

The Ghetto in European Perception

From Cities to Bodies

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Between 2010 and 2015, the political pressure on European countries reached its peak during the so-called “migrant crisis.” At that time, migration was already a highly debated issue due to the permanent population flows from Africa and the Middle East, as well as the silent exodus from the East, due to the collapse of communism and the enlargement of the European Union. Yet it became a more pressing matter following the Arab Spring in 2011. Refugees asking for asylum reached their highest numbers since World War II, and new regulatory frameworks among EU member states became a ground for political negotiations. In the meantime, the world witnessed a number of unprecedented tragedies. In October 2013, three hundred and eighty-six people lost their lives on a boat a few miles from the Lampedusa shore. In April 2015, seven hundred shipwrecked victims were counted in the Sicilian Strait. Further, landed migrants came to face new barriers. Following the first attempts at government aid, some were repatriated, most were temporarily confined in camps, while heated discussions revolved about the shared responsibility of Northern countries concerning the distribution of migrants among member states. The sea interventions, containment strategies, and the strengthening of external borders (alongside the emergence of new internal ones) dominated the transnational debate, impacting a number of national political campaigns.

One clear example is the rise of far-right Italian populism, embodied by Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Northern League, who garnered support through anti-migrant positions and measures, such as closing the ports. Xenophobic hate speech and acts went hand-in-hand with an open affirmation of right-wing policies, which inspired collective engagement on the part of anti-racist activ-

ists to counter this trend, in order to provide a voice to new citizens, migrants, and asylum seekers, fostering new areas of inclusivity through art. It was in this context that the project *The City Ghettos of Today* was conceived by politically engaged artists from different European countries who collaborated in the production of multicultural urban performances with the financial support of the European Commission, under the auspices of the “Creative Europe” initiative.

An interdisciplinary, artist-run, and transnational project, *The City Ghettos of Today* was organized by theatre and cultural associations from Italy, Poland, France, Finland, and Belgium under the artistic direction of the Italian playwright and director Pietro Floridia and the management of the Polish Strefa Wolnościowa Foundation. Productions consisted of participatory workshops, meetings, and site-specific performances that took place in Bologna, Milan, Paris, Warsaw, Antwerp, Berlin, and Helsinki between 2013 and 2015. During the project, artists and researchers from partner units investigated the meaning of the word “ghetto” in European inner-city neighborhoods together with inhabitants recruited through the organizers’ engagement with local migrant communities. Beyond the confinement of bodies and groups commonly associated with the term “ghetto,” both socioeconomic barriers and the processes of “territorial stigmatization,” as described by the sociologist Loïc Wacquant, were considered in alongside urban processes and the participants’ own collective and individual narrations.¹ These matters were then given a theatrical form, moving from improvisation and stage writing to the creation of installations and performances that were, in the end, located at sites in each of the partner cities. These locations included shopping and cultural centers, museums, courtyards of public buildings, and small theatres in both cities and surrounding suburbs.

For each performance, the work developed over several months, both in the street, where testimonies were gathered and forms of ghettoization was observed, and in the rehearsal room. There, social and personal data were read in the light of the master-servant relationship, taking Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as its main point of reference and catalyst text. *The City Ghettos of Today*’s laboratory consequently became a socialization and empowerment tool for the intergenerational and multicultural participants, yielding and a proving ground for new forms of protest and public awareness through art. Its cultural importance is closely linked to this process that softened—from within—the barriers perceived by participants, giving shape to temporary *critical* communities that represented the cultural borders dividing the European people from within. The laboratory’s overall effectiveness be measured in terms of both the creation of new relationships between otherwise divided people and places, and in the many counter-narratives it exhibited.

TRANSNATIONAL AND LOCAL CREATIVE TEAMS

The City Ghettos of Today had transnational and strong local dimensions. In each city, a network of artistic collaborations was activated, precipitating the direct involvement of stakeholders—cultural and community associations and institutions—in order to organize dramaturgical work in relation to the cultural specificities of a given territory. Social workers, cultural actors, artists, and academics were united during all phases of the project, with the intention to connect theory and practice, and thereby produce a greater understanding of the current forms of marginalization in their own cities. The particular coordinates of the events reflected this composition, producing an unprecedented map of heterogeneous places, which ultimately comprised more than thirty different locations. In Warsaw, the State Ethnographic Museum, the Refugee Center in the Targowek district, a prison, and a number of other sociocultural foundations participated. In Bologna, workshop activities took place in a community center in an outlying area with a strong migrant presence (the Centro Zonarelli in the suburban Navile district), but the main exhibition took place in the courtyard of Bologna's town hall, breaking down, on a symbolic level, the implicit hierarchical distances between the various urban ambiances.

The partner units consequently shared an operational mode, which they adapted to the myriad places and people they encountered. Nonetheless, the artistic director, Pietro Floridia, played a major role in building a common methodology. At the inception of the project, he worked at the Teatro dell'Argine, located near Bologna. Floridia had been the director of the Compagnia dei Rifugiati since the 1990s. In 2014, he left Teatro dell'Argine in order to found Cantieri Meticci, a multicultural and multidisciplinary organization made up of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and Italian citizens who originated from over twenty different countries. In other words, Floridia had long perceived the risk of marginalization inherent in the composition of a "company of refugees," and purposely adopted the formula of social intermingling, in line with the objectives of the nascent City Ghettos project, which promoted integration through intercultural artistic activity that could reflect the profound changes within European society that have taken place since the migratory waves of the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, all of the artists involved in the project drew inspiration from the migrant history of the countries they worked in, using the lens of urban structure and related policies to interrogate its effects on migrant communities. Local and national tensions specific to each city (or area) were combined with transnational ones.

In practical terms, the international team brought together different skills in order to integrate, at each stage, the materials and knowledge of each participant. The local artists also acted as mediators for their foreign partners in codesigning

installations (or short-term plays) based on what emerged within each working group. Each unit held pre-workshops that served to “hook the places,” by involving participants and collecting a variety of preparatory materials including interviews, photos, news reports, poems, cartoons, illustrations, videos, sounds, songs, and more physical actions. At times, they drew on representative figures of the local culture, such as the use of the first Roma gypsy poetess, known as Papusza, in the project’s initial workshop in Warsaw. In other circumstances, the concept of European identity was explicitly scrutinized through films and documentaries such as Jef and Margot Vingerhoedt’s *I Am Europe* (2010–11), wherein migrants told their stories and offered a mirror to reflect the condition of participants as native and migrant citizens. The collected materials were subsequently woven together into a comprehensive fabric of multidisciplinary activities within installations and plays, presented between 2014 and 2015, along the stations of an itinerant path led by the international team, which, in moving from city to city, orchestrated site-specific and collaborative events. While the partners worked independently to promote the project within each location, in finalizing the performance they worked in direct collaboration. Louis Alejandro Olarte and Marek Pluciennik, from the Helsinki team, provided visual and sound designing expertise, while Tomasz Groamdkka, based in Warsaw, handled dramaturgical duties with Florida. Each took inspiration from the participants for the individual performance concepts, benefitting from local networking.

Upon entering the Cultural Center Stoa in Helsinki, the audiences of *Prospero’s Veils* (2014) could hear the testimony of Josif, an Iraqi poet who immigrated to Finland and was detained in Estonia during his flight. He recalled the strategies he employed to escape and arrive in a northwestern European country:

We were all sitting in one place, where the priest began to tell the story of David. He said that David was a strong, twenty-year-old man. I translated his words from Russian to Arabic: ‘Today we are here to talk about the hunger strike.’ [. . .] When he summarized the story of David and Goliath, I said, ‘We have to be unanimous in the decision to strike.’²

His voice was emitted from the broad and narrow pipes arranged in seemingly random order around the installation space. Spectators could also meet with him directly as he walked among the crowd and recounted his story. In this case, the oral transmission was adopted as the prevailing dramaturgical device of the collaboration within the Finnish Sivuvälo project, which supported migrant poets who wrote in languages other than Finnish. This tactic became the engine of the stage writing for the public events in Helsinki; the scenic and sound environment was conceived to convey the poets’ experience in a theatrical format that would both suit their needs and be emotionally engaging for the audience. In general,

two dramaturgical and scenographic devices served as a link between the partner cities, defining a common denominator to negotiate each unit's position. These were the underlying text of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and a series of hollow black tubes/pipes of different diameters and lengths that could channel sound and light, be engraved, written over, and drawn on before and during each performance. The way each group confronted these stimuli depended on its own perception of the ghettos, based on the observation of the cities they lived in.

THE CITY AS AN INTERPRETIVE FILTER

The diversification of the ghetto, rather than its ontological definition, became crucial for developing The City Ghettos of Today. In Paris, one theatre association, Check Points, chose the locales from among the urban outskirts as the subject of investigation, in order to build a "ghetto dramaturgy," ultimately focusing on two circumscribed areas in Goutte d'Or and Nanterre. As Rachel Shapiro explains in "Europe. . . Island Full of Noises," an anthology and report published at the conclusion of the project, the intent was, "first, to provide concrete neighborhoods in which project participants could base their individual and collective reflections on 'ghettos' in the Île-de-France region. Second, to enable participants to compare two neighborhoods that had been similarly singled out by popular discourses on 'ghettoization' in the Île-de-France region."³ The process thus arose from the recognition of marginal areas, through a perception of their socioeconomic and cultural isolation. However, while the preparatory interviews, creative writing, and photographic documentation were carried out in the suburb of Goutte d'Or, with rehearsals at the prestigious theatre La Cartoucherie, the final play was staged at the Museum of Immigration History. The performance generated a dissonance between the experience of the performers and the image of Parisian grandeur that glitters throughout this building, constructed in 1931 to celebrate an international colonial exhibition. The devised play, *Caliban's Voices*, was staged in March 2014, and brought with it the discomfort of a history inevitably celebrated in the vestiges of the space, which clashed with the still-persistent forms of ghettoization in Paris.

From the outset, Helsinki's approach was near the opposite. In Finland, the project organizers decided not to identify specific areas in order to avoid the undesirable effect of stigmatizing particular neighborhoods. This critical choice reiterated the local policies, which over the years have opposed the construction of urban enclaves in favor of a heterogeneous composition of different neighborhoods that guarantee equal educational opportunities to young people from different backgrounds. The term "ghetto" was thus abstracted from the concreteness of place, to indicate the invisible boundaries that separate people and, above all, deny the knowledge that the other (foreigner) brings to be both understood and accepted.

In Antwerp, the vision of the ghetto was replaced by the concept of “super diversity,” used to highlight the heterogeneous character of the various neighborhoods that make up the city. Among these, the 2060 district was considered to be an “arrival neighborhood” in which several generations of migrants and residents were mixed together. Throughout the dramaturgical process, the key issues of internal debates concerned strategies of social harmonization between “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches. A repeated phrase was “homecoming,” and the concept of travel was a theme that ran through both improvisation and creative writing. Conversely, in Milan, the cultural association Teatro degli Incontri, which has a long history of producing social and cultural activities with migrants, zeroed in on a particular location, Via Padova, in order to protest the discursive power of “political ghettoization.” The underlying concept was that public safety provisions put into place in this high-migrant-density area had, over time, led to its isolation, and exploitation of the area through stigmatization and criminalization. In fact, the reality that the Milanese organizers faced was quite different from the ones highlighted by dramaturgical choices made in Antwerp and Helsinki. Both the casting of the participants and the workshops themselves reflected this view.

From these examples, it is clear that the conception of the ghetto was partly dictated by cultural and urban specificities, in addition to the perception of place through an interpretive filter offered by the promoters of the initiative. This filter penetrated the creative process as much as any artistic device, and imbued the project with dynamics of struggle, resilience, and commitment to root the productions in local stories and experience. In Paris and Milan, there was talk of an “island-ghetto” with reference to peripheral and marginalized areas; in Bologna, the context of detention camps—both in Italy and abroad—were witnessed to consider “the island” as a straitjacket that imprisons migrant bodies during the various stages of the journey to and within Europe. Therefore, the main characters of these stories became migrants and asylum seekers with experiences of incarceration and confinement.

While *The Tempest* text and the scenographic solutions aimed at creating a unique “plot” in the path carried out by the individual offices, the analysis of the sociocultural and urban situation of the cities and work done with local participants contributed to the formation of a conceptual mapping of the term “ghetto” that, as one might expect, differed for each unit. The public space, as a place of collective negotiation, and the individual body (marked, traced, and constrained in its movement) became axes of a dual research path—horizontally, in search of tracing marginalization as it has been deposited within the urban fabric, and vertically, in terms of how each individual and his or her memories



Rehearsals of *The Island is Full of Noises* at the Cortile Del Pozzo, Palazzo D'Accursio, Bologna, July 2014.
Photo: Pietro Florida.



Constructing the installation for *Prospero's Veils*, Stoa Cultural Center, Helsinki, September 2014.
Photo: Outi Korhonen.



Detail of *Island Europe*, State Ethnographic Museum, Warsaw, January 2015. Photo: Eveliina Heinonen.

of migrant experience. The whole, as it were, was then brought together within different dramaturgical parameters for each station and later diversified, adapted, and expanded by Floridaia and Gromadka. The final productions were the result of a compromise between the stimuli of the participants and the inputs of the international team, revolving around the relationship between Shakespeare's text and the ghettos analyzed in the particular work group.

FROM AUTHORSHIP TO THE COLLECTIVE TEXT

In his role as artistic director, Floridaia marked out a common line of action for artistic residencies that anticipated the public performances. Specifically, through scenography and the Shakespearean text, Floridaia proposed two elements used for years in his multicultural projects with migrants and asylum seekers to stimulate forms of collective writing for the stage. The first element is a classic text that acts as a catalyst for reflection, providing both a "mask," allowing participants to protect themselves from direct exposure, and a "tool" in order to speak about themselves, and express their viewpoints on the issues their migrant stories engender. Second, Floridaia used a series of transformable, cheap objects that can literally weave together the texture of stage space, creating a physical action and a common environment between people with nonhomogeneous artistic and linguistic skills. The latter was the function of the pipes, which were fashioned during the first workshop of the entire project held in Bologna in 2014, and later hit the road to be rebuilt and adapted in the other host cities.

Methodological cohesion did not nullify the differences between the collaborators, especially with regard to *The Tempest*, with its presumed epistemological gap between "civilizing peoples" and the inhabitants of the New World. For example, the relationship between Prospero and Caliban was been reinterpreted by Aimé Césaire in *Une tempête* (1969), the Caribbean author's postcolonial rewriting of the play, which uses speeches by the servants Caliban and Ariel in order to proclaim form of both violent and peaceful struggle for the liberation of black people—taking as its model the contrasting stances of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. In this instance, the choice of *The Tempest* reflected a desire to use the classics as "containers or vessels to process materials drawn from reality," as Floridaia recounts.⁴ In relation to Shakespeare's text and its established place within European theatre, the play was not adapted with the aim of making a faithful or updated version. Instead, it was subjected to a collective rewriting, beginning with the responses of the participants, and elicited through various critical perspectives, offering an opportunity to reflect on the present. Here, a number of questions arose. Who is Prospero in today's society? Who is Caliban? Who is Miranda? How do their interactions within the plot describe the master-servant relationship? Can the island be a metaphor for today's ghettos? It is enough to

scroll through the titles of the productions presented by The City Ghettoes of Today to note the different answers that were borne out of the project. Shakespeare's text was transformed into *Caliban's Voices* (Paris), *Miranda Gazes Upon the Sea* (Warsaw), *The Island Is Full of Noises* (Bologna), *Prospero's Veils* (Helsinki), *The Caliban's Cave* (Milan), *Uninhabited Island* (Berlin) and *Under Sail* (Antwerp).

Choosing the individual venues of the play/installation followed one of two interpretive paths drawn from the principles that emerged in the pre-workshops. Groups could either identify with one of Shakespeare's characters, intended as a privileged figure for discussing migrants or European natives, or facilitate the construction of an environment conducive to embodying the processes of contemporary ghettoization, starting from the notion of "the island" in relation to the perception of one's lived urban reality. In the Warsaw production, which took place in May 2014, Miranda was called upon to talk about her encounter with the foreigner in her territorial borders. According to Florida, "it was the Polish participants who indicated this reading, feeling like Miranda, devoid of memory and bewildered by the arriving foreigners. Through Miranda, an immature and memoryless Poland became the pivot of the play."⁵ At the center of a space strewn with images and projections of drawings, with black tubes looming from above, a woman spoke to the public about a journey towards a utopian world without exploitation, with equal rights and freedom, and was soon surrounded by a chorus of other women.

In Paris, Milan, and Bologna, Caliban served as the focal point of reflection. The productions drew upon a critique of the educational system in society in order to highlight the non-homogeneity of educational paths guaranteed to those who live in the most disadvantaged suburbs. In Finland, any adherence to the narrative of *The Tempest* was disregarded, and the internal relationships of the narrative were reversed. As recalled by Ouki Korhonen, the coordinator of the project in Helsinki, workshop participants criticized the adoption of a Western text in a multicultural project, stressing how it imposed "an oppression-based interpretation of migrants as inhabitants of ghettos that the team preferred to avoid for reasons related to stigmatization."⁶ In the final installation, *Prospero's Veils*, Caliban was not represented by a dark-skinned migrant, but personified by the natives of Finland, while Prospero was peopled by the face of migrants, as bearers of a wisdom not always recognized in the territories to which they arrive. The interviews that comprised the dramaturgical plot of the installation focused on the topic of misunderstanding. Voices and sounds were processed and inserted into the installation pipes, so that they could be picked up and discovered by visitors in "installation actions" located in different parts of the city. The composition of *Prospero's Veils*, for instance, became a mobile relational device,

modeled for the three public locations—in a museum, on the street, and inside a shopping center. In the first location, the Stoa Cultural Center, testimonies of visitors willing to record their experience were immediately integrated with the those transmitted shortly afterwards within the same installation, serving as an invitation to the public to actively participate in the production.

While the narrative collided with internal debates, producing often conflicting versions and texts, Florida's stage-installation afforded a consistent, familiar interface across the various productions. Besides acting as a bond between the different units, the stage-installation had a symbolic purpose. In the case of the Bologna group, which focused on stories from detention camps, the hollow tubes served to transpose the physical experience of an escape. Alongside the testimony of Jan, an Afghan boy who escaped from a refugee camp in Patras, who recalled climbing into and hiding inside passing trucks, the tubes were used to build obstacles to overcome, suggesting multiple strategies of resistance without anchoring them to any specific narrative or biography. In this way, they evoked other flights and the unending obstacles faced by migrants. On the stage, and throughout each of the performances and installations, the pipes were commonly transformed into rafts, walls, and cages that both enclosed and sheltered migrant bodies. In the Antwerp version, they became gigantic pencils for the rewriting of history. These building blocks produced an open and malleable structure, capable of accommodating improvisations and testimonies, and channeling them in a much more direct way than the catalyst text or any "interpretive grid" that had been provided to participants at the outset.

BODY THRESHOLDS BEYOND THE GHETTO

Throughout the project, the use of "place" and "threshold" as implicit conceptual terms for "ghetto" went hand-in-hand with notions such as "body," "movement," and "relationship." Each of these became crucial for defining subjective perception and showing the proliferation of the many invisible barriers that compounded the more recognizable physical obstacles both surrounding and found within contemporary ghetto spaces. In spite of its organizational structure and artistic setting, what emerged most clearly from *The City Ghettos of Today* were the distinctive forms of inclusion and marginalization that are found across the continent. These acts of artistic creation served as a kind of privileged magnifying glass, capable of pinpointing the relationship between individual perception and collective dynamics, in order to exclude any clear-cut, received narrative.

In the common imagination, Europe remains a landing place where different generations of migrants assemble. Yet the many ghettos Europe has produced

over the last few decades present different kinds of physical, relational, and identity confinement that coexist and make it unwise to present any synthetic notion of “the ghetto” that could be valid for the whole of Europe, at the risk of overwriting the historical and geopolitical specificities of stories told by generations of migrants, both past and present. In this sense, the participants’ voices contributed to countering the abstraction of the term, and to dismember the very idea of territorial demarcation as a static form of ghettoization. The continent did not appear impregnable in the stories of the refugees, who have passed through multiple places of custody. The forms of constraint in movements, relationships, and in the possibilities of individual action remained constant and diffuse. The threshold that divides and makes it possible, once crossed, to be welcomed into a common membership of community was replaced by the perception of a permanent condition of physical and symbolic limitation along the journey to and within Europe. As such, these voices brought together an unexpected perspective, revealing the less perceptible aspects of European policies at the local level. Making these experiences tangible by comparing them is, to some extent, the final artistic outcome of the project.

Today, processes of cohesion and marginalization remain a relevant topic of inquiry, especially in view of the effects of right-wing European policies in recent years and the global fallout of the pandemic. In August 2017, a summit between France, Germany, Spain, and Italy called upon nongovernment organizations operating in the Mediterranean Sea to abide by a code of conduct that prohibited rescuing survivors as a “humanitarian crime,” because these actions lacked consideration for exigencies of the state. This policy intensified the repatriation and relocation of migrants arriving in Italy to various European countries. Although an object of debate and political pushback, this agreement generated a shift of conscience regarding the meaning of “crime,” as an *excess* of humaneness—not a lack of it. This rule of closure as a form of territorial protection has been renewed once more under pandemic ordinances. Isolation and distancing have ostensibly gone from being instruments of social and economic discrimination to become measures of personal safety. Yet the escalation of migrant landings after Covid-19 and the recent escape from Afghanistan are feeding anti-migrant sentiments both on social media and in political discourse.

The question of “the ghetto” is not one that is about to be exhausted in the face of today’s crisis. Both for its intrinsic cultural value and as a source for further debate, *The City Ghettos of Today* has offered an observation point for considering how much has changed, and for thinking about new applied theatre projects that the pandemic has rendered even more urgent.⁷

NOTES

1. Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 5.

2. Rachel Shapiro, ed., "Europe. . . Island Full of Noises" (Warsaw: Strefa Wolności Foundation, 2015), 42, <http://cityghettos.com/wp-content/themes/ghettos/images/EUROPE-ISLAND-FULL-OF-NOISES.pdf>. As for all interviews, the surname of the author is not reported in the text.

3. Shapiro, "Europe. . . Island Full of Noises," 12–13.

4. Shapiro, "Europe. . . Island Full of Noises," 4.

5. Pietro Florida in discussion with the author, March 17, 2021. A full-length recording of the Warsaw production is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwvRn7qru3Y>.

6. Shapiro, "Europe. . . Island Full of Noises," 43.

7. The collaboration between the partners of The City Ghettos of Today dissolved after the end of the production phase, so its socio-cultural value remains confined to the perception of those who were exposed to it. The above reconstruction is meant to document both of its outcomes and processes, trace the critical debate that animated them, and reflect on the role of migrant theatre in today's Europe. I would like to thank Pietro Florida for speaking with me and providing the photographs that accompany this article.

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