

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.