1980 earthquake in Irpinia that led to the rehousing of many people in the area (Dines 2002: 178–179; Serao 1994, 90; Snowden 1995: 86). Ibra was good friends with Giovanni, who owned the grocery. He was also friendly with Salvatore, the doorman of the apartment block next to the grocery, although their relationship was quite fraught. Most of Ibra's customers were Neapolitans living in the backstreets around his stall. His first language was Wolof and he had also



4 Alfonso's stall

learnt Italian over the seven years he had been in Italy. He was still in the process of regularising his visa status. Initially he was extremely suspicious of me and suggested I pay him by the hour to stand near his stall. The products he sold were not illegal but the pitch had no permit, as he was not able to apply for one without a visa. After a short discussion in Italian he relented and suggested I come back the next day. I brought Omar to introduce and vouch for me more formally in Wolof, and the fieldwork began. I mainly spent afternoons on the stall, as police



5 Ibra's stall

controls were more aggressive in the mornings. Often I went to meet Ibra and he wasn't there because there were too many police patrols. He also told me that he didn't pay any local criminal groups to use the spot on the pavement for his pitch but the oblique presence of the Camorra in the city's commercial practices may have been a factor in his initial reluctance.

Modou, another Senegalese street vendor, was introduced to me by Omar. Modou sold high-quality fake Louis Vuitton bags and wallets off a sheet on a side street close to the Rettifilo (see [Figure 6](#)). He was Senegalese, in his mid-thirties and undocumented. He had been unable to regularise his visa status in Italy on account of the multiple criminal charges he had incurred for selling fake goods. Nonetheless, he had placed his pitch in the same spot for about five years and had a number of regular customers. He also did good business with tourists. He had very good relationships with the men who worked in the bars around his stall. He insisted to me that he didn't pay any protection money to, or rent his spot from, any local Camorra group, although, as has been noted by other scholars, it is understandably very difficult to get a clear response on this issue (Rea 2006: 6). We talked in Italian and dialect. He spoke dialect fluently and enjoyed a constant joking banter with his Italian friends in Neapolitan.



6 Modou's stall

Ku was a Chinese street vendor who sold electronic goods from an irregular stall on this road with a group of his compatriots (see [Figure 7](#)). He was introduced to me by Wu, a cultural mediator for the Chinese community who, as with Omar, I met through contacts and friends in anti-racism. Ku had a work visa and a market stall permit, but his permit required him to move constantly and not stop in one place. As such his stall was irregular and he was always on the watch for police patrols. His efforts were part of a family business. He worked alongside his father-in-law whilst his wife and mother-in-law ran a wholesaler's, also selling electronic goods, in nearby Pompei. The stereotype was that Chinese migrants didn't learn to speak any Italian. I, however, had no trouble speaking with Ku in pretty fluent Italian.

In sharp contrast to the unlicensed pitches, Poggioreale market, also known as the 'Caramanico' because of the street it was located on, was a regulated market space known internationally for selling 'Made in Italy' clothing, shoes and accessories at wholesale prices (see [Figure 8](#)). It was open from approximately 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. from Thursday to Sunday and could be reached in ten minutes from Piazza Garibaldi by tram. The market was strictly monitored and managed, although unlicensed street vendors did set up stalls on the road up to its entrance in the high season (Christmas and the summer months). Vendors paid a higher fee for their spot than at other markets



7 Ku's stall

in town and the presence of contraband items was very strictly controlled. All of the stall owners were Neapolitan and they often employed first-generation migrants. The customers were predominantly Italian or West African. This created a different linguistic picture in the market, compared to the other sites I worked in, because of the need to conduct a lot of trade in English.

The Italians came as regular consumers to buy gifts and treat themselves. The West African men and women came in groups to bulk-buy stock for boutiques



8 Poggioreale market

in Europe and West Africa. This second trade was big business for the vendors. They made agreements with West African men living in Napoli to act as taxi drivers, bringing customers to the market and back to their hotels. Often vendors would take stock directly to the hotels of respected customers. The languages spoken with Italian customers were Italian and Neapolitan, whereas with African customers a combination of English, French and some Italian was the only way to conduct negotiations. I was often called on to act as translator in negotiations.

I was introduced to Titti and Ciro, a married couple who ran the Eddy Pell stall, by the mother of one of the contacts I had made when negotiating access. Eddy Pell sold middle-range Italian designer leather bags, belts and silk scarfs from a stall that had originally been opened to supplement the family's first business, a shop in the Piazza Mercato neighbourhood beneath my contact's flat (see [Figure 9](#)). Titti introduced me to father and son Pepe and Alessandro, of *Pepe's Bags*, which, although it also sold bags, had totally different stock (see [Figure 10](#)). About half the stock of *Pepe's Bags* comprised cheaper imported Chinese bags, and the other half was Italian designer leather bags. The family also had a shop in the Borgo di Sant'Antonio neighbourhood near Piazza Garibaldi, where Alessandro's mother and wife worked. They regularly employed a Ukrainian man, Anton, on the stall, to assist with packing and



9 Eddy Pell



10 Peppe's Bags

unpacking the stock as well as to sell bags to customers. They also employed a series of different English-speaking West African men while I was there to help talk to the West African customers. Alessandro told me that he had given all his employees contracts and paid them a fair rate.

Poggioreale was the most economically buoyant of all my sites. However, 2012 was still a bad year for the market. There were many ‘dead days’ with very few customers, particularly from January to April, and a large number of empty stalls. Local Italians had little money to spend on luxury goods and there were fewer foreign customers than usual. Napoli was starting to lose its reputation as a go-to destination for good-value high-end products, and many buyers told me that they were making fewer trips to Napoli and more to Turkey to stock up their boutiques. These stresses, and the imperatives of getting by through trade that often had to be conducted in English, created cultural and linguistic interdependencies that rubbed uncomfortably alongside national and local understandings of race, difference and belonging.

While my fieldwork mainly took place at these market sites, I also ended up making notes on things that I witnessed and took part in during marches and protests; community events; and, as I went about my regular life in the city, doing my shopping, hanging out with friends and travelling on public transport. The kinds of vivacious and open sociability that take place on buses and trains in Napoli made these journeys particularly interesting occasions to observe everyday interactions in the city. That, coupled with the fact that many street vendors used public transport to move their merchandise – and created stress when occupying space with large bags during peak times – offered rich opportunities to observe the fraught and convivial transcultural interactions that extended out across the city from the street markets I was working on.

Notes

- 1 As Sidney Tarrow pointed out, southern Italy had, in any case, been a ‘semi-colonial’ territory from the twelfth century and was largely governed through a ‘logic of colonial exploitation’ by a series of rulers, starting with the Normans (Tarrow 1996: 394). In keeping with this rationale, the Bourbon rulers, who were overthrown by Unification, failed to implement critical land reforms in the south, and ideas about southern Italian inferiority also originated at this time (Verdicchio 1997: 3). This book does not address the pre-Unification period in Italy except to note that the southern regions should not be perceived as a homogeneous mass, as they have historically presented differing levels of urbanisation, agrarian development, industrialisation, banditism and nascent mafia activity (Tarrow 1996: 392–393).

- 2 But see the work of scholars such as Lidia Curti (2006), Angelica Pesarini (2017) and S. A. Smythe (2018), who have been attempting to recover this history in the present.
- 3 The 'Made in Italy' merchandise mark indicates that an item has been planned, manufactured and packed in Italy.
- 4 The available data on migrant occupations do not reflect the total migrant population in Napoli and Campania because of the numbers of undocumented and informally employed. However, it would appear that just under half of migrants are employed in the service sector (in particular as carers and domestic help), with 14.5 per cent employed in construction, 12.5 per cent in commerce (including street vending), 10.8 per cent in catering, 9.7 per cent in agriculture and 5 per cent in the food industry (Amato *et al.* 2009: 124).

2

Talk and the transcultural

If Italian, as I was learning it, seemed studied and clear and, in its crystalline grace, evocative of female beauty, Neapolitan struck me as primitive and flowing and masculine.

(Belmonte 1979: 5)

THE ABOVE QUOTE, taken from Thomas Belmonte's famous ethnographic account of the Neapolitan poor in the 1970s, emblematises the fraught relationship between language use, inequality and power in Napoli that I explored in the [previous chapter](#). In *The Broken Fountain* (1979), Belmonte examined forms of culture and community emerging in a city suffering from deep-set economic decline and high unemployment rates. His thesis was that the cultural practices associated with the Neapolitan poor, such as playing up to the caricature of the sly, comedic and streetwise Pulcinella character in *commedia dell'arte* tradition, were 'compensatory practices' in an under-industrialised city, rife with unemployment, that didn't allow 'genuine' culture to emerge (xxi). He explained that the strength of the poor lay in their ability to mitigate extreme physical and moral suffering with semi-legal activities and a redemptive joking culture. However, he argued that they did not organise politically because of their deep-seated respect for bourgeois power (124–143). For him, this view of a supposed cultural subalternity and limited political vision amongst the Neapolitan working classes and lumpen poor was first guided by the impression that Neapolitan talk made on him. Like many other visitors to the city, he arrived in the field already preconditioned to think of the difference between what was Neapolitan and what was Italian, in terms of intersecting racialised, classed and gendered hierarchies.

Other ethnographers have also described an initial fascination with language use in Napoli. In *The Art of Making Do*, Jason Pine (2012) described arriving in the city with the initial intention of studying local language and gesture. His thoughtful and reflexive attempts to learn Neapolitan eventually led

to an ethnography about the city's neomelodic music scene and its connections to organised crime. Pine's account of the difficulties he encountered gaining respect and inclusion as a Neapolitan speaker amongst Neapolitan men, and his reflections on the importance of a forceful linguistic dexterity in the Neapolitan spoken by both men and women on the street, spoke to the centrality of language use in everyday life in Napoli (63–69).

I, too, came to this project interested in language. Part of this was personal. My mother was born in a village about an hour's drive from Napoli. She married my British father in 1980, and my sister and I grew up in the Home Counties. We were raised bilingual, speaking English and Italian. However, my Italian grandparents spoke only Neapolitan and many of my relatives, who could speak Italian, chose to speak Neapolitan a lot of the time outside work. My sister and I were instructed not to learn Neapolitan, although we did understand it and learnt to speak a bit. I very quickly perceived the stigmatised status of Neapolitan language and how that located people in terms of class status, levels of education and respectability. Outside the family, people's frequently shocked reaction to my fluent Italian revealed the ambivalent processes at stake in the recognition of a linguistic subject who didn't quite look Italian enough to be Italian.

But my question, on returning to Napoli as a researcher, was about what these fraught maps of culture and communication looked like for people speaking from a much more vulnerable, precarious and urgent position than I was. In the introduction and [Chapter 1](#) I described the wider context of migration and austerity that had an impact upon the street markets where I did the research for this book. I started to depict the multilingual babel that was the soundscape of everyday life as I moved around Napoli. I argued that edgy multilingual talk in the heterogeneous and multiethnic street markets where I did my fieldwork took place in a wider context of racialised antimigration sentiment – where people were dying in the Mediterranean as they sought to cross over into Europe – and austerity measures that were impinging on people's ability to make enough money to live on.

In this chapter I will address the question of language within broader scholarly debates about contemporary racism. I will show how theoretical contributions around racism and language have helped to form the conceptual framework that I have used whilst writing up the findings of the research. As already stated, I have been particularly influenced by Glissant's argument (1981, 1997) that post-colonial intersubjective dynamics – what he calls 'Relation' – have been guided by a fraught, multilingual principle through which people have negotiated the violent legacy of colonialism and racial hierarchy. Other literatures, on the significance

of linguistic dexterity, on humour, on mourning, and on urban multiculturalism and struggle, have also been useful and important. Gathering field data related to talk, and theorising the results, involved articulating the links between discourse and practice, or understanding language use within the material context of its deployment: in other words, learning to pay attention to how culture, meaning and language vitally constituted the economic, political and material (Drew and Hall 1998: 222–225). As I expand on below, I have done this through a Bakhtinian analytical lens (Bakhtin 1984 [1965], 1986), whereby a ‘heteroglossia’ of dialogic speech genres revealed the connections between everyday talk and highly contested ideological debates around difference, belonging and entitlement that existed at the local, national and international level.

Glissant’s multilingual counterpoetic

Edouard Glissant’s notion of Relation (Glissant 1981, 1997) has helped me to think more carefully about how everyday multilingual and transcultural encounters at my street market sites were wrought through by historic connections between language and power. Glissant talked about there being two forms of historically inflected identity: ‘root identity’ and ‘Relation identity’. He explained that a pulsation towards monolingualism had been intimately linked to the nation-building projects and imperialist endeavours that accompanied the rise of modernity in the West (1997: 23, 49; 1981: 51). The symbolic and material violence of this encounter generated particular forms of ‘root identity’, or the idea of a transparent and clear form of belonging, which founded itself in distant past and myth, and ratified itself through the possession of land (1997: 43). The relationship between different languages in this environment, particularly when one language officially dominated over one or more spoken languages, was political and thus generative of inequalities and oppression (Glissant 1981: 560–561). Glissant defined this linguistic inequality – which, in his case, focused on the distinction between French and Creole in the French Caribbean – as ‘diglossia’: the domination of one ‘vehicular’ language over one or several other ‘vernacular’, or spoken, languages (1997: 118–119).

On the other hand, Glissant explained that a non-reductive relationship towards difference, a ‘Divers non universalisant’, had also occurred as a result of the various encounters of modernity, and this had allowed for the emergence of transverse, non-hierarchical and non-generalisable cultural configurations. ‘Relation identity’ was linked to this conscious and chaotic experience of transcultural interaction that was not interested in a rooted legitimacy: it

‘gives-on-and-with’ (Glissant 1997: 44). His poetic of planetary Relation, or *Relation planétaire*, started from the irreducible difference of the Other and an attitude of equality and respect to them ‘as *different* from oneself’ (Glissant 1981: 27, 799–800). Diversity, or *Divers*, was the most important value in Relation, as it created a totality or unity that exploded traditional definitions of centre and periphery and was never fixed, but produced itself through constantly shifting interconnections. As such, it was uncontainable and chaotic because it lacked a permanent essence. The logic of hybridity triumphed over one of rootedness or legitimacy (Britton 1999: 11–17). He argued that this violent but consensual creolising result of colonial contact was multilingual and central to the chaotic reality of living with a constantly diversifying *divers* (Glissant 1997: 5).

Glissant called this multilingual reality a ‘counterpoetics’ (1981: 627–628; 1997: 5). He described counterpoetics as the predominantly oral and verbal strategy of communities whose means of expression were constrained, partial and contradictory. Based on an understanding of a necessary engagement with the language of the oppressor, he described counterpoetics as something that refused assimilation but, rather, abrogated and assimilated to produce something radically different (Britton 1999: 30–34). Glissant’s understanding of the relationship between language and collective action shifted throughout his life. He moved from a focus on identity and subjectivity, as constituted through language practices, to an understanding of creolisation as a point at which language would become so diverse that it would be no longer possible to speak one language that was clearly demarcated from any other. For Glissant, counterpoetics represented a transitional stage on the path towards that goal (Britton 1999: 48–52).

Glissant has contributed overall to an understanding of what I am calling the edginess of the verbal-ideological processes that formed the bedrock of my fieldwork, by demanding that full attention be paid to the implications of chaotic, incomplete, ambivalent, humorous and resilient multilingual communication in everyday interactions. He argued that it was important to pay attention to the linguistic creations springing from the friction between different languages to produce innovative speaking practices or innovative relationships to speaking (1997: 104). Importantly, he said that this required an attitude towards understanding interactions across the boundaries of difference that allowed itself to remain opaque: it paid attention to the texture of the weave between people and did not seek to clarify and elucidate everything (1981: 14, 19; 1997: 90). This challenged the western concept that linked acceptance of the Other to detailed and transparent understanding of them, constructing them as an ‘*object* of knowledge’ (Britton 1999: 18–19). Instead he stated that it was necessary to attempt

to untangle the diglot linguistic creations people produced through plural and mobile forms of cultural meaning-making that were playful, horizontal and tactical (Glissant 1981: 793–6, 1997: 20). This revealed the ‘penetrable opacity’ of Relation: ‘a world in which one exists, or agrees to exist, with and among others’ (Glissant 1997: 14).

The opaque, playful, risky, exhilarating and generative linguistic edginess that I witnessed were evidence that it was possible to exist in a normal, fluid and continually evolving Relation with other people differentiated by ‘race’, class and legal status. The patterns of culture and communication that existed on the street markets where I did research indicated that talk was almost always possible, despite being frequently painful, partial and ambivalent. However, these interactions existed despite, and because of, a proximal context of radical incommunicability in the Mediterranean, where a ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembe 2019) ruled that it was acceptable to allow people to drown at sea because their lives were deemed disposable. As Achille Mbembe explained, from the twentieth century a juridical order was established that set in place the right of the sovereign State not simply to foster or disallow life, as Foucault argued, but to kill – (67). Borders, frontiers and colonies became key to the recognition of State authority and spaces of exception where it was possible to rationalise and civilise the act of killing by suspending juridical order and waging constant war (76–77). There, necropower was deployed in the destruction of a mass of people who had been classified as disposable and so therefore could be consigned to ‘*death-world*’ or to the ‘*living dead*’ (92, emphasis in original). Talk was important to the constitution of necropolitics. Other work that has reflected on the possibilities for talk in spaces of exception, such as the camp (Levi 1986: 69–79) and the slave plantation (Gilroy 1993: 57), has shown that these spaces were ‘not a community if only because a community, by definition, implies the exercise of the power of speech and thought’ (Mbembe 2019: 74–75). Rather, as Paul Gilroy argued, those consigned to such spaces of exception were expelled from humanity. Their only possibilities resided in ‘rebellion, suicide, flight and silent mourning’ and, if kept alive, they remained in a ‘state of injury’, in conditions of terror and violence (Gilroy 1993: 57; Mbembe 2019: 74–75).

Urban transcultural dexterity

Having established what was at stake in the everyday multilingual and transcultural talk that I recorded in my fieldwork, I now turn to the wider anthropological, sociological and sociolinguistic work on racism and language that I have drawn

on. This starts with a literature about the importance of being able to deploy communicative zeal and prowess in city spaces: something I describe, using the work of James Trotter (2008a, b), as ‘urban transcultural dexterity’.

As Trotter noted in his work on prostitution in South African port cities, the ‘cultural dexterity’ of his research participants came from knowing how to converse fluently and confidently in multiple languages that were not their own. He described this as an urban phenomenon that was multilingual and transcultural, enabling an everyday ‘practical cosmopolitanism’ despite a wider racialised context that would encourage division and separateness (2008a: 684–685, 2008b: 87). On one of my first days doing fieldwork at Via Bologna I was stopped by a Senegalese man as I walked down the market clutching a notebook. He made a jokey show of rushing at me and shouting in Neapolitan, ‘Put that away! I’m *guappo!*’ As Pine noted in his work, the figure of the *guappo* was ambiguously connected to the streetwise and possibly violent personage of the *camorrista* (Pine 2012: 133–135). The unknown Senegalese man was warning me that I looked too officious with the notepad and would make everyone in the market uncomfortable and suspicious. He was also teaching me a valuable lesson about the importance of performing an agile linguistic dexterity in Neapolitan street markets, particularly if one might be perceived as an outsider. By making a big scene in Neapolitan, and claiming a very specifically Neapolitan street identity, he was showing me how to gain respect and inclusion through the way I spoke.

These pragmatic attempts to mitigate difference at my field sites were inextricably linked to the performance of particular kinds of locally hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Two important examples of these local masculinities included the figure of the *guappo*, and the figure of the cunning and comedic Pulcinella character of Neapolitan *commedia dell’arte* tradition. These were a significant feature of everyday practical cosmopolitan encounters in street markets. They were ethnically marked and masculine performances that, however, migrant men and women were also able to buy into in an attempt at claiming inclusion, even if this could have ambiguous and uneven results. For example, *u’maschiolona* – which could be translated as ‘ladette’ – is a term that can be used to describe women who speak loudly and with masculine bravado in public. Being able to show linguistic prowess – by conversing loudly and forcefully in a rapid Neapolitan (Pine 2012: 63–74), or by showing off skills in English and other languages – was central to these hegemonic masculine performances.

An important strand of sociolinguistic and anthropological scholarly work on language and speech in ethnically diverse, urban settings – mainly based in

a northern European or American context – supports these insights about linguistic aptitude and everyday negotiations across transcultural boundaries. The collection of essays in *Language and Superdiversity* (Arnaut *et al.* 2016) brought together work that integrated ethnography and sociolinguistics in approaching multi- or polylingual and ethnically diverse contexts. Unlike much historic sociolinguistics, the book was interested in investigating the context of communication – its social relations, cultural ideologies etc. – through ethnographic immersion, and so connected much more closely to sociology and anthropology (Blommaert and Rampton 2016: 33). Similar studies on language negotiations and multiculturalism have been published in the King's College London *Working Papers in Urban Languages and Literacies*. For example, Ben Rampton (1997a, b, 2003, 2010) explored how new ethnic identities and a sense of 'liminality' had been creating innovative 'language-crossing' practices or contemporary vernaculars that challenged dominant views about insiders and outsiders within a culture. This work grew out of work on language, ethnicity and difference by linguistic anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s, in particular the work of Smitherman, Labov, Gumperz and Hymes, which exposed the way in which traditional notions of language groups and speakers as ideological formations were tied up with exclusionary and racist ideas of nationhood and ethnicity. For example, John Gumperz's work on interethnic miscommunication explored ways in which intonation, tone and rhythm produced misunderstandings during transcultural interaction, perpetuating negative stereotypes about minority groups of people (1982: 172–186; 2003). Dell Hymes argued for a need to study 'ways of speaking' – how people actually encountered and made use of languages around them – in order to understand wider questions of inequality in social life resulting from race, classed and gendered cultural patterns, institutions, and value systems (1996: 26, 56–9).

Much of the fine-grained attention to semiotic and linguistic detail in sociolinguistic work in the Italian context has also been superseded by a more macro focus on language practices and tactics. Such work carried out in Italy in the 2000s reflected a profoundly multilingual contemporary situation where the status and proliferation of different codes, repertoires and linguistic/social variables appeared along a constantly shifting speech continuum (Parry 2010: 327–328). There was little agreement amongst experts as to the discrete categorisation of people's language into different patois or koiné dialects; Italianised dialects or dialectised Italians; popular, folk or 'working class' Italian; informal, regional or common Italian; or formal regional or common Italian. John Trumper (1989: 31–37) – like many sociolinguists following the work of Gumperz and

Hymes – argued that what really mattered for understanding the Italian situation of diglossia was how and why people chose to switch between codes, not what the variability between codes actually was.

Anthropological studies from the 1980s and 1990s, which explored the use of creole by black and white young people in the UK, also examined the connection between language, social differences and racialised inequalities (Gilroy and Lawrence 1988; Sebba 1993; Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985; Hewitt 1986). This work emphasised the significance of switching between different languages – as a form of resistance against institutional oppression (Gilroy and Lawrence 1988: 132–140; Sebba 1993), and as ‘acts of identity’ whereby claims about ethnicity were linked to linguistic questions and, in hostile circumstances, drew communities closer together (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). Roger Hewitt’s book *White Talk, Black Talk* (1986) looked at the use of Jamaican patois by black and white young people in south London as a ‘formulaic corpus’ that could be drawn on to ‘transpose struggles over power into struggles within signification’ (8, 98). Supporting my own observations about locally hegemonic masculinities in Napoli, Hewitt’s exploration of the ritualised ludic and competitive uses of creole amongst black and white young men signals the ways in which the semiotics of gender could be appropriated by racial and ethnic referents (170–179). He concluded that, whilst all social relations among groups of people would need to be transformed in order to overthrow racism, ‘partial alternative structures of association, of coding, of symbolism’ were also engendered in the interactive processes between black and white people that represented a ‘semantic “guerilla tactics”’ (205, 235).

Janus-faced humour

The forms of top-down racialised and economic subordination experienced by my participants worked alongside a differential power dynamic *within* the groups of people working next to each other on the pavement. This was frequently manifested through joking language and comedic behaviour. Humour was Janus-faced: it acted at times as a form of comedic self-effacement that created a convivial transcultural inclusivity, whilst at other times it was a violent power slap-down and racialised act of domination.

Luisa Passerini’s work on irreverent behaviour, “‘subversive’ slips of the tongue’, double meanings and wit referring to the baser functions of the body during fascism has been helpful for understanding this. She argued that irreverent behaviour revealed the small ways in which people sought to undermine

the authoritarian regime and retain small amounts of dignity and autonomy. The oppression of free speech and, as already mentioned, the move to create a unifying ‘totalitarian language’ were key dimensions of fascism. However, this resistant comic behaviour of the people was double-edged. It both subverted and restored order to become merely a ‘collective sneer’, and could also allow people to be hurt and sent up at the same time (Passerini 1987: 67–126). Passerini also pointed out the ideological potential of such language practices. In a later work she described how the laughter and mockery of the piazza got passed up to the students protesting during 1968 to become part of a cultural guerilla tactic designed to critique and transform social reality through language (1988: 112–114). In a different context, Geneva Smitherman’s work on speech play in African American cultural forms described humorous language and wordplay such as ‘playing the dozens’ or ‘your mother’ jokes as a form of stress release and social commentary amongst subaltern people who would be in danger were they publicly to lash out (1977, 2006: 99, 2007).

Mikhail Bakhtin’s work identified certain spatio-temporal instances when the utterance has a greater transformative potential. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin argued that during carnival ‘a special idiom of forms and symbols’ worked to turn the world inside out and to up-end hierarchy in a way that was not merely destructive, but also regenerative (1984: 10–12). He accepted that over the centuries the ‘festive laughter’ of the carnival had diminished, but its utopian character survived in the raucous, Billingsgate language of the marketplace (9). This laughter was generated by abusive and insulting language, as well as profanities and threats that had an ambivalent nature, working to destroy but also to regenerate. Comic imagery, which particularly focused on the grotesque functioning of the body with relation to food, sex and defecation, also worked on the same principle. Bakhtin explained that the ‘familiar speech’ of the marketplace was related to laughter because it was excluded from official speech and so took on the ambivalent and yet utopian potential of carnival (17–18). The temporary suspension of hierarchies created an ambivalence during communication allowing for new kinds of meaning to emerge (6). However, while the carnivalesque marketplace could temporarily recode relations of dominance and subordination across the whole social structure, it failed to do away completely with power and often functioned in complicity with it, participating in the abuse of those who were more vulnerable (Stallybrass and White 1986: 9). The idea of the carnivalesque and its relevance to marketplace interactions very practically influenced the way I thought about the selection and definition of research sites in this project. The festive laughter of my market sites spread out along

the pavements of the city centre and onto the main forms of public transport that carried my vendor participants and their merchandise to and from work. It also infiltrated different contexts, in particular the city's student and anti-racist networks, informing the kinds of social struggle that took over my street market sites during the research.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott argued that disguised public expressions of dissent, in the form of gossip, jokes and codes, were important because they revealed the 'infrapolitics' of the powerless. Culturally informed verbal practices such as jokes, euphemisms, exhortations of despair and codes created a disguise of 'ideological insubordination' from where people could construct an antihegemonic 'imaginative capacity' that might or might not be acted on depending on the situation (Scott 1990: 19, 90–92). These strategies were often only partially successful. For example, he described 'linguistic veiling' – pretending not to speak or understand – as a key infrapolitical protective strategy of powerless people. But, whilst this could be an effective survival strategy, it also gave fuel to stereotypes about the inherent inferiority of subaltern groups of people. It illustrated the ways in which people were obliged to carry out a performance of dominance whereby the hegemonic public transcript was reproduced by both the dominant and the dominated (32–26).

The topsy-turvy and ambivalently political humorous interactions that were such a common feature of my time researching the street markets in Napoli were also suffused by the particular configurations of male power and leadership that developed between Italian unification and the end of the Second World War, creating a local context of sexuality. In particular, this related to the potential threat of racial intimacy between Neapolitan women and black migrant men, which was the subject of aggressive joking. I have already spoken about the way in which locally hegemonic masculinities – in particular the *guappo*, a Pulcinella-esque joking figure and *u'maschiolona* – informed the daily joking negotiation of cosmopolitan life in Neapolitan street markets, on the part of both men and women. The ambivalent and contestable nature of these daily gendered performances was legitimised by a pervasive white supremacist and patriarchal fear about taboo manifestations of racial intimacy. This is evidence of the significance of sexuality in everyday social, economic and cultural relations, as described in the now classic feminist text by Gayle Rubin. In 'The traffic in women' (1975), Rubin argued that, over the course of history, a set of sexual conventions, practices and systems had given rise to, and continued to perpetuate, a hegemonic 'sex/gender system'. Under this system women were subjected to particular rules when it came to their sexual behaviour and any transgressions they might be considered

to commit. Important black and anti-racist feminists of the same period pointed out that non-white women were subjected to different codes and conventions in this regard (hooks 1994; Carby 2000; Ware 2015). They asked that attention be paid to the intersection of race, class and gender in particular sexual worlds. For example, bell hooks examined the conditions under which racial intimacy has been lived and governed in the USA in order to show the ways in which white women have participated in the racist oppression of black women (1994: 93–110). In her study of lynching in the USA, Vron Ware's work explored how racial terror was justified by the spectre of the rape of a white woman and hysterical fears about black male sexuality (2015: 167–224). The anthropological literature on sexual preserves in rural Italy from the same period showed how rules around sexuality and public intimacy were maintained through joking (Reiter 1975: 58) and the sexual division of 'verbal roles' – distinct topics of talk, and the practice of maintaining secrecy amongst men or gossiping amongst women (Harding 1975). These studies of humour as a way of managing sexual worlds have been useful in understanding the Janus-faced joking about racial intimacy that formed an important feature of my fieldwork.

Melancholic, monolingual and postracial language attitudes

Napoli's particular history, described in depth in the [last chapter](#), infused the talk of Neapolitans in my research with a kind of discursive melancholia, as Butler has described it (Bell and Butler 1999: 170), where talk, and talk about talk, recalled histories of cultural erosion and departure as well as contemporary difficulties with worklessness and a lack of future prospects. This occurred at moments where participants referred to ongoing loss as a way of talking about everyday, lived transcultural encounters. This kind of melancholic approach to loss and subordination entailed a process of grieving that could potentially unpick the cultural inheritances that perpetuated racism in ways that were both ambivalent and aggressive and (Ramazani cited in Clewell 2002: 54). As such, it was politically significant because accounts of Neapolitan subordination were commonly used – by people doing anti-racist organisation as well as people in the street – in order to connect Neapolitan historic victimhood to an anti-racist appeal for welcoming migrants to the city. However, these melancholic strategies often didn't work – or only worked partially – as a 'politics of speech' because it was too easy to avoid rethinking and reframing the ritualistic accounting of loss in relationship to unequal structures of domination in the contemporary moment (Bell and Butler 1999: 165–166). As Clewell noted, reflecting on the work of Ramazani and

Freud's later work, melancholic rage often disallows a move beyond itself into a process of mourning, where ambivalent and contingent attachments to new individuals and situations would enable a more revolutionary relationship between past, present and future (Clewell 2002: 56).

In Napoli, melancholic discourses around language and culture loss prevented any real coming to terms with either Napoli's historic subordination or its involvement in Italian imperialism and fascist violence. This 'postcolonial melancholia', as Gilroy (2004) has described it, made it difficult for people to connect Neapolitan modern history to the contemporary situation of migration to the city. It allowed Neapolitans to claim they were innately welcoming and friendly to new arrivals because they were historic victims of racialised oppression. I would like to argue that this produced a particular form of Neapolitan postracialism where accounts of Neapolitan goodness and past victimhood allowed for claims to be made about the mutuality of people's life experiences that denied the insidious effects of racial hierarchies (Dawes 2018).

Under postracialism, race is silenced as a *particular* category of domination with its own history and context, often in favour of a focus on poverty, inequality, economic entitlement and class struggle. Critical scholars of race have argued this has led to a collapse in anti-racist solidarity and mobilisation whilst racial suffering continues to exist (Gilroy 2012; Goldberg 2009: 19, 158; Lentin 2011, 2014). David Theo Goldberg argued that this widespread 'racial denial' held particular weight in the European racial context, where the emergence of particular racisms was intimately tied to the context of migration and so-called 'migration crisis', and where the 'political economy' of migration criminalised migrants, removing their rights at the same time as it thinned out the rights of European citizens to access work, healthcare and security (2009: 177, 181–183). The fates of the Neapolitan and migrant vendors in my research were intimately linked, as they themselves claimed; but their collective experience of work and social struggle needs to be examined without, as Gilroy has suggested, reducing analysis to a 'deterministic' and relativistic idea of the relationship between race, class and experiences of injustice (380). As such, I have used the notion of melancholia and interconnected Neapolitan victimhood and goodness to highlight these dangerous postracial tendencies that appeared frequently at moments where it became necessary to organise collectively in defence of their livelihoods.

Another key way through which melancholia manifested itself was a protective regional identity that focused on the racialised and hierarchical status of different languages, in particular Neapolitan. Geneva Smitherman argued that hierarchical 'language attitudes' allowed dominant groups of people to use language in a

simple way as a tool of oppression against the powerless: ‘who’s speaking “the” language and who’s speaking only a dialect of “the” language depends on who has the army’ (Smitherman 1977: 193–199). Instead of leading to claims about postracialism, a negative inferiority complex about the status of the Neapolitan language – something that was emblematic of decline and marginalisation in the Italian south – sometimes enabled a collapse into nationalistic and racially exclusionary tendencies. Migrants who could converse in Neapolitan were often congratulated and supported for their linguistic dexterity. But those who could not were often disregarded and blamed for the mistreatment they experienced on the part of people in the street, the police or local organised crime groups. Some of the same Neapolitans who spoke melancholically about their subordinated status in Italy as southern Italians – a status that I have argued was frequently tied up with speaking Neapolitan – also called for migrants to assimilate linguistically in order to survive and be accepted in Napoli. At this point hierarchical ‘language attitudes’ about Neapolitan were invoked to excuse an exclusionary and assimilatory pride that could be conceptualised as a Neapolitan ‘monolingual nationalism’, using Ulrich Beck’s (2005, 2007) work on ‘methodological nationalism’. This was a kind of postcolonial melancholia that refused to account for and open itself up to the lived reality of globalised and cosmopolitan difference. In these moments the highly precarious and contingent status of transcultural linguistic dexterity revealed itself. Thus, ideas about melancholia, postracialism, language attitudes and monolingual nationalism allowed me to think about the moments where communication was refused, broke down or failed: when talk became the violence of not talking at all.

Urban multicultural and place-making struggles

Racialised place-making struggles were an important feature of the daily functioning of street markets around Piazza Garibaldi whilst I was in the field. This place-making involved difficult processes of transcultural economic collaboration in situations of economic precariousness and informality, where some people were undocumented, some people were selling contraband and some people had not paid their vendor licences. On an everyday basis, this necessitated forms of safeguarding, compromise and warning systems that were designed to mitigate the impact of police incursions into markets. As my research progressed many of the sites I was working in were being closed down, and the attempt to resist this coalesced into an organised struggle involving Neapolitan and migrant street vendors, supported by anti-racist and migrant rights activists.

The book's reflections on the liminal and improvised precariousness of urban life have been informed by the work of critical urbanists Suzanne Hall and Abdoumalig Simone. Hall's work on London described the city as 'shared spaces of intersection' where hybrid and intercultural relationships were the result of the hard work involved in travelling across time and space and building new economic opportunities (Hall 2009: 55–56, 2012). Her work on the economic and cultural lives of Rye Lane and Walworth Road in south London (2012, 2013, 2015) also argued for the significance of the 'intercultural proficiencies' (2015: 22) that underpinned everyday sociability and economic collaborations amongst people from over twenty countries of origin, a third of whom (in Rye Lane) could speak four languages or more. This economic and cultural diversity was placed within the context of a national and international anti-immigration politics that limited her participants' rights and possibilities. Simone's writing about endurance in the urban south has suggested that processes of improvisation – where human lives are held together and worked out through provisional solutions that are both constantly specific and changing – are vital resources in locations that have been rendered uninhabitable for those that must live there (2018: 4–12).

The findings of my research also draw insights from ethnographic work about urban multiculturalism, everyday transcultural interactions and economic activities in the city of Napoli, particularly based on work carried out from the late 1990s onwards (Dines 2002; Sarnelli 2003; Schmoll 2003). Camille Schmoll's work examined the transcultural collaboration that underpinned retail activities in the city as part of a pragmatic, everyday cosmopolitanism whereby people had learnt to negotiate encounters with difference in order to facilitate trade and economic activity. Dines' writing on urban planning processes around Piazza Garibaldi from the 1990s (2002, 2012) noted the multilingual nature of economic transactions and everyday sociality, as well as remarking on Piazza Garibaldi's appropriation as a principle site of protest for both migrants and unemployed Neapolitans (2002: 184, 2012: 2019). Sarnelli (2003) described the use of obscenities and mimicry between Neapolitan and Senegalese traders in Neapolitan markets as revelatory of ambivalent, everyday encounters with difference.

Don Mitchell's work has been useful for understanding the spatialisation of struggles between different street vendors and the State that I witnessed. In *The Right to the City* he argued that the production of particular kinds of space according to the logics of capital made it impossible for other sorts of people who needed that space to survive. Those who needed it for its use-value – in Napoli this would be the migrant and Neapolitan street vendors – were seen to threaten

the exchange-value of that space as envisaged by the State (Mitchell 2003: 177–178). With the election of Mayor de Magistris in 2011, City Hall’s vision for growth involved redesigning Napoli as a popular tourist destination. In order to protect the exchange-value of the spaces it wished to transform, the way in which the space was put to use by the poor, particularly through street markets, needed to be limited. This was justified through discourses about those street markets as disorderly and illegal. However, Mitchell also argued that new spatial and cultural reconfigurations could be made by the people being excluded from particular spaces in the city, and this showed the ways in which these spaces could be won and protected through active and on-going struggle (2003: 3–6).

The forms of everyday collaboration, through which street vendors in Napoli struggled to retain and obtain legal permissions to sell their goods in the most profitable spaces of the city, crossed racialised boundaries and implicated groups of people stigmatised and segregated along the lines of race, class, gender and legal status. They often also involved informal economic practices, such as warning unlicensed vendors of the arrival of police patrols, sharing spaces on market stalls or turning a blind eye to any contraband being sold. These transcultural practices can be thought of as a type of hustling that, as Stuart Hall *et al.* argued in *Policing the Crisis*, requires a defensive, or oppositional, class-consciousness about what it means to be stigmatised and marginalised in order to secure the survival of whole communities of poor and racialised populations, particularly living in urban contexts (Hall *et al.* 1978: 381–391). In their work about marginalised and subordination communities in cities, Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg (2009: 8) and Loïc Wacquant (1998: 4) noted that skill as a talker was key to the economic success of the street hustler. Street vendors in Napoli relied on a conscious resistance against negative ideas about street vending in order to protect their livelihoods. As I explore in the section of this chapter on urban transcultural dexterity, this required a proficiency in multilingual talk.

Antonio Gramsci’s work on the relationship between structure and super-structure, relations of force and the problem of the national-popular has offered further useful guidance in conceptualising the urban place-making struggles that took place during my fieldwork. His argument centred on the disconnect between the Italian intellectual class and the popular mass movements below them, resulting in a lacking ‘national-popular’ capable of bringing about change (Gramsci 2000: 366–367). For Gramsci the solution to this lay in a national class alliance between the southern Italian peasantry and the northern industrialised proletariat who could act as the hegemonic force. This would mean overcoming the animosity that had been created between the two groups to bring about an

alternative ‘national-popular’ (Chambers 2008: 8; Gramsci 2010: 54, 118, 141). Gramsci suggested that there were three key moments in the formation of the relations of force that were capable of struggling against a period of crisis: first, measurable relations of social forces in the structure; second, the formation of a group’s self-aware political consciousness and an understanding that one group’s corporate interests could be translated to, and also become the interests of, another subordinated group at both national and international levels; and third, the introduction of decisive action and military force. He argued that it was this second moment that was fundamental in marking the passage from structure to superstructure and is what underlay his argument about the need for collaboration between different groups of people (Gramsci 2000: 201–207). Gramsci’s ideas can be applied to the processes at work in a particular place and time (Hall 1986: 417–421, 433–434; Said 1993: 57), and Pasquale Verdicchio has suggested that Gramsci’s idea of alliance could be applied to the indigenous and emerging subalterns in contemporary Italy as a result of globalised markets and globalised movements of people (1997: 162). Thus, when examining the multilingual and transcultural nature of the struggle that took place at Via Bologna market in Napoli, I use the idea of an emergent ‘local-popular’ in the multilingual and transcultural collective that took place in the street markets I worked in. I argue that the successes and failures of this local-popular connected to other struggles of stigmatised and subaltern groups across the city and country, and globally.

Bakhtin’s heteroglossia

I used the philosophy of language of Mikhail Bakhtin/Valentin Voloshinov to think practically about how to analyse talking practices in street markets from the perspective of place-making struggles and collective action.¹ Voloshinov and Bakhtin’s writings about language have suggested ways in which the collective material condition of the utterance is connected to and negotiated within society’s larger ideological superstructure. Voloshinov stated, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, that the utterance was ‘the most sensitive index of social changes’ and of changes ‘still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularised and fully defined ideological systems’ (Voloshinov 1986 [1929]: 15–19). He suggested that the sign, or utterance, had ‘two faces’ because its role in social change was affected by having to pass through intersecting and different social interests. This ‘social multiaccentuality’ was key because it revealed the ambiguous role the utterance played in the articulation of ideologies, particularly at moments

of ‘social struggle’ (23–24). According to Voloshinov, individuals used culturally, historically and ideologically available language to speak, and thus ideological habits were deeply rooted in language. However, ideologies were formed as part of a dialogic reasoning so they always had a ‘contrary theme of common sense’ that challenged the dominant ideology of the time (Billig 2001: 217–220). Therefore ideas about the world were generated and reimagined through talk as part of a ‘dialogic’ process. Talking was not simply about transmitting ideas but originated in the interactive and reciprocal social processes that I was interested in understanding in Napoli (Maybin 2001: 64).

Voloshinov further clarified that the relations of production in a particular social and political system governed this dialogical verbal contact between people. He suggested paying close attention to the unofficial discussions, exchanges of opinion or chance exchanges of words in ‘speech performances’ that made references to issues surrounding work, politics and ideological creativity in particular contexts (1986 [1929]: 20). Each speech performance was then subjectified through the responsive understanding of a listener who went on to produce a counterstatement. The ensuing collision between different social accents generated a site of struggle where cultural meaning was contested and negotiated (Voloshinov 1986 [1929]: 40–41). For Voloshinov there were multiple evaluative layers that framed the production of meaning out of the many possible connotations and associations in each ‘speech act’. The authority of the person producing the utterance played a critical role in defining the boundary between the listener and the speaker. Meaning then arose out of an ‘electric spark’ between the listener and the speaker: the listener orientated towards their own inner consciousness while the balance of inequality and subordination affected the transmission and absorption of particular ideas (Maybin 2001: 68–69).

Bakhtin conceptualised the production of meaning in language as a struggle occurring through ‘centripetal’ forces that sought to unify and centralise the ‘verbal-ideological world’, versus ‘centrifugal’ forces of ‘diversification’ that, at their height, allowed for open and provisional discourse. This tension operated at all levels of language and among all social groups (Bakhtin 1981 [1975]: 271–272, 291–292; Maybin 2001: 65–66; Smith 2004: 63). He identified a number of ‘speech genres’ that were central mediators of this tension-in-language. The themes, constructions and linguistic styles of Bakhtin’s ‘speech genres’ were particular according to situation, and functioned in ways that were plastic and flexible (Maybin 2001: 66). He wrote, in a later essay, that ‘typical situations’ and ‘typical themes’ of speech communities generated their own speech genres as a result of ‘particular contacts between the meanings of words and actual concrete

reality' (Bakhtin 1986: 61, 87). 'Types of relations' between the participants in a conversation and 'particular conditions' of communication also gave rise to particular speech genres and styles of their delivery (1986: 64). The utterances that made up these genres were filled with '*dialogic overtones*', reflections and refractions of past utterances, that were taken on and adapted by the speaker (91–92, italics in original). Multiple, unmediated 'speech genres' cohabited, contradicted each other, and multiplied at the same time creating a hybrid 'heteroglossia' that governed the relationship between language and culture (Bakhtin 1981 [1975]: 270–272, 291–292; Maybin 2001: 66–67; Smith 2004: 63). They also played a particularly important role in moments of crisis to provide a 'descriptive frame' that allowed subaltern people to 'think, act, and survive' in the face of hegemony (Ries 1997: 1; Smith 2004: 53).

Researching heteroglossia in street markets

I started the process of exploring ways of entering the field and identifying gatekeepers in 2010. Initially I spoke to a number of members of the Social Science and Humanities faculties at the Orientale University in Napoli about my ideas. They put me in touch with other researchers and activists who were also involved in the city's anti-racist scene. Through them I met people working full time as immigration advisors and cultural mediators for the city's migrant population. These people took me on tours around the city centre and introduced me to others who were organising politically in support of migrant rights in various locations. One key group were people associated with Lo Ska, which stands for Laboratorio Occupato di Sperimentazione e Cultura Antagonista, or Occupied Laboratory of Experimentation and Antagonistic Culture. Lo Ska is a social centre located in the historic centre of Napoli that was occupied as a result of mobilisations by the student movement against changes being made to the university fees system in 1994. From the beginning they sought to build solidarity and action with groups of people outside the university context, in particular with migrants on whose behalf and alongside whom they have mobilised politically (Dines 1999). Over the course of a series of trips to Napoli from London between the middle of 2010 and late 2011 I attended political meetings and public events, and helped with a few Italian language lessons. This commitment continued once I entered the field full-time in December 2011. I attended weekly meetings of the Anti-Racist Forum, a body set up to share knowledge and resources about the various struggles people were facing in the region, which later ceased to exist. I also decided to organise my own English and literacy classes at the Zayd Ibn

Thabit mosque in Piazza Mercato, again through a friend who was a cultural mediator. I did this in the hope of giving back in some way to the communities who were helping me with my project, and as a way of contributing something meaningful to the wider anti-racist efforts in the city (Dawes 2019).

I often broke the ice with the people I was meeting by asking them what their favourite swear words were. This produced interesting results. On one occasion, early on in the fieldwork, I was taken to a Burkinabé restaurant by a friend on the anti-racist scene. One Burkinabé man told me his favourite swear word was *Che sfaccima e' burdell'* (in Neapolitan, *sfaccima* means semen and *burdell'* means brothel, or chaos). He had picked this term up in a side job as a nightclub DJ. Another responded that he enjoyed using the insult *Va a fa mmoc a chi t'è muort* (in Neapolitan: 'Go and ejaculate into the mouths of your dead ancestors'), to much hilarity, with Neapolitans working next to him in the fields. This led into a longer discussion about the ways in which the Neapolitan language had changed to become more vicious and yet also playful. Expressions that, in the past, would have led to violence, were now being employed humorously and tactically in transcultural interactions in order to make claims for belonging and acceptance. These extended conversations enabled me to get to know the biographies of my main research participants and helped them to understand what I was interested in finding out. They also provided opportunities for them to tell me what they thought were the most serious issues Napoli faced with regard to migration and racism. I was often told 'put this in your book' or, on one occasion, pressed to turn away from street markets and my questions about swear words. A man from Burkina Faso who was a political refugee told me: 'What you really need to understand is what's going on with migrants and the oranges.'²

My tentative first approaches eventually led me to the street markets and pitches that were to become my main sites, and the traders who were to become my main research participants. In the end I focused on street markets over other possible sites because it was there more than anywhere else that horizontal and spontaneous interaction could take place across racialised boundaries despite and because of a wider context of antimigrant racism. The important role that Neapolitan anti-racism played at the beginning of the project continued throughout, most of all because of the flow of information and support that went back and forth between migrant rights groups and the street vendors themselves. By seeking access through anti-racism I was able to trace the connection between struggles that took place in markets and organised collective action that relied on political networks across the city and country.

Inevitably this still told a particular story about racism and resistance. Lo Ska had a history of organising politically alongside migrants predominantly from the Maghreb and West Africa. This meant I was able to gain access to the African market in Via Bologna, and a whole network of Senegalese street vendors working across the city, because of the longstanding relationship between Omar, a Senegalese cultural mediator, and the anti-racist scene that operated out of Lo Ska. Similarly, I was introduced to a group of Chinese street vendors by Wu, another cultural mediator who had long participated in putting together intercultural events and other political initiatives alongside Omar. Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in the city also worked as street vendors, but the connections between their community and the wider activist networks with which I was connected were less strong. It was clear that there was a longstanding tradition of anti-racist collaboration and struggle in Napoli involving predominantly young Italians and black African men who were mainly first-generation migrants. In appearance, though not in organisational structure, this sought to mirror other historic anti-racist struggles, particularly in the USA. Activism in the city was under severe strain whilst I was there. Power struggles and an acute lack of funding made it very difficult for people to work together on collective, common goals. So, it is possible that South Asian community groups *were* working together with Neapolitan activists, but I was just not party to these projects because of the political fragmentation amongst activists.

The central challenge of my fieldwork had to do with the multilingual nature of talk in the field. I speak English, Italian, Neapolitan and French. I also came to recognise Wolof and interact at a basic level in it whilst I was in the field. I wrote my field notes in a combination of languages, mainly Italian and English, and I was writing and thinking about the research in more than one language right from the beginning of the process. In practice I cannot claim that I understood everything that was said during fieldwork, as so many different languages were being spoken. In cases where I was unsure about something I asked those around me to interpret and I checked the accuracy of data I had gathered by showing transcriptions and field notes to my field participants. I also used audio recording as I got to know my research participants better and they came to trust me more, because my interest in language meant I wanted to pay attention to the exact wording of what was said in order to quote precisely in the finished work.

Towards the end of the fieldwork I let those who were interested in doing so read all the notes I had made whilst with them. I deliberately made the notes in Italian so they could read them if they wanted to. This provided them with

an opportunity to correct things they thought I had missed or misunderstood and take back anything they had said or done that they were uncomfortable with me writing up. I should note, however, that only those born in Italy accepted my offer, with my other research participants telling me they trusted me, or intimating that they found it difficult to read large amounts of text. Whilst I was working with Ku, Wu read the notes I made on his behalf. With everyone else I decided to discuss the general content of my fieldwork, emphasising anything I considered particularly important or sensitive. My attempts to put in place more contested and collective processes of knowledge production were imperfect, but it was the only realistic compromise I could come to in the circumstances.

As I was gathering data, I paid attention to the ways that particular types of talk and patterns of communication, such as swearing, greetings, rumour and switching between languages, mediated the ways that people constructed meanings about racism in Neapolitan marketplaces in my data. This was based on my experiences in the field, as well as my readings of other work examining the way talk related to broader questions of cultural meaning-making, outlined throughout the chapter. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin/Voloshinov, I analysed this data ‘dialogically’, paying close attention to how language use amongst my research participants produced meaning through interaction and negotiation. This required a close reading of the context, social setting and circumstances of the interaction, also taking into account my own presence there. Over the course of collecting, organising and going through the data, I began to define a series of speech genres, as Bakhtin described them, through which a heteroglossia of ideas about difference, belonging and positionality were being worked out in Neapolitan street markets. These genres were constituted by the particularities of the time and place of the research, as well as local taxonomies of communication and their performative characteristics (Finnegan 1992: 142–145). They were not fixed conventions but dialogical forms of speaking that were spread and renegotiated through repeated iteration (Ries 1997: 4). These patterns of communication, and their relationship to a wider terrain of economic and political struggle, began to tell a story about the bigger issues at stake in the enactment of a daily multilingual Relation in Napoli’s markets.

In the process of writing the book I have translated the dialogues and notes I recorded into English. In recognition of the fact that issues around representation and language were fundamental to the spirit of the project, I have not sought to hide the nuts and bolts of this process in the following chapters. Dialogue is coded in the text to give an idea of the different languages being spoken: anything that was said in Neapolitan is in italics, anything said in Italian is in normal

type and anything that has been transcribed directly without being translated is underlined. All extra descriptions of the scene have been put in bold.³ I have also integrated this into my interpretation of the different kinds of meaning-making at play in Napoli.

I have tried to render a sense of the multilingual chatter of the field in my translation in a way that is sensitive to the language-based power dynamics that shaped intersubjective interaction, the effort involved in speaking across transcultural divides and the reductive temptation of monolingual tendencies. Sometimes this was quite difficult. For example, in a later chapter I will talk about the earning activities of a group of men who Neapolitans call *pacchisti*. They were essentially scammers who tricked passers-by into buying a smart phone and then sent them away with an empty package. This scam was called *fare il pacco*, or ‘making up a package’. In this case I decided not to translate the term at all but to explain what they did and how it formed part of the local cultural context around Piazza Garibaldi. I also decided not to translate the word *negro*, which was often used to insult or describe black men. I wanted to preserve the weight of its use on the street in Napoli without decontextualising it from Napoli’s colonial and fascist past. It is not a term simply borrowed and translated from American popular culture. As Federico Faloppa has shown, the word came into use in romance languages – as in Anglo-Germanic languages – in the colonial period to designate an individual belonging to an inferior race (Faloppa 2011: 29). In general I have avoided translating into standard English and tried to produce a translation that ‘foreignises’ the text, bringing the reader to Napoli to some extent (Temple 2004).

This is a book about talk and language use, but the chapters are also interspersed with photographs taken by my participants and I with disposable cameras during the research period. These photos are of the participants’ market stalls, the streets in which the markets were situated, the participants themselves with their customers at work, the demonstrations we went on and dramatic events that took place whilst we were together. Given the urgent nature of social conflict around race in Napoli, photographic methods helped to lend immediacy and understanding about the people participating in the research. They also became part of the research context itself and affected how people were positioned and regarded in ways that were gendered, racialised and classed. The photos have been woven around the book’s narrative to provide further visual notes on the dialogical, fluid and ambiguous performances of people in multiracial street markets.

Each of the chapters that follows starts with a piece of southern Italian – generally Neapolitan – music or poetry that is intended to frame the key concerns of

that chapter within a local or regional history that has particular implications for contemporary transcultural encounters in Napoli. These excerpts, shown in the original language with an English translation alongside, connect the past to the present and act as the sonic background of the ethnographic material in the rest of the chapter. Alongside the use of imagery, they form part of an approach to critical race- and postcolonial studies that foregrounds multiple ways of knowing and engaging with the social. Chambers and Cavallo have also argued that music is central to the construction of Neapolitan cultural identity, as the city is a crossroads and meeting place of different cultures and creolised histories (Chambers 2008; Chambers and Cavallo 2018: 4). The street is where the counternarratives ingrained in Neapolitan cultural production are reinterpreted and given life, in particular through the connections between popular music and the city's anti-racist squat scene (Chambers and Cavallo 2018: 14–15). Globally, music has been so important to the history of anti-racism (Gilroy 1993), and its use in this book makes explicit the links between the everyday intersubjective processes of the street and the voice of the people agitating for social change.

Notes

- 1 There is some confusion over the authorship of Voloshinov's and Bakhtin's works (Maybin 2001: 4). In so far as both address the voice, dialogue and ideological nature of language they are treated in this text as being of the same author, or a single set of theoretical ideas, although the two different names will be used when referencing.
- 2 He was referring to the awful living conditions of African fruit pickers in Puglia and Calabria, and the 2010 race riots in Rosarno, Calabria.
- 3 Please refer to my Note on the text (p. xi) for a full explanation of how I translated and coded dialogue in the book.

3

Talking about talk to talk about difference

Un populu mittitulu a catina	You can put a people in chains
spugghiatulu	remove their clothing
attupatici a vucca	stop up their mouths
è ancora libiru	they are still free.
livatici u travagghiu	take away their jobs
u passaportu	their passports
a tavola unni mancia	the table where they eat
u lettu unni dormi,	the bed where they sleep
è ancora riccu.	they are still rich.
un populu diventa poviru e servu	a people become poor and servile
quanno ci arrobanu la lingua	when their language is stolen
addutata di patri:	something received from their
	forefathers
è persa pi sempri.	is lost forever.
diventa poviru e servu	they become poor and servile
quannu i parole nun figghianu parole	when words don't birth words
e si manciano tra d'iddi	and just consume each other

Extract from 'Lingua e dialettu' ('Language and dialect') (1970)
by Sicilian poet Ignazio Buttitta, translated into English
from Sicilian and Italian (translations by the author)

IFIRST CAME ACROSS Ignazio Buttitta, whose poem 'Language and dialect' (1970) is reproduced in part above, whilst I was thinking about the hierarchical weight given to different languages amongst the people I was speaking with in Napoli. Buttitta was a Sicilian poet and socialist, writing in the turbulent interwar and postwar period, who used his work to support popular struggle against fascism and the mafias. He helped to revive the *Cantastorie* tradition in Sicily by writing

songs with a social and political content for itinerant storytellers to perform in villages across the countryside (Monelli 2014). He also chose to communicate his art exclusively in the Sicilian language. ‘Language and dialect’ speaks of language loss as a radical disempowerment of the people. Buttitta is referring to the inferior status ascribed to Sicilian, and other languages spoken on the Italian peninsula, in the wake of Italian Unification, when the spoken language of ordinary people came to be of pivotal interest to the political project of unification. The poem describes how the devaluing and impoverishment of spoken local languages, through state education and mass media, which promoted a written national norm, has caused significant damage to southern Italian identity, agency and self-esteem. At the same time, given Buttitta’s contribution to popular struggle, the poem can be read as a call to arms both to protect the local cultural and linguistic heritage and to allow it to continue evolving. This speaks to a notion of identity that is fluid, open and able to negotiate the relations of domination.

From the beginning of my research I noticed that there was a hyper-awareness, amongst born-and-raised Neapolitans as well as more recent arrivals to the city, of how multiple communicative forms shaped their existences in ways that were both painful and joyful. They talked frequently about talk in relationship to wider questions of cultural difference, belonging and entitlement, and this fascination was filtered through the power-laden history of language recounted in Buttitta’s poem. I came to think of this talking about talk as a particular kind of speech genre (Bakhtin 1986) that attended both to the fraught regional history of language and to the multiaccentual, ambiguous and provisional dialogic processes at stake in a contemporary Napoli that was multilingual and multicultural as a result of migration into the city from across the so-called Global South. Beyond simply telling us a particular story about southern Italy, this spoke to wider questions about the relationship between language and hierarchies of difference where ‘language attitudes’ were actually about dominant and subordinated people and cultures, and became a form of racism (Smitherman 1977: 191–197). This notion of language attitudes allowed me to connect the personal feelings people expressed about the act of talking in Napoli to the power-laden, ambivalent and pragmatic verbal dynamics of transcultural interaction in the city’s street markets.

In the street markets where I did ethnographic research, talk about talk shaped communication in a number of ways: as a way of reflecting melancholically on what Napoli was, as well as what it was in the process of becoming; as a practical necessity whereby migrants and Neapolitans had learnt from each

other through socialisation and working together; and as a means of making claims about belonging or expressing ambivalent forms of solidarity. The different language attitudes that emerged through people talking about talking directly addressed the complex linguistic dynamics that arose within a local context where anti-immigration politics rubbed alongside the pervasive notion that Neapolitans were themselves subordinated and so more open to cultural difference. The patterns of culture and communication related to Napoli's history as a port meant that it was almost always possible to talk, even under unequal, improvisational and ambiguous conditions. But there were also moments where the linguistic dexterity people described themselves as relying on failed, and where transcultural interaction between migrants and Neapolitans working in street markets fell apart. People talked about being able to talk, but also sometimes claimed they were not able to talk to, or be understood by, each other. Thus, this chapter explores how people talked about talk, but also considers the problem of communication breakdown, seeking to define the threshold where interactions reached the edge of sociality and failed.

Talking about talk as a Neapolitan melancholia

It was lunchtime at Via Bologna, early on in my fieldwork. I was sitting on a plastic carton outside Riccardo's shop eating a sandwich that Sohna had made for me on her mobile food stall. Sohna and her husband, Serigne, were there keeping me company, along with Riccardo, who was standing at the entrance of his shop taking some air. The sandwich filling was a thick Senegalese chicken stew, or *soupe* as they would call it, with lettuce leaves and a slathering of mustard-mayonnaise and hot sauce. I was at the quiet end of the market but I could hear the vendors' calls from the more busy stalls further down the road, along with the faint notes of Egyptian music from a CD stall and the revving of mopeds and cars going round Piazza Garibaldi. A young Roma girl of about 5 or 6 approached me with her hand stretched out, asking for something without me being able quite to catch the words. I knew her, as she spent most days on the street playing within safe distance of older relatives. She had decided she wanted to befriend me. I offered her my unopened soft drink but Serigne shouted at her to 'leave people alone when they're eating!' She looked chastened and walked quickly away. Serigne turned to me and told me 'they are all the same', and Riccardo opined, 'It's in their DNA to ask for stuff.' There was an awkward pause. I didn't know Riccardo very well yet so I told him a bit more about the research I was doing. I explained that I was interested in how Neapolitans and migrants got on with each other and how

Napoli had changed as a result of migration. He told me that I should be looking at particular neighbourhoods in Napoli in order to get an understanding of the different ‘realities’ at play in the city. To illustrate this, he told me how in the Quartieri Spagnoli people still had Spanish words in the Neapolitan they spoke.¹ For example, they said ‘è salita’ instead of ‘è scesa’ to say ‘she’s gone out’.² For Riccardo these cultural ‘realities’ were part of an older emotional legacy, related to domination and sea trade, that pushed in, uninvited, to forcefully interrogate the contemporary urban situation. And above all, for him, these ‘realities’ were linguistic. The way people talked showed their cultural and biological lineage. He might say it was an audible manifestation of their ‘DNA’. In a conversation about contemporary migratory dynamics, he instead referred to historic cultural differences within the city’s settled community, highlighting its reputation as an exoticised and precarious place. He talked about talking as a way of talking melancholically and nostalgically about Neapolitan history.

Talk about talk in Napoli allowed many people to deal with feelings of loss about Napoli as it used to be, as well as to express the anxieties they felt about their social, economic and political futures. The collision between a protective and subordinated local identity and the fraught politics of globalised migration often inspired a retreat into more exclusionary and exclusive notions of belonging. But at the same time it could generate a sense of horizontal solidarity that crossed racialised boundaries and explained itself through the trope of Neapolitan friendliness and simplicity, generating a problematic kinship with other ‘Others’. Often these melancholic reflections about belonging and Neapolitan identity revolved around concerns about what was being transmitted to the younger generation. One day a man called Augusto dropped by Gennaro’s stall to say hi to him. This conversation ensued when he found me there:

Augusto: Sprechen Sie Deutsch?

Me: No, zero Deutsch I’m afraid.

Gennaro: German is the language of angry people! It’s an angry language!

Augusto: Yeah! When I hear all that ‘ich’ ... ‘mach’ ... It’s angry.

Me: So you think a language shows the personality of the people who speak it?
In that case what are English people like?

Gennaro: Well ... a bit nicer at least! OK, look, for me this is how it is: French is a language I really like, then Spanish and then Italian. Then I would like to speak English because they speak it all over the world. But you know it really gets me ... when a woman speaks Spanish ... how can I put this? It’s a language you speak with your tongue between your teeth –

Me: You mean it's sexy?

Gennaro: Ehum ... well [**embarrassed**] ... And then French is musical –

Augusto: And Neapolitan is like African – *you sing it* ... Us lot, you know – Neapolitans, Africans, Arabs ... we sing our words, like *ei!* Or *uagliò!* [**ways of calling people's attention**] It's like it's sung ... you know: *sung!*

...

Gennaro: [**referring to Augusto**] He's like me, a Neapolitan. So he's naturally friendly.

Augusto: Yeah Neapolitan people are all like that, like they're clowns, but people appreciate that. Deep down Neapolitan people are just friendly dumbasses.

Me: What do you mean?

...

Augusto: It means you let people have one over on you.

Gennaro: No, look. We are streetwise people but we are a people that resign ourselves. Something bad happens and it's all: '*ok let's see*' and '*what can you do?*', '*things'll get better*', '*let's wait and see*' ... And other people don't do that! We just let the big things go even if in our daily lives we are clever and tricky – because when someone says 'Oh you're Neapolitan are you?!' they mean '*You're a thief!*', '*cause all of us Neapolitans are thieves* – but really we just have our eyes wide open, you get what I'm saying?

Augusto: Anyway. The real Neapolitan doesn't even exist anymore.

Me: What do you mean? They've disappeared?

Augusto: It's all because there's this accumulation of ... *the more the black race comes over here* ... and it's like that in nearly all the other cities.

Me: Well things change for good as well as bad.

Augusto: I guess. The real Milanese doesn't exist anymore either ...

Me: Yeah, well I guess that's because Milan is full of Neapolitans!

Gennaro: But you know Napoli was so lovely because ... we used to have all these metaphors ... for example, look, I'll give you an example. My older daughter when she wants to get her own way she has her mum not knowing whether she's coming or going and I tend to be stricter. Then, sometimes, mum gets strict about something and she comes to me asking for whatever it is she wants. *I get fed up and tell her 'you're like Magdalen's boat!*' Oh – how can I explain that one to you? – you know the thing is even she doesn't understand – *it's hard to explain but it's like a boat that bobs one way and then the other... it's like saying you're not steady* ... you understand? *We say Magdalen's boat ... you go wherever you feel like!*

Augusto: You go in whatever direction the wind blows fastest, do you get the metaphor?

Gennaro: Exactly. And, you know, my daughter doesn't understand any of these things.

Me: Does your daughter speak Neapolitan?

Gennaro: She can speak it, but not like me.

Me: So what is your daughter to you? Is she more Italian or more Neapolitan?

Gennaro: So, look: I've got a strong Neapolitan accent, like him as well [**points to Augusto**]. If we want to speak Italian we can but when my daughter speaks Italian you can't even hear an accent.

Me: How come?

Gennaro: Because she's going to school ... and anyway – we've always tried to speak Italian because I can't assume that she's going to be able to stay here in Napoli or if she's going to have to go to the north or some other place to work.

Me: Yeah, that's why my mum never let me speak dialect ...

Gennaro: But you know if she wants to speak dialect, she can ... And when I have to speak Italian sometimes I get a bit stuck because I have to do a quick bit of translation.

Initially, both Gennaro and Augusto argued that the language you speak in constitutes your identity in ways that shift between fixed and fluid notions of belonging. Gennaro drew upon a number of familiar, stereotypical and exotic notions about what national languages express about culture and identity, but then agreed with Augusto when he likened Neapolitan to the sound of West African languages and Arabic. Neapolitan and African languages were described as being similar because they are both 'sung', suggesting intriguing commonalities between Napoli and places further south. This speaks to a number of interconnected accounts of Napoli as a friendly city, as hybridised or as belonging to the racialised edge of Europe.

Then the jokey and crude masculine banter about the stereotypical cultural characteristics of different national languages segued into a more melancholic territory of anxiety, loss and regret. Starting with the question of Napoli in terms of its difficult political, economic and social climate, the conversation digressed smoothly and inexorably towards the issue of language extinction and cultural erosion. This change of tone was precipitated by Augusto's comment about 'the more the black race comes over here', again highlighting the power of blaming migration for anxieties about economic security and cultural identity. Augusto

claimed there were no real Neapolitans anymore because of the cultural dilution that had resulted from migration, despite the fact that he had made a fraternal link to these migrants by comparing the way Africans and Neapolitans spoke. Thus, the two men stopped short of raising the possibility of any real solidarity with the migrants in their midst, while ambivalently recognising that they sounded like them. I pointed out that southern Italians were, and continued to be, migrants in northern Italy and Europe – as a way of reminding them of the historic discrimination internal migrants had faced in Italy (Signorelli 2006: 36), which they themselves were now reproducing with regard to migrants in Napoli. But this fell on deaf ears. Instead, contact with cultural difference evoked a melancholic aggression leading both men to speak of the pain of their own subordination and ethnic humiliation when stereotyped as sly thieves. They ambivalently recognised the Other's alterity in the alterity they themselves had been subjected to, but refused to draw the links together into some kind of productive or emancipatory politics in the present. Whilst attending anti-racist events in the city I often heard Italian activists allude to the history of Italian emigration in order to call for kinship and solidarity. But this 'politics of speech', as Judith Butler noted (Bell and Butler 1999: 165), often failed, was only partially successful or was unpredictable. Here, it yielded a melancholic display of victimhood that did not allow the two men to work through the complex webs that connected their disenfranchisement to that of more unfortunate people around them.

Gennaro went on to transfer these melancholic feelings into the realm of the familial and, again, found it necessary to talk about the act of talking in order to explain this to me. However, this time he talked about not being understood, or not being able to talk, as a way of explaining these feelings of loss. His dramatic phrase 'we used to have all these metaphors' referred to the richness and depth of Neapolitan language and culture that had not been fully transmitted to his children's generation. In order to give an example, he described telling his daughter '*si 'na varca 'e Matalena*' ('you're like Magdalen's boat'), and his sadness at her uncomprehending response to a common phrase from his own childhood. Popular religious legend has it that Mary Magdalen crossed the Mediterranean from the Middle East to Europe in a boat with no oars. The metaphor Gennaro described using with his daughter expressed the idea of life as changeable and unpredictable. When pressed, Gennaro admitted that he and his wife did not encourage their daughters to speak Neapolitan because of the likelihood of their having to leave the city to find work, and the historical prejudices faced by Neapolitans who migrated internally and externally. As with my own upbringing, strategies to protect against such prejudice have

often focused on the question of language and accent, but there was a sad price to pay for this. It was interesting that Gennaro used a metaphor he felt to be rooted in the Neapolitan landscape that, in fact, recalled fluidity and migratory movement. It evoked memories of mass emigration from the Italian peninsula as well as – for me – conjuring up images of the small boats arriving at that moment on Mediterranean shores. For Gennaro and Augusto, nostalgia around eroding forms of culture and communication did not allow them to connect productively to this present emergency.

Talk about talking English

These feelings around loss, movement and departure, related to speaking Neapolitan or Italian, were also connected to preoccupations about speaking English. Renato Carosone's famous song 'Tu vuò fà ll'americano' described a Neapolitan man who effected the American leisure activities of the 1950s by dancing to rock and roll, drinking whisky and soda, and even speaking English. It was a satire about Americanisation in Italy in the postwar years:

Tu vuò fa' ll'americano	You're a wannabe American!
Comme te po' capi' chi te vo' bbene	How can the people who love you understand you
si tu lle parle miezo americano?	If you speak half American?
quanno se fa ll'ammore sott' 'a luna	And when we make love under the moon
comme te vene 'ncapa 'e di' 'I love you'?	How can you think to say: 'I love you'? ³

As well as pointing towards the cultural influence that America has wielded over the world throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the song spoke to particular histories of philo-Americanism in the city. It evoked the Allied presence there from 1943, which in some ways continued from the 1950s in the form of the NATO base. It also recalled the tens of thousands of returnee Italian emigrants who came back to Italy – many from North America – from the 1930s. As Carosone's song showed, emigrant returnees and American soldiers, with their fashionable clothing, money and foreign speech, seemed almost irresistibly glamorous to those Italians who had stayed behind. 'L'americano' became a common nickname given to Italians of a certain age who had travelled abroad and

so were considered worldly. But this glamour was tied up with the sadness of loss and departure, which was the legacy of both war and migration. Italian people continued to emigrate in their millions well into the twenty-first century and, in fact, the sampling of Carosone's song in the international house hit *We No Speak Americano* by Yolanda Be Cool and DCUP (2010) demonstrated the on-going salience of these emotions about migration and needing to speak English.

In the street markets of my research, historic tensions and internalised inferiority complexes around speaking English reappeared in mutated form because English had become a sort of *lingua franca* between Neapolitans and new migrants arriving in the city (Dawes 2016). This raised issues around being able to talk with prospective customers, especially in Poggioreale market, where English was the principal language of communication between vendors and their West African customers, who came to Napoli specifically to bulk-buy leather goods. It also highlighted uncomfortably the ways in which speaking English was connected to the workings of power and appropriation. In so doing it made uncomfortable connections between Neapolitan otherness and those whose encounters with English in colonial West Africa and South Asia had been much more violent and destructive. The following statement was made by Ade, a Nigerian man who was visiting Poggioreale market:

Ade: Like you were asking me, I think one of the problems I had when I came in – because I came in from Milan – was the language problem. Because I only speak English so I found it difficult to communicate. And some people, if you talk to them and they don't know what you're saying, they get angry or don't want to talk to you again. So I find it difficult to communicate and then get to the people and then know them. I walked on my own, just all by myself, just doing nothing because I can't speak with anybody. I can't talk so to find out how the people behave is difficult for me. I can't really speak ... and they can't understand me either. So it's a big problem for me!

Me: Are you planning to come to Italy again?

Ade: Oh yes. Maybe next year ...

Me: And will you learn some Italian for that?

Ade: In marketing they should learn English because most of who they deal with are foreigners so to be able to interact and communicate ... If you speak English and the customer speaks English they will find it easier to be with you. There is more from Africa coming to buy ... so it's time for them to start learning some English so they can reach out and sell more.

Here, Poggioreale market figured as a microcosm of global capitalism, where speaking English was the default and supposedly neutral marker of economic progress. I asked the Neapolitan vendors at Poggioreale market whether it was stressful for them to use English when conducting business. Some of them took the situation of English-speaking African customers in their stride. When I first met *Ciro* and *Titti* of the *Eddy Pell* stall they exclaimed that it was great I spoke English as I could help them negotiate with all their English-speaking customers. Then they jokingly told me that I wouldn't be much good, as I myself would need to learn what they called the 'dialects' of English that their customers really spoke. They told me that when clients asked how much a bag cost, they knew to pronounce the 'thirty' of 'thirty-four euros' as /tʒ:ti:/ not /θʒ:ti:/, as I said it. *Titti* told me she and her husband had never been scared to throw themselves into communication in other languages. She put this down to the fact that they had both finished school, unlike the majority of the vendors with stalls around them. However, this sense of playfulness and resourcefulness did not extend to all the vendors I spoke to. This is how *Peppe*, of *Peppe's Bags*, responded to my question about haggling in English:

Peppe: Well you know ...

Me: Is it the language thing or their methods, or both?

Peppe: No it's because they're much more ... for me it's about something else.

Me: Well I guess you're used to it by now.

Peppe: You should see what they do! They buy thirty bags and then another one of them will want the bags and then it's all 'No I got them! Anyway ... then you put them to one side and tot up the bill and then it's all 'wait a minute!' And then they pick one bag up and remove another and in the end they don't want any of them and they've convinced someone else to buy them. Then, sometimes we take the sold bags straight to the hotel. When we get there, out of thirty to fifty bags – all made of leather that you have sold and brought all the way there – all of a sudden they try to return thirty of them. You know, you've bought fifty bags and not let anyone else buy them then you have them brought to the hotel where you can get comfortable and have another look at them. I won't have that! You've already spent two hours looking at them in the market! I'm telling you ... But then there's other people that are... good customers ... they come and buy thirty bags straight up. [brief pause] You know the language thing is so important for us though.

Me: The fact that you need it to work?

Peppe: No, I mean the fact of having to communicate with them ... We get angry because ... well ... my son knows a thing or two but not much really ... *you get me? What can you do?*

Me: I understand. Everyone who comes to buy speaks English or French.

Peppe: Yeah ... but you know: there's also quite a few of them that know a bit of Italian. Quite a few ... I just wish I was twenty years younger so I could go off and learn English. You know it's always been like this ... that English has been spoken here ... we knew we should get studying English. But in our day our parents, well, we just didn't go to school. My son also didn't want to do any type of studying and he's raising his own son this way as well, because my grandson doesn't want to study. It's always a cause of big arguments ...

For Peppe, talk about talking English reawakened latent memories of emigration and foreign influence in Napoli. The kinds of mourning this inspired became the lens through which transcultural relations were experienced in the contemporary moment. Peppe veered between blaming his African customers for not doing business respectfully and honestly, drawing on racist notions of black unruliness, and then blaming himself for not being sufficiently educated and disciplined to have learnt English properly at school. He recognised the stress of participation in the global economy as an old legacy, showing an awareness of how contemporary issues of poverty and precariousness are connected to historical processes of disenfranchisement and the uneven legacy that modernity has inscribed on different parts of the world.

It was true that Peppe and his son, Alessandro, did not find negotiations with foreign customers so easy. They employed English-speaking help on their stall but often lost their tempers when those employees didn't respond quickly enough or correctly understand their Italian instructions. Often I would see both Alessandro and his dad shout 'When are you going to learn some Italian, eh?!' at their staff before repeating the same command in a louder and more menacing tone.

The linguistic dynamics between Neapolitan vendors, African and Eastern European employees and African customers at Poggioreale revealed the contingent and uneven ways in which power enmeshed them together in their everyday relationships with each other. The vendors at Poggioreale spoke English to their English-speaking customers because they had to, but not all of them communicated respectfully with their foreign staff. This was because people were positioned in different ways according to ambivalent and shifting hierarchies of wealth and status. Comic language could temporarily suspend those hierarchies and allow

new horizontal conceptions of diversity to appear, as Titti and Ciro's joking comparison between Nigerian English and standard English showed. But humour, as has been shown elsewhere (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]; Passerini 1987), could often act as a portal to abusive and oppressive language, for example with Alessandro and Peppe and the way in which they wielded their linguistic frustrations against their foreign staff.

Teaching and learning new languages

Many of the street vendors I spoke with elsewhere in the city also emphasised the importance of learning how to talk in different languages for their everyday working relationships. Having latterly moved into the market at Via Bologna, Gennaro had opened his market stall in Piazza Garibaldi in 1993 and had witnessed all the changes that had occurred there since that time. Early on in the research I asked him whether – as I had read elsewhere in work about migration in Napoli (Dines 2002) – it was true that Neapolitan street vendors had learnt bits of Ukrainian and Arabic in order to talk with non-Italian-speaking vendors and customers. He confirmed that, when migrants started arriving in large numbers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he and the other Italians learnt some basic business words in their languages to be able to trade with them. Eventually, the new arrivals who settled in the city started to learn Italian and Neapolitan, and now these were the languages that were predominantly being spoken in markets around Piazza Garibaldi. At Porta Capuana market many of the Italian stall owners had also hired foreigners who had all learnt to conduct trade in Neapolitan or Italian. For example, over the years they had learned to use Neapolitan slang for money, such as: *n'a triglia rossa* (a red mullet) = 10,000 lira, *o'caravaggio* = 100,000 lira, *o'babà* = €50.⁴ He felt that this evidence of extensive linguistic transmission and hybridisation over many years proved that Neapolitans were not racist. It was interesting that he connected my question about language to issues around migration and racism, because I had not asked him whether he thought Neapolitans were racist or not.

Gennaro's defence continued in the next story he told me. He explained that he had a knack for learning languages because he was able to understand all the Africans at Via Bologna just from their gestures and tone of voice. This had helped him in a number of tricky situations, including one that he described as an episode of 'reverse racism'. Most market traders with established pitches didn't carry all their goods back and forth but stored them close to their place of work. He told me about an occasion when he had wanted

to rent a storage depot together with a Malian friend, Moussa, and another Malian man he didn't know. This Malian man refused and had a fierce argument about it with Moussa in Bambara. Eventually Moussa explained that the man was not keen because there wasn't enough room. But Gennaro said that perhaps there was more to it and Moussa eventually admitted that the other Malian man didn't want to share a depot with Gennaro because he thought Neapolitans were dishonest and made problems for everyone. Despite being hurt by this, Gennaro stayed friends with Moussa and they went on to rent a space together with Comfort, a Nigerian woman with a stall at Via Bologna market. But even there they had problems. Initially the Nigerian lady who was renting the space out, on behalf of an Italian owner, had asked for €300, but she eventually asked for €500. 'In the end', he said to me, crossing his fingers together in a steeple, 'we're all linked to each other. It's just that sometimes things don't work out.'

So, for Gennaro, multiple language-crossing practices, and the pedagogic processes that facilitated them, were related to the pragmatic necessity of getting by in a cosmopolitan and globalised reality where both migrants and Neapolitans earned money side by side through some sort of retail activity. This connected Napoli to other global port cities that have become sites of a 'practical cosmopolitanism born of an acceptance of – and indifference to – difference'. In Napoli, a pragmatic approach to living with difference involved the development of particular forms of 'cultural dexterity' and learning how to negotiate and barter in many different languages (Trotter 2008a: 684–685, b: 87). Gennaro described the way in which this worked, through a combination of active learning and intuitive attempts at communication. The practical cosmopolitanism he outlined activated the notion of Napoli as an open and welcoming port city, hence his claim that multilingual interaction across transcultural boundaries was indicative of an innate Neapolitan anti-racism. Without wishing to discount his distress at being stereotyped as dishonest because of being Neapolitan, the equivalence that he argued this created between his situation and those of his migrant colleagues was problematic. It elided the issue that, for example, factors such as race, nationality and legal status had bequeathed very different life outcomes to him and Moussa, his Malian colleague. The significance he gave to his story drew upon a local form of Neapolitan postracialism – predicated on the idea of Neapolitans as friendly and welcoming because of their own historic experiences of oppression and prejudice – that sought to deny racism as a local problem and thus reduced all social struggle to a question of economic inequality between the poor and the rich.

Pedagogic linguistic exchanges were central to many of the ambivalent and contingent transcultural mediations I recorded in my field notes. For example, this was the perspective of Salvatore, a doorman along the Rettifilo who had an uneasy friendship with a Senegalese street vendor called Ibra:

Salvatore: Ibra and the others [**Senegalese street traders**] can read Italian all right! Sometimes they ask me Italian words so they can learn more. For example, they point to a moped and ask how you say that in Italian. All the street traders down this road that I know are good people. And, you know, there's good and bad everywhere. I ask them words in their own language as well, to make friends and to tease them you know ... Like, I might ask them, 'How do you say ugly?', and then I call them ugly! [**I smile**] Good! You've understood the game. Here's another one: *manga dem* means 'I'm going home, bye.' I say it when they leave but sometimes I also say it when they arrive in the morning to tell them jokingly to go away. There was this other guy who spoke good English. Often tourists would ask us all directions in English and I would tell this guy what to say, and also give some advice about precautions to take with your stuff around the train station. But I would do this so it wasn't obvious it was me feeding him the instructions because then the tourists might think I was threatening them, 'cause of what people think about Neapolitans.

In accordance with the Janus-faced nature of joking and laughter, the episodes of teasing in each other's languages that I saw created the opportunity for both a transcultural conviviality and a racialised power slapdown. Humorous disparagement, particularly directed at migrant men by Neapolitan men, often served to reinstate hegemonic anti-immigration stereotypes. But poor Neapolitan men were themselves victims of gendered and racialised discrimination – as evidenced by Salvatore's fear, expressed above, that people might think he was a thief if he were to try and help them. The ambivalent nature of multilingual sharing and tormenting between Neapolitan and migrant men in my fieldwork was connected to the unstable racialised position that Neapolitan men occupied. Their aggression against non-white men was a way in which they sought to make up for their own economic, political and cultural disempowerment.

The laughter produced by these uneven and unequal pedagogic practices occasionally allowed for moments of male bonding – such as that in the photograph of Ibra and Giovanni, who owned the grocery store behind the spot where Ibra generally set up his market stall (see [Figure 11](#)). Ibra, Giovanni and I agreed



11 Ibra, Giovanni and colleague in front of Giovanni's shop

it showed what good friends they were. On looking at the digital image, Giovanni gently joked to Ibra that the photo hadn't come out very well because they were both pretty ugly. Salvatore, who was also present, agreed that they were all *gorgou niaw* ('ugly man' in Wolof), and all three men cracked up laughing. Then Salvatore said, 'but Ibra, where are you? I can only see two people and a black stain in the middle!' Salvatore used his learned Wolof as a weapon against Ibra in his malicious joking. He appealed to the innocent and open nature of these

pedagogic interactions whilst, at the same time, using them as part of a vigorous and sharp takedown that drew on racist stereotypes that black people don't show up in photographs because of their skin tone.

Knowing how to talk

For migrants such as Moussa, a street vendor who had come from Mali, learning to speak the local language and – critically – knowing when to deploy particular linguistic skills had been key to gaining 'street cred' and defending themselves from racist harassment:

Me: So how do you think Italians treat foreigners in Napoli at the moment?

Moussa: Well because of the crisis, at the moment there are a few problems.

Racism is much better though – well, better anyway ...

Me: I understand. So then years ago, when you arrived in Italy, what did they used to say to you?

Moussa: Listen ... OK, let's be honest here ... every now and then they would call me 'black', 'African' –

Me: Anything else?

Moussa: They would say 'negro', 'slave'. They would call you 'Kunta', you know, in Neapolitan so you couldn't understand ... you know Kunta: that American slave?⁵ So now I understand, well, I can defend myself. But you know it's a totally different story now. Where we are now things are definitely a little better.

Humorous linguistic prowess was central to self-defence and the negotiation of ambivalent solidarities in many of the moments of transcultural encounter I observed in public spaces across the city. The following episode took place on the eve of the day of Epiphany on the train from Napoli to Sorrento. I was sitting in a crowded compartment of people who had mainly come to Napoli for the day to visit the festive market stalls. In Italy this had always been a religious holiday of equal importance to Christmas Day. It began with a middle-aged Polish man (who had Italianised his name to Piero) who started up a conversation with a group of young Italian teenage men, sitting opposite him, about the merits of drinking a little vodka in order to get up and go to work first thing on a winter morning. As was typical of train conversations in the Italian south, progressively more people got involved in the conversation as things got more entertaining:

Teenager 1: Is Poland in the EU?

Piero: *Poland has been in Europe for seven years! Schengen for three! Do you know what Schengen is?*

Teenager 1: Erm, no ... **[trails off]** So what is it anyway?

Piero: *Ha, I can see you don't understand! You obviously haven't done school, have you? I have studied a lot. It's to do with people committing crimes and police being able to chase them across borders. You all think Polish and Romanian people are shit don't you?*

Teenager: Not at all! **[His friends all nod and hold their hands palm-side up in a gesture of peace.]**

Piero: **[returning to a conversation point that had clearly started before I had got on the train]** *You know, another thing vodka's good for is curing a cold. You need to put loads of pepper –*

Teenager 2: How many spoons?

Piero: *Loads! It's gotta taste like shit! This is what we drink on New Year as well: two bottles of bubbly and ten of vodka!*

Laughter rattled round the train compartment. The teenagers got up to shake Piero's hand before leaving. At this point another young Italian man, Alessandro, started up a conversation with Piero who, it turned out, he vaguely knew.

Alessandro: You know I work in Eastern Europe, across Croatia, in Zagreb.

Piero: *Oh yeah? I've worked in Croatia too. What other places do you know?*

[They listed a number of small towns they had been to.]

Alessandro: So how's your friend, what's he called, Alfonso?

Piero: *Oh – Alfons! Yeah – he's good. You and me do know each other don't we? I'm that 'Polish bastard'!*

Alessandro: No – it's not like that. We don't see it like that.

Piero: **[to the woman sitting to his right]** *Madam I should apologise for swearing.*

[She smiled, looking a bit uncomfortable. Piero then turned to the man sitting next to me.] *Are you Polish?*

Man: No – I'm Albanian.

Alessandro: What language do they speak in Albania?

Man: Mainly Albanian and Italian.

Piero: *In Poland we only speak Polish, but we had to learn Russian at school. What's the point of that? Nowadays what you really need is English and French.*

[Everyone nodded and murmured in agreement.]

Piero: [to the Albanian man] *How long have you been here?*

Man: Only four months.

Piero: *What?! You speak such good Italian!*

Alessandro: Yeah – that’s amazing!

Man: *I know.* But you know I spoke Italian before ’cause we speak it in Albania. I also speak Yugoslav [*sic*] and Greek.⁶

Alessandro: You know what job you could get here? [**He perhaps meant a cultural mediator.**]

Man: Oh I already have a job. I’m a tattoo artist. I had my own shop in Greece and I want to open one up here but I need to get to know people first.

At this point the three men started comparing tattoos and another Italian man joined in the conversation, as he wanted to pay for a tattoo for his girlfriend. The Albanian man introduced himself as Besi and his friend sitting next to him as Ahmed from Morocco, and they all started swapping numbers. Everyone in the train compartment, including myself, was watching avidly and people were leaning in from the corridor to get a good view of the discussion. People laughed and reacted to what was being said. In the middle of this my sister called me to find out when to pick me up from the station and I had to make a critical decision about what language to answer the phone in, finally opting for a mix of both. The atmosphere in the train compartment thickened palpably. Piero got off at Pompei, kissing Alessandro, Ahmed and Besi goodbye on each cheek and promising to catch up again soon. The four remaining men moved to sit all together. The Italian man, Giuseppe, who wanted to buy a tattoo for his girlfriend started talking:

Giuseppe: You know – I’m an artist, a painter. I’ve been looking for any kind of work for seven months, but nothing!

Besi: There’s work here! You could be a labourer, you know? Just to get by. I don’t manage just on tattoos. By day I’m a carpenter.

Giuseppe: [**crossing his arms angrily across his chest**] *Oh yeah? Where is this work?*

Besi: Well, we all find work ... but you know there’s this economic crisis going on so ...

Giuseppe: How did you come to Italy?

Besi: We got our visas in the latest round of immigration amnesties, didn’t we? [**He turned to Ahmed, who nodded in agreement.**]

Ahmed: *We decided to stay in Napoli ’cause, you know, people are nicer down here. They’re not as mean as they are up north.*

Alessandro: It's true. They're such cold people up there.

Besi: No – it's also because Neapolitans also go out to work like us.

Alessandro: Yeah – that's true as well.

Besi: What do you all think about immigrants?

Alessandro: [**spreading his arms wide**] For me it doesn't matter where you're from ... it just matters that you're a friend to me.

Their discussion turned to wages in the south and the low cost of living. The train had emptied a lot by now and the four men had been enjoying their chat so much that Besi, Ahmed and Giuseppe had missed their stop. They got off at Castellammare to get a return train and, as they exited, Ahmed turned to me to say goodbye as well.

Ahmed: Bye English! [**I smiled**]

Alessandro: [**to me**] So where are you getting off?

Me: Vico Equense.

Alessandro: Me too! Are you from there?

It turned out Alessandro and I were from the same village and he went to school with my eldest cousin. We said goodbye at the train station and promised to say hello if we saw each other again.

This episode was a testament to the collective and dialogic familiar speech via which people work through ideas of difference, belonging and positionality in public spaces in Napoli. Here, talk about talk – which incorporated discussion about how many languages people spoke, what languages were useful, what were key phrases and words to learn and how well people spoke a language – allowed people who had never met (or didn't know each other very well) to have an open and fun discussion about fraught issues such as immigration and unemployment. The conversation about speaking as a hierarchical and political practice connected the fates of the migrant and Neapolitan men in the carriage to the kinds of precariousness and instability that they were seeking to survive and overcome. This spoke both to the kinds of interconnected work activities that they got involved with in order to make ends meet in the south of Italy, and to the reasons why people had to move away from home to get work. Ahmed suggested, to general agreement, that they understood each other better because Neapolitans 'go out to work', by which he meant that many had historically been forced to emigrate in order to find dignified employment. Their joking, swearing and laughter, which included everyone in the train carriage whether they

contributed to the discussion or not, created a temporary suspension in normal hierarchies that allowed for transcultural tensions to be lifted and for difficult things to be discussed. Together, a transverse and non-essentialist vision of cultural difference was imagined, where they helped each other to stay strong and imagine a better future. However, their talk, although part of a conscious public performance, did not allow the equal participation of the women in the carriage, as Piero's apology for swearing illustrated. The men's banter defused tensions and established a playful and competitive masculine bonhomie that illustrated the importance of mobile and fluid performances of locally hegemonic masculinities in Napoli (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, on this occasion at least, these performances could not fully incorporate women into the dynamic of their sociality.

The acts of switching between different languages were also central to the alternative cultural configurations being imagined. This revealed the ambivalent, shifting and temporary conceptualisations of social difference between the men involved in the discussion and involved complicated decision-making processes. Piero's choice to speak in a Neapolitanised Italian for the whole conversation was a statement about his own right to belong in Napoli, even though he said right at the beginning that he had always worked mainly in Rome and northern Italy. Besi did the same thing when he responded that he knew he spoke good Italian by saying it in dialect ('*o' saccio*' instead of 'lo so'), although he spoke Italian for the rest of the conversation. The particular history of domination in Napoli often revolved painfully round the question of Neapolitan, and so decisions to use or not use dialect, or to switch between different languages and registers, were never neutral for either locals or newcomers. To quote Moussa again, 'I can speak Italian and Neapolitan. Lots of my Malian friends can't do that. And I know when to speak Neapolitan and when to speak Italian.' Moussa's statement about knowing what language to speak, and when, connected talk to the ways in which masculine street cred and respect were mobilised in Napoli. The Italian men in the train carriage episode above all spoke in a regional Italian, except for Giuseppe, who slipped into Neapolitan when he got annoyed with Besi. In so doing he reasserted cultural dominance over Besi through the performance of a *guappo* masculinity that showed he was ready to protect his honour and dignity, with aggression if necessary. At the same time, he expressed brotherhood and solidarity in their shared creative spirit and horizontal struggle to find work, showing the ambivalent nature of playful masculine performances when cut through with hierarchical notions of race and ethnicity. The other young Italian men chose to speak Italian, as they had been taught that this was the way

to be polite and respectable since their early years of school. They would also have felt that speaking Italian made it easier for outsiders to understand them. They did not realise that migrants in Napoli usually learned Neapolitan, or a Neapolitanised Italian, because that was the language they came into contact in through the kinds of work they did, and in everyday street encounters.

Linguistic aptitude was important in other multilingual professional contexts I entered into through my contacts in anti-racism and migrant rights. In Italy, professional cultural mediators occupied an important role as linguistic and cultural intermediaries among migrant groups or between individuals and State institutions. They were qualified to work in places such as schools, hospitals and migrant advice bureaus, with the aim of interpreting and carefully negotiating on behalf of people who couldn't speak the official language of the country they were in. Many of the activist friends I made whilst seeking access for this project in Napoli were professional cultural mediators, including Omar. The way in which they worked in different spaces of the city, from the street market to City Hall, taught me a lot about the values placed on language for negotiating unequal power dynamics and demonstrating support and solidarity across transcultural boundaries.

One afternoon in January, after Via Bologna market had closed for the day, I went with Omar to meet his colleague Luisa, an Italian cultural mediator at a migrant advice bureau around the back of the train station. After we had been there for a while, a Ukrainian woman came into the bureau and, seeing me, immediately mistook me for a conational and started talking in Ukrainian. We all laughed and Omar blustered 'not again – she's English!', as it was not the first time it had happened since he had met me. The woman laughed wryly as if recognising that she had been the victim of a practical joke. She then explained that she had come on behalf of a friend who had been put in prison. She wanted us to call the friend's lawyer, as she believed they would take someone who spoke good Italian more seriously. Omar and Luisa gave her the advice she needed, and after she left, this provoked a discussion about whether Italians or migrants made better cultural mediators for other migrants. The question of language was central to this. Omar argued that a good mediator did not have to speak grammatically perfect Italian in order to be successful. Instead, he said, they needed to understand different cultures and how domestic and international laws worked. He hated having his Italian corrected and wished people would just listen to what he was saying. He also believed that often people corrected him as a way to mobilise power against him. In a way this assertion was reinforced by the woman who had come to the bureau – to whom we all spoke Italian without

any problem – when she asked for a native Italian speaker to contact the lawyer on her behalf.

Multiple ways of referring to people talking were used in this situation to position the different social actors, including myself, within and against a hierarchy of belonging and entitlement in Napoli. The ability someone might have to understand Neapolitan culture because of their position as an insider or outsider, as well as the ability to recognise where people might be from, were related to the uneven workings of power via the ideological superiority ascribed to the figure of the native speaker (Rampton 2003). This figure was seen to have the best chance of a good outcome in their interactions with the spectre of the lawyer and the other institutional bodies that migrants and their mediators regularly had to interact with. This was revelatory of the ways in which hierarchical ‘language attitudes’ were used to subordinate and silence vulnerable people. However, the communal laughter we all shared also created a temporary break in the hierarchies we ourselves were discussing, allowing for a transverse and non-reductive coexistence with difference, or a Relation, to emerge. Our ability to speak, mediate and argue on our own or others’ behalf showed the ways in which transcultural solidarity could be used to speak back to hegemony.

Not talking at all

However, there were times when these ambiguous processes of linguistic pedagogy and mediation between Neapolitans and migrants broke down and failed. This meant that people claimed they couldn’t understand what was being said to them, even if they were actually communicating effectively. It also meant that people became paranoid about whether or not people were lying to them or dissimulating about how much they could speak or understand. These processes where people described ‘not talking at all’ were indicative of how far talk about talking could go when it came to the daily negotiation of difference, belonging and entitlement in multicultural Napoli. The notion of not being able to talk revealed the ideological force represented by racial hierarchies and nationhood, manifesting as a sort of violent monolingual nationalism that rejected the possibilities opened up by a daily multilingual Relation.

For example, early in my research I was taken by Luisa, the mother of one of my gatekeepers, to Duchesca Market. This market ran through the back streets behind the statue of Garibaldi in Piazza Garibaldi and was famous for selling contraband and stolen items. The vendors were predominantly Neapolitan and West African and the atmosphere in the market was tense and circumspect when

I went there. Luisa wanted to introduce me to her nephew, Gianni, who sold labelled jumpers. We approached his stall and they greeted each other affectionately as they hadn't seen each other in a while. She told him I was doing a project about markets in Napoli and asked him how the Italians and the foreigners got on with each other in the Duchesca. 'No, we don't get on at all', he responded, his mouth turning down at the corners. But at this moment a black man appeared behind him and asked Luisa, 'Are you his mum?' 'No, I'm the aunty', she responded, 'so you know Gianni?' The man smiled broadly and told her, 'This is my brother!' Gianni nodded in acknowledgement of his presence, but did not smile back.

Luisa encouraged me to tell the man about my work. As I was speaking he became more and more withdrawn: 'Sorry, I don't understand', he told me. He pointed to another African man with a stall opposite Gianni's and told me to explain to him. I started speaking, trying both Italian and French, but again the man told me he couldn't understand me, and passed me on. The third man I spoke to introduced himself as Abdou and smiled encouragingly at me. He got out his work visa for me, ostensibly to show me how to spell his name but really, I suspect, to prove he had a right to remain in the country. Abdou told me I was welcome to come back and spend time on his stall. We swapped numbers and Luisa and I went back to Gianni's stall to say goodbye. Gianni also said I could come and do fieldwork with him, but he thought I should sit with him and not with the African vendors. I never ended up doing further fieldwork at Duchesca Market. It was subjected to a series of police raids and I decided I didn't feel safe spending extended periods of time there.

Here the denials of understanding on the part of the three West African vendors I spoke to were revelatory of the threat I represented as an unknown interloper into a market where illegal and semilegal activities were happening that it might be better not to subject to excessive scrutiny. Negotiating this was a key part of gaining access and managing risk in the field for me. Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that claiming not to understand was a key strategy used by migrants, particularly when authority figures were exercising control over them. In this case I was making them anxious, as they weren't sure who I was or where I came from, so it was better for them to avoid responding directly to my explanations and questions. This silence could be interpreted as a form of resistance, as it interrupted the flow of the dominant discourse and forced intersubjective interactions to become opaque and unclear. As Glissant argued, in postcolonial contexts opacity has historically provided protection from the surveillance of the oppressor when the face-to-face of daily Relation became

impossible (Britton 1999: 19–25; Glissant 1981: 14–19, 1997: 114, 190). At the same time, as Scott noted, this tactic of ‘linguistic veiling’ has also helped to fuel racist stereotypes of non-white people as sub-intelligent (Scott 1990: 32–36).

Gianni’s refusal to acknowledge and speak to the African man who approached us as we were talking was a different sort of not understanding; it was an ideological refusal to recognise him as a fully fledged fellow human. His evident dislike of working alongside black street vendors was compounded by my presence, a young white woman and therefore eliciting white males’ fears about racial intimacy and miscegenation. The African man’s use of kinship titles was a failed attempt to establish a convivial Relation, as ‘*ò fra*’, or ‘my brother’, is a common way of addressing male companions both in Napoli and across West Africa. Gianni refused to talk back to him and the potential for a moment of intersubjective Relation was rejected.

The mirror image of this problematic appeared elsewhere when I witnessed economic transactions where customers were totally convinced that the vendors couldn’t understand them, even when evidence to the contrary was presented to them. This was particularly true in the case of Chinese street vendors, who were criticised for self-segregating and believed to be incapable of learning Italian. At Ku’s stall, I noticed that most of the customers communicated with gestures, holding out their phone and pointing at the charger socket, or repeating the name of the item they were looking for over and over again, such as ‘Padlock. Padlock.’ Ku had been in Italy for six years at this point and I knew he could speak Italian, as that was the language we communicated in. But his customers didn’t seem to think he could understand or respond to complex phrases. One African man approached the stall, looking for a USB stick. He picked up a multi-pack and put his fingers round one of the sticks, indicating he wanted only one from the pack: ‘How much?’ ‘Three euros’, said Ku. The man made a shocked face and held the pack up again: ‘How many here? One, two, three, six [counting on his fingers]! How much all?’ Ku responded resignedly that the whole pack cost ‘seven euros’. ‘So one euro!’ Ku accepted to sell the USB stick for €1 and the man moved off. On one memorable occasion, a middle-aged Neapolitan man approached Ku’s uncle’s stall, holding out his mobile phone. He pointed to the charger socket:

Man: [pointing] Eh! Eh!

Ku’s uncle: A phone charger?

Man: Eh! Eh! [noises to indicate agreement]

[Ku’s uncle showed him the charger.]

Man: How much?

Ku's uncle: Three euros.

Man: Eeeeeei?! [**He rubbed his thumb and forefingers together to indicate that the price was too high.**]

[**Ku's uncle shrugged and the man moved on.**]

The Neapolitan customer was so convinced that Ku's uncle couldn't understand him that he failed to compute that the vendor's calm and sensible responses were spoken in perfect Italian. In fact, he turned himself into a parody of what he believed Ku's uncle to be: an incomprehensible and insensate foreigner who could only be communicated with in a limited way through the use of grunts and gestures. He believed that the alterity of Ku's uncle was too great to be overcome.

A bitter sense of classed and racialised victimhood also animated other interactions between Neapolitans and migrants, causing them to suspend their efforts at transcultural communication even at moments when the need to earn a livelihood was at stake. For example, on one occasion Modou, Omar and I were sitting outside the bar next to Modou's stall having a coffee when a Neapolitan street vendor approached us, asking if we would like to buy a lighter or a notepad and pencil for a few cents. We declined politely with a tilt of our heads and then studiously ignored him while he continued to stand there: '*I have a family*', he informed us plaintively. We looked at the ground. 'Do you speak Italian?', he asked us, changing tack. We didn't respond. His gaze settled on me, the only white person and the only woman at the table: 'Do you speak Italian?' I capitulated and said that I did. 'No, No. I don't believe you', he said, 'you're Polish aren't you?' I raised my eyebrows at this and shrugged my shoulders. He also shrugged and walked away.

While it might have initially appeared that the street vendor wanted to know if we could speak Italian in order to facilitate communication and persuade us to buy from him, his reaction to my assertion that I could indeed speak Italian suggested that there was something rather different at stake in his question. The vendor asked us whether we could speak Italian as a way of calling us out as *not* Italian and therefore outsiders. It was a power slap-down inflicted because we refused to buy his wares and this made him angry. Mobile street-vending of such low-value goods as the man was selling was the most vulnerable form of street vending and indicated that his economic situation was particularly precarious. His mobilisation of these ideas about belonging, 'race' and national belonging – which he chose to deploy because of, and despite, his urgent

economic situation – suggested that there were racist logics that sat outside the need for cosmopolitan cooperation and convivial codependence.

This was not the only time that fraught politics surrounding understanding and not understanding across transcultural boundaries led to racist exclusion and paranoia. On one occasion I was standing with Comfort at her stall at Via Bologna market when Omar showed up. Comfort started complaining about the troubles the market was experiencing until, all of a sudden, she received a call telling her that there had been an explosion in her home town in Nigeria. She rushed off to a nearby phone centre to call her family there, and there was a general upheaval and panic around us as other Nigerians in the market did the same. At the same moment, an approaching police patrol caused the Guinean street vendors at the top of Via Bologna to run away into the back streets of the Vasto neighbourhood. Omar and I started talking about the laws surrounding the production and sale of contraband. Then, two Senegalese vendors with stalls within the market approached Omar and started speaking to him angrily in Wolof. The argument got heated and I caught French words such as ‘*antiracisme*’ and ‘*Angleterre*’ coming from Omar. I suspected that they were arguing about my presence in the market. Everyone else who didn’t speak Wolof, including Comfort returning from her phone call, looked on in confusion. A Neapolitan man asked Comfort what they were saying and she told him that she didn’t understand. The man looked affronted and commented that it was ‘not possible’, with rancour in his voice, as if he believed she was deliberately keeping the information from him. After a few more minutes of discussion Omar seemed sufficiently to calm and reassure the two Senegalese vendors who returned to their stalls, still visibly fuming. Omar told me they had heard us having a discussion about contraband the previous day and were convinced I was a councillor spying on them from City Hall. He had to work hard to convince them of my true identity and good intentions.

Different racialised language attitudes were at work in the scene that played out next to Comfort’s stall. The Neapolitan man who questioned her about the argument assumed she understood because he assumed that all the Africans at the market spoke the same language or were in some way all the same as each other. These ideas were contested amongst Neapolitans. Gennaro, who had a stall within the market, was well aware that there were different nationalities amongst the African vendors there, and was sensitive to the tensions of cross-cultural communication that often arose. However, this other Neapolitan man’s assumption of linguistic homogeneity had its roots in colonial constructions of a ‘dark continent’ without history or cultural diversity. Nestling alongside this was the common assumption that people talking in a language you didn’t understand

were automatically a threat to you. This was connected to a monolingual nationalism that equated the speaking of multiple languages, that were not the official national language, with betrayal and social breakdown.

Talk about talking, or not being able to talk, was a potent indicator of the way the past bled into present intersubjective relations in Napoli, revealing the ideological struggle inherent in the use of language. It contained the potential to transform melancholy into a more productive mourning, leading to pragmatic cosmopolitan collaboration, or even transcultural solidarity and resistance. At the same time, the coexistence of nationalistic, reductive and stereotypical ideas about language-speaking – such as the paranoid resentment of not being able to understand the Other – demonstrated the strength of language ideologies, and their obsessive link to power interests, boundary maintenance and group membership. All communication was multilingual, multiaccentual and strategic. The French-inflected Wolof of the angry Senegalese market vendors, as well as the Neapolitan-inflected Italian used by Comfort, Omar, the Neapolitan man and myself in the above scene, all attested to the ways in which we could use different semiotic resources, both within and without conventionally defined languages, in order to construct meaning together in dialogue. The linguistic choices we all made showed how community could be made or broken through ‘semantic guerilla tactics’ (Hewitt 1986: 205). In the following chapters I will move away from talking about talk to think about how people actually talked to each other as they sought to communicate across transcultural boundaries in Napoli’s street markets.

Notes

- 1 The Quartieri Spagnoli was originally a garrison built during the sixteenth century to house the Spanish soldiers needed to quell Neapolitan revolts against the Bourbon rulers.
- 2 Actually they say ‘è sagliut’. Riccardo automatically translated the Neapolitan into Italian as he could see I wasn’t local.
- 3 In other words: how can you think to say I love you in English instead of saying ‘ti amo’ in your native language? Carosone and Salerno (1956), translation mine. Renato Carosone (1920–2000) was a Neapolitan singer-songwriter.
- 4 A *babà* is a typical and much-loved Neapolitan pastry, similar to a brioche and soaked in dessert rum.
- 5 Kunta Kinte is a character in the 1994 novel *Roots* by Alex Haley, which has been adapted twice into a hugely popular television series. Haley claimed that Kunta Kinte was one of his ancestors, a Gambian man who was enslaved and sent to America in the eighteenth century.
- 6 Serbo-Croatian is one of the spoken minority languages in Albania. This is probably what he mean by ‘Yugoslav’.

4

Banter, catcalls and racial intimacy

Io nun capisco, ê vvote, che succede	I don't understand what's going on these days
E chello ca se vede nun se crede! Nun se crede!	And you wouldn't believe it either.
È nato nu criaturo niro, niro.	A baby was born – all black.
E a mamma 'o chiamma Giro,	And his Mum calls him Ciro,
Sissignore, 'o chiamma Giro.	Yessir, she calls him Ciro.
Seh! Gira e vota seh!	You can twist it and turn it,
Seh! Vota e gira seh!	Twist it and turn it how you like,
Ca tu 'o chiamme Ciccio o 'Ntuono	Whether you call him Ciccio or Antonio,
Ca tu 'o chimme Peppe o Giro	Whether you call him Peppe or Ciro
Chillo 'o fatto è niro, niro	It's black times we're in
Niro, niro comm'a che!	As black as can be!

Verse 1 and chorus of 'Tammuriata nera' (1944), music by E. A. Mario, lyrics by Edoardo Nicolardi (translated from Neapolitan by the author)¹

THE EXTRACT FROM the song 'Tammuriata nera', reproduced above, speaks of the birth of a baby boy to a Neapolitan woman and an African American Allied soldier towards the end of the Second World War. We can assume that the soldier arrived in the city with the Allied troops after 1943, following the Italian surrender and the Four Days of Napoli, when members of the Italian Resistance grouped together with town folk to rise up against the German troops occupying the city. From Napoli, the Anglo-American troops moved north and, eventually, defeated the Germans in 1945. But the Allied presence in the city continued until 1947, and then was reconfigured through the imposing presence of the NATO

base, situated next to Lake Patria. Until the 1980s arriving in the city by plane involved flying into a base, often in the company of military personnel, and after British Airways took over the airport a segregated area was maintained solely for military use. As local people told me, US, French and Italian bombers took off from Capodichino Airport during the First Libyan War in 2011, causing the ground to shake as they departed. My research participants also mentioned the foreign troops based locally, using the loose term ‘the American soldiers’ to describe them. They talked about them starting fights with *pacchisti* around Piazza Garibaldi and I met people who had been in relationships with soldiers based in the city.

‘Tammuriata nera’ dwells upon the birth of non-white ‘occupation children’ in Napoli, a topic that has been the subject of a number of novels, war memoirs and academic studies about postwar experience in Europe and the USA (Cassamagnaghi 2009; Fehrenbach 2007; Malaparte 2010; Pezzarossa 2013). The birth of non-white children during wartime was seen as the ultimate emblem of the problem of uncontrolled female licentiousness and the taboo of miscegenation. In a white-supremacist, patriarchal society these war romances were subject to far greater social sanctions than those involving white GIs, which were also common. This was because the women were seen to have transgressed on two grounds: against their sex by entering into a sexual relationship outside marriage, and against their race by engaging in intimate relations with a man who was not white. ‘Tammuriata nera’ has been celebrated as an antiwar song, performed at urban concerts and village *feste*, and enjoyed by subsequent generations of Neapolitans. However, James Senese, the famous Neapolitan blues musician and one of the generation of mixed-race war children born in the city, has asked people to stop celebrating the song as a local cultural treasure, but instead listen more carefully to what the lyrics say about the immorality of the mother and the ambivalent status of the child (Quagliata 2019).

Pezzarossa has argued that the negative treatment experienced by these children in the postwar period connected scientific racism and fascist ideologies to the forms of cultural racism that, particularly, black migrants experienced when they started arriving in Italy (2013: 274). My fieldwork was replete with obsessive talk, sometimes directed at women and sometimes emerging in discussions between Neapolitan and migrant men, about women who spent too much time in public spaces such as street markets, where their presence was not respectable and was potentially threatening to their honour. The status of women in public spaces was connected to long-standing notions of how to maintain ‘sexual preserves’ in towns and villages in the Mediterranean – by controlling

the behaviour of women in public spaces (Harding 1975; Reiter 1975) – but also to the ideological underpinnings of empire, white supremacy and militarism (Ware 2019). This pointed to the centrality of sexuality in social, political, economic and cultural relations, where women’s sexual behaviour has been closely governed in ways that are gendered, racialised and classed (hooks 1994; Rubin 1975; Ware 2015). The differential experiences of the women in my street market sites – black women, white Neapolitan women, those working in the market or those passing through – revealed key insights about interconnected patterns of sexual conventions and racialised domination in Napoli. These conventions uncovered a melancholic recollection of colonialism and US military occupation – that continued to demarcate the city in subtle ways – and laid the groundwork for negotiating and managing contemporary fears around racial intimacy.

Paranoias about the threat to local ‘sexual preserves’ were articulated through darkly humorous speech genres – that I refer to as banter and catcalls – that formed an important part of the performance of locally hegemonic masculinities in the everyday life of the street (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Harding 1975; Reiter 1975: 58). Elsewhere in the book I have talked about humour as something that both challenged power – to defuse tension or imagine alternative solidarities – and functioned in complicity with power to abuse, silence and oppress subaltern groups of people (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]; Passerini 1987: 67–126; Smitherman 1977, 2006, 2007). In the case of talk about the status of women and the threat of racial intimacy, joking practices were much more likely to shut down the possibilities for a transcultural Relation. Banter between men, and catcalls directed at women, served to make space for ritualised insults to take place within a playful context in such a way that things were usually prevented from escalating out of control (Hewitt 1986: 170–187). These performances revealed a reality of locally hegemonic masculinities where violence was potentially justified as a reaction to the humiliation of economic austerity and the lack of opportunities for employment. They also showed how a local hierarchy of masculinities existed that occasionally implicated both Neapolitan and migrant men in its activation (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 845–847). However, whilst migrant men could sometimes participate in banter and catcalling, the participation of women in this sort of talk was much more contingent. Banter and catcalling worked to fix the status of women and control the threat of racial intimacy as part of displays of militarised, almost exclusively white, and masculine dominance.

Banter with women working in street markets

The feminist literature, cited in the last section, about the management of sexual preserves in the Mediterranean, was based on research conducted in the first half of the twentieth century. This research showed women to be largely absent from, or only able to pass through, public spaces on their way back to the private sphere of the home (Harding 1975; Reiter 1975). Street markets in Napoli of course became increasingly diverse, fluid and contested spaces following the end of the Second World War. Nonetheless, it was still significantly less common to see women working as street vendors when I was doing research in 2012. Alessandro, of *Peppè's Bags*, had run a stall at Poggioreale market for the last decade. Like many other vendors, he and his family had started out with a small warehouse in the centre of Napoli and then later took on the stall to make more money. There were many things about running a market stall that Alessandro struggled with. He and his goods were at the mercy of the weather and he always had to wear his oldest and most casual clothes. Above all, he didn't like the market because he thought stall-holders were common and rough: 'they shout', he told me, 'and they use nasty words'. In fact he didn't ever let his wife work on the market stall. His wife ran the family shop, as he felt that markets, unlike shops, were unsuitable working environments for women, and so she was safer there. He believed that the bawdy and ribald language that often dominated market life was unsuitable for women to hear, precisely because it was often irreverent and contained sexual undertones.

Nonetheless, women did work on market stalls, such as Titti of the *Eddy Pell* stall at Poggioreale market, who worked alongside her husband. Whilst she often worked in the family shop on her own, I noticed that when she ran the market stall her dad was usually there as a chaperone. The few West African women who had market stalls selling clothes, fabric and jewellery at Via Bologna market, or sold hot and cold meals and refrigerated drinks from hampers that they dragged on trolleys around Piazza Garibaldi, worked alone or alongside other West African women. Comfort had run a market stall around Via Bologna and Piazza Garibaldi since she had arrived in Napoli from Nigeria twenty years previously. She was the first black woman to run a stall in the area and had learnt to be tough and uncompromising in order to safeguard her position in the market. She worked alone, although her Nigerian friends often came to visit her. When we were first introduced, she had a spot right on the corner of Via Bologna, one of the most lucrative points in the market for taking advantage of the footfall that passed by the market going from the train station to the city centre. She

was furious because she felt that the unlicensed street vendors on the corner of the market were moving in on her spot. At the time, many of these men were Guinean nationals, newly arrived in the city via the Mediterranean crossing and awaiting the result of asylum applications. She was also deeply suspicious of the other Nigerian women who had set up stalls selling wax cloth, jewellery and accessories further up the market. She told me that she had called the police on them, claiming they were selling contraband and hadn't paid all their taxes. She was, however, cordial to the Senegalese, Guinean and Nigerian women who wheeled mobile stalls up and down the market selling food, snacks and hot drinks, often buying rice and stew from them for her lunch.

Comfort was comfortable expressing frustration, rage and a sense of unwelcome competition when it came to other migrant vendors, both men and women. These dynamics changed markedly when it came to interacting with the Neapolitan men working in and around the market. With them, it was important for Comfort to be able to engage in aggressively masculine and ambivalently humorous performances of banter in order to safeguard both her spot and her status. The *pacchisti* particularly liked to tease her by calling out her name and trying to tickle or embrace her. She would smile at them and then hit them soundly, telling me, 'they're funny but they're not good people'. On one occasion, one of these men came to greet her, reaching through the curtain of clothes hanging round her stall and calling out.

Man: Comfort, how are you?

Comfort: Good, and you? How's work?

Man: I'm always good when I see you, Comfort. You work better in summer don't you? The winter is always slow ... How's your work going today?

Comfort: [making a face and rubbing a thumb and two fingers together]
Need money.

Man: Comfort, if you need money you just need to ask ... How much do you need? A thousand, a hundred? I have [rifling through pockets] two euros.

Comfort: Give me! I need to buy some water.

Man: You need water? You just need to ask! I will go and get it for you ...

The man trotted off, leaving Comfort looking slightly bemused. He was never to return.

She watched him depart with a perplexed expression on her face whilst their interaction became a source of amusement for the men with stalls around her. The man had put on a mocking pretence of male chivalry, pretending to play the

role of the male provider and family man. His offer of money, and even the offer to get her a bottle of water, were not sincere, but a jokey performance intended to produce a parody of gender relations that sent Comfort up as a woman who was not respectable.

On another occasion, Comfort sought to include herself in a discussion about the possible closure of Via Bologna with Gennaro, Alfonso and Omar. As she approached the men, one of the *pacchisti* tried to grab her round the waist, receiving a number of thumps in return. She turned to Gennaro and joked.

Comfort: *That guy's 'ricchione* [homophobic Neapolitan word], *innit!*

Gennaro: *Hey there now!*

Pacchista: *What, you're even wearing gloves? So you offer a full service then?*

[eruption of laughter amongst the Neapolitan men]

Comfort: [confused] *That's to not get cold! To not get cold!*

The conversation about the market went on for a little while and then Comfort returned to her stall. I asked Gennaro what 'full service' meant and he told me that the man was calling her a sex worker. Gloves were a slang word for condoms and a 'full service' was the term used to describe a sex worker prepared to offer full intercourse.

Me: Do you think she understood?

Gennaro: I don't think so, or she would have given him a good kicking!

Comfort had learnt to try and defend herself against this sort of treatment by acting up to the local figure of *u'maschiolona* – a woman who affects the mannerisms and forms of banter of a local tough guy. Her loud proclamation of '*That guy's 'ricchione, innit?*' showed how homophobic accusations were an important way in which locally hegemonic masculinities were asserted within the context of Neapolitan pavement interactions. However, it was clear, from the fact that Comfort's body remained vulnerable to abuse and aggression, that these appropriations of masculine banter were highly contingent for her. Comfort's efforts to include herself in key discussions about the market, and defend herself from being physically assaulted by the men working there, resulted in a further reinforcement of her status within the political economy of sexual hierarchies in Napoli, where black women were stereotyped as sex workers. The men's language was both comic and violent, referring grotesquely to intercourse and prostitution in order to fix Comfort's body around exclusionary markers of race,

gender and sexuality. In Napoli, language practices of inclusion and exclusion were constructed through a hierarchical linguistic dexterity with both Italian and Neapolitan, as well as locally understood meanings about sexual worlds, femininities and masculinities. As a speaker of Italian as a second language, Comfort's lack of knowledge with Neapolitan sexual slang rendered her unable to realise fully what was being said in order to try and put the man back in his place. The man who spoke knew she would be unlikely to understand and took advantage of this to have a laugh at her expense, with the receptive complicity of the other men present.

The white Neapolitan men in street markets subjected Comfort to such frequent public humiliation because she was a lone businesswoman, but also because she was a black woman. In general, black women, particularly if they were Nigerian or might be seen to be Nigerian, were subjected to intense racist and sexist abuse on the streets in Napoli. Frequently it was implied, or asserted, that they were sex workers. This stereotype had emerged in Italy from the 1980s, as a horrific trade in sex trafficking from West Africa had developed (Okojie 2009: 150–151). In 2017, it was estimated that 80 per cent of Nigerian women arriving in Italy by sea were being trafficked into sex work (Kazeem 2017). The kinds of banter Comfort took part in, and had imposed on her – from the everyday attacks, whereby she was tickled and called by name as she worked, to embarrassing and confusing role-plays of gender normativity, to barely veiled accusations that she was a sex worker – allowed the *pacchisti* to reinforce local sexual conventions that were formed of interconnected, racialised, gendered and militarised patterns of white-supremacist patriarchy. Local convictions about feminine respectability interacted with historic tropes about black femininity and hypersexuality where the present replicated patterns of domination between female slaves and slave masters, or colonised women and colonial soliders. Comfort's vulnerable status in the street markets was infused by the reality of Napoli's situation on the edge of the necropolitics being enacted in the Mediterranean, where women like her appeared to be outside humanity and disposable (Mbembe 2019).

Banter about the women back at home

When women were not present they were conjured up through the banter between men about each other's womenfolk. This allowed the men to explore ideal types of feminine behaviour within a heteronormative social order that was trying to come to terms with the fact of migration. One of the first things that Salvatore

said to me about Ibra was, 'Do you know that Ibra has four wives?' Ibra rolled his eyes and crossly told us, 'It's not true!', but smiled to show he wasn't really angry. Salvatore turned to me and told me that it was true that, 'these Senegalese men have more than one wife'. Salvatore's joking banter about polygamy highlighted the different sexual roles within Islamic and Judaeo-Christian custom as part of an attempt to embarrass Ibra and goad him into a confrontation.

Of course, the fact of my being there to witness such discussions problematised the comic exchanges taking place. To some extent they were happening for my benefit or with an awareness as to my presence. One day I went to do some field-work at Via Bologna market. It was raining and I found Gennaro, Serigne and Riccardo chatting together in Riccardo's shop. At one point in the discussion, conversation turned to relationships and the games men played to avoid having to make formal commitments to women. Riccardo offered the example of a man he once knew – a committed bachelor – who used to say, 'If I want a glass of milk why do I have to buy the cow?' The men cracked up laughing. It was only at this point that they noticed my pained expression and then awkward justifications and declarations ensued. Gennaro told me that women had only one sin: that of having betrayed Adam. Serigne nodded in approval and Gennaro commented that even Serigne, as a Muslim, knew this was the truth. Then the men started telling me how amazing their womenfolk were. Gennaro told me that there was nothing as beautiful as the connection between two partners, and recalled how his wife had a sixth sense about various situations he had been in over the years that had saved him literally from ruin. Riccardo told me he had a son and a daughter. His son had a degree and worked as an engineer. His daughter was a housewife but she was much sharper than his son. 'I vote women', he told me, making a fist with his right hand and raising his arm in the air.

They then started to joke about the difficulties of talking to women. Gennaro complained that men could never say the right thing in an argument, whether they talked or remained silent. But he thought a woman's silence could be terrible, and her anger even worse. He stated that women ruled in the home and they were tough, even though it didn't always seem so. Gennaro then commented that African wives were more oppressed. He said that his friend Moussa had told him they beat their women in Africa to keep them under control. Riccardo disagreed, saying that whatever it looked like from the outside, the women were always in charge. He said that the mistake women had always made was to spend so many years hidden behind their men. Serigne interjected to say that it wasn't true that all African men beat their wives. Gennaro responded that his friend Moussa had told him; he didn't make it up himself.

The initially unselfconscious banter between Gennaro, Riccardo and Serigne served to explore the possibilities of a general consensus about the role of women in relationship to men. In trying to justify Riccardo's misogynistic joke about milking cows they only further clarified a series of sexual conventions about women as wives, belonging in the home and existing only in relationship to their husbands. In their justifications they integrated historical beliefs and cultural practices that were both secular and religious, formed of the interconnection of ancient forms of patriarchy, Abrahamic religion and the transformations that had come about in the relationship between public and private, self and Other, from modernity onwards. They playfully joked about the limits of the power that men had over women, with Gennaro positioning African husbands as more violent within the context of a racialised distinction between white male civility and black male savagery. When Serigne challenged him, Gennaro denied responsibility for his comments by stating that an African friend had told him these things, so they must be true. Their banter established a local sexual order where communities did not meet across racialised boundaries outside the public sphere of the street market. The maintenance of these sexual and racial preserves helped to reinforce the notion that, at home, each man was in charge of family life, and the types of control he chose to exercise there were reflective of the differential statuses of particular racialised and culturally inflected masculinity. My presence, in itself disruptive of local sexual conventions, forced them to justify the things they were saying but didn't effectively dismantle the ways in which they spoke about women and their social status with regard to men.

Catcalling foreign women

Catcalling and sexual harassment are, of course, universal phenomena, and happen across national, racialised and classed contexts. As elsewhere, the way catcalling worked in Napoli was connected to racialised tropes about femininity that had local and global resonances. Catcalling connected local memories of implication within colonial and military dominations to the lived reality of contemporary migration. As I have already discussed, black women were violently interpellated as sex workers and asked how much money they wanted to earn in return for sex. Women with blonde hair and light colouring would hear '*Hey Polish*' or '*Hey German*' muttered at them as they passed by. These kinds of specific ideas about women, defined by different racialised, ethnic and national stereotypes, necessitated a multilingual approach to catcalling that was typical of daily life on the city's pavements. The proficiency of this multilingual catcalling

opened a window onto Napoli's history and contemporary reality as a crossroads of different cultures and people (Chambers 2008) – migrants leaving and arriving, merchants, foreign militaries and rulers – that had engendered myriad creolising encounters in complex and improvisational situations of inequality and subordination.

One day, whilst I was doing fieldwork at Ku's stall, a young Neapolitan man came to sit on an empty plant pot near us. He introduced himself as Luca, the nephew of the Neapolitan street vendor selling CDs opposite Ku's stall. He told me that he was a builder and had previously been working to waterproof the region's road tunnels, but had just lost his job. He complained that he had nothing to do, and no money, so was hanging out in front of the station to waste some time. As we sat there, he periodically called out 'konnichiwa' to East Asian-looking women who walked by us, 'Madame' to West African-looking women, and 'Uè bella' ('Hey pretty') to European-looking women. He then turned to me and said, in Italian, 'Aren't our Italian women beautiful though?'

In this episode Luca coded women within a racialised hierarchy of feminine beauty, where 'our' (belonging to Neapolitan, male) women were at the top of the scale. The pleasure he derived from catcalling the female passers-by was clearly heightened by the discomfort and dirty looks he received in response. His performance of masculine domination appeared to salve the frustrations he expressed at the beginning of our conversation about being out of work. It was part of the way in which he derived power in a situation where he felt his own status to have been damaged by the lack of locally available employment. Economic austerity was articulated as a threat to his masculine pride and offloaded onto women in the form of abusive and threatening talk.

On another occasion in the summer, I was taking the Circumvesuviana train back down the coast from Napoli to spend some time with my family in Vico. I entered a compartment that was already filling up with tourists and Neapolitan beach-goers. Getting on just in front of me was a South Asian family, dressed elegantly for what seemed to be their day off. There were two couples, and the women were wearing shalwar kameez. Both were also wearing hijab and one of the women wore a niqab. They had three young children in pushchairs, which they positioned in the aisles as they sat down next to their husbands. A teenage boy, sitting in a large and boisterous group behind me, turned to his friends and joked, in Neapolitan: '*The terrorists are here!*' I turned to stare angrily at him as his friends laughed. He ignored me and repeated, '*The terrorists are here!*' The train continued to fill up with more tourists – judging, by their accents, from America, Northern Europe and Japan; middle-aged Ukrainian women

in groups; and Bangladeshi and Senegalese street vendors weighed down with plastic sacks of merchandise and cardboard boxes to make up into temporary market stalls at the entrances to the beach resorts of the Amalfi Coast. The boy spoke again, *'Can I say something? It looks like the foreigners here are us!'* More giggles and murmurs of assent erupted from his group of friends. As the train set off, the group of teenagers behind me started playing tech house from one of their mobiles, and many of the tourists started chatting animatedly to their travel companions. English, Spanish and Japanese could clearly be heard mingling with Neapolitan, Ukrainian, Wolof, Bengali and so on, set off by the tinny beat issuing forth from the young Neapolitan's phone. The multilingual babel of people speaking with, and across, each other sparked something off for the young man, keen to entertain his receptive peer group further. He turned to a young American woman and asked her, in accented English, *'Where are you from?'* Without waiting for her reply he told his friends, in knowing tones, *'She is a beautiful girl.'* Then, to a young Spanish woman, he said, *'Como estas?'*, followed by *'Arigato!'*, presumably for the benefit of a group of Japanese tourists on their way to Pompei. A young American woman suddenly exclaimed, *'Oh my God!'*, in response to something her friend had said. The boy immediately mimicked her, shouting *'Oh maaaaaaaaiiiy Gooooood! It is wonderful!'*, in drawn out tones. His friends laughed hysterically. The group exited the train a few stops after this outburst and the hum of conversation resumed as we continued with our journey.

This episode provided further insights into the different status of women in Napoli on the basis of the ways in which they were both racialised and classed. The performance of talking *about* the South Asian family – within their earshot and using recognisable racist stereotypes about Muslims, but in a thick dialect that was designed to be deliberately incomprehensible and so vaguely threatening – jarred starkly with the effort the young Neapolitan made to showcase his linguistic aptitude in the languages of the privileged and wealthy female tourists. The South Asians were described as terrorists because of the hijab the women in the group were wearing. This drew on widespread Islamophobic ideas whereby the trope of the oppressed and veiled Muslim women symbolised concerns about the threat of terrorism to western society (Rashid 2016). The flirtatious language invoked with regard to the female tourists was of a different register. Being able to speak English or French to the visiting young women connected the young Neapolitan men to the upward mobility that the women represented. But the sharpness in the young man's mockery on the Circumvesuviana also revealed the

fraught combination of resentment, attraction, shame, cool and uncool inherent in such interactions. Hierarchical ‘language attitudes’ (Smitherman 1977) were in place that allowed the young man to use language in a simple way as a tool of oppression against the group of South Asian Others on the train. But at the same time, his interactions with the tourists showed how aware he was that his own language and culture had historically marginalised him.

Migrant men were also often on the receiving end of catcalls. The catcalls that migrant women were subjected to were not unconnected to the jokey forms of address that Neapolitan men gave out to migrant men, such as ‘Oi, blondie!’ (to black men) and ‘myfren’ (‘my friend’). These calls were often directed at men unknown to the callers themselves and were part of the same performances of locally hegemonic masculinity through which gendered and racialised power dynamics were asserted in daily life. Catcalls mostly sought to police and maintain sexual conventions that were heteronormatively heterosexual, but not exclusively. The catcalling of migrant men by Neapolitan gay men, who would not have been so bold as to harass straight Neapolitans, highlighted the vulnerability of migrant men within the local political economy, and the racialised dynamics of gendered control. It would definitely not have been safe for gay Neapolitan men to approach straight Neapolitans in the city in this way. On one occasion I saw a local man make an obscene gesture and wiggle his tongue at a black man walking in front of me with a female companion. A few of my Senegalese male friends also told me they had been followed home after nights out by men in cars seeking to pay them for sex. I once spent an evening at the stall of one research participant locked in an awkward interaction between him and a Neapolitan man who regularly came to the place where he put his stall out looking for him. The fact of the Neapolitan man’s attraction was never expressed explicitly but my informant felt it strongly enough that he had avoided repeated invitations to meet up outside of work. In these encounters the greater sexual privilege lay with the gay Neapolitan men, and the migrant men were vulnerable because of their economic marginalisation and, often, undocumented status. The fact that gay Neapolitan men were more empowered than migrant men revealed a really important truth about the forms that gendered violence could take when cut through with race and class. These practices were illustrative of the ways in which local masculinities, and the exercise of gendered violence, existed within a hierarchy of masculinities where being oppressed and oppressing someone else could meld together, transform and mutate depending on the circumstances (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 845–847).

Policing racial intimacy

Banter and catcalling were also used to comment aggressively on instances of real and suspected racial intimacy between white Neapolitan women and black migrant men in public spaces. These interactions most clearly revealed the ways in which Neapolitan male power was founded on the maintenance of local sexual preserves, and the gendered domination of both migrant men and women. Sometimes these violent instances of talk called explicit attention to these connections between past and present. A Senegalese man I spoke to told me that his friend's girlfriend was once subjected to a loud tirade in the street by a group of young Neapolitan men, who accused her of 'liking black men'. Another Neapolitan woman told me that once she was at the beach with her Senegalese partner of ten years and she got called a prostitute who '*liked these Americans*' by a middle-aged Neapolitan man as he sat tanning on his lounge. The public sighting of racial intimacy signalled a critical breakdown of Neapolitan female morality that threatened Neapolitan male power. This threat was managed through aggressive verbal attacks that sought publicly to humiliate the woman and threaten her partner.

Other times, these forms of male control were exercised in more subtle ways. One late Sunday afternoon I was standing with Modou on the pavement next to his stall. The designer wares glimmered in the light of a street lamp, set off by the white sheet arranged in a neat rectangle at our feet. It was cold and there weren't many people about so I did notice the intense look sent our way by two Neapolitan men as they passed by. I pointed it out to Modou and we both laughed, imitating the stare we had received. It was only later, when I was at home transcribing the recordings made during that afternoon, that I realised the significance of this look. This is what I heard on the digital recorder.

Me: I need to go to the bathroom.

Modou: Ok.

Me: I'll just go to the bar ... I'll leave everything here.

Modou: Ok!

[I leave and a few seconds pass by.]

Voice of Neapolitan man: *So is that your stuff?*

Modou: No ... she – England.

Voice of Neapolitan man: *Oh ok. So that's not your stuff then?*

Modou: No, no ...

Unlike English, Romance languages such as Italian and Neapolitan do not require a subject pronoun to indicate who is doing the action of the verb. The gender of

the surrounding nouns and adjectives in the phrase, as well as the context of discussion, generally make the meaning clear to the speakers involved. Here, 'is that' was a translation of 'è', the third person conjugation of the verb 'to be'. The object of the sentence was 'stuff', or 'roba', a feminine noun. On the surface the Neapolitan man could easily have been asking about the wares on Modou's stall; but Modou's response unequivocally demonstrated that he understood the man was talking about me. He was asking if I was romantically involved with Modou, and Modou was very keen to emphasise that I was not. Moreover he let them know that I was not local, but a foreigner whose honour they potentially had lesser claims over.

The next time I saw Modou I asked him if he remembered who the men were and what they meant by 'your stuff'. Modou said he had no recollection of the exchange. Marco, a middle-aged Neapolitan friend of Modou, was hanging out nearby and overheard our discussion. He confirmed that the disembodied voice on the recording was most probably talking about me and, looking at me curiously, asked if I was offended. I told him that I wasn't but that this was interesting for my research project. He became defensive, saying he couldn't see why it was interesting. He told me it was 'normal for Neapolitans to act that way', and gave me an example of something else that had happened between himself and Modou. One time he had come to say hi to Modou and found him chatting to a Neapolitan woman. He playfully hit Modou and the woman said, '*leave him alone or I'll have ya'*'. He asked her if she was his girlfriend and she replied that she wasn't.

Modou and I had transgressed racialised sexual conventions in Napoli by being seen together in public space. As Marco told me, the reaction of the unknown local Neapolitan men was normal and we didn't have the right to expect otherwise. The crude, jokey warning given to Modou in Neapolitan about me possibly being his 'stuff' served to re-establish a localised hierarchy of male power that was white and Neapolitan. As mentioned elsewhere, the use of Neapolitan often corresponded to a masculine gangster or *guappo* stereotype and so functioned as a form of posturing, aggression and intimidation. To emphasise the aggressive, and yet banal, nature of these pavement dynamics, Marco provided an example of how he himself had taken part in a similar moment of jokey sexual policing between Modou and another white woman. This was revelatory of the ways in which both complicity and oppression worked side by side in the maintenance and reinforcement of local sexual conventions.

This episode also made me understand how potentially risky it had been for Modou to allow me to come and do research with him, and how carefully he had worked to negotiate my presence, for example with his assertion that I was

English and not local. Modou would often jokingly tell curious passers-by that I was his sister. On one occasion this clearly annoyed a Neapolitan friend of Modou who said to us, ‘Your sister? She’s white!’ When I first met Carlo, he asked if I was Modou’s girlfriend and Modou again claimed that I was his sister. I told Carlo about my project and he responded, ‘What are you researching? The bog?’ Carlo’s use of grotesque comic and abusive language served here to overturn Modou’s joking claim of kinship and put my honour back into question, re-evoking the potential of humorous language to function in complicity with oppressive power dynamics.

Salvatore, who worked near to the spot where Ibra set up his mobile market stall, was another Neapolitan research participant who was overly concerned with the maintenance of female honour and the threat posed to it by the presence of black men. One day Salvatore decided to broach this topic with me. He complained about a group of young female students who lived in one of the apartments in the block where he worked as a doorman. When he went to knock on their door they would invariably answer in their pyjamas and invited him in for a snack. He had always thought their behaviour was scandalous. Another female friend also often asked to use his personal toilet when she passed by and he was horrified that she never locked the door or asked him to guard the door outside. ‘You never know what can happen these days’, he told me, his brow furrowing with concern. He explained that a man might pretend to be a friend to a woman but, as soon as he got the chance, would attack and rape her. At this point our conversation was interrupted by a young couple on their evening stroll. The Senegalese man stopped to greet Ibra in Wolof while his Neapolitan girlfriend waited for him.

Salvatore: [loudly, to me] You see that?

Girlfriend: [to her boyfriend] Baby, I have to pee!

Salvatore: Look! She even says that she has to piss!

Salvatore continued talking to me, explaining that women needed to be even more careful when they were with black men, because they were so physically strong. I pointed out that Ibra was actually slighter and shorter than him, but he said that he was only talking in general. He explained that black men were stronger than other men so if things started to get intimate between a white woman and a black man, and the girl decided she didn’t want to have sex, the man could easily still force her. He told me, ‘*only a rifle would stop him then. Not a pistol. You would need a rifle.*’ Salvatore’s astonishing pronouncement called to mind the idea of the

shotgun wedding, a historic term used to describe a marriage that comes about because the bride has fallen pregnant. First, the image of the rifle evoked the idea of feminine honour that had been brought into question by improper sexual relations between men and women outside marriage. Second, the rifle evoked a colonial image, redolent with ideas of safari and big-game hunting, that painted black masculinity as over-sexualised, irrational and dangerous to Neapolitan female honour. This connection had not occurred to Salvatore naturally. Rather, it was formed of racist tropes about black masculinity that arrived in Italy, first via colonialism and American mass culture in the early twentieth century (Giuliani 2013: 62), and second through the intimate relationships that flourished between black GIs and Neapolitan women during the war. This episode showed the ways in which these ideas were reactivated by the arrival of black men arriving in Italy from Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s.

Salvatore's paranoia about the threat posed by black migrant men to Neapolitan female honour arose on a number of other occasions. He would frequently raise this topic by picking fights about sex with Ibra and the other Senegalese men who had market stalls near to where he worked. Often the conversation started with Salvatore accusing his Senegalese colleagues of leading incomplete and unnatural lives, far from their families, and focused only on making money and surviving. Ibra would usually retort that, 'Italians all get cheated on. Just smoke. Just eat. Just do *fiki fiki*.' Usually he would start cracking up towards the end of such diatribes and escape from the Neapolitans' exaggerated expressions of offence and raised fists. He would never retaliate physically. The three men's dispute around having sex, or doing '*fiki fiki*' as they called it, revolved around the physical and moral structuring of their masculinities. Mimmo, a local shop owner, proudly told Ibra that, 'yes! Italian men eat three times a day and do *fiki fiki* three times a day!' Ibra retorted that this weakened a man and could lead to his death. To illustrate this he wove around the Neapolitan men, limping, to illustrate their physical debilitation through excessive coitus. Salvatore responded sniffily that male virility actually originated in the knees and if men didn't have enough sex they would weaken themselves at the skeletal level.

These humorous discussions about male sexual prowess represented a somewhat safer way for the Neapolitan and Senegalese men to negotiate the racialised and gendered tensions that existed between them. However, the threat of racial intimacy was a constantly lurking undercurrent in their interactions. For the Neapolitan men it was incomprehensible that the married migrant men sincerely intended to wait faithfully to return to their wives in Senegal.

Salvatore: [to Ibra] When are you gonna have sex? In ten years time?

Mimmo: Why don't you take an Italian woman?

Ibra: Italian woman not the same.

Mimmo: [offended] Why's that?

Salvatore: Look. In life it's important to eat, work and do fiki fiki. But you just work and eat!

Ibra: [smiles] Look, I'm Muslim. We can't do sex outside marriage.

Salvatore: I think Ibra is gay ... Ibra, you gay?

Ibra ignored him and went to reorganise some of the hats on his stall. Mimmo came over to stand behind his bent form, holding his waist.

Mimmo: Ibra be careful when you bend over or else I'll punish you!

[Ibra jumped up in shock and anger, moving out of Mimmo's reach.]

Mimmo: [regretfully] *Look how pissed off he gets!* Come back Ibra! [to me] Ibra gets so angry when we joke with him like that ... even if we just walk around behind him ... he gets angry and says 'Mimmo! Don't do that! You're no good!'

[Mimmo shrugged and goes back into his shop.]

Salvatore: You're wrong Ibra. It's normal to have sex.

Ibra: Look. It's fine.

Salvatore: [to me] Other Senegalese friends of mine tell me that when they go home to visit all they do is have sex. They go back to make a son they never see. It's not right.

Salvatore: [to Samba, a Senegalese street vendor who had just arrived] Do you like Italian women?

Samba: [holding up his hands] I'm Muslim. I can't do illegal sex.

A number of key themes emerged in the men's bantering about sex. First, it was made clear that ideal Italian or Senegalese masculinities were produced through the way men were seen to exercise their sexuality. Male prowess was constructed either through the practice of regular intercourse or through the exercise of self-control, discipline and restraint. This second vision of masculinity was connected to the Islamic principles that governed relationships between men and women. Catholic dogma did not form a counterpart to the argument the Senegalese men made about 'illegal sex'. Instead, the Neapolitan men made use of hegemonic ideals about the virile family man, a stereotype that emerged under fascism (Giuliani 2013: 63; Sabelli 2013: 88), as a way of accusing the

Senegalese migrants of not fulfilling their manly duties within the family by being away from home.

As the performance of masculinity involved exercising the male right to exchange of women as sexual objects, then the Neapolitan men offered local women as an alternative to the lack of locally available Senegalese women. However, this offer was highly ambiguous and laden with risk. This was a line that the Senegalese men knew they shouldn't cross in order to maintain a complicit truce with their Neapolitan interlocutors. Both Ibra and Samba negotiated this by explaining that sex outside marriage was *harām*, or forbidden to them on religious grounds. The response of the Neapolitans was to emasculate them by accusing them of being gay. In the episode detailed above, Mimmo took things further and physically grabbed hold of Ibra whilst he was bent over, threatening to punish him, ostensibly by raping him. The projected rape of a straight man by another straight man constituted a more complex form of control than if Mimmo were gay or Ibra were a woman. Such ritualised insults served to undermine and intimidate Senegalese men along the pavement by putting them in the difficult position of having to prove a heterosexual masculinity whilst avoiding the spectre of miscegenation.

Neapolitan women passing by on the pavement repeatedly elicited these episodes of violent and barely manageable banter between the Neapolitan men and the Senegalese street vendors I was working with. One evening a Neapolitan woman walking down the road clearly caught the eye of the men whom she passed. Salvatore muttered to me darkly, 'If she decides to get with a black man who hasn't seen a woman for years ... well you know that they really need to do fiki fiki!' On another afternoon, a Neapolitan woman walked past Ibra's stall wearing bright pink leopard-print leggings and a tight black top. Salvatore commented to me, 'Look how all the blacks are watching her.' A young Senegalese street vendor made a face at Salvatore and, indicating Ibra, who had lowered his gaze as the woman passed by, pulled on his left earlobe with his index finger and thumb. This homophobic Neapolitan gesture was meant to indicate that Ibra didn't look at the woman because he was gay. Both men laughed and Salvatore commented, 'All the men are looking, except Ibra. Ibra doesn't look at women. Ibra doesn't do fiki fiki.' The young Senegalese man came over to continue bantering with Salvatore and Salvatore asked him, 'Do you like women?' The young man looked awkward and started saying, 'Nooo', hesitantly. Salvatore immediately snapped back with 'So you're ...' – starting to lift his hand to his left ear. The young man quickly responded, 'OK yes!' Salvatore congratulated him and they both laughed amicably.

Grotesque and darkly funny banter and catcalling raised questions about the status of women, migrant men and racial intimacy. It played an important role in the constitution of pavement life in Neapolitan street markets. Like the ways in which people talked about talk in the [previous chapter](#), this was a key part of everyday negotiations of difference and belonging. These verbal styles and ritualistic games embodied locally hegemonic, masculine performances that integrated markers of race, ethnicity and class. They formed the social space of the pavement around notions of morality, kinship and economic entitlement that bolstered the political economy of sexual conventions in the city. Edgy humour was central to the ways in which this violent language was partially resisted by migrants working in street markets: it defused tensions and allowed them to make claims for inclusion in local hierarchies of masculinity. Yet humour also exacerbated tensions and acted in complicity with the oppression of other, more vulnerable people. It didn't stop migrant men from being vulnerable to the ever-lurking threat of violence, and mostly excluded migrant women who attempted to participate. These depressing displays of masculine prowess raised the spectre of people's humanity being up for question, something that remained negotiable in the street markets, but not so much elsewhere as antimigrant politics ramped up and policies designed to stop more people from making it to Europe were rolled out across the Mediterranean.

Note

- 1 Mario and Nicolardi (1944). 'Tammuriata' means the drumming of tambourines, which are the rhythmic base of this traditional southern Italian folk genre.

5

Multilingual market cries

Vuò sape e che parte so?	Do you wanna know where I'm from?
Songo e Napule e sto cca.	I'm from Napoli and I'm here:
Sto vestuto a tripulino	Dressed up like a Tripolitan
P'o servizio ch'aggi'a fa.	For a job I'm on.
Mmiez'a ll'Arabe, all'Ebreie	Amongst the Arabs and the Jews
Rappresento o rinnegato;	I am considered a traitor [to my own people];
Ma i mme guardo e fatto mieie,	But I mind my own business,
Senza maie fa' suspetta.	Without letting people know [where I'm from].
Na parola contro a nnuie:	If they say a word against us [Christians/Italians];
Puh, nu schiaffo, t'o sturdisco.	I punch them and dull their senses.
Chillo guarda, io nun capisco,	They look at me, I don't understand,
E illo dico, vuò cumpra?	And I ask them wanna buy?

Extract from 'O tripulino napulitano' ('The Neapolitan in Tripoli')
by Raffaele Viviani (1925; translated from Neapolitan by the author)

Ci trovi nelle piazze, ci trovi nelle vie, ci trovi nelle strade,	You find us in the squares, you find us on the streets, you find us on the roads,
Ci trovi pure al mare, camminare per ore, con la voglia di fare.	You even find us at the beach, walking for hours, wanting to work hard.
Chiamami Vu' Cumpra.	Call me ' Wanna Buy '.

Vita ambulante (cosa vuò accattà?),	A hawker's life (what you wanna buy?),
Dalle borse alle sciarpe (nun ti preoccupà),	From bags to scarfs (no worries),
Dai vestiti alle scarpe (nelle quantità).	From clothes to shoes (in bulk).

Extract from 'Vu' Cumprà' by Goraman feat. ESA (2009;
translated from Italian by the author)

THE EXTRACTS FROM the two songs reproduced here are both about the fraught experience of being a migrant street vendor. The protagonist of 'O tripulino napoletano' (Viviani 1925) is a Neapolitan hawker in Tripoli, Libya, in the early twentieth century, whereas the protagonist of the song 'Vu' cumprà' is a migrant Senegalese street vendor in contemporary Italy. At different moments in time, and in different contexts, they describe the tacit accords and identifications that migrant street vendors need to make with the settled population in order to be accepted and make a living. The Neapolitan vendor in Tripoli describes his attempts to blend in amongst local Arabs and Jews. The song reads like a confession of his true identity with the vendor's announcement that he is considered a traitor – to his own people, to his race, to his Christian faith – when discovered to be a Neapolitan man pretending to be a Libyan street vendor. Studies of Italian migration to the 'new world' (Harney 1998; Stella 2003) have spoken of the discrimination faced by Italian migrants there and explain the need for dissimulation expressed in the song. The vendor describes reacting rigorously and violently to insults in such a way that the aggressor's attention was turned away from his treacherous foreignness in order to re-engage a process of barter. The final phrase 'vuò cumprà?' is neither Italian nor Neapolitan (the vendor's native language, in which the song is composed) but, rather, a Neapolitanised distortion of Italian that has occurred because the vendor is speaking a language that is not his own. It is not clear whether the vendor experiences his Neapolitaness as something particularly stigmatising although we know that Neapolitans *were* particularly stigmatised both in the historic accounts of travellers to Italy and in descriptions of Italians abroad. Here it appears that the Neapolitan vendor makes his claim for the right to live and work in Tripoli on the basis of both his national identity and his ability to integrate into the local culture.

The various ways in which the Neapolitan vendor seeks to defend himself and practise his profession mirror those described by Goraman in 'Vu' Cumprà

(Goraman, feat. Esa 2009), the second song that begins this chapter. In the mid-1980s the term *vu' cumprà* emerged as a derogatory term to describe the large numbers of migrants from West Africa who started arriving in Italy and took up work as street vendors (Faloppa 2011). It literally mimics the phrase that African vendors called out to potential customers in this period, meaning 'Do you want to buy?'¹ Here Goraman describes black street vendors being racially insulted, whilst also subtly reclaiming the term as a source of self worth by associating it with the desire to work hard and hustle.² By placing the two songs together we can see that the idea of the *vu' cumprà* is exclusionary – it places the street vendor as an outsider – whilst at the same time generating unsettling commonalities between the Senegalese street vendor and the history of Neapolitan alterity, precariousness and movement that the song 'O tripulino napoletano' captures. The key to understanding the negotiation of this status is through the linguistic choices made. Although Goraman is a Senegalese singer-songwriter based in the north of Italy, he uses Neapolitan when mimicking the calls of the Senegalese vendors – 'cosa vuò accattà?' ('what you wanna buy?') and 'nun ti preoccupà' ('no worries'). This highlights the fact that Napoli was an important entry point for Senegalese (and other) migrants when they started migrating to Italy, and the place where they often cut their teeth linguistically as street vendors in Italy (Riccio 1999, 2001). Their use of regional languages and styles was not an attempt at racial or religious dissimulation but was intended to engage potential customers in barter marking a moment where language became a site for transcultural connection, integration and claims-making about the right to belong and make a living in the city.

In both pieces the point of focus is the market cry, or the way in which the street vendors reached out across racial, linguistic and cultural boundaries to interpellate the potential customer. In this chapter I explore the examples of transcultural and multilingual speech performance related to buying and selling that took place in my fieldwork. I first examine greetings and bartering in Neapolitan, and their importance for migrant street vendors seeking inclusion and acceptance on the city's streets. I then turn to the frustrating process of bartering in English for Neapolitan street vendors at Poggioreale market. In Napoli, markets cries functioned as a humorous and multilingual speech genre that showed how alterity was handled by both settled Neapolitan and migrant vendors in order to facilitate trade and economic activity. This connected Napoli to other global port cities that had become sites of a 'practical cosmopolitanism born of an acceptance of – and indifference to – difference'. In Napoli, a pragmatic approach to living with difference involved the development of particular forms of 'cultural dexterity' and learning how to negotiate and barter in many

different languages (Trotter 2008a, b). This hybrid, multilingual transcultural relationship was the result of the hard work involved in building new economic opportunities in a context of migration and precariousness (Hall 2009: 55–56; 2012; 2015). It also connected the past to the present when the raucous and comic ‘Billingsgate speech’ (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 7) revived the echoes of older market traditions of barter and haggling whilst adapting to the new urban reality.

However, given the increasing political and public pressure to close down and limit the amount of street vending in Napoli during my time there in 2012, the tactical deployment of these market cries also revealed how street vendors sought to legitimise their presence and continue making a living in a context where their livelihoods were threatened. Like other urban survival skills, street vending could be described as a type of hustling because it was often quite informal and was an earning tactic practised by communities stigmatised on the grounds of class, race and legal status. The tactical deployment of market cries, to facilitate trade and maintain good relationships with other people using the spaces around which street markets were set up, also revealed the defensive formation of a consciousness about the stigmatised nature of the profession (Hall *et al.* 1978: 351–391). Given that skill as a talker was key to the economic success of the street hustler (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009: 8; Wacquant 1998), the attention this chapter pays to market cries – the talk of the hustle – allows an examination of the oppositional class-consciousness through which negative ideas about street vending and street vendors were resisted and renegotiated on the ground.

Greetings

It was a sunny afternoon in late February and it finally seemed as though the unusually cold and lengthy winter we had experienced was releasing its grasp on the city. I was sitting at Comfort’s clothes stall, at the Piazza Garibaldi end of Via Bologna market, warming my bones, chatting with Comfort and her cohort of Nigerian girlfriends, and generally watching the world go by. At one point, a Neapolitan street vendor joined the line of Guinean men selling contra-band sunglasses from unregulated mobile market stalls at the entrance to the market. He was wheeling a huge, steaming, steel cooking-pot that he slipped into line with the rest of the men. Inside the pot was something that, although the seasons didn’t mean anything any more, made those in attendance think greedily of summer: boiled corn on the cob. The man tilted back his head, took a deep breath, and cried out ‘roi roi! roi roi!’ starting out high and bringing the pitch of his voice down dramatically on the second ‘roi’ of each pair. A West African

man, sitting on the railings at the top of the market, was particularly tickled by the performance and imitated the sounds the vendor was making – ‘ahhhh-ohhhhh! Ahhh-ohhhhh!’ – whilst laughing uproariously. The vendor looked sideways at his mocker with an expression of deeply insulted dignity but then turned back and carried on calling out to potential customers.

The corn vendor obviously knew a good thing because his stall was almost immediately besieged by stall-holders, market regulars and other passers-by. Together they chomped with satisfaction on their cobs and then joyfully tossed the husks over the blue wall that had been erected around the Piazza Garibaldi building site. Although anomalous next to the Guinean vendors, the Neapolitan man was easily incorporated into the line-up. An hour or so later a patrol of municipal police slowly started to descend down our side of the Piazza to clear out the unlicensed hawkers. As was typical, warning of their advance reached the men, via a network of people stationed up the side of the road, in time for them to wheel their stalls down Via Bologna into the backstreets of the Vasto neighbourhood and escape detection. The corn vendor was attentive to the same warning signs as the other men running irregular stalls near Via Bologna market and employed their same tactics of evasion, fleeing and then returning with them five minutes later to set up his pitch again.

Street vendors often called out humorously to potential customers as they passed through the market in order to persuade them to come and look at their wares. These greetings were ancient – relying on local conventions to describe the wares on offer and how much they cost – whilst nevertheless changing with the times. Although we all quickly understood what goods the corn vendor was advertising, many people, including me, didn’t understand the meaning of his words. Gennaro later explained to me that he was shouting, in Neapolitan, ‘Two lira! Two lira!’, just like the street pedlars of the early twentieth century who sold portions of spaghetti in the street for that amount of money. The cobs actually cost 50 cents.

So the corn vendor’s cry of ‘roi! roi!’ evoked the traditional figure of the Neapolitan pedlar. But this image was then interrupted by the interactive and comedic reception his presence activated amongst the people present, and the harmonious way he worked alongside the non-Neapolitan vendors. This revealed the innovative forms of transcultural economic collaboration through which different vendors made use of and shared the space of the pavement for their earning activities. This pragmatic approach temporarily did away with paranoias about political austerity and anti-immigration sentiment in order to ensure collective survival. But it also hinted at a kind of oppositional consciousness to established hierarchies. The success of the vendors’ intersubjective

communicative tactics depended upon a place-making struggle being enacted that produced the space of the market according to the needs of the people making a living there. The cry and response of ‘roi! roi!’ tactically produced localised spaces of manoeuvre in situations of inequality and domination through the use made of it by the vendor and its reappropriation by passers-by, shedding light on the reciprocal and transcultural politics of street vending.

These intersubjective politics could be deeply ambivalent and depended on regular reiteration. When I met him, Modou had been laying down his piece of cloth on the same patch for the last seven years. He was a Senegalese street vendor who sold high-quality, fake designer accessories that were crafted in factories in the city. As such, his legal status and place on the pavement were particularly precarious. Repeated arrests and seizures of his merchandise had made it impossible for him to gain a work visa. He had developed relationships with a lot of the people who lived and worked in the area, in particular the men who worked in the bar he patronised nearby, and a couple of men with whom he enjoyed lively football banter. One person even allowed him to store some of his merchandise in his shop to avoid him having to carry it back and forth. Modou was careful to greet everyone he knew as they passed by in an eclectic mix of the local and international forms of salutation he had picked up on the job. Doing participant observation with him was often a series of:

Modou: Uè Lellooo! [*Yo, Lellooo!*]

Lello: Tutt’a post uaglio? [*All right, mate?*]

Modou: Hola!

X: Myfren!

Y: Modou!

Modou: Cava?!

Modou: [**to one person**] *What’s up, hey! What the hell do you want? Get the hell out of here!!* [**to another person**] Hola Chico!

These highly raucous and vociferous greetings were an important way in which Modou established reciprocal relationships with the Italians who were his occasional customers and whom he came into contact with everyday. They didn’t question his right to set up in that spot and, beyond patronising his stall, often helped him in some important way. This shouldn’t be taken to indicate genuine affection and trust between Modou and the people he greeted so warmly. I remember that, on one occasion, following an onslaught of greetings, he turned to me and said, ‘I just can’t stand those Italians.’ His throwaway comment

revealed how exhausting these performances of lightly humorous transcultural greeting were for him.

Occasionally, though they were unplanned, discourses about cultural difference and solidarity were also opened up in these market greetings. For example:

Modou: [to Italian man walking past stall] Merry Christmas!

Man: What?! But you don't celebrate. You're Muslim!

Modou: [holding both palms up] *What's that mean? I can still give you season's greetings!*

Man: You're right: one race. [He makes a fist on his chest in solidarity before hurrying off.]

Not all migrant street vendors shared Modou's self-confident and jokey linguistic style. Ibra, another Senegalese vendor I worked with, preferred simply to greet people he knew with 'Ciao', or call out 'Prego' or 'Prego capo' ('tell me' or 'tell me, Boss') when potential customers lingered by his stall. These forms of greeting were more deferential and devoid of humorous intent, partly because Ibra was a much quieter and shyer person. Also, his greetings were the traditional ones that were utilised by market vendors in Napoli. It was significant that Ibra did not choose jokey Neapolitan forms of greeting, as Modou did, even though he certainly understood Neapolitan and would have known how to say things like '*Uagliò! Tutt'a' post'?!*' ('Hey man! What's good?!') if he wished to do so. The people I was working with were individuals who found ways of coping with their situation in the manner best suited to their personalities. As a devout Muslim, Ibra took seriously the lengthy religious and cultural formalities that structured Wolof greetings. The friendship between him and Giovanni, who owned the grocery shop behind his stall, was genuine and respectful and, as Giovanni told me, took some time to develop. Every time I came to work with Ibra we would greet each other, always enquiring after each other's families, and then he would remind me to go and greet Giovanni before I started any fieldwork with him. His way of calling out to people also seemed to me to be a signal of the precarious nature of his spot on a city street that was regularly being patrolled by police at the time. Aside from his friendships with Giovanni and with Salvatore, there were predominantly tense relations between the street vendors and shop owners along the road. Ibra's more cautious choice of greetings appeared to be in recognition of these fraught local dynamics. His and Modou's different styles of greeting reflected the particular conditions of communication and attendant power dynamics in their respective market spots.

However, the use of humour was frequently important in street vendors' attempts to call out to potential customers. In particular it acted as a buttress for communicative difficulties. On one occasion, at the start of summer, I was sitting at a market stall set up next to the main railway station. A group of Ivorian men and women were standing in front of me chatting in French about how they were going to organise their day. One of the men said to the group, in French, 'Please could you drop my brother off at home', and started to move away from his companions. The rest of the group also started walking but were then stopped in their tracks by a Neapolitan man on a moped who rode up onto the pavement and screeched to a halt in front of them. They stopped talking and stared at him with wary curiosity. He held up one index finger to them, raising his eyebrows to indicate for them to wait a minute and pay him attention. Then, wiggling his eyebrows up and down in clown-like amazement, he reached down for a plastic bag held between his legs and drew out some ties. Again he raised an index finger and told them 'one euro!' in English. He sifted through the ties and spread them out in his hands to show them off better, all the time looking at the ties in wonder and looking up at the group with an amazed smile and raised eyebrows. Everyone smiled at the man and one of the women did crane her neck to have a better look at the ties. The Ivorian man who spoke before turned back to find his group still fixed on the spot. He approached the Neapolitan man, rolling his eyes: 'Look, one euro!' said the vendor. The Ivorian man waved his hand dismissively saying '*Leave it out*', in dialect, and started shepherding the group away. The vendor protested, in English and then Italian, 'one euro! Look! The woman was interested!' They moved on and the man shrugged his shoulders dramatically, shaking his head in bewildered amazement that they could miss such a good deal. Then he started the motor of his moped and drove off.

The Neapolitan man in this scene did not have a fixed stall but sought to sell his wares by roaming the city, itinerantly, on his moped. Mopeds were a cheap mode of transport in Napoli and whole families were known to make use of them to travel around the city. This particularly humble form of vending allowed those who practised it to make good use of busier parts of the city at different points in the day and week. On the switch-side it wasn't possible to carry large amounts of merchandise and they lacked the security and familiarity offered by a regular stall and customers. Here the vendor used his moped as a prop to grab the attention of the people he wished to offer his ties to. This was dramatic and funny, as well as being slightly threatening – people did often drive their mopeds along the pavement in Napoli and pedestrians were advised to be wary of them lest they try to grab a handbag as they pass by. However, the vendor deflated any anxiety he might have created with a comedic performance that combined gesture and the

small amount of English he was able to use. Whether or not they spoke English, there was no doubt about the meaning of ‘one euro’, when it was combined with his hand gestures and facial expression.

His comedic performance was based on the assumption that the group of Ivorians would be familiar with local masculine stereotypes such as that of Pulcinella in the city’s *commedia dell’arte* tradition. His choice to use English to grab their attention revealed the way in which English has become a *lingua franca* amongst people who have been subjected, in uneven ways, to Anglo-American economic and cultural hegemony. These things signalled the complexity of meanings about race, difference and belonging in the Neapolitan context. But they also spoke to the significance of choice regarding how to live with difference in everyday life, where intersubjective connections can be made without attendant power struggles and without a need for full transparency in communication.

Bartering in Neapolitan

One evening, as I was standing with Modou next to his cloth spread out with designer bags, a young couple walked past us, taking an early evening stroll. They were fashionable; both of them wore skinny jeans and branded trainers. The young woman stopped at Modou’s stall and picked up a Louis Vuitton tote that she liked the look of. They discussed the merits of the item in Neapolitan and then the woman turned to Modou.

Young woman: *How much do you want for this?*

Modou: *Forty euros*

Young man: [**holding up a smaller version of the same bag**] *Myfren, how much for this ’Uitton?*

Modou: *Thirty-five.*

Young man: *Come on that’s too much! Listen here: I work in the factory where they make these bags. I know how much they cost. How much d’you pay for each one there: twenty?*

He puffed his chest out and grinned at his girlfriend, who giggled, rolling her eyes and smiling at me.

Young woman: *Don’t worry about it!*

Young man: *Twenty-five, myfren, twenty-five.*

Modou: *OK!*

The young man paid Modou, who went to get the protective cloth sack that came with the bag.

Young man: *Don't bother. She's gonna wear it right now.*

The couple walked off smiling and holding hands. Modou commented to me that he had achieved quite a good price considering what he could usually get selling similar items on the street in Napoli. He added that he had paid €17 for the bag at the factory. Clearly his profit margin remained healthy even if he had seemed so agreeable in lowering the price to meet the young man's offer.

In this exchange the young man tried to show off his insider knowledge of the contraband industry in Napoli to secure a profitable deal. Whether or not he actually did work in the factory, making fake bags as he claimed, he made use of rumours that circulated in certain quarters of the city about the health and value of the market. Their choice to conduct the whole negotiation in Neapolitan was significant. Both the young man's and Modou's use of Neapolitan suggested a shared insider knowledge about the contraband industry in the city. This reflected the unstable and codependent politics of a local business that implicated migrants and Neapolitans at different stages of manufacturing and sale; although, of course, West African street vendors took the biggest risks and paid the highest price for carrying out this illicit trade. Using Neapolitan in street markets was a sign of an edgy, complex and ambiguous transcultural codependency in Napoli.

The use of Neapolitan evoked local performance of streetwise know-how that guaranteed respect was forthcoming on both sides. Because of the history of political, economic, cultural and linguistic subordination in Napoli, and because of the kinds of oppositional style that have emerged in an urban scenario where organised criminality competes so openly with the State for control of the local economy, Neapolitan use has come to stand for a particular sort of gangster, or *guappo*, street machismo. It was used by men – as well as women playing *u'maschiolona* – in playful and competitive situations that took place between Neapolitans and migrants in racialised transcultural interactions, to avoid losing face and to give out a tough vibe that assured respect and survival. The young man spoke loudly and ostentatiously, and called Modou 'myfren', a cheeky and slightly underhand way Neapolitans have of addressing African men. If he had wanted to be more respectful he would have said, 'amico mio', in Italian, not English. Modou was not Neapolitan but had learnt to transact in this way following long experience and residency in the city. The confidence he displayed came from the recognition that he took big risks selling luxury fakes such as these.

He asked for high prices because he knew people would stick around to haggle him down. He was also able to respond quite brusquely in dialect reflecting the fact that street markets were particular spaces in which migrant men are able to use Neapolitan in joking and disrespectful ways that were not permitted to other migrants in different working environments.

The decision to barter in Neapolitan reflected the specific dynamics within the local informal economy, as well as gendered and racialised tensions that played out in particular ways in street markets in the city. Humour was also central to market exchanges conducted in Neapolitan. The laughter produced was unofficial and informal, and its very distinction from the verbal forms used in official public discourse allowed new kinds of temporary and ambivalent hierarchies to emerge.

Modou: [to young man carrying a sports bag] *Whats'up?*

Man: *All good, all good.*

Modou: *Where you going?*

Man: *To the gym.*

Modou: *Ah.*

Meanwhile, an older man snuck up to Modou's stall while he was talking to the younger man and picked up a bag, pretending to run off with it.

Modou: [noticing] *Hey, thief! Marioooo!*

[Modou laughed and jogged over to the old man to retrieve his bag.]

Modou: [turning back to the young man] *You're not watching the match tonight?*

Man: *No – I'm going to the gym.*

Modou: *You don't like football?*

Man: [bending to pick up a bag] *This is nice.*

Modou: *There's another one even more nice nice ... you want it? 180 euros. You want it or not?!*

Man: *You wanna give it to me for free?*

Modou: *If you want!*

Man: *Wow, good present!*

Modou: *Where you gonna have the party then – here or at yours?*

Man: *See you later!*

The joking sociality of Modou and the Neapolitan man's banter about football, the gym and the bag he liked was sidelined by the older Neapolitan man playfully

attempting to steal Modou's merchandise. The older man was not actually stealing the bag. Like the moped-riding tie vendor in the previous section, he was playing up to the stereotype of the Neapolitan thief. Modou responded by participating in the jokey role-play and calling him a '*latrì*' (from the word *latrina*, or 'bog') in Neapolitan and laughing. As Sarnelli noted in his work on markets in Napoli, this was a common practical joke carried out by Neapolitan men against Senegalese vendors that had undertones of bullying to it (2003: 30–31). Here Modou laughed it off and called the man out – again in Neapolitan – so as to show he knew what was going on and that the older man couldn't get the upper hand over him. Nonetheless, he had to run over to retrieve his bag from the old man and not vice versa. The gendered balancing of power between Modou and the older man was echoed in the heteronormative, 'blokey' conversation Modou was also simultaneously having with the younger man about football and parties. Neapolitans often jokingly asked for items to be given to them when they haggled at market stalls. For example, I heard this exchange taking place at Poggioreale market.

Neapolitan woman: *I've got to give someone a gift!*

Ciro: *Yes it's YOU that's got to give the gift to someone, NOT me!*

Neapolitan woman: **[laughing]** *That's a good one: 'you've got to give the gift' ...!*

Ciro: *You know my love, I would like to do it but I've got no dough!*

Even though the man at Modou's stall didn't have any real intention of buying the bag he picked up, the performance of bartering in Neapolitan allowed for delicate socialities and balances of power to be explored by the two men. The exchange ended with Modou agreeing to see him later for a party. The enjoyment taken from their performance of Neapolitan bartering presented the possibility of transcultural socialities being extended from a cloth on the pavement into the private sphere of the home.

Bartering in English

The status of English use in street markets was somewhat different and offered an important insight into the ways in which Neapolitan street vendors had adapted to cultural difference and global economic changes since more migrants started to arrive in the 1980s. Over the years, market traders in Napoli had learnt to barter in a number of languages that they had picked up through their work and would not need, or necessarily be able, to use outside the context of the street market. As I described earlier in the book, Gennaro related a situation to me

around the Ferrovia where phrases and lexical items from Arabic, English, French and Ukrainian had been very useful to the Neapolitan traders when migrants first started arriving in large numbers, but where, now, different variations of the local market patois of Italianised Neapolitan or Neapolitanised Italian were mostly sufficient for the conduct of trade, alongside the occasional bits of English and French. This was what I noticed happening too. However, given the particular composition of the buyers going to Poggioreale market, where people flew in from Europe and West Africa specifically to buy items for shops before taking them back home, the Italian vendors there had to be able, in Alessandro's words, to 'barter in all the necessary languages'. A lot of money was exchanging hands in some of these transactions and they were often a reasonably lengthy process. English was the dominant language of barter with foreign customers, and the imperative of getting by in situations of linguistic insecurity could generate stress and paranoia.

My records of multilingual barter at Poggioreale show the considerable communicative skill and edgy zeal that were involved in using English to barter. This zeal coexisted alongside paranoia, resentment, and frustration about economic securities and the problems of communication. For example, one sunny day in late March I was at Poggioreale market, which was starting to pick up after an unusually slow winter. Customers thronged around Eddy Pell's fabric-covered tables and elegant displays of accessories, picking things up and examining them inside and out. I could hear vendors calling out in Neapolitan to customers across the market: 'come look, come look!', 'one eurooooo!', 'eighteen for three eurooooo!' A West African woman with a male companion and a small child in a buggy approached the stall and started to examine some handbags. Recognising the possibility of a sale, *Ciro* approached her.

Woman: [holding up a small brown leather handbag] This how much?

Ciro: Thirty.

Woman: Give me twenty-five. I buy four.

Ciro: Is not possible. This is not Chinese. This is all Made in Italy – excellent quality!

Woman: Please, please!

They continued to negotiate prices, with *Ciro* explaining that he generally only gave a discount on larger purchases. He relented and the woman bought five bags at €25 a bag. She and her partner started to pack the purchases in a large holdall they had brought with them. The woman's child was leaning out of the buggy, touching the handbags and pulling on the scarfs which were artfully

draped round their handles. It was making *Ciro* nervous that his products would fall and get damaged, so, to attract the woman's attention to this, he said 'Your daughter is like my daughter – always touching!' The woman smiled distractedly and, pulling her child's hands away, said goodbye and moved off.

This exchange showed the levels of linguistic complexity that traders at *Poggioreale* – who had generally not studied much English or spent any time in an English-speaking country – needed to be able to manage when speaking to their customers. The tension that arose from conducting business in chaotic and crowded public spaces could be managed, depending on the linguistic resources at the disposal of the vendor or the customer. *Ciro's* basic English was good enough that he was able to communicate tactfully to his customer that she needed to stop her child making a mess of his products. The comparison he made about their daughters sought to establish a reciprocal link between his family and her family's wellbeing.

The language was functional and relied on long-established scripts that were used by vendors in street markets across the city when trying to convince their customers to part with money. Vendors explained that their products bore the 'Made in Italy' merchandise mark and so supposedly were handmade from leather by local craftspeople. This meant they were not cheaper imports from China, generally made from inferior material and mass-produced. They would tell them that, given that these products came directly from the warehouses in the city where they had been manufactured, they were already at the best possible price, but were not as cheap as Chinese merchandise because of the difference in quality.

This script was contextually situated within a widespread narrative in *Napoli* that Chinese competition in the retail market was destroying people's livelihoods. Since the 1990s, some areas of the city, and surrounding suburbs, had become enclaves of Chinese-owned warehouses and shops, where Chinese imports were sold in bulk directly to the customer. A lot of the resentment that people felt towards Chinese migrants and their economic activities in the city drew on ancient orientalist stereotypes about Chinese cultural insularity and more contemporary fears about Chinese economic expansion locally and globally. Many of my research participants told me that cheap Chinese imports had destroyed the market for 'Made in Italy' products in *Napoli* over the last decades. The *Neapolitan* and *West African* street vendors I spoke to told me they had totally changed what they sold and they claimed that Chinese stockists frequently undercut them when selling the same products. I often heard grumbles that the Chinese worked so hard that anyone else was unable to keep pace. I also heard much speculation that Chinese economic success was fed by the involvement of the Chinese mafia. This common assertion joined other, more fantastical, rumours that circulated about

the Chinese in Napoli. For example, I was told about an urban legend that there had never been a Chinese funeral in the city. When someone died people said that their body was sent back in a container to China and their documents were recycled for another person, who entered using the dead person's visa. Thus, the Neapolitan neomelodic singer Pino D'Amato captured a number of imaginations in the city when he dedicated an entire album to the issue of Chinese economic activities in Napoli. The song 'Sti Cinis' (2007) starts with a deeply distasteful oriental riff, and then continues in the following way:

Sti cinis c'hann cumbinat?	What have these Chinese done?
Tutto Napule s'hann pigliat	They've taken the whole of Napoli
Nun se ne tornan	They'll never leave

D'Amato (2007; translated from Neapolitan by the author)

These racialised narratives about the Chinese elided the fact that much Italian manufacturing had moved out of the city to warehouses in regions such as Puglia, where rent was cheaper and there was more space for large vehicles to move around (Amato 2017: 25). In the majority of cases, particularly in the areas in and around Napoli, the Chinese had moved in to take spaces abandoned by Neapolitans. Their success in the region reflected more the logics of late capitalist consumption and globalisation than any sort of Chinese imperialist takeover.

My expertise in English made me popular with street vendors at Poggioreale. One of the first things they said to me when we agreed to work together was that I could help them speak to their English-speaking customers. The following two excerpts show how this worked in practice.

Pepppe: Tell her it is all stock price.

Anton: Yes explain her ...

Me: He's saying that –

Pepppe: Tell her it's already a great price.

Nigerian woman: Yeah I want him to give me a good price. I buy from him all the time. All the time here I come. I come here and I buy stuff. So he has to give customers discounts.

Me: [to Pepppe] She says she comes here all the time so she wants a discount.

Pepppe: It's already discounted. Already discounted!

Me: He says it's already discounted ...

Nigerian woman: You know customers can't be satisfied like that. He has to do something. So you'll be happy and come again.

Me: [To the woman] Shall I say that?

Nigerian woman: Yeah.

Me: She says you have to satisfy your clients so they come back again.

Peppe: No, no no!

Nigerian woman: Why are you being like that?!

...

Peppe: [to me] Do you understand? Or can't you pick up anything?

Me: They're comparing things, like colour and material ... thinking about what would sell well.

Peppe: Oh!

...

Peppe: Sorry, what's your name again?

Me: Antonia.

Peppe: Tell them those bags cost loads of money –

Me: Yes and you bought them at stock price –

Peppe: For their benefit.

Me: OK so he's he's saying that this bag originally was very expensive but they buy it from the factory, create a stock and sell it at a lower price so the quality is very good and the price is very good.

Ade: So what is he saying actually?

Me: Sorry?

Ade: What's he saying?

Me: That's honestly what he's saying. Look: this is the original price ... because what they do is they buy – I can't remember what the word is – they buy ...

Ade: In quantity?

Me: Yeah. They buy in large quantity to give you a good price. You come to Poggioreale because everything has been bought directly from the factory so it's a good-quality bag at a good price.

Ade: Ok.

Peppe: Tell him that these ones are leather and are a real bargain – only forty euros!

I did as Peppe asked and then explained my project to Ade and his sister. They agreed to have their photos taken and the conversation recorded whilst they carried on haggling over the bags. Once they had selected the bags, with Alessandro and Peppe's help, the actual negotiations started. As [Figure 12](#) shows, I remained in



12 Haggling at Peppe's Bags

physical proximity to the discussion as I recorded and photographed it, so that I could continue assisting with interpreting.

Peppe: So ...

Ade: So ... we are buying plenty!

Peppe: So look at this, look.

[He raises his eyebrows at me, nodding to Ade to indicate I should cut in to get Ade's attention.]

Me: You see this?

Peppe: This: forty, forty, forty, thirty and thirty. [indicating all the bags] One-hundred-and-eighty!

Ade: One, two three ...

Me: Three at forty ...

Ade's sister: Check how many are forty! These two thirty thirty ... he can't give you good price?

Giuseppe: No. Finito! This is the best price!

Ade: No no no no: customer. Me: talk to me. I'm your customer.

Giuseppe: No, no: finito. If you want: one-hundred-and-eighty. One-hundred-and-eighty. Finito.

Ade: Customer, customer ...

Giuseppe: No, no ... One-hundred-and-eighty.

Ade looked at me in exasperation, indicating with a flick of his head that I should intervene on his behalf.

Me: I'm not a haggler.

Ade: Oh, you don't want me to haggle?

Me: Well you can try but I can't do it for you!

Peppe: This is already at stock price. Tell him it's stock price.

Me: He says it's already stock price. He can't ... at the risk of not making a profit. And he says that [**to Peppe**] being a client –

Ade and Peppe eventually agreed on the original price of €180. Ade paid in cash, with a €500 note. Peppe searched for the complementary mirrors that came with the bags, and Anton, their Ukrainian assistant, was instructed to remove the stuffing and pack them in cloth sacks.

Large amounts of money were being exchanged in these sorts of transaction, and tempers could fray quite quickly with each party accusing the other of being crafty or discourteous. The photo I took is also illustrative of the closeness of the space under the roofs of the stalls at the market, which obliged people to invade each other's personal space whilst haggling, leading to further anxiety and discomfort (see [Figure 12](#)). As the above episodes showed, when I was placed in the middle of bartering processes, both sides questioned me closely, unsure whose side I was on. I found myself in an awkward position, as I felt obliged to help out but was aware of the ways in which I was influencing the sale and, often, endorsing the point of view of the Neapolitan vendors who had called me into the process, by embellishing the things they were asking me to translate. What made things worse was that I clearly wasn't able to mediate the deep currents of transcultural tension and distrust that these processes of barter evoked, as could be seen from the raised voices and body language of both vendor and customer. Ade, who was new to the process of buying abroad, found the negotiation of cultural and linguistic differences in the market a major source of worry. He told me separately that not being able to communicate effectively with Italians was making him feel distrustful and isolated. The Neapolitan street vendors at Poggioreale were similarly anxious. As well as having to barter in foreign tongues they complained about the haggling style of the West African buyers, which they thought was overly aggressive.

The importance of the African buyers at Poggioreale market complicated established racialised scripts and hierarchies about getting by and about economic cooperation in the city. Barter in English reawakened older inferiority complexes about speaking English which recalled melancholic memories of Italian emigration. This pricked at complexes about the supremacy of Anglo-American cultural, political and economic hegemony, and joined new paranoid fears about Chinese economic supremacy. Instead of seeking work from Italian employers – and obviously then contributing to the economy through tax and consumption – the predominantly West African buyers at Poggioreale created economic opportunities *for* Italians, in contrast with the dynamics of street markets in the rest of the city and in contrast with an anti-immigrant politics that said foreigners took jobs and resources from Italians.

Although the stalls at Poggioreale were owned by Italians, the vendors often decided to hire English-speaking West African assistants to help them communicate more effectively with their customers. Christopher was a Nigerian-Togolese man who had been hired by Peppe to help out on his stall in the market on busy weekend days. When we first met he showed me his light-blue UN passport, which indicated that he held recognised refugee status. He was a devout Christian who spoke little Italian and didn't tell me about his experiences of arriving in Italy beyond showing me this document. A lot of the time, I saw that the frustration and resentment Peppe and Alessandro felt about bartering in English were taken out on Christopher and Anton. On one occasion, during a rather stressful negotiation where Alessandro had punched a series of prices into the calculator incorrectly, and so ended up having to accept a lower price from the customer, he turned to Anton and shouted viciously, 'You've been here for six years. When are you going to learn some Italian?' Anton stared at him without speaking. On another occasion, Giuseppe instructed Christopher to remove the paper stuffing from the bags he had just sold and Christopher didn't do anything because he hadn't understood. 'Take out the paper! The paper!', screamed Peppe in Italian, miming his hand going inside a bag and grabbing something. Christopher responded, 'Oh the paper!', before muttering in English 'You should have just said.' Later on that same morning, two belt stands on the side of the stall fell over in the wind. Giuseppe shouted at Christopher to go and get a canister to weigh the bases of the stands down better whilst he and Anton set about picking up the belts. Christopher came back with some rope and Peppe screamed 'a canister!' at him, making the shape of a canister in the air. When everything was back in its place Giuseppe told me he regretted having lost his patience. He said that he was just really worried about the stands breaking as they were expensive.

These excessive responses to misunderstanding and incomprehension were about power. The levels of precariousness both employees were situated within were incomparable to any anxieties Peppe and Alessandro might have about stands breaking or paper not being stuffed quickly enough into a bag. The aggression they frequently meted out to their foreign employees was emblematic of the kinds of lurking racist antipathy that manifested itself in performances of masculine dominance.

The Poggioreale vendors also made deals with West African taxi drivers who ferried customers and their goods between Poggioreale market and their hotels. These men also brought clients direct to particular stalls, in exchange for a small fee. Giuseppe only paid them if he had managed to sell his more costly leather items, as he said he couldn't afford to pay for customers who came and only bought Chinese goods. On one occasion a taxi driver approached the stall to ask for his cut. Peppe explained that the customer had only bought Chinese products so there was no payment. The man got angry and told him in threatening tones, 'OK, I'll give it to you for free.' Peppe looked intimidated and shrugged his shoulders, reaching for his pocket. Alessandro noticed this and shouted at the taxi driver to 'Fuck off and die!' The man scowled and strode away. Alessandro then accused his dad of being weak and needing to toughen up.

At Poggioreale market the imperatives of a trade that had to be conducted in English created cultural and linguistic interdependencies that rubbed uncomfortably alongside contemporary understandings about race, difference and belonging at the national and regional level. Barter in English could as much allow for the establishment of situations of multilingual cohabitation – even if they were fleeting moments – as it could precipitate a descent into misunderstanding and miscommunication, and so bolster established racial hierarchies. The tension surrounding the use of English in market haggling revealed a consciousness about the hierarchical and historical weight ascribed to English. This understanding about communication mapped onto a cultural understanding about power and hegemony and how it had brought people together in one place, through colonialism and interconnected processes of political and economic subjection.

Multilingual know-how as an oppositional consciousness

Multilingual economic transactions and haggling in Neapolitan street markets often appeared joyful and exuberant although, as I have noted, they could break down and descend into abuse. Street vendors talked about enjoying their work and taking pride in earning their money honestly and in a traditional way. As *Ciro* of

Eddy Pell at Poggioreale told me, ‘the market is an anti-depressant’, even when business was slow and the weather was freezing cold. Gennaro explained that:

There are people in this city who don’t want to suffer like we do. But we [market vendors] really like the contact you have with people in this job ... and being at ease with what we do. You know, you go home and you’ve worked honestly, you’ve met other people ... In summer we meet people from Germany ... Brazil ...

Their success in conducting business and making a living depended on multilingual dexterity and edgy know-how, or *sapè fà*. In his work about precariousness in Napoli, Italo Pardo described *sapè fà* as something shifting and fluid that drew on an understanding of geographical, political, economic, social, administrative, moral and cosmological boundaries in Napoli. Know-how was key to the successful negotiation and mediation of unequal and ambiguous power relationships in Napoli, particularly when one was engaging in practices that could blur the boundaries between the formal and the informal (Pardo 1996: 184, 136). In the street market *sapè fà* manifested in a particular form of fiery and persuasive selling spiel. It was a way of communicating that was multilingual and switched between a variety of linguistic codes in the effort to be persuasive and impressive. The following excerpt from a recording in the field shows the joy inherent in the market cry.

Gennaro: [to approaching client] Tell me, tell me!

Customer [West African man]: [pointing to a pair of socks] How much this?

Gennaro: This here is one size fits all.

Customer: [another pair of socks] And this?

Gennaro: This one is size 39.

Customer: 39 ... hmm ... And how much does it cost?

Gennaro: This pair costs three euros.

Customer: How much?!

Gennaro: Because this pair is better ... these others cost two euros. Can you see where I’ve put the price?

Customer: Too expensive!

Gennaro: Hmm ... but have you understood what kind of sock this really is?

Customer: I’ve understood!

Gennaro: No I want to show you. I’m not forcing you to buy, yeah? I just want to show you. Ok, so this kind of sock is a technological thing. Can you see

those bands inside the edge that stop the sock from slipping off? The fabric is also of a kind of quality that really keeps the heat in! It's not a Chinese product but Italian-made – and that's an important fact. Look: 'Made in Italy', written on the packet.

Customer: Please, I can't speak Italian well!

Gennaro: Yes – I'd realised you weren't Italian! [laughs]

Customer: I have little money.

Gennaro: Trust me, I'm worse off than you, maybe you haven't understood!

Let's do two euros fifty, yeah? Come on, *amico mio!*

[The customer threw up his hands in refusal and walked away.]

Gennaro: Look here, there's about three kilos of wool in this sock. Three euros!

Gennaro started his spiel with 'Tell me, Tell me!' This opening cry, a rough translation of the Italian 'prego, prego!' was commonly heard shouted out to customers across Italian markets. Etymologically *prego* derives from the Latin noun *precaria*, meaning something that has been obtained through prayer (Etimo 2008). Needless to say, it is connected to the idea of precariousness, highlighting the links between market vending, market crisis and material survival in Napoli. Despite initial linguistic confusion – Gennaro thought his African customer was asking for information about sizes where in fact he was asking about prices – he nonetheless launched into a complicated technical explanation about the socks' manufacturing as a way of dazzling and impressing the man into buying. He took advantage of the fact that the man's Italian was not strong enough to be able to follow the entirety of his explanation and laughed knowingly when the man asked him to slow down. However, he switched his expert stance towards the end of the transaction. When the man explained he didn't have much money, Gennaro positioned himself as equally needy, appealing to the client's sympathy and generosity to make the sale and calling him 'amico mio' ('my friend').

Gennaro's market *sapè fâ* also took advantage of a complex understanding of the different linguistic subjectivities animating public life around Piazza Garibaldi. Like many other transactions I observed, the discussion was fast and concluded quickly. Gennaro also became quite pushy in an attempt to complete the sale, something he admitted he didn't like doing but felt compelled to in the harsh economic climate. On this occasion he was unsuccessful. However, the diverse and aggressive selling tactics he used highlighted his relatively privileged position in the city's street markets. He was located in ways that relied on the security he enjoyed as a man and as an Italian citizen with particular rights and resources that migrants and female vendors didn't have the privilege of making

use of. His approach was different from that of Modou selling fake designer bags, or of the Neapolitan street vendors struggling with English at Poggioreale market.

The horizontal dynamics of street vending in Napoli were coded and enacted through particular cultural languages that aimed to ease trade whilst also opening up the possibilities for other sorts of transcultural negotiation and solidarity. Neapolitan market cries had ancient origins, but there was now a new community of vendors who were creating a language of cultural communication in markets. If struggles over power can be understood by looking at the struggles going on within signification then the negotiation of market cries revealed both the external pressure that was affecting the livelihoods of vendors, and the different positionalities of people making money on the pavement. The deployment of market cries revealed the history of lumpen suffering and hustling that connected the Neapolitan and Senegalese hawker in the ambiguously unequal forms of transcultural collaboration that took place on the pavement, as well as in a shared history of economic marginalisation that had been mitigated by migration. Market cries revealed a will to survive and overcome a fate of precariousness and marginalisation.

Notes

- 1 The emergence of its use across the mass media was met with anti-racist pushback that prompted serious reflection on the problem of racism in Italy. The term is now widely acknowledged to be offensive and is not generally used. I didn't hear anyone use it in my research. Instead, people use the politically correct term *venditore ambulante* (street vendor) – which, nonetheless, is understood tacitly to mean a migrant and most probably black African street vendor.
- 2 This is typical of the playful verbal style of Hip Hop where previously discriminatory language is reappropriated, reclaimed, and so defused and disempowered (Bramwell 2015; Smitherman 2006: 118).

Infrapolitical verbal styles

Fra le onde del mare, posso ancora sentire	Amongst the waves of the sea I can still hear
Voci antiche, grida Saracene.	Ancient voices, Saracen cries.
I mercanti di schiavi, orizzonti di navi	The slave merchants, the ships on the horizon,
Maledetto ritmo di catene.	The cursed rhythm of chains.
Siamo tutti africani, siamo africani	We are all Africans, we are Africans
Simm tutt' african nui napulitan.	We are all Africans, us Neapolitans.
E batte nero nero nero ... questo cuore	And this heart beats black black black ...
E canta nero nero nero ... questo cuore	And this heart sings black black black ...
In culo al mondo che in fondo vorrebbe rubarci anche l'anima	At the bottom of the world which, deep down, wants to steal our souls.
Ci ha preso tutto ma non ci potranno mai prendere l'anima	It has taken everything from us but will never take our souls.

Extract of 'Cuore nero' (1997) written by Enzo Rossi and sung by Franco Ricciardi, featuring 99 Posse (translated from Italian and Neapolitan by the author)

RICCIARDI'S 'CUORE NERO' (Rossi 1997) meditates upon a key theme in Neapolitan popular culture: that of the racialised subalternity of Neapolitan people. The extracts of songs and poems that I have shared so far in the book have concerned issues related to the anxiety of southern Italians about their own alterity – their othering through the denial of their language and culture as a result of Italian Unification; paranoias about miscegenation with African American

GIs; reflections on how precarious work and emigration have connected them to other marginalised people. By contrast, in ‘Cuore nero’ a painful, subaltern and oppressed regional identity is reclaimed as a source of pride and action. The idea of Neapolitans as black can be understood as a political statement that connects southern Italian marginalisation and suffering to the countercultural aspiration to freedom, citizenship and autonomy that Paul Gilroy has described emerging from Black Atlantic cultural traditions (Gilroy 1993). Examples of these kinds of claim abound in parts of the Neapolitan music scene that became heavily influenced by African American blues and reggae from the 1980s. The late Neapolitan Blues artist Pino Daniele dedicated a whole album to the experience of Neapolitaness, which he called *Nero a metà*, or *Half Black* (1980). Neapolitan dub and reggae group Almamegretta wrote a piece called ‘Figli d’Annibale’ (‘Hannibal’s Sons’) on their album *Migrant Soul* (1993), which makes claims about African ancestry in the DNA of southern Italians. Reflecting upon transatlantic slavery, Ricciardi sings in Italian and then repeats in Neapolitan: ‘We are all Africans, we are all Africans / We are all Africans, us Neapolitans.’ In this music, black African diasporic traditions have inspired alternative ways of being that reopen repressed and negated memories of the city’s history of subordination and connect them to contemporary globalised inequalities. Sung predominantly in Neapolitan or a Neapolitanised Italian, they decentre the cultural hegemony of the global north and propose the city as a site of transnational liberation (Chambers and Cavallo 2018: 1–5).

These songs are about the experience of subordination and marginalisation of Neapolitans who, in reality, are racialised as normatively white. It is intriguing to consider how this notion of commonality and fraternity with the Global South plays out in a city that, since the 1980s, has become more and more multicultural in a wider context of increasingly vicious anti-immigration politics. Later on in ‘Cuore nero’, 99 Posse rap at high speed in Neapolitan, referencing a line from ‘Tammuriata nera’, about which I wrote in [Chapter 4](#) (Mario and Nicolardi 1944):

pecche addo semin o gran o gran cresce	Because where you sow grain, grain grows
Riesco o nun riesce è semp gran chell ch’esce	Success or failure, grain always comes up
Semin semin e cresce semin semin e cresce	Sow sow and it grows sow sow and it grows
O problem vene quann o gran piglia e fernesce.	The problem’s when the grain runs out.

The fear expressed in the song about an inability to grow and flourish in Napoli was certainly reflected in the discussions and events that I witnessed on the ground. The city street was the place where the breakdown of law and the disastrous consequences of capitalist organisation referenced in the music were lived and negotiated (Chambers and Cavallo 2018: 6–7). At the time of my research Napoli was in a deep economic recession. Street vending represented an important way in which both Neapolitans and migrants with few resources could make money for themselves. But if they operated without correct licences they were subjected to repeated police crackdowns and risked both their living and, in the case of migrants, their legal status. The fear people felt about their own survival in this context raised questions about solidarity and entitlement that, at their core, were racialised. Many Neapolitans relied on a corpus of ‘racist formulae’ (Back 1996) about street vending, illegality and, above all, black African street vendors as undocumented, criminal and dangerous, in order to argue for the prioritisation of their own marginalised status as Neapolitans. At the same time some people – both Neapolitans and migrants – produced a countercultural response through which they sought, in small and subtle ways, to protect each other in recognition of a common precariousness, vulnerability and desire for autonomy. This response was not explicitly tied to direct action or organised resistance, but formed part of the everyday life of the pavement. Veiled public expressions of transcultural fraternity and solidarity – which often took the form of gossip, jokes and coded warnings – formed what James Scott has called an ‘infrapolitics’ that created a disguise of ‘*ideological* insubordination’ from which people could construct an antihegemonic ‘imaginative capacity’ (Scott 1990: 19, 90–92). People in Napoli often reproduced the hegemonic public transcript about street vending through performances of dominance, on the part of both the powerful and the marginalised. However, at the same time, infrapolitical verbal styles allowed in small ways for dignity, entitlement and, occasionally, transcultural solidarity to be expressed as part of daily intersubjective processes.

As is common with humour and codes, these infrapolitical verbal styles were frequently double-edged, ambiguous and contingent. With jokes, hierarchies could be both subverted and reinstated. For example, untrue warnings addressed to African street vendors about police coming to seize their goods and arrest them often appeared as a ‘collective sneer’ (Passerini 1987: 67–106) that further reinforced their subordination. The totalising power of the State in the lives of migrants was undermined by the performance of the Neapolitan speakers showing themselves coming to the migrant street vendor’s aid. But, at the same time, they took on the hegemonic persona of the forces of law and

order, recreating the anxiety of being hounded by the police and also sending the street vendors up for being afraid. However, this banter, as with other sorts of aggressive joking in contexts of racial terror and hierarchy (Smitherman 1977, 2006, 2007), also defused tension and allowed transcultural conflicts around belonging and entitlement to be transformed into a sort of social commentary that could be worked through relatively safely. Nevertheless, these humorous negotiations took place almost exclusively between men, whereas women in street markets, as I explored in Chapter 4, were subjected to forms of violence that were more difficult to speak back against. This ritualised, ludic and competitive talk relied on an understanding of a local form of the masculinity of the *guappo* – a man of the people who was hardworking but also knew how to protect his own dignity and honour. Acting like a *guappo* was both part of a collective struggle and a weapon of differential control that had gendered, ethnic and racial referents. Black, male street vendors were the particular targets of racial terror and their survival depended on an ability to engage in an affective and aggressive verbal word-play that granted them respect and protection from Neapolitan men on the pavement. An exploration of the verbal infrapolitics that took place across transcultural boundaries in street markets allows critical questions to be asked about what the claims made about Neapolitan blackness actually mean for a local, transnational politics of liberation in the city street.

Racist formulae about unruly street vendors

I often heard people complain about street vending in Napoli. They were generally referring to the unlicensed stalls that lined city pavements and they were almost always talking about the migrant and, above all, black West African street vendors selling fake branded bags, accessories and DVDs. Regulated markets such as the one at Poggioreale were not painted in the same light. However, Via Bologna market, the only regulated market in the city where the vendors were predominantly West African in origin, *was* considered to be a problem. This litany was often heard issuing from the mouths of Italians as they passed by Via Bologna market next to Piazza Garibaldi:

Get all this stuff out the way, move it! God, this is Africa here now!

This is Africa here – it's not Europe any more!

Most of the time, though, the fact that the vendors were foreign wasn't explicitly stated in people's objections to street vending. Instead, people would say the

market stalls made the pavements congested and dirty, that they felt harassed by vendors calling out to them, or that the vendors were breaking the law and damaging legitimate businesses. These veiled objections to street vending formed a corpus of racist formulae, or a racist speech genre, that painted the predominantly male West African vendors as unruly, dangerous and criminal.

In particular, local residents complained about the mess and dirt that street markets left behind at the end of the day. Instead of seeing this as evidence of the municipal neglect of working-class neighbourhoods and the much-documented role of organised crime in waste disposal across the region (Saviano 2006; Pine 2012), they explained the problem through racist associations between non-white people and cleanliness. For example, the Roma market of scavenged goods around the main railway station was a huge problem, but the crevice full of food waste on the pavement at the edge of the Neapolitan-run market in the San Antonio neighbourhood was not highlighted.¹ If these markets were dirty then non-white street vendors were also dirty. On one occasion I bumped into a Neapolitan lady who had a jewellery stall in Via Bologna market. Her daughter often spent time on the stall with her after school. She was crying and explained to me that a local Neapolitan man had warned her that morning to keep her daughter away from the Senegalese men in the market, as black Africans carried diseases. 'But *we* [we Neapolitans] *have diseases: we have cholera!*', she told me through her tears, acknowledging the historic prejudice faced by Neapolitan emigrants who were frequently stigmatised as unclean disease-carriers (Snowden 1995; Stella 2003). Her evocation of this commonality of experience between historic southern Italian emigration and contemporary migration to Italy was a common antihegemonic and anti-racist response to racist and antimigrant ideas in Napoli.

People reported feeling menaced and harassed by black African street vendors. I remember one afternoon my flatmate telling me that there had been no street vendors during her shopping trip that day. It was a sunny weekend day and the vendors had probably gone down the coast to sell their merchandise to beach-goers on their day off. She commented how nice it had been to walk freely along the pavement without having to negotiate the crowds of people that jostled around the wares laid out on cloths on the pavement. This sense of being besieged by black street vendors hawking their wares was not specific to Napoli alone. For example, I was once at a First Communion lunch full of Italian expats back at home in the UK. One man told me he had just come back from Pisa and was shocked by what he referred to as 'those great big Nigerians', who he said tried to bully him into buying merchandise as he attempted to approach the Leaning Tower.

It was also felt that the African street vendors were part of the wider problem of organised criminality in the city. Early on in my research I was told by an older relative not to speak to street vendors because they were working for the Camorra. Again, it was not explicitly specified, but we both knew she was referring to West African street vendors. Certainly, the entrepreneurial mafia that emerged in Italy from the 1980s relied on migrants as a key labour force (Arlacchi 1986: 83), and profited nicely from the numbers of undocumented migrants. Italy's immigration legislation was designed so that migrants could not easily legalise their status and find legitimate work if they arrived, or later became, undocumented. Senegalese migrants – the majority African nationality amongst street vendors – initially arrived in Italy and went to the north of the country hoping to find employment, often in manufacturing, and subsequently get their legal status regularised. However, in lieu of that, they encountered well-established Senegalese trade organisations that allowed them to make a living as licensed or unlicensed vendors on beaches and city streets across the country and, potentially later on, as self-employed business owners (Riccio 2008: 220, 223). From 2001, the Bossi–Fini immigration legislation made it almost impossible to legalise your status in the case of any sort of criminal conviction. This made it even harder for some groups of migrants, such as the Senegalese, to get visa papers, as they had a high sentencing rate for crimes such as 'receiving stolen goods', 'forgery of brands and industrial products' and 'violating intellectual property', which were associated with participation in street vending and sale of contraband (Interior Ministry 2014: 96–99). This law, which was pretty consistently implemented despite instructions by the appeals court to reinterpret certain aspects of it, criminalised many Senegalese men who were co-opted into certain kinds of work because of a differential and unequal access to the labour market.

The Camorra profited from this legal framework by efficiently managing the labour force in Napoli through the allocation of specific tasks to racially differentiated groups of people. For example, fake designer bags were made in illegal factories in the city. Italian nationals sewed together the bodies of the bags, the labels were attached by South Asian migrants, and West African street vendors (in particular Senegalese nationals) took on the most risky and visible role in the supply chain as they sold the merchandise directly to the customer (D'Alessandro 2009; Schmoll 2003). Some of the street vendors I worked with were willing to explain how they were connected to the lines of production and distribution within which the Camorra operated. Modou told me he had a Neapolitan supplier whom he ordered his stock from directly at the factory where they were made. He paid first, €1,000 at a time, and then picked up the

bags when they were ready. His supplier wouldn't bring bags directly to Modou because of agreements with local clans about distribution.

In addition, and like other business owners in the city, black street vendors were the victims of extortion, having to pay a bribe, or *tangente*, on their profits and to 'rent' the part of the public pavement where they had their stall. Gennaro – who was very uncomfortable discussing this with me – told me the Camorra were not interested in extorting money from people who only made small amounts – for example those, like him, who sold socks or other small items – but they did extort money from migrants and Neapolitans selling contraband. Whilst this certainly happened to some street vendors, no one I did research with, including people involved in the sale of fake designer goods, would confirm that they paid any *tangente*.

Black street vendors were not different from anyone else working in commerce in Napoli, in that people of all races and ethnicities were implicated in, and complicit with, the semilegal and illegal practices going on in the industry. As Libera D'Alessandro showed in her detailed research about commercial practices in the city (2008), regulated spaces of commerce in Napoli were not significantly different from unregulated or underregulated market spaces in terms of their merchandise or connections to informal and semilegal economies. The lines between legality and illegality were especially blurred within commercial practices, to the point that no legal judgment had ever been made that concretely connected the activities of the Camorra with the manufacture and sale of contraband (D'Alessandro 2009). However, predominantly Senegalese street vendors had been, and continued to be, held up as responsible for embedding and spreading criminal practices in commerce. They were forced to take the biggest risks and pay the highest price.

Across Europe, to be Senegalese was to be indelibly associated with illicit forms of street vending. Lord Alan Sugar was the subject of widespread condemnation during the 2018 World Cup when he tweeted, in reference to the Senegalese team, 'I recognise some of these guys from the beach in Marbella. Multi tasking resourceful chaps'. The tweet, which Sugar defended as 'a joke', included images of cloths laid with sunglasses and fake designer bags superimposed onto a photo of the Senegalese national team.

In Napoli the particular objects and goods associated with Senegalese street vendors had themselves become imbued with racialising and stigmatising meaning. For example, one day at Poggioreale market an elderly Neapolitan woman and her daughter approached Alessandro's stall, looking for a new suitcase. The daughter wandered over to the selection of soft holdalls that were at

the front corner of the stall. She started reflecting that she might prefer a soft bag to a regular hard-shelled suitcase, saying, '*You can get more stuff in a soft bag.*' Alessandro nodded, indicating that this was undoubtedly the case. But her Mother objected to this: '*No. We would look like one of those Negri on the streets.*' People who worked in retail often needed to move large amounts of goods around. Those with licensed market stalls or shops used their own vehicles, but others who were working on a smaller scale, such as unlicensed street vendors and many of the West African buyers at Poggioreale market, tended to move their merchandise around the city on foot and on public transport. For this purpose they used large, soft black holdalls with wheels, or blue plastic sacks tied with rope to trolleys. These activities created tension on crowded buses, metro trains and trams, and I often saw Neapolitans cursing and gesticulating at them as they got on and off vehicles. Such local struggles over the cultural configuration and use of public space emblematised a wider racialised attitude towards migrant street vendors as too numerous and a threat to local Neapolitans. The woman wanted to avoid evoking any stigmatising and potentially humiliating association with this image and so refused to consider buying a soft holdall. I would suggest that these associations were already too close for comfort for her, as the figure of the street vendor, with his unwieldy bag of wares, evoked historic stereotypes about Neapolitan poverty and subalternity. What was at stake was a damaged regional pride that made any hint of commonality between Neapolitans and migrants in Napoli something to be avoided at all costs.

On another occasion a group of Nigerian refugees in the middle of a housing crisis provoked a similarly scathing response that associated black people with illicit street vending and criminal behaviour. In the middle of the night of 3 June 2012, I was woken by a text message from a friend on the anti-racist scene asking me to come to the Piazza Garibaldi train station bar the following morning for an emergency demonstration.

When I arrived the next morning, I found a group of men and women variously standing and sitting around a mountain of what seemed to be their worldly possessions, piled up against the wall of the station. These included pots and pans, mattresses, suitcases, small bits of furniture, and a large number of umbrellas (see [Figure 13](#)). My friend told me they were members of six families of Nigerian origin who, having escaped civil war in Libya to claim asylum in Italy, had been kicked out of their hotel by the Protezione Civile (Civil Guard) following a number of days of tension that culminated in them occupying a bus in the hotel car park.² Two of the women were heavily pregnant and one had a new baby. The women had been given emergency accommodation whilst the men spent the



13 Kicked out on the street: 'They've set up a market!'

night sleeping in the station. A crowd of Neapolitan men, mostly in early middle age, were standing around and watching. Staff from the bar in the station had complained that their belongings were blocking the exit, and a group of municipal police and station security guards approached as I arrived to try and move them on. One bystander joked, 'Hey, they've set up market!', and another told the officers, 'You need to get them out. You just need to get rid of them.' A third complained that they already had enough *guappi* to deal with in Piazza Garibaldi.

As there were a number of activists there it was possible to intervene on behalf of the stranded Nigerians. We helped them move all their belongings away from the exit whilst negotiations were under way to stabilise their situation.

The malevolent joking and plaintive appeals directed by the Neapolitan bystanders towards the forces of law and order highlighted the strong semantic connections between black masculinity, street vending, urban decay, criminality and anti-immigration beliefs about being swamped such that, in order to insult the refugees, it was enough simply to accuse them of setting up their own market. Their worldly belongings came to symbolise the wares laid out on the pavement by other West African street vendors, and all the tensions around economic entitlement and use of public space associated with those activities. Describing the group as *guappi* positioned them as a threat to poor locals trying to make a living, and sought to diffuse any notion that they might be in need of help or protection. This strategic appropriation of hegemonic anti-immigrant discourses argued for the prioritisation of Neapolitan unemployed and underemployed on the basis of the exclusion and public punishment of black migrants.

‘Hunting’ street vendors: from threats to action

Sometimes these antimigrant statements and threats translated into outright displays of racist aggression and violence. This foreshadowed a widespread antiblack hostility that reached epidemic proportions across Italy in the following years as a result of an extremist resurgence and moral panic about the so-called European migration crisis. Amongst the crimes – being referred to in Italian media as a veritable ‘hunt’ of black people (Mascia 2018; Affricot 2018) – that grabbed the attention of the international media was the wounding of six West African nationals in a racist shooting spree in Macerata on 4 February 2018, followed by the murder of Senegalese street vendor Idy Diene in Florence on 5 March. Diene was the cousin of Samb Modou, the Senegalese street vendor murdered by Gianluca Casseri when he went on his racist and murderous rampage in Florence on the 13 December 2011 (Montanari 2011). Casseri also killed Mor Diop, and wounded Moustapha Dieng, Sougou Mor and Mbengue Chieke.

Similar episodes also took place in Napoli during this period, such as the attack on two Malian refugees in the nearby city of Caserta. The victims, Daby and Sekou, were shot at with an air gun by two men on a moving moped who shouted ‘Salvini, Salvini’ as they sped off. Matteo Salvini had been elected interior and deputy prime minister that same year (anon. 2018b). Following the non-fatal shooting of Senegalese street vendor Elhadji Diebel Cissé in the

Vasto neighbourhood behind Piazza Garibaldi in August 2018, the Senegalese Community organised a march to denounce six attacks against migrants over the previous four days (anon. 2018a). These episodes, and others besides them, were indicative of a resurgent far right that was being emboldened by people at the centre of power in Italy and across Europe (O’Grady 2018; Trilling 2012; ; Bjørge and Mareš 2019). However, they were certainly not a new phenomenon. Napoli and the surrounding region had been a key location for racist violence against black migrants over the last three decades, including the murder of Jerry Masslo in Villa Literno (Napoli) 1989, the murder of seven West African men in Castelvoturno (Napoli) in 2008 and the shootings of West African migrants working in agriculture in Rosarno (further south in the region of Calabria) in 2010. These last two episodes also exemplified instances where the Italian mafias had intervened with violence in order to re-establish their authority within two different commercial activities that rely on a large migrant workforce: drug dealing and agriculture.

When I was conducting fieldwork, black street vendors were clearly being targeted for special attention by police raids against street markets. I will discuss this further in the next part of the chapter. Stories also abounded about black migrants being terrorised by different factions of organised crime. But when it came to the daily interactions between Neapolitans and migrants that I was witnessing from market stalls, I saw frequent episodes of racist violence against Bangladeshi street vendors. Episodes of opportunistic racist violence against black migrants seemed less of a threat than they became in subsequent years, and often the Bangladeshi victims would seek protection from black migrants who worked alongside them but were not subjected to the same sort of regular mistreatment. These episodes were predicated on an idea of their inability to speak Italian or Neapolitan. In a context where being able to speak the language, and speak back when attacked, were vital to the performance of a hyper-masculine *guappo* street identity, the inability to do so made them into ideal prey. Being linguistically powerless implied they were physically powerless.

Their lack of linguistic prowess meant that often the market cries of Bangladeshi street vendors were badly received by the potential customers they were calling out to. One day I was passing through Piazza del Plebiscito, in the historic centre of the city, when it started to rain heavily. An itinerant Bangladeshi vendor appeared with a trolley of umbrellas and started to circulate. He called out to a young man fleeing the downpour, holding out an umbrella to him: ‘Hey, man!’ The man responded aggressively, physically pushing the man away and

shouting, ‘*Hey! Leave it out!*’ The Bangladeshi man remonstrated and the man ignored him, hurrying away.

On another occasion I was walking past Piazza Garibaldi train station on a rainy day in April when I saw an elderly Neapolitan man drunkenly approaching a Bangladeshi umbrella vendor who was standing with his trolley outside the steps down to the metro. The old man brandished a smashed glass bottle in the vendor’s face and shouted brokenly at him: ‘*Why don’t you go back to the toilet you came from?!*’ The unfortunate man shrunk back in fright. I was with a friend and we stopped next to the altercation in case it was necessary to intervene. Fortunately the homeless man quickly blundered off and left the vendor in peace.

‘*Hey, man!*’, a translation of the Neapolitan *guagliò*, was a common informal greeting between young people in Napoli. Many vendors used the word to call out to potential customers and the decision to use Neapolitan was often successful in establishing interpersonal ties between migrants and Neapolitans. But Bangladeshi vendors were perceived to be unable to communicate effectively in Italian and their attempts to talk were often rebuffed aggressively. Many Neapolitans made fun of the Bangladeshi practice of selling umbrellas. They would check the weather and make sure to appear as soon as the first drops of rain started to fall in order to take advantage of the fact that people might have left the house unprepared for the elements. As itinerant vendors they circulated the city or set up pitches in many different spots, allowing them to come into contact with many more potential customers. But this could be risky. It meant they were not as familiar with their surroundings as migrant vendors who set up a pitch in the same spot every day. As a result, their judgement about how to approach prospective buyers could be less acute, particularly as they were speaking Italian or Neapolitan as a second language and so were less quick at picking up verbal or non-verbal cues from potential customers. Also, they were unable to rely on the implicit trust and acceptance that Neapolitan street vendors could make use of. Their selling tactics were seen as opportunistic, but they were no different from the Neapolitans who circulated the city asking people to buy lighters or tissues.

Meanwhile, young Neapolitan boys would roam the pavements in groups, or ‘baby gangs’ as they were called in the Italian media, preying on students from out of town and street vendors who were unprotected by neighbourhood codes of respect and so defenceless against attacks. This behaviour encompassed both the comic and the abusive dimensions of the carnivalesque that Bakhtin described, whereby playful games – such as throwing foam in people’s faces during Carnevale³ – could quickly turn menacing. Their raucous and festive laughter functioned in complicity with power, as they participated in the abuse

of some of the most vulnerable members of society. Whilst doing fieldwork with Ibra and Salvatore, I became quite familiar with a group of about a dozen of these young boys who targeted the Bangladeshi street vendors along that route.

On the first occasion I saw them, they greeted Ibra raucously and he laughed at their high spirits, saying 'ciao, ciao'. After they had passed by, Ibra told me the Bangladeshi street vendors were scared of these boys because they stole things off their stalls. He told me they didn't target the Senegalese vendors and I asked why; 'Afraid', responded Ibra. A couple of weeks later I was standing with Salvatore when a group of them rushed the stall of a young Bangladeshi vendor, who had set up next to Ibra that day, and stole a mobile phone cover. They ran away really fast and Salvatore told me this was the fourth time they had targeted this vendor since the morning. He told me it was always different boys and they did it for fun, throwing the phone covers away once they got round the corner. He commented wryly that the young vendor had sold fewer than had been stolen from him that day. We went over to stand with the man and commiserate with him, although we didn't have any language in common as he spoke very little Italian and we had no Bengali at all. Salvatore got frustrated with this: 'He doesn't understand anything. He just says "*Sì sì sì*". *When are you gonna learn some Italian?*' Salvatore told me he had recently offered this vendor a television he didn't need any more and it had been really difficult to decide how and when to pick it up as they couldn't understand each other very easily. In the end the man came to get it ten minutes before Salvatore finished work and Salvatore had to insist that he went and got one of his friends to help him carry it away. He told me that he had suspected the man would have difficulty carrying it because he thought Bangladeshi men were all physically slight and so less strong. He told me his assumptions had been correct, as the vendors and his friend had struggled to hold the heavy television between them. The friend he brought with him spoke good Italian as he had been in Italy for a while. Salvatore noted that at least he would be able to defend himself when the groups of boys came by.

At this point in our conversation another group of boys appeared and Salvatore approached them saying, '*Go away, leave it!*' The boys heeded Salvatore's warning and moved on, only to stop by the stall of Samba, an elderly Senegalese vendor. The man in question immediately jumped up and approached the boys aggressively, causing them to run off. I mentioned to Salvatore that they had avoided Ibra completely and then run away from Samba, and Salvatore responded that they were afraid of the Senegalese men. The group of boys who had just passed us now appeared to be having a disagreement. They all turned as one and headed back towards us. The atmosphere cooled sharply and Salvatore

started talking to them softly with his hands held out towards them, telling them to leave it alone and that they needed to behave themselves. Again, they moved on past us like a wave. Salvatore resumed our discussion, telling me that these boys were from a historically poor neighbourhood to the north of the road we were standing on. Their parents were unemployed, or in prison for offences associated with the Camorra. These young boys were left to themselves and so lived a 'street life', he said, maybe eventually taking a similar path in life to their parents.

Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi vendor brought over a €50 note he had just been handed and motioned to Salvatore to check whether it was a fake. The young couple who were waiting for their change next to his stall looked offended. The Bangladeshi man said thank you and then went back to the couple to give them their change without taking back the large note. Salvatore said, 'Thanks for the money!', and laughed, together with Ibra. The vendor smiled ruefully and came back with hands outstretched for the note, but Salvatore waved the money in the air above the man's head. He immediately dropped his arms down and took a step back as if intimidated. At this, Salvatore became repentant and said to me, 'Look, he makes you feel sorry for him', giving the money back. Salvatore turned to me and said angrily, 'They have to worry about police. They have to worry about the kids. And now they have to worry about the fake money. What do they come here for? Why don't they go back to where they came from?' I responded that they might well be asking themselves that very same thing, but Salvatore morosely responded that, 'No, they have to be thinking they're better off here.'

Whilst all this was happening, the same boys as before were arguing about five metres away from us. They had found a long steel rod and were trying to break it in half. I started to feel scared and asked Salvatore what he thought they were going to do. Salvatore responded reassuringly that, 'You just have to know how to take them', and commented that it was a shame for them that they might do something bad before understanding the consequences of their actions. 'Write all this in your book', he told me. Ibra started packing up his stall to go home and, as usual, I went over to help. Two boys then suddenly rushed at the Bangladeshi vendor, who grabbed his mobile stall and wheeled it as fast as possible towards Salvatore, who was standing at the entrance of the apartment block he worked in. Standing behind Salvatore in the doorway he was relatively safe. They boys surrounded Salvatore, who held his hands out again, trying to reason with them. After a few seconds they all moved off. Ibra and I approached Salvatore and the vendor to see if they were OK, and Salvatore told the vendor, '*You gotta go home. Do you understand? They're gonna come back!*' Ibra pointed out that the street was emptying itself of vendors. Belatedly, the Bangladeshi vendor realised he was

going to be alone on the pavement. He started to pack up his stall but Salvatore anxiously complained that he was taking too long and the boys would come back. We all helped him bunch together phone cases with elastic bands and pack them into a large white raffia sack hung round a trolley. About five minutes later he was all packed up and he thanked us before heading off down the road.

The boys came back again whilst I was there, about a week or so later. They surrounded the same Bangladeshi vendor as before and followed him as he escaped to hide behind Salvatore. One boy told him, '*I'll smash your face in. Aren't you ugly.*' They didn't take things any further and stalked off.

The differential treatment meted out to street vendors by the young people was reflective of racialised attitudes about masculine hierarchies that form part of the modern legacy of racial thinking in the West – in which South Asian men have been positioned as weak and childlike, while African men have been stereotyped as physically strong, hypersexual and aggressive. The behaviour of the young boys, in terms of whom they thought it was safe to target, mirrored the assumptions that Salvatore also voiced to me whilst they were coordinating their attack, and throughout the work we did together, as has been discussed elsewhere in the book. The connection between forms of consumption and the role exercised by the Camorra in commercial activity had generated lifestyles and identities that were extremely attractive to people not involved with organised criminality (D'Alessandro 2009: 42; Pine 2012). This was particularly true in the case of some young people living in areas conditioned by a strong Camorra presence. The young boys' activities mimicked the Camorra style by emulating a *guappo* masculinity that was acquired through fearless performances of aggression and a disregard for the law.

Salvatore made small efforts to protect the Bangladeshi vendor and persuade the children to leave him alone. He recognised the damaging effects of their behavior, the unequal and precarious social and economic context in which they had taken root, and the wider politics around migration that brought the Bangladeshi vendors and others to Napoli in the first place. He was conscious of the brutalised economic and political reality in which these episodes were taking place, and that was why he told me to 'Write all this in your book.' His efforts at solidarity were deeply ambivalent and problematic because he simultaneously expressed antimigrant and racist rhetoric. This rhetoric was justified by an argument about them not being able to speak the language of the place they had migrated to. Salvatore argued that they, the victims of aggression, were at fault because they couldn't speak to defend themselves. Being able to converse fluently in Neapolitan was a source of subaltern pride in Napoli and also a way in which migrants could seek acceptance in their new

home. But welcome cannot be contingent on linguistic prowess. Salvatore's insistence on linguistic assimilation transformed a source of marginalised regional pride into an exclusionary monolingual nationalism.

Spectacles of policing

Violent policing formed the backdrop to these unpleasant episodes. I once saw police descend on a Roma street market and kick their scavenged wares out of arrangement and across the pavement whilst shouting at the vendors to go away. A lot of the time unlicensed street vendors didn't work because constant police patrols made it impossible for them to set up their stalls, or forced them to grab their merchandise and run, only to return and repeat the same scene all over again. I noticed that the African street vendors folded the corners of their cloths over to make it easier to gather everything up quickly, throw the stall like a knapsack over their shoulders, and escape down a side street. Whilst I was in Napoli these controls picked up significantly in intensity, and on many days, when I went to look for my research contacts, I was unable to find them.

One day in early January I set off to do fieldwork and ended up walking round to all the different spots of my research participants without any luck at all. Eventually I found Ibra standing near his usual location, leaning against the wall and looking both resigned and agitated (see [Figure 14](#)). His merchandise was packed away in his trolley. He told me there were plainclothes police going up and down the road on foot and on mopeds. He wasn't able to work and didn't want me to hang around. 'Napoli is no good any more', he told me. Politely he suggested I go and greet Giovanni and then he went home for the day, trailing his wares on the trolley behind him.

After this, I headed off to Via Roma to see if I could chat to a Senegalese vendor I had been recently introduced to but hadn't managed to bump into again. The Neapolitan street vendors were still in their spots on the street corners but there were hardly any migrant vendors out there as I made my way up the road. On the way back down I saw a group of black vendors laying their cloths back down on the pavement and starting to unwrap their merchandise. I noticed, in the distance, men in uniform on foot, in cars and on mopeds. However, the group of vendors didn't have time to react to this. A passing moped, with two men on board dressed in civilian clothing, suddenly slowed as it passed the line of men. The riders froze, scrutinising the men and trying to figure out who they were. I was right behind the vendors and noticed their eyes bulge as veins pulsed on their foreheads and the hairs stood up vertically on their arms. The moped



14 Unable to work

passenger leaned in towards the men and locked eyes with them, making a precise Neapolitan gesture with his right hand that told the men in no uncertain terms to ‘get lost’.⁴

Whilst aggressive in intent, the police were not seeking any arrests that day. This gesture gave the vendors time to pick up their merchandise and run again. When goods were seized and impounded this involved financial losses that could vary from €200 to €500, according to my participants. The legal consequences,

particularly for migrants, were even more serious. If they were arrested they usually spent a night or two in Poggioreale prison, whereupon most were released with a verbal warning and a deportation order if they were also undocumented. Many did not initially realise it but their case then would go in front of a judge and they would end up with a criminal record, which made it very difficult, if not impossible, for them to get or maintain a work visa. One of my research participants, Modou, was even more unlucky. One day, after I finished my research with him, he went to the police to report being robbed. When they checked his ID they discovered a warrant out for his arrest for repeated offences to do with selling fake bags. He had been convicted in absentia and was immediately removed to prison for a six-month sentence.

Given the scale of unregulated street vending that was being practised in Napoli, it was obviously impossible for the police to arrest and seize the goods of every vendor they came across. However, their presence and threatening behaviour contributed to the penal spectacle of arrests that legitimised national and international anti-immigration politics and fuelled local antipathy to migrants. This reflected a shift towards more punitive methods of urban control, given an increasing lack of welfare support and decreasing economic stability in the West in general, whereby migrants have been made into the scapegoats of urban poverty and decay (Wacquant 2008a: 46, 51). The game of cat-and-mouse that the police and vendors played was a performance of dominance whereby racist formulae about West African street vendors were forcibly reproduced by both the dominant and the dominated.

I could not forget how awful it was to see people so frightened. Vendors did everything they could to avoid being caught by the police, as they were aware of the consequences. This had led to tragic consequences in Napoli, and elsewhere in Italy. In the summer of 2013 in Sanremo, a Senegalese street vendor called Mame Mor Diop, who was fleeing from the police because he had a small amount of contraband amongst his merchandise, ran into the river and drowned (Parodi 2013). In June 2014 a violent police raid on an unregulated market close to Via Bologna in Napoli resulted in the arrest of twenty Senegalese men and the subsequent savage beating of Magnane Niane when he tried to call for help from the police station. Magnane said he was getting a coffee at the bar on that road when the police started their raid and subsequently arrested anyone who was black that they could catch. He wasn't vending but he was rounded up with the other vendors along that road. He told the lawyers and activists, who were eventually alerted to his situation and rushed to his aid, that the police had kicked his head as if it was a football (anon. 2014).

Ambiguous solidarity and infrapolitical banter

In order to avoid getting caught by the police, street vendors relied on their ability to recognise a number of visual, verbal and non-verbal clues to see danger before it arrived. Senegalese vendors would scan the road to see if it was safe for them to set up their stalls (see [Figure 15](#)). As well as flashing blue lights and uniforms, they were also looking for plainclothes police and dodgy-looking cars, which might be parked or circulating. I never became very good at picking up on these tell-tale signs, and always annoyed the vendors by asking them to explain what they were looking and listening out for. They also had ways of relaying danger non-verbally – such as making a circle in the air with the index finger that got passed down the line of vendors on a road when police were coming. The direction of the oscillation of the finger (clockwise or anti-clockwise) indicated whether the police were coming towards them or finally heading away. Such spatial awareness and communicative repertoires were a crucial part of the street vendor's survival toolkit.

These tactics of evasion took place in collaboration with Neapolitans who worked in nearby shops and bars, guarded the entrances of buildings or just lived locally. These people helped their street vendor friends by watching out for police and occasionally looking after their merchandise. Modou had an agreement with a shop near to where he pitched his stall, and he left the bulk of the merchandise that he wanted to put out each day in the shop. He only carried the most expensive pieces back and forth from his home. Barmen were in a particularly good position to warn of oncoming danger because they circulated the area delivering espressos and croissants to local businesses as part of their job. Thus racist formulae that reflected a desire amongst the Neapolitan public to rid the pavement of black street vendors existed alongside collaborations between migrants and Neapolitans who were stratified by differential power relations.

Playful threats about the police were central to this. For example, Salvatore liked to tell Ibra to 'Watch out, police!' when there were no police present, and sometimes he would threaten to call the police. Once, Ibra responded wryly, 'Why bother? Police are already here!' Whilst functioning as a deeply ambiguous experiment that measured the balance of power between the two men, these episodes were also ways in which fear was defused and the possibility of collaboration explored. This humorous banter was a kind of talk both suffused with racialised violence and ambiguously open to the possibilities of transcultural connection. The sharing of warnings and humour acted as a form of contingent



15 Scanning the road

and contentious infrapolitics, whereby the hegemonic order was disrupted and toyed with.

However, the sense of sympathy and solidarity Neapolitans felt for the plight of migrant street vendors was often quite limited, and infrapolitical talk existed alongside calls for their exclusion and expulsion. Salvatore told me he didn't get involved with the business of the migrant vendors he came into contact with, limiting himself to warning them when police were coming. His policy was to

do nothing if they got caught; there was nothing he could do and he thought it was understandable that the police got violent if they resisted arrest. These were '*problem ro' nir*' ('black people problems'), he told me. His obsession, explored in [Chapter 4](#), with the idea that black men were physically stronger than Neapolitan men justified his argument that they were better able to stand constant police harassment, though he was aware of how stressed they were. At the same time, he told me that the Government should let them all look for proper work or not let them come at all. Otherwise in no time '*the immigrants will be more than us*', and the situation for ordinary Neapolitans would be out of control.

Interactions between migrant street vendors and potential customers also featured multiple ambivalent joking performances. These ludic transcultural episodes, often conducted in Neapolitan, were similarly wrought through with a gendered semiotics where ideas about masculinity, race and hegemony were contested and negotiated. Customers who came to look at merchandise on the stalls of migrant vendors I was working with would often mobilise negative ideas about street vending both as a way of establishing convivial relationships with those vendors and as a show of intimidation. One day I was again sitting with Comfort at Via Bologna market, listening in as she chatted in pidgin to two male friends about her money troubles. To illustrate her woes more effectively she drew a stack of crumpled, unpaid bills out of her handbag and asked us how on earth she was going to pay them. She then showed her friends a grey and lime-green polo shirt she had in stock. An Italian man in skinny jeans and a pink polo shirt approached in interest:

Comfort: [holding up the T-shirt to him] You interested?

Man: Is it a fake?

Comfort: [stiffening in suspicion] Go away! Go away!

Man: [affronted] But why? How much is it?

Comfort: Do you want it? Ten euros. Are you gonna take it?

Man: [cracking up laughing] yeah right!

Comfort: Go away then! Bye, now! Shoo!

Man: Why are you being like this?

'Is it fake?' was a question I often heard Neapolitan customers ask migrant vendors, as a prelude to, or following, a transaction. The customers would smile widely as they asked, something that stood at odds with the discomfited and fearful reaction that they clearly provoked. The vendors were extremely aware

of the vulnerability of their position, and their customers seemed to enjoy the power this gave them. Their laughter at this stock joke reflected the oppressive side of the carnivalesque market place that Bakhtin described. In this case it functioned as a ritualised threat, reinstating hegemonic ideas that linked together migrants and criminality as opposed to subverting them. The unequal legal and economic positionalities occupied by street vendors put them at risk of being hurt by anyone wishing to exert power over them.

The same kinds of playful-threatening dynamic animated other sorts of stock performance between vendors and their customers. In the following episode I was doing fieldwork with Modou again when a Neapolitan man swaggered aggressively towards his stall:

Customer: *So, whats this here?! I am gonna confiscate all of this stuff!* [indicating a designer tote bag] *What do you want for it?*

Modou: *But you won't pay me!*

Customer: *Look, I'm interested in a style that looks something like this bag here* [indicating a woman's cross-body bag]

Modou: *Yeah ...*

Customer: *Well? Is it a good one or not? I asked you a month ago?!* [indicating his own tattered bag] *Look how I'm walking around, look?!*

Me: *What brand is it?*

Modou: *The man's style.*

Me: *But it still has a cross-over strap?*

Customer: *Yes – but what have you got on you?*

Modou: *Not much really. There are some good bags here but the one you want – it costs a bit ...*

Customer: *So bring it to me!*

Modou: *I'm not bringing it back and forth.*

Customer: *You bring it to me – I'll take it.*

Modou: *Ok ...*

Customer: *How many bags –*

Modou: *You're right –*

Customer: *How many bags have I bought off you?*

Modou: *You're right ... Ok which day?*

Customer: *You know. [to me] You don't know me and you might think that I – [turning back to Modou] have I bought other bags off you? Or not?*

Modou: *What a joker!* [laughs]

Customer: *So will you bring it to me? Holy Mother Mary!*

Modou: *Ok then what day ... Tuesday?*

Customer: *Wednesday?*

Modou: *OK, if you want. I'll bring it for you. A hundred per cent.*

The Neapolitan, a local man whom Modou clearly knew quite well, seemed to play the role of the demanding but loyal customer, even though Modou clearly thought he had no intention of actually making the purchase. He was right – I asked later and the man never came the following Wednesday for the bag, which, in any case, Modou hadn't bothered to bring for him. So what was the whole performance about? The Neapolitan man's outraged exasperation and religio-comic invective to the Virgin played up to a stereotype of the jokey Neapolitan. However, it was significant that the interaction started with him pretending to be a police officer about to sequester Modou's contraband merchandise and potentially arrest him for breaking the law. Humour, again, served as an ambiguous threat that reinstated Neapolitan masculine dominance. It was also a game of what Jason Pine has termed 'who am I and who are you?' in his ethnographic work on criminal undercurrents and the Neapolitan *Neomelodica* music industry (2012: 25–33). This game referred to the processes of identification and self-identification through which people delicately examined and sought to assert power differentials as part of their everyday life. Note how the man made it clear to me that I didn't know who he was and, hence, I was also implicated in these processes, by virtue of my presence, and subtly warned to be on guard. The man was re-establishing gendered and racialised power hierarchies by making it clear to Modou that his presence was contingent on the acquiescence of local people, predominantly men, who were unnamed and invisible but always keeping watch. What could be granted could also be taken away.

In order to participate in these power plays it was necessary to demonstrate significant linguistic dexterity and knowledge of Neapolitan. Modou, like many of his Senegalese colleagues, tended to respond with equal force to his Neapolitan interlocutor and this made for an uneasy but somewhat balanced dynamic between them. Unlike the scene involving Comfort, Modou was able to play a role in the unfolding drama and make use of the linguistic prowess developed through years working as a street vendor in the city. Comfort, instead, had to resort to silence and refusal, turning her back on her interlocutor as he tried to shame her with his accusation of fake goods. Unlike women, and other migrants, such as Bangladeshi street vendors, Modou was praised for his ability to speak back.

We Africans, we Neapolitans?

Pending here is a discussion of how Neapolitan street vendors felt about their migrant colleagues. In the [last chapter](#) I explored how Neapolitan and migrant street vendors worked pragmatically side by side in order to make a living. I argued that, given the context of economic recession and austerity whilst I was doing my fieldwork, these tactical approaches to making money should be understood as evidence of an oppositional class-consciousness. Here I think about the infrapolitical lens through which Neapolitan vendors actually articulated that daily cohabitation with migrant street vendors. This speaks to the heart of the tantalising suggestion of brotherhood raised by the song ‘Cuore nero’ at the start of this chapter. It asks whether the claim of commonality between Neapolitan and African marginalised people translated itself from the realm of popular culture into the sense of self of precarious street vendors in their working lives. To what extent did Neapolitan vendors show and enact support for migrant vendors whilst also defending their own right to work?

The Neapolitan street vendors I worked with were deeply conscious of their precariousness and lower-class status compared to other business owners in the city. I noticed that most shop owners and street vendors maintained a stony avoidance of each other and, occasionally, I saw open hostility deployed by shop owners in the form of passing remarks or aggressive gestures. One man, whose family business was in high-end leather goods that bore the ‘Made in Italy’ merchandise mark, explained to me that unregulated street vendors had not earned the right to do commerce in the same way as them. They did not pay the same (or any) rent and tax on the spots where they set up their stalls, nor had they invested time and energy in building up relationships with stockists as shop owners had. Furthermore, their activities affected higher-end and legitimate retail activities because they ruined the look of high streets. A couple of local councillors were extremely vocal about the ‘problem’ of street markets whilst I was doing my research, with one respondent reporting to me that he had heard a City Hall councillor telling a group of Neapolitan street vendors at a public meeting that he wanted to sweep them away, as if they were rubbish.

Street vendors – migrant and Neapolitan – defended themselves against the accusation that they were breaking the law or a public menace. Gennaro and Alfonso from Via Bologna market often reminded me that the difference between them and shopkeepers was one not of practice but of position: they all sold the same products but market traders were considered to be socially inferior because

they couldn't afford to rent a shop and so sold their products from the pavement. Gennaro told me:

You know, when you work as a street vendor people act like you're second division. Because, you know, we do the same job as shopkeepers. We deal with the same clients except we interact more directly with them. But – mon ami – it may be more direct but it's more human!

But the fact remained that, despite the ideological corpus of vendor pride that challenged hegemonic discourses about street vending, markets were hard places to work and generally not people's first choice of livelihood. When I gave Gennaro a disposable camera to take photos for the project, one of the images that he produced was of an unknown elderly street vendor (see [Figure 16](#)). He was an itinerant pedlar who had stopped for a short rest on the corner of Via Bologna and Piazza Garibaldi. I asked Gennaro why he had taken this picture.

Gennaro: These are people that in an advanced age, you know, being very old they have a small stall; but at this age they continue to sell on the streets because the person who sells on the streets is getting the money they need to get to the end of the day. Do you understand?



16 The elderly street vendor (photo by Gennaro)

Me: Does he just sell magazines?

Gennaro: No it's a bit mixed because he sells, say, good luck charms, toys, nuts – you know – a bit of everything. It's a little bazaar.

Me: And it makes you sad ...

Gennaro: Yes it makes me sad because I'm 48 years old and I have to think that this person is like 75 or 76 and they are still doing this job. That really depresses me. But it is what it is.

The Neapolitan street vendors I worked with were understandably very concerned about their long-term prospects and lack of financial security. This complicated the way in which they related to their migrant colleagues. Gennaro also took some photos for me of the interior of Via Bologna market, where most of the stalls were run by African vendors. These are his reflections on what is significant about the photos (see [Figure 17](#)).

Gennaro: I just took this photo to show the immigrants who are behind the stalls that give them their living. Well – 'living' – it is what it is here and it turns out –

Me: So is the newly organised market working out now that there are more Neapolitans here?



17 The 'interethnic' market (photo by Gennaro)

Gennaro: No, the market doesn't work well because it is badly organised and run even worse. It's not publicised – no one knows where it is. A better market was set up here in 2000, but then it was done to sort out a number of people who were spread out across the city to make an immigrant market, not an interethnic market, as they called it. But in any case, having got this place, it never really made much money.

Me: Didn't they sell different stuff before?

Gennaro: Yes – in the beginning they sold objects from their home countries. You know – those wooden objects of things like elephants all made with their own hands. And, as a novelty, this worked well for them for a while – oh yeah, they also sold those musical instruments – they sold well because they were a novelty and didn't cost much. Now they're selling the same merchandise that we Neapolitans sell and so there's competition.

For Gennaro, the images of people and merchandise, both of which he described as ethnically marked, offered a material manifestation of the kinds of transcultural economic rivalry and tension that had arisen in street markets since the 2008 economic crisis, when it stopped being remunerative to sell 'Made in Italy' products or so-called 'ethnic' or 'cultural' objects. People had less money and stopped buying these items, so migrant vendors diversified and started selling cheaper Chinese merchandise, which was readily available in warehouses across the city and arrived directly into the city's port.

Transcultural competition was also an issue amongst vendors who had known each other for many years, like Gennaro and Comfort. They had started their stalls in and around Piazza Garibaldi around the same time about two decades before. As Gennaro told me, they had been on marches together and had watched each other's children grow up. They had also spent ten years of their twenty-year acquaintance not talking to each other following a political falling-out, as Gennaro put it. Gennaro told me Comfort was only thinking about herself and not showing sufficient solidarity with him and the other street vendors. My arrival in the field marked the end of this decade-long hiatus. On one occasion in late May, I arrived at Via Bologna to find that Gennaro and Alfonso had not set up their stalls that day. I called Gennaro and he told me they were trying out a different unlicensed spot on the other side of Piazza Garibaldi. Comfort approached me to ask where the two men were and I invited her to come with me:

Comfort: (on arrival) So do you have any permit to set up here?

Gennaro: Can't you see there's no one coming by?

Comfort: Today I haven't sold anything ... There isn't even a mosquito flying through Via Bologna. No one's selling anything. How are things here?

Gennaro: It's worse here than there! We wanted to give it a go but no one is stopping. Everyone just passes through and doesn't buy. Since this morning me and Alfonso have had one sale each. So in Via Bologna ...?

Comfort: Antonia, how are things in Via Bologna?

Me: Ha! Well, yes, no one is coming through the market. It's worse than before.

Comfort: See? It's not just me saying it ... But if you are selling well here you should tell me ...

Gennaro: Don't worry Comfort. We know as well as you what things are like in there. We're just saying things as they are here. We all sell different products so it's not like that ...

Competition seemed to govern the relationship between migrant and Neapolitan street vendors in ways that didn't exist amongst Neapolitan vendors. For Gennaro and Comfort, the sense of common purpose and experience they clearly shared was mediated by a delicate balancing act of shifting power dynamics and paranoia.

Gennaro had worked side by side with many migrant vendors, both as a regulated and an unregulated vendor, over a twenty-year period. The greater horizontality of his and their work routines, as well as his politicisation through involvement in the Precari Bros unemployment movement, had seen him develop a vocal politics of transcultural solidarity with other street traders:

I mean, do you think I was born to be a street vendor? I'm a street vendor because I haven't had other opportunities to work. I don't think these boys who've come over from Africa say, 'Let's go to Italy! Let's go to Napoli! Let's go and be street vendors!' No! They came here because they thought there might be something more for them. Then you see that there isn't and the first thing you can do honestly is sell a product. You sell it and you stay alive, right? That's what we do too! I told this person [**a town councillor**] that if someone loses their job and is unemployed for months on end and can't find anything, even though Monti says that job opportunities need to open up because everything is blocked and 'boring'⁵ [**sarcasm**], then do you know what he does? He goes to fill a bag with a bit of merchandise in it and he goes and sells it ... It's just basic! Or if he's dishonest he goes thieving. That's how I see it. So, if we want to fix this city, if we want it to be reborn, we need to build our foundations right here, do you understand me?

Gennaro's emotional defence of street vending made use of his understanding of politics and powers of oratory. As someone who left school at the age of 11, these were skills he had built through his work and his activism. In his speech, street vending was repositioned as a humble but honest form of capital accumulation, central to the urban growth and renewal that he saw politicians talking about but unable to implement. Not only did he place himself in dialogue with hegemonic discourses about work and the city, but he showed that he had personally faced up to powerful people when he described his conversation with the city councillor. Speeches like the above became key to the formation of antihegemonic discourses and organised action when the livelihoods of my research participants were threatened during my fieldwork. This is examined closely in the [next chapter](#). Here, though, it is interesting to reflect upon the ways in which Gennaro's ideological discourse contrasted with his description of the lived experience of getting by across transcultural boundaries. The daily life of multicultural street markets necessitated ambiguous infrapolitical talk where power was reinforced as much as it was disrupted.

Notes

- 1 Whilst there is most certainly an inequality in the way that Neapolitan and migrant street vendors are treated by the administration and in public discourses, in Napoli there have been cases of predominantly Neapolitan-run markets being closed down for reasons of poor hygiene, such as the fish market at Porta Nolana in 2009 (anon. 2009).
- 2 An article by Mario Leombruno and Luca Romano (2012) gives further details of this episode. The authors frame it as symptomatic of the incompetent and malicious mismanagement of the Libyan crisis.
- 3 Carnevale (Carnival) is a Catholic festival celebrated immediately prior to Lent, just before people customarily begin a period of fasting. People don masks and costumes and have a big party. Its roots are ancient and predate Christianity. Previously called Saturnalia, it used to be the festival of slaves and servants.
- 4 He made a steeple with his hand, raising the little finger up vertically. He twisted his hand from the wrist, up and down, up and down, in quick succession.
- 5 Gennaro was quoting the then premier Mario Monti who, in the wake of the reform of the labour market, stated that, 'young people need to get used to the fact that they won't get one [an indefinite contract]. Permanent jobs are boring, it's nice to change' (anon. 2012).

Speaking back to power

Na lotta aggia avut da fa', Na lotta aggia avut da fa'	I had to fight, I had to fight
Na lotta aggia avut da fa pe' nce trasi	I had to fight to get this job
E quann aggio trassuto, Mamma 'e ll'Arco, ch'impresson'	But when I got in, Mother Mary What a shock I had
...	...
[northern Italian accent of the factory manager] 'Uè ma se tu vuoi mangiare, uè ma se tu vuoi mangiare, per forza qua devi crepar'	'Hey if you wanna eat, hey if you wanna eat You have no choice but to die here
Uè ma tu padron' mie che maronn' staje dicenn'?	Hey boss what the hell are you saying?
Je nun song n'animal e né nu schiav'	I'm not an animal nor a slave
...	...
E tira accà e vott' allà, e nuje c'avimm organizzà, e a 'sti padrun amma caccià	Even though we didn't choose this life, we've got to get organised and kick these managers out
Uè pe' colpa 'e sti 'nfamune tutt' a cassa integrazione	Because of these bastards we're all on unemployment
E stanotte m'agg' sunnate ca tutte cose era cagnate	And last night I dreamt everything had changed
E nun ce steve cchiù sfruttate 'ngopp' a sta terra	And there were no more exploited on this earth

Extract from 'Tammuriata dell'Alfasud' (1976) by Gruppo Operaio "E Zezi' di Pomigliano d'Arco (translated from Neapolitan by the author)

THIS CHAPTER TURNS from the ambiguous and fraught infrapolitical genres of transcultural solidarity explored in the [last chapter](#) to examine moments of organised political action that took place across linguistic, cultural, national, classed and racialised boundaries during my fieldwork. This collective action became necessary because of a combination of austerity measures and city-mandated regeneration processes that were closing down street markets and taking away vendors' livelihoods in 2012. The vendors' actions drew upon a strong tradition of creative proletarian political organisation in the city: for example, the 'Gruppo Operaio "E Zezi"' (Zezi Workers Group), formed in 1974 from a group of factory workers at the Alfasud car factory in Pomigliano d'Arco. This area, formerly a village to the east of Napoli where people survived through agriculture and artisanship, was suddenly plunged into industrialisation with the arrival of a number of manufacturing plants from the late 1950s (Abbruzzese 1985; De Falco 2018: 8–9). Their song 'Tammuriata dell'Alfasud' (1976) describes the experience of disorientation and, then, dawning horror when they started working at the Alfasud factory and realised how monotonous, dangerous and exploitative the work was. The conflict between the northern Italian management and the southern Italian workers is made explicit in the song through the delivery in a northern accent of the manager's threat about them having no other means of sustenance. As they explained in the documentary *Il sogno dei Zezi* (Bellasalma and Guadagno 2009), they formed a musical and theatrical group, taking inspiration from the folk traditions of street performers singing what the peasantry called *zezi*, but transforming the genre to sing about their own lives and to call for political action. Their music came from the coalface, and eventually the group included students as well as unemployed people. It became the soundtrack of protests they were involved in, and the music itself was interspersed with the sound of those protests.

These proletarian legacies of protest were of direct inspiration to the street vendors I was working with around Piazza Garibaldi. They were tied up with their experiences of work, whether or not they had been born in Napoli or employed in the city's factories, which started to close down from the mid-1980s, creating further waves of unemployment and hardship. Titti's father, who helped out on the family stall, Eddy Pell, at Poggioreale market, had worked for Alfasud and was now retired. Gennaro and Alfonso, who had been self-employed since leaving school at 11, had long been involved in social movements such as the Precari Bros union, which acted on behalf of the city's unemployed. Piazza Garibaldi also had a historic reputation as a 'working-class piazza' because of the active presence of trade unions and anti-racist groups there, and its popularity as a place to hold

protests (Dines 2012: 183). The experiences and actions of migrant street vendors forcefully interrogated, and claimed a part in framing and articulating, the relations of power in these struggles. Many of the Senegalese migrants I worked with – such as Samba – had worked in factories in northern Italy and came south to work as street vendors only when they were made redundant. I was also moved to meet an older Senegalese street vendor who had been in North America in the early 1990s. He told me that he had a stall at the market on 125th street in Harlem that City Hall tried, and eventually managed, to shut down following organised action on the part of the African American and black migrant vendors from Africa and the Caribbean (Stoller 1992). As Nick Dines has shown, there is a history of anti-racist organisations collaborating with Piazza Garibaldi vendors to approach the administration that precedes the events of 2012 (2012: 200). Many of the West African and Neapolitan vendors were involved in migrant groups such as Napoli's Senegalese Association, and anti-racist groups such as A3f or Garibaldi 101. Omar, the president of Napoli's Senegalese Association in 2012, was a cultural mediator and activist who had previously been a street vendor. In the 1970s, the Zezi of the Alfasud factory combined folk memory with proletarian experience and the struggles of the unemployed and students. This notion of organising across boundaries in Napoli adapted as the city was transformed by the advent of mass migration in the following decades.

When it came to street markets, City Hall had long operated a tactic of what Roediger and Esch (2014) have termed 'race management', by offering out licensed market spaces and opportunities for work on a nationally and racially differentiated basis. The creation of Via Bologna market as an African market in the early 2000s was a concession to the large numbers of migrant vendors wanting licenced market spaces, and was designed to keep them out of legitimate market spaces in the rest of the city (D'Alessandro 2008). A number of Neapolitan street vendors had exclusively won the right to operate market stalls along the busy thoroughfares around Piazza Garibaldi since the 1990s. However, in 2012 a shopping mall combined with a metro station was being built around the city's main railway station in front of Piazza Garibaldi as part of a long-term regeneration process that was intended to redesign Napoli as a popular tourist location. As part of this, in August 2011, the new city administration, headed by Mayor Luigi de Magistris, evicted twenty Neapolitan vendors from their spots on the pavement around the edge of the piazza in order to make the area more appealing to tourists. These evicted vendors refused to move to the alternative spots assigned to them and some of them were setting up informally on Via Bologna when I started the research in January 2012. The official plan was to

integrate them into a rejuvenated and redeveloped ‘multicultural’ Via Bologna market, which was to be called ‘Napoliamo Road’ (Zagaria 2011). However, instead of facilitating this redevelopment, Via Bologna market vendors, both Neapolitan and migrant, were accused of selling contraband and failing to pay taxes and licence fees, and City Hall temporarily closed down the market.

The emergency created by the rapidly diminishing legitimate and licensed street market spaces around the piazza offered an opportunity for transcultural collective action to emerge between Neapolitans and migrants. This happened in a context of economic deprivation in the city that predated, and was exacerbated by, the wider geopolitical context of austerity and the so-called migration crisis. A number of widely publicised suicides and suicide attempts, in the city and across the country, brought to the fore the suffering of the street vendors. Laments about the city being dead or dying formed the background to their struggle. The rubbish piling up in the streets, an issue that has given Napoli some infamy (Saviano 2006), came to symbolise the street vendors’ sense of neglect and abandonment by the State. Their livelihoods were dying and, like the rubbish, they were being left to rot.

The Via Bologna street vendors took on, reformulated and transformed narratives about crisis, death and decay, in Napoli and globally, in order to protect the possibilities for work that they had carved out for themselves. Particular sorts of dialogical speech genre – typical statements that drew on locally significant narratives about death and dying, as well talk of rights and justice that took inspiration from the language of trade unionism and anti-racist politics – framed the way in which vendors struggled to find a way to keep their market stalls open. This politics of local solidarity was, by necessity, multilingual and multicultural, as well as fraught with ambivalent multiacculturalities and cross-purposes. Their use and adaptation of antihegemonic talk, and their efforts to translate this across cultural divides, echoed Glissant’s assertion that multilingual linguistic exchange was key to understanding social struggle and political transformation.

As such, the struggle for Via Bologna offered an opportunity to think about the relations of force that could emerge amongst people subjected to unequal and differential legal and economic statuses – people who also spoke different languages, followed different religions, and had different political visions and group interests – but found themselves attempting to transcend these differences and work together to survive. This spoke back against prevalent postracial discourses (Gilroy 2012; Goldberg 2009; Lentin 2014) that have tried to collapse complex transnational and heterogeneous social inequalities – and the possibility of overcoming them through collective action – into questions of class

struggle, poverty and economic entitlement. Instead, an ambiguous, Gramscian-inspired, transcultural and multiethnic 'local-popular' emerged amongst the Via Bologna street vendors that was capable of speaking back to power.

Napoli is rubbish, Napoli is dying
Napoli is dead.
This is burnt earth.
The only thing left for us to do here is die.

A preoccupation with talking about Napoli as full of rubbish, dying and decaying was so common amongst the people I spoke to during my research that I eventually came to paraphrase such discussions as the 'Napoli is dead conversation' in my field notes. When I asked them to tell me a bit more about what that meant, they referred as much to political corruption, urban mismanagement and the municipal neglect of the city's precarious workforce as to actual piles of rubbish on the pavement. It was also a key way in which they articulated their own sense of exclusion and rejection as if they, too, were rubbish. This fear was a very real prospect from their perspective on the edge of a Mediterranean where necropolitics availed itself of the right to kill people who had been excluded from humanity and were considered disposable (Mbembe 2019). However, discussion about being considered disposable was not an expression of despair, but a way in which people sought to articulate the wider political and economic structures weighing down on them and other subaltern people. Over the course of the fieldwork, it became a way of talking that formed the bedrock of social struggles vying to overcome the fate assigned to them.

The cohabitation with imaginaries of death and disposability was also important to Napoli's particular story of modernity, where outbreaks of contagious illness had connected to urban deprivation; colonialism; and migration into, and out of, the city. Epidemic disease had regularly swept through the deprived portion of the population, leading to the description of Napoli as a 'living cemetery' (Snowden 1995: 5). The images of skulls throughout the city, and the skeleton shrines, such as Fontanelle Cemetery in the Sanità neighbourhood, testify to a history where high mortality rates were palliated by a fusion of Catholic and pagan ritual. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cholera arrived in the port of Napoli via colonial trade with South Asia. Returning Italian emigrants and foreigners were blamed for the epidemic, which was fatal predominantly for people who were unable to nourish themselves adequately.

Rubbish, disease and death came to be politicised in Napoli as far back as the election of Antonio Bassolino as mayor of Napoli in 1993. In the wake of the *Mani pulite* investigations (Operation Clean Hands), which revealed the scale of political corruption across the country and particularly in the region of Campania, he worked on transforming and renewing public space in Napoli by cleaning up rubbish, stopping illegal parking and reopening previously closed monuments. The idea, as in 2012, was to transform Napoli into a tourist destination in the wake of postwar deindustrialisation, which had created massive issues of unemployment. This devastation had been compounded by a cholera epidemic, a huge earthquake and a rise in violence associated with the Camorra (Pine 2012: 6). Under Rosa Russo Iervolino's mayorship, from 2001 to 2011, the city was beset by a rubbish crisis that made international news. On two occasions, in 2008 and 2011, the army was called in to clear rubbish from the streets. The region's waste sites were full because, for many years, the Camorra had been dumping toxic industrial waste there (BBC 2014). Luigi de Magistris, a former public prosecutor who had focused on bringing to light the links between the mafia and politicians, was elected mayor in 2011. As well as dealing with the inherited waste problem, he promised to crack down on illegality and bring about a new rebirth of the city, again through the encouragement of tourism. When it came to the question of illegality de Magistris particularly highlighted the street markets around Piazza Garibaldi as problematic. He had positioned himself as politically left-wing, anti-racist and pro migrant rights. In a public speech given at the beginning of his mandate, he clarified that:

It's not about ... marginalising street vendors, migrants or anyone else. Above all, it's about offering them dignity as well by creating appropriate locations; important markets; and markets that are true, authentic and multiethnic. But Napoli cannot have, as a gateway to the city, Piazza Garibaldi reduced to its current state. (de Magistris 2011, translated by the author)

This stated position was repeatedly revealed to be untenable as regeneration processes forged ahead and market spots started rapidly diminishing.

Street markets were central to the formation of interconnected conceptualisations of death, disease, decay, migration and urban governance. This was because markets were visible signs of the threat of worklessness and precariousness. They were public spaces of interaction with migrants and the poor, both of whom had historically been associated with the spread of disease.

The mess that markets could leave behind at the end of the working day evoked further fears of contamination, dirt, decay and degradation. The problems experienced by street vendors in Napoli during my research showed how economic anxieties, which made a scapegoat of both immigration and ineffective urban government, were still tightly interlinked with phantasmagoria of disease, death and decay in the city. At the same time, these associations amongst rubbish, disease and political corruption infused the ways in which my research participants articulated fear for their futures and their frustrations with the urban administration. When he was asked to take photos of what Napoli meant to him, one of my field participants, Gennaro, brought me a series of images of rubbish against a backdrop of street markets and the protests he regularly attended as a member of the Precari Bros, a union that represented the unemployed and underemployed (see [Figure 18](#)). These images were juxtaposed with photos of the migrants working next to or hanging out around his market stall, whom he described as both comrades in the daily struggle of survival and a threat to his livelihood.

Alongside worries about rubbish, street markets, and attendant efforts to regenerate public space in the city in 2012, the international media was writing about a suicide epidemic that was spreading across Italy as people lost their jobs and small businesses had to close down as a result of austerity (Vogt 2012). These stories and events circulated, becoming entangled with pre-existing narratives about death, disposability and crisis. I remember a discussion with Salvatore, a doorman for one of the luxury apartment blocks on Corso Umberto, telling me how shaken he was about a fellow doorman, further down the road, who had committed suicide after he lost his job. He told me this should never be the solution and that people should always try to go on. He insisted that there were always ways to find pleasure in life, even when the going was hard. He said you could have spaghetti with clams after New Year when the clams were cheaper,



18 Rubbish and protests (photos by Gennaro)

and you could always go to relax at the beach for a day. Talking about this sad death was a way in which he talked about precariousness and surviving in the face of suffering.

In Neapolitan street markets suicide was both something tragic that was really happening to people, and a metaphor through which ideas about death, threats to livelihood, disease, migration and governance could be discussed, explored and negotiated. One day in late May I was walking to Via Bologna to do fieldwork when I came across a terrible scene unfolding in the parallel street, Via Torino (see [Figure 19](#)).

The assembled crowd were staring up at a man hanging half in and half out of a seventh-floor window of the CGIL trade union building. The police were already in attendance and had blown up a suicide balloon, which was standing like a quivering, red, bouncy castle on the pavement outside the building. A Neapolitan man commented to me that, ‘people are desperate’, his mouth turning down at the corners as he shook his head in disgust. I went over to greet a Senegalese friend from Via Bologna market. He was immersed in an argument with a group of West African men in French about what would happen if the man hanging out of the window was a migrant. One tall, very thin man angrily declaimed, ‘If he was an immigrant they would push him out the window! They would put him in prison!’ His friend protested that, ‘It’s not true! This isn’t the jungle here!’, to which his interlocutor responded, ‘The jungle is better than here.’ I moved



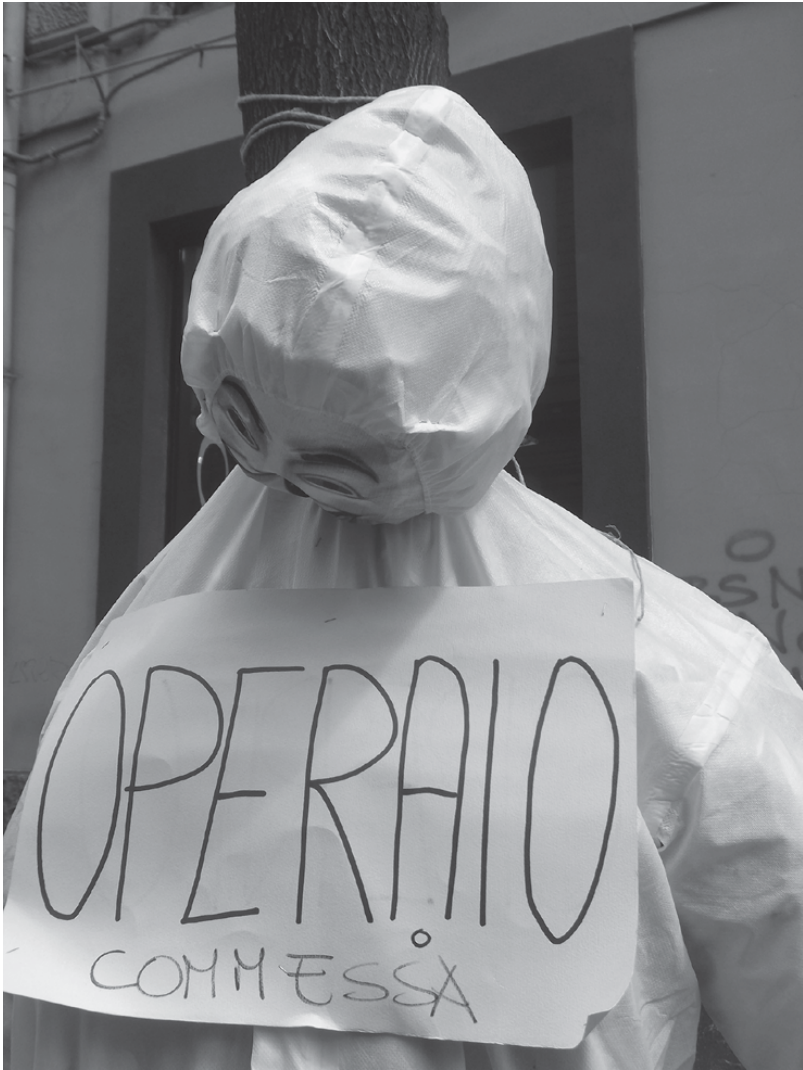
19 Attempted suicide at the CGIL trade union centre (photo by Serigne, 23 May 2012)

over to greet an activist friend, who sarcastically asked me whether things could get any worse than this. Serigne arrived from Via Bologna, clasping the camera I had given him for my research project. He took a series of photos, of which [Figure 19](#) is an example. Everyone around us was asking each other whether the man at the window was foreign or Italian. Eventually he consented to being pulled back inside the building. Everyone on the pavement, and those watching out of surrounding windows and balconies, clapped and cheered, and eventually started to disperse.

The unofficial discussions taking place amongst the spectators in front of the CGIL spoke of the ways in which the realities of death and disposability were abstracted dialogically through interactive and reciprocal social interests and experiences in Napoli. The fact that such an act of desperation could come to stand for multiple and intersecting instances of suffering and struggle on the part of both Neapolitan citizens and African migrants raised the possibility of some sort of Glissantian Relation identity amongst the Piazza Garibaldi local-popular that was being articulated through an opaque, chaotic and shifting multilingual togetherness. Whilst the streets around Piazza Garibaldi were being reconfigured as a tourist paradise of sanitised leisure shopping, the subversive, carnivalesque potential of the market informed the resistant strategies of the local people who were being pushed out. But, as with all instances of the carnivalesque, the attempts to recode the relations of dominance failed to do away completely with inequalities of power resulting in the painful reincorporation of racialised and gendered hierarchies.

The ideological content of the spectators' dialogic reasoning manifested itself in their sarcastic and impassioned talk about death, suicide and its relationship to wider social structures. The imagined possibility of being pushed out of the window to fall to your death, the wry and embittered manipulation of the idea of the jungle and civility, and the eloquent exhortations about this being a sign of generalised desperation were all subtle ways in which subordinated groups of people sought to speak back to power. The different verbal strategies of the Piazza Garibaldi local-popular demonstrated the ways that race and racism met contextually situated imaginaries of death, dying and human waste to inform the potential for collective subaltern ideologies and, possibly, action across racialised, transcultural boundaries. These dialogical processes were often contingent and ambiguous in their ambitions. Utopian imaginings always contained the possibility for the creation of further hierarchies and subordination.

The day after the suicide attempt at the CGIL trade union, the city woke up to an unusual spectacle along the main arteries of the city centre (see



20 The worker, hung out to dry (25 May 2012)

Figure 20). Overnight, an unknown group of political activists had stuffed white boiler suits with newspaper, stuck balloons in the hoods to mimic faces, and hung the resulting 'bodies' by the neck from trees and lamp posts across the city. The 'bodies' had signs around their necks saying things like 'worker', 'pensioner', 'woman' and 'immigrant', thus representing the groups of people who were being literally disposed of as a result of austerity politics and immigration policy.

In these episodes, the arresting spectacle of a hanging – redolent of both suicide and historic forms of public punishment – acted as a commentary and protest about the urgent state of the current historical conjuncture. A few days after the event at Via Torino, the antihegemonic commentary provided by the migrant and Neapolitans who gathered to see what would happen at the CGIL was echoed and reconfigured by the unknown group of activists. A lament of death coalesced into a wider human-rights discussion, and the language of the streets was taken up and organised by people working for social and political transformation.

The struggle for Via Bologna

In the midst of all this, City Hall evicted a number of licensed Neapolitan street vendors from Piazza Garibaldi and was threatening to close the licensed market at Via Bologna on the grounds that vendors were breaking the law by selling contraband merchandise. Mayor de Magistris, who had widespread support on the city's anti-racist scene because of his claimed anti-racist and anticapitalist politics, was accused of sacrificing his professed pro-migrant solidarity in pursuit of a punishing ideology of legality, law and order that was being pushed for by the centrist members of his administration (Chetta 2012; Cervasio 2012; Sannino 2012).¹ Neapolitan and migrant vendors had to work together, across boundaries of language, culture, religion, race and citizenship in order to organise collectively and protect their jobs. To do so they developed, and deployed, multilingual forms of political talk about death and about rights in collaboration with the city's anti-racist groups and trade unions. The following is an account of events that took place between February and May 2012 as the market was facing closure and, eventually, won the right to stay open.

Talk of death, dying and decay

The following transcript of a conversation between Gennaro and myself shows how talk about Napoli dying enabled him to express disillusionment and frustration with the process he and the other vendors were going through, after they had been evicted from their historic places around Piazza Garibaldi and not offered suitable new spots. At this time Gennaro, and a few of the other Neapolitan vendors, who had lost their spots, had set up a stall temporarily within Via Bologna market, where this conversation took place. The hopes that had been raised by a demonstration and meeting with town councillors a week or so before had now been dashed by the recent announcement that the Neapolitans couldn't

return to their original spots and had not been assigned anywhere new. They had requested a new meeting with the mayor, which had been refused.

Gennaro: It all looks black to me ... completely black.

Me: How do you mean?

Gennaro: It's just that ... I dunno ... that Neapolitans say 'Napoli is dying!' But it can't die, you know? In the meetings I've had with various councillors I've told them, 'look, I'm willing to roll my sleeves up, to work, for this city, even in the cold, so that we can rise out of this situation where "Napoli is decadent", "Napoli is dirty", "no one cleans Napoli", "Napoli can't fight back"'. 'Let's do this!', I tell them. Even if it does my head in. Even if I have to roll my sleeves up. And then after all the talking [the discussions about where to move their stalls to] there's nothing, despite all we've tried to do. It has no value. So I'm not doing it [moving the stall to the proposed new site] because I would kill myself with work for ... nothing. You see?

Talk about Napoli as dying was a way in which Gennaro condemned the urban management of market spaces, and struggled against his own marginalisation. He often echoed de Magistris in discussions about the city dying and needing to be reborn, but emphasising the role of marginalised figures like Gennaro himself and other street vendors in this renaissance. On another occasion he said to me, 'So, if we want to fix this city – if we want it to be reborn – we need to build our foundations right here, do you understand me?'

In Gennaro's political vision, the rebirth of a dying city was interwoven with his own reintegration into a renewed and thriving economy. His painful exclusion from the dignity of work was part and parcel of Napoli's marginalised and decaying status. He spoke frequently about the painful and mortifying experience of negotiating with city councillors.

Gennaro: You know Narducci [a councillor, later removed from his post] went to Piazza Carità and saw all those stalls that had been nicely done up – because they weren't ugly. He went up to one of the historic vendors there and said, 'Can I tell you something? These stalls make me sick.' He's got it in for the street vendors! He can't stand them. You see? You go up to a vendor to humiliate him ... When I asked him [Narducci], the first time we met in City Hall, about whether the vendors might get their places back, do you know what he did?

Omar: Hmmm ...

Gennaro: [He put his index fingers in his ears as Narducci had.] ‘What’s that? I can’t hear you!’

Omar: Yes, I was there. When you said, ‘Us ten want to go back in front of the station’, he did that. He was standing up over all of us, sitting down.

Gennaro’s discussion of death and dying protested not only the lack of opportunities for work in the city but also the offended dignity and threatened autonomy of street vendors who were being humiliated and vilified by City Hall. These kinds of speech formed part of a ‘formulaic corpus’ (Hewitt 1986: 8) about ideology and action through which he articulated common interests and ideas for collective struggle amongst the vendors at Via Bologna market.

Gennaro and his cousin Alfonso tried multiple tactics to ensure that they retain their livelihood during the market upheaval. As well as joining the African vendors from Via Bologna, they also collaborated with a group of Neapolitan vendors who had been evicted from spots around the city. They were working with the CGIL trade union and the A3f activist group as part of a petition that was separate from the organisation taking place at Via Bologna market. One morning I joined Gennaro, Alfonso and the twelve other displaced Neapolitan street vendors at a small protest outside City Hall. They were surrounded by a Precari Bros occupation, a representative of A3f and a representative from the CGIL union called Enzo. Enzo had attempted to arrange a meeting with the mayor and had been refused; the group were depressed and angry. They emerged without having achieved their objectives and the depressed atmosphere darkened significantly. Together the group discussed possible strategies, including an assembly at the CGIL with the mayor. One elderly street vendor, who had sold CDs and reading materials around Piazza Garibaldi for over two decades, said that if an assembly happened he would tell the mayor, ‘*You’re a wanker!*’ Enzo responded that he shouldn’t speak like that, or he would get thrown out. The old man got angry and shouted, ‘*I’ll say things how they are: you’re a wanker, you’re a shithead!*’ We all laughed. He continued, ‘*Can’t I just kill him? He’s killed me, so why can’t I kill him?*’

Here, again, the trope of life and death was used in order to conceptualise and articulate the struggle the vendors were facing. The stream of insults proposed by the old man was an important form of release for the suppressed rage and frustration that he and his colleagues were feeling. The man’s use of profanities was not intended to be expressed outside their circle but was meant as a tool for organising their rage in a situation where it was necessary for them to be much more strategic and dialogical about how they petitioned City Hall for their jobs.

Rights talk

At other times the vendors' rights talk seemed to take inspiration from the language of trade unionism and anti-racist politics, which was testament to Piazza Garibaldi's long reputation as a site of political protest and collective action for workers and migrants. The events surrounding the struggle for Via Bologna in 2012 were given form and support through collaborations between the street vendors and a range of groups, from the CGIL trade union to the Precari Bros unemployed movement, small migrant rights charities such as Garibaldi 101 and migrant associations such as Napoli's Senegalese Association. The language that came to be utilised by street vendors to articulate their struggle, and address powerful institutions, was revelatory of the ways in which a local-popular could emerge through experiences of direct oppression that were fed upwards into wider networks, crossing classes, and national, racialised and linguistic boundaries.

Towards the end of January 2012, a joint march around Piazza Garibaldi organised by the Senegalese Association and the street vendors culminated in a meeting with a group of city councillors. Omar attended on behalf of the African vendors on Via Bologna market, and Gennaro attended on behalf of the displaced Neapolitan vendors from around Piazza Garibaldi. I was not allowed to join them for these negotiations but was told afterwards they had received reassurances that Via Bologna was not under threat of closure. They were told that the Italians who had been evicted would be given priority when applying for new spots in licensed street markets. I went to greet them at Riccardo's shop on Via Bologna the day after the march. Serigne and Gennaro were there, chatting amicably, and Gennaro told Serigne that they had done the right thing by joining forces and marching on City Hall en masse. 'It is appropriate', he said jubilantly, 'that the rights of all the historic street vendors around Piazza Garibaldi have been recognised'. He then continued, 'It's also right that City Hall gives new people a chance to get by', referring to the new market spots that had been mentioned in the meeting.

Gennaro, knowledgeable about the mores of both political discourse and action, took the lead in this conversation about the recent march and meeting. He defined two important social actors in the street vending landscape: historic street vendors and aspiring street vendors, drawn together by the need to 'get by'. The verb he actually used was *campare*, which means to survive, subsist, or get by as well as possible. He was thus connecting the political actions of the dispossessed vendors to the dignified and quasi-political logic of making a living in conditions

of worklessness and precariousness. This needs to be understood against a history of City Hall managing street vendors differentially through what Roediger and Esch (2014) have termed ‘race management’, offering out market spaces and opportunities for work on a nationally and racially differential basis. Gennaro’s celebratory comments reflected a strategy for concerted action that was transcultural and explicitly worked against attempts to divide by race and nationality.

However, at other times the political language of Gennaro and the other Neapolitan vendors functioned to flatten out the differential power dynamics between the Neapolitans and the migrants. This amounted to a denial of the pernicious effects of racism and a refusal to think about collective struggle as also being about providing cover to people who were standing alongside you but experiencing a different set of oppressive circumstances. Only a week after the jubilant conversation I have recounted, it became clear that City Hall were not following through on their promise. Two of the Neapolitan vendors, Gennaro and Alfonso, became suspicious that they were being double-crossed by their African colleagues. They confronted Omar about this.

Gennaro: Omar, just tell it to me in Italian because you speak Italian well. I still understand a bit of Italian ... What got said last Tuesday? They said that Via Bologna market will stay as it is and there will be the opportunity to reapply for the spots, but giving priority to those who have been there for all these years. Then, if there are other spots available within Via Bologna, we get priority for those spots.

Omar tried to explain that the situation was more complicated for the African vendors – that they were in this situation because of systematic discrimination over many years and on a number of different levels.

Omar: Look, immigrants ... the vendor licences of these vendors here got regularised ten years ago. People buy their vendor licences but are discriminated against still. In this country!

Gennaro: Discrimination? But that’s even between us, you get me?

It is interesting that Omar – the left-wing migrant activist – got positioned as having the ear of the city’s political elite, expressed through the accusation that he was able to speak Italian. This was one of the ways in which the Neapolitan vendors insisted on presenting the struggle through a lens that relativised the experience of injustice, with a Glissantian linguistic analogy of an authoritative

‘vehicular’ national language undermining a subaltern and powerless speaker of ‘vernacular’ dialect (Glissant 1997: 118–119, 143). The slippages in Gennaro’s speech between ‘racial denial’ and a call for class-focused politics were made possible by the emergence of postrace discourses that reduced and simplified the struggle to reactive modalities (Goldberg 2009: 192).

At this point relations between the West African street vendors in the market, represented by Omar, and the Neapolitan street vendors were becoming strained. Although much of the interaction was delivered in a joking tone of voice, as often happened on Neapolitan pavements, humour was a verbal strategy that signalled openly identifiable threats. Dialect was often used in this way to make a point about differential status and positionality between Neapolitans and migrants and as part of the performance of a gangster or *guappo* masculinity with its attendant capacities for violence. Relations between Omar, Gennaro and Alfonso continued to sour. A week or so later I was again standing with Gennaro and Alfonso by their stalls when Omar passed by. The two men called for Omar to stop for a minute and Gennaro asked him why they hadn’t been invited to the last meeting with City Hall. Omar seemed irritated by their questioning and wearily explained that this was an Anti-Racist Forum meeting to do with the refugee situation in the hotels. Gennaro angrily interrogated, ‘refugees and ...?’ Omar, looking at him strangely, and responded, ‘Just for the refugees.’ Gennaro snapped back that, ‘You see, I thought you were about to say something else: ‘refugees and r-acism’. Omar repeated again that the recent meeting had been organised by the Anti-Racist Forum and was nothing to do with the markets. Gennaro shouted at him, making his position completely explicit: ‘There’s just one race: the political race!’ Omar nodded understandingly, and slightly resignedly, and told us he had to go. Gennaro and Alfonso asked him when he would be back to talk, and Omar responded, ‘After six thirty’. ‘After six months?!’, shouted Alfonso in disbelief. I explained that he had misheard. ‘No, six months sounds about right’, responded Alfonso sarcastically.

This scene was revelatory of the growing paranoia affecting the relationship of Gennaro and Alfonso with Omar, whom the African street vendors within Via Bologna were all deferring to on the matter. Omar was involved with numerous struggles at this time, including Via Bologna and the so-called migrant crisis that had been proclaimed in the wake of the Arab Spring and the collapse of the Italy–Libya migration agreement. Again Gennaro made a plea for a common alliance using a language of class struggle that refused to recognise the stratifying effects of racism. I knew, from discussions with both Omar and Serigne at the time, that they were growing frustrated with, and distrustful of, Gennaro and Alfonso

because of their constant manoeuvres between different campaigning groups, some of whom they did not wish to affiliate themselves with. For their part, Gennaro and Alfonso felt that the African vendors were closing ranks against them. I also found myself in the middle of this, with demands from Gennaro and Alfonso about the whereabouts of Omar and Serigne and what they were planning. I was both a fellow Italian and an outsider to them, and they knew of my connections to the people helping them in the anti-racist scene. Serigne asked me to not report anything to them but to try and let things just play out. I tried to manage the awkward position I found myself occupying in this dispute by not commenting on what they said to me, although this occasionally generated more discord. Following another row between Gennaro and Omar outside Riccardo's shop, Riccardo asked me why I said nothing. I told him I was just listening, and he laughed at me scornfully. I said to him that it would be nice if there could be greater solidarity amongst all of us and he told me, with a wide smile, 'It's culture, it's society.'

Facing the crackdown together

These intersubjective tensions amongst street vendors were then brought into sharp focus by a number of interventions into the market made by the media and the city's police forces in partnership with City Hall.

One day in early March the market was interrupted by the impromptu arrival of a reporter and videographer from an Italian news-and-current-affairs programme called *Striscia la notizia*. They started speaking with two officers of the *Vigilanza Urbana*, which represented the branch of the police force responsible for urban management. A shiver of fear snaked up the whole road, and people started whispering frantically to each other, thinking that these men might be linked to the *Finanza*, the branch of law enforcement that dealt with matters of fraud. Alfonso, having casually walked over to eavesdrop on the two intruders, immediately enlisted the help of a local Neapolitan to pick up his stall and run as fast as possible away from the unfolding action. Everyone else started shoving any contraband items they might have into large bags, closing their stalls up or covering everything with a cloth.

Initially the reporter circulated amongst the migrant and Italian vendors at the Piazza Garibaldi end of the market, asking to see vendor licences and sales receipts. He homed in on two migrant vendors from Guinea-Conakry and Senegal. On reaching Assane, the Guinean street vendor, the reporter shoved the microphone towards him and shouted, 'Have you got a vendor permit? Show

me your visa documents!’ Assane stuttered incoherently, holding the palms of his hands up to the man who immediately turned to face the camera and said, ‘As you can see, no one here has a permit. This is an illegal market.’ He then approached Pap, an elderly Senegalese street vendor, asking the same question. He, too, stuttered and was unable to respond, clearly from nerves. Comfort walked up to interrupt him and told him, ‘People here are just trying to survive.’ The reporter simply snapped back, ‘Where is your permit? Where are your visa papers?’ Omar arrived, and Alfonso, having returned from hiding his stall, asked him what on earth was happening. Meanwhile, the reporter started interviewing an Italian vendor who, unlike all the other street vendors on Via Bologna, had already managed to obtain a vendor permit on Via Bologna. This, in and of itself, marked him out as suspicious. Many vendors were suggesting to me at the time that he knew important people, or had struck some kind of deal in order to legitimise his presence in the market ahead of everyone else. These suspicions were further raised by the ease with which he welcomed, and delivered his speech to, the reporter, as if he had been expecting him.

I approached Assane and asked him if he was OK. I told him, ‘Next time you say “no comment”. It means you refuse to speak.’ A Neapolitan man standing next to me added that, ‘“No comment” is universal language nowadays.’ The interviews with Assane and the Senegalese vendor made it into the final online video, published on *Striscia*’s YouTube page (*Striscia* Napoli 2012). As the video shows, both vendors had trouble understanding and responding in Italian to the journalist, and the sound of canned laughter was superimposed over their conversation to highlight this, and so provide a moment of racist humour and mockery. Assane and Pap’s features were blurred, but the face of the Neapolitan vendor interviewed was not, a technique that was further suggestive of their purported undocumented and criminal status. The soundtrack of the video was ‘He’s a pirate’ from the score of *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, a further attempt to emphasise the market as unruly, lawless and threatening.

Meanwhile, all around us could be heard the frantic whisper that, ‘Finanza are coming, Finanza are coming!’ Before I was even aware of it, the Chinese-owned shops along the back of the market had slammed shut the metallic security gates of their shop-fronts. Suddenly five police cars, with ‘Finanza’ emblazoned along the side, screeched down the middle of the market, having presumably removed the pedestrian barrier at the back entrance. They stopped at the midway point of Via Bologna and we saw two black men get bundled into the back seat of one before the line of cars, blue lights flashing, sped off again. This was all filmed by the dynamic reporter and his cameramen as we watched in horror.

At this point I decided to approach the journalist and his cameraman, who were again standing at the head of the market, and introduce myself. I told them I was wondering what they were doing there. The reporter responded that they were putting together a report for *Striscia la notizia* about illegal markets and contraband in Napoli. I then explained that I was doing a research project about the market. The reporter asked me, 'Are you a journalist?' 'A researcher', I told him. He then asked me, 'Are you Neapolitan?' Failing to see the relevance of this, I evasively responded, 'Half half'. He stared at me suspiciously for a few seconds and then, feeling intimidated, I thanked him and left.

In the palpable relief that followed the departure of the journalist and the police I went to see if Omar and my other research participants further up the street were OK. As we talked about the fate of the two Nigerian vendors, we speculated whether the whole thing had been set up. We discussed the claims, being made publicly by members of the city's anti-racist scene and assessors in City Hall in journalistic interviews, that the Assessor for Legality, Giuseppe Narducci, and Head of the Municipal Police, Luigi Sementa, were working against Mayor de Magistris' stated claim to support the continuation of Via Bologna market by creating and amplifying the moral panic about its existence as a threat to legality and public order (Chetta 2012; Cervasio 2012).

The special treatment that was reserved for the city's only 'migrant' market was demonstrative of the ways in which migrant street vendors had historically been presented as a key social problem in Italy. Moreover, it also demonstrated the ways in which black migrant street vendors and the sale of contraband had been presented as a key social problem in Italy. The journalist Pino Grazioli explained that his team were investigating *illegal* markets and the sale of contraband, even though Via Bologna was certainly *not* illegal or unauthorised at that time, whether or not *some* of the vendors might have been selling a bit of contraband on the side or had omitted to pay the entirety of the taxes they owed. It is therefore possible to consider his comments as defamatory. Given that it was well known that fake merchandise was also being sold in the new market at Porta Capuana around the corner, where the street vendors were all Neapolitan, it is important to question why Via Bologna market was targeted so aggressively. The majority were able to reopen their stalls following the market's reorganisation, suggesting that the vendors at Via Bologna had been largely scrupulous in their business practice.

However, during the discussion we had following the raid, Riccardo told Omar that he should stop doing protests against racism because 'there is no racism'. 'We should protest about these kinds of corruption', he asserted. Instead

of recognising the ways in which African vendors were being specifically targeted by the authorities, different hierarchies of oppression, to do with race, legal status and linguistic aptitude were reduced to a question of the powerful against the powerless. Riccardo, who had a bit of a literary bent, turned to me and said, 'This is the time of the spider, Antonia, and we are the mosquitoes in the net.'

The street vendors deployed a number of strategies in order to protect and defend themselves against this onslaught. The first of these was the tactical use of silence and stuttering used by Assane and Pap. This 'linguistic veiling' was a key protective strategy that had historically been used by the powerless in the face of oppression. However, it was only partially successful. Whilst it protected the two vendors from further scrutiny, it also left them vulnerable to racist mockery, as highlighted in the video (Scott 1990: 2–26). Humiliation worked together with terror in the performance of dominance that took place. Others chose more direct approaches that relied on talk of death and dying as a political strategy, allowing people to claim a right to survive. Comfort made such an exhortation about the vendors' desperation and need to survive. I myself tried to hold the journalist to account by asking him what he was doing there. We were, of course, both ignored and brushed aside. Our interventions did not make it into the final video. These dialogical and strategic responses revealed the rebellious imaginative capacity of people who had to be very careful about how they face power.

In the following weeks a number of attempts were made by the police to close the market down. One morning I arrived at Via Bologna to find Serigne in a state of high agitation. He told me some police officers had shown up at the market at 8 a.m. with an order to close the market down because it was 'illegal'. Upon inspection, it appeared this order was from the year 2000, before the market had even been regularised and when it was, indeed, illegal, or unregulated. The officers were asked who had given these orders, and what their identification numbers were, but refused to give any information and abruptly left.

At that point all the street vendors were going through the process of reapplying for their spots within the market, ahead of the deadline specified by City Hall. Serigne and Omar were working together to make sure that everyone's documentation was in order. As well as being in possession of a work visas, identity cards and vendor licences, they needed to prove that they had paid the relevant local and national taxes. As this had all been decided rather abruptly, and it was a time of year that many vendors were visiting family back home, this was creating significant bureaucratic difficulties for everyone involved. Omar told me that he felt they had no choice but to play the bureaucratic game for now. The short notice that had been given for the applications process revealed the way

in which institutions made it difficult for people to complete tricky bureaucratic processes on time, even when they were eligible and had completed all the necessary requirements. This was a key way in which hegemony worked at local and national levels.

A week later, I got to Via Bologna to discover that the market had been shut down by police the previous day. They didn't have an order this time but explained that Via Bologna had to be closed until the market was reorganised because there had been complaints about the selling of contraband there. Omar and Enzo, the representative from the CGIL trade union, had arrived on the scene as it was happening, and demanded to see an official eviction notice. The police officer they approached responded by asking to see Omar's visa. Enzo protested that this was unethical, and the officer promptly threw him to the ground and dragged him along the pavement. Then both Omar and Enzo were arrested, only to be released without charge a few hours later. The atmosphere when I arrived was tense, with a significant police presence and the vendors sitting around helplessly.

Omar then arrived with Serigne, having come from City Hall, where they had tried and failed to obtain a meeting with the mayor or any other councillor. Word was passed round for all the vendors to gather in front of Riccardo's shop. Omar told those assembled that there was going to be a protest in front of City Hall the following morning. He spoke first in Wolof and then in Italian, asking them to make sure they were on time and to bring their children. The group of vendors that crowded round Omar to seek guidance were Senegalese, Guinean, Nigerian, Egyptian and Italian. They were Italian nationals, documented migrants and undocumented migrants with little hope of regularising their status (see [Figure 21](#)). The practical decision to communicate in two languages marked a turning point in the nature of the struggle. Not only was it clearly time for direct, organised, political action to be taken, but this action had to be collective and would take the form of a multilingual 'counterpoetic'. They would have to speak together, and on each other's behalf, despite their different racial, class and national statuses, and despite the difficulties of communication.

The protest was organised in collaboration with a number of anti-racist groups in the city and Napoli's Senegalese Association. Vendors were given placards to hold that had been made for them, whilst activists stood by in support. The idea was to centre the vendors' voices and allow them to appeal directly to City Hall. A market stall was set up as a symbol of the livelihood that had been removed from them (see [Figure 22](#)). Omar started off proceedings by taking a megaphone and greeting the mayor, explaining why they were gathered there and telling him he should be ashamed about targeting migrants in this way and leaving over



21 The multilingual counterpoetic response (28 March 2012)

eighty families without money to live on. After this, different street vendors took turns with the microphone, shouting at the vacant windows of City Hall. Alfonso used his time with the mic to express his solidarity with his ‘migrant brothers’, united in struggle. He eloquently stated that they all knew their lot: they would never be able to rent a shop and so were considered lesser people. For them, he said, the market was a means of survival, and they had been messed around for months now. He told them that City Hall did not understand how business worked, and they should be working with the traders to help them find the best places to make a living. Comfort took the mic and urged them to help her and her family survive by opening up the market again.

Then Omar convinced Elijah, the 1-year-old son of one of the Nigerian vendors, to say a few words (see [Figure 23](#)). He decided to address Mayor de Magistris directly: ‘Come down here and face us. Because of you my mum can’t buy food. I was born in this country but I don’t feel welcome here. We look different but we are all equal!’ Many people started crying, and an unknown Neapolitan bystander grabbed Elijah and kissed him on the head. I went over to him to ask him if he knew the young man or his mum. He told me he had never met them before but was moved by their situation, as it mirrored his own. He was a member of the Precari Bros and told me that, since his unemployment benefits



22 The street vendors gathered in front of City Hall (29 March 2012)

had been cut, he no longer knew how to feed his family. He told me that the previous month he had come to City Hall and tried to set fire to himself in protest.

The demonstration crystallised many of the intersecting social interests and experiences of disenfranchised people in Napoli. The kinds of spontaneous transcultural solidarity that emerged that day refused attempts to divide by race or nationality in the discovery of a common struggle, but without completely doing away with the differences in power between them. The vendors' protest, and particularly Elijah's furious address, appeared in all the major news outlets the following day. An unattributed quote from a member of the city's anti-racist network accused the mayor of racism and migrant scapegoating:

We believe that the democratic city should offer an immediate response regarding these interventions, which are heavily redolent of racism, on the responsibilities of the Head of the Municipal Police, Luigia Sementa; of the Assessor for Legality, Giuseppe Narducci; and also of Mayor de Magistris, who should clarify with facts whether he really wants to show openness and solidarity towards migrant citizens or if he hopes to continue hiding behind the arrogant faces and truncheons of some of his employees. (Chetta 2012, translated by the author)



23 Elijah takes the mic (29 March 2012)

Mayor de Magistris took to Twitter that day to say he was offended by this accusation. However, in an interview given during this period, de Magistris is quoted as saying, 'I am a tolerant person, but it is intolerable to see the pavements of Via Caracciolo [a pedestrianised boulevard along the seafront popular with tourists and locals] occupied by all those goods' (Sannino 2012). This statement reveals much about the ambiguity of de Magistris' position, as avowedly pro-migrant and anti-racist but also serving a logic of security and order that would

displace, even with violence, what were seen as unruly public displays in order to encourage tourist wealth. On this occasion, the council waited until 2 April 2012 to announce that the market would reopen as a temporary fair, free of charge, until everyone's documentation had been checked and the market could reopen on a regular basis.

Ambivalent victories

Early on in 2012 the Combonian missionary Father Alex Zanotelli wrote a public letter addressed to Mayor de Magistris entitled 'The cry of the Neapolitan street vendor', accusing him of fomenting war amongst the poor by pitting migrant and Neapolitan street vendors against each other in the fight for diminishing market spots. However, the efforts made by the State institutions to dismantle street markets, through the same processes of 'race management' that they had historically used to organise markets in the city, were undone by the actions of the street vendors in collaboration with a group of activists who rallied around them. Although migrant and Neapolitan vendors were pitted against each other in the struggle for diminishing market spaces, the events they collectively experienced at that time also worked to bring them together and forge a Gramscian-inspired transcultural local-popular capable of appropriating and rehabilitating a wider narrative about crisis, the economy and migration, and using it to speak back to power. Their use and adaptation of antihegemonic talk, and their efforts to translate this across cultural and linguistic divides, spoke to both Bakhtin and Voloshinov's arguments about language and social change, as well as to Glissant's assertion that multilingualism was central to political transformation in a world that had been devastated by racial violence and division. Clearly this was not a simple activity, but the product of compromise and forbearance, where genuine reciprocity, collaborative performances, rubbing alongside and bitter resentment coexisted uncomfortably together. Their politics of local solidarity was, by necessity, multilingual and multicultural in ways that were both transformative of social relations and, at the same time, deeply ambivalent.

The events at Via Bologna should be seen as a provisional victory. Imaginaries of death, dying and decay continued to inform the talk of vendors at Via Bologna after it had been officially reopened for business in May 2012. This was reflective of the ongoing difficulties vendors were facing in a depressed economy and following months of ideological warfare against the markets they worked in. I went down to Via Bologna on the day it reopened. All the vendors had been allotted numbered spaces along the road, and some were very unhappy about

their new positions. The spots were also quite small, so people had to adapt their stalls and put less merchandise on show. A few of the historic vendors had lost their spots because they hadn't paid all their taxes. This had created space for new vendors to come into the market, all Italian. There was a simmering tension and bitterness about this amongst the West African vendors. For their part, Gennaro and Alfonso were complaining about the smell of African food being cooked, and pointed out the culprits to me, saying they didn't know how they would stand it if they had to stay in the same spot. Although they had been active members of the struggle to keep Via Bologna market open, and had argued vociferously for collaboration across transcultural boundaries at the time, the translation of these statements of solidarity into everyday collaboration was not seamless or simple to achieve.

The market continued to fail to thrive as I came to the end of my fieldwork. When I went to see the vendors there, we spoke of past struggles, old age and their belief that they didn't have any more fight left in them. These nostalgic discourses, while seeming hopeless and melancholic, showed a continued understanding of how their struggle for work, dignity and autonomy fitted into a longer history and wider context of struggle. As such there was an edginess to their talk, where it was possible to see sparks of grim exhilaration and a willingness to keep on going. On one morning that I spent at the market, Gennaro started to tell me stories about the historic struggles to set up market stalls around Piazza Garibaldi. He told me more about the nature of the political disagreement he had had with Comfort ten years earlier. Comfort had been an important ally but they had fallen out after Via Bologna market was transformed into a legal market in 2001. She ended up with a spot within the market itself – which was designated as an African market space – but Gennaro and Alfonso were given spots around the square, where business was better. She had accused him of betrayal and they had only started speaking again ten years later. For their part they had accused her of being unreliable and failing to show up to protests as she was more interested in opening her stall than in taking time out to march and petition.

I went off to greet other people in the market and found Comfort, who decided to go and say hello to Gennaro and Alfonso with me. They commiserated about the new market organisation and then Gennaro asked her how old she was. She said, 'I'm 52. I'm old now and I can't take this any more.' They nodded in agreement. She said, 'Maybe it's time to go home.' Gennaro gently started to remind her about the old days, when she sold wax cloth and her son was small. She smiled in recollection and said that business was good in those days. Gennaro asked her, 'But where did all your money go Comfort? Did you send it all home?'

Comfort mentioned that she had opened an internet café that had gone bankrupt because there was too much competition. She said that she had lost all her money on this venture. On the way home I dropped by Riccardo's shop and asked him how things were going. 'They're going badly! No one is coming anywhere near this street!' he told me. He said that the recent troubles had put people off. The dilapidated state of the market, and the heavy police presence, were also not helping. He suggested that the council had decided it was easier to starve out the market vendors instead of killing them off directly.

Note

- 1 Mayor de Magistris and his administration were accused of racism and hypocrisy in their treatment of the market vendors around Piazza Garibaldi and Via Bologna. Father Alex Zanotelli stated that, 'It seems that City Hall is ashamed of the vendors', whilst activist Antonio Esposito said that, 'an ideological use is being made of the idea of legality that, deprived of justice, becomes an instrument of violence that serves an ideology of order and security' (Cervasio 2012).

Rebuilding the Tower

THE WORK OF Edouard Glissant, about the historical connection between language, power and domination, has been the central guiding force of this book. I mentioned, at the beginning, how his use of the Tower of Babel story has helped me to think about the liberatory possibilities of the multilingual talk that took place in the heterogeneous and multiethnic market places around Piazza Garibaldi in Napoli. Beyond the linguistic confusion, violences and silences of the postcolonial world, he argued that it was possible to build the Tower – *in every language*. (Glissant 1997: 9). This moving notion was as much a description of real processes at work as a call to action. His multilingual counterpoetics described a transitional stage in the struggle for autonomy that was necessary for overturning the relations of power that made transcultural Relation so unequal and violent (Britton 1999: 52). In this book, I have sought to show how the ability to talk *in every language* was about how to claim the right to be somewhere; how to defend yourself from exclusion and violence; how to live with multiethnic heterogeneity; how to translate for, provide cover for and support other people; how to imagine a better world. These imaginaries eventually animated the ambivalent and partially successful political action the street vendors organised in 2012, a moment that recollected past activism, and prefigured future difficulties.

Via Bologna market was subject to another eviction attempt in June 2017, this time, ostensibly, to make space for an underground car park for the railway station. Descriptions of the market as a ‘souk’ and justifications from City Hall about tourism, public order, and legality again highlighted the racialised nature of discourses around migration and the neoliberal imperatives placed on the use of public space (anon. 2017a). As before, the city’s social movements sprang into gear in solidarity with the evicted vendors and, as before, the market was successfully reopened. Mayor de Magistris clarified, ‘We always help people who want to integrate themselves into our society and respect our laws’ (anon. 2017b).

Whilst staying in Napoli in summer 2018, I walked through Piazza Garibaldi on my way to buy food for lunch. The new metro station-cum-shopping centre had been completed and was open for business. It loomed over the piazza, shaped like a gigantic metal spider. Its steel limbs supported a glass roof over escalators that disappeared into the bowels of the piazza, where rows of chain stores led you to the city's underground train lines. I thought again of Riccardo – whose shop on Via Bologna had now moved elsewhere to try and pick up more business – and the time he told me that Napoli was in 'the time of the spider' with the poor and marginalised as the flies in its net. The piazza appeared completely empty and 'clean': there was no rubbish on the streets, very few street vendors were still attempting to set up stalls alongside the big spider and there was a visible presence of police. I had also heard that vigilante groups had been going around with baseball bats and threatening vendors in unlicensed street markets, in particular the Roma markets of scavenged goods. Vicious attacks against black people, in particular against black street vendors, had taken place in Napoli, as in the rest of the country, despite the city's reputation for being more welcoming and open-minded. I was told that people weren't going out in the evening as much as before. Migrants, particularly, felt unsafe, both with regard to law enforcement and with regard to the local population. Nearby, Via Bologna market was still hanging on, but was quiet and lethargic, in much reduced form. Piazza Garibaldi had been successfully redesigned by City Hall as a popular tourist destination, and the city's so-called renaissance had necessitated the clearing away of anything that might disrupt the experience.

The following evening, I dropped by Giovanni's grocery shop whilst I was walking down an eerily empty Rettifilo with my family. After we had chatted for a bit he told me, his voice wobbling slightly with emotion, that, 'of course we lost Samba'. Giovanni explained how, when he fell ill, he helped Samba's friends in Napoli raise the money so he could fly home to die with his family. I hadn't actually heard this sad news. Samba was someone who had been present on a few occasions whilst I was spending time on Ibra's stall, but was not someone I knew very well. Thinking about what had happened to Samba made me reflect upon the conspicuous absence of so many of the people I had worked with or come to know whilst doing fieldwork in 2012, many of whom I had kept in touch with. I thought about Modou, who had been sentenced in absentia for selling contraband and, when the police caught up with him, was sent to prison. I thought about those who now messaged me with updates and holiday greetings from northern Italy, France or Germany, where they had found work, with or without the correct paperwork. The restrictions and crackdowns on street vending – a key

source of informal employment in Napoli – had made it impossible for them to stay there. Many of the activists and cultural mediators I knew had also left the city to seek opportunities across Europe.

Despite this, an unspectacular everyday multiculturalism endured in Napoli where, as in other towns and cities across the world, an alternative, antinationalist class politics was part of the way in which ordinary people improvised, got by and made their lives (Hall 2012; Simone 2018; Valluvan 2019). Multilingual talk persisted in the face of the awful spectacle of radical incommunicability in progress in the Mediterranean, as disposable people continued to drown trying to cross over into Europe (Mbembe 2019; Gilroy 1993: 57; Levi 1986: 69–79). The ‘edginess’ of multilingual talk – amongst people diversified in terms of race, legal status, religion and language, but united by an understanding of their potential disposability – offered useful insights into the kinds of imaginaries that would be needed to overcome a rising politics of borders and nationalism. Edginess defined processes of transcultural negotiation that were precarious, risky, frightening, but also exhilarating and enjoyable because they were potentially transformative. Both in its everyday manifestations, and as part of organised social movements, edginess was the entrenched, counterpoetical and multilingual response to racism as a scavenger ideology (Fredrickson 2002) that might rise and then be beaten back, only to reappear in another location, and at another moment, as its persistent shadow.

One important dimension of edgy talk concerned the significance of humour. Humour was double-edged: it could both up-end and reinstate power differentials and racialised hierarchies, creating the possibility of convivial openings or violent closures against difference. The frequently humorous multilingual strategies invoked by my research participants walked a fine line between abuse and companionableness, and the grain of both possibilities often resided in the same people. This ambivalent humour was connected to joy, and the transcultural communicative dexterity through which people bantered with each other, made money and resisted marginalisation. I have tried in the book to define where things broke down, where there were limits, and where events on the pavement coalesced upwards and formed into collective struggles that generated links between street vendors, students and other activists.

Another important dimension of this edginess concerned the constant fluctuation between linguistic powerlessness and linguistic resilience. Throughout the book I have reflected on what it meant to not be able to talk, for example with the Bangladeshi street vendors who were attacked in the street in [Chapter 6](#) on the grounds that they couldn’t speak back. I have also reflected on defiant accounts

of repossession of language, of migrants telling me they knew when to talk and how to talk in order to gain respect and legitimacy. I have examined episodes of linguistic veiling, when speaking in other languages, or claiming not to be able to speak, offered ambivalent protection and camouflage from violence and scrutiny. These dynamics showed how power differentials shaped the way in which people communicated with each other every day to create new communalities and ambiguous possibilities of unity.

The multifarious languages being spoken – such as Italian, Neapolitan, Wolof and English – occupied different symbolic statuses within emotional trajectories of movement and struggle. They also had racialised ideologies and painful histories attached to them. Their use, and the styles of their delivery, enacted different symbolic purposes in transcultural pavement interactions. The dichotomy of speaking Italian or Neapolitan connected to the wounded narrative of Italian nation-building, and the nurturing of a subaltern local street cred that granted, or denied, respect to the people making their living on the street. The need to speak English was a constant reminder of the cultural imperialism of the USA and the lack of control that they could exert within the world economy. For Neapolitans, this feeling of inferiority, filtered through the memory of returnee emigrants speaking ‘americano’, was further complicated by the fact of having to try and speak English to other people who had been wounded by modernity. Other languages, introduced by people previously only known through a suppressed memory of colonialism, were partially integrated into transcultural talk where it was expedient to do so and where bridges needed to be built.

In short, the people working in Neapolitan street markets often did not have full mastery over the languages in which they communicated with each other. They were always translating, and their linguistic toil was frequently difficult and incomplete. The struggle involved in this daily effort simply to be able to speak to each other was yet another dimension of edginess. Despite the difficulties, communication was nearly always successful, even if it could shift between a transcultural positive and negative. In 2012, the vendors at Via Bologna managed to keep the street market open because of two factors: their ability to translate political objectives and action points across various languages and cultures, and their understanding of the need to take a positive position on the issue of migration and black street vendors in Napoli. These interconnected elements of the vendors’ political organisation were reflected in struggles taking place globally. Roediger and Esch’s work on international labour movements (2014) charted the emergence of social movements that were working explicitly against ‘race management’. Central to such struggles – for example, the Minneapolis Hotel

Workers' strike and Smithfield's Tar Heel North Carolina Plant wildcat strikes – was a pro-migration political stance and multilingual strategies of organisation that involved providing cover whilst standing alongside those subjected to differential and unequal legal statuses (Bacon 2008).

So, what did these indeterminate and power-laden processes of joking; linguistic resilience; and transcultural, multilingual translation suggest about the realities of living on a constantly shifting plateau of difference? Despite difficulties and breakdowns, the people who participated in my project were able to live with an incomplete understanding of everything that was being said around them, and to them. An acceptance that some of the talk would appear opaque, or not fully discernible, entailed a disposition towards living with difference as something both constant and constantly shifting. This lived Relation had important implications for understanding the contemporary stakes of racism. The global movement of people created a mobile, multilingual babel in all those locations where transcultural encounters occurred, and the result was not chaos but an ever-changing and interactive amalgamation of difference. Accepting opacity entailed a practice of freedom that refused borders and reinscribed what was involved in claiming belonging. It was true that these processes emerged in a polylinguistic Europe, where diverse and heterogeneous linguistic and cultural circuits existed alongside borders, nationalist homogenisation and 'racial denial' (Goldberg 2009: 152–192). But, at the same time, ambivalent and partial multilingual counterpoetics were not something that institutions and governments could do much either to encourage or to repress, despite frequent stated intentions to do so. They could no more stop the babel of late capitalism than they could prevent the movement of people looking for choice and opportunities in other places. The edgy languages of the people signified the power of their collective drive.

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