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# LIVING "TRANQUILLO" IN PALERMO:
## Place-Making among West-African Migrants in the Historic Quarter of Ballarò

**Abstract:**
Through an analysis that combines anthropological theories of place and space with an ethnographic fieldwork in Palermo's historic quarter of Ballarò, I examine the process of place-making among irregular male West-African migrants. While confirming that place-making is always affected by already existing power relations in the relevant spatial context, the paper argues – contrary to the widespread tendency in anthropology to assume that people's perception of places is connected to their belonging – that spaces can be turned to places in different ways. West-African migrants in Palermo do not belong to Ballarò, but the quarter is their reference point in the city, because it is "*tranquillo*" and "like Africa": the paper shows how West-African migrants turn Ballarò to their place both by living it and by attaching meaning to it. Finally, while showing how irregular migrants live and therefore make their own lives in Ballarò, the paper also shows that in doing this they don't fall under the stereotypical categories of the law-breaking "villains" who enjoy their status, or of the helpless "victims" of exploitation.

**Keywords:** place, space, West-African migration to Europe, Italian migration policy, Sicily, Senegalese in Europe

> "Ballarò – the most beautiful quarter of Palermo"
> (*Franck, Ivory Coast*)

> "Ballarò is a centre for every foreigner, especially like Africans, if you enter Palermo, the direction that they are giving you is Ballarò. If you get to Ballarò, you will see a lot of the blacks, a lot of Africans. Then you ask them who you are looking for or where you are going - they`ll give you direction. You`ll find your brother there! So, I think about Ballarò as a centre of Africans, or foreigners."
>
> (*Michael, Liberia*)

> "Ballarò is a fantastic thing! /.../ But also, look! For immigrants it's ideal! There are also some things of which... (*clearing the throat*) I wouldn't even want that you write. In a sense that at this house I am paying 300 euro, right? But I am not paying for electricity. You understand? There are some nice things here which I do not want to tell you, because I don't want to be... (*laughing*), because like this they will cut it off.
> /.../ Also the food here is cheap, right? Taking into account that it is in the centre of the city, historical centre, you can move... no, it's *tranquillo*[1]. Also when they know you, there is at least some security, in a sense that it is known how things work here. There is also the mentality of maf... when you know at least how to fit yourself in, okey? But at the same time there is also amazing *bordello*[2], huh! (*laughing*) Amazing! That they are making *bordello* at three a'clock in the morning, the music – bom-bom-bom! More or less like Africa!"
>
> (*Assane, Senegal*)

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[1] *Tranquillo* (it) translates to English as *quiet, calm, peaceful* or *untroubled,* depending on the context.
[2] *Bordello* (it) refers to noise and chaos; a racket.

Ballarò is the centre of Palermo. It is the base and the reference point. In Ballarò you can move freely, without fear, and from Ballarò you can find everything or everybody you need. It is like Africa, because it is chaotic, but also because there are many Africans. This is how my informants – male West-African migrants – portray Ballarò, the most decaying quarter in the historic centre of Palermo, in Sicily. It is a very different way of looking at the neighbourhood, which is usually by media, politicians, urban planners and inhabitants of Palermo portrayed as dangerous, inconvenient, poor, dirty, noisy, decayed and problematic[3].

These two ideas of Ballarò are that different that they seem to be describing two different places. I suggest that in a way they do: they talk about the same physical space, but not about the same place. In January 2011 I moved to a house next to the busiest squares in Ballarò to find out how migrants make their own place in the quarter.

I lived in the neighbourhood for three months to carry out an anthropological fieldwork. I limited my focus on West-African male migrants, with a special interest in the Senegalese. My informants are not "migrants of Ballarò" in its direct meaning. In fact, many of them do not even live in Ballarò, but they do have something in common – they are all male, mostly West-African origin, and they all meet in Ballarò.

My research group consisted of 34 male migrants of whom 14 were Senegalese. The youngest of the group are in their early twenties, the oldest in late thirties. The average time that my research participants have been to Italy is 6,3 years. In order to avoid repetition I from now on use the term West-African Ballarò, while being aware that it reflects solely the male perspective of it.

My data was gathered in three main ways – through participating, observing and interviewing. In parallel to following different West-African friends to their gathering places and work, I also volunteered in one of the immigrant centres in the neighbourhood. Due to the fact that many of my informants are in the country irregularly, they were more willing to accept me as a researcher with a notebook rather than with a recorder. Therefore, I gathered most of my data through informal talks and by barely following them in their daily activities. As complementary to informal conversations I carried out 19 interviews (14 recorded and 5 unrecorded). All interviewees were male, 17 of them being migrants, of which 9 were Senegalese.

On the level of broader theoretical context I was interested in what role space and certain landscapes play in people's lives, particularly in migrants' lives. With the help of anthropological theories of space and place I intended to analyze how a group of people is forming "meaningful relationship with the locales they occupy, how they attach meaning to space, or transform "space" into "place""[4]. I was specifically interested in researching place-making among migrants in their "new" neighbourhood. It is a rather unconventional path to take in times when migration research emphasizes transnational aspects of migrants' lives and sees migrants to be living across borders[5].

[3] J. Cole, *New Racism in Europe. A Sicilian Ethnography,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997; F. Lo Piccolo, *Palermo, a City in Transition: Saint Benedict "The Moor" versus Saint Rosalia,* in "International Planning Studies", 5(1/2000), pp. 87-115.

[4] S.M. Low, D. Lawrence-Zuniga, *Inscribed Spaces,* in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture,* Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003, p.185.

[5] see further L. Bottos, *Transformations of Old Colony Mennonites: the Making of a Trans-statal Community,* in "Global Networks", 8(2/2008), pp. 214-231.; P. Levitt et al, *International Perspectives on Transnational Migration: An Introduction,* in "International Migration Review", 37(3/2003), pp. 565-575.; P. Levitt, *Redefining the Boundaries of Belonging: The Institutional Character of Transnational Religious Life,* in "Sociology of Religion" 65(1/2004), pp. 1-18.; K. McHugh, *Inside, Outside, Upside down, Backward, Forward, Round and Round: a Case for Ethnographic Studies in Migration,* in "Progress in Human Geography", 24(1/2000), pp. 71-89.; K. Olwig, *"Transnational" Socio-Cultural Systems and Ethnographic Research: Views from an Extended*

While some social scientists like Jonathan Friedman, Adrian Favell, Kim Knibbe and Marten van der Meulen criticize a trend of overemphasizing the deterritorialising effect of transnationalism[6], general transnational focus in migration studies still gives priority to transnational spaces which are produced by people on the move and sees migration to be "about people dislodged from place, people in motion, people with attachments and connections in multiple places, people living in the moment while looking backward from where they came and forward to an uncertain future"[7]. In this context, research about place-making among migrants in one specific location without reference to transnational spaces where they also operate, might seem dated for today's anthropology. On the contrary, I agree to Ghassan Hage that it is worth reminding that many migrants spend, for example, only two days of their lives for travelling, and therefore mobility is not as essential for their self-perception as often assumed[8].

However, questioning the meanings that new places in a new country of residence mean to migrants can be a path worth taking. In fact, doing this in interplay with current anthropological approaches to space and place puts in question assumptions that both migration researchers and space and place theorists have about people's relationship with place. While anthropologists like Margaret Rodman[9] criticize that anthropologists tend to reduce place only to location where things take place, then at the same time, research which seeks to reveal complex relation between place and people still mostly deals with groups who are historically tied to specific locations[10]. Moreover, anthropological research on the relationship between people and place often carry an assumption that people perceive space in a specific way due to their cultural belonging. This, ironically then again reduces place to a location where things take place and identities are formed. The first argument of this paper thereby is that based on my study in Ballarò places can have significant importance to people also in other ways than through providing location for belonging, and that thereby researching relations that migrants form with their new surroundings should be encouraged.

From political perspective I chose to research among migrants, because I wanted to get to the stories of migrants who are a target of European politics, but whose voices are rarely heard. Due to Italy's poor migration policy, which "tends to make the chances of becoming a legal resident migrant

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*Field Site,* in "International Migration Review", 37 (2003), pp. 787-811.; A. Ong, *Flexible Citizenship among Chinese Cosmopolitans*, in P. Chea & B. Robbins (eds.) *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1998, pp. 134-62.; S.Vertovec, *Migration and other Modes of Transnationalism: Towards Conceptual Cross-Fertilization*, in "International Migration Review", 37(3/2003), pp. 641-665.; A. Wimmer and N. G. Schiller, *Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology*, in "International Migration Review", 37(3/2003), pp. 576-610.

[6] see further J. Friedman, *From Roots to Routes: Tropes for Trippers,* in "Anthropological Theory", (2/2002), pp. 21-36.; A. Favell, *Games Without Frontiers? Questioning the Transnational Social Power of Migrants in Europe* , in "European Journal of Sociology", 44 (3/2003), pp. 397-427., K. Knibbe*, "We did not Come Here as Tenants, but as Landlords". Nigerian Pentecostals and the Power of Maps,* in "African Diaspora", 2(2/2009), pp. 133-158., K. Knibbe and M. Van der Meulen, *The Role of Spatial Practices and Locality in the Constituting of the Christian African Diaspora*, in "African Diaspora", 2(2/2009), pp. 125-130.

[7] K. McHugh, *Inside, Outside, Upside down, Backward, Forward, Round and Round: a Case for Ethnographic Studies in Migration*, in "Progress in Human Geography", 24(1/2000), p. 83.

[8] G. Hage, *A Not So Multi-sited Ethnography of a Not So Imagined Community*, in „Anthropological Theory", 5(2005), p. 469.

[9] see further M. Rodman, *Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1992], pp. 204-223.

[10] see Rodman's own research in Melanesia: Ibid.;  James Fernandez on some African sacred places: J. Fernandez, *Emergence and Convergence in some African Sacred Places*, in  S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1984], pp. 187-203.; and John Gray on Scottish borderland shepherds: J. Gray, *Open Space and Dwelling Places: Being Home on Hill Farms in the Scottish Borders*, , in  S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1999], pp. 224-244.

higher for an undocumented migrant who is already in Italy, than for a potential migrant who is trying to gain a legal access to the Italian labour market from abroad"[11], a big part of my research participants turned out to be undocumented. 14 of my research group confirmed that they had experienced irregular status during their stay in Italy and only 5 made clear they had never had problems with residence permit. The remaining 15 referred to their current or previous irregular status, but did not confirm it.

Conducting fieldwork with undocumented migrants raises a number of ethical issues. Giving information about my research participants' identities and describing how they have made their lives which they are not allowed to make, could seriously harm them. Thereby names of my research participants are changed.

A second ethical issue comes from the presentation of undocumented migrants. They are often presented in an oversimplified way: either as "victims" of exploitation (by smugglers, employers, and other third parties) or as "villains" who have set out to break the law"[12]. My research was conducted during an outbreak of Arab Spring when Italian media was daily broadcasting news about Tunisian migrants arriving Lampedusa. Stereotypes of helpless and victimized irregular "boat-immigrants", on the one hand, and stereotypes of migrants who come to Europe to take advantage of its welfare system, were vivid and continuously reinforced. Furthermore, in the Italian case, it has been argued that ignoring the importance and real essence of the phenomenon of undocumented migration is also the basis for political debates and policy making[13]. In order not to contribute into simplistic stereotypes, undocumented migrants' lives need to be studied and presented through multiple angles. The second argument of this paper is that researching migrants' place-making in their new or temporary homes helps to understand the complex ways of their survival and the ways they make their lives in new locations, without falling into simplistic stereotypes. My research participants are persons who use their agency in response to structural constraints that they face in the Italian society and make their lives there in spite of the fact that they are officially not allowed to live there at all. Besides the publicly acknowledged story of immigrants who started settling in the historic centre of Palermo since early 1980s, there is also another story: the one telling how these migrants are continuously building their life in the neighbourhood. This is the story that this paper seeks to tell.

The article is divided into two sections. The first analyzes how male West-Africans make their place in Ballarò, how they ""write" or impute in an enduring way their presence on their surrounding"[14]. They make their place in Ballarò which plays an important positive role in their life: it is *tranquillo* and like Africa. Despite all West-Africans not being strongly tied to each other they make this place in a shared way. They are not completely free in attaching meanings to Ballarò. In fact, it is not their neighbourhood. Spatial power, call it Mafia or area boys, set situational context for place-making processes.

The second section takes a step further and discusses why West-African migrants perceive Ballarò exactly the way they do. Perceiving the quarter to be *tranquillo* and like Africa reflects migrants' problems with residence permits and their ambiguous attitude to legality. On the one hand they appreciate that Ballarò is *tranquillo*, a police-free area, but on the other hand their biggest wish is to

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[11] CLANDESTINO Research Project, *Irregular Migration in Italy* [pdf], available at: http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/clandestino_report_italy_final_3.pdf , 2009, p. 19. [Accessed 12 May 2011].

[12] B. Anderson and M. Ruhs, *Guest Editorial. Researching Illegality and Labour Migration*, in "Population, Space and Place", (16/2010), p. 177.

[13] CLANDESTINO Research Project, *Irregular Migration in Italy* [pdf], available at: http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/clandestino_report_italy_final_3.pdf , 2009, pp. 71-72. [Accessed 12 May 2011].

[14] S.M. Low, D. Lawrence-Zuniga, *Inscribed Spaces*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003, p.185.

escape from their irregular, and sometimes illegal, lives. The place-making process does not simply happen. Instead, the way migrants make places reveals more about their life, about their agency in a constraint society. In other words this paper is not simply about West-African Ballarò. Instead, West-African Ballarò is a symbol of marginalization of a group of people in Italian society.

## 1. Space and Place in Ballarò

I run into Franck in front of my building one midday during my first weeks in the city. We had met a few times before, but he had always kept distance. All I knew about him was that he is from Ivory Coast and that he is always *in giro*[15], because there is nothing else to do. Now suddenly he greeted me in a very friendly manner and a few minutes later I found myself chatting with him about life in the city. Among other things he told me that Ballarò is *tranquillo*, because migrants are not asked for their residence permit here. He also told me that although he is not living in the quarter himself, he is always *in giro* here, like at this very moment, because it is his reference point. Moreover, Ballarò is like Africa, because you can go and visit people without making an appointment before. I remembered having heard something similar last night from Assane, a Senegalese at whose place I and Yaya had our late-night dinner. Assane had told me that Ballarò is his city: it is ideal for migrants because of its central location and because *"we all know how things work in Ballarò – nothing is legal!"*.

Franck was not the only person who told me of Ballarò that day. The same afternoon I heard it once again when I was waiting in front of the biggest immigrant centre in the neighbourhood. It had been Olivier, another young man in his late twenties from Ivory Coast who has been living in Italy for six years. After I told him that I am in Palermo to research on what migrants think of Ballarò, he replied me immediately that for him Ballarò is the base. It is also like Africa, because even Sicilians in the neighbourhood live like Africans.

Assane, Franck and Olivier became my good friends in upcoming months. They knew each other, but they were all moving in different social circles. I was impressed that despite their minimal contac with each other, they all told me a very similar story of Ballarò – it is their base, *tranquillo* and like Africa.

Anthropologists, like Kim Knibbe[16] with her research in the Bijlmer, an immigrant neighbourhood of Amsterdam, suggest that different institutions and social groups have different ideas of the same physical spaces – they draw different maps of the very same neighbourhood. Noticing that places and landscapes play a significant role in people's lives and that people perceive spaces in different ways, anthropologists have started thinking of space and place in a conceptualizing way. In an introducing chapter to "The Anthropology of Space and Place" Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuniga argue that "anthropologists have begun to shift their perspective to foregrounding spatial dimensions of culture rather than treating them as background"[17] and that "anthropologists are rethinking and reconceptualizing their understanding of culture in spatialized ways"[18]. This shift is what makes anthropological theories of space and place daring for analyzing West-African migrants' way of thinking of Ballarò. Not all my informants belong to the same social circle, but the ideas they have about the neighbourhood unite them. I would not dare to call them constituting a West-

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[15] To be *in giro* means to hang around.
[16] K. Knibbe, *"We did not Come Here as Tenants, but as Landlords". Nigerian Pentecostals and the Power of Maps,* in "African Diaspora", 2(2/2009), pp. 133-158.
[17] S.M. Low, D. Lawrence-Zuniga, *Locating Culture,* in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003, p.1.
[18] Ibid.

African Ballarò culture, but they do share a similar way of living and lifestyle. Moreover, I suggest that this way of living is in many ways bound to their shared perception of Ballarò. Therefore, through analysis of their perceptions of Ballarò I seek to illustrate how they create their lives in Palermo and in the Italian society more generally.

Low and Lawrence-Zuniga introduce a number of thematic categories inside anthropology of space and place, which they find to be "the most exciting and promising directions currently being explored"[19]. My study speaks to the category that they call "inscribed spaces". The interest within this category lies in the relationship between people and their surrounding[20]. In other words, it focuses "on the fundamental ways in which humans "write" or impute in an enduring way their presence on their surrounding"[21]. It emphasizes the idea that place is socially constructed, since it revolves around "how people collectively form a meaningful relationship with the locales they occupy, how they attach meaning to space, or transform "space" into "place"[22]. Rodman[23], for instance, criticizes heavily how anthropologist have so far taken places as containers where things happen, and, therefore, have made places to be primarily anthropological constructs. Instead, places are also social constructs and "a place comes explicitly into being in the discourse of its inhabitants"[24]. While the general idea about social constructedness of places is shared by different authors, there is no consensus about using the two central terms, those of space and place[25]. My intention here is not to fall into a debate over the terms, but instead to focus on the meanings that West-Africans attach to Ballarò. Therefore, for the sake of consistency, I use the concept of place-making to refer to the collective process of attaching meaning to space through narrative and practice. I thus talk about "space" as a situational context in Ballarò which is by West-African migrants turned into their West-African "place".

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[19] Ibid.

[20] S.M. Low, D. Lawrence-Zuniga, *Inscribed Spaces*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003, p.185.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] M. Rodman, *Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1992], pp. 204-223.

[24] Ibid., p. 206.

[25] For some anthropologists and human geographers "space" refers to something more neutral and "place" to constructed and meaningful locations (see for example J. Fernandez, *Emergence and Convergence in some African Sacred Places*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1984], pp. 187-203.; G. Mowl, *The Place of Leisure*, in R. Pain et al. (eds.) *Introducing Social Geographies,* Arnold, London 2001, pp. 44-68.; and M. Rodman, *Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1992], pp. 204-223.). For these scholars "place-making" becomes a central concept.
Others, like Tilley (1994 cited in J. Gray, *Open Space and Dwelling Places: Being Home on Hill Farms in the Scottish Borders*, , in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1999], pp. 224-244.) still use place-making as a central concept, but define "space" as a situational context "constructed by and for human action", and "place" as a centre of "human significance and emotional attachment" (Ibid. 228). Besides this there are also anthropologists like Ben Chappell (B. Chappell, *Custom Contestation: Lowriders in Urban Space*, in "City & Society", 22 (1/2010), pp. 25-47.) for whom "location" is neutral, "space" is meaningful and "place" does not have any importance as a concept. Therefore, a central tool for his analyses is "space construction". Furthermore, Knibbe (K. Knibbe*, "We did not Come Here as Tenants, but as Landlords". Nigerian Pentecostals and the Power of Maps,* in "African Diaspora", 2(2/2009), pp. 133-158.), for instance, does not define precisely "place" and "space" at all and focuses on "spatial practices", which form part of "place-making".

## *Shared* Tranquillo *and Africa-like Place*

West-African place-making in Ballarò is done in a shared way. Even if all West-Africans in Palermo are not in close contact, they told me the same story of Ballarò, repeating that it is *tranquillo* and like Africa. Rodman emphasizes the multivocality of the place or in other words the idea that a single physical landscape "shapes and expresses polysemic meanings of place for different users"[26]. Taking into consideration this multivocality of the place, one might ask if shared places can exist at all, or maybe individuals only perceive spaces in personal ways. Human geographers tend to be more interested in how individuals perceive space while being constraint by factors like their gender, age etc[27]. However, André Sorensen's research on a neighbourhood movement in Yanaka, in Tokyo, illustrates how on the one hand "urban spaces have multiple meanings, that can vary between individuals and over time"[28], but how, on the other hand, groups – therefore individuals collectively – can "change or add to the meaning of particular places and spaces within the city"[29].

Individual West-Africans in Palermo also perceive Ballarò in different individual ways, but they create their West-African *tranquillo* and Africa-like place mutually. For instance, Pape, Michael and Yaya are three of many West-Africans in Palermo who have chosen not to live too close to Ballarò, because they find it too noisy and chaotic. Pape and Yaya also dislike that there are too many thieves in the quarter. I once asked Yaya why there was one shoe hanging upon his front door a few blocks away from Ballarò. He told me that it was drying there. *"They steal everything here. This is why you have to dry one shoe one day and another one the other day. This way they do not steal them".* He added that it is much worse in Ballarò, where you cannot leave anything outside, because Italians of the quarter are stealing.

This way of looking at Ballarò reveals Pape's, Michael's and Yaya's personal perceptions which are not consistent with the general West-African way of describing Ballarò. However, this does not entail that they do not participate in West-African place-making in the quarter. Quite the contrary, Pape is the main draught-player of the neighbourhood and Yaya is spending most of his day in Ballarò visiting different friends. Michael, on another hand, develops his tiny barbecue business every Sunday on the main square and arranges all his meetings to take place in Ballarò. Furthermore, they all equally told me the same story of the neighbourhood as Franck, Assane, Olivier and many others did, i.e. emphasizing that Ballarò is *tranquillo* and like Africa.

*Tranquillo* translates to English as *quiet, calm, peaceful* or *untroubled,* depending on the context. Noisy market and lively street life with accelerating scooters, horning cars, fighting dogs and shouting people is all but quiet and calm. What do then West-Africans mean by referring to Ballarò as *tranquillo*? It is not that they do not notice the chaos and noise in the quarter. Quite the contrary, they do, and refer to it as *bordello*. *Tranquillo*, on the other hand, refers to something else: Ballarò is *tranquillo*, because it is possible to have an untroubled life there. Untroubled in a sense that in Ballarò one can rent a house without a contract and possibly one can even steal electricity and water. In addition, Ballarò is in the centre of the city, and therefore there is no need to spend time and money for transport. For the group of West-Africans among whom I did most of my participant-observation – the Senegalese – appreciate Ballarò's central location, because of the type of job they are doing. They are sellers at different markets around the city, and they appreciate Ballarò's central

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[26] M. Rodman, *Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1992], p. 212.

[27] see for example G. Mowl, *The Place of Leisure*, in R. Pain et al. (eds.) *Introducing Social Geographies,* Arnold, London 2001, pp. 44-68.

[28] A. Sorensen, *Neighbourhood Streets as Meaningful Spaces: Claiming Rights to Shared Spaces in Tokyo, in* "City & Society", 21(2/2009), pp. 208-209.

[29] Ibid., p. 209.

location, because from there it is easy to reach all their selling spots. Furthermore, in the middle of the quarter there is the oldest and the cheapest market of the whole city – *"one can find everything from Ballarò"*, as it is often praised both by Italians and migrants. In addition to these pragmatic aspects, Ballarò is also *tranquillo*, because there is almost never any police in the quarter. *"There is no police here! This is why I like Ballarò!"* says Kufuo, my Ghanaian friend.

The other term West-Africans use to describe Ballarò is that it is like Africa. However, they do not always refer to same aspects. Some, like Pape, refer to the physical decay in the neighbourhood:

> "From the moment I arrived at the station in Palermo I was given the directions directly to here – to Santa Chiara[30]. When I saw it here... the houses, I said *"Mammamia*! This is Italy? This is worse than back home!"*. I saw terrible houses, the streets.... *"Mammamia!*", I said, "No, perhaps I am not in Europe. No, no, no. This is a wrong place".
>
> *(Pape, Senegal)*

Kufuo told me a very similar story about his arrival at the central station, which is situated right next to Ballarò quarter. He came to Palermo from Northern Italy, where he had been working in a factory which was eventually closed due to economic crisis. He said he had been in shock when he got out of the train station. His first thought was that he had been deported back to Africa. He had felt sad and lonely. However, by now, both Kufuo and Pape enjoy their lives in Palermo and do not even consider moving to the North.

Another reason to call Ballarò Africa is that the quarter is inhabited by many Africans, who open African shops, play African music and fill the streets with African atmosphere. Some claim that even Sicilians in the quarter have an African mentality – referring to their respect for family, their easygoing behaviour and their willingness to communicate with foreigners. Or in other words, as one Senegalese put it in an interview: *"We could say that Ballarò is the quarter of hospitality, that they like foreigners".*

By taking into account this shared way of narrating Ballarò, I suggest that although individual West-Africans certainly have their personal views of different places, which might even be conflicting with the group's view, they still repeat the narrative and take part of the practices through which their shared understanding of place is made.


## West-African Place at whose Space?

> Franck: But have you noticed, while living here, that on Sunday evening there are practically no Sicilians on the streets here?
> Siisi: Yes
> Franck: It is strange that they have left this one evening for Africans.

West-African migrants experience Ballarò in a shared and mutual way as illustrated above. This place-making, however, does not happen in a vacuum, and West-Africans are not absolutely free in their opportunities of giving the space a meaning and turning it into place. Although they describe Ballarò to be like Africa, it is not an African quarter. Instead, it is an Italian quarter where they are allowed to create their lives up to a certain point. *"Sometimes, if you go a little too... if they give you a finger, and you try to take a whole hand... and you try to take a whole hand, they tell you "You are not at home, you are at my home!""*, explained me Demba, one of my Senegalese informants who lives in the quarter. *"Because*

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[30] Santa Chiara is the biggest immigrant centre in Palermo, situated in Ballaró.

*them, if they want to kick you out, they kick you out, for sure!".* And he continues: *"if the foreigner does not get into Palermitan things, he can be* tranquillo. *But if you mix their things, it becomes* bordello*".* He perceives the neighbourhood to be highly controlled from inside and reckons that West-Africans can live there *tranquillo* only if they do not contest local power. Similarly, Franck finds it even strange that one evening of the week is left only for Africans. Therefore, place-making among West-Africans in Ballarò is largely affected by power-relations in the quarter.

Some anthropologists have pointed out how the production of meanings in neighbourhoods does not take place just for itself, but, instead, is affected by several factors. Arjun Appadurai suggests how it is affected by meanings produced by larger-scale social formations like nation-states and trading cartels among others[31]. Space is under a sovereign authority of state and states use space to control its citizens. For instance, space is often nationalized through the presence of police-stations, toll-booths and museums etc.[32]. Ben Chappell proposes that in researching space we should take a challenge and try "to glimpse how the spatial productivities of policy, the state, and the built environment operate in kinetic relation to the constitutive uses of space, to the human beings who occupy and traverse it"[33]. Michel de Certeau is emphasizing how pedestrians in the city "reappropriate" the city of the cartographers and planners to their own interests[34]. While de Certeau's focus is in pedestrians' agency, he also assumes the space to embed power of the state through planners and cartographers' views.

Low and Lawrence-Zuniga[35] do not mention the importance of power-relations when introducing the category of inscribed spaces, but they do mention power under categories of "contested spaces" and "spatial tactics" which they introduce in the same volume. In fact, they wisely point out that the categories which they introduce "are not definitive or mutually exclusive, as there is considerable overlap in the ways that sociospatial problems are defined and theorized[36]. By looking at the role which Ballarò as a space plays in West-African migrants' lives in Palermo, it becomes evident that their place-making in the neighbourhood cannot be understood without taking into account spatial power-relations. However, when Low and Lawrence-Zuniga, Appadurai, Chappell and de Certeau all draw attention on the important factor that different institutions manifest their power in space, they tend to connect this idea primarily with state institutions. In this regard, Ballarò's case serves as a counter-example: the state presence in the neighbourhood is minimal.

Those "they" who have left the Sunday evenings for Africans, and can kick Africans out of Ballarò whenever they want are not presenting Italian state nor policy makers. Usually police does not even enter the quarter. The first time I saw them in the neighbourhood was after I had lived in the quarter for six weeks. It was a Friday evening and I came back to Ballarò with a high-bourgeois status Sicilian woman, who I have known for four years. When we got to my street she could not drive me in front of my house, because four *carabinieri* cars had stopped in front of tiny African bars down my building and had hence blocked the whole traffic. She agreed to let me go on foot after I had promised to give her a missed call as soon as I would be at home. As I had given my word I went straight to my building and called her. However, instead of going upstairs I went back to streets,

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[31] A. Appadurai, *The Production of Locality*, in R. Fardon (ed.) *Counterworks: Managind the Divesrity of Knowledge, Routledge,* London 1995, p. 211.

[32] Ibid., pp. 214.

[33] B. Chappell, *Custom Contestation: Lowriders in Urban Space*, in "City & Society", 22 (1/2010), p. 31.

[34] M. de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angles 1988 [1984], pp. xii-xiv.

[35] S.M. Low, D. Lawrence-Zuniga, *Locating Culture*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003, pp.1-47.

[36] Ibid.. p.1.

eager to find out why all of a sudden there were so many police cars on the street where I had never seen any before.

I found a seat on a *Vespa* next to an old Ghanaian man and asked what had happened. An African man had come to a Ghanaian bar with a 50 euro note, *"which was not good"*. As it had not been the first time, the owner of the bar called the police. We were sitting in silence, waiting for the solution. The Ghanaians were shouting and screaming in Ashanti. Most of the policemen were waiting, doing nothing, except one. He was talking to an African man who I assumed to be the one with the fake note. Suddenly the policeman turned around and told his mates: "*amuni*!" (Let's go, in Sicilian). The four police cars left without taking anybody with them, leaving the Ghanaian bar visitors confused and with a closed bar. Although the old man and I were observing the scene from the same point, I asked again what had happened. He replied that the police had left without taking the guy, because the guy had friends in the police.

The first peculiarity of this incident lies in the fact that the police was in the quarter at all. The fact that police enters with four cars to catch one fake 50-euro note illustrates that coming to the quarter is an extraordinary thing to do. Also the fact that the police did not eventually arrest anybody turns the whole incident into a theatrical scene. Even if the police at times enter the quarter, they do not exercise their power – neither to arrest the fake money owner, not to check the legacy of businesses which run in the area. Furthermore, it seems to be publicly accepted that laws apply differently to people who *"have friends in the police"*. State-laws do not reach Ballarò strongly.

The lack of state power makes it also possible that one of my undocumented informants rents a room from a police officer, and that another one is making friends with the mayor of his city (a smaller town close to Palermo) and his other local friend happens to be a *carabinieri* and calls him his *fratello* (brother). Furthermore, my third undocumented informant has organized a holiday in Senegal for the guard from the market where he is illegally peddling. This lack of state-power, however, does not entail that everything is allowed. Instead, life in Ballarò is heavily controlled.

If it is not the state then who is the "they" that Demba and Franck talk about? Most of Sicilians would reply to this question, that it is Mafia, because Ballarò, like most of Palermitan neighbourhoods, is controlled by the Mafia. Since primary focus of my study was on migrants' perceptions of local power in Ballarò, analyzing the notorious phenomenon of Mafia would go beyond the aim of this paper. I only look at this phenomenon through the eyes of West-African migrants. In fact, many of my informants do not acknowledge this local power as Mafia. I heard them often claiming that they have never seen Mafia in Palermo and do not know what it means. Michael, my Liberian friend who has lived in Palermo for eight years is one of them. For instance, he experiences local power through the phenomenon what he calls the "area boys", the groups of teenagers who one can easily see being *in giro* in the neighbourhood day and night. Michael explains:

> "If they know you, they don't make a problem to you. But if they not know you, if you do something small, which is not even up to any problem, they take it as a problem. And they don't fight with one, they come with a group. They beat you with sticks, everything….
> …You African, you're no right to fight with anybody. But they are right to beat you."

On the other hand, some of my informants did talk about the local power with more direct reference to Mafia. The Senegalese cousins Demba and Matar, who both live in the neighbourhood, explained me the local neighbourhood rules as following:

> Demba: It's better to… leave them in peace. Have peace with everybody and *fatti i cazzi*…, how do you say it?

Siisi: ... *cazzi tuoi*?
Demba: ... *cazzi tuoi*.
Siisi: Then let's say that the first rule...
Demba: ... is this: *fatti i cazzi tuoi* [37]! And do not mix yourself to the problems of others.
Matar: Then it's like the saying I told you: "In Sicily, one watches, but does not speak!". This is the first thing to know to live here well.
/.../
Siisi: But also the police doesn't see.
Matar: huh? Here in Ballarò, I don't know. Yes, yes, yes. They don't come...
Demba: Here in Ballarò, it's like another...
Siisi: Zone? Another city?
Demba: ... it's like another state inside Palermo, inside Italy. There are rules that have nothing to do with laws, these things. No, totally their own ones.
Siisi: But which are these rules? The first rule is that it's not allowed to speak?
Demba: The first rule is this one: "*Fatti i cazzi tuoi*, first". *(laughing)* This rule gives you everything!

The rule that Matar and Demba talk about is not a special rule for migrants who live in Ballarò. Jeffrey Cole suggests that in Palermo in general "pervasive organized crime breeds fear and a cautious attitude of keeping to one's own affairs"[38]. Anton Blok refers to the same code of behaviour more analytically. In his book on the early history of Sicilian Mafia he mentions it as *omertà*, according to which "a person makes himself respected by keeping silent over "crimes" witnessed, suffered, or committed"[39]. He argues, that *omertà* "was not something abstract, floating in the air so to speak, reinforcing or influencing actual behaviour. On the contrary, [...] it constituted a very concrete and real part of the behaviour of people who depended on each other in specific fundamental ways"[40]. Whatever the mutual dependency between the local neighbourhood power-holders and West-Africans is, there is no doubt that the latter's opportunities depend on the first's wish.

In short, West-Africans' place-making in Ballarò happens in conditions which are to a large extent controlled by local power holders. Place-making can thereby only be researched by paying attention to power-relations that determine it. Incorporating de Certeau's[41] understanding of space and place can be helpful for analyzing it theoretically. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it must be noted here that de Certeau uses two concepts, space and place, in a reverse way to the place-making concept. In his terms it is space, which is made by practice. De Certeau argues that place is "the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence"[42]. In other words, he understands place to be organized by those who have power. Space, on the other hand, "is practiced place"[43]. No matter how the two terms are used, I hereby want to draw attention to the fact that de Certeau's distinction between space and place emphasizes the idea that none of the two is meaningless and neutral. In his terms, place has already power-

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[37] *Fatti i cazzi tuoi!* (it.k). In literal translation "do your own dicks". Equivalent English expression could be „mind your own fucking business!". It is often-used expression in colloquial language.

[38] J. Cole, *New Racism in Europe. A Sicilian Ethnography,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 32.

[39] A. Blok, *The Mafia of A Sicilian Village, 1860-1960*, Wavelend Press, Illinois 1988 [1974], pp. 211-212.

[40] Ibid.

[41] M. de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angles 1988 [1984].

[42] Ibid., p. 117.

[43] Ibid.

relations embedded into it through the relations and positions of the elements that constitute it. And when this place is used through practice, it is modified and turned into space. He "sets out to show how peoples' "ways of operating" constitute the means by which users re-appropriate space organized by techniques of sociocultural production"[44].

In addition to providing more complex and power-including approach to space and place, de Certeau's theory[45] enables also to look at the place-making process in a more complex way than just stating that the local power determines the process. Although power plays an important role, local power holders do not dictate place-making process. De Certeau[46] suggests the concepts of space and place inside his broader theory of daily practices – practices of everyday life. He suggests that in order to understand the logic of these practices, it is not sufficient to focus on structural forces only. For understanding the position of ordinary actions and actors, he uses the consumer-producer relations, suggesting that "to a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds *another* production, called "consumption": The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own production, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order"[47]. I suggest that place-making takes place in a similar manner. People do not make their place out of nothing, but neither do they follow predetermined rules. They use the already produced space – they consume its rules, and then, silently, almost invisibly, they produce their own place.

### *Making Place "Silently, almost Invisibly"*

West-African place-making in Ballarò is not dictated by local power-holders. I did not conduct any interviews with the representatives of this group, but it is clear that they have not decided what West-African place in Ballarò should be like. It is West-Africans themselves who, by following the rules of local power-holders, have started appreciating Ballarò as *tranquillo* and like Africa. Franck is quite right in saying, that *"they have left this one evening for Africans",* but it is West-Africans themselves who have made this evening in Ballarò to be as it is.

Michael, my Liberian friend, is one of the West-Africans who contribute every Sunday evening to turn Ballarò to be something like Africa. Three-four years ago Michael and his two friends started selling barbeque at the main square. He tells me of the struggles of the early days of business as the following:

> Siisi: But you can do it only on Sundays?
> Michael: Only Sundays, because of the market. We don't want to disturb, disturb people with the smoke of the meat.
> Siisi: But in the evening there is no market.
> Michael: In the evening there is no market, but we are supposed to start somewhere like a six a 'clock. And the market close 8 to 9. So, we disturb people. And before we started it was a big war. They don`t want us, they don`t accept us to stand there, no! They don`t accept, because of the smoke. People who stay around that area, they don`t accept. They say the smoke is disturbing them. But because we're Africans. Because they also roast. There was one man who

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[44] S.M. Low, *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Space and Place*, in "Semiotica", 175 (1/4/2009), p. 22.

[45] M. de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angles 1988 [1984].

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., pp. xii-xiii. (original emphasis)

was roasting there. The man stopped, so we are doing it. It's like it gets smoke modestly what we are doing... but! They don`t complain. Because we are blacks, we`re Africans they have to complain.
/.../
Siisi: But you don`t have to pay for...?
Michael: No, we don`t have to pay for the land. We don`t have to pay for anything. It is only one old man that we always give something after the work. We say something like 3, 4, 5 euro, 10 euro. He comes, we give him, and give him the meat. He`s an old man so we have to respect him like our father.

Starting a business on the square in Ballarò needs to be negotiated with local people. It is a clear example that public space does not belong to West-Africans, it belongs to local Italians. Even now when they have worked there for three-four years, they still pay the local man for using the space. Furthermore, they can run their business only on Sundays, because other days they would disturb people at the market. In fact, on Sundays they do not stop selling meat before midnight. On working days they could thus start roasting at nine and work at least three good hours. That would be a huge development for the business, but Michael does not even consider this. It might be so, because the other evenings in Ballarò are not left for Africans.

On the other hand, while following the local rules, Michael and his friends choose what they roast and which clientele they attract with it. They roast "African kebab", as they call it, and most of their clients are West-Africans. They are not the only African entrepreneurs in Ballarò on Sunday evening. This one evening of the week they together with others contribute into turning Ballarò into Africa. On Sunday evenings the smells and rhythms on the square are African, and so are the people who enjoy it. Other evenings the same phenomena can be found, but in a more hidden manner – existing besides Italian rhythms, *panelle*[48]-smell and wine-drinking students. Therefore, it is true that local power influences Africans' opportunities in using the space, but without migrants' own agency there would probably be no *tranquillo* and Africa-like Ballarò. Although West-African migrants acknowledge that it is not their neighbourhood and they depend on local rules, it is them who name these words – *tranquillo* and Africa, when describing the quarter. They narrate and they practice the place in their own way.

### Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, West-Africans are continuously making their own place in Ballarò: a place which is *tranquillo* and like Africa. Although individuals have their own personal ways of thinking of the quarter, they make their West-African place in a shared and mutual way. Their place-making is limited by local power-holders, whose rules they reappropriate to make their own West-African place. This way of understanding West-African place-making, however, is possible only by incorporating power-relations into the analysis. In fact, place-making never takes place in a vacuum. Instead, space always has power relations embedded into it, which then provides a basis for the place-making process. Incorporating de Certeau's[49] theoretical understanding of space and place into the research on place-making reveals, therefore, the complexity of spatial context in which groups attach shared meanings to spaces. This is helpful for understanding *how* places are made, as opposed to barely describing *what* is made by attaching meanings to spaces.

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[48] *Panelle* – a typical Sicilian fried food made of chickpea flour.
[49] M. de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angles 1988 [1984].

## 2. Appreciating *Tranquillo* Ballarò vs. a Wish to Escape Irregular Life

In the previous section I illustrated *how* West-African place is made in Ballarò. In order to understand place-making fully, however, it is equally important to ask *why* it is done in this specific way. Anthropologists are not simply interested in how people think and use the place, but, instead, they are equally curious to understand what role these understandings play in people's lives. For instance, Rodman argues for joining the concepts of multilocality and multivocality so that anthropologists could "look "through" these places, explore their links with others, consider *why they are constructed as they are*, see how places represent people, and begin to understand how people embody places"[50]. In other words, according to Rodman, the interest of anthropologists in space and place aims at understanding not only the process of place-making, but also the role places play in people's lives. John Gray, similarly, is not only interested in the ways in which Scottish borderland shepherds encounter and perceive mountains, but he also argues that "in creating places in the hills and forming attachment to them, people also implicate a historicized image of themselves as people of the Scottish Borders[51]; and James Fernandez analyzes how specific qualities are brought to some African sacred places by performance and acting out of images, while ultimately being interested in how these images reflect spatial notions of the culture itself[52].

Although I would not advocate for the existence of something like West-African Ballarò culture, I do suggest that the place that West-Africans make in Ballarò does not exist simply *per se*, but reflects their life in the city and in Italian society more broadly. There are many things about Ballarò that my West-African informants never notice, but for them the neighbourhood certainly entails the two: it is like Africa and it is *tranquillo*. Why are these two specific aspects playing such a significant role in my informants' lives? The fact that they have started appreciating Ballarò for its similarity to Africa most probably refers to African shops and high population of Africans in the neighbourhood. This resemblance to their home country most probably provides my informants with familiarity and comfort that tends to lack in their lives as migrants. However, the reasons for revolving their perceptions of Ballarò around the term "tranquillo" refer to problems more specific to immigrants in Italy than to a general migrant status. This section explores further, why Ballarò as a *tranquillo* neighbourhood plays such an important role in West-Africans' lives. Why is it important for them to find illegal housing, save money from transport and food and to keep distance from the police?

A straightforward answer to this question is that many of them are undocumented; and those who are not, are facing economic difficulties. Although it is a rather obvious answer, it should not be taken light-heartedly. The migrants' undocumented status and economic marginality in Palermo, and more generally in Italy, requires critical attention. I will discuss in the following pages what it means for an undocumented migrant to create his life in Palermo in spite of the fact that he is not allowed to live there at all. I will do so by discussing specifically the case of the male Senegalese, because they formed the majority of my research. Some of the topics I will discuss in this section are very specific to this national group. Many other issues, however, describe also the situation of other migrants. These cases will be clarified in the text.

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[50] M. Rodman, *Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1992], p. 218 (my emphasis).

[51] J. Gray, *Open Space and Dwelling Places: Being Home on Hill Farms in the Scottish Borders*, , in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1999], p. 224.

[52] J. Fernandez, *Emergence and Convergence in some African Sacred Places*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1984], p. 190.

### Illegality Enjoying Villains?

The migrants' undocumented status and its connectedness to the way they perceive Ballarò should not be taken light-heartedly. So should not be understood migrants' appreciation of the lack of state power and *tranquillità* in the quarter. Lack of police does enable some of my informants to *"search money"* from a shadow economy, while for others it simply assures them that they will not be asked their residence permit every time they go out of their house. This, however, does not imply that West-Africans in Ballarò approve working in a shadow economy and do not respect the Italian state, its authorities and officials.

After I had lived in Ballarò for a month and already understood the lack of state presence in the quarter, I once happened to have an enlightening chat with Yaya on the street. I was rushing home for lunch when I saw him passing by on the street. After joking about overeating he started telling me about his oldest brother who is *"really big"*. His brother works for the Senegalese military, and Yaya finds it to be a very important job, because *"every country needs to be protected"*. In his family there is always somebody working for the military and somebody for the police. Since our conversation took place in the middle of the police-free Ballarò, I was provocating him by saying that I do not understand why we need all these institutions, *"look, here in Ballarò, there is no police and there is also no problem. Life is beautiful without it!"*. By claiming this I thought myself repeating the same idea what I had heard him and his friends telling me a lot of times. However, this time Yaya did not agree. *"No-no! Every country needs police and military. This place here is dangerous!"*, he replied. I was surprised that now suddenly he claimed Ballarò to be dangerous, while usually they all stood against labelling this quarter with this word. In short, Yaya does not find Ballarò to be a normal area, an example of how things should work in the world. He is criticizing the lack of police in the area even if he personally profits from this factor in his daily life.

My informants' respect for the police came also into the fore through their comments on one of the incidents that happened in the quarter about three years ago. Many walls in Ballarò are covered with graffiti. One of the messages that the neighbourhood walls carry is dedicated to Giuffrida and Pasquale, two area boys. Although each and every single graffiti is unique, they all carry a similar message: "Giuffri and Pasquale, we are always with you. The police is a shit!". This message can be found in each square and street in the neighbourhood. Two area boys found their unfortunate and early end in an accident while escaping with their scooter from the police patrol that was following them. There are different rumours about what caused their death. In my interviews with West Africans I also asked my informants about the graffiti. Those who had been living in the quarter for longer knew the story. As I was struggling with understanding the fault of the police in the whole incident, I asked those who knew the story to explain me what the graffiti's message was. Matar, for instance, responded as following:

> Siisi:. But it wasn't the fault of the police? I don't get it...
> Matar: No, because they think that it's fault of the police.
> Siisi: And according to you?
> Matar: No! When, for instance, the police tells you to stop, you have to stop. But they, perhaps, had... I don't know... didn't have the licence. All boys drive here with scooters without the license and insurance. They were afraid, they wanted to escape. And this is why police started following them. Because I heard that the police car hit them. Others say that they just fell. No, you have to stop!

Assane commented on the same incident claiming that this is the Mafia mentality in the quarter and that they do not respect the police. Differently from "them", Matar's comment illustrates that the Senegalese respect state authorities.

The ambiguous attitude that the Senegalese have towards the police and legality gets even more complicated when taking into account the job that most of them are doing. Similarly to what happens in Emilia Romagna and Lombardy[53], they are usually involved in a well established Senegalese trade organization. They sell clothes, bags, shoes and sunglasses in different markets in Palermo and in its surroundings. The job is considered to be dangerous, as due to their irregular status they are forced to do it without necessary documents. Furthermore, eager to increase their income, many of them sell counterfeit brand products. Given that the latter is a crime, their job involves constant risk of being caught by the police, which would mean losing the goods in which they have already invested money but, even worse, might also entail being sent back to Senegal.

The Senegalese sellers are known throughout Italy as *vu cumprà*[54]. *Vu cumprà* stands for "vuoi comprare?" pronounced with the Senegalese accent, which means "Do you want to buy?" in Italian[55]. I did not hear this expression to be used in Palermo, but my Senegalese informants were aware of the term. In 2009 a Senegalese and an Italian rapper, GORAMAN and ESA, together published a song in You Tube[56], which describes very well what I observed and was often told by my Senegalese friends about their job. Similarly to my informants they point out how *vu cumprà* have to be careful about the police, and how they often get fines and risk with being sent out of the country. Moreover, they also emphasize that this is their job for now until they will get a better job and that they do this to "stay on feet" – to survive, because they do not want to beg. This type of justification for being involved in this illegal business can often also be heard among the Senegalese in Palermo. It reflects the Senegalese attitude towards jobs that other undocumented West-Africans do to "stay on feet".  Namely, it is mostly the Senegalese who are involved in street vending. Other undocumented West-African migrants in the city have other ways for survival. In my interviews I asked my Senegalese informants to comment on different jobs that migrants do in Palermo. I asked them to list the jobs in order of preference for themselves. Without exceptions they claimed Ghanaians and Nigerians to do *posteggiatore* – they help to park cars and ask money for keeping an eye on parked cars. The Senegalese, however, claim proudly that none of them is doing this job, because they consider it to be begging, or *"a job for lazy people"*. In addition, many West-Africans work in Italian households as caretakers or cleaners[57]. There are a few Senegalese who have done the job for short periods of time to keep their residence permit, but generally they claim it to be a job that Ghanaians and Ivoirians do. *"Many Senegalese… they want to be more with the Senegalese mentality, much more independent,"* explained me Pape.

 Doing *posteggiatore* and working in Italians' homes without a contract are not fully legal jobs, but they are not considered to go strongly against the law either. However, some West-Africans in Palermo are also involved in drug-trafficking and prostitution. In my informants' eyes it is mostly the

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[53] B. Riccio, *West African Transnationalism Compared: Ghanians and Senegalese in Italy*, in "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies", 34(2/2008), pp. 217-234.

[54] B. Riccio, Toubab *and* Vu Cumprà. *Italian Perceptions of Senegalese Transmigrants and the Senegalese Afro-Muslim Critique of Italian Society*, in R. Grillo & J. Pratt (eds.) *The Politics of Recognizing Difference: Multiculturalism Italian-style*, Ashgate Publishing, Hampshire 2002, pp. 177-196.

[55] Ibid., p. 179.

[56] Doctorfranz, *Vu Cumprà*. [video online], 2009, available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybk_-rujm0k [Accessed 22.05.2011].

[57] S. Booth, J. Cole, *An Unsettling Integration: Immigrant lives and work in Palermo*, in "Modern Italy", 4(2/1999), pp. 191-205.

Nigerians who are involved in these businesses[58], and the Senegalese strongly criticize it by distancing themselves from these two survival strategies. The Senegalese do not consider any of the above mentioned jobs realistically suitable for themselves. Surprisingly, they do not consider their own job, selling counterfeit goods, acceptable either. When I asked during the interview why they had put it in the list of the jobs that they would not like to do, they stated: *"this is a job that should not exist. It is illegal"*.

Interesting and enlightening parallels can be drawn between the Senegalese attitudes to their illegal job and the Puerto Rican crack sellers' wish to "go legit" in El Barrio, in New York, extensively researched in early 90s by the American anthropologist Philippe Bourgois[59]. Bourgois argues that while, on the one hand, his informants "treated their return to the world of street dealing", after having been fired from legal jobs, "as a triumph of free will and resistance", "at the same time, however, becoming a crack seller is by no means the voluntary triumphalist decision"[60]. Instead, his informants expressed repeatedly their frustration over not being able to find legal jobs. Bourgois claims the problem to be structural, since the legal jobs that were available for Puerto Ricans, like "room clerks, photocopiers, and messengers in the high-rise office corridors of the financial district propels many inner-city youths into a wrenching cultural confrontation with the upper-middle-class white world"[61].

Similarly to the Puerto Ricans in El Barrio, the Senegalese in Palermo wish to get a steady and legal job. Like Pape, a Senegalese who has done street vending in Palermo for eleven years put it: *"I would really like to work for a company, you understand? Like everybody, you understand? Without running left and right, without risking, you understand?"*. The major structural hindrance for them is the absence of documents. At the same time, many who manage to get documented keep on doing the job. For instance, also Pape, who had documents for some years, kept on street vending. Only because a precondition for his document was having a legal job, he also did a domestic job three times a week. He did not like the job itself and, moreover, it did not provide him with the steady income he was looking for. It turn out that keeping oneself legal is also economically an exhausting enterprise.

The negative attitude that the Senegalese have towards their own job, and Puerto Ricans' wish to enter the legal job market, indicate that titling migrants who are involved in illegal jobs as villains is extremely simplistic and problematic. Khalid Koser argues generally about irregular immigration that "for some people irregularity is a deliberate choice or decision, but many others find themselves in an irregular situation because of a lack of information or due to administrative obstacles"[62]. I suggest that the Senegalese do not come to Italy with intensions to be undocumented and cherish its shadow economy. Instead, they start street selling, because after arrival they find themselves with an undocumented status and without other job perspectives. Pape described me why and how new Senegalese in the city enter the job circle.

> "Because they all come and arrive here desperate. In Senegal some say that here you can have a car, wear nice clothes and they think that maybe here, this is a country where the money is falling on the ground. But then later, many get disappointed. Because they see how much one has to suffer to make a little bit of money. How much one has to suffer, you see? Because in the

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[58] For more on Nigerian prostitution in Palermo read J. Cole, *La Prostituzione Nigeriana a Palermo e gli Interventi per la Riduzione del Danno*, in C. Bartoli (ed.) *Esilio/Asilo: Donne Migranti e Richiedenti Asilo in Sicilia. Studie e Storie*, Duepunti Edizioni, Palermo 2010, pp. 83-109.

[59] P. Bourgois, *In Search of Respect. Selling Crack in El Bario*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997.

[60] Ibid., p. 115.

[61] Ibid.

[62] K. Koser, *Dimensions and Dynamics of Irregular Migration*, in „Population, Space and Place", 16 (2010), p. 183.

end it's all about luck, because each of us is different, you see? But it is difficult for everybody. More of disappointment. And then, trying to fight, because here it is a little different from how it is back home. One might come all alone, without anything, and all the Senegalese help him to start. But it is not easy...."

Therefore, many Senegalese arrive to Palermo and start street selling as a way for survival. I argue with the authors of the report of the Clandestino project that "the relevance of the irregular flows and stock of immigrants and their deep involvement in the Italian shadow economy, therefore, can be probably better explained as the result of the lack of a reasonable regulation rather than as the deliberate attempt to circumvent it"[63]. In the following paragraph I analyze the situation and the hindrances that my informants encounter while trying to get a residence permit in Palermo.


## Helpless Victims?

"Very, very horrible. That's a horrible life I'm living. I'm telling you. This is the life I'm living. So, that's why I'm crying, shouting every day I need document."

*(Michael, Liberia)*


As my research proved, getting a residence permit is the most important daily concern in migrants' lives. This does not apply to the Senegalese only, but also to other migrants among whom I did my research. In 2001-2002 Liza Schuster conducted a qualitative research among migrants with different backgrounds in Rome and concluded that all her undocumented informants found acquisition of papers extremely important, because "having documents meant that they could return home to visit family and friends"[64]. Differently from Schuster's findings, most of my informants argue a residence permit to be primarily important, because it would increase their job opportunities. In addition, some, like Assane, who lived undocumented for five years, but now has a permit, mention that *"the residence permit gives you at least hope that you will make it. Do you understand? This is the security"*. Only those of my research participants who already had papers stated that a good part of it is that now they can visit their relatives back home.

Schuster's research also illustrates that migrants' undocumented status is not something specific to Palermo only. Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo from the Law Faculty of Palermo stated cunningly at the roundtable "Migrants Still between the Reception and Custody", which I attended on 1st of March 2011 in Palermo: "Italy is a factory which is producing clandestinity". What Vassallo Paleologo refers to is that Italian migration policy is, on the one hand, "closing the front door of legal entry, while keeping the back door for illegal entry half open"[65]. In fact, it has often been argued that "the poor design of Italian migration policy tends to make the chances of becoming a legal resident migrant higher for an undocumented migrant who is already in Italy, than for a potential migrant who is trying to gain a legal access to the Italian labour market from abroad"[66]. Sally Booth and Jeffrey Cole

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[63] Clandestino Research Project, *Irregular Migration in Italy* [pdf], available at: http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/clandestino_report_italy_final_3.pdf , 2009, p. 8. [Accessed 12 May 2011].

[64] L. Schuster, *The Continuing Mobility of Migrants in Italy: Shifting between Places and Statuses*, in „Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies", 31(4/2005), p. 766.

[65] Zincone 1998 cited in CLANDESTINO Research Project, *Irregular Migration in Italy* [pdf], available at: http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/clandestino_report_italy_final_3.pdf , 2009, pp. 16-17. [Accessed 12 May 2011].

[66] Ibid., p. 19.

bring an example of one migrant in Palermo whose legal status had changed during 1992-1998 from tourist to undocumented and then to documented residence permit holder[67]. This is a very typical path that also the migrants I interviewed have gone through. All the Senegalese migrants I interviewed had entered Europe with tourist visas. "Indeed, in 2005 the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs estimated that around 70% of the undocumented migrants currently residing in Italy are "overstayers""[68]. However, differently from the example case that Booth and Cole provide, not all of my informants have managed to get to the documented status, and some of them, 3 out of 34, have fallen back to an undocumented status.

As noted above, most of the migrants in Italy spend at least some time undocumented. The Clandestino report claims that there are two main channels to then obtain legal status: amnesties and the quota system[69]. Interestingly none of my informants mentioned the quota system. I thus do not fall into describing how it works. Amnesties, however, play that important part in my informants' lives that talking about it became part of our daily conversations. Italy boasts with the highest number of regularization programs for undocumented migrants in Europe. By the time of the research Italian governments had approved six different amnesties since 1986: in 1986, 1990, 1995, 1998, 2002 and 2009[70]. According to the analysis conducted in 2004, more than half of the documented migrants who resided in Italy had obtained their legal status through one of the amnesties[71].

Many of my undocumented informants had applied for the amnesty in September 2009. A few of them had already obtained the permit or got it during my research period, while others often claimed that they practically had it, but they had not received it yet – a year and a half after having submitted their applications. The amnesty of 2009 was addressed only to domestic workers and care workers[72]. Within this scheme, 12 248 people asked a residence permit in Sicily and by the 5th of July 2010, 6 253 permits were released[73]. As I noted above, the Senegalese in Palermo are not usually working in the domestic sector. Therefore, this amnesty should not apply for them. Those few who had still received the residence permit through the program, had done the job for a short time in order to be able to apply, or had simply found somebody to sign a necessary false contract with them.

However, besides those few who received the permit with the last amnesty and those who were still hoping to receive one, there is a relatively big group of migrants who for several reasons could not apply for the permit. The Clandestino report and Schuster's study in Rome focus primarily on the so-called success cases – on those migrants who finally manage to get a permit – while they do not analyze what happens to those who do not manage to manoeuvre between the laws to meet their goal. I suggest that irregularity is not a deliberate choice for them either. The same Senegalese informants who desperately wish to get documented did not apply for the last amnesty, because they knew that their application would not be approved.

Omar, who has lived in Italy without a permit for three years, is one of them. He explained me his situation one evening in Yaya's living room when everybody else was out. When he said that he has

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[67] S. Booth, J. Cole, *An Unsettling Integration: Immigrant lives and work in Palermo*, in "Modern Italy", 4(2/1999), p. 193.

[68] CLANDESTINO Research Project, *Irregular Migration in Italy* [pdf], available at: http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/clandestino_report_italy_final_3.pdf , 2009, p. 61. [Accessed 12 May 2011].

[69] Ibid., p. 65.

[70] Ibid., p. 13.

[71] Blangiardo and Tanturri 2004 cited in Ibid., p. 13.

[72] Ministero Dell'Interno, *Emersione lavoro irregolare di colf e badanti: al via il 1° settembre la procedura on line, 2009,* available at: http://www.interno.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/sezioni/sala_stampa/notizie/immigrazione/0157_2009_08_10_circolare_Interno_Lavoro_emersione_colf_badanti_.html [Accessed 12 May 2011].

[73] Caritas Italiana and Fondazione Migrantes, *Immigrazione. Dossier Statistico,* Roma 2010, p. 446.

no permit, I automatically assumed that he had not yet received it from the last amnesty. Instead, he said that he had not even applied, because the amnesty was only for domestic workers. Knowing that this had not stopped others from applying, I asked further. Now he explained that he had discussed it with the lawyer who is voluntarily helping the Senegalese and the latter had suggested him not to apply, because those who have had any problems with the police would not receive a permit anyway. Omar had been caught by police once, when he was selling things on the beach of a neighbouring town. They had taken him to the police station and later brought the case to the court. In the court, Omar had said that he is doing this job, because he needs to survive and there is nothing else to do. They let him go, but this incident went into the record. Because of this, he cannot now apply for the permit. Given that the selling of counterfeit products is illegal and it takes place in public, most of the Senegalese have been caught at least once. Similarly to Omar, the documents are blocked for the same reason also for Yaya, Pape and many others in the city.

Cases like those of Omar, Pape and Yaya draw attention to the fact that research on undocumented migrants in Italy should not only focus on the channels of getting regularized. In addition, there is a big group of migrants who wish to escape their illegal ways of living, but for several reasons do not succeed. My research among undocumented Senegalese street sellers raises a number of questions which require further research. I agree with Corrado Bonifazi[74] and the CLANDESTINO report[75] that Italian policy makers should make more use of statistics which is available about irregular migrants in the country. However, I argue that it is equally important to keep in mind that different migrant groups in Italy respond to migration control policies in different ways. Therefore, qualitative research should also be carried out among different groups. I tentatively suggest that the job that the Senegalese migrants are practicing has serious implications for their chances to receive a residence permit. They are almost trapped in a vicious circle where their undocumented status pushes them into their illegal job, and then again this illegal job makes it impossible to receive a residence permit.

Could we then conclude that Omar, Pape and Yaya are helpless victims of the incompetent migration policy? I would rather agree that they are victims of the structure, but I would be careful with titling them as helpless. Although they are desperate, they have found a way for making their lives. I suggest that de Certeau's[76] metaphorical concepts of consumption and production become helpful again for analyzing this situation. The Senegalese life opportunities in Palermo are limited by the dominant legal order, which they "consume", but through their ways of using it, they "silently, almost invisibly"[77] create their own lives. If they would follow only the legal dominant rules and not make use of their own agency, their undocumented status would leave them helpless, without income and housing. Instead, they make use of the holes in this legal order. They make use of the lack of state in Ballarò and thus find housing. Furthermore, they also base their business "headquarter" in this quarter to reduce the possibility of getting caught by the police. However, it must be kept in mind that they do not keep away from the police because they are law-breaking villains. They primarily do so because getting caught by the police would limit their chances of getting away from this illegal life by getting documented.

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[74] C. Bonifazi, *European Migration Policy: Questions from Italy*, in R. King, G. Lazaridis & C. Tsardanidis (eds.) *Eldorado or Fortress? Migration in Southern Europe*, MacMillian Press Ltd, London 2000, pp. 233-252.

[75] CLANDESTINO Research Project, *Irregular Migration in Italy* [pdf], available at: http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/clandestino_report_italy_final_3.pdf , 2009. [Accessed 12 May 2011].

[76] M. de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angles 1988 [1984].

[77] Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

## *Concluding Remarks*

West-Africans' way of making the *tranquillo* and Africa-like place in Ballarò reflects their lives in Palermo and in Italy more broadly. This is why it is important not only to analyze how places are made, but also ask why they are constructed as they are. By simply researching the process of place-making would in Ballarò's case lead to simplistic research conclusion – i.e. to portraying West-Africans as illegality approving villains. This would contribute to enforcing negative stereotypes about migrants. A closer look at the topic, however, reveals Senegalese migrants' ambiguous relation to legality and enables to see what makes them appreciate the *tranquillo* aspect of the neighbourhood. While they appreciate that Ballarò provides them with a possibility for survival, they do not approve the illegal way of life. Quite on the contrary, their biggest daily concern is to receive a residence permit and to escape from this life. In their ordeals, however, they encounter several legal constraints. Undocumented West-African migrants in Ballarò are neither illegality enjoying villains, nor simply helpless victims of the incompetent migration policy. Their opportunities are limited by the dominant legal order, which they "consume", but through their ways of using it, they also "silently, almost invisibly"[78] create their own lives.

## Conclusion

It is now time to bring together the bits and pieces of contradictions and complexities I have introduced throughout this paper. How do then male West-African migrants make their own place in Ballarò?

West-Africans perceive Ballarò through positive emotions and emphasize that it is *tranquillo* and like Africa. They form "meaningful relationships" with the neighbourhood by attaching meanings of *tranquillo* and like-Africa to its space and thus transform "space" into "place"[79]. They do this in a shared way: despite their individual opinions and perceptions of the neighbourhood, they, without even belonging to a closely knit community, all praise Ballarò as *tranquillo*. Furthermore, by participating in the life in its streets, they make a place that is like Africa. At the same time their meaning attachment to the quarter takes place in a spatially limited situational context: it is highly controlled by local power-holders – or by local Mafia, as Italians would call it.

However, people do not only make places *per se*, but the qualities they bring to places reflect their culture[80], or in Ballarò's case rather West-Africans' way of life in the city and in Italian society more broadly. The way West-Africans see Ballarò reflects their socially marginalized status in the city and in Italian society in general. Because of their undocumented status, they appreciate that Ballarò is *tranquillo* and a police-free area. That, however, does not entail that they approve illegality. I argue that analysing place-making in the new or temporary homes of migrants helps to understand complex ways in which migrants make their lives despite the hindrances they encounter in host societies.

Understanding the complexity of migrants' lives has social and political relevance, because it helps to avoid falling into simplistic stereotypical presentation of migrants – either as helpless victims of

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[78] Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

[79] S.M. Low, D. Lawrence-Zuniga, *Inscribed Spaces*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003, p.185.

[80] J. Fernandez, *Emergence and Convergence in some African Sacred Places*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003 [1984], p. 190.

structure or law-breaking villains[81]. West-Africans' lives in Ballarò are, on the one hand, conditioned by local Italians' spatial power domination, poor Italian migration policy and their socially marginalized status, but they, on the other hand, use their agency to find ways for survival. They either develop sophisticated trade organizations in a shadow economy or find undocumented housing and social acceptance from Ballarò. Michel de Certeau's[82] concepts of production and consumption help to grasp the idea of this structure-agency dynamic. In order to understand the position of ordinary actions and actors, de Certeau uses the consumer-producer relations, suggesting that "to a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds *another* production, called "consumption": The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own production, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order"[83]. West-Africans make their lives in Palermo in a similar manner. They consume the dominant order, which is constituted by the Italian migration policy, Sicilians' superior status in Ballarò's public space and at the job market. Through this consumption they produce "silently and almost invisibly" their own West-African place, participate in a sophisticated trade organization and negotiate with Sicilians their social status in the city. Thereby, the first argument of this paper is that researching place-making among migrants is a fruitful way for discovering, understanding and presenting migrants' lives without falling into simplistic stereotypes.

Secondly, I argue that the way West-African migrants relate themselves to Ballarò illustrates how relation between place and people is not necessarily only and barely about belonging. In the introduction to a special volume dedicated to anthropological theories of space and place Low and Lawrence-Zuniga introduce the category of "inscribed spaces" which they argue to "focus on how various scholars define the fundamental relationship between humans and the environments they occupy"[84]. While stating this to be the primary focus of the category, the different contributions of the volume tend to assume that the nature of this relation is about belonging and identity formation. Instead, this paper shows how a relationship with a place can fully develop and express itself in ways other than through historical belonging and place-based identity formation. Places carry meanings and influence people's lives; people attach to them or stay away from them without necessarily belonging to these places. For instance, Ballarò plays a significant role in West-Africans' lives: it is their base and their reference point. The West-African place they are continuously making in Ballarò plays a central part in creating their lives in the city. However, they do not belong to Ballarò: they do not perceive themselves as West-Africans *of* Ballarò. Many of them do not even live in Ballarò. This way of relating to place draws attention to multiple possibilities for defining the fundamental relationship between humans and the environments they occupy and might encourage further research on migrants' relationship to their new surrounding.

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[81] B. Anderson and M. Ruhs, *Guest Editorial. Researching Illegality and Labour Migration*, in "Population, Space and Place", (16/2010), p. 177.

[82] M. de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angles 1988 [1984].

[83] Ibid., pp. xii-xiii. (original emphasis).

[84] S.M. Low, D. Lawrence-Zuniga, *Locating Culture*, in S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zuniga (eds.) *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford 2003, p.13.