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Talking Back through Graffiti and other Visual Methods: Photo Essay



“Morally acceptable reasons for civil disobedience include overriding obligations to others, conscientious objection to performing required acts, belief that disobedience will promote justice or welfare, and, occasionally, strong personal motivations.” (Greenwalt , *Justifying non-violent civil disobedience* 11). I begin with this quote from Greenwalt to provide context to the several ways in which

we captured people talking back against the European policies against mobility that many migrants face. Each photo provided will provide context through which this concept was portrayed in each of the locations that we visited in Italy. This first photo shows Casa Don Gallo, an abandoned house where illegal migrants in Padova live. Firstly, this property is not owned by any of the migrants, and they find themselves squatting, an illegal act that the local government has seemed to overlook. Many of the migrants residing at Casa Don Gallo come from war torn countries, fleeing conflict and seeking safety, yet are still in Italy illegally. These migrants find themselves without any form of valid residency because they have either been rejected for asylum, or are still waiting to hear back from the immigration consul. To me, the act of living in this house is not only an act of civil disobedience, but also a way of talking back. For the province of Veneto, where Padova is located, to rather let these asylum seekers squat in an abandoned house while processing their status (which some migrants had said was taking them over a year to hear back from the government), is morally unacceptable and hopefully through the ongoing use of this property and their promotion of their cause they will be able to change Italian’s minds on the laws and inefficiency in place. As they had explained in their growing repertoire with the local home owners that surround them.



Figure 2: Top: "Cross the lotteries. We Open the Borders." Bottom: "No Frontiers for the Rights of All"

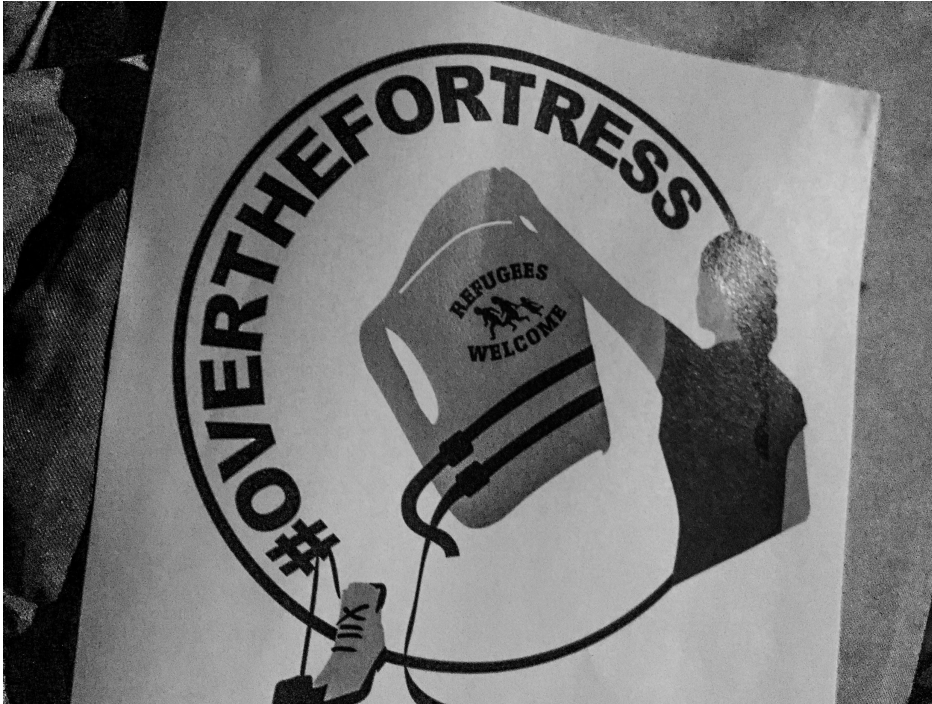


Figure 1: "Against border, wars, racism and security. FOR THE RIGHTS OF ALL"

While we were in Padova, in addition to visiting Casa Don Gallo, we attended a protest that drew on the testimonies of migrants in Padova as well as bring highlight to the unjust policies that are in place in regards to asylum seekers and the free movement of people throughout the world. The following photos are taken from this protest and provide mentalities and suggestions of talking back against the policies in context to this issue. As the one in reference to the third photo with the #OverTheBorder, talks back directly to the laws in place with messages of civil disobedience, instead of keeping migrants out and deterring them from coming this sign is saying "come to Europe, cross over the border, we welcome you." This protest and the messages said at this protest can be directly connected to the movie *Io sto con la Sposa* and its call for civil disobedience. While unlike the drive from Italy to Sweden in the movie

was an illegal act of civil disobedience, this protest was most likely legal and allowed by the City as there was no presence of police hindering or breaking up the peaceful gathering. Instead, this act of talking back calls upon the majority's moral standards to question the laws and policies in place that hinder the free movement of people. These signs that discuss legally

making it to Europe as “winning the lottery” or borders as a method of “confinement” help to stress the contradiction of borders and their purpose. These messages were not just expressed in the protest in Padova but can be connected to the message we heard from both the Doctor and Mayor of Lampedusa calling for a “Humanitarian Corridor,” for while migration will never stop, the loss of lives and exploitation by smugglers can hopefully cease to exist.



“Political Graffiti constitutes as an alternative urban geography that stands in direct competition with the narratives expanded by mainstream mass media and the governments” (Zaimakis, *‘Welcome to the civilization of fear’ on political graffiti heterotopias in Greece in times of Crisis*, 373.)

“The majority that accepts laws and behaviours that give negative meaning to the position of being a migrant could understand what being a non-person means only if the members of that majority were placed in the position of a non-person. It is a difficult and problematic operation that different narratives about the internal otherness inherent in Italianness can only attempt to perform.” (Parati *The art of talking back in a destination culture*, 26)

These next images show messages of civil disobedience throughout Italy. As the first quote states, while the mainstream news focuses on the “[flooding of migrants](#)” and the vast numbers in which migrants are entering the country, the streets are filled with messages of acceptance, and irony to try and change the mindset of those coexisting in these spaces. Additionally, the anonymous nature of street artists allows for the messages to stand on their own, giving them more agency due to the lack of bias towards the artist. Is it a migrant? An Italian? White? Black?



Figure 3: "Born to worry about your self-distruction" Far Right: "Fuck Negro"

These first two images incite different messages based on the viewer and their knowledge. For instance, the first one of the boy watering hearts, is a direct inspiration of the famous street artist Banksy who did the same style piece however, I include it in this photo essay because the artist who signed his work: Alessio-B, has done other street art of the same style in which he calls for

Peace, showing a what seems to be a [refugee child](#) (based on popular images in the media of migrant children walking to Europe look like) holding up a peace sign on a beach facing the ocean. To me this motivates a message of peace among nations from migrants coming to Italy via the Ocean are from.



Figure 4: "Defend Bologna from the League's invasion."

One of the messages consistently heard when asked about Lega Nord, was, "The Lega Nord is our version of Trump." This is to mean, the most extreme of the right-wing politics in Italy, thriving on xenophobic anxieties and racist messages to incite hate and gather support against the "other." This graffiti's message reads, "Defend Bologna from the League's invasion." With the League being one of the common names given to Lega Nord.

In general, all of the powerful artwork used throughout Italy was used to grab hold of the majority's morality in an attempt to bring to light the injustices that migrants struggle against in the face of Fortress Europe's policies against mobility. These different methods are all part of the overarching category of talking back, a way to find a voice—whether that voice is of the migrants who have no other way of speaking out against the government or Italians who use their resources to create protests which take a less passive approach and force others to confront the issues at hand.



Figure 5: "And now yes, that is home"



“The dark stain
Spreading on maps whose shapes
dissolve their frontiers
The way that corpses melt in a lime put or
The bright mulch of autumn is trampled
into mud”
-Derek Walcott “The Migrants”



Figure 6 “We Choose Life” Written in Spanish, Arabic, and Italian

