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'If I see a black dot, I shoot it on sight!': Italian rap between anti- and neo-fascisms

ABSTRACT

This article explores the connections between anti-fascism and hip hop in Italy between the 1990s and today. In the first part, I look at how several bands affiliated with the posse *movement of the early 1990s relied on the network of students and of young people hanging out in the* centri sociali *(squatted centres) to spread their political messages. Picking up the baton from the militant singer-songwriters of the 1970s, Italian posses often mixed rap with other foreign musical influences such as reggae and punk, frequently rapping about the lack of anti-fascist activism among the youth and denouncing the gradual abandonment of anti-fascist ideals by members of the parliamentary Left. In the second part of the article, I discuss how, in the late 2000s, a new generation of anti-fascist hip hop artists emerged, with rappers such as Kento and Murubutu being among the most influential representatives of a subgenre known as 'letteraturap' (literature-rap). Kento and Murubutu's narrative skills show their opposition to Fascism through the use of fictional characters, using short stories that are rich of metaphors to illustrate the importance of resisting to contemporary forms of fascism. Lastly, this article explores the gradual appropriation of hip hop culture by neo-fascist groups such as CasaPound. Understanding hip hop's potentialities to recruit large numbers of young people, CasaPound organized street art conventions on graffiti, and promoted the emergence of hip hop crews like Rome's Drittarcore. I conclude the*

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article by analysing the efficacy of anti-fascist rap in earlier decades and considering CasaPound's attempt to appropriate some of hip hop culture's disciplines, ultimately showing not only a general crisis in political ideologies and cultural values, but also the power of neo-fascist movements to manipulate and reinvent subcultural formations to influence the youth.

Emerging in the early 1970s in the New York City borough of the Bronx, hip hop is a subcultural youth movement that has always had anti-racism as one of its founding principles. Coming from marginalized African American and Latino communities, hip hop immediately became a counterhegemonic means of expression that allowed young people to create new trends, focusing on street art, music and dance rather than on gang violence and crime. With the global spread of hip hop culture in the 1980s, local scenes started to emerge all over the world, often imitating the style of the first artists who toured outside of the United States, while also adapting hip hop to the particular social and political circumstances of their geographical area. An interesting case is presented by the Italian hip hop scene, which owes part of its success to student activism, anti-fascist and anti-racist networks, and the development in the 1990s of the *posse* movement, which was especially active in the context of Italy's *centri sociali occupati* ('squatted social centers').[1]

Picking up the baton from the militant singer-songwriters of the 1970s, Italian posses often mixed rap with other foreign musical influences such as reggae and punk, proposing new ways for music and activism to coincide while also criticizing the moderate political conduct of the institutional Left (Wright 2000: 127). A decade later, in the late 2000s, a new generation of anti-fascist hip hop artists has emerged, with rappers such as Kento and Murubutu being among the most influential representatives of a subgenre known as *letteraturap* ('literature-rap'). Finally, in spite of its historically anti-racist and anti-fascist roots, even neo-fascist movements like Italy's CasaPound have attempted to exploit hip hop culture's appeal, understanding its potentialities to recruit large numbers of young people. After a brief review of the emergence of hip hop culture in the United States, this article considers its development in Italy, focusing in particular on the efficacy of the posse movement and of contemporary artists to spread anti-fascist messages, but also on its appropriation and manipulation by Italian neo-fascist movements.

'BROTHERS GONNA WORK IT OUT': THE EMERGENCE OF HIP HOP CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

Hip hop emerged in the early 1970s in New York City. Latino and African American communities, as well as young Caribbean immigrants, were the original core of this subculture, which manifested itself through disciplines as different as graffiti writing, DJ-ing, MC-ing (also known as rapping), and b-boying (also known as breakdancing). Central to the initial emergence of hip hop culture are the innovations introduced by three DJs known as Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa, who are considered hip hop's godfathers. While Bambaataa was born and raised in the Bronx from Jamaican and Barbadian parents, Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash were born in Jamaica and Barbados, respectively, and immigrated to the United States during their teenage years. The diasporic and Caribbean origins of these DJs are particularly significant to hip hop culture's evolution from a music genre

1. All translations from Italian are the author's.

that was primarily performed in its live dimension to, a few years later, the actual recording of songs (Chang 2005: 21–39). That is, in the minds of its original performers, hip hop was supposed to replicate the atmosphere of music parties traditionally held in the Caribbean and especially Jamaican *yard*s (Rose 1994: 75; Chang 2005) rather than becoming a new phenomenon for the already well-established recording industry.[2]

One aspect that led to the creation of hip hop culture was the will of young African Americans and Latinos 'to survive through strength, self-expression, and plain old fun' (George 2002: ix) to the racial and socio-economic marginalization that they were facing on a structural level. The days of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s were gone, and very little had been done to combat the emergence of neo-liberal politics that threatened to worsen the already difficult social and economic situation of these minorities. Moreover, the so-called 'war on drugs' inaugurated by President Nixon in the early 1970s was bearing fruit, unevenly affecting minorities. Lastly, rampaging violence in the streets of New York City had led to the gradual division of its territory into turfs dominated by different gangs that often formed according to racial alliances (Schneider 2001).

Raised in a family that was immersed in international Black cultural and liberation movements, in 1973 Afrika Bambaataa founded the Universal Zulu Nation, an international awareness group that had the purpose of keeping youth away from the perils of drugs and gang-related activities. The Universal Zulu Nation's motto recited 'peace, love, unity, and having fun', resonating with discourses of transracial unity among youth living in the different neighbourhoods of New York City. Bambaataa's group, however, also had the ambition of turning into a global phenomenon, using hip hop as the main amplifier for its message; just a few years later, Bambaataa and other artists started touring outside of the United States.

CROSSING THE POND: HIP HOP GOES TO EUROPE

The first time that European audiences were exposed to hip hop culture was in November of 1982, when Kool Lady Blue – a British promoter and founder of New York City cult nightclub Negril – organized a short European tour with the help of French journalist and independent record label owner Bernard Zekri. Structured over the course of two weeks, the self-proclaimed *New York City Rap Tour* had seven dates planned in London, Paris and a number of smaller French cities. While the show was headlined by Afrika Bambaataa and his support band, the Soul Sonic Force, the bill also featured b-boys from New York City's Rock Steady Crew, as well as the World Champion Fantastic Four Double Dutch girls, graffiti artists like Futura and Dondi, and versatile artists like Rammellzee and Fab 5 Freddy (Chang 2005: 182–83). The 1982 *New York City Rap Tour* did not have any concerts in Italy, hence Italian audiences did not witness first-hand what hip hop was about in its live dimension. This, however, did not mean that Italians had not been exposed to some of hip hop culture's founding elements in other forms; indeed, the relative unfamiliarity of Italy's youth with the English language favoured the early diffusion of hip hop's non-verbal elements: graffiti writing and breakdancing (Morgan and Bennett 2011: 182).

The interest of Italians in graffiti writing can be traced back all the way to 1972, when Andrea Nelli, an Italian student in his early twenties, visited New York City. Impressed by the local graffiti scene, Nelli managed to get in

2. Since the publication of Chang's seminal book, other hip hop historians such as Mark Skillz (2014) have questioned Chang's emphasis on Jamaican sound systems as fundamental inspirators for the emergence of hip hop culture. Similarly, documentaries such as Ron Lawrence's *Founding Fathers* (2009) problematized the idea that hip hop was born in the Bronx.

touch with different crews of artists, taking hundreds of photos and eventually transforming this into the topic of his graduation thesis and, later, into one of the first books on graffiti to be published on the Italian editorial market and worldwide (Nelli 1978; Bordin 2013: 310). Throughout the 1980s, the Italian graffiti movement gradually expanded, yet remained a scattered phenomenon until the mid-1990s, when the organization of conventions favoured the creation of networks of artists who lived in different cities. In addition, conventions were pivotal in bringing together hip hop's different disciplines, promoting unity among artists who were otherwise interested in individual aspects of this culture (Bordin 2013: 311). At this stage, participation in the growing Italian hip hop scene was overwhelmingly male, even though the relevance of all-female graffiti crews such as Rome's *00199* was sometimes highlighted (Lucchetti 1999: 156–64; Monfeli and Cappuccini 2003: 94; De Angelis 2010: 19). Italian b-boys and b-girls gathered around public spaces such as the *Muretto* in Milan's Piazza San Babila, *le banche* in Padua, Piazza Piccapietra in Genoa, Galleria Colonna in Rome, or in front of Turin's main opera house, the Teatro Regio, all of which had marble floors where b-boys could dance. While some danced, others listened to music on portable stereos and boomboxes, rode skateboards, played frisbee, drew tags on sketchbooks, and sometimes spray-painted on the walls nearby (Mininno 2008: 36).

In 1980s Italy, not many music venues played hip hop records, and access to the clubs was both expensive and limited to older audiences (Patanè Garsia 2002: 22). As a result, the emergence of b-boy culture performed directly in the streets became a cheap solution for b-boys and b-girls to keep themselves entertained, while also allowing for a democratization of this discipline. Moreover, it put Italian b-boys and b-girls in touch with lower class communities of young immigrants who shared a passion for similar Black musical styles. In a passage from his autobiographical work *Vivo per questo* ('I live for this'), Italian-Egyptian rapper Amir Issaa recalls his early days as a b-boy hanging out in Piazzale Flaminio, a central square in Rome. Issaa states:

> Some of the kids came from Francophone African countries like Gabon. Despite their origin, they spoke two or three languages and knew about hip hop culture more than we did. […] Skin color was not a theme in Piazzale Flaminio: what mattered was how much you knew about hip hop, what you could do, and what your contribution was with respect to the artistic ecosystem that was developing at the time. I had spent all my life feeling different, and suddenly I was way less different than the others.
>
> (Issaa 2017: 102, translation added)

Much like Issaa's experience, the gathering of b-boys and hip hop fans at Milan's *Muretto* favoured the coexistence of young Italians with the historically rooted communities of East Africans from postcolonial Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, many of whom came from families who had migrated to Italy after the Second World War (Andall 2002; Arnone 2011; Paolos and Maglio 2015). The common interest for hip hop culture and for its African roots ultimately favoured the creation of transracial alliances among Italians and children of immigrants (who often did not have Italian citizenship); moreover, the spaces where b-boys reunited constituted examples of racial tolerance and appreciation for this kind of otherness. Meanwhile, the development of both graffiti writing and b-boying also promoted the emergence of the first Italian MCs.

MY STYLE IS STRICTLY ITALO: THE EMERGENCE OF ITALIAN RAP AND THE ITALIAN POSSES

In the early 1980s, the worldwide release of hip hop-themed American movies such as *Flashdance*, *Style Wars*, *Wild Style*, *Beat Street*, and *Breakin'*, further popularized some of the elements inherent to hip hop culture among Italian audiences. Indeed, many of the participants in the early Italian hip hop scene recall their fascination in watching these movies in movie theatres, on local television networks, or even at local parishes' recreational rooms for the first time (Ivic 2010: 17–19; Zukar 2017: 16–19). In addition, video clips to songs like the Sugarhill Gang's 'Rapper's Delight' (1979) or Malcolm McLaren's 'Buffalo Gals' (1982) were also broadcast on the first Italian television music channels in the early 1980s, thus further forming Italians' perception of what hip hop was both visually and sonically. Meanwhile, by the late 1980s, the increasing touring of US artists to Europe and to Italy led to the emergence of the first hip hop crews composed of Italian MCs. At first, Italian MCs rapped in English, preferring to copy the styles, gestures and linguistic expressions that they had seen being performed in concerts and on television by their American counterparts (Mitchell 2001: 217; Santoro and Solaroli 2007: 485 n12). Soon, however, MCs personalized their approach to rap, adopting Italian language or local dialects instead of English. Moreover, using music as a form of political militancy, the early 1990s saw the formation of groups known, in Italian, as *posse*.[3]

Finding its origin in the *patois* language used by diasporic Jamaican communities, and especially by those who migrated to the United Kingdom in the 1960s, the term posse identifies an open group of people who are united by a common interest or passion for something, and in this case for music (Scarparo and Sutherland Stevenson 2018). In particular, posse conveys the idea that its members are not fixed, and rather that each posse stands as a collaborative experiment characterized by the fluidity of its structure – even though Italy's posses were predominantly formed by white male members.

Conceptually, the posses offer a manifesto for subcultural collaboration that surpasses rigorous divisions among music genres and opposes the individualism typical of mainstream rock musicians of the 1970s and early 1980s. Instead, the idea of posses proposes a structure where all members are important and, simultaneously, no member is essential. As journalist Pierfrancesco Pacoda puts it, posses represent 'the triumph of solidarity, a sort of original communism […] because the age of rock stars is over, and it's once again the age of [social] movements' (Pacoda 1992: 72). Italian media in the early 1990s often adopted the term posse 'as a generic label for an often-disparate range of artists and musical styles that tended to blur the boundaries between the aesthetically and culturally related forms of reggae and rap' (Scarparo and Sutherland Stevenson 2018: 127). Making music that united political criticism, reportage and social denunciation, and often choosing to rap in local dialects rather than in standard Italian, the posses developed a glocal approach. Additionally, resisting nationalized notions of culture that deny diversity, the posses were examples of a national-popular culture that emerged organically and collaboratively from below, in opposition to an institutional culture imposed from above – with all the homogeneous fascist and racist connotations such officialdom often implies in Italy (Verdicchio cited in Scarparo and Sutherland Stevenson 2018: 129).

Central to the development of different posses across the Italian peninsula was the emergence around the same years of *Pantera*, a nationwide student

3. In the Italian language, the term *posse* is both singular and plural, so that we can talk about 'una *posse*' ('one posse'), or 'il fenomeno delle *posse*' ('the phenomenon of the posses'). Throughout this article, I will use the English version of the term.

movement that conducted month-long occupations of universities across Italy in protest against the Italian government's education reforms.[4] With the first occupation occurring in Palermo, Sicily, the students attempted to contest the increasing threats to the privatization of Italian – especially of Southern ones – fearing that it would lead to a progressive elimination of those departments that were judged as 'less productive' (Denaro cited in Scarparo and Sutherland Stevenson 2018: 131).

While Palermo remained the beating heart of the student movement, the protest spread throughout Italy; in Rome, the protest turned to music, effectively creating a soundtrack of reggae and hip hop posses, and propagating its message through the autonomous cultural spaces of the *centri sociali* ('occupied social centers') and the *radio libere* ('free radio stations').[5] Of particular relevance for the posse movement has been the example of *Radio Onda Rossa* ('Red Wave Radio') and indeed one of Italy's major posses emerged out of it: Onda Rossa Posse. The radio station was politically tied to the environment of Rome's leftist movement *Autonomia*, and it explicitly promoted itself as not merely free, but rather as revolutionary and militant (Scarparo and Sutherland Stevenson 2018: 130–37). In addition, some of Radio Onda Rossa's shows promoted the politics and culture of American hip hop through a process of cultural translation that merged the radical black militancy of groups like Public Enemy with the marginal local traditions of the Italian extra-parliamentary Left. The posses' messages were not solely related to the situation of the student movement, or to the critique of the parliamentary Left and of other institutional parties within the Italian political spectrum; rather, the posses denounced the gradual depoliticization that Italy had suffered throughout the 1980s (Gervasoni 2010: 132–35). Acting as heirs of the militant singer-songwriters of the 1970s (Santoro and Solaroli 2007), the posses gave a new spin to the connections between music and politics, updating the themes that were discussed and promoting the need for new and strong youth-led anti-fascist and anti-racist movements.

Together with Rome, other important centres for the emergence of the posses included Turin in the North, Bologna in central Italy, and Naples in the South. It is precisely in Naples, however, that the posses best developed a specific connection between music and anti-fascism, especially thanks to groups like 99 Posse. Gravitating around Naples' *centro sociale* Officina 99 – an abandoned garage occupied in May 1991 and located in the suburban neighbourhood of Gianturco – 99 Posse rapidly grew to become one of the most prominent posses of the entire movement. As rap scholar Tony Mitchell points out, 'few of 99 Posse's songs deal with anything other than political subjects, and they run the risk of browbeating their audiences to the point of exhaustion' (Mitchell 2001: 211).

Mixing raggamuffin, rap and trip hop, 99 Posse's songs are permeated by the band's urgency to fight against all forms of fascism, starting with their 1993 debut album *Curre curre guaglió* ('Run boy, run'). For example, in songs such as 'Rigurgito antifascista' ('Anti-fascist regurgitation') – one of their main anthems – 99 Posse demonstrates 'an antagonistic reading of the way Capital uses marginalities as its hegemonizing control mechanism' (Anselmi 2002: 42). Rapping over a rather basic beat made of drums and keyboards, 99 Posse states:

> Cool dudes all turgid and hard / they go down the street, proudly, chests ablaze / they feel virile, athletic and pure / they are dry shit under the

4. The name of the movement came from the fact that a panther had escaped from Rome's zoo and was later seen prowling through the streets of Rome (Simeone 2010; Denaro 2011).

5. The *centri sociali* can be described as an especially European reality consisting of:

> abandoned urban sites such as old industrial units or empty government buildings [...] that [once squatted] were consequently converted into community-based laboratories of cultural innovation and artistic creativity, offering concerts, films, dance courses and a variety of informational services such as discussion circles on political antagonism or drug use and language classes for immigrants. (Santoro and Solaroli 2007: 482)

> sun, lurid fascists! / Sunday, in the soccer stadium, they are letting it all out / after weeks of frustrations accumulated in obeisance / obeisance to a power instrumental to capital / [they repeat:] 'Yes sir, I'm sorry, I was very bad' / Night comes down, and having set away the briefcases / they hold their pants up with two convenient suspenders / they shave their heads, the army boot is well displayed / a knife in the pocket and here we go / […] Twenty to one is your strength, you fucking fascist / you hide and then stab me in the back / Your face is covered, but that is pointless / I can identify you among many, because you smell like shit / I have an anti-fascist gut reaction / if I see a black dot, I shoot it on sight.
>
> (99 Posse 1993, translation added)

Here 99 Posse does not merely highlight the indissoluble connections occurring between capitalism and fascism – an aspect that will be dealt with later in this article, with the example of Kento. Showing the double life that neo-fascist activists live, 99 Posse also emphasizes how fascism remains pervasive in contemporary Italy, and how the only viable form of resistance is one that may involve violence. 99 Posse's reference to 'black dots' is meant to symbolize the traditional association of fascism with the colour black, as shown for example by Benito Mussolini's paramilitary army, the Black Shirts. At the same time, 99 Posse's use of the term 'punti neri' ('black dots') is a play on words, since In Italian the expression is also used to talk about blackheads on someone's skin. Comparing neo-fascists to a kind of pustule, 99 Posse pushes for its eradication from the body of Italy. Indeed, recalling a famous anti-fascist slogan, later in the song 99 Posse goes as far as claiming that the only good fascist is a dead one.

The results met by the posses during the 1990s have been subject to a rich body of academic and journalistic literature that has analysed some of the posses' lyrics (Pacoda 2000), but also the overall failure of the posses and of the network of the *centri sociali* to remain independent from Italy's mainstream record industry and bring about long-lasting and concrete changes in youth-led activism (Mitchell 2001). In the next section, I focus on the reception of some of the posses' messages regarding anti-fascist activism after the end of the 1990s, looking in particular at two examples from Italy's contemporary rap scene: Murubutu and Kento.

LETTERATURAP: THE CONTEMPORARY ANTI-FASCIST HIP HOP OF MURUBUTU AND KENTO

By the mid-1990s, the crisis of the student movement and the decreasing attention paid by the Italian media led many of the posses to disband. On the one hand, a constant need to cover new stories was to be expected from generalist media such as Italy's main television networks and newspapers. On the other hand, it is important to point out that even a specialized magazine like *Aelle* – *which* at the time was the most long-lived journalistic source on hip hop culture in Italy – purposely avoided discussing the significance of Italy's posses and the environment of the *centri sociali*.[6] As reported by music journalist Damir Ivic, it took the magazine roughly eight years to develop a critical analysis of this phenomenon; by then, in 1999, the vast majority of the posses was no longer active (Ivic 2010: 95–100).

Naturally, Italian rap music and the hip hop scene did not stop with the decrease in popularity of the posse. Rather, rap evolved and became

6. In December 1998 (*Aelle* issue #32), an anonymous reader wrote a letter criticizing the magazine's editorial line and asking why it routinely ignored artists who gravitated around the *centri sociali* scene. Editor Claudio 'Sid' Brignole replied that the *centri sociali*'s audiences had historically treated hip hop as a disposable object that had been set aside after losing its political momentum (i.e. the end of the Pantera movement). For Brignole (1998: 56), *Aelle*'s mission was to discuss hip hop as a culture 'free from ideologies, that is not and cannot be used as a political tool, as it happens in many *centri sociali*'. What Brignole failed to mention, however, was that many of the posses refused to interact with media like *Aelle*, seeing it as an expression of mainstream and capitalist interests. In other words, lack of interest was mutual.

increasingly commodified, with artists leaving the stages offered by the *centri sociali* and the free radio stations and instead welcoming record deals from major labels that wanted to capitalize on the success of less politically radical artists. In the early 2000s, the commercial success of US rappers such as 50 Cent and Eminem further facilitated the transition of Italian hip hop into the mainstream. Rather than political militancy in the *centri sociali*, Italian rappers preferred to celebrate materialism and play in for-profit clubs. However, the lesson taught by the posses in the early 1990s was picked up by a minority of independent artists, who continued to expound some of the posses' ideas in rather clever and original ways. In order to discuss the existing links between anti-fascism and the contemporary Italian hip hop scene, I choose to focus on two rappers known as Murubutu and Kento.

Born in Reggio Emilia in 1975, Murubutu (né Alessio Mariani)[7] has been active in the Italian hip hop community since the early 1990s with his posse, La Kattiveria. A former b-boy, graffiti artist, and skateboarder, it is with rap that Murubutu eventually emerged in the late 2000s, affirming himself as one of the most talented storytellers in the Italian hip hop scene. A humanities high-school teacher in his daily life, Murubutu has successfully promoted a kind of rap whose lyrical content is denser than the average, making regular use of high jargon, rhetorical figures, and frequently referencing sources such as classic novels from European literature and ancient Greek myths (Tucci 2017: 9). Murubutu's records often focus on a specific element (such as the wind, the sea, or the night), around which the rapper manages to narrate the histories of common people and society's underdogs, usually with the purpose of providing the listener with a final moral; for these reasons, Murubutu's style has often been informally defined as *letteraturap* ('literature-rap'), and his songs have been labelled *rap-conti* ('rap-tales').[8]

During interviews, Murubutu does not shy away from his anti-fascist background, and in fact he lays claim to the importance of growing up in a city like Reggio Emilia. For example, when asked about it by web journalist Antonio Alaia, Murubutu states:

> I always talked publicly in favor of anti-fascism. This position derives from the cultural legacy of my territory: Reggio Emilia and Emilia-Romagna at large. I was always told histories about [World War II] partisans, about the Resistance, and all of that enriched my own knowledge about the topic, a kind of knowledge that I then decided to express in several songs.
>
> (Alaia 2019, translation added)

A central location for the history of anti-fascist resistance during the Second World War, Reggio Emilia stands as a space where the joint effort of society, community and local traditions, as well as the work of intellectuals, artists, filmmakers and cultural activists have allowed for the creation of what scholar John Foot defines 'a civic religion of the resistance' (Foot 2009: 154). In 1950, the city was awarded a gold medal for the sacrifice and courage of its partisans during the war for liberation from Nazi-fascism. Hence, Reggio Emilia and the countryside and hills around it are the often-unnamed locations serving as the background for many of Murubutu's songs.

While Murubutu's entire artistic production is disseminated with general references to the need to pay attention to how history repeats itself, in three songs in particular the rapper discusses the theme of anti-fascism. In 'Storia

7. Murubutu's nickname derives from the Arabic *marbūṭ*, a term that identifies sub-Saharan African shamans who are capable of curing both social and physical sufferance. From Murubutu's perspective, his healing action is performed through rap, rather than traditional shamanic practices.

8. Murubutu's approach to rap as a fully legitimate form of literature is achieved not merely through his particularly dense lyricism, but also through the strategic use of sound. For example, each of the tracks from his first two albums starts with the sound effect of pages rustling, as if in listening to the songs the audience was also leafing through a book.

di Gino' ('Gino's story'), the rapper focuses on the fictional story of a 9-year old dispatch rider who delivers messages to the partisans. The song displays the national-popular character that the movement of resistance to fascism had assumed after the armistice of 8 September 1943 (Foot 2009: 110–12). Claiming that 'la resistenza non ha standard né target' ('resistance has neither standards nor target groups') (Murubutu 2009), Murubutu emphasizes how everyone – even kids – could potentially join the fight against fascism in 1943; indeed, I argue that this verse is meant to promote anti-fascism as a prominent and contemporary value and that, irrespective of someone's social class or age, everyone should make sure to embrace and practice it nowadays too.

Despite his young age, Gino is portrayed as an idealistic figure who understands the perils of Italian fascism and how it threatens the survival of people like him. In the first verse of the song, Murubutu raps:

> Gino – this young mind / feels that there is no safe future / but his fist is clenched. And growing up / he believes [in the Anti-fascist cause] / he runs and does not give up / every month, death gets closer.
>
> (Murubutu 2009, translation added)

In the song's last verse, it is revealed how Paolo – a kid who is slightly older than Gino and whose family sympathizes with the fascists – has talked to the fascists about Gino's collaboration with the partisans in exchange for some money and ammunition, eventually causing Gino's capture and death sentence. While, according to Murubutu, what remains today of Gino's contribution to the fight for Italy's liberation from Nazi-fascism is just a memorial stone on Italy's Apennine Mountains, the rapper is also quick to emphasize how Gino's heroic actions have influenced Italy's history during the Second World War. In other words, Murubutu's song democratizes the history of the Italian Resistance, pointing out how even the small gestures of a child could be seen as an integral and foundational part of the fight for Italy's liberation.

Murubutu's focus on the heroism of ordinary people continues in 'La collina dei pioppi' ('The poplar's hill'), where Murubutu narrates the story of Dino and Laura, two peasants who meet and fall in love in the early 1940s, when the Second World War has already flared up. Despite their poverty, love unites these two fictional characters up until the moment in which Dino decides to enrol in the anti-fascist resistance. As Murubutu raps:

> Dino was not cut out for a role as a subject [to the fascists] / so he immediately joined the Resistance / When the fascists came looking for him / he was already with [our friends] / in the woods, waiting for the Spring.
>
> (Murubutu 2011a, translation added)

It is significant to point out how Murubutu – who here functions as an omniscient narrator to the story – uses the term 'nostri' (Italian for 'ours' or, in this case, 'our friends') to identify the partisans, hence revealing his own partisanship and approval of the partisans' actions. Later in the song, Dino's story is narrated from Laura's point of view; Laura frequently hears rumours about how Dino may have already remarried, fled Italy in favour of London (to help the English Allies), or again how he may have betrayed the anti-fascist partisans and would now be in Rome, serving the Fascist regime. After much speculation, Murubutu concludes the song narrating Dino's return to his

home, after having been interned in Buchenwald's concentration camp. Dino rejoins Laura and they witness Italy's social rebirth thanks to the efforts of the National Liberation Committee.

The previous examples show Murubutu's ability to tell fictional stories that are set during war times. However, Murubutu does not limit his analysis to that period; instead, he also explores the post-war years of the so-called 'economic miracle', where Italy became one of the protagonists of the great expansion of European markets (Ginsborg 2003). For example, in 'Martino e il ciliegio' ('Martino and the cherry-tree') – significantly, the song that comes right after 'La collina dei pioppi' in the same record – Murubutu considers the life of Martino, a factory worker living in Reggio Emilia in the late 1950s. Martino witnesses the passage from a society that used to be primarily based on agriculture to one that is now heavily involved in industrial development, thanks to Italy's 'economic miracle'. Murubutu portrays Reggio Emilia as a space where, even years after the end of the war, 'la cultura della Resistenza è ancora viva' ('the culture of the Resistance is still alive'), and where people spend time telling stories about the partisans or remembering the events that led to the killing of the seven Cervi brothers.[9] Martino is fascinated by the stories that he hears from the former partisans, and considers them as wise elders, even though they are not more than forty years old. By the late 1960s, with the emergence of the workers' movement, Martino remembers the lessons taught to him by former partisans and sees his own fight for the workers' rights as a new form of Resistance.[10] Consequently, Martino moves to Milan and becomes one of the leaders of the workers' movement.

In the song, Murubutu recalls some of the historical moments that led many Italian workers to embrace the armed struggle. Initially portraying Martino as an idealistic figure who hesitates to take part in the armed struggle, he ultimately agrees to what has been decided by the extra-parliamentary group that he is part of. In an intricate verse, Murubutu raps:

> [Martino] knows that what he fights for is right / if the way [in which you fight for it] is right / He's doubtful, but there's no doubt / that the sense of what is right is determined by what the group deems to be right / Right?.
>
> (Murubutu 2011b, translation added)

Sounding as if he wants to ask for a confirmation that what he is about to engage in is correct, the last word that Martino pronounces – 'Right?' – is softly whispered by Murubutu before moving to the final part of the song, where Martino dies under the fire of the police. The song is loosely inspired by the life of Prospero Gallinari, a native of Reggio Emilia and former member of Italy's far-left guerrilla group, Red Brigades. The song has caused some protest among activist of the far-right movement Forza Nuova ('New Force'), who claimed that by dedicating a song to Gallinari's history Murubutu is effectively condoning his behaviour and that of the Red Brigades at large (Barbetti 2014). However, the song's lyrics – as well as Murubutu's own reaction to Forza Nuova's polemic – demonstrate Murubutu's opinion as the song develops, not approving of Gallinari's choices, but rather showing how for many factory workers in the late 1960s the fight for their labour rights represented a battle similar to the ones that many of them had fought during the Second World War.

9. Natives of a village in the outskirts of Reggio Emilia, the seven Cervi brothers came from an anti-fascist family who, after the armistice, collaborated with the anti-fascist partisans and conducted actions against the fascists. Captured by the fascists in late November 1943 and confined in Reggio Emilia's jail, the brothers were jointly executed a month later, as a revenge for the killing of a fascist official (Foot 2009: 165).

10. Indeed, as pointed out by scholar Robert Lumley (1990: 23), most of the activists involved in the early phases of the workers' movement had directly taken part in the anti-fascist Resistance during the Second World War.

What can be gathered from these examples is that, on the one hand, Murubutu's anti-fascist militancy is not as aggressive as that of the 1990s posses, who frequently named names and did not make use of polished rhetorical language. Murubutu's polished approach instead forces the listener to investigate the meanings that the rapper hides behind his lyrics, a stylistic feature that may make Murubutu's lyrics just as effective and powerful as those of the posses. On the other hand, in line with the posse's militancy, Murubutu also attempts to update anti-fascism's character, recognizing a continuity between the Second World War partisans, the armed struggle of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the threats posed by the resurgence of fascism through contemporary movements such as Italy's CasaPound and Forza Nuova, which will be discussed later in this article in the context of rap's appropriation.

Another contemporary Italian rapper who combines the storytelling that characterizes Murubutu with a more outspoken critique of contemporary fascism and of its current manifestations is Kento. Born in 1976 in Reggio Calabria, Kento (né Francesco Carlo) has been active in the Italian hip hop scene since the mid-1990s as part of different projects that mix rap, reggae and blues music. In his work, Kento unites the topic of anti-fascism with his conditions as a citizen of Southern Italy, often comparing the migration of those Italian political activists who escaped Fascist repression in the early 1900s to the contemporary migrations of Africans arriving to the coasts of Europe. In this, Kento's lyrics are very much in line with what had already been proposed by Southern posses such as Naples's 99 Posse in the 1990s (Dawson and Palumbo 2005). Yet, Kento's artistic and political contribution to the debate is apparent in his critique of the new political realities that have emerged in Italy throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. Although Kento's first albums already include references to relevant Italian activists such as anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, or anti-Mafia community organizer Giuseppe Peppino Impastato, it is with his third record that Kento best demonstrates the relevance of contemporary anti-fascist activism. Significantly titled *Da Sud* ('From the South', 2016), the album was released at the same time as Kento's editorial debut, *Resistenza Rap*, which details the rapper's relationship with hip hop culture and social activism.[11]

Right from the first track, 'Ribelle' ('Rebel'), Kento declares himself to be a threat to capitalism, citing militant hip hop bands like Public Enemy as a fundamental influence on his lyrics, and asking those who are listening to the record and who may have voted for Lega Nord's leader Matteo Salvini not to go to his live concerts. In songs such as 'Piazzale Loreto', Kento best represents the evolution of neo-fascism and how far-right movements are now increasingly connected to Italy's power structures (Froio et al. 2020). The song is named after the Milanese square where, on 28 April 1945, the dead bodies of Benito Mussolini, his mistress Claretta Petacci, and several other high-ranking fascist officials were hung upside down and displayed for a few hours (Foot 2009: 180). In the song, Kento looks at the connections between neo-fascism and capitalism, claiming that the former is essential to the success of the latter. In the first verse, Kento raps:

> I see the fascists of yesterday and today, with jacket and tie and briefcase / bringing the money that serves to pay the Mafia through corruption / [It is called] Mafia Capital, it is that electoral system / in which the [fascist] comrade is useful because he is a slave to money / In their

11. While the original, Italian version of Kento's book was released in 2016, in this article I will reference its English translation, which was released two years later by John D. Calandra Italian American Institute's publishing house, Bordighera Press (Carlo 2018).

> political rallies they fuel hatred / they stick to their guns like a good soldier / they despise the gypsies / but they certainly don't hate the money that they brought them.
>
> (Kento 2016, translation added)

In these first few lines, Kento relates neo-fascist movements not only to the expansion of capitalist interests, but also to the Mafia that often facilitates the presence of Roma people (and many migrants) on the Italian territory.[12] Of course, for Kento the problem does not lie in those subaltern subjects here symbolized by the examples of Roma people; rather, Kento points out the irony of neo-fascist individuals who promote hate against diversity and foreigners, and yet are complicit in their proliferation through the support of the Mafia and capitalism.

Later in the song, Kento becomes even more explicit in his attack against neo-fascist movements, and points at the attempt of some neo-fascist groups to appropriate hip hop culture and take advantage of its appeal among young people. Here Kento raps:

> Only hatred for CasaPound, [Greece's] Golden Dawn, and their slogans / and for those who have taken old shit and called it New Force [Forza Nuova] / Up until yesterday they were the guardians of clean walls and decorum / now they have conventions about rap and graffiti, so people will talk about them / This is why I bring resistance [to the stage], not a step back / every stage I step on is Piazzale Loreto.
>
> (Kento 2016, translation added)

Making strategic use of hip hop's braggadocio, Kento denounces the attempt of neo-fascist movements to appropriate some of hip hop's disciplines. As a guardian of this culture, he goes as far as saying that every stage he steps on becomes similar to Piazzale Loreto, hence metaphorically killing the neo-fascists' initiatives. Indeed, he concludes the song stating that the only way to have racists and fascists changing their minds is to hang them upside down, just like what happened in 1945 in Piazzale Loreto.

More outspoken than Murubutu, Kento's rap is a closer successor – at least stylistically – to what Italy's posses showed in the 1990s. As described by scholar Joseph Sciorra in the introduction to the English translation of Kento's autobiography, the rapper 'chronicles the ongoing dynamics involving the potential of rap music's Italianate permutations and the legacy of a progressive, left cultural politics […] to renounce such societal ills as neo-fascism, xenophobic racism, and misogynistic violence plaguing twenty-first century Italy' (Carlo 2018: 5). Kento uses rap's educational function and works as a community organizer, taking advantage of hip hop's multifaceted nature to integrate it into school workshops and to create events that involve Italy's youth. In addition, as a contributor to Italy's daily newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, Kento sometimes comments on the use of music for social purposes and has issued a call to action to his fellow Italian rappers, urging them to join him in refusing all forms of fascism and racism (Kento 2015).

Nowadays, hip hop has become a mainstream musical genre that appeals to listeners across the political spectrum, often irrespective of someone's political beliefs. As a result, it is not surprising to see how even prominent neo-fascist movements like CasaPound have attempted to take advantage of hip hop's appeal among the youth to promote their agenda, exerting particular

12. 'Mafia Capitale' is a journalistic term that was coined in December 2014, following the arrest of a group of 28 individuals among which is Massimo Carminati, an Italian criminal and former member of the Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari (Armed Revolutionary Nuclei), a neo-fascist organization active in the late 1970s. The accusation against Carminati and his group is that they used European funds that were supposed to go towards Roma communities in Italy to, instead, pay corrupt politicians. Kento's lyrics then make strategic use of the word 'capital' to indicate both Italy's capital city, Rome and the deeper connections between capitalism and the mafioso style of Carminati and other neo-fascists.

leverage on the question of Italy's cultural and social identity. A relatively small and yet expanding subgenre known as *rap identitario* (roughly, 'identity-making rap') has emerged in the last few years, with artists such as Rome's Drittarcore quickly becoming the most prominent right-wing rap act on the Italian scene. In the next section, I focus on the emergence of this phenomenon and trace its evolution while looking at the larger context of appropriation of youth subcultures perpetrated by far-right movements.

Rebel heart: Italian hip hop and neo-fascism

As two of the most relevant right-wing movements in contemporary Italy, *Forza Nuova* and CasaPound understood very early the importance of supporting their political initiatives through a strong cultural base. Founded in 1997 and 2008, respectively, both movements learned from the experience of their predecessors that the perpetuation of ideals as well as of political practices could be best achieved through their promotion in cultural contexts. Between 1977 and 1981, the right-wing, neo-fascist party *Movimento Sociale Italiano* ('Italian Social Movement', MSI) organized summer camps via its youth division, the *Fronte della Gioventù* ('Youth Front'). With the purpose of gathering and building a new generation of party militants, the summer camps hosted a variety of activities that included sports, debates, workshops and especially music performances and concerts (Froio et al. 2020: 24). Indeed, it is during MSI's summer camps that we see the emergence of a new musical trend among right-wing activists: the so-called *rock identitario* ('identity-making rock') (Froio et al. 2020: 89).

Joining a trend known as Rock Against Communism (RAC) – that is, a series of concerts organized in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s by white supremacy activists, in reaction to the initiatives of the cultural and political movement Rock Against Racism (Dyck 2016: 19) – Italy's identity-making rock bands defined their style as 'alternative music'. Refusing globalism in favour of nationalism and seeing capitalism as a power structure dominated by Zionist elites, bands within the *rock identitario* genre claimed to be the only true rebels in Italy's music scene; since no mainstream radio, television or music channel had ever showed interest in their music, *rock identitario* bands proudly displayed their alternativeness and independence from the capitalist market (Lazzaro 2008). The evolution of the Italian political scene led to MSI's dissolution by the mid-1990s. Consequently, a few years later, many of MSI's former militants merged into *Forza Nuova* and CasaPound, effectively giving continuity to their political practices and ideals. With the formation of these new movements, bands like Bologna-based Legittima Offesa and Rome's Zetazeroalfa also emerged; while the former has been historically close to *Forza Nuova*, the latter is fronted by CasaPound's president and founding member, Gianluca Iannone, and it has been recognized as the movement's official band. A punk-rock band with anti-establishment lyrics that focus on the exaltation of Italy's mythical past and on a condemnation of globalization and the capitalist market economy (Castelli Gattinara et al. 2013: 243–44), Zetazeroalfa quickly became 'an evangelising force for fascism', attracting the attention of the media also thanks to concert rituals like the *cinghiamattanza* ('death-by-belt-whipping'), a practice where fans take off their belts and whip each other in the mosh pit (Jones 2018).

CasaPound's cultural politics are particularly interesting, because they show how the movement has been capable of resignifying many of the

practices previously used by the posses and the audiences of the *centri sociali*. For example, CasaPound's own foundation is closely linked to the illegal occupation of an empty building in central Rome in 2003, with the movement claiming that it was an 'occupazione non conforme' ('occupation not complying with the norm'), an expression meant to mark a difference with respect to the occupations led by left-wing or anarchist collectives in the 1980s. Turning the building into a gym, and also into a space for residential use for Italian citizens, eventually fostered other occupations of empty buildings throughout the city of Rome (Cammelli 2018: 204). Parallel to that, CasaPound made sure to have a representation among high-school and university students with its organization, *Blocco Studentesco* ('Student Bloc'), and also created a web radio station, a publishing house, and a theatre company. Meanwhile, thanks to the increasing presence on the Italian territory of networks created by activists and militants, CasaPound's Zetazeroalfa toured and recorded albums throughout the 2000s, becoming a point of reference among alternative right-wing music circles. Zetazeroalfa's increasing popularity transformed the use of music among CasaPound's militants: no longer simply a form of expression within the movement, music became a tool for external recruitment (Albanese et al. 2014: 85). The interest that Zetazeroalfa managed to raise among CasaPound's youth sectors eventually inspired the formation of other bands outside of the rock music genre. Because of the popularity that hip hop has achieved in Italy in the last few decades, it was only natural for CasaPound to try to take advantage of it. In fact, the adoption of hip hop culture among far-right movements was already common in other European countries.

While 'it would seem almost contradictory to consider hip hop a viable medium for hate messages and the promotion of right-wing ideology' (Putnam and Littlejohn 2007: 453), several scholars have investigated the increasing connections between far-right nationalist movements and rap since the early 2000s. In the European context, analyses have focused primarily on Germany (Güngör and Loh 2002; Franz 2014; Funk 2018), France (Batson 2009), and Sweden as well as the broader Scandinavian area (Teitelbaum 2017). By claiming that 'music and other expressive forms bear no inherent ethnic associations, but are shaped by the identities of people who perpetuate them', far-right European groups treated hip hop as 'a site for ethnic conquest' that they could take part in (Teitelbaum 2017: 86). Arguments for the adoption of hip hop varied across Europe. Some equated the socio-economic marginality of African Americans in the United States with the ideological isolation of right-wing groups in European societies, hence seeing rap as a medium to 'have one's voice and opinions heard in a world that otherwise forgot that you existed' (Putnam and Littlejohn 2007: 454). In Sweden, artists such as Zyklon Boom praised the minoritized racial identity and working-class origins of US rappers such as Eminem, framing hip hop as a viable music genre for right-wing ideological minorities (Teitelbaum 2017: 67). Finally, Germany's N' Socialist Soundsystem and French Breton's Basic Celtos qualified their engagement with hip hop, claiming that while they adopted singing techniques associated with rap they refused to identify with rappers on sociocultural grounds (Teitelbaum 2017: 73). In the case of Italy, far-right movements used hip hop mainly as a recruitment tool, while also articulating discourses of ideological marginality.

In January 2011, CasaPound's official Facebook page publicized a graffiti convention organized in the occupied space of Area 19, a former train station in Rome that had been squatted by some of CasaPound's militants in the late

2000s. Titled *International Street Art Competition*, CasaPound described the event as a meeting of graffiti writers from all over Europe, and even raffled a cash prize to be awarded to the artist who would create the best piece. Rome's graffiti artists criticized the hypocrisy behind CasaPound's attempt to appropriate graffiti culture, showing how the same movement had previously labelled street art as a form of urban degradation, going as far as organizing street patrols and neighbourhood surveillance groups to prevent graffiti artists from painting on walls (Boccacci 2011). However, CasaPound was not new to cultural appropriation, having previously engaged in controversial campaigns that celebrated the lives of singer-songwriters Fabrizio De André and Rino Gaetano – who were both very distant from CasaPound's ideology – and even of communist leaders such as Karl Marx, Ernesto Che Guevara, Giuseppe Peppino Impastato, and Hugo Chávez (Carlo 2018: 98; Vercelli 2018: 177). There were obvious reasons behind these celebrations, namely CasaPound's interest in showing itself as a moderate, across-the-board political force, capable of dialoguing with everyone while simultaneously appealing to the youth. In addition, CasaPound was allegedly showing how the power of someone's ideas – whatever those ideas may be – deserved respect, and that respect was expected to be mutual. In other words, in conceding one brief moment of celebration to the opponents' lives and ideologies, CasaPound was ultimately trying to legitimate its own ideological marginality.

In the early 2010s, a rap-rock band called Drittarcore (StraightToTheHeart) emerged in Rome's musical scene and started spreading among CasaPound's audience. Their first full length album *Liberi alti fuochi* ('Free High Fires'), released in 2017 under Iannone's music label Rupe Tarpea Productions, includes the collaboration of several bands that gravitate around CasaPound's cultural environment, such as punk groups Bronson, Ribelli d'Indastria, and, naturally, Iannone's Zetazeroalfa. In line with Zetazeroalfa's repertoire and with the style of those bands, Drittarcore refrains from explicitly stating its position with respect to fascism (Dyck 2016: 73). Yet, the subtle references to Italy's past during the 1920s, as well as the iconography that is displayed both on the band's official video clips and on their social network profiles, do not leave any doubts regarding their political tendencies.

In the video clip for 'Cuore ribelle' ('Rebel Heart'), one of the band members appears with a t-shirt that reads 'FCK ANTIFA', graphically styled to resemble the logo of US hip hop group Run-D.M.C. Additionally, portraying themselves as guardians of their territory, Drittarcore's rappers declare: 'Come il marmo reggeremo ora che l'Occidente cade; dalla Senna al sacro Tevere torniamo per le strade' ('We will resist like marble, now that the Western world is falling apart; from the Seine to the sacred Tiber, we are back on the streets') (Drittarcore 2017a). The idea of being part of a militia that stands as the only defender of the homeland is a common trope throughout Drittarcore's songs, which often emphasize the importance of territory as a means to reinforce identity. For example, in 'Come tuoni di maggio' ('Like Thunders in May') the band recalls the historical legacy of the river Piave, where in 1918 the Italians defeated the Austro-Hungarian Empire, marking a victory that proved to be decisive for the outcome of the First World War. Similarly, in 'Difendi Roma' ('Defend Rome'), Drittarcore portrays the band members as well as their fans as 'sacerdoti di una Roma che oggi vendica chi tira dritto nonostante tutto, non mendica' ('[secular] priests of a Rome that today avenges those who go ahead despite everything, and do not beg for help') (Drittarcore 2017b).

Drittarcore's lyrics reflect their attempt to use the historical legacy of the Roman Empire as a form of political and cultural legitimation (Forlenza and Thomassen 2016: 123–27). Moreover, by stressing the importance of their national territory and advocating for its defence from the invasion of foreign enemies, Drittarcore's themes echo the same kind of sociocultural marginality that other far-right European musicians evoked. Reframing such marginality in terms of alternativeness and opposition to the mainstream, Drittarcore's appropriation of hip hop culture follows a trend that has been on the rise among far-right groups in Europe since the early 2000s. As a result, while their anti-global and nationalist messages are in direct contrast with the 'international, transnational, multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual' and diverse communities (Morgan and Bennett 2011: 177) that populate hip hop, Drittarcore's underground success among young far-right activists should not be minimized or ignored.

CONCLUSION

The journey that has led hip hop culture from New York City's neighbourhoods all the way to Italy has been long and quite tumultuous: emerging as a diasporic and multifaceted cultural phenomenon, hip hop's different disciplines have met new interpretations as they travelled across the world. In the case of Italy, hip hop also first emerged in the streets, only to be later incorporated in a variety of contexts, one of which being the network of the *centri sociali* where hip hop became a weapon to promote youth-led social fights against fascism and racism. The messages launched in the 1990s by Italy's *posses* have been further expanded by a minority of independent artists who, in later decades and through original styles such as *letteraturap*, managed to update them to fit the needs of fighting against renewed forms of fascism. Obviously, hip hop's mainstreaming has also opened the door to its cultural appropriation by very distant political subjects, with far-right movements such as CasaPound using hip hop as a tool of recruitment among Italy's youth. In spite of the relatively small number of groups that use hip hop culture to promote a nationalist agenda, it is important to recognize the existence of this subgenre and consider it as a consequence of the more general rise of far-right movements in Europe and across the globe.

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