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HOW TO MANAGE THE PARADOX?

Festival and Heritage as Sites of Responsible Encounter with Otherness

Abstract

This article focuses on one paradox rarely discussed in connection with the expanding prominence of festivals and heritage in cultural life, beyond acknowledging its inevitability: the way in which their successful promotion appears to undermine the very qualities that characterize them. Both festivals and heritage are instrumentalized as a means of promoting tourism, but their appeal is based on notions of authenticity and uniqueness that clash with their success. Rather than dismissing festivalization and heritagization as mere processes of linear standardization and “touristification”, we explore the possibilities of a more nuanced appreciation, focusing on encounters with various forms of alterity in the tourist experience and the reflexivity they enable. We present some empirical evidence of how these issues play out through the case study of “IT.A.CÀ Migrants and Travellers” festival, contributing to the debate on defining sustainable and responsible tourism.

Keywords

Festival; heritage; otherness; responsible tourism; reflexivity

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1. INTRODUCTION

As with other phenomena that grow in number and recognition, the increasing prominence of festivals and heritage in cultural life has been accompanied by a dilution of their definition. The bigger a share of public space and attention festivals and heritage have received, the less clear their boundaries and purpose have become, as different perspectives and actors have claimed them as their own. This is one of the paradoxes of the processes of festivalization and heritagization, that also for this reason merit to be considered in association. While this opens many possibilities, as evidenced by a diverse and expanding literature¹, this article focuses on one paradox that is rarely discussed beyond acknowledging its inevitability: the way in which the successful promotion of festivals and heritage for tourism purposes appears to undermine the very qualities that characterize them.

Indeed, both festivals and heritage are instrumentalized as a means of promoting

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¹ J. Mair, *The Routledge Handbook of Festivals*, London: Routledge, 2019; U. Kockel *et al.*, eds., *Heritage Festivals in Europe*, London: Routledge, 2020.

tourism, but their appeal is based on notions of authenticity and uniqueness that clash with their success and with the subsequent processes that have been described as commodification and objectification. This creates a paradoxical situation that is becoming increasingly evident. In this article, rather than dismissing festivalization and heritagization as mere processes of linear expansion, standardization and “touristification”, we explore the possibilities of a more nuanced appreciation of their broader significance, opened by focusing on encounters with various forms of alterity in the tourist experience and the reflexivity they enable. This contributes to the debate on defining sustainable and responsible tourism. To substantiate this contribution, we present some empirical evidence of how these issues play out through the case study of the festival “IT.A.CÀ Migrants and Travellers”².

2. HERITAGIZATION AND/AS FESTIVALIZATION

Heritagization and festivalization have been identified as framing processes that characterize the growing cultural significance of both festivals and heritage. This may point to a profound similarity in the role of festivals and heritage that underlies the significance of their intersection, however occasional or instrumental it may appear. That deep interconnection places them in line with many other *-izations*, first of all globalization of course, but also mediatization or, more critically, standardization – processes that are central in contemporary social theories. Festivalization started out as an occasional and dismissive qualifier to signal a degenerative process of previously more “serious” culture, in line with early days’ critiques of the culture industry and associated processes of commercialization and privatization, particularly in urban settings³. More recently the term, having also gone into some policy circles through optimistic ‘hyped’ accounts of the role of festivals⁴, is being reassessed. Festivalization as “a term pertaining [...] to society at large, including food, sports, tourism, city development, product marketing as well as all kinds of artistic and identity expression”⁵ becomes an important interpretive key to access contemporary cultural configurations. So festivalization according to Owe Ronström is fourfold. It is both a semantic process – more phenomena are included under the umbrella term – and an actual increase in number and geographical spread of these phenomena, as well as in size and shape of existing ones, creating a festivalscape reckoned with by public administrators, third sector organizations and private investors alike – not to mention the academy and media. Furthermore, the semantic and quantitative festivalization also affect the content and experience of cultural events. As a third dimension, these are increasingly *festivalized*, made to fit a handful of festival formats. This formatting according to the medium ‘festival’ has an impact both on repertoires of content production and on patterns of consuming behaviours or experiences. Overall, according to Ronström’s typology, a fourth encompassing way to conceptualise festivalization is as the broad influence of festivals in framing cultural life.

For heritagization too, it is possible to consider a similar prism of facets: a sym-

² Data available here, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://www.festivalitaca.net/>.

³ A. Smith, *Events in the City: Using Public Spaces as Event Venues*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

⁴ G. Waitt, “Urban Festivals: Geographies of Hype, Helplessness and Hope”, *Geography Compass*, 2, 2 (2008): 513-537.

⁵ O. Ronström, “Four Facets of Festivalisation”, *Puls: Musik-och dansetnologisk tidskrift/Journal for Ethnomusicology and Ethnochoreology*, 1, 1 (2016): 67-83 (72). This article is a reference for a discussion of term usage and typology of both festival and festivalization.

bolic extension of term usage, especially since the introduction of intangible cultural heritage; an expansion, both quantitative and geographic of phenomena under the increasingly capacious umbrella term; a formatting effect of content and experience of that expansion and, finally, a lens to interpret cultural trends more generally. Whilst on the one hand a key difference between the two processes lies in the greater institutionalization of heritagization, driven arguably by Unesco's policies and control over definitions⁶ – a more conceptually significant key similarity can also be discerned. This similarity, or even deeply common origin, could be found, very generally, in how they both mediate transitions and encounters with otherness: festivals mainly through collective effervescence, heritage through inter- and intra-generational solidarity. They have to do with how socio-cultural reproduction *and* change need spaces of liminality that are neither but enable both – long associated with ritualized aspects of collective life in which values are embodied and played out through re-enactment, challenges, reversing⁷.

It is precisely when seen as connected, or better when “the heritagisation process of recent years [is placed] in the context of the festivalisation process of the same period” that “the surge in festivals in general and the festivalisation of intangible heritage in particular may be understood in the context of ‘reflexive modernization’”⁸. Heritage, particularly intangible, and festivals perform reflexive modernity, they display forms of encounter with otherness that require and promote a certain reflexive distance from one's standpoint and, therefore, openness to cultural alterity.

3. FESTIVAL ENCOUNTERS

Seen through the lens of encounter with otherness, the paradox unleashed by festivals' success is both highlighted and defused – and reflexively thematized within festival practice. Both festivals and heritage, especially in the framework of tourism within which they are increasingly experienced, are informed by a concentrated expression of alterity. They connect phenomena originating from and stage encounters with the past, with cultural forms from other times or places, with ways of life beyond the accepted conventions of what is currently ‘normal’ and routine. Through this mediating function they enable potentially meaningful and transformative experiences that can then be treasured as both shared legacy and collective effervescence, and in this inform inter- and intra-generational connections. These are fundamental to energise and integrate communities – particularly anomic contemporary communities where integration cannot be taken for granted, and where uniqueness and authenticity are increasingly contested. Rather, a reflection of what encounter means and the forms it can take, especially in the framework of ideas of responsibility and sustainability, helps moving the analysis forward.

The increased centrality of festivals and festivalized heritage in cultural life can then be taken as an index and a platform to examine the dimensions of reflexive modernity that have to do with how we include a consideration for others in our experience and action, both individually and collectively. Put in this way, that appears as another way to

⁶ J. Leal, “Festivals, Group Making, Remaking and Unmaking”, *Ethnos*, 81, 4 (2016): 584-599.

⁷ V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, London: Routledge, 1969.

⁸ V.T. Hafstein, “Afterword: Festival as Heritage/Heritage as Festival”; referring to U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

articulate the accepted definition of sustainable development: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”⁹. Having been codified since 1987 in the path-breaking *Our common future* (or Brundtland) UN report, sustainable development has gained momentum since the turn of the century – in attention if not in actual impact (see *infra* for details on how it has entered the field of tourism studies and practice). Particularly since the establishment in 2015 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, this principle has been mainstreamed – in the sense of increasingly integrated as a systemic focus – at least in policy narratives, even if with still limited achievements, as well as criticism about its conceptual adequacy in terms of definition and objectives. The term tends to be accepted rather un-critically in media discourse, and it is sometimes stretched beyond analytical utility, both too much and too little utopic¹⁰. This is not the place to engage with this debate. It may be recalled, however, that among the first critical remarks was precisely the paradoxical nature of the expression, which can be considered an oxymoron¹¹. The paradoxical dimensions that are highlighted relate to how the idea of *development* as linear growth is precisely at odds with the idea of *sustainable* as a modality that can be preserved and perpetuated as it is now. This shows how studying festivalization and heritagization as promoters of tourism provides a privileged perspective, precisely because whilst they are bearers of similar paradoxes, these are shown in concrete and well-defined social situations. The “time out of time” that defines framed experiences such as those of the festival highlights paradoxes – festivals do not resolve them, but must find ways of staging them, and of reflexively integrating them in the ways relationships are established across the paradox.

The liminal effervescence of festivals allows those who take part in them to approach alterity with an open, reflexive attitude. This can range from the simplest and most common – a sort of omnivorous taste based on curiosity and openness to otherness in terms of cultural consumptions – to the strongest, deepest and perhaps rarer sense of a reflexive disposition entailing the formation of a moral consciousness rooted in emotional responses to global issues, concern with global ethics based on shared values¹². Cultural exchange and learning through experience is key to experiences mediated by festivals. The debate is open as to whether this “cosmopolitan” omnivorous taste may also promote a more equal or just relationship with others, a more sustainable and responsible attitude beyond the festival space. Festivals and heritage provide platforms to display and thus debating fundamental ideas of value and development; by staging paradoxes otherwise bypassed as unsolvable – in particular that of their own success – they

⁹ World Commission on the Environment and Development (WCED), *Our Common Future*, report. Data available here, accessed July 24, 2025, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/139811?ln=en&v=pdf>, 1987 (16).

¹⁰ For a debate reviewing sustainable development history, from the original focus on environment to progressive extension to social and then cultural dimensions see Throsby, championing culturally sustainable development, followed by Isar, arguing as a reply for a strategically narrower focus on original ideas of environmental sustainability: D. Throsby, “Culturally Sustainable Development: Theoretical Concept or Practical Policy Instrument?”, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23, 2 (2017): 133-147; Y.R. Isar, “‘Culture’, ‘Sustainable Development’ and Cultural Policy: A Contrarian View”, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23, 2 (2017): 148-158.

¹¹ M. Redclift, “Sustainable Development (1987-2005): An Oxymoron Comes of Age”, *Sustainable Development*, 13, 4 (2005): 212-227.

¹² L. Giorgi, M. Sassatelli, G. Delanty, eds., *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, London: Routledge, 2011; M. Sassatelli, “Festivals, Museums, Exhibitions: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in the Cultural Public Sphere”, in *Routledge International Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, edited by G. Delanty, London: Routledge, 2018, 186-197.

create the space for reflexively come to terms with them in practical ways. Therefore, where that leads is an empirical question for each festival rather than a theoretical questions to answer once and for all. It is thus to an empirical case that we turn to – after a brief contextualization of the themes at hand within tourism studies more specifically.

4. SUSTAINABILITY, RESPONSIBILITY, TOURIST ECOSYSTEM

Today, tourism stands alongside industry and commerce as a major global economic force. It is deeply entwined with international investment and trade and demonstrates a remarkable resilience to crises and disruptions. While commonly associated with leisure and vacation, tourism accounts for a significant share of GDP in many countries – approximately 10-12% in Italy – and exerts profound influence on both economic and cultural landscapes.

Due to its interplay of the visual, the aesthetic, and the popular, tourism provides a valuable lens through which to interpret territories beyond purely economic terms. It plays a central role in the socio-spatial dynamics that give meaning to places: on one hand, it nourishes individual and collective imaginaries through the creation and circulation of icons and representations; on the other, it physically transforms spaces, producing ‘touristified’ geographies that reflect and reinforce these constructed images.

The impacts of tourism are not without consequences. The sector contributes to environmental degradation and exacerbates urban tensions through overtourism, which fuels gentrification in historic cities such as Venice, Barcelona, and Dubrovnik, displacing long-time residents. Tourism-driven economic models often prioritize profit extraction over local benefit, with high leakage rates and labor precarity enriching multinational corporations at the expense of host communities¹³.

This critique of tourism – as a form of alienation, environmental degradation, and neo-imperialism – was first articulated by scholars such as Nuñez and de Kadt¹⁴. These early academic concerns later influenced international policy frameworks, such as the Cape Town Declaration¹⁵ and the definition of responsible tourism endorsed by the UNWTO¹⁶. In its early stages, sustainability in tourism was understood almost exclusively in environmental terms, with the aim of minimising negative impacts on natural resources and ecosystems¹⁷. Soon after, this perspective expanded to include the well-being and quality of life of resident communities, recognising that social acceptance and community engagement are essential for tourism to be viable in the long term. The notion then gradually incorporated economic sustainability, stressing the need for tourism to contribute to equitable and lasting economic development without creating dependency or exploitation. More recently, the socio-cultural dimension has become an integral part of the debate, linking sustainability to the preservation of cultural identity, heritage authenticity, and intergenerational equity.

¹³ C. Stroma, M. Nigel, eds., *Tourism and Inequality. Problems and Prospects*. Wallingford: CABI Publishing, 2010.

¹⁴ T.A. Nunez, “Tourism, Tradition, and Acculturation: Weekendismo in a Mexican Village”, *Ethnology*, 2, 3 (1963): 347-352; E. de Kadt, ed., *Tourism: Passport to Development?*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

¹⁵ Data available here, accessed July 25, 2025, <http://www.capetowndeclaration.org>.

¹⁶ World Tourism Organization *Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics*, Madrid: UNWTO, 2020.

¹⁷ S. Gössling, “Global Environmental Consequences of Tourism”, *Global Environmental Change* 12, 4 (2002): 283-302.

Aligned with these principles, the “IT.A.CÀ Festival” embraces the definition of responsible tourism proposed by the Italian Association for Responsible Tourism (AITR)¹⁸. According to AITR, responsible tourism operates on principles of social and economic justice and full respect for the environment and local cultures. It recognizes the central role of host communities and their right to actively shape the sustainable and equitable development of their territories. This model fosters constructive engagement among the tourism industry, local populations, and travellers. The aim, therefore, is not merely to promote isolated sustainable tourism products or niche alternatives, but to advance a systemic, integrated approach that ensures tourism is conducted in harmony with the environment, local cultures, and communities.

Notably, recent policy documents and scholarly analyses have begun to reframe the figure of the tourist, moving beyond the early sociological conception of the tourist as a passive consumer of pre-packaged experiences. Instead, they recognize the tourist as an active participant in the consumption process. This shift is particularly evident in studies linking travel with postmodernity. Within the context of “reflexive modernity”¹⁹, new forms of mobility and consumption are seen as opportunities for fostering intercultural understanding and advancing more sustainable forms of development. This perspective is further enriched by the “new mobilities paradigm”²⁰, which offers a culturalist lens for analyzing tourism.

Drawing upon the idea that tourism and migration are the two main interrelated dimensions of human mobility, this framework focuses on the connections between different forms of movement that link people, places, and human activities. Within this paradigm, both tourists and migrants actively participate in processes of symbolic and spatial negotiation concerning human mobility through their performances²¹. In this view, tourism becomes not just an economic activity but a participatory and meaning-making process that can contribute to well-being and territorial development.

From this perspective, both tourists and local communities actively participate in negotiating the meanings embedded in tourist practices. The figure of the “post-tourist”²² embodies a reflective and often playful engagement with inauthenticity, challenging conventional distinctions between the authentic and the staged.

More fundamentally, the separation between the time and space of everyday life and that of tourism is increasingly blurred. In a world marked by fluidity and hybrid experiences, tourism and daily life intersect in complex ways. Tourists are no longer merely external consumers of destinations; they may also be residents who adopt a tourist gaze within their own environments²³. This shift reflects the erosion of the binary between “home” and “away”, as interconnected systems of technology and mobility dissolve the clear boundaries between travel and everyday existence²⁴. In this context, the tourist can be considered an integral component of the tourism system, not merely as

¹⁸ Data available here, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://www.aitr.org/>.

¹⁹ Beck, Giddens, Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*.

²⁰ M. Sheller, J. Urry, “The New Mobilities Paradigm”, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 38, 2 (2006): 207-226.

²¹ C. Rojek, J. Urry, *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, London: Routledge, 1997; T.R. Schatzki, K. Knorr Cetina, E. von Savigny, *The practice turn in contemporary theory*, London: Routledge, 2001.

²² M. Feifer, *Going Places. The Ways of the Tourists from Imperial Rome to the Present Day*, London: Macmillan, 1985.

²³ E. Dell’Agnese, *Bon voyage. Per una geografia critica del turismo*, Milano: UTET, 2017.

²⁴ P. Musarò, “Come coniugare crescita e benessere? Il turismo responsabile in prospettiva globale”, *Sociologia del Lavoro*, 132 (2013): 143-158.

a passive consumer but as an active participant whose choices, behaviors, and interactions directly shape the sustainability and authenticity of destinations. This perspective extends the focus beyond the internal dynamics of the tourism system to encompass the broader ecosystem of tourist services and stakeholder relationships, where value is co-created through the interaction between tourists, local communities, service providers, and governance structures²⁵.

5. "IT.A.CÀ": THE FIRST EUROPEAN FESTIVAL OF RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

The ideas and dynamics outlined in the preceding sections provide the foundation for "IT.A.CÀ – Migrants and Travellers", the first European festival entirely dedicated to the theme of responsible tourism. More than just an event, "IT.A.CÀ" is an invitation to rethink the meaning of travel and hospitality – encouraging new, more conscious relationships between tourists and local communities. It actively involves a diverse range of stakeholders of the tourist ecosystem, including institutions and tourism operators, to foster the sustainable prosperity of local areas and the well-being of those who inhabit them.

Founded in 2009 in Bologna by three third-sector organizations (Yoda, COSPE, and Nexus), the festival has grown into an expansive national network. Today, it brings together over 700 organizations, including tourism professionals, cultural practitioners, public institutions, and grassroots associations. Over its 17-year history, "IT.A.CÀ" has been hosted in 56 different territories and, by 2025, will feature a six-month calendar with 20 stages spread across Italy.

In 2018, "IT.A.CÀ" received international recognition from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) for its innovative integration of key strategies such as cultural production, creativity, sustainability, intercultural dialogue, and territorial development. The festival stands out for its bottom-up approach, emerging from spontaneous local initiatives and leveraging the creative potential of communities to bring places to life.

"IT.A.CÀ" is more than a festival – it is an ongoing project of social innovation. Each edition sparks new dynamics aimed at enhancing local communities and their territories. Functioning both as a network of responsible tourism actors and as a promotional platform, "IT.A.CÀ" gives visibility to a wide array of local projects focused on sustainable tourism. Its networked structure enables synergistic communication and participatory event planning, which together help amplify each local initiative's reach and impact²⁶.

National coordination is based in Bologna, but each local stage of the festival is independently designed and implemented by local associations. These programs vary in length – from three-day events to multi-weekend experiences – and may include conferences, workshops, nature treks, culinary tours, bike rides, and guided visits. In order to resolve tensions between growth and sustainability the festival's decentralized organization ensures economic sustainability for local events, while contributing to na-

²⁵ R.A. Rather, A.H. Najar, D. Jaziri, "Destination Branding in Tourism: Insights from Social Identification, Attachment and Experience Theories", *Anatolia*, 31, 2 (2020): 229-243.

²⁶ P. Musarò, M. Moralli, "De-Bordering Narratives on Tourism and Migration. A Participatory Action-Research on Two Innovative Italian Practices", *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11 (2019): 147-173.

tional-level communication and coordination efforts. The fact that local organizers are the ones deciding the festival program (from the type of events to the reference territories, from the articulation of the national theme to relations with local and sometimes national media) not only acknowledges the central role of the local community but also seeks to balance tourist attractiveness and the protection of authenticity.

“IT.A.CÀ” is grounded in the principles of sharing, co-design, dialogue, and experimentation. Every element – from the festival’s calendar to its themes, event formats, participant engagement, and funding strategies – is decided collectively. Local communities choose to adopt and adapt the festival because they see their own values reflected in it. The process is bottom-up, respectful of *genius loci* – the unique spirit of each place – and mindful of local identities and traditions.

Since 2016, the festival has been inspired each year by a unifying theme, interpreted and localized by each territory to reflect its own cultural and geographic specificity. These themes offer a lens through which to explore contemporary challenges and opportunities in tourism and place-making. Some of the most recent themes include: Habitat, Biodiversity, Roots Tourism, Restanza, the Right to Breathe.

Just to name a few, in line with Italy’s national Year of Roots Tourism promoted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the 2024 theme “Roots Tourism” explored multiple layers of identity and belonging. The festival worked with existing local networks to support both those tracing their ancestral origins – such as descendants of Italian emigrants returning as tourists – and those who have recently arrived in these places, including migrants and refugees planting new roots. This dual approach highlights the fluid and evolving nature of belonging, as ecosystems are continually reshaped by movement and coexistence.

The 2019 theme, Restanza, drew from the work of Italian anthropologist Vito Teti²⁷ and asked participants to reflect on the act of staying – of choosing not to leave one’s homeland. Restanza, once tied to necessity or attachment to land and family, is reimagined by Vito Teti as an ethical and political stance. It is a conscious commitment to care for and revitalize one’s place of belonging, even in the face of depopulation, abandonment, or hardship. Throughout that year’s stages, the festival supported collaborative projects that redefined tourism as a tool for community empowerment. Co-design meetings highlighted how local actors who choose to stay and act collaboratively can turn Restanza into a social responsibility, rather than a purely economic one. Particularly in rural or semi-abandoned areas, these efforts generated new models of development rooted in community, tradition, and sustainability. This is particularly crucial in rural territories affected by depopulation, fragmented services, and economic vulnerability²⁸. In such contexts, tourism – when grounded in natural resources, local knowledge, and community participation – can become a powerful driver of development and a catalyst for innovative collective action.

The festival’s approach aligns with the UN’s New Agenda 2030, which promotes a triple-bottom-line view of sustainability: environmental, socio-cultural, and economic. From an environmental standpoint, tourism can help protect biodiversity and support conservation efforts, as seen in the establishment of Natural Parks and Protected Areas. On the social and cultural level, it fosters inclusion, offering opportunities to marginalized groups, creating jobs, and counteracting rural exodus. Economically, it can

²⁷ V. Teti, *La restanza*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2022.

²⁸ F. Barbera, A. De Rossi, eds., *Metromontagna*, Roma: Donzelli, 2021.

revitalize territories through sustainable enterprise, though such developments must be supported by strong labor protections to avoid precarious or exploitative conditions, especially in hospitality and service sectors. Politically, the festival promotes participatory governance, where local communities play an active role in shaping their own futures.

“IT.A.CA” has focused considerable energy on what Italy’s National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) calls “marginal territories” – areas rich in culture and nature, but distant from essential services such as health, education, and transport. These areas make up 60% of the country’s surface, but only 23% of its population. Rather than accept decline, “IT.A.CÀ” showcases how experiential and responsible tourism can catalyze renewal. In the Bolognese Apennines, for instance, the festival has spurred the creation of new tourism trails like the Via degli Dei (Gods Road), the Via della Lana (Moon Road), and the Via della Seta (Silk Road). In partnership with local municipalities, the festival has served as a cultural facilitator and planning tool, helping communities design projects that attract visitors while strengthening local identity and capacity. In addition to developing new trails and organizing events to promote them, the festival engaged in community-based initiatives such as co-creating participatory maps with residents of Camugnano (Emilia Romagna), training new professionals in the tourism sector, and collaborating with local schools to raise awareness around the principles of responsible tourism. Similarly, in the Sibillini Mountains (Marche), in Salento, as well as in Umbria, “IT.A.CÀ” has helped re-signify territories historically seen only through a lens of lack – of infrastructure, opportunity, or value. The festival pushes back against urban-centric narratives, proposing a vision in which caring for place means recognizing and building upon what already exists: human, non-human, and symbolic capital alike.

Further, a distinctive feature of the “IT.A.CÀ Festival” is its approach to tourism and migration as interconnected phenomena²⁹. Since its inception, the festival has launched various initiatives that explore intercultural heritage linked to migration as a means to better understand local dynamics and to dissolve the boundaries traditionally separating tourism and migration. These efforts include public debates on mobility and geopolitics, intercultural dinners, concerts, exhibitions, and film screenings. One notable example is the 2015 launch of Bologna’s first Migrantour itinerary, developed in collaboration with Next Generation Italy³⁰. This initiative empowers migrants to lead guided tours through ethnic neighborhoods, offering unique insights into the cultural richness of these areas while engaging both tourists and locals in dialogue with community members, from shopkeepers to activists. Consequently, the members of the local community in the neighbourhood can likewise be involved in THE process of identity construction generated through Migrantour.

Between 2016 and 2018, the festival hosted an intercultural writing lab aimed at dismantling migration stereotypes through storytelling and plural narratives. In 2018, it also organized the international conference “Innovative Practices of Integration and Intercultural Hospitality,” showcasing effective approaches from global practitioners. That same year, “IT.A.CÀ” launched an Experiential Training Course on Tourism Development and Intercultural Hospitality in partnership with Asp Città di Bologna, SPRAR, and Open Group³¹. The 60-hour program combined theoretical instruction with hands-

²⁹ P. Musarò, E. Piga, “Turismo e migrazione”, *Scritture Migranti*, 13, 14 (2020).

³⁰ Data available here, accessed July 26, 2025, <https://migrantour.org/migrantour-bologna/>.

³¹ Data available here, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://www.festivalitaca.net/2018/05/corso-di-formazione-esperienziale-su-sviluppo-turistico-e-ospitalita-interculturale-nellappennino-bolognese/>.

on experience for young Italians and asylum seekers, promoting new models of sustainable, inclusive tourism.

Through its diverse initiatives, “IT.A.CÀ” reimagines tourism as a dynamic platform to create virtuous collaborations and economic inclusion. Rather than treating tourism and migration as opposing forces, the festival underscores their interconnectedness, using intercultural heritage as a powerful resource for community growth and cohesion.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In light of the paradoxes surrounding heritage and festivals, the analysis of “IT.A.CÀ” invites several concluding reflections. First, it compels us to acknowledge tourism as an inherently expansive economic force, one that paradoxically undermines the very conditions of its own growth. This critique, already articulated by Fred Hirsch in *The Social Limits to Development*³² and more recently by Marco D'Eramo in *The Selfie of the World*³³, frames tourism as a self-consuming system driven by commodification and spectacle.

Yet, “IT.A.CÀ” proposes that sustainable or responsible tourism need not be an oxymoron. Rather, it can become a space of critical reflexivity – an opportunity for rethinking mobility, belonging, and development. Adopting the perspective of a tourist ecosystem, the festival provides concrete alternatives to overly reductive visions of sustainability, which often reduce the concept to forms like proximity tourism or zero-impact agritourism. Instead, its practice shows that tourism can serve as a strategic tool for revitalizing territories “on the margins”, particularly vulnerable to depopulation and marginalization³⁴. As argued by Musarò, Cappi and Vignola³⁵, the festival activates meaningful processes of territorial empowerment by foregrounding diverse local narratives and fostering community participation.

“IT.A.CÀ” envisions the territory as a living, evolving space shaped by both long-term residents and temporary travellers. It encourages us to see the margins not as sites of absence, but as crucibles of creativity, possibility, and alternative futures. To quote bell hooks: “The margin is [...] a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance”³⁶. That is the essence of “IT.A.CÀ”: a platform that reclaims the margin, putting it back at the center – not just of maps, but of meaning.

Over its 17-year trajectory, IT.A.CÀ has spread across Italy, developing a national network that brings together cultural, scientific, educational, culinary, and recreational events. This expansive network generates locally grounded development processes, supported by bottom-up collaborations among grassroots organizations, institutions, and residents. In responding to the challenges of standardization and “touristification,” the festival tries to deal with the tensions between authenticity, commodification, and responsible tourism by engaging local communities directly in the planning and benefit-sharing phases of each initiative.

This is part of the virtuous process that the festival network succeeds in activating

³² F. Hirsch, *I limiti sociali allo sviluppo*, Milano: Bompiani, 1981.

³³ M. D'Eramo, *Il selfie del mondo. Indagine sull'età del turismo*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2017.

³⁴ D. Cersosimo, C. Donzelli, eds., *Manifesto per riabitare l'Italia*, Roma: Donzelli, 2018.

³⁵ P. Musarò, V. Cappi, M. Vignola, “Coabitare il territorio: il turismo responsabile come pratica di ospitalità e cura delle comunità”, *FUORI LUOGO*, 18 (2024): 13-26.

³⁶ B. Hooks, *Elogio del margine. Razza, sesso e mercato culturale*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1998 (8).

in the various territories, firstly thanks to the participation of the local population in the planning phase, and then thanks to the sharing of the benefits deriving from these processes. As articulated in the festival's Manifesto, its vision of territorial development resists the logic of fleeting, extractive tourism. Instead, it fosters long-term rootedness, creative transformation, and what the festival terms *becoming* – a process essential to counteracting abandonment and demographic decline. By stimulating new ideas, supporting emergent cultural actors, and cultivating audiences attuned to lesser-known forms of travel, "IT.A.CÀ" positions itself as a catalyst for social innovation. It embodies a form of new civic engagement, wherein active citizens contribute their time, energy, and imagination to creating practices that can be disseminated, institutionalized, and recognized as a collective good.³⁷

Seen through this lens, responsible tourism – as the festival enacts it – can be understood as a "form of encounter"³⁸ that challenges dominant binaries between tourism and migration, defusing paradoxes that seem intractable in theory. Festivals such as "IT.A.CÀ" are platforms that construct plural, inclusive narratives that reframe diversity as a source of social and cultural wealth, as responsible encounter with otherness, enabled by the experimental, or playful, liminal space created by the festival.

³⁷ E. Manzini, *Politiche del quotidiano*, Roma-Ivrea: Edizioni di Comunità, 2018.

³⁸ D. Crouch, ed., *Leisure/Tourism Geographies: Practices and Geographical Knowledge*, New York-London: Routledge, 1999.