'I Rap Therefore I Am' : Second Generation Rappers and Italian Citizenship

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"I rap therefore I am". Second generation's rappers longing for belonging and Italian citizenship.

Abstract: The 2019 "Sanremo" Music Festival has stimulated a heated debate on immigration and Italy's so-called liberal elite' pro-immigrants as the winner, Alessandro Mahmoud, a 26-year-old rapper born in Milan, is the son of an Italian mother and an Egyptian immigrant, to whom he "dedicated" his winning song, "*Soldi*" (Money) that speaks about irresponsible fathers. A rapper with an Arabic name winning Italy's most famous festival has shocked many Italians who were used to seeing in Sanremo a reassuring representation of the old traditional *canzone italiana*. His victory was unexpected in a country, in which anti-immigrant attitudes are becoming mainstream and the League's movement is deliberately whipping up this nationalist wind. However, Mahmoud represents only the tip of the iceberg as since 2005 a number of so called 'second generation rappers' has been growing in Italy, who are using their lyrics to talk about personal and collective discrimination' experiences. Through a text analysis of the most prominent second generation rap writers, this chapter aims at detecting the claims for belonging they attach to this musicalized social and political forum, shedding light on the question of Italian citizenship that is still denied to second generation young people.

Keywords: second generation, rap, belonging, recognition, citizenship.

Introduction

Since 1950, the "*Festival di Sanremo*" has been Italy's most important musical performance of the year with about 10 million viewers in a country of 60 million people. With his Arabic and Muslim-sounding name, Mahmood was however born in Italy to an Italian mother and therefore has had Italian citizenship from birth. Despite this his victory was controversial discussed in the political arena and in the mass-media as the immigration issue - especially immigration from Africa and Arab countries - has become a very hot topic in Italy fueled by the populist and anti-immigrant government that came to power in June 2018.

"What the political and legal spheres deny, the cultural one supplies" (Clò, 2016) and rap music represents a powerful tool for the dissemination of an alternative culture, a vehicle for expressing political dissent or in any case a musical performance offering a scene to *pactices of resistance* (dell'Agnese, 2015). It offers a relevant element of identification to those second generation young

people grown up and living in disadvantaged or peripheral areas. With the term second generation rappers I refer to those artists, who share a migrant background with no or only one ethnic Italian parent(s), and engage in their musical production with issues such as belonging, (multiple)identity, citizenship, ethnicity, and discrimination. In the Italian music scene, their emerging voices and discourses are politicizing Italian rap in a different way, representing both a marker of *integration* and *dissent* that exposes the raw nerves and emotions of young people, who are left aside because of their ethnic background. At the same time, this genre offers to the public an insightful and multifaceted representation of the new emerging - and politically negated – multifaceted Italian identity.

The aim of this chapter is to deepen the case of Italian second generation rap that expresses the voices of marginalized young people, giving them opportunities to discuss not only individual but also societal problems and challenges (e.g. Rose, 1994; Mitchell, 2001). A special focus is set on the claims for recognition of their belonging to the Italian culture and society they express in their lyrics. Belonging, that is denied them both at the *legal leve*l as the acquisition of Italian citizenship, despite the many attempts to amend it, still follows the rule of *jus sanguinis*, and at the *cultural level* as they are still stereotyped according to their parents' origin and not as an expression of a new Italian culture. Despite the fact that they are very often born in Italy, their friends are Italian, their educational trajectories have taken place in the Italian schools, they have grown up watching Italian TV, listening to Italian music and being supporters of Italian teams.

The first section of the chapter presents the theoretical definition of *belonging* that is used as an heuristic tool to conduct the texts' analysis of the lyrics. The second illustrates the shift from the Italian second generation 'collective' rap phenomenon that emerged going hand in hand with the political engagement of the Network G2 (Rete G2) asking for the abolishment of the *jus sanguinis Law* (Legge 91/92) to a new wave of social engagement developed by single artists at a more individual level. The third presents the analysis of some lyrics of the most prominent rappers, whose texts will be discussed with a special focus on the sense of belonging they express in the text.

1.   **Belonging as pluri-dimensional, structural and agentic, process**

Mobility represents the most important feature of the globalized world, through which any sort of diversity and difference can connect. Therefore, "a new conception of citizenship, in which diversity and difference are valued" is urgently needed (Stone 1996, p.51).

All around the world, the widespread mobility flows imply "multiply interactions with others not personally known" and confront people with situations in which "occasions for identification are particularly abundant" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 14). In this situation, subjects are more and

more required to reflect on the way in which "one identifies oneself and how one is identified by others" (*ibid*). Thus, belonging has become a crucial question of identity, especially for vulnerable and disenfranchised individuals and groups. 'Where and in what ways can (and may) I belong?' represent hot questions, especially for immigrants' children, even if they are born in the host country of their parents. For them, the chances, the obstacles and the grievances related to misrecognized belonging are often challenged and questioned in various ways (Eliassi, 2010, p. 89).

Citizenship is a formal element, which allows an individual to feel part of a society, "it exhibits the state's power to include or exclude individuals" (Andall 2003, p.289). Due to the *ius sanguinis* law, second generation young people have difficulty in acquiring Italian citizenship. Although they are born in Italy, they have to face a challenging condition as many of them continue to be foreigners, a condition that complicates their integration process. Italy's current citizenship law has lasting repercussions on them. Without Italian or EU citizenship, young people cannot take part in Erasmus exchange programs, are precluded entry into professions such as law and medicine, are barred from public office and cannot take part in the civil service. Needless to say, they cannot exercise the most basic democratic right of voting. This creates an insider/outsider relationship, by which they are second-class citizens, who do not have full rights and obligations. Many obstacles arise from the lack of citizenship, both at practical and emotional levels. This could involve employment opportunities and legal residence, but the worst difficulty is that concerning the sense of belonging, if one is not considered as a citizen in the country one considers home.

From a theoretical point of view, belonging represents a multifaceted two-side (internal and external) process combining *social*, *discursive* and *affectiv*e dimensions.

The social, internal and external, dimensions imply a two-way process based on mutual adaptation and tolerance. The internal dimension has to do with the socially constructed, embedded process leading people to "reflexively judge the suitability of a particular place as appropriate with respect to their social trajectory and position in other fields" (Savage, Bagnall & Longhurst, 2005, p. 12). On the other side, the external dimension consists of the way in which those living in that place are - or not - open to the presence of newcomers there. Belonging incorporates social and psychological dimensions as well, entailing also "one's practical cognitive and affective sense of who one is, of one's social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p.17). Thus, belonging also relates to subjectivity and agency (Bell, 1999, cfr. Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), to the degree to which subjects struggle (or not) for identifying with particular sites and people.

Belonging encompasses two interrelated dimensions also discursively. On the one side, a discursive process is semiotically constructed and negotiated in discourse. This implies specific choices of language, acts and patterns of interaction, as well as activities, in which understandings of belonging

are suggested and negotiated in situated ways. On the other side, belonging is discursive because it involves the ways in which we construct others and ourselves in different discourse contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 19). At the same time, it is also discursive in the Foucauldian sense as it regards questions on "what makes us who we are within a particular social complex and how are we to understand ourselves, our politics, our desires and our passions as produced within this historical present" (Bell, 1999, p. 1). More than ever, nowadays technologies, discourses and power/knowledge networks posit individuals at the intersection of specific possibilities and constraints for claiming belonging.

The affective dimension of belonging is about "emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home' and […] about feeling 'safe'" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197) and derives from the experiences of the past made in the place from where one comes, and the present and future aspiration connected to the place in which one arrives (Savage et al., 2005; Probyn, 1996; Fortier, 2000). It thus implies longing and desire to belong, connected to the fear that "the stability of belonging and the sanctity of belonging are forever past" (Probyn, 1996, p. 8).

In the text analysis of rap lyrics, belonging serves as a key analytic coordinate. For emergent second generation rappers, belonging represents an epistemological and discursive tool for questioning the ways in which they and others like them are marginalized at material, political and discursive levels in the increasingly xenophobic Italian society, on one side, and for voicing their own chances, experiences and desires connected to belonging, on the other one.

2. The Italian way to rap.

In the mid-1970s, New York City and the South Bronx offered fertile ground "for the birth of a revolutionary cultural movement called hip hop" (Price, 2006, p. 4). About twenty years later, hip-hop had spread across the globe and can no longer be "viewed simply as an expression of African American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world" (Mitchell, 2001, p. 1–2). Besides encompassing a global dimension, rap, as a part of the hip-hop scene, is always locally rooted and inspired through local linguistic, discursive and cultural means. In fact, music has strong links with identity as it provides individuals with a sense of belonging to a society as a whole and/or to a specific group, bringing out the essence of a place.

Italian second generation rappers are among the last to arrive on the world hip-hop scene as Italy has turned into a multicultural and multiethnic society decades later than many other European countries. Dramatically growing during the last far right government's coalition League and Five Stars, this change has triggered strong anti-immigration reactions ranging from xenophobic and protectionist

public debates to discriminatory discourses on the ethnic and/or migrant otherness, and to restricted politics and measures concerning asylum-seekers. As the arenas of conventional political participation have been severely restricted for migrants and minorities, culture, music and the arts have emerged as a viable means of implicit or explicit political expression. In this societal, political and discursive asset, second-generation rappers and the perspectives of the stories they offer highlight both individual and collective experiences and make both the Italian public opinion and their second generation peers reflect on how to come to terms with *difference* and *diversity* (Forman, 2002). In their texts, questions come to the fore regarding identity and belonging- *who* may belong *where*, *how*, and on *what* grounds. However, their engagement against racism and social marginality/exclusion takes a variety of regional and local forms. From the militant, left-wing rap groups that have grown up from the areas inhabited by squatters and self-managed *centri sociali* (social centers) to the claim of being an *italiano vero* (real Italian man) as a means for negotiating the hostility shown by the "ethnic Italians".

In 2005, children of immigrants and refugees founded in Rome the second-generation network Rete G2 with the aim of both supporting through cultural and artistic proposals second-generation self-esteem and raising awareness about their legal limbo. Sponsored by the Ministry of Social Solidarity of the center left government, in 2008 Rete G2 produced a CD titled "*Straniero a chi? Tracce e parole dei figli dell'immigrazione*" (Foreigner to Whom? Tracks and Words by Children of Immigration) collecting the texts of 13 young rappers coming from a variety of countries around the globe who used rap to spread their message in several languages: Italian, English, Arabic, Portuguese, and local dialects. In this collective music project, they denounced the legal misrecognition and cultural discriminationn they face due to their skin colour and immigrant status. Some of them (Amir, Zanko El Arabe Blanco) are still active both as rappers and as integration ambassadors, running workshops at local schools where they help kids work on rap lyrics to combat discrimination in Italian schools. However, the collective engagement and appearance of the first second-generation rapper has left the place to more individual performances and distribution circuits.

During the last ten years, as social media have become more integrated into our daily life, a new wave of second generation rappers have learnt how to use them in order to overcome the missing interest of the Italian music labels for their genre. One of them, Ghali, son of Tunisian parents, has 12 hits on the Top Download & Streaming Chart in Italy. YouTube, Facebook and Instagram have offered them the chance to reach audiences beyond their locality. Social media performances are something that they can themselves monitor and use as a powerful sounding boards in order to reach potentially an unlimited audience. Thanks to the web, they have succeeded in creating a daily relationship with their public that is nurtured by the rate of numerous video views, likes, share and feedback. In the last couple of years, this new generation of rappers has appropriated the social media, 'invading' with

their engaged youth-oriented repertoire the Italian mainstream media and music charts, adopting in their texts humor and parody as stylistic tools to highlight otherness and ethnic stereotypes (Westinen, 2017). In this way, they entertain while taking a position on political issues such as (anti)racism and multiculturalism. While doing so, they also 'talk back' from their marginalized positions and become role models for their second-generation peers. These last second-generation rappers are still striving for recognition but differently from the previous group, they show a great deal of pride in their *diversity* that they offer as a *resource* to the Italian society (cf. Cuconato, 2017), voicing at the same time, their right to be different and despite this be recognised. Discussing the content of some exemplary texts, the next section aims at shedding light on *how* in the multicultural Italian society rap is used as a powerful tool for expressing needs of identity and belonging, as well as recognition, paving the way for critical reflections on and responses to the country's mounting xenophobic and nationalist discourses.

3. Rapping for belonging

3.1 The first collective second generation rappers

This section moves on from the assumption that nowadays rap represents a space for interrogating experiences, emotions and discourses related to belonging. 'Belonging to' a society and culture implies reflexive and relational actions of meaning making, through which perspectives and attitudes of the mainstream ethnic Italians and those of migrants intersect, contrast and blend. However, it should be pointed out that the sense of belonging is not static, but develops according to internal and external situations, which are strictly dependent on the context in which they are lived. In the following, it will be analysed *how* this sense has changed from the first to second wave of Italian rappers with migrant background according to a dominant discourse on migration that is of fear and hatred.

In 2008, the first gigs collected in the CD *Straniero a chi?* (Foreign to whom?) expressed the anger of being misrecognised by an Italian society that appeared hostile to them. However, while they rap the same social and discursive misrecognition of their belonging, their affective dimension is different. In the gig that opens the CD, "*In ostaggio*" (Hostage), Nasty Brooker (a.k.a. Claudio Magoni), Italian-Haitian-Cape Verdean, raps

Sono di una seconda generazione/ il mio nome Selvaggio/ vengo da una brutta situazione/ la società mi tiene in ostaggio/ le mie origini antichissime africane/ oggigiorno le posso solo ricordare/ intanto lì la gente muore/ mi trattano come un cane nel mondo occidentale.	I am of a second generation/ my name is savage/ I come from a bad situation/ society keeps me hostage/ my ancient African origins/ I can only remember them today/ meanwhile people are dying there/ [and] they treat me like a dog in the Western world.

In this lyric, the rapper expresses his sorrow for being stuck in the middle of nowhere: far away from his origins but treated like a dog in the Western world. Italy did not appear to be as a place where he could belong emotionally, but as an expression of the Western society that exploited him.

On the contrary, in "*Prospettive*" (Prospects), Mike Samaniego, born in Italy of a Filipino father and a Chinese mother sings

Ho dei sogni senza fine, cambiare la mia vita/ ma ho solo prospettive quel foglio tra le dita /sono nato in questo stato/ conosco la cultura e questa lingua/ ed ho ragione se vi chiedo dei diritti/ ma nessuna distinzione	I have endless dreams to change my life/ but I only have prospects/ [with] those papers in my hands/ I was born in this state/ I know the culture and this language/ and I am right when I ask you for rights/ but without distinction.

In this case, the rapper contextualises his unease in the framework of Italian legislation that does not recognises him as Italian, preventing him from fulfilling his dreams. The missing (external) recognition of his social belonging goes hand in hand with the emergence of an internal discursive sense of belonging based on the knowledge of culture and language of the country, in which he was born. While asking for rights, he demands recognition of his 'particular' way of being Italian, with foreign origin but still Italian. He makes no mention of his parents' cultures.

In "Umano normale" (A Normal Human), Zanko, born in Milan of Syrian parents, goes further and appeals to people's common humanity and to the cosmopolitanism of second generations:

"Sono palestinese, sono siciliano, sono albanese, sono latino americano, sono napoletano/ sono il siriano di Milano/metro-cosmopolitano/ so di essere un essere umano	"I am Palestinian, I am Sicilian, I am Albanian I am African/ I am Chinese, I am Latin American I am Neapolitan/I am the Syrian from Milan,/metro-cosmopolitan/ I know I am a human being

This gig of Zanko asserts the possibility of *plural belonging*. Naming different nationalities, the rapper tries to humanize migrants, who are often considered in the discourse on the crisis of migration as an undifferentiated foreign mass assimilated to natural disaster (floods, plague), moving his audience to look at them, as *subject who matters*, like us. When he raps, "I'm Sicilian, I'm Neapolitan", he wants to stress how also immigrants from Southern Italy were discriminated against as being foreign, when they emigrated from the Southern region to the Northern industrial cities in the Fifties of the last century. He expresses a sense of affective universal belonging that pertains not to a state but to the human race.

3.2 The new wave of second generation rappers

Second generation rappers have in a relatively short time risen from semi-obscurity to ubiquity. From their collective debut in 2008, in ten years they have become a popular and commercial genre for Italian young people. Thanks to the social media, functioning as advertising tools both of protest and manipulation (Osumare, 2001), rap music has gained a very important channel, through which issues of (in)equality and citizenship enter Italian society, aiming to build new models, which evolve alongside a country that despite evidence to the contrary is trying to convince itself that it is not multi-ethnic.

Indeed, in 2018 the album "Rockstar" by the rapper Sfera Ebbasta was one of the greatest hits, while other second-generation rappers, among them Amir, Ghali and Kuti, regularly make it into the top 10 on domestic music charts. Despite their success among the younger generations, until 2019 the victory of one of them in an institutional context such as Sanremo was unpredictable. Presenting as exemplary cases the text analysis of Amir and Kuti, this sub-section follows the development of the sense of belonging in this new wave of second-generation rappers. They have in common the use of street-Italian language that they contaminate with fragments of local dialects and slang and Arabic, Spanish or other migration languages to create alternative forms of visibility and disrupt prevailing norms of representation. This language choice represents both an attempt to communicate with the mainstream Italian-speaking audiences and an indication of discursive belonging and claim for plural identity.

As the son of an Egyptian immigrant father and an Italian mother, Amir was born and raised in Rome. In his lyric "*Straniero nella mia nazione*" (Foreign in my nation), he poses a politics of interrogation of social belonging – a means for identification, self-expression and protest – that is meaningful not only for him, but also for his second-generation peers sharing the same social and cultural location.

So' qui come portavoce/scendo in missione contro la disperazione/ che affligge troppe persone di seconda generazione s.o.s. bilancio negativo/ se me chiamano straniero nel posto dove vivo	I'm here as spokesperson/ I take up my mission against the despair/ that hits too many second generation persons/ s.o.s. negative balance/ if they call me foreigner in the place where I live

While expressing his unease for the social refusal of the second generation belonging to Italian society, he further asserts the value of the second-generation young people, who are *pietre preziose* (precious stones) in the midst of Rome's garbage crisis (*monnezza*, in Roman dialect) symbolizing the richness that these new Italians could represent for the whole decaying Italian society.

/[…] se non lo capisci che hai trovato la ricchezza/ noi pietre preziose in mezzo a tutta sta monnezza/	[…] if you don't understand that you found richness/ we precious stones in the midst of all this garbage/

In his lyric, the "rap" scene expressed through the metaphor of "pen" represents the attempt of looking for a less oppressive dimension of social and affective belonging, aiming at reaching Italian-speaking rap audiences in order to make them appreciate and learn more about diversity and marginality.

scrivo con la fame di chi non si rassegna/ prendo il vostro odio e lo trasformo in questa penna/	I write with the hunger of those who does not give up/ I take your hate and transform it into this pen/

In a different vein, Tommy Kuti who was born in Nigeria and migrated with his parents to Brescia at the age of two, in his most famous rap "*Afroitaliano*" (Afro-Italian) claims his rights to have a double affective belonging without being socially and discursively discriminated against. On the one side, he explains through a humorous and stereotyped representation of Italian-ness that he has grown up having the same cultural experiences of his Italian peers, even though he is black and has a Nigerian last name.

By mobilizing discourses on Italian-ness and Italian culture, Kuti thus shows his awareness of the Italian cultural features and practices, while also denouncing the sense of refusal that his request to belong meets in Italian society, implying that black people are not entitled to belong to the country in which they live.

Non mangio la pasta senza il parmigiano/ Ho la pelle scura, l'accento bresciano/ Un cognome straniero e comunque italiano.	I don't eat pasta without Parmesan cheese/I have dark skin, the accent of Brescia [Northern city near Milan]/ A foreign surname but anyway I'm Italian
Mi dai del negro, dell'immigrato/ il tuo pensiero è un po' limitato/ Il mondo è cambiato, non è complicato	You call me nigger, immigrant. Your thinking is a bit narrow/ the world has changed/ it's not so complicated
Quando io rappo è in italiano/ E anche se parto resto un italiano/La prima volta che ho detto "ti amo"/ ti giuro, l'ho fatto in italiano.	When I rap I do it in Italian/ And even if I leave I remain an Italian/ The first time I said "I love you", I swear to you, I did it in Italian.
Sono Afro italiano, perché sono stufo di sentirmi dire/ Cosa sono e cosa non sono!/ Sono troppo Africano per essere solo Italiano e troppo Italiano per essere solo Africano. Afro italiano, perché il mondo è cambiato	I' am Afro Italian, because I am sick of hearing the question/ What am I and what am I not! / I am too African to be just Italian and too Italian to be just African. Afro Italian, because the world has changed

In the official video-clip, a psychoanalyst asks Tommy, who is lying on the coach "but do you feel more Italian or African?" This question relates to all second-generation young people who experience problems of belonging due to different expectations both of their parents and of the Italian

society. With his rap, Tommy Kuti wanted to help them to gain self-esteem and pride in their being "other". Children of immigrants born in the country, in which they live their everyday life, are often stigmatized as "second-generation immigrants" and considered as "suspended between two cultures" (Baumann, 1999). In this conception, culture is not a living process derived from social conditions and interaction, but is an external reality to which they have to adhere, a so so-called "reified culture" (Mantovani, 2008). Instead, culture is dynamic and thus complex, fluid rather than static, which means that culture changes all the time, every day, in subtle and tangible ways.

4. Some concluding remarks

The current historical period allows and creates the substratas for the diffusion and popular explosion of rap among masses of young people to the point of becoming a pedagogical and therapeutic tool for getting in touch with themselves and the others. Young people use it as a means through which they can let off steam, to speak about every possible topic, or simply about themselves and their own problems. Fant (2015) has analysed how - thanks to rap - a group of young people who grew up in the ghetto have developed new and effective ways to learn, take care of themselves and their own social context in conditions of material and existential hardship.

This chapter has focused on some exemplary second generation rappers in Italy, analyzing the ways in which their lyrics engage with the question of belonging and are used as a powerful channel for critical responses to emerging xenophobic and nationalist debates and discourses on Italian-ness.
Their raps offer a nuanced analysis of the possibilities and desires of belonging and a multi-faceted picture of the tensions and challenges that second generation young people, especially the black ones and those coming from the Maghreb have to face with in Italy.
Despite Italy's history and present reality of local, fragmented and conflictual identities, Italian-ness is still widely constructed as something culturally and socially homogenous. Underlying these discourses is still the assumption that being Italian is synonymous with being white and Catholic. The experiences of many second-generation people in Italy confirms that those who do not conform phenotypically or in terms of religious identity are often not recognised as 'real' Italians.
In order to counteract this xenophobic assumption, the new wave of second-generation rappers in particular express their affective belonging to Italy and their right to be recognised as Italians as they share the same cultural features as their Italian peers. They criticize Italian society for its denial of their being at home in the nation and of their political and social belonging, remarking on the ways in which both in their everyday lives and in the national approach to the acquisition of citizenship they are faced with practices and discourses of exclusion and marginalization.
However, besides the image emphasizing the political, social and cultural refusal of their request to belong in Italian society, the existence of a less oppressive dimension of belonging comes to the fore:

that of the rap scene. Rapping in Italian aims at and addresses Italian-speaking rap audiences in order to make them appreciate and reflect more about issues such as diversity and marginality. The choice of the Italian language sometime mixed with dialectal words and expressions acts as an identification proposal to others who consider rap as a significant cultural practice, and are ready to hear messages conveyed by new voices, without taking into account their citizenship.

Following Bhabha (2004) it could be stated that rap functions as a "third space" (1994), in which second-generation rappers can affirm their belonging, together with others like them, as well as with people who understand and support them and their instances of belonging. With their rapping, these artists offer 'new' and critical points of view on and embodiments of Italian-ness. More than reflecting on their own individual experiences and problems, they raise awareness on the large-scale danger of denial of diversity and racism.

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