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Visualizing conviviality in the fortress of the Italian far-right: the case of Veronetta

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ABSTRACT

In Italy, the city of Verona is known not merely for its stunning historical scenery, but also for its reactionary environment foreshadowing the nativist turn in the wider society. Against this backdrop, the racialized neighborhood of Veronetta offers much needed insights into convivial practices with pluralist interconnections. Part of a three-year fieldwork, this research investigates possibilities of everyday conviviality and intercultural sociability in urban spaces, tracing those dynamics that allow a racialized neighborhood to strive in a hostile city. Alongside participant observation, in-depth interviews, and archival research, the visual method of photo-elicitation is utilized to draw out multidimensional aspects of conviviality, where migrant and non-migrant residents photographically narrate their everyday practices. The article argues that the juxtaposition of intentional urban encounters and accessible public spaces, alongside everyday community-building practices of grassroots actors complement each other in transforming a “no-go zone” into an anti-racist movement space that challenges exclusionary territorial identities.

KEYWORDS Racialized space; nativism; conviviality; sociability; anti-racist grassroots activism

(Figure 1) Nativist sentiments and territorial belongings are steadily on the rise in the last decade in different contexts (Duyvendak, Kesic, and Stacey 2022; Hochschild 2016; Valluvan 2019) with the normalization of far-right discourses in mainstream politics (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; Wodak 2020). A striking manifestation of this political trend has been a statement made in April 2023 by the newly elected Italian Agriculture Minister from the far-right *Fratelli d'Italia* party that has won a landslide victory in alliance with the populist right Lega in 2022, claiming that Italians faced the threat of “ethnic replacement”.¹ These developments have taken place in Italy alongside the enduring failure to produce concrete multicultural policies for incoming waves of migration, contrary to other European counterparts (Allievi 2010), where a monocultural national identity is still taken as the



Figure 1. An anti-racist banner hanging from a balcony in the neighborhood of Veronetta (Facebook post of Veronetta 129, 20 March 2019).

norm and social inclusion left primarily to local and non-governmental actors (Mascitelli and De Lazzari 2016). The surge of ethnonationalism and the nativist logic have been foreshadowed in privileged observatories of the far-right at the local and regional levels, such as the city of Verona offering a model for transnational identitarian actors (Demirsu 2023), where local groups wage “ethnic resistance” against multiculturalism in tandem with discriminatory local policies.

The mid-sized city of Verona in the northeastern region of Veneto has been admired worldwide as the romantic setting of “Romeo and Juliet”, boasting its long and rich history perfectly preserved since Roman times. Against this scenic background attracting thousands of tourists year-round, the city is marked by a less visible albeit deep-rooted nativist and reactionary socio-political environment, premised on the imagined territorial belonging

of a Padania northern identity (Agnew and Brusa 1999; Merrill 2014) that draws far-right groups in its orbit with its claims to whiteness and Christian traditionalism. Verona has thus proved to be a conducive ground for cultivating anti-immigrant sentiments capitalized on by successive city administrations (Del Medico 2004), as the city became the migration capital in the region of Veneto.² Coming to be referred to as a “laboratory of intolerance” (Antonini 2018), where clear boundaries of belonging are visible in everyday urban life, an exclusionary territorial belonging negates not only ethnic and religious minorities, but also sexual minorities and other locals who do not fit into the ideal Veronese identity.

This is until one crosses the bridge and wanders into the streets of *Veronetta*, a neighborhood adjacent to and partly overlapping with the historical center, separated from the main *piazze* by the River Adige. This “multiethnic” quarter is associated with urban marginality (Wacquant 2016) from an outside gaze, due to the presence of “undesired” migrants, “dishonored” minorities, and the working-class. Despite being physically and culturally a continuation of the historical center, the neighborhood has been perceived as “a container of subjects alien to the city” (Di Nicola 2018), and a “periphery” par excellence due to the high visibility of unwanted difference in the proximity of the touristic center (De Vita and de Cordova 2018). Yet, on a closer look one can observe in Veronetta a contending representation of the city that breathes a cosmopolitan air, composed of colors, sounds, and sights that contrasts the monochrome representations of local culture predominant in the touristic center. The neighborhood articulates a different way of belonging to the city, co-created by migrants, non-migrants and other minority groups, fostering possibilities of an alternative *modus vivendi* that are sustained by grassroots actors who play a central role in the everyday life. In this regard, the neighborhood poses itself as an “island of hope”, where “convivial existence bridges divisions and exclusions” (Back 2021, 16).

This article positions itself at the intersection of nativist territorialities, everyday practices of sociability, and anti-racist grassroots initiatives in rewriting possibilities of conviviality in cityscape. At a critical historical moment in which we observe the global rise of the nativist logic accentuating “territorialized” conceptualizations of identity characterized by a hierarchical separation of natives and migrants (Duyvendak, Kesic, and Stacey 2022), nationalist concerns over “non-belonging” subjects come to the forefront, often in the form of “race-coded anxieties” (Valluvan 2019, 2). Furthermore, such concerns are directed at “unwanted” multiculturalism as the principal culprit of social conflict in western society (Duyvendak, Kesic, and Stacey 2022; Valluvan 2019). Succinctly asserted by a Veronese far-right representative in 2017: “We have to take it to the streets ... to invert the course of our identitarian cancelation that is the offspring to 20 years of multicultural

political correctness”.³ It is at this juncture that the need to evaluate repercussions of populist and anti-immigrant sentiments for urban diversity and conviviality has been brought to attention in urban scholarship (Bodden 2022; Carta 2022; Erel 2011; Gawlewicz 2022; Gawlewicz and Yiftachel 2022; Krifors 2022), whether it is directed at racialized groups (Crețan and O’Brien 2019), immigrants (Papatzani 2021), or other marginalized subjectivities (Saitta 2022) who are perceived as threats to co-existence and public order (Gattinara 2019). As put by Gawlewicz and Yiftachel (2022): “[W]e call for recognizing neo-nationalism as a key driving force in the emergence of urban hostile environments. This factor has been largely ignored in urban studies literature” (2022, 351). Hence, the study positions itself in this burgeoning literature by focusing on the prospects of everyday conviviality and the construction of an anti-racist movement space in an unlikely nativist context. In investigating convivial practices, I follow the suggestion of Wise and Noble in asking not only what people do when they “draw lines of racial exclusion”, but “what it is people do when they build connections” (2016, 426).

There is a rich variety of theoretical lenses and methodological approaches utilized to study everyday multiculturalism and practices of conviviality in multiethnic or racialized neighborhoods (Arredondo and Bustamante 2022; Blokland and van Eijk 2010; Çağlar and Glück-Schiller 2018; Harris 2009; Karner and Parker 2011; Kesten et al. 2011; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Robertson and Colic-Peisker 2015; Romania and Zamperini 2009; Zukin, Kasinitz, and Chen 2016), with works on the everydayness of multiculturalism (Amin 2002; Hall 2021; Neal et al. 2019; Wise 2010), conviviality (Gilroy 2004; Krifors 2022; Neal et al. 2019; Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021; Samanani 2023; Wise and Noble 2016), racialization and belonging (Chamberlain 2022; Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg 2022; Erel 2011), as well as good practices in “laboratories” of multiculturalism (Back 2021; Bodden 2022; Wilson 2015). This study aims to contribute to this growing field with its focus on possibilities of conviviality and bottom-up practices of belonging, where everyday multiculturalism is transformed into intercultural exchange by the efforts of grassroots actors as an anti-racist practice in hostile cities. It differs from previous works in that it does not trace exclusionary practices in reactionary settings, nor conviviality in cosmopolitan settings, but instead potentialities of convivial relations in a highly nativist context renowned as the fortress of the far-right in Italian society. It is argued that the juxtaposition of multiple actors from different walks of life willing to participate in intercultural encounters, situated alongside accessible social spaces where community relations are nourished by grassroots actors, work in tandem to defy larger constructions of defensive localism.

Ethnographic research and visual methods

The article employs a multidimensional approach to unearth the nexus of belonging and cityspace from the point of view of residents from various backgrounds. Here, methodological nationalism is avoided by granting residents of different ethnic, racial, or religious origins the same social agency (Çağlar and Glück-Schiller 2018). In the “multi-authored communicative space” (Pauwels 2016, 1325) of the city, the narration of places and flows are substantially deepened by a visual depiction giving way to hitherto unforeseen aspects in traditional interviews. These images tell us about the relations between human beings as protagonists of the landscape and the context which they refer to, and have been found particularly conducive in the study of social inclusion (van der Does et al. 1992). Thus, the option of “stimulating the field to produce its own imagery” (Pauwels 2015, 95) has been utilized, whereby respondents were asked to generate images based on what makes them feel at home and what makes them feel uncomfortable/uneasy in urban life, which were then explored further verbally through in-depth interviews. Today, the method of photo-voice has been increasingly utilized to study multicultural contexts, investigating youth perceptions of multiculturalism (Johansen and Le 2014), older people’s perceptions of urban social inclusion (Ronzi et al. 2016), and lived realities of migrant women (Sutherland and Cheng 2009). As suggested by Frisina (2016), visual qualitative methods allow us to go beyond dominant representations of “otherness” by recognizing the plurality of gazes, and by providing the chance of self-representation to marginalized groups. It is for this reason that the incorporation of visuality from the point of view of the respondents has been essential in reading a racialized social space such as Veronetta located in a larger nativist context, seen from an outside gaze as a place of “urban decay” yet from the inside as an alternative space offering convivial ties and sociality. In fact, it has been primarily through the narration of respondent-generated images that have elicited the role played by “vernacular landscapes” (Krase 2009) of conviviality through material realities and intentional urban encounters, pointing out how space impacts social relations.

That being said, the article is premised on a larger 3-year ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Verona from 2018 until 2021 with my particular positionality as a Turkish migrant woman living in this city. It investigates those everyday dynamics that makes it possible for a cosmopolitan conviviality to flourish in such an inhospitable terrain, through the perceptions of its old and new inhabitants along the space/identity axis, who (re)write shared social spaces with their own experiences, encounters, and rituals. The wider doctoral program that this research was part of did not foresee the approval of a separate ethics committee; however, every phase of the research was closely scrutinized by the Board of the Social Sciences PhD Program at

University of Padova. Permission was granted by the Board members to enter the field and conduct interviews initiated with informed consent on the use and preservation of the data, including the scientific use of visual materials generated by the participants. As a result, the research is grounded in a novel multisensorial approach composed of (1) participant observation in various organizations, collectives, and hangout places in Veronetta, both (2) in-depth interviews (with 22 respondents) and (3) participant generated photo-elicitation interviews (with 14 participants, generating in total 185 images) of inhabitants from different backgrounds with respect to gender, age, place of origin, and citizenship status in line with ethical standards. These include Italians originally from Verona, long-term migrants, and newly arriving refugees, with ages varying from late 20s until late 60s, who have all been provided an informed consent. Lastly, the study has also included (4) archival research of official documents, local news, and movement archives, thereby building up a multidimensional account of the spatio-temporal experiences of respondents in which they visually express aspects of everyday life (Guillemin and Drew 2010). Hence, the intertextual reading of narrative and visual accounts is substantiated through a triangulation of additional qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations, and archival data. This corpus of data has been analyzed through *thematic coding* (Flick 2009) with the help of the qualitative research software ATLAS.ti.

Social space, conviviality, and place-based belongings

This study borrows from Massey's (2005) conceptualization of space, as an artefact of social relations and a sphere of "coexisting heterogeneity" allowing multiple modes of existence and a multitude of identities contemporaneously. In light of this conceptualization, the case of Veronetta is considered as a social space that not only accommodates plurality of actors conveying different stories of the place they live in, but also plays a role in the construction of belonging shaped by social ties. The spatial dimension in the construction of identity can be understood as a mutually constitutive process, wherein individuals shape the identity of the place they inhabit and in turn are characterized by this very socio-spatial entity (Massey 1994).

The enactment of place-based identities through "powerful local territorial mechanisms" is visible in the modern city, most notably so in urban neighborhoods that are often segregated along race, ethnicity, class, and religion (Soja 1971, 36). Within the city space, some neighborhoods are marked conceptually as well as physically different than others, functioning as borders or boundaries (Brighenti 2014). In this process, some come to be stigmatized as "no-go" zones, associated with various social problems, inhabited by "undesired" migrants, "dishonored" minorities, and working-class families (Wacquant 2016). What is sociologically interesting is to trace potentials for

“sociability” (Çağlar and Glück-Schiller 2018) in these marginalized spaces, where different social actors find meaning in partaking in everyday life.

This move is indispensable in unsettling essentialist claims to authenticity that work to exclude certain groups while prioritizing others, as stable coherent identities are uprooted by the time–space compression of globalization (Hiebert, Rat, and Vertovec 2015; Massey 1994). It has been noted that global dynamics of migration and human displacement often intersect with processes of urban marginalization (Hall 2021). Yet, concurrently it is in urban peripheries where placemaking practices from the margins take place (*Ibid.*). In neighborhoods that receive a substantial number of newcomers, both the local and the migrant cultures transform overtime in cityspace, as they interact with each other and acquire the chance to master the art of coexistence, equipped with a set of values, attitudes, and skills (Samers and Collyer 2017). These include traits such as openness to difference, recognition of the human condition of growing interconnectedness, a “toolkit” of adaptation to diverse cultural settings that are matured through transnational experiences and contacts (Vertovec 2009). Also named as “cosmopolitan competence” (Wessendorf 2019), these skills are not necessarily acquired with the experience of migration *per se*, but through sustained contact with difference among migrants and non-migrants.

It is from these theoretical pillars of space and spatial relations that everyday acts of conviviality are analyzed, as situated forms of togetherness that encompasses a process of belonging through “embodied, affective, and sensory dimensions of lived difference” (Wise and Noble 2016, 427). Meaning attributed to space and a sense of identity derived from it is negotiated through everyday encounters, in “embodied practices of local interaction, and the imaginaries of local space” (Robertson and Colic-Peisker 2015, 72). As a result, both material spaces as well as situated social relations epitomize everyday multiculturalism (Wise and Noble 2016), where negotiations and transformations of bounded identities take place (Samanani 2023) even in the most unlikely hostile setting. Drawing on the vast literature on conviviality, Samanani (2023) argues that convivial relations in urban spaces harbor emancipatory potentials for their power of imagining situated belongings that challenge the racist logic, where difference is not antagonized. While it has been suggested that not all encounters with diversity promote a cosmopolitan understanding of conviviality (Erel 2011; Plage et al. 2016), an ethics of “giving” inherent in the host/guest dichotomy needs to be replaced by an ethics of “sharing” to establish horizontal ties (Plage et al. 2016).

Hence, a convivial space (Gilroy 2004) is necessarily inhabited by individuals that uphold porous and flexible identities going through lively daily encounters without a sense of anxiety for difference, manifested in everyday emancipatory practices (Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021). An everyday approach to multiculturalism (Semi et al. 2009; Wise 2010) premised on situated

practices and experiences can concomitantly unpack everyday resistance against the taken-for-grantedness of seemingly natural representations, creatively offering pluralistic explanations of the social reality (Semi et al. 2009, 71). Such resistance inevitably includes everyday forms of anti-racism in city life, as social actors continue to struggle against subtler forms of racial discrimination (Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg 2022), towards imaginaries of “alternative societies beyond racism” (Krifors 2022, 73). In this way, everyday city life can also help foster mobilization around a pluralist identity and conviviality as opposed to exclusionary territorial identities (Nicholls 2008). As has been pointed out by Krifors, there is a growing scholarship on conviviality with a spatial focus of smaller suburban cities or towns where “shared everyday activities” and “neighborliness” can generate attachment to “local places of diversity” (2022, 77). It is in this respect that the research concurs with the suggestion of Wise and Noble in stressing that “conviviality is just as much a legitimate research object as the reproduction of racism” (2016, 425).

In the social life of the city, certain movements can come to be associated with a specific urban area or neighborhood, or vice versa, in which a neighborhood can function as the locus of collective action and/or organizational practices, where simply partaking in everyday cultural activities can constitute a form of activism (Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, and Haritaworn 2019; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Melucci 1984). Particularly for those groups who experience a sense of “not belonging” to the nation, the family, or the local community, the socio-political setting of the city allows them to reinscribe urban spaces as a strategy of “transformative placemaking”, defined through “everyday acts of conviviality and community building”. (Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, and Haritaworn 2019, 168) European cities, in particular, possess the potentials of “nonconforming elements and counter-discourses” (Dines 2021, 2), where bottom-up dynamics of conviviality can be found at the margins of city life even in the most exclusionary settings. It is at this intersection that in interpreting conviviality as radical and connective community practices in urban space (Neal et al. 2019), the article seeks to draw attention not only to intercultural forms of urban encounter, but also to bottom-up community practices that challenge fixed categories of belonging. In other words, the research demonstrates how both fleeting urban encounters (Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021; Robertson and Colic-Peisker 2015; Samanani 2023) in cityspace as well as “spaces of connective social life” (Neal et al. 2019) realized by social actors contribute to sustaining intercultural conviviality in the everyday. These intertwined mechanisms offer alternatives to exclusionary belongings, where local grassroots initiatives play a fundamental role in cultivating everyday practices of sociability in a highly racialized neighborhood.

The hostile setting of Verona and the racialized neighborhood of Veronetta

In the Italian society, the mid-sized city of Verona in the region of Veneto has been in the forefront as the fortress of far-right in all its shades (Demirsu 2023), which has become institutionalized through its alliance with the populist right in the city administration. This is partly owing to the historical centrality of the city during the Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, 1943–1945), and partly due to a modern reinterpretation of an exclusionary territorial identity by a multiplicity of far-right and nativist actors (Del Medico 2004; Tutino and Verza 2013). Such stance has been exemplified by proposals in the city council to “segregate” entrances in public transportation between autochthons and “*extracomunitari*” (non-European migrants)⁴, to reactionary protests against migrant reception centers under the banner “Verona ai Veronesi” (Verona to the Veronesi)⁵, reaching the extremes of a black mannequin being hanged from the local football stadium by two fans dressed in the typical Ku Klux Klan outfit.⁶ The recent success of far-right discourses in the Italian peninsula has been characterized by some experts as the “Veronification” of Italian politics (Torrise 2019). As described by a leading local activist, such “identity” (Massey 1994) of the city has manifested itself in everyday life:

People who are considered different for some reason are subjected to marginalization and intolerance, whether they are immigrants, homosexuals, democrats, young individuals with a left orientation etc., in which the aim is to create a model city that is safe, clean, and as white as possible in every sense of the term.⁷

It is at this juncture that the neighborhood of Veronetta comes to the fore as a social space cultivating possibilities of everyday conviviality among different social actors. The neighborhood is a continuation of the historical center rather than being merely adjacent to it. Historically characterized as a working-class area with low housing prices, since the 90s Veronetta became a locus of migration, eventually perceived by the locals as urban decay and insecurity, notwithstanding the fact that statistical levels of crime do not significantly deviate from other urban areas of Verona (De Cordova and De Vita 2013). The ethnicity and religious profile of newcomers in the neighborhood has remained variegated, with a high presence observed among residents arriving from Romania, Sri Lanka, Moldova, Morocco, Nigeria, Albania, China, and Ghana (Ibid.).

Given its mixed demographic make-up, newcomers and their offspring are still not recognized by a part of the elder white population as fellow “Veronesi”. As put by an elderly inhabitant having an informal conversation with me in a community garden of Veronetta: “These black boys playing in the garden, some of them speak the local Veronese dialect. But does that make

them Veronese? Of course not" (Fieldnotes, 16 May 2019). This comment demonstrates the rigid boundaries of belonging, where racial difference trumps linguistic sameness in the use of the local dialect, epitomizing how the "face of the nation" is reproduced from below (Antonsich, 2018). Over time, the neighborhood has been perceived as a "racialized space" (Lipsitz 2011) and derogatively referred to as "*Negronetta*". The neighborhood came to be codified as a "no-go zone" (Wacquant 2016) in the cognitive map of Veronesi in the 90s and early 2000s, as it was associated with unesthetic urban scenery, unwanted newcomers, and criminality: "Veronetta was known as the Bronx of Verona. It was a difficult neighborhood, very difficult" (Photo-elicitation interview with F.S., 27 May 2019).

A parallel yet by and large unexplored reality in the neighborhood has been the high intensity of grass-roots activism of a network of local associations and collectives that contribute to the social life of the area. These actors have gradually chosen to settle in Veronetta, due to the relative low rent and centrality, alongside the onset of mutual tolerance set down by different migrant communities. Today, this informal network has come to be an indispensable feature of the neighborhood, seeking to cultivate conviviality and everyday anti-racist resistance. In promoting practices of community-building embedded in a pluralist environment (Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, and Haritaworn 2019; Neal et al. 2019; Nicholls 2008), these local groups bring together inhabitants of various backgrounds, generations, and gender identities in ritualized face-to-face encounters as "neighbors" (Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021; Samers and Collyer 2017):

It offers more opportunity or willingness for an alternative identity, that's what many people come to look for in Veronetta. It's an enclave where things go a bit differently than the rest of the city. There is a sociality that highlights multiculturalism. (In-depth Interview with E.N., 9 April 2019)

However, the growing visibility of an intercultural urban space at the close vicinity of the historical center led to an attempt of re-territorializing (Brighenti 2014; Soja 1971) by prominent far-right groups under the slogan of "ethnic resistance" to reinstate a white Veronese identity.

The making of a convivial space in an unlikely terrain

Traces of sociability in everyday encounters

In Veronetta, the sources of "sociability" (Çağlar and Glück-Schiller 2018) are deeply ingrained in everyday urban encounters and a mutual recognition of the need to sustain contact between migrant and non-migrant residents (Vertovec 2009; Wessendorf 2019). Despite the unease caused by the superimposition of elder local population and migrant newcomers, over time everyday convivial practices started to characterize this urban space and the social

relations it authors (Back 2021; Wise and Noble 2016). These everyday practices of *modus vivendi* involve an outward-looking worldview, a curiosity for difference, and a willingness to interconnect (Samers and Collyer 2017; Semi et al. 2009), differentiating Veronetta from the wider context of nativist localism it is positioned in. One notable venue promoting everyday intercultural exchanges among the residents is intentionally sustained urban encounters of economic exchanges (Hiebert, Rat, and Vertovec 2015; Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021; Robertson and Colic-Peisker 2015; Samanani 2023) in migrant-owned international stores that characterize its main street:

This is the main street *via XX Settembre*. The blending, the hybridization ... For me, the fact that such [international] stores exist is absolutely a positive thing in itself. There are some criticisms that usually such stores are dedicated to a particular ethnicity. I go there, I enter, and I buy things that I don't even know how to eat or cook. With my own actions, I want to render such types of commerce available also to Veronesi like myself. When I go there, of course they are very kind. They explain to me "maybe this is a bit too spicy", and for me it is a kind of challenge. So, I have to try it! (Photo-voice interview with M.S., 8 June 2019)

Figure 2 above allows us to visualize Veronetta through the eyes of M.S., a middle-aged Veronese, whose motivation for frequenting the neighborhood is possibilities of everyday intercultural exchange in a city antagonizing traces of diversity. As such, there is a demand to transform the notion that city life is composed of "little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate" (Park and



Figure 2. Migrant-owned international store on via XX Settembre (photo by M.S.).

Burgess [1925] 1967, 40), that does not simply equate to “banal cosmopolitanism” through consumption which often works to validate racial or ethnic differences (Erel 2011; Plage et al. 2016). On the contrary, the accounts of the respondents attest to a genuine interest in intensifying everyday exchanges (Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021) not only between migrant and non-migrant residents, but also among non-migrant residents from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. A positive visual observation in this direction is noted by I.S., mesmerized by the vivid colors of African fabric she saw at an Asian store which she believes is a way of bringing customers from different backgrounds into contact with new cultures in the everydayness:

Previously, I saw that every store had products from their own country. Instead, now in the same store you find African, oriental, Latin American products ... It's a means of socializing I think, where people enter, and they talk to one another, (Photovoice interview with I.S., 7 June 2019)

Likewise, another Veronese participant recounting the exchange of jokes she enjoys making with a Sri Lankan shop owner she regularly goes to shop from as a “form of interaction” (Photovoice interview E.S., 28 May 2019) which is vital especially for the elderly, illustrating how everyday routinized contact can transform a cityspace over time, from a perception of “no-go” zone to a locus of conviviality through embodied, affective and sensory dimensions of togetherness (Wise and Noble 2016). These accounts from middle-aged local residents attest to the presence of “diversity seekers” (Blokland and van Eijk 2010) in the neighborhood, as a visible characteristic of Veronetta, that go beyond a mere “indifference” approach to multiculturalism (Van Leeuwen 2010), but rather manifest itself in a curiosity for diversity in a city where homogeneity through northern whiteness has been reified.

Urban materiality of conviviality

Particularly in the visual accounts, such sociability nurturing feelings of attachment to the neighborhood are also attributed to the material dimension of urban space (Neal et al. 2019; Wise and Noble 2016) in cultivating sustained intercultural exchange, thereby encouraging a sense of belonging. Hence, a key ingredient of everyday conviviality is the presence of open and accessible spaces of “connective social life” (Neal et al. 2019), that breaks the dichotomous construction of “host/guest” positioning between migrants and non-migrants in favor of horizontal ties (Erel 2011; Plage et al. 2016). M.G. originating from Eastern Europe visually describes in Figure 3 how the physical open space of the typical courtyard in the architectural style found in Veronetta makes her feel at home through sustained contact with her neighbors from various ethnic and religious backgrounds in an inclusive physical setting, rekindling childhood memories. Here, the



Figure 3. Neighbors' windows in a typical courtyard in Veronetta (photo by M.G.).

materiality serves a double function, namely representing social connection and stimulating feelings of homeliness (Brzozowska and Postuła 2022):

This photo makes me feel at home because even if I see the other window from a distance, there is an exchange of glances. Even if they are strangers, I trust them, I leave my window open and so do they. There is no fear, no closure, no embarrassment. We used to go downstairs to play with the neighbor's kids in the courtyard. So, there was this big green space in which you could meet with kids from other apartments ... Hence for me, here is an idea of home understood as a mutual acquaintance. For me home needs to be something open, it shouldn't be a fortress where you close yourself in. It should be in communication with others. (Photovoice interview with M.G. 25 April 2019)

The image portrays openness to the "other" that is not only figurative but also taken literally, as exemplified in the visual representation of M.G.'s understanding of neighborly relations and the role played by open urban materialities for convivial ties. Social ties sustained in everyday public spaces are valorized by the inhabitants, contrary to the anonymity and homogeneity

marking the touristic center: “When you have a public space, you can experiment ways of being together, of connecting with the neighborhood itself. It becomes a laboratory where you can build a community with its own rules” (In-depth interview with B.M., 8 October 2021). Shared open spaces that are rendered accessible and welcoming to individuals from different backgrounds partaking in the daily life of the neighborhood, therefore, offer sources of sociability and conviviality.

Operating beyond the logic of profit, these public areas do not only include communal parks, squares, or courtyards, but as one of the most visible characteristics of Veronetta, it also involves progressive spaces managed by local collectives. The sports camp in Figure 4 run by volunteers is a lucid example of this phenomenon, reflecting the convivial potential of Veronetta in challenging the racist logic from below. Explained by M.R., a refugee from West Africa living in Verona, this space not only provides a context of everyday sociality among migrants and non-migrants (Semi et al. 2009; Wessendorf 2019), but it also sparks a situated sense of belonging through every placemaking practices from the margins (Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, and Haritaworn 2019; Hall 2021):

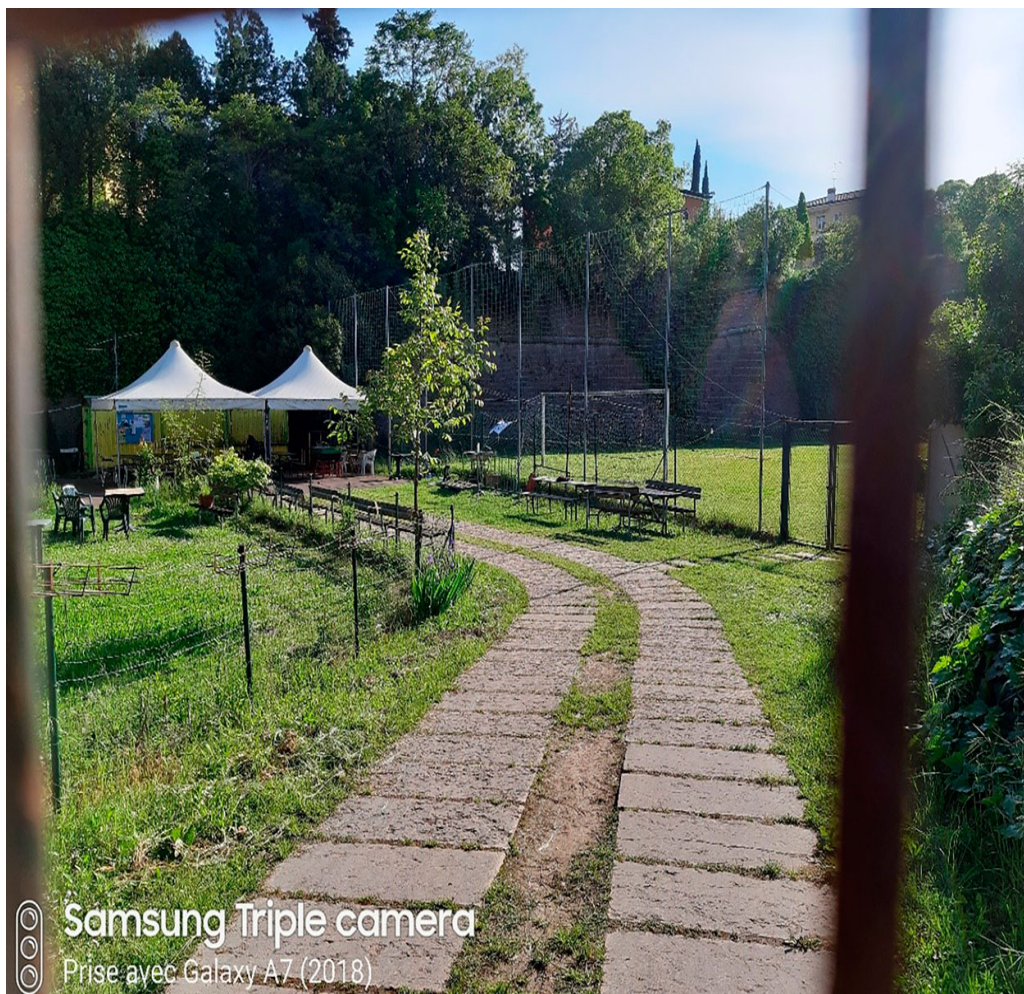


Figure 4. Sports Camp outside the city walls run by volunteers (photo by M.R.).

I went to work in Africa, before coming back home I would buy cookies and candies, I would take them to the kids. So, when they saw me, all of them would come running to me [laughter]. (Photovoice interview with M.R., 13 May 2019)

In short, accessible material realities shaping the “imaginaries of local space” (Robertson and Colic-Peisker 2015) in Veronetta help nourish the set of “cosmopolitan competence” (Wessendorf 2019) necessary for a space of conviviality, against localist closure.

Everyday as anti-racist movement space

As mentioned earlier, local grassroots initiatives and social collectives that operate in Veronetta have gradually become an inextricable part of the neighborhood, promoting an anti-racist everyday space that defies exclusionary territorial identities (Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg 2022; Krifors 2022; Samanani 2023). This informal network in transforming everyday multiculturalism in intercultural community practices, seeks to establish an anti-racist space of conviviality in Verona. This endeavor was underlined by a local activist in a community meeting of Veronetta: “Here we have a myriad of associations, informal groups, and local initiatives that are involved in social inclusion and solidarity” (Fieldnotes, neighborhood community meeting, 10 December 2018).

This process does not involve a simplistic and unidirectional “integration” project, but a socio-cultural cross-pollination that gives way to a new social space, that is co-written by migrant and non-migrant individuals alike, around an ethics of “sharing” and not “giving” (Plage et al. 2016): “We are the people who come from all around the world, from other Italian cities to study here, a complexity a multiplicity that doesn’t talk about integration, but talks about interaction, cooperation, relations, and mutualism” (Fieldnotes, demonstration against far-right presence in Veronetta, 22 December 2018). Hence, bottom-up dynamics of conviviality are sought through counter-discourses (Dines 2021) and alternative readings of the “Veronesi” identity, based on a fluid and porous belonging that bridges social divisions (Back 2021; Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021). This dynamic is clearly captured in the visual narration of a refugee gathering in the same sports camp described by a Veronese volunteer (Figure 5):

When they come here and see our friends with little kids, they don’t wanna leave them alone. There is a willingness and need to spend time with little ones. And the kids here live in a provincial area of Verona, where normally at school their classmates would yell “he is black!” when they see an African. But this boy will never do so. It’s surely an education for them as well. (Photovoice interview S.P., 10 June 2019)



Figure 5. Gathering at a local collective (photo by S.P.).

For newcomers, taking part in the sociocultural life of the network of associations can mean forging new friendships and becoming part of community relations (Melucci 1984; Nicholls 2008). Such blossoming of new connections inevitably impacts the lived space, and assign substance to situated togetherness beyond co-existence (Semi et al. 2009; Wise and Noble 2016). The visual account of a south Asian graduate student in Figure 6 testifies to these everyday dynamics, where she elaborates her experience in the activities of a neighborhood initiative called *Social Street*:

A professor at my department asked me “Don’t you know about this social gathering near your home? Let’s meet one day, I will take you there”. So, she invited me one day and showed me Social Street. She introduced me to an [Italian] couple. Since they were living in the same apartment as me, I was going and talking with them regularly. I was going to their home. Before participating in the activities of this local association, I didn’t have many friends. After being introduced to this association, if I have some problems, I can talk to many many people now. (Photovoice interview with N.S., 7 June 2019)

The scene that is presented in this visual narrative depicts the centrality of social and cultural activities of these grassroots initiatives in bottom-up community building efforts among old and new inhabitants. It must be noted that Social Street also operates in a community space accessible to all that was provided to this association by the municipality. Through their initiatives, inhabitants from different backgrounds partake in the same dynamism, thereby solidifying not only conviviality, but also a sense of belonging in



Figure 6. Community potluck table at a neighborhood gathering (photo by N.S).

this alternative social space that challenges the reactionary environment present in the rest of the city. It is the richness of these sociocultural rituals, practices, and events in Veronetta that work to cultivate a sense of place (Samanani 2023; Wise and Noble 2016), fueling greater sociability and horizontal ties as an anti-racist “movement space” (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Krifors 2022; Melucci 1984). The account of a Veronese in Figure 7 who unexpectedly found himself partaking in a community event for the *International Day for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* involving painting banners with anti-racist quotes (to be hanged on private windows and balconies) captures this dynamic even further:

I was passing there by chance because I knew the organizers. I wanted to greet them and see how it was going. I really liked what was going on, I had the time, so I decided to participate. I was there for 2–3 hours painting a banner that was later hung on someone else’s balcony. It was a very beautiful day. I took this photo as a memory of the sociality of Veronetta and of how rich sociality is here. In any other neighborhood this almost never happens. (Photovoice interview with M.D., 8 June 2019)

The sustained social ties stimulated by the grassroots initiatives do not only involve the migrant and non-migrant communities, but also migrants and other minority groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. The latter has a high visibility in the neighborhood owing to the air of liberty established



Figure 7. Social event in public garden on anti-racism (photo by M.D.).

through protracted efforts to sustain a convivial culture in everyday emancipatory practices (Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021). This is once again at a stark contrast to the wider conservative Catholic outlook that characterizes much of Verona, epitomized in motions against the recognition of equal treatment for LGBTQ+ individuals⁸ and the municipality's proactive endorsement of anti-gender events on the international level, such as the World Congress of Families.⁹ The official position undertaken by successive city administrations resonate in cityspace, where everyday practices of micro-

violence against same-sex couples is normalized (Demirsu 2022). Against such backdrop, the most politically active LGBTQ+ association is located in the neighborhood Veronetta right across from a Muslim barber shop, demonstrating the cartographic dimension of conviviality made possible in this alternative movement space. With a long history of mobilization for the rights of sexual minorities in Verona, today this office functions as a pluralist space allowing sociability to flourish not only among people of different sexual orientations, but also of different ethnic and religious origins. The extract below describes an event hosted by the association in the photo taken, testifying bottom-up cosmopolitanism not only through intercultural exchange, but also mutual respect of sexual identities (Figure 8):

This was a party right before Verona Pride where lots of migrants who follow this organization, about 40 to 50 individuals, came to join. It was nice because at the beginning there were only them, migrants who played their own music and danced, there were few whites. After which, we had organized a group to play Irish punk and some more whites arrived. There was this mixture. It was nice because for me it represents Veronetta where cultures don't contrast each other, but rather balance each other, accept each other. Otherwise, if one goes away when the other arrives, there is no new construction. (Photovoice interview with O.P., 8 June 2019)



Figure 8. Party with people from different backgrounds at a local LGBT association (photo by O.P.).

Revanchist backlash

The increasingly salient practices of everyday conviviality sustained by anti-racist groups in Veronetta have put the neighborhood on the agenda of far-right movements in the last couple of years. These groups target the neighborhood and its social relations by re-positioning their offices in Veronetta to undertake what they call an “ethnic resistance”¹⁰ against migrant communities living in this area. The growing visibility of a multicultural urban space at the close vicinity of the white sanitized touristic center led to an attempt of revanchist reterritorialization of Veronetta (Smith 1996; Soja 1971). Such mission was undertaken by two prominent Italian neofascist organizations, namely *CasaPound* and *Forza Nuova*, in order to reinstate a white Christian Veronese identity once again in one of the most historic neighborhoods of the city that was now considered “racialized space” (Lipsitz 2011):

We didn’t choose Veronetta by chance. We want to dismantle the fact that any neighborhood of Verona would belong to any group in particular, or even worse any particular ethnicity. Certain ethnicities are left absolutely free to act and to break the law, which is demonstrated by the local news every day. (Interview with local representative of Forza Nuova in *Verona Daily*, 22 December 2018¹¹)

In fact, these new offices are rarely active in the everyday life of the neighborhood as can be seen in Figure 9; however, they still serve a significant symbolic function of reclaiming Veronetta as “white space” through textual graffiti and stickers with neofascist symbolism, alongside episodes of violence towards migrants and antifascist activists during night patrols they undertake. Consequently, such presence has been causing a sense of insecurity, brought up by migrant and non-migrant respondents alike, conceived as a provocation. As put by a Romanian resident living in Verona for 20 years:

[The office of Forza Nuova] is a place of discomfort, a negative change from a political perspective to have two representations of extreme right in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, they are gaining more support in Verona, and in the north in general. Pointing out migration, always putting the blame on who is different ... Obviously the fact that they opened here in a multiethnic neighborhood is a provocation, because they could’ve chosen any other neighborhood. Instead, they chose here to provoke, to create moments of conflict. (Photovoice interview with A.R., 1 June 2019)

Conclusion

It has been noted by Wise and Noble (2016) that studying conviviality in the everyday can reveal both everyday forms of racism as well as everyday forms of cosmopolitanism. Especially in a historical conjuncture where far-right and populist sentiments are ever on the rise, with concrete consequences in



Figure 9. The closed window-front of a far-right office in Veronetta (photo by A. R.).

everyday relations, finding sources of convivial sociability acquire a greater importance beyond the locality. The picture depicted here of the microcosmos of Veronetta, based on the accounts that bring together the visual narratives of situated practices, has traced those aspects that favor the realization of a convivial space amidst a larger context embedded in localist white pride and an exclusionary territorial identity. In doing so, it has treated urban inhabitants as social agents in the “localized reproduction of regional, national, and global affairs” (Krase 2009).

Undoubtedly, tension does exist in Veronetta alongside convivial relations, particularly with respect to how migrant communities are perceived by the locals and the revanchist re-territorialization attempts of far-right groups. Nonetheless, the study provides glimpses into what can be, opening a window on how conviviality is possible even in the most unlikely hostile environment with adverse conditions, not merely in terms of a formal tolerance towards one another at the level of indifference (Van Leeuwen 2010), but instead a willingness to connect and to co-create community ties through everyday relations. It is exactly these glimpses carrying possibilities of intercultural sociability in contested urban spaces that is of sociological interest, everyday acts that challenge the prevalent social closure that characterize hostile cities such as Verona and carry the potential of transforming them from within.

The research therefore presented an alternative construction of the neighborhood against the image of “racialized space” where intercultural urban encounters are sought by the local residents. Such dynamic is further reinforced by everyday acts of belonging situated in open and accessible urban materialities, meticulously fostered by progressive actors who valorize the extant setting of multicultural. In this endeavor, the role played by local grassroots initiatives has been indispensable in their transformative place-making practices that sustain curiosity and interconnectedness among diverse groups as a form of anti-racism. That is to say, it is the juxtaposition of difference with mobilization for sustained intercultural contact and openness, horizontal ties between migrant communities with locals who defy exclusionary territorial boundary-drawings, that are the main ingredients for a convivial pluralist oasis. As such, in a city notoriously renowned for its lingering loyalty to Italian fascism and Padania nativism, Veronetta presents itself in as a stimulating example of “the everyday” as an anti-racism movement space leading to a reawakening of convivial community ties, porous identities, and a bottom-up construction of a sense of place. Following a long history of populist right mayors with far-right allies, the recent victory of a leftist mayor in the city administration, thanks to his collaboration with this network of progressive actors, attests to the significance of everyday community practices and promises hope for progressive change.

Notes

1. For more information on the statement, see: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65324319>.
2. For more information, see: <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=19106>.
3. Leader of Forza Nuova quoted in the local journal Verona Sera (7 June 2017), available at: <http://www.veronasera.it/politica/striscione-forza-nuova-moschea-islam-terrore-7-giugno-2017.html>.

4. Official Proposal at the Consiglio Comunale di Verona, Pervenuto 266, 09 September 1999, *Mozione Urgente*, Verona. Translated from the original Italian text.
5. Their public social media account can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064754050909>.
6. For more information on this episode, see: https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/verona/sport/19_novembre_08/ieri-manichino-oggi-cori-23-anni-nulla-cambiato-verona-non-ha-ancora-capito-b1faf13e-01f9-11ea-9e6a-948f99bef679.shtml.
7. Open letter by Gianni Zardini from Circolo Pink, *La Cittadinanza Va Scritta: Manifestazione Nazionale per l'affermazione della piena cittadinanza degli orientamenti sessuali, delle differenze e di tutte le minoranze religiose, etniche e culturali*, 9 June 2001, Verona.
8. In 1995, Verona became the only European city to pass a motion rejecting the A3-0028/94 European Parliament resolution on the equal treatment and equal rights for individuals of different sexual orientation. For more info: https://ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/1998_equality_in_eu_english_0.pdf.
9. The official website of the event can be found at: <https://wcfverona.org/en/>.
10. For more information on the so-called “ethnic resistance in Veronetta, see: <https://www.heraldo.it/2018/12/21/le-due-anime-di-veronetta/>.
11. The full interview can be accessed at: <https://daily.veronanetwork.it/news/forza-nuova-la-casa-dei-patrioti-e-aperta/>.

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