

**Susanna Scarparo / Mathias Sutherland Stevenson: *Reggae and Hip Hop in Southern Italy. Politics, Languages, and Multiple Marginalities*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
ISBN 9783319965048. 251 pages.**

On a Saturday afternoon in the Autumn of 1994, several hundred people – mainly youth in their twenties or younger – gathered in one of the main squares of the city of Taranto, in Apulia. They were demonstrating against the policy of intolerance that the major Giancarlo Cito employed since he gained office in 1993. The march slowly moved towards a large building about three kilometers away, that used to be a tennis club. Once there, the protest suddenly switched to a collective occupation, the building then became the basis for the local *centro sociale*, a squat used for social activities. On that very night, a concert of 99 Posse and Bisca celebrated the occupation with a vibrant show of their “Incredibile Opposizione Tour”.

I was in my first year of high school when I partook in both the demonstration and the concert and, despite almost three decades have passed, the memory of the deep nexus between the political and social experience of the movement of young people in Taranto and the reggae band performing at the end of the night is still extremely vivid. Although the book from Susanna Scarparo and Mathias Sutherland Stevenson did not mention that specific event, the two authors successfully describe and analyse the nature of that nexus across Southern Italy. The period between 1991 and 1994 is at the centre of their narrative, but they also provide a thorough analysis of the reggae and hip hop scene beforehand, starting from the 1960s, and afterwards, as the final part of the book focuses on artists who carry the legacy of the highly politicized musical expressions of young Southern Italians. Through the use of personal interviews and a rigorous systematization of the scant but fundamental literature on the topic, the authors cast light on the historical arch of this rich scene and provide a fundamental investigation into the cultural and political implications of reggae, raggamuffin and hip hop in Italian and Italian dialects.

As underlined by the title, the book focuses on bands and artists based in Southern Italy, paying specific attention to the regions of Apulia and Sardinia. This focus is well motivated through the first part of the book, as it explains how the work of a band such as Different Stylee constituted a driving force all over Italy, as the reggae scene was gaining momentum through the 1980s. The main argument of the book is that reggae and later hip hop, as sounds originated within the African-American and the Afro-Caribbean contexts, provided the most appropriate musical and lyrical material for young artists from Southern Italy, who

then found an effective means of expression for their resistance against the dominant culture of neoliberal individualism, embodied by the shows broadcasted by the Berlusconi-owned Italian televisions. The authors successfully argue that it makes historical and social sense that such musical expressions emerged firstly and prominently in the South of Italy, as it was – and somehow still is – an area in which higher unemployment rates and neglected social conditions still show the effects of what the authors, following the theorization of Joseph Pugliese, consider as a colonization of the South by the North.

The two authors present their argument together with a compelling narrative that starts from the presence of musical features influenced by reggae within Italian popular music of the 1960s and 1970s and describe the ways in which a growing interest in the Afro-Caribbean genre of reggae in the 1980s resounded the famous concert of Bob Marley and the Wailers at San Siro Stadium in 1980. Slowly but constantly, across the 1980s, such interest intersected the politics of a youth movement that was slowly raising again from the ashes of the 1970s, dancing at Jamaican rhythms.

The introduction (first chapter) presents the main framework of the book. It explains how reggae and hip hop are here considered as “imported musical forms [that] have been synthesized within locally distinctive Italian contexts, emphasizing a transcultural process that foreground non-institutional politics and marginal subjectivities” (1-2). Here we find already key-words of the interpretation provided by the two authors: the transcultural process; sounds that foreground non-institutional or anti-institutional politics; the role of music in building connections among marginalized subjects and groups.

The second chapter contains a compelling analysis of how music and politics interrelates both in the historical arch of reggae music and within the Italian context more generally. The third chapter discusses the cultural and social identity of Southern Italians in relation to questions of blackness, adopting the idea that Southerners have been perceived as Italian blacks. Moreover, it chronicles the emergence of the reggae scene in Bari in relation to the young political movement that started in the 1970s and continued after the so-called *anni di piombo*. More importantly, it discusses how the extremely politicized and culturally involved reggae scene in Bari functioned as a point of reference for other (Northern) scenes in Italy. Culmination of the accomplishment of the *Barese* scene was the featuring of a song by Different Stylee in the internationally acclaimed compilation *Reggae from Around the World* (1988).

In the fourth chapter the music of Sud Sound System – probably the most famous reggae band in Italy – emerged. Sud Sound System, the authors argue, “can be seen as the peak of a broader movement of resistance and opposition towards a colonial project such as the Italian unification that took place through means of a violent suffocation of the ‘unincluded’ Southerners” (86). Therefore, the use of vernacular that has always characterized the music of Sud Sound System is considered as part of ‘guerrilla incursions’ (89). The resistance of Southern youth against historical and cultural conditions together with the use of music as a ‘guerrilla incursion’ are two concepts that effectively explain how the 1994 demonstration in Taranto, together with hundreds of similar moments throughout Italy in the first half of

the 1990s, unfolded. The book therefore makes a powerful contribution insofar it creates a framework in which the proliferation of moments of social and cultural rebellion, fueled by musical expressions, can be better understood.

In the paragraph “Southern connective marginalities” (94) the parallel between blackness and the condition of Southern people is further investigated. Not only from a social and political perspective, but also from the point of view of sound. The authors emphasize how the musical tastes and style from Militant P (Piero Longo), who was interested in afrobeat and other genres directly coming from the African continent, influenced the whole scene, giving the peculiar role of Militant P as a bridge between the scene in Bari and the burgeoning one in Lecce. Militant P was promoting “la musica te li niuri” (“music of black people”) to his fellow musicians. Later on, during a 2009 interview Sud Sound System’s singer Nando Popu affirmed “nui simu niuri” (“we are black”) when asked about his relationship with black music (Salvatore 2010). An identification such as the one from Nandu Popu, coming from a musician who at that time was enjoying fame and international success, could sound problematic according to contemporary discourse on cultural appropriation, but it was anyway at the very center of the elaboration of a Southern Italian version of African-American music that – despite its later success – came out of a distinct socio-political statement through music and vernacular texts. Borrowing Scarparo and Stevenson’s words:

The identification with and adoption of the ‘black’ Afro-Caribbean musical form of reggae by Longo and his friends, through the connective marginality dynamic, offered them the means through which (as was the case with Different Stylee) they could articulate an alternative to dominant understandings of Italian cultural identity and nationhood, along with the apparatus of power that these understandings support. (94-95)

It is also relevant that the authors underline the role of academics in promoting and supporting the work of Sud Sound System. They quote Antonio Petrachi, also known as Treble, one of the founders of the band, who described how members of Sud Sound System, together with professors at the University of Lecce, such as George Lapassade, contributed significantly to the definition of the area in Southern Puglia called Salento: “Little by little we constructed this word ‘Salento’, because for us it signified ‘Jamaica’”. (103) This is a complicated and fascinating aspect as – starting from the end of the 1990s – the area of Salento became a popular touristic destination admired for what has been perceived as a distinct cultural identity, mainly expressed by performances of traditional music (usually called *pizzica*). Although the authors do not delve into this aspect, as it lays too distant from the main focus of their analysis, it is interesting to read how reggae, as an Afro-Caribbean music employed by young artists, contributed to the branding of an area based on the supposed authenticity of its music.

The fifth chapter covers the moments of the highest triumph for reggae in (Southern) Italy and for the history of the ‘posses’, the name – adopted from Jamaican slang – used to define musical and political groups. It pinpoints how 1991-1994 is to be considered the

“most widely influential period of the posses” (158). The period that followed saw a rapid extinction of the musical and political fire of those years. However, as the two authors state, the legacy of the political involvement and its musical expressions endured through a new generation of musicians and bands.

They are presented in the following chapters, where the linguistic analysis of texts aims to underline how the connections of marginal subjectivities have been at the forefront also for musicians of the new generation. In this sense, the linguistic analysis of texts of Sardinian artists (sixth chapter) is particularly relevant as it shows how, after the success of Sud Sound System, the issue of linguistic choices became crucial. At the same time, the chapter deals with the definition of a certain type of political hip hop as opposed to “commercially produced and distributed rap music” (182) that also emerged in the second half of the 1990s. The authors describe how some of the reggae and hip hop artists of the so-called new generation decided to continue along the tradition of political involvement while some other artists joined a mainstream in which the commercial success was independent from political statements. The authors show how such decision was often based on, or concomitant with, linguistic choices.

The seventh chapter analyses videos and songs of some of the main artists coming from the new generation, with a focus on one of the most prominent artists of the Sardinian scene: Randagiu Sardu. Finally, the analysis takes in consideration the work of two female artists whose music both engages with the most influential works of the posses and widens it. On the one hand their songs encompass a discourse on genre that was often overlooked in the previous phase, and on the other hand they embrace other musical styles, either from the African diaspora or otherwise.

The Sardinian singer and songwriter Claudia Aru and the Apulian Mama Marjas are therefore presented as artists who employ reggae and hip hop, albeit not exclusively, while keeping the focus of their artistry on a socio-political involvement. At the same time, they cross boundaries of musical genres and scenes, as Aru was acknowledged for her performance at the Andrea Parodi world music award – a honor usually reserved to interpreters of traditional music – and Mama Marjas was cast as the main character in the rendition of *Carmen* by the Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio. Those are just two examples that clarify how the legacy of political and musical involvement so precisely described by this book crossed the line of musical genres in more recent years, and therefore found new forms of expressions within a sonic scenario that is extremely different from the one of the 1990s, but nevertheless continues to offer spaces for connections of marginalities.

In the conclusion (eighth chapter), after briefly discussing the career of Alborosie, the authors draw a compelling parallel between “Mr. Babylon” from Different Stylee, a pioneer reggae song published in Bari in 1986, and “Mr. President”, sung in Patois by Alborosie in 2009. The two songs mark off a period of time that includes more than thirty years of a musical elaboration of political themes and experiences that emerged from marginal areas in Southern Italy and raised to international acclaim.

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Filmography

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