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Contemporary Youth Culture at the Margins of Marseille and Milan: Gangs, Music, and Global Imaginaries

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Abstract

In this article, we will compare Marseille and Milan, as well as the social (and digital) practices of young people living in two neighbourhoods: LaFab in the third district—one of the poorest areas of the French city—and San Siro—one of the largest social housing areas of the Italian one. These young people were born in France and Italy, but their parents are mostly of African origins. This comparative analysis is carried out at three interdependent levels: the youth policies, the ethnographic study of young people practices, and the imaginaries they (re)create. In conclusion, we will show how social exclusion intersects with spatial marginalisation and how, in the two cities, groups of young people (through music production, NGO projects, or illicit drug-trafficking networks) have developed glocally-oriented strategies to create self-determination and creativity spaces as an alternative to such structural obstacles.

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Keywords

gangsta rap music – glocalisation – migrations – youth street groups – Marseille – Milan

1 Introduction

This paper will compare two cities, two neighbourhoods and two peculiar sociabilities developed by youth street groups.[1] The two cities are Marseille and Milan; the neighbourhoods are, respectively, LaFab,[2] a neighbourhood of the third district—one of the poorest areas of the French city—and San Siro—one of the biggest social housing neighbourhoods of the Italian one. We have chosen to compare these two neighbourhoods on the basis of some characteristics they have in common. Obviously, the two neighbourhoods also have substantial differences that make them unique and distinctive. Thus, what unites and what distinguishes LaFab from San Siro?

The two urban areas share some dynamics that mark them as "marginal": they are two poor and stigmatised places (Wacquant, 2008), where immigrants have settled since the 1960s in Marseille and since the 1990s in Milan. Young people in these neighbourhoods were born in France and Italy, but their parents are mostly of African origins (from Comoros in Marseille, and from Egypt and Morocco in Milan). In both cases, social housing and the connection with the city centre are structural aspects of the neighbourhood: a mixed co-ownership composed of social and private housing on large appartements blocks in LaFab, and social housing apartments in San Siro; a subway that connects in less than twenty minutes both neighbourhoods to their respective city centres. In LaFab the majority of the residents are French citizens, children of immigrants, while in San Siro half of the inhabitants are Italian retirees and the rest are migrant families without Italian citizenship.

Drawing on authors such as Andre Gingrich and Richard Fox (2002), this article develops a "qualitative" comparison between two urban contexts lived

1 According to the TRANSGANG project (see note number 3), we will use the term "youth street groups" as a generic word, that includes different types of groupings: from those related to delinquency to those more associated with leisure and lifestyle (Feixa et al. 2019).

2 We have decided to omit the name of the Marseille district to ensure the privacy of our interlocutors, also because we will cite some sensitive data relating to the illegal activities of young people. We could not do the same for the Milan neighborhood, partly because Paolo Grassi has already published several articles using the real name, partly because the rappers mentioned are very famous at national level. In this second case, however, we have guaranteed the privacy of the interlocutors, using fictional names.

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by different "street groups", a comparison that is not theoretical (or theory-oriented) but rather capable of crossing regional, historical, and transnational dimensions. We are not looking to find discrete, homogeneous, and stable units of comparison, but rather to bring together elements caught in their dynamic dimensions, yet connected within a world-system, or a global-scape (Grassi, 2018a). This approach also partly evokes the notion of "disjunctive comparison" of Lazar, i.e. a type of comparison based on the simple juxtaposition of cases that "has the potential to raise questions that may not emerge through a more strictly representative form of comparison" (Lazar, 2012: 352). As we will show, in this phase of our research we believe it is essential also to ask new questions relating to the phenomena we are studying, thus stimulating new debates.

This comparison exercise is carried out at three interdependent levels of analysis: the level of youth policies (Section 2), the ethnographic level of the practices implemented by these young people, and the level of the imaginaries they create and reproduce (Sections 3 and 4). We will show how ethnic and social exclusion intersect with spatial marginalisation and how, in the two cities, groups of young people have developed glocally-oriented strategies (Robertson, 1995; Ritzer, 2003) to cope with them (Sections 5 and 6). We refer to different practices, such as the production of rap music, or social projects managed by NGOs, or participation in illicit drug-trafficking networks. These are permeable practices where the stigmatisation dynamics and contemporary youth cultures circulate and are reappropriated, each time, under new perspectives.

Based on the glocalisation logic, we will investigate how groups of young people who aspire to become recognised rappers in LaFab and San Siro integrate different cultural references spreading over Internet (*e.g.*, gangsta rap music, narco and drug movies and series) in their cultural productions. Which are the intersections between these glocalisation practices and their local community life? To what extent can these global cultural references be considered forms of local resistance and resilience in each of the case studies?

This paper will develop some insights, arising from the European project "TRANSGANG", whose objective is to study the "transnationalisation" process of street groups using two directions of analysis: "from above" (imaginaries, symbols, criminal and repressive policies) and "from below" (communities of mutual aid, migratory processes and virtual interactions) (Feixa and Mecca, 2019).[3] As we will specify in the next pages, this paper is based on participant

3 Two of the authors are local researchers, respectively, in Marseille and Milan, with their ethnographic work starting in 2017 in Milan, and 2019 in Marseille. The third author is part

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observation, interviews, and literature reviews. According to our project methodological framework, we will provide multiple forms of data starting from a dialogical relationship established between us, as researchers, and our interlocutors. Through our ethnographic gaze, we want to show youth street groups "micro-cosmos", encompassing the social agents that are part of them (state, academia, media, the street groups themselves) to understand how this field operates.

2 Marseille and LaFab

Popular, working-class, and very unequal (Donzel, 2014), Marseille has become a place of arrival (railway, ferry terminal), transit (to other cities in France and Northern Europe) and settlement of immigrant populations (in downtown and in the northern districts) coming mainly from the Mediterranean basin and the former French colonies in the Indian Sea, mostly Mayotte and Comoros, but also, in recent decades, from sub-Saharan Africa such as the Gambia (Johnson, 2016) and the Middle East.[4] Marseille is frequently presented as a "dual" city (Donzel & Moreau, 2005), marked by the socioeconomic differences between the southern neighbourhoods, with autochthonous inhabitants and high-income households, and the northern neighbourhoods, historically popular and immigration territories.

Since 1988, faced with institutional weaknesses and seeking more effective social control, France has intensified public policies of "urban social development" in sensitive neighbourhoods—due to their economic and material precariousness (Cesari, 1993: 87). However, since the beginning of 2000, repressive management policies in these neighbourhoods have increased, degrading relations between their inhabitants and the police forces. From then, a large number of economic and social changes have taken place in France, impacting the lives of the young people of the *cités/banlieues*[5] and their forms of

of the advisory board of the project and is responsible for the South-European area. He made ethnographic visits to the two cities, deepening some reflections with local researchers.

4 In 2015, Europe faced the most serious migrant reception crisis since World War II. More than a million migrants have arrived in European Union countries via the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkans, from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Immigration is a fundamental issue in French geopolitics.

5 Currently, the "*banlieue*" or *"cité"* designates an imaginary of social exclusion and economic dependence, the most disadvantaged part of the city. The term *"banlieusard"*, indicating a person who inhabits the banlieue of a large city, and often synonymous with youth from public housing neighborhoods, is highly pejorative.

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organisation. Today, the biggest social, political, and economic challenges facing Marseille are concentrated in the city centre, where, unlike other French cities, the poorest neighbourhoods are found. This corresponds better to the model of inner urban areas of large British (Harrison, 1985; Moore, 1992) or North America cities (Wilson, 2006). The neighbourhoods in the north of the city, and several in downtown, represent a "ghettoised"[6] space, historically relegated and with a range of possibilities (violent, creative, supportive) for its inhabitants. Among the less favoured communities of Marseille, the historical processes of segregation (Bouillon et al., 2017; Samson et al., 2015) have led to the loss of legitimacy of institutions such as schools, police, and justice. For more than thirty years, the city centre of Marseille has been the subject of major urban renovations which have reinforced the processes of segregation (Bouillon et al., 2017; Samson et al., 2015). The latest ongoing operation is the Euroméditerranée consortium,[7] a public land use planning establishment (EPA) created in 1995 to "revitalise" certain areas of the city. The city centre of Marseille thus represents the core of the social, political, and economic conflict that the city is experiencing today. It is an area of resources for the Maghreb populations (Jordi & Témime, 1991) and other African populations of Muslim tradition: low-cost furnished hotels, prayer rooms, bazaars, open-air markets, grocery stores and halal restaurants, hairdressers, NGOs and institutions providing daily support. The life experience of all Marseille residents (mainly the poorest) is closely linked to the future of the city center. It is therefore an area of strong sociability and solidarity among successive generations of immigrants (Audren et al., 2018, p. 95), with regular mobility to the northern districts. For immigrants who arrive in Marseille, "access to the northern districts is a second step, they first arrive in the city center and, from there, mobility continues" (Audren et al., 2018, p. 99).

Illicit drug trafficking has introduced new forms of crime to the poorest neighbourhoods of Marseille, where today the issue of immigration and ethnic origin has assumed fundamental importance; islamophobia[8] (Hajjat &

6 Ghettos can be racially determined spaces (Wacquant, 2007) or segmented social organisations (Lapeyronnie, 2008). Such a conceptualisation reveals the diversity of the ghetto, not only in terms of the type of groups that make it up, but also in terms of causes, processes, and consequences.

7 Its main interest is to create commercial premises and offices to develop the Marseille tertiary sector, as well as museums, business hotels and, to a lesser extent, social housing. Considered the third largest commercial district in France, Euroméditerranée operates on the main roads and pedestrian areas in the city center and on the urban coast.

8 Islamophobia is defined as "a complex social process of racialisation / alterity otherness based on the sign of belonging (real or perceived) to the Muslim religion" (Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013, p. 20).

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Mohammed, 2013; Liogier, 2012), xenophobia (Althabe, 1985) and the question of national identity are at the forefront of national debates in France. Since the early 1980's, the trivialisation of drug use and illicit economies[9] (Mauger, 2009; Mohammed, 2014), the labour market crisis, and rising unemployment among young people in working-class neighbourhoods have been the breeding ground for new living conditions in Marseille's marginalised neighbourhoods. Today, the confusion between ethno-religious and social exclusion must be added to the context of the marginality of these neighbourhoods—the main spaces for (trans)formation and socialisation of low-income youth street groups.

Marseille has a significant proportion of young people under 30 years of age: in 2016, the city had 862,211 inhabitants, of which 19.4% were between 15 and 29 years old (INSEE, 2020). Regarding the immigrant population in Marseille, the Maghreb is over-represented: in 2016, of the total population of Marseille, 14.5% (124,790 individuals) were immigrants (51% women and 49% men), within said immigrant population, Algeria is the country of birth of most immigrants in Marseille, followed by other countries in Africa, Europe, and the rest of the world (INSEE, 2020).

Young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the north and north-east have more difficulties accessing employment. These labour difficulties can be explained through various obstacles. First, the national context. In France, young people whose parents were born abroad (children from migrant backgrounds), at an equivalent level and academic background, have twice the risk of being unemployed than those whose parents were born in France (Brinbaum & Guégnard, 2011). Second, territorial segregation. The risk of unemployment is multiplied by 1.5 for young people who live in areas classified as "priority neighbourhoods", as is the case with LaFab. Third, the socioeconomic inheritance. In Marseille, in schools located in priority neighbourhoods, 66% of students come from disadvantaged social categories, compared to only 19% of students from disadvantaged classes in schools that are outside a priority neighbourhood (AGAM, 2015). All three factors combine to place additional obstacles in the job search trajectory of young people from low-income neighbourhoods. In addition, the share of the out-of-school population aged 15 or over without a diploma stands at 41.1% at the third district, against 25.6% at the city level and 25.9% at national level (INSEE, 2015).

Covering an area of 4.5 ha. and built on a former soap factory between 1957 and 1960, LaFab has a mixed co-ownership composed of social housing and

9 In Marseille, graffiti clearly specify the points of sale of illicit drugs with a welcome phrase, prices, and opening hours for customers—all in a colorful / artistic or simple and informative design. It is not anecdotal graffiti, but a widespread practice in view of all people.

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private appartements. Located 3km from the city centre and having nearly 1000 houses, it has welcomed several waves of immigrant populations from Maghreb and Comoros. LaFab has already been the subject of two urban renewal plans (2000–2005 and 2007–2012). The latest data estimates that 676 young people between the ages of 15 and 29 live in LaFab, out of a total of 3,000 inhabitants (INSEE, 2015). The poverty rate of the third district (53%), where LaFab is located, is above the Marseille average (26%), and well above the national average (14.1%) (INSEE, 2015).

The NGO network (funded by the government through regular calls for projects) is another important element when it comes to understanding the current life of young people in Marseille's neighbourhoods, particularly in LaFab. This NGO social intervention, focused on young people, is quite extensive and active in the city. Only in the third district (including the LaFab neighbourhood), you can quickly count dozens of youth-oriented NGOs working on topics as diverse as professional insertion, sports, culture, art, legal protection, help for decent homes, etc.

In short, in Marseille, NGOs' social intervention is so anchored in the relationship between popular classes, migration, and urban planning, result of a local policy that places it at the centre of a set of exchanges and organisation of consensus and social balance. Peraldi and Samson (2015) remind us of the borderline case of a neighbourhood where there is one social worker for every five families. Historically, public policies of social action in the city, with a grounded approach, *i.e.*, using NGO managed by actors on the ground, seek not only to fill the urban void and the precariousness of these populations, but also to reduce social tensions. Since the 90s, Marseille's local government considered this associative trend in public housing neighbourhoods as an evolution of youth street groups towards a controlled and organised model of subsidised NGOs (Blöss, 1989).

3 Milan and San Siro

Milan is the economic capital of Italy. The World Expo of 2015 guaranteed an enormous flow of investments (the GDP of the event was 13,9 billions of euros, according to its official report) (Expo 2015 s.p.a., 2018). Giuseppe Sala, the commissioner of the public agency responsible for its management, is now the mayor of the city. The city has put a lot of resources for the requalification of vast urban areas and the realisation of mega-renovation projects. New squares, skyscrapers and infrastructure have sprung up. Through this mega-event, Milan changed not only its skyline, but also its identity, becoming a capital capable

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of competing with other major European cities. The rhetoric of the "Milanese Renaissance" has been promoted by local and national politicians and media, sometimes hiding the problems to which the marginal neighbourhoods of the city are forced to face (see Cognetti, Gambino and Lareno Faccini, 2020). Milan has thus defined itself as a two-speed city, in which some areas continue their development, while others seem to lag behind, excluded from the stimulative dynamics described, despite the plans implemented and the projects subsidised by public and private social actors (Grassi, 2018b).

Among these more marginalised spaces, the public housing neighbourhood of San Siro is undoubtedly a prototypical case. San Siro is a "rationalist" quadrilateral,[10] built between the Thirties and the Forties in a peripheral area of Milan to accommodate the families of workers employed in the local factories (Migliucci, Oriani and Schiavi, 2016). Now centrally-located thanks to the expansion of the city centre, San Siro has a population of about 12,000 inhabitants and is one of the largest public housing neighbourhoods of Milan (around 6,110 apartments). In the last few years, San Siro has become an area of great cultural diversity, characterised by the presence of a young population of foreign origin (around 50% of the total), with 84 different nationalities, besides the Italian one. Many children and youngsters of San Siro were born in Italy, but, as for all children of migrants, national legislation does not allow them to obtain citizenship until they are 18 years old.[11] On the contrary, a consistent part of the Italian residents is formed by elderly inhabitants. Between young migrants and elderly Italians sometimes there are problems of coexistence, which arise in particular in conflicts related to the management of courtyards and public space (Cognetti and Padovani, 2018).

Thanks to the public housing allocation mechanism, which favours people in need, many fragile subjects live in San Siro: in particular, single-parent and single-income families, and people with disabilities, especially of a psychiatric nature. However, San Siro also constitutes a "laboratory" of social activities, i.e. an urban area where different local actors (NGOs, local committees, volunteers, and so on) interact, promoting various projects, even if often short-term and not always well coordinated with each other (Maranghi, 2019).

The so-called "Great recession" that began in 2007 worsened the living conditions of residents, while accentuating social polarisation (Comune di Milano

10 Rationalism is an architectural philosophy which developed in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s. It believed that form always followed function. It promoted the construction of single functional buildings.

11 Generally speaking, anyone born in Italy, at the age of 18, has one year to become a citizen, if they can prove their legal residency since birth.

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and Assolombarda, 2018). Moreover, in recent years, San Siro has often been described by local and national media as a "casbah", an unassailable Arab fortress in the centre of the Lombard capital. San Siro has become the neighbourhood which the city needs to give a name to its own fears, currently linked above all to immigration dynamics (Toubon and Messamah, 1990).

Thus, the "foreign" (according to the Italian law) youngsters of San Siro move in and out of this stigmatised and deprived context, between different urban areas, educational institutions and scarce job opportunities. The city's youth policies are connected to a broader national framework. According to Riccardo Grassi, (2009), Italy was one of the few countries of the European Union in which a youth policy was not defined at a central level, at least until the creation of the first Ministry of Youth Policies, in 2006. In the past, however, even if there was not an organic development of a "system" of youth policies, there have been many initiatives aimed at young people, mostly driven by the municipalities (also through a strong public-private partnership) and, in parallel, by the catholic church. The different experiences activated in the municipalities focused on four sectors: information, socialisation and culture, training and work placement, marginalisation. The main results produced were, respectively: the so-called Youth Aggregation Centres (*Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile* in Italian), cultural events, the Youth information Centres (*Informagiovani* in Italian) and the Youth Forums (Grassi, 2009: 22–23).

Milan has experienced a progressive disinvestment on some types of youth policies closer to the territories, aiming at initiatives with more selective access criteria, to develop the participation of young people and their empowerment. Thus, for example, in San Siro a program called the School of the Neighbourhoods (*Scuola dei Quartieri* in Italian) has tried to incubate innovative ideas promoted by groups of young people who have a certain social and cultural capital, while the local catholic church represents the main place for socialisation and organised leisure. In San Siro there are no Youth Centres, libraries, cinemas, rehearsal rooms, or municipal offices. The so-called Neighbourhood Laboratory, a social project sponsored by the municipality during the implementation of an important requalification program (Cella, 2006), is currently closed, due to the lack of funds. However, over the years, it has involved mainly the elderly Italian population of the neighbourhood, not the adolescent one. A local committee close to the Milanese social movements organises various activities in an occupied building not far from San Siro, but the political activism of its members seems to attract only a minority of San Siro's young residents.

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The streets and squares of the neighbourhood become the only public space that can be used by youngsters. In those streets and squares the expressive language of rap has exploded since 2019.

4 Youth and Permeable Glocal Networks in Marseille: Music, Drugs, and NGOs

There are no American-type gangs in Marseille—even if the media tries to convey the parallelism to each incident between the police and the youth of public housing neighbourhoods. In the second largest city in France, there are groups of young people that have been living in the same neighbourhood since childhood, sometimes playing soccer, sometimes going to school, sometimes looking for a temporary or ephemeral professional training, sometimes selling marijuana or hashish.

In Marseille, conflicts between groups of young people linked to cultural, racial, or symbolic distinction issues have not a criminal importance. Our informants do not mention the word "gangs" when describing the current daily life of the studied neighbourhood. There are conflicts and violence that involve young people, that is true, but it responds more to the management of illicit drug-trafficking networks, personal fights, or spontaneous altercations.[12]

In the LaFab neighbourhood, youth trajectories intersect in time and space. Young people come and go between licit and illicit activities, without a binary distinction being valid, but rather a "continuum" (Feixa et al., 2019) that evolves alongside cultural references—and their eventual disruptions. Young people transit between (some of) these life trajectory stages, hoping for individual success (as the contemporary way of life dictates), but, paradoxically, their trajectories follow homogeneous patterns: temporary jobs, short professional training, low university attendance, scarcity of well-paid jobs, and unemployment benefits.

Illicit drug-trafficking is an important aspect of LaFab's social construction. Not necessarily because of its economic impact—which is, quite marginal, considering that only a handful of young people work in illicit drug-trafficking

12 In Marseille, in 2016, the average crime rate here was 7.6 incidents recorded per 1,000 inhabitants over, this violence was particularly low in the 3rd district; the perpetrators of physical violence verified by the police were mainly men, mostly between 22 and 35 years old; minors perpetrators represented 11.5% of all perpetrators of this violence (compared to 88.5% of adults). Source: National Observatory of Crime and Social Contexts (Mucchielli, 2017).

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networks on a regular basis—but because of the solid collective imaginary that this generates in the community. This illicit drug trade represents a recurring imaginary/cultural reference—both inside and outside the neighbourhood—of the possibilities and practices of young people who live, study, and settle in LaFab. Wamel, a young black man in his early 20s, who lives in the neighbourhood and occasionally liaises between vendors and middle-class youth and tourists in downtown, talks about his life prospects and making money selling drugs:

> I live there, I know LaFab, there is nothing to do there. What do you want to do!?, spend all day holding a wall! Pffff…, there is no work, I do not want to work for a pitiful salary, receiving orders from an asshole, in one night I can earn what I would earn in a week. I don't want to stay selling [*illicit drugs*], my idea is to get enough money to start with and then see what I can do, but for everything you need money to start, you know, something to start.

The precariousness of jobs for the LaFab youth is an imaginary/cultural reference that not only accompanies the emergency and the current trivialisation of illicit drug-trafficking, but is also carried (as a reverse of the stigma) through creative practices such as production of "gangsta rap" and "ghetto superstar" music. The "bad guys in the neighbourhood" and crime's codes are thus introduced into their musical productions, in an exercise in theatricality and artistic performance (of resistance) of the stigma.

The most remarkable point about this youth music practice in LaFab is that they produce their own songs/video clips (mainly gangsta rap), without the help of NGOs or publicly funded programs. One or two of the group members are the "rappers" and they write, sing, and compose the beats. Several members are featured in the video clips where friends and neighbours re-enact the song's story and help with the staging. Other members are in charge of filming, editing, and promotional activities. In the first phase, they record their first songs thanks to proximity and solidarity networks. In a second phase, eventually, they record their songs in recording studios—which can be in commercial settings or even in homes—where they pay for services and rental time for audio-visual equipment.[13]

13 For example, K2K records at Studio Crampella Production, whose leader Malko is part of a network of young music producers (between 25 and 40 years old) from different neighborhoods of the city (Astral Gang Records).

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In their songs you can repeatedly hear allusions to a gangster atmosphere in the city: "Marseille is not an easy place!", "Marseille is hot!", as well as challenges and warnings to other rappers about which is the most popular and dangerous crew in the neighbourhood/city. This conflict logic does not necessarily indicate violenct behaviour between neighbourhoods or enemy crews. It should be understood more as an aesthetic heritage of the North American gangsta musical style and as an effect of the folklorisation of low-income youth street groups in France.

The mediatic folklorisation of the social universe of youth street groups in Marseille (sometimes called "gangs")—even in the social sciences, accentuating the relative alterity of the gang phenomenon (Monod et al., 2008: 40)—makes gangsta rap music a tool for counteracting stigmatisation and a fundamental feature of collective identity in LaFab. Young people post video clips of famous rappers, mainly French, share posts of other rappers in the neighbourhood/city and create hybrid virtual communities (using physical and digital spaces) around current events in the local/national hip-hop scene.

Young people in LaFab know each other, those who are in the illicit drug-trafficking network and those who are not, those who rap with those who play football, those who go to school with those who alternate between precarious jobs. The neighbourhood is built from permeable spaces, there are no clear lines of distinction and incommunicability. According to Kamed, a young black man from Mayotte Island who arrived to LaFab at 6 years old, relations are calmer with young people in the neighbourhood illicit drug-trafficking network: "they are from the neighbourhood, we went to the same schools, we know them, they respect us for what we do [*NGO projects*], and they also do things for the neighbourhood". Kamed cites the example of the summer inflatable pools[14] as something positive that young people involved in illicit drug-trafficking networks do for the community, "as this contributes to the wellbeing of children in the neighbourhood".

In LaFab, NGOs' networks occupy the intermediate space (mediation) between individuals and the State. The social workers or "mediators" (as they prefer to define themselves) are a mirror of the youth of this neighbourhood with which they work: they have origins from Maghreb, Guadeloupe, Mayotte and Comoros. Mediators are black and Maghreb, and they come from public housing neighbourhoods. This is a notable element that tells us at least two things: on one hand, the construction of the local population, the long work of

14 Well known in the different public housing neighborhoods of Marseille, these pools are "a way to make sure that the little ones who do not leave the neighborhood during the summer can spend a good moment", affirms Loak, a social worker in LaFab neighborhood.

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migration and colonialism in Marseille, and one the other, the educational and associative work as a mobility tool for young people in these neighbourhoods. Educators, mediators, and social workers in LaFab are both a terminal of concrete public policies at the street level and an expression for what is perceived as problematic by public actors.

In the French *cités*, the fundamental resource handled by notable politicians has historically been the ceiling and the access to public housing. However, employment around social work is also a crucial element in Marseille today, to the point that if a group that wants to set up a new NGO in the neighbourhood it is viewed with distrust, because that disturbs the public funding (and political) balance. "The other NGOs [*present in the neighbourhood*] see us badly, as one more competitor" says Mussa, a 25-year-old French Comorian black man from the LaFab neighbourhood.

LaFab's youth are often critical of both politics and NGO projects that come from outside the neighbourhood, that depend on public money and are in competition for it: "politics is patronage, they use you for their ends, it is not sincere", insists Mussa. He leads an NGO project registered at the Prefecture of Marseille (one of the many public funders), which consists of gathering young people from different neighbourhoods of the city and training them in oral expression and debating skills. The collective actions of these young people are thus constructed in a double movement: between the recognition of the uniqueness of the neighbourhood (the socio-historical conditions that classify them as "a youngster from the *quartier*[15]") and the (possible) openness to the unknown, to everything that differs from the neighbourhood.

It is interesting to observe in the speech of Mussa the distrust towards everything that comes from outside the neighbourhood (such as a political-NGO project) and, at the same time, to see that his personal/collective project consists of leading the youth of the neighbourhood outside their social and spatial limits, through the constitution of a new NGO. This apparent contradiction, between the neighbourhood as a shield and the projection outside the neighbourhood,[16] marks the construction of public policies, NGO projects, and cultural practices of young people in LaFab.

15 In French, it literally means "neighborhood", although the collective imaginary indicates young people from a public housing and poor neighborhoods, generally with immigrant parents.

16 The relationship with the neighborhood seems to be built in an ambivalent mode for these young people, protected and locked in by this space (Deville, 2007).

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5 Seven Zoo: Rap and Glocal Imaginaries in Milan

Ethnographic work in Milan with youth street gangs is part of a long-term fieldwork,[17] which started in 2017, mapping the Milanese Latin American gangs—present at the beginning of 2000s (even in San Siro)—and making contact with social actors (ex-gang members, social workers, policemen) who have been protagonists of the phenomenon. However, today Latin American gangs seemed to have reached an end, or rather, an evolution that distanced them from the main object of the TRANSGANG project. They seem smaller, more mobile and hidden, and with a higher criminal profile. As a policeman summarised in an interview, Latin American gangs in Milan today do not probably reach fifty people and, above all, they do not produce a circulating imaginary within the youth cultures of the street (Queirolo Palmas 2010, Grassi 2021). For this reason, we decided to go back to San Siro, and open up our reflection to something different that in some respects questioned the very interpretative framework of the TRANSGANG project: a rap music scene formed by young people of different origins, strongly rooted in their marginalised neighbourhood, and at the same time projected on a global scale.

As we said, the Milanese institutions seem to have partially disinvested on those youth policies closer to the territories. The gaze of the institutions is thus less focused on prevention and local services than before. This hypothesis was confirmed also by Stefano—a social worker of a cooperative who has been engaged in street education projects for years—during an online focus group with stakeholders on the 12th of February, 2021: "[Milanese] Adolescents are invisible. Basically, boys and girls are not seen by institutions. They are seen only when they become a problem. Institutions do not 'see' streets and do not think about streets with respect to how places are redeveloped". Unlike in Marseille, in the Milanese suburbs we do not find so many institutions or NGOs engaged in territorial work.

However, Stefano also added that today youngsters depend less on public infrastructure, or on other resources that can be provided by youth policies

17 The field work in Milan has been developed with the Mapping San Siro action research group (Polytechnic University of Milan), formed by urbanists, architects, and anthropologists. Mapping San Siro developed through the years as a stable *socially* oriented Urban Living Lab (Franz 2015), that is, a process-oriented space, focused on social innovation, user empowerment and codesign creation (Cognetti and Maranghi 2020). This process was made possible also thanks to the assignment by ALER—the public company that manages the apartments of San Siro—of an empty ex-commercial space on the street level, in 2014. Since then, Mapping San Siro has been developing research and teaching activities and promoting local change.

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and associations. The case of San Siro is emblematic in this respect. There, similarly to LaFab, a group of boys made rap music their main expressive reference, turning San Siro into a capital of a youth imaginary built from the periphery. "Those boys make their music with their phones," Stefano said, "they spread it through social networks, they do not need much from us [*the local associations*]. Those of San Siro are an example of success. They are myths for many young people".

Walking through San Siro, the walls appear as the mirror of these many coexisting narratives. They are not strata of different archaeological eras, but fragments that describe contemporary daily life. There are many writings in Arabic, love messages, some indications to buy drugs (like "Cocaine: follow directions", or "Retail: 10 euros per gram")—San Siro is a drug-dealing hotspot of the city, the same as LaFab is in Marseille. There are political slogans related to a local committee, claiming the right to the city and to housing (Harvey 2003). Finally, some tags refer precisely to the local rap scene.

The San Siro's rap scene has a short history. Born within the local community centres and linked to their political activism, the scene has emancipated itself from the latter in the last few years. Some very young rappers have been successful since 2019 and have become a social and cultural phenomenon, recognised at the city and a national level. There are boys who often do not reach twenty years of age, of Maghreb, Latin American and Italian origins, and have grown up in a poor social housing neighbourhood and are able to fulfil their dreams. Their names are, among others: Neima Ezza, Sacky, Vale Pain, Rondo da Sosa, Keta. Singles on Spotify and videos on YouTube—often set in the neighbourhood—one after the other, month after month. Their lyrics are similar, they speak of suburbs, drugs, money, and prisons: a catalogue of the transnational imaginary of the *gangsta* rapper (Alridge and Stewart 2005). Some of these guys have really had problems with the law (as they often boast on social media), or at least their relatives and friends have had them. Neima Ezza himself explains it in an interview with Rolling Stone—one of the Italy's main music magazines—in December 2019: "If somebody could help us to find a job to get five hundred euros a month to help our parents, answer a whim, or get a haircut, or go to the disco, no one would think of getting into trouble" (Blumi Tripodi, 2019).

The San Siro rappers speak in Italian about their families, the poverty of the neighbourhood, the prison and the police that they hate. They built an identity linked to the neighbourhood—Zone Seven, or Seven Zoo, as they called it in their lyrics—playing with the gangsta style and the mythologisation of the French peripheries, exhibiting money, motorbikes and cars. They talk about drug dealing as a normalised activity in their social environment. The street life is at the

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centre of their narratives, while ethnicity does not seem to be a central problematic issue. The neighbourhood itself and their common social condition define their identity. They refer to the suburbs but project them on a global scale. In this sense, rap shows another phase of Milanese youngsters' socialisation in relation to another phenomenon at the beginning of the 2000s which was still attached to the reinvention of ethnicity—Latin American street groups. The rappers of San Siro do not look to Cairo, Casablanca, or Guayaquil, the cities of their origins or where their parents were born. Rather, they look to the global cities of music, such as New York, London, Paris, and Marseille (see Ritzer, 2003). Among the young people of the neighbourhood who have become famous, there are dozens of their peers who use music as a way out of their routines involving petty crime and drugs. Rap music has been established as a cultural and creative scene of this segment of second-generation kids (Belotti, 2021).

Music is a language that is always capable of reassembling itself and reinventing itself. The "field" of rap is a fragmentary territory where different points of view collide and seek affirmation (Neal, 2004). Other youngsters in the neighbourhood write raps also referring to different imaginaries. For example, Mohammed, a 17-year-old boy who was born in Egypt but grew up in San Siro, has a different point of view. His raps do not speak of drug dealing, or weapons, but explore the working-class world and the Milanese social movements, without however ever fully recognising himself with it. In February 2021, during an interview, he said:

> I wrote about racism because when I went to middle school, I suffered from it myself. They made jokes about me because I was Arabic. In the class there were boys from the upper-middle class… and we from San Siro were seen as barbarians. This is no longer the case now in high school, where in each class there are at least half who have a non-Italian origin. It is good.

Here it is possible to recognise a typical dynamic on the part of young people who enter schools and rebuild a new social space that becomes a protective shield from racism. "I am good at school, I like it. I think that if I study, and others do it as well, society can change. We could make it better, different. I want to go to university, maybe I want to study sound engineering," Mohammed added.

Mohammed knows Neima Ezza and the other "top rappers" from the scene, but he does not usually hang out with them, even if they continue to hang out in the neighbourhood and its public spaces. Mohammed appreciates them, but also subtly criticises their commercial pose. They are inside a professional industrial circuit made of production and distribution, of sponsored

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objects that appear in their videos and Instagram profiles. On the contrary, Mohammed is certainly part of the rap scene of San Siro, but in a more marginal and "unprofessional" way; he and his brother have produced a couple of songs and put them on YouTube.

However, both the "top rappers" and Mohammed express a deep bond with their neighbourhood. "My brother is zone 7," Neima Ezza says in a song. "Milan, Zone Seven, hitman kills shits; on the sofa the curtain opens and you feel the gap with us, the rappers," Mohammed echoes him, in another one. On one hand, through rap the stigma that marks that portion of the urban space is turned over into an emblem, while on the other the neighbourhood and the city are re-defined and re-signified (see Lamotte, 2014).

Rap has a crucial meaning in the lives of some of the youngest residents of San Siro, allowing them to develop dynamics of re-territorialisation and letting them rethink their marginalised urban space (Raffestin, 2012). Drawing from local and global traditions at the same time, rap spatialises itself and establishes divisions, between inside and outside. As mentioned by the social worker named Stefano, rap symbolically redesigns the urban ecology of Milan, also filling a political void not occupied by youth policies.

6 Theorizing Glocally-Oriented Practices from Marseille and Milan Low-Income Neighbourhoods

The urbanisation of the way of life and the massive use of the internet produces a structural tension in our societies: on one hand, in spreading homogeneous global values and, on the other, in developing local and specific cultural practices. This is valid especially for young people (without social and geographical distinction), immersed in constantly digital and physique interactions, *i.e.*, hybrid public spaces (Mansilla & Schwartz, 2017).

The concept of "glocalisation"—a widely discussed term (Ritzer, 2003; Robertson, 1995)—applied to gang studies, allows us to understand how the collective identity construction and cultural practices of these young people in Milan and Marseille are carried out, as well as the role of information and communication technologies (ICT)—such as smartphones, mobile Internet, digital social networks—in this process. With the gangs or street groups, glocalisation refers to the production of the collective imagination of what a gang or a street group is and how they should act. The production of this imaginary (and the effective practices that are derived from everyday life) results in the encounter, on one hand, between the cultural constellations that are part of the inhabitants of the low-income neighbourhoods, and on the other hand, from

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images that circulates in hybrid public spaces—transnational in scope, thanks to the internet. Local actions of youth groups in low-income neighbourhoods in Milan and Marseille are (retro)fuelled by global fictional narratives (myths) about what contemporary youth culture is (or what a gang or a street group is) and how it operates, *i.e.*, glocalisation. Drawing on Hellemont and Densley (2018: 170), we could state that, specifically: "Emotions and desires, shaped by discrimination, racism and social exclusion, are the driving force behind gang glocalisation". These perceptions are the fuel of their symbolic organisation.

This glocalisation dynamic does not appear only with the democratisation of the internet and digital social networks. Hollywood movies were the first examples of how glocalisation worked. In France in the mid-90s, the film Menace II Society was, according to the testimony of several Marseille's young people of that time (today reaching their 40s), responsible for the way young people in the *cités/banlieues* (low-income neighbourhoods) of France began to dress, walk, and even sing at that time.

Similarly, films such as La Haine (1995)—the story of a boy killed by police in a Parisian suburb—Fast & Furious (2001), or 8 Mile (2002)—the story of the white rapper Eminem—helped build the urban imaginaries of Italian youngsters born in the 90s.

The perception of discrimination and social exclusion in the French *cités/banlieues*, and the Italian social housing neighbourhoods determine how their young inhabitants incorporate global and local narratives in their communities' daily life.

F. Dubet (1995: 143) thus portrays the feeling of exclusion and marginality of the most disadvantaged French banlieues:

> To this spatial marginality, it must be added that the inhabitants of the "difficult" banlieues also constitute captive audiences of certain urban facilities. There is only one school or college that must endure all the reputation and problems of the neighbourhood. There is also a single shopping centre, sometimes just a coffee shop and a single recreation centre. And if the presence of these facilities invites us not to assimilate the quartiers of the north of Marseille to the ghetto of Washington, the fact is that the sensation of exclusion and marginality weighs too heavily on the lifestyle of the inhabitants of the French quartiers.

Today, for example, based on the glocalisation logic, it is useful to investigate how young people aspiring to become recognised rappers in working-class French *cités/ banlieues*, or Brazilian favelas, or South African shanty towns, or Italian social housing neighbourhoods integrate the cultural references

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spreading over the internet (e.g., gangsta rap music, narco and drug movies and series) in their cultural productions? Does filling up youngsters' minds with these cultural references influence the community's perception about rising criminality in daily life?—of course, glocalisation is not only about criminal behaviour, there are also numerous examples around the world of cultural resistance and improved living situations in troubled communities through art and music (Mansilla, 2017).

Internet and new communication technologies, thanks to their low-cost contributory nature and their immediate transmission functionality, favour the emergence of new forms of decentralised organisation. This is the case with youth street groups or "gangs". The video-sharing websites' digital environment and hyperlinks[18] structure allows users to reproduce information at almost zero cost; individuals move more quickly and directly from one information node to another, new hybrid (physical/digital) communities emerge, and individual and collective identities become more complex. The digital age, especially online video, therefore, offers us a "cognitive journey", as Zreik (2012: 16) asserts, "unprecedented in our history as a human species". This acceleration in the transmission of information is one of the attributes of electronic communication; Bimber (2003) calls this flow of information "accelerated pluralism". A question arises at this point: which are the intersections between these youth glocalisation practices and local community life?

An important challenge in the glocalisation era is misinformation and manipulation of young people's perception about society. The omnipresence of information and the immediacy of the event provided by the Internet and the ICTs give a perception of total knowledge of reality. Media information, and information in general, strengthens identity from the fragmentation (labels) and assimilation (replication) of social realities. Thus, the different social groups are represented (mediatised) from labels that facilitate a simplified reading of their realities—against a complex dimension, closer to their realities and their socio-cultural structures. Today, Labels or social codes transmitted using ICTs is a way—albeit not the only—of guaranteeing the self-legitimation of a functional socio-economic model (capitalist-consumerist) in the interests of the producers of this "mediatised reality" (oligopoly markets, *e.g.*, Amazon, Uber, Google, Facebook). Sometimes youth street groups (gangs) choose social resistance against mediatised realities, in order to create new ways of community, close to their needs, dreams, identities.

18 Link associated with an element of a hypertext document, which points to another textual or multimedia element.

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The consolidation of a youth street group is therefore a phenomenon that goes hand in hand with the dissemination of practices of cultural resistance against—or as an alternative—to dominant moral communities[19] (such as the educational system, the labour market, the police, other gang, or the government in power). It is through the recognition of the advantages that you (as a gang member) receive from sharing a common vision of the world (*i.e.*, desires, fears, habits) with other gang members, that you accept to bear certain burdens or obligations that are necessary to the production and transmission of information from this community support network. However, the distribution of these advantages and obligations does not respond to a logic of equitable distribution among the youth street group, but it is based on a complex system of assignments based on community values in constant readjustment, in relation to the flows of information from surrounding moral communities—not only in a local dimension, but also in a global realm, particularly thanks to the internet. The constant interaction with surrounding communities, the individual expectations and values, and different degrees of community affiliation, produce new information flows and transform (eventually) the youth street group's activities—and consequently the nature of this moral community. The forms and fields of expression of these new youth street group activities are multiple (*e.g.*, young squatters, young traceurs, drug traffickers, hooligans, street artists, videographers, rappers), but their raison d'être remains the same: exist as an alternative to other dominant moral communities in the city, either by reinforcing the group's values or by changing the form of theirs practices and the use of available resources.

7 Conclusion

LaFab and San Siro are two marginal neighbourhoods, marked on the one hand by similar dynamics (immigration, poverty, drug trafficking), in which, however, there is no complete lack of institutional presence or social projects. There, a significant number of young people developed different strategies to cope with their marginalisation, also through music and other leisure activities. Along different forms of segregation and different levels of degradation—which responds to the legal and material history of each city and its housing policies—the practices and spaces of resistance take different forms in LaFab and San Siro. In the former, the dynamic of polarisation that crosses

19 "Moral community" (Ragin & Becker, 1992, p. 143) is used to explain the logic of identity that shapes cultural practices among different groups of people.

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the youth and the neighbourhood itself opposes, on one hand, the state with its financed NGOs, and on the other, the illegal drug-trafficking networks. Autonomous spaces, spaces for creativity, spaces for narration, spaces for resistance or autonomy, are often under the shadow of omnipresent subsidy policies (through government-funded NGOs), confusing these disruptive practices with clientelist justifications, commercial, or capitalist social entrepreneurship. In the latter, it is precisely this space between the State/institutions and illegal drug trafficking that occupies the scene, both in political terms (through local inhabitants' initiatives and their grass roots organisations), and through the young rappers who narrate the neighbourhood with its contradictions and opportunities.

In the case of Marseille, young people's life trajectories sometimes reflect forms of resistance and resilience, moving between self-managed practices (music, sports, illicit drug-trafficking networks) and spaces supervised by adults (school, temporary jobs, professional training). Despite their neighbourhood-centred practices, the emotions and desires that build their strategies are shaped by global imaginaries.

Similarly, in Milan youngsters' life trajectories sometimes reflect forms of resistance and resilience. Referring to same expressive language, but approaching it through different perspectives, both Mohammed and the "top rappers" have promoted a suburban aesthetic that has taken root inside and outside the neighbourhood, overturning its stigma, breaking the spatial segregation they experience, and offering their peers a "magic" path to realisation, *i.e.*, achievable only at a symbolical level (Hebdige, 1979).[20]

These collective dynamics of LaFab's and San Siro's young people are the result of cultural/imaginary references transmitted globally (thanks to the internet and the massive use of connected telephones) and reappropriated locally. This movement between exported and imported cultural references, and how each one (retro)feeds on its counterpart created in different cultural/geographical spaces, is not new.[21] Nowadays, using the internet and the networks of cultural exchanges could be also dematerialised, creating

20 It should be noted that this path appears to be already saturated today.

21 For example, between the 70s and 80s, a youth audience spread throughout the Midwest (Chicago, Detroit), migrating from disco to Italo-disco and then to new-wave music. "It may seem strange that African American teenagers in Detroit have heard soul and the angular, almost robotic disco coming from Europe; the European groups they idolized were themselves reflections of American music" (Sicko, 2019). At that time, Detroit was a carrefour where real ties between people were established, carried through the music. This exchange of musical ideas, crossing the Atlantic in both directions, between the United States and Europe, has happened since the 50s. It is a (non-linear) process by which music passes from

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hybrid public spaces—blending face-to-face and digital interactions—where new forms and contents circulate.

LaFab and San Siro refer to a common phenomenon of marginalisation of groups of young social actors, which in some respects intensifies their sense of belonging, which also passes through glocal imaginaries. The Internet and the ICT allow the consolidation of hybrid moral communities (acting on physical and digital realms) of double action, local and global (glocalisation), which favours the construction of transnational networks of collective identity, both, of common sense and individual expectations. At this point, one question that could guide future research on the collective practices of young people living in low-income neighbourhoods of contemporary cities: are the moral communities of young people from these neighbourhoods a vehicle for a global discourse of resistance against stigmatisation? Or are they expanding a market of advertising and consumer values (and incidentally a global hegemonic system) to the last corner of each of their communities? Certainly, further research along this direction of analysis may provide even more in-depth answers. Currently, our response lies on a continuum of possibilities between these two trends.

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one culture to another and is copied in both senses. With the arrival of the Internet, these carrefours of cultural references become hybrids, between urban and digital spaces.

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