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“Listening through the Warzone of Europe” Rachel Beckles Willson

Modu has moved into the center of the circle and picked up the *djembe* from the floor. Holding it under his left arm, he raises his right hand. “You listen now,” he says gently, turning around as he speaks. The young men in the circle gradually stop rattling shakers, clapping, and chatting. Now he is facing me again. He looks straight in my eyes as he starts singing, his right hand padding gently on the *djembe*. “You’ve got to cry for peace in Africa.” He is turning on the spot. “All the womens are crying, all the childrens are crying, that’s why you’ve got to cry for peace in Africa.” As he comes full circle he points at me—“now you”—so I sing the last phrase of his melody once, then again. Some in the group pick it up as well, one joins with a shaker, then others copy, and we’re all singing it over and over, but Adbullah is holding out his hand, pointing to a young man who has started tapping a *djembe* —“no drum,” he says. We stop to listen while he sings another part over his own *djembe* beat. “All the children are crying in

Mali.” He rotates as he sings; when he is facing me, he pauses, and I look at the glassiness of his eyes while I echo each of his phrases and hear the shakers and voices building up again. “All the children are crying in Ghana. All the children are crying in Nigeria. That’s why you’ve got to cry for peace . . .”

Modu, aged sixteen, is one of many thousands of unaccompanied minors who have arrived in Europe across the Mediterranean from sub-Saharan Africa after passing through the militia-run, collapsed state of Libya. He lives in a reception center for minors on the Italian island of Sicily, where he is provided with food and lodging and some minimal access to education. Modu hopes to gain further proficiency in European languages, learn professional skills or become an apprentice, and build an independent life. I am interested here in thinking about what it means to listen to his voice, to echo his voice, and to see him use his voice within a community.

Listening to Individuals in a Fraught Space

I met Modu in the summer of 2017 when I worked as a volunteer musician among unaccompanied minors in reception centers in the Syracuse district of eastern Sicily.¹ These centers are funded through the Italian Home Office but with the support of the European Union, and they are run with varying levels of efficiency by associations of social workers, psychologists, and tutors. They are located outside urban centers, often with consideration for integrating asylum seekers into the surrounding community. Educational provision is meager and is enhanced sporadically by volunteer programs; nevertheless, for an outsider wanting to volunteer it can be a challenge to make contact, let alone arrange access.

To visit a center is to enter a labyrinth of fragments of past lives, journeys, painful arrivals, and dreamed futures. It is also to enter a space in which Italian, colonial languages English and French, pidgins, the (often) religious language of Arabic, and a range of African languages such as Wolof and Tigrinya intermingle and alternatively bridge and divide the young people. This is also a world of intense bureaucracy. For these individuals, all of them between fourteen and twenty-one, there are many hours of paperwork and court rulings ahead.² Moreover, their bureaucratic limbo exists in a larger limbo: figures vary, but the Italian economy is stagnant, and unemployment is high.

I based my initial workshops as a volunteer musician on earlier experience with a London-based refugee choir and recent research in creative writing projects assisting traumatized refugees.³ I drew in practical terms on the work of Tia DeNora, a sociologist examining practices of music therapy. My starting point was the idea of using music to cocreate “temporary asylums” (DeNora 2013:262), environments that would be led by the participants and that might

help to facilitate what DeNora terms, following Erving Goffmann, the “crafting of self” (265–67). These concepts remained useful points of reference, yet participants also challenged them substantially.

I worked in the two centers for young men with another volunteer musician, Francesco Iannuzzi. We opened workshops with a guided group improvisation, beginning with games using voice and body percussion and incorporating varied types of interaction and role-playing. We gradually taught some vocal patterns and distributed percussion instruments among the men. We added guitar to create a harmonic loop, dance movements, and a saxophone improvisation. Very rapidly all the men were taking part, some dancing very energetically, others singing, some also using percussion. This group improvisation created a space of welcome, and a seemingly coherent group formed. Yet—in the words of DeNora—the music making was “socially textured”: it afforded a range of participatory styles (2013:261).

As we continued with weekly workshops, the group improvisation became a familiar starting point, a type of ritual that the men remembered and played around with. We followed it with songs, first Bob Marley’s “Get Up, Stand Up,” and then songs chosen by the men, mainly by Francophone singers Alpha Blondie, Tiken Jah Fakoly, and Takana Zion. We learned together in a horizontal knowledge exchange (Araujo 2006) combining YouTube recordings on our phones, the men’s familiarity with the words (and the languages), and our instrumental backing. Some men wanted to perform as soloists, so we alternated sections and verses to give everyone the chance to participate.

On one such occasion, Sean, a young man from Nigeria, called out, “I have something to sing.” As he went to the center of the circle he raised his right hand in the air and placed it close to his ear as if he was on the phone. “No instruments,” he said to the men, but he gestured to Francesco and myself to accompany him. In a swaying dance, during which his gaze shifted alternatively from the floor to the ceiling, he began to sing the words of “It’s Not Easy,” by the reggae musician Lucky Dube—“I remember the day I called Mama on the telephone.” The group started accompanying him quietly on shakers while he went on. “I told her, Mama, I’m getting married. I could hear her voice on the other side of the telephone, she was smiling.” As he continued, the lyrics described telling Mama news of an imminent divorce, and Sean seemed to struggle with his voice. But haltingly, he carried on, covering his eyes with his left hand. Eventually, he broke down in tears, backing away from the circle with his head in both his hands, the song unfinished.

Sean’s contribution enacted a phone conversation that immigrants in Europe’s refugee camps have described as impossible. They fabricate success stories rather than admitting to their family, in particular to their mothers, exactly how things are going (Calais Writers 2017). For Sean, on the other hand,

“It’s Not Easy” seemed to be a vehicle through which to perform a difficult emotional truth. Joy and hope had been replaced by disappointment, loss, and radical uncertainty.

Sean had created a moment of extraordinary poignancy, but the response of the group suggested that that moment was unexceptional. Or perhaps the need to channel emotion was equally strong in others. Either way, everyone just got on with the music they themselves wanted to present, and Sean rejoined the circle once he had composed himself. DeNora has emphasized the role of solo song performance in fostering a sense of achievement, a crafting of “self” that is transferable from an intimate musical space into broader social spheres (2013:266). But in the reception center, the sense of a broken project and the lack of perspective on a socially integrated future may obstruct that possibility.

Singing as a Vehicle for Movement

Along one wall of the classroom, six young Nigerian women are standing, clutching notebooks. At the prompt from their teacher, they sing in unison across to the other side, “Avete del caffè?” (Do you have coffee?). Some sway their hips, some wave their notebooks; their faces are split open with smiles. Six women on the other side are ready with their response and sing, “Oggi non c’è” (Today there isn’t any); some glance at their notebooks nervously. The first group is already singing the next phrase, “Che peccato” (What a pity), and then, enthusiasm overriding role-playing, three sing on with the closing phrase of the verse that should be sung by the second group, “Scusa Signora” (I’m sorry, Madam). In the hubbub that follows, at least seven voices are shouting, including mine. We straighten out the roles, try it over, and then go on to the next verse.

While there are far more male immigrants to Italy than female, women’s lives are frequently a great deal more complex. Many men have made the journey across Africa with an ambition, and they bring that with them, even while they also bring the trauma of loss and abuse. In contrast, large numbers of women have arrived after brainwashing that draws on religious practices and is referred to as “juju.” They believed they would be trained as hairdressers, but in fact they have become slaves in the global sex trade.⁴ Those who overcome their fears and go to the police are offered protection. But this “protection” fosters closed environments in which psychological and educational support is minimal (even though some arrive as young as fifteen), and volunteers may struggle to enter.

When, after several weeks of awkward negotiation, I gained access to a women’s center, it was with the agreement that I would provide musical support for Italian lessons. So, following consultation with the Italian teacher, Anna, I set some suitable text to “Fanga Alafia,” (Hello, Welcome) a traditional Nigerian call and response. The class was under way when I arrived, with twelve women

sitting at desks with notebooks in front of them. Some had their heads down as if trying to sleep. Others were calling out questions very loudly in competition with each other. Anna told the women that I was there as a musician, and some were unhappy about this. “No musica,” shouted one. “Scuola!” Anna tried to explain that the music would be incorporated into the “school.” A silence fell after some further discussion, and some of their faces turned toward me. I started singing “Fanga Alafia” with traditional words.

A ripple of smiles and then giggles spread across the classroom. Two women lifted their heads from their desks. Soon several of them were laughing. Some of them were singing. Some were shouting things out. I pointed at the blackboard where Anna was writing the prepared phrases, and I changed the words I was singing to incorporate Italian. It took some time, but after some practice, as described above, two groups were standing on opposite sides of the room singing to one another in Italian about the availability of eggs, the cost of cheese, whether they liked peaches, and so on.

When the women left the classroom, they were laughing and yelling, and as they passed along the corridors, they greeted Italians, singing the phrases they had learned. I passed the reception desk on my way out. The women were hanging around the desk, calling out the phrases to each other, waving their notebooks. The director of the center was in the foyer and turned to me immediately. “When can you come again?” she asked.

The episode revealed the energy that could emerge from an amalgam of existing, embodied knowledge (“Fanga Alafia”) and access to a new technology (the Italian language). The identity of the women who took part had shifted in the classroom. They had been in the role of recipients, struggling—through depression in some cases—to acquire knowledge; but they became users of it, users who performed it with their whole bodies, moving in ways that the music led them habitually. It led to new exchanges with staff in the center, as everyone found themselves in new conversations in a transformed space. It could not last long: the radical uncertainty of these lives is patent. However, with repetition, persistence, and much support, experiences like this one could be part of a bridge into a future existence.

Cultivating Hope among the Survivors

When in 2015 European leaders failed to manage an expanded influx of immigration, mediatised rhetoric (an “invading army,” a “swarm of illegal immigrants,” people bringing “parasites and disease,” and then the persistent notion of a “refugee crisis”) contributed fundamentally to the fragmentation of the European Union. German prime minister Angela Merkel announced that Germany would open the door to all Syrians fleeing war, intending to take a lead that other

EU states would follow. However, six countries introduced border controls that had been abolished within the EU twenty years ago with the so-called Schengen agreement; others like Hungary erected borders with non-Schengen countries; and in a UK referendum held in June 2016, 51.89 percent of voters wished to shore up national borders and leave the EU.

Among many reasons for mass migration (the desire for a better life, as well as the need to escape war, militarization, torture, enslavement, disease, famine, and environmental disaster) there is one reason that merits more discussion than it currently receives. This is the role of intrastate negotiations in border areas and the phenomenon of coerced economic migration. This practice has a long and wide history (seventy-five instances made by states and nonstate actors since 1951; see Greenhill 2010), and it shapes the broad sociopolitical space fundamentally.

For example, for years Italy established economic deals to ensure that Libya contained potential immigrants, in reaction to President Ghadafi's repeated threats to "turn Europe black." Agreements between Italy and Libya broke down in 2011, resulting in increasing immigration, and political pressure led to a new agreement in 2017 (Kuschminder 2017). Similarly, following the arrival of over a million Syrians in Europe in the summer of 2015, President Erdogan of Turkey threatened to facilitate even more transfers of Syrians from Turkish shores. A deal in March 2016 stopped him doing this (to an extent) and allowed Europe to expel large numbers of "irregular" immigrants back to Turkey; but the deal also achieved Erdogan's goal of restarting stalled negotiations regarding EU membership (Greenhill 2016). These arrangements reveal Europe's vulnerability and the rapidity with which leaders turn against their own principles of democracy and universal human rights.

Coercive strategies and responses are inevitably absorbed inside the EU, so that in recent years, new legislation, arrests, and criminal inquiries have led an increasingly wide range of humanitarian actors to be accused of illegal activity (Provera 2015; McMahon 2017). The space for humanitarian work in border areas is thus narrowing drastically, and divisions are widening not only between EU countries but between citizens inside the countries. This heightened situation, with its new rhetoric of "collusion" and "collaboration," reminds us of sociopolitical frameworks Europe had hoped to have left behind.

The contexts of the musical activities I described above are, at this point, legal and, at least in the seclusion of the reception center, welcomed. Yet in our weaponized, criminalizing climate, such moments of creative expression and group listening are precarious. It is perhaps not going too far to read Sean's use of "It's Not Easy" as a cipher for Europe's current crisis: we may not be calling "Mama" to admit that things aren't working out, but we are confronting the fact that European policies are diverging substantially from the ideals that seemed

for decades to be fundamental to the continent's identity. After World War II, frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Refugee Convention (1951) seemed to offer certainties in parts of Europe at least, but today the failures in their implementation are unmistakable.

The moment with Modu I described at the beginning of this article, however, is an expression of something else. When Modu shared his song, he went a step further than any others had done, actively involving everyone in it and giving instructions. He taught it to us, gave us roles, and instructed us against certain actions, all this, as he told me later, even while the song was not yet finished. His contribution was not only that of a "survivor" (Pilzer 2015) but that of a survivor who was building a community of survivors and building something with them. This was a "crafting of self," in DeNora's terms, that actively created spaces for other selves. As such, it was a remarkable testimony of a possible future for Europe.

Notes

1. The number of unaccompanied minors arriving in Italy doubled between 2015 and 2016, reaching 25,846 in 2016; the majority remain in the South, Sicily in particular. See Open Migration n.d.

2. Individuals can apply for leave to remain in Italy as *neomaggiorenni* (neo-adults), a status that can last for three years after eighteen, the legal age of maturity. See Open Migration 2017:point 4.

3. Woven Gold, formerly affiliated with the Helen Bamber Foundation, <http://www.helenbamber.org/music-group/>. For recent work on creative writing in refugee contexts, see Calais Writers (2017); Stonebridge (2017).

4. They have been warned to mistrust white people and fear that if they disobey their traffickers, their families will suffer. The trade is global, but for a brief discussion of the situation in Italy, see Toldo and Kelly (2017).