

“Le Radici Ca Tieni”
Redefining Apulian Identity Through *Tarantamuffin*

by

Brittany Nicole Fowler
Class of 2009

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Italian Studies

Acknowledgements

Thank you,

Marcello Simonetta, for your guidance and mentoring both here at Wesleyan and in Bologna;

Ellen Nerenberg, Francesco Fiumara, and Daniela Viale, for teaching me the essentials of Italian and Italian culture and for your guidance and support throughout various stages of my college career;

Mariantoinetta Dioli, Giuliana De Meo, and Francesco Sensi at the Eastern College Consortium in Bologna, for your guidance as well as your unrivaled mastery of Italian bureaucracy;

Sara Danner Dukic, for giving an inexperienced but eager college student a chance to work behind the scenes at an opera festival in Lucca;

Marco and Mattea Piazzesi at Bar Astra in Lucca, for making each morning during the summer of 2008 a much-anticipated pleasure;

My fellow ECCO 2007-2008 year-long companions, particularly Pamela Quezada, Ari King, and David Wen Riccardi-Zhu, for helping make my year in Bologna unforgettable;

My thesis carrel and European travel buddy Becky Malik, for your wonderful company and constancy;

The members, honorary members, and alumni of PINOY, especially Cecil Apostol, Mark Leonida, Lisa Cunningham, Reyson Punzalan, Chenelle Tanglao, Leana Luna, Jimmy Ong, Malilay Timbancaya, Pat Lee, and Yuki Shiraji, for providing me with some of the best memories of my college career;

My 20C Fountain housemates and almost-housemates Daphne Schmon, Jessica Posner, Nick Field, Matt Podolin, and Kennedy Odede, for your good humor and generous moral support;

My Bologna anchors Claudio and Stefano Palumbo, for your constant support, love, and generosity and for always providing me a home away from home;

My family, most of all, for their unfailing love and support throughout everything.

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Introduction

From the early 1990s Apulian rap and hip hop artists have differentiated their music from the more national Italian hip hop scene by incorporating traditional Apulian culture—dialect and popular folk music—and Jamaican reggae and dancehall in their sound. The result has been a music style dubbed *tarantamuffin*—a play of words on the traditional Apulian dance “*tarantella*” and Reggae-dancehall music style “raggamuffin”—by both the critics and the artists themselves. Why have Apulian hip hop artists chosen to utilize these specific elements in their music? In many cases the artists themselves are mixed in their responses and justifications. Some argue that they do it “for fun”, while others express a more conscious intent to question and subvert the norms of both American and Italian hip hop. I contend, however, that Apulian posse and hip hop artists, particularly the group Sud Sound System, utilize local dialect, traditional regional culture, and Jamaican reggae idioms in *tarantamuffin* as means to reconstruct their musical identities as dynamic identities that constantly renegotiate and integrate their circumstances and non-local influences.

Though the nature of my argument is not new, this regionally-specific thesis was inspired by Tony Mitchell, who suggests that “the use of regional dialects by a large number of posses also attempts to build ‘a new culture’, drawing on rap and ragga in conjunction with local popular folkloric traditions.”¹ By using local forms of culture, regional Italian posse artists not

¹ Tony Mitchell, “Questions of Style: Notes on Italian Hip Hop,” *Popular Music* 14: 3 (October 1995): 346.

only resist the hegemony of both U.S. and Italian culture but also navigate and reconstruct their own cultural identities through music.

But for Mitchell, the use of regional dialects in hip hop also can have more aggressive implications. He claims that

indigenous languages other than English in rap music in Zimbabwe, Switzerland, France, Italy, and Aotearoa/New Zealand are . . . examples of “resistance vernaculars” which re-territorialize not only major Anglophone rules of intelligibility but also those of other “standard” languages such as French and Italian.²

The idea of “resistance vernaculars,” according to Mitchell, was taken from Russell A. Potter, who claims that African-American rap is a form of “resistance vernacular” that “deform[s] and reposition[s] the rules of ‘intelligibility’ set up by the dominant language [English].”³ Mitchell further contends that “the assertion of the local in hip hop cultures outside the United States also represents a form of contestation in of the importance of the local and regional dialect as a ‘resistance vernacular’ in opposition to a perceived U.S. cultural imperialism in rap and hip hop.”⁴

Steve Wright also suggests that regional Italian hip hop functions as a means of resistance. He argues that the indigenous Italian rap and hip hop groups—especially militant rap groups like Assalti Frontali and 99 Posse—that were cultivated in *centro sociali* use music as a vehicle to explore, communicate, and discuss the political and cultural conflicts of Italian autonomist movements. He further suggests that “an exploration of the lyrics

² Tony Mitchell, “Use of ‘Resistance Vernaculars’ in Hip Hop,” *Global Pop, Local Language* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003): 3-4.

³ Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995): 69.

⁴ Mitchell, “Use of ‘Resistance Vernaculars’ in Hip hop,” 4.

and other pronouncements of these music groups offers a privileged vector from which to address some of the tensions between cultural labour and political commitment which currently hold sway within Italy's social centres movement."⁵ For Wright regional Italian rap is less about identity politics than it is about the tangible local politics of labor and government.

Like Wright, Italian musicologists Marco Santoro and Marco Solaroli assert that the use of dialect among Italian posse rappers has inherently political connotations, but unlike Wright, these political connotations are cultural too. They claim that dialect reinforces the "otherness" of regional identities against the fairly modern conception of a national Italian identity.⁶ They write specifically that "the concept of 'otherness' refers to an expansion of the symbolic boundaries of multiple Italian music discourses that, especially in the case of rap, turns out to have undeniable political connotations."⁷ By embracing the "otherness" of dialects, regional Italian posse artists actively confront issues of Italian identity that reverberate not only in music but also outside of the artistic sphere in the private and public lives of citizens.

Goffredo Plastino, another Italian scholar, explores the issue of whether Italian raggamuffin, especially *tarantamuffin*, is directly derived from local folk music traditions. He observes that "molti osservatori (critici musicali, studiosi) e a volte i musicisti stessi asseriscono che è possibile

⁵ Steve Wright, "'A Love Born of Hate': Autonomist Rap in Italy," *Theory, Culture & Society* 17 (2000): 117.

⁶ Marco Santoro and Marco Solaroli, "Authors and Rappers: Italian Hip Hop and the Shifting Boundaries of *Canzone d'Autore*," *Popular Music* 26, no. 3 (2007): 478.

⁷ *Ibid.*

cogliere nel rap e nel raggamuffin una continuità con le musiche tradizionali, individuabile nell'uso del dialetto, nello stile del canto, nella riformulazione hip hop delle formalizzazioni musicali folkloriche.”⁸ But after observing interviews with actual Apulian posse artists who deny that their style is descended from the *tarantella*, Plastino suggests that the issue is more complex, reflecting an active attempt by regional hip hop artists to reconstruct and reconcile in their music and lyrics their identities as Apulian, Italian, and “world citizens.”

Though other regional Italian hip hop scenes besides those from Apulia also use dialect and traditional music in their sounds, I am largely focusing on Apulia and the group Sud Sound System for two reasons: 1.) to examine the unique way *tarantamuffin* is constructed and 2.) to examine in depth the sometimes contradictory ways in which Sud Sound System defines their music and its relation to their identities. Thus how do Apulian hip hop artists reconstruct their cultural identities in their music? First I will explain the origins of Italian hip hop in *centro sociali* as well as those of the more region-specific *tarantamuffin*. By using their song “Le Radici Ca Tieni” as a case study, I will address how Sud Sound System utilizes traditional music and dialect in their sound alongside dancehall beats to redefine their regional identities.

⁸ Goffredo Plastino, “Introduzione,” *Mappa della voci: rap, raggamuffin e tradizione in Italia* (Rome: Meltimi, 1996): 11.

Centro Sociali: Origins of Italian Hip Hop

To understand the development of *tarantamuffin* and the Italian hip hop scene in general, it is necessary to look beyond Italian mainstream media, which only embraced the musical idiom after the Italian underground musical scene had already developed and made extensive use of it. Underground Italian hip hop, especially Italian posse music, has its most direct roots in the experimental and open environments of the *centro sociali autogestiti* (CSAs).⁹ CSAs are self-managed and occupied social centers, which are direct descendents of the *case di lavoro*, or community centers, formed by the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, or PCI) during the first half of the twentieth century as communal meeting spaces for its members and supporters.¹⁰ In the early 1980s the emergence of CSAs during “the ‘riflusso’ (recession and resignation) of 1970s left-wing militant students and disaffected young people”¹¹ morphed the *case di lavoro* into their current incarnations as “laboratories of cultural innovation . . . [and] dens of iniquity and subversion”,¹² thus providing the ripe watering grounds to nurture and cultivate Italian rap and hip hop in its infancy.

By the 1990s the CSAs had diffused extensively across the country into well over a hundred different non-permanent “establishments” of questionable legality. For example, the most famous *centro sociale* of Bologna, the L’Isola nel Kantiere, provided the breeding ground for ground-

⁹ Andrea Membretti, “Centro sociali Autogestiti: Territori in Movimento,” *Confederazione Generale di Lavoro*. 1995? 1 November 2008 <<http://www.cgil.it/org.programma/webprep/cso3.htm>>.

¹⁰ Tony Mitchell, “Fightin da Faida,” *Global noise: rap and hip hop outside the USA* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001): 197.

¹¹ Mitchell, “Questions of Style,” 339.

¹² Wright, “A Love Born of Hate,” 118.

breaking posse artists such as Isola Posse All Stars; however, it was shut down in 1990 by the police. As most CSAs were and continue to be located in abandoned buildings illegally occupied by means of squatting, their locations change frequently and many cease to exist entirely. It is difficult to account for how many CSAs there are in a given period of time. Their non-permanent and anti-establishmentarian nature make them what Hakim Bey would consider “temporary autonomous zones,” a term usually reserved for the rave culture and related dance music of the 1990s.¹³

Based in outer metropolitan and university areas like Rome, Turin, and Milan, the CSAs do not have homogenous missions and programs and the volatility of their locations is reflected in their non-definable purpose. Tony Mitchell attempts to define them as an ever-changing amalgamation of

‘underground’ drop-in centres, youth clubs, drug rehabilitation centres, and even recording studios, cinemas, video and post-industrial art galleries . . . as well as rehearsal rooms and concert venues for punk rock groups, eventually transforming into hip hop music and graffiti art centres.¹⁴

In these terms CSAs can be understood as unstructured, communal intellectual youth “playgrounds” that flourish under a democratic system of egalitarian participation. Notwithstanding their illegality, CSAs can more fluently be described as concentrated venues of counter-culture activity where the old guards, both militant and pacifist, of the *anni di piombo* of the 1970s

¹³ Hakim Bey, *Temporary Autonomous Zones, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, New York: Autonomedia, 1991.

¹⁴ Mitchell. “Questions of Style”, 340.

could collaborate with the current generation of Italian youth, a “post-political generation who responded to the collapse of political languages with music.”¹⁵

The *centro sociali* are often referred to as safe spaces for musical experimentation in Italy, and many Italian posse artists recorded their first songs and albums in CSAs while constructing their new musical voice. It was here that reggae was reconciled with American hip hop and Italian sensibilities and dialect found another outlet of expression. Groups like 99 Posse (named after the famous CSA in Naples) and Onda Rossa Posse grew out of these establishments, and many took to self-identifying themselves as “posses” (as opposed to bands), rejecting exclusivity in regards to group members and promoting a more collaborative approach to music making in both content and musicians.

The culture of CSAs, however, has not been constrained within the walls of abandoned factory buildings in the outer edges of cities. Italian rap and hip hop’s socio-political roots eventually expanded into university populations and to the fringes of mainstream pop culture, especially during the early 1990s in response to the Democratica Cristiana government’s attempt to pave the way for the privatization of public universities and in 1992 as a reaction to *Tangentopoli* and the fall of Bettino Craxi’s PSI (Italian Socialist Party) government.¹⁶ During the 1994 national elections rappers like Frankie Hi-NRG and the 99 Posse held concerts in support of the “left-wing

¹⁵ Carlo Brazaglia, Pierfrancesco Pacoda and Solaro Albora, *Posse italiane: Centro sociali, underground musicale e cultura giovanile degli anni '90 in Italia*, (Florence, Italy: Editoriale Toscana, 1992): 19.

¹⁶ Mitchell, “Questions of Style,” 336.

alliance of *progressisti*” while groups like AK47 and Onda Rossa Posse presented themselves as vocal proponents and self-identified members of the Communist party.¹⁷ Thus CSAs’s cultural influence could be felt throughout underground and left-wing youth movements in Italy during the early 1990s.

Are CSAs and their musical products always by necessity political in nature? According to Steve Wright there exists a “long-standing, almost symbiotic association [between] Italy’s alternative music scene”, politics, and CSAs;¹⁸ this has encouraged some scholars to suggest that the youth of the CSAs use music as an alternative form of political expression.¹⁹ Tony Mitchell argues that Italian posse music was “a subcultural movement which discovered a new rhetoric of political militancy of its own, using rap music to criticize political corruption . . . and a whole range of social and political ills.”²⁰ He further suggests that rap and hip hop could be understood as “one of the main cultural catalysts of a political renaissance of oppositional Italian youth movements” especially during the early 1990s against the DC government.²¹

Alternately, some scholars have suggested that the political nature of Italian posse music is not derived necessarily from its origins in CSAs but rather from the construction of the music itself. This idea is particularly relevant to Marco Santoro’s and Marco Solaroli’s argument that the politics of Italian posse artists is not expressed directly in the contents of the lyrics but

¹⁷ Ibid., 340.

¹⁸ Wright, “A Love Born of Hate,” 119.

¹⁹ Maurizio Viano and Vincenzo Binetti, “What is to Be Done? Marxism and Academia,” *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (London: Routledge, 1996): 245.

²⁰ Mitchell, “Questions of Style,” 340.

²¹ Ibid.

rather in the deliberate choice of using dialect as the language of the songs.²² The conscious use of dialect in music is by nature a political choice, as it gives voice to the marginalized cultures not represented in standard Italian.

Aside from issues of political intent in CSA-cultivated music, there are also issues of authenticity among CSA music groups. Many Italian posse artists argue that the only “authentic” posse music comes from artists who first established their careers in CSAs. Tony Mitchell writes that for many CSA-bred posse artists, CSAs were “indicators of authenticity, political militancy, and street credibility.”²³ Mainstream rap artists such as Frankie Hi-NRG and Jovanotti (whose name means “young man”) have frequently endured criticism from Italian posse artists who established their careers in CSAs. The Sicilian group Nuovi Briganti, who began their music career in Fata Morgana, a *centro sociale* in Messina, has vocally accused Frankie Hi-NRG of “selling-out” to the mainstream audience through the exploitation of the “independent, alternative principles of the Italian hip hop movement represented by the *centro sociali*.”²⁴ They also accuse him of appropriating the posse identity without having the necessary “street credibility” (not having “paid his dues,” so to speak) that enables him to participate in authentic posse music-making. Jovanotti endures similar criticism and has also been accused manipulating Italian posse rap to fit mainstream consumption habits.

Mitchell argues that the actions CSA Italian posse artists who claim that authenticity in Italian rap can only be achieved within CSAs are best

²² Santoro and Solaroli, “Authors and rappers,” 477.

²³ Mitchell, “Fightin’ da Faida,” 197.

²⁴ Mitchell, “Questions of Style,” 341.

understood as “the posturings of a self-defining, politically correct orthodoxy.”²⁵ Their tendency to “monopolize claims of ‘credibility and legitimization’ [exposes] their political rhetoric as another form of fashionable stylistic appropriation,”²⁶ rendering whatever valid political message they may have victim to their own self-conceit.

Regardless of later issues of authenticity among more mainstream artists, CSAs were the first places in Italy in which hip hop was embraced and used as a new genre of musical expression. The creative and anti-establishmentarian nature of CSAs have encouraged thousands of Italian posse artists to create musical voices from hip hop that have consistently questioned the status quo of only musical genres in Italy as well as what it means to represent one’s self and one’s identity as an artist through music itself.

Apulian Posse Music: Influences

The influence of global music cultures beyond the Mediterranean can be heard throughout the works of not just Apulian posse artists but of other Italian hip hop artists as well. For Apulian posse artists, their biggest musical influences can be traced to American hip hop and, later, Jamaican raggamuffin, or ragga. And in the case of many Apulian artists like Sud Sound System, their own regional influences can be heard in their music as well.

²⁵ Ibid., 342.

²⁶ Ibid.

American hip hop exerted a profound influence on the development of Italian hip hop and, later, *tarantamuffin*.²⁷ Though the CSAs initially bore a musical bias towards punk and its reactionary sensibilities in the 1970s and 80s, they eventually provided shelter for other musical street styles “marginalized by the [Italian] pop mainstream” such as hardcore music, industrial rock, reggae, and eventually rap and hip hop. Though rap faced initial resistance from musicians and frequenters of *centri sociali*, it eventually found its home in their self-managed walls as it seemed “particularly conducive to the [CSA] movement’s gradual emergence by the decade’s end from the siege mentality of years past.”²⁸ With the *Anni di Piombo* coming to an end, American hip hop and rap provided an alternative genre of music that could potentially be just as militant and political as punk and yet be flexible enough to allow more nuanced forms of expression and, later, irony and humor.

The first rap CD, *Italian Rap Attack*, debuted in Italy in 1992 by the dance-label Irma, based in Bologna, and it consisted of tracks sung almost exclusively in English—except for one song by Frankie Hi-NRG. As Italy’s first rap hit in Italian, Frankie Hi-NRG’s “Fight da Faida” [Fight the Feud] in 1991 “calls for a halt to the family blood feud practices of the Camorra and the Mafia as one of the fundamental causes of Italy’s social and political evils.”²⁹ Influenced by the power given to the spoken word in American rap, the song’s central focus is the text and incorporates musical samples from American

²⁷ Wright, “A Love Born of Hate,” 122.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Mitchell, “Questions of Style”, 338.

groups like the Jungle Brothers and Sly and the Family Stone. The song, however, has been criticized by other Italian rappers for its origins in the House and dance music scene as opposed to the more “authentic” breeding grounds of CSAs, relating back to issues of authenticity previously mentioned in CSA music culture.

Remarkably, Italian posse artists have developed differently from American rap groups in that many CSAs have grown and manifested themselves within marginalized regional centers outside of the metropolitan bustle, most notably in the South. Certainly the *centri sociali* of Rome and Milan provided a fruitful outlet for this budding creative process, but regions like Apulia, Campania, and Calabria also bore witness to an increased interest in rap as an alternative form of musical communication thanks to the appearance of CSAs. In America where instances of group marginalization are more prominent in urban centers, by contrast in Italy the shift to the Southern regions highlighted the economic and cultural marginalization also experienced by residents there. The regional concentration of CSAs has perhaps been one of the more influential factors regarding the integration of traditional folk music—like the *tarantella* and *pizzica-pizzica*—in Italian posse hip hop.

The influence of Jamaican music styles like reggae and ragga is also evident in the sounds of Apulian posse music. Reggae first developed in Jamaica during the late 1960s, and its own distinctive sound can be traced to Africa and the Carribean as well as to musical styles like ska and American

rock music.³⁰ Ragga is defined as “Jamaican music similar to reggae but played entirely (or mostly) with digital instrumentation”;³¹ some scholars identify ragga as another form of dancehall music, although others further interchange the terms ragga and dancehall to refer to the same thing. In Italy ragga found particular champions in Sud Sound System, who proudly incorporate the music into their sound.

Why have Apulian rap artists embraced Jamaican musical idioms so eagerly? When asked why they used reggae sounds in their music, Sud Sound System replied that it is because

. . . il reggae, come il jazz ed il blues, ha un valore di protesta universale, perché si rivolge immediatamente alle sfere intime, private dell’ascoltatore, piuttosto che ad esteriori atteggiamenti antagonisti. [C’è] nei testi giamaicani [una] meridionalità infinita. Lo stesso attaccamento alle radici, la voglia di cantare l’amore ed il sentimentalismo, l’insofferenza per l’oppressione, da quella della scuola a quella del servizio militare. Ma soprattutto ci piaceva il desiderio del reggae di lottare, prima di tutto, contro il malessere che è nell’uomo. È una musica interiore.³²

To them reggae is an “intimate” music that reconciles exterior antagonistic forces like oppression with an interior form of protest. Because of its open embrace of roots (“lo stesso attaccamento alle radici”) and origin as well as possessing a kind of unabashed “sentimentality”, it has a Southern Italian aspect (“meridionalità infinita”) that lends itself well to a group who embraces its own regional culture so openly. Thus reggae has been embraced among

³⁰ Wayne Chen, “The Heartbeat of a People,” *Reggae Routes* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998): 6.

³¹ Ellen Koskoff, ed., “Glossary in Volume 3: The United States and Canada,” *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music 2000*, <http://gld.alexanderstreet.com/View/328936/Highlight/ragga#ragga1> (accessed 20 November 2008).

³² Sud Sound System, interview by Carlo Branzaglia, Pierfrancesco Pacoda and Alba Solaro, *Posse Italiane*, 96.

Apulian posse artists not only for its musical qualities but also for its socio-political connotations (“il desiderio del reggae di lottare”) that appear to encompass the same struggles that Apulia endures as a region.

Alongside American hip hop and Jamaican ragga, many Italian posse artists began to incorporate regional folk music of the Mediterranean, following the folk music revival in the late 1960s started by American scholar Alan Lomax and the Italian Diego Carpitella in the 1950s.³³ Mitchell observes that “a number of the Italian posse incorporate elements of traditional regional Italian music, from the Apulian peasant shouts and chants used by Suono Mudu, to the Neapolitan shepherd’s horn used by 99 Posse.”³⁴ Artists like Sud Sound System and the Sicilian group Tinturia also occasionally utilize regional instruments within modern instrumentation, creating a paradoxically harmonious tension between the modern acculturation of foreign music influences and traditional timbres.

Despite the ways in which they use global music styles, Italian posse artists have never been accused of cultural imperialism by scholars and critics in the way that American artists have been who have appropriated reggae and other culturally-based musical traditions in their music. According to Tony Mitchell, these artists have passed the “initial phase of imitating outside models and moved into an acculturation of rap” in which their music maintains a distinct and wholly “authentic” voice from the musical roots of

³³ Mitchell, “Use of ‘Resistance Vernaculars’ in Hip Hop,” 9.

³⁴ Mitchell, “Questions of Style,” 345.

the forms they appropriate such as reggae and American hip hop.³⁵ Or perhaps, more likely, it is because these regional Italian hip hop groups represent marginalized cultures to outside audiences, thus rendering them innocent of whatever claims of unrighteous appropriation of other non-Italian musical styles because *they too* suffer culturally as well (in this case, they endure the hegemony of an all-encompassing “Italian culture” that often represents Northern Italy much more than the South.) Regardless, the resulting product of this amalgamation is a distinct musical style that is modern, unique, and reflective of the artists’ cultural roots and their foreign influences.

***Tarantamuffin* from *Tarantismo*: Direct Derivation?**

What is *tarantamuffin*? The term was coined by the French ethnomusicologist George Lapassade in describing the innovative hybrid of musical styles used by Apulian posse artists. Its founding fathers are universally acknowledged to be the Sud Sound System, one of the most important bands of the *raggamuffin* movement in general. Though characterized by the rhythm and rapping style of Jamaican ragga, *tarantamuffin* goes further by integrating traditional Salentino musical instruments as well as popular musical idioms from the *tarantella* and the *pizzica-pizzica*.

In *Mappa delle Voci*, the author Goffredo Plastino asks if *tarantamuffin* is a modern continuation of the Apulian musical tradition of

³⁵ Ibid., 347.

the *tarantella*. Listening to musical excerpts from songs like the Sud Sound System's "Le Radici Ca Tieni", the influence of this traditional Apulian music is difficult to deny; even after repeated hearings the response seems obvious and intuitive.

But in a striking conversation between the Italian posse artists Papa Ricky, GgD of the Sud Sound System, and "Fracitana" of Salento Posse as well as the Italian scholar Pier Fumarola and French ethnomusicologist George Lapassade, the Salentino musicians suggested otherwise. When asked by Fumarola and Lapassade how the *tarantella* figures into Sud Sound System's music, GgD remarked that

Io immagino che oggi la gente pensa al prossimo disco dei S.S.S. [Sud Sound System] con i tamburelli a fare i tarantolati . . . Noi abbiamo fatto l'ultimo disco, *Turcinieddhri*: che c'entra con tutte queste cose, cioè con il tarantismo ecc.; che c'è là dentro la tarantella? Niente. La gente ci stima al di là del tarantamuffin . . . e poi a proposito di questa cosa . . . noi lo avevamo fatto per scherzo, un gioco. Porca miseria! Voi avete dato troppo peso . . .

LAPASSADE: Vuoi dire che non c'è un manifesto teorico?

GgD: No, voglio dire che era un gioco e che non avevamo nessuna intenzione come quella con cui voi avete sopravvalutato la faccenda.³⁶

On an obvious and intentional level GgD denies continuing the tradition of the *tarantella*, citing usage of its musical idioms as the product of a musical "joke." He rejects the metaphoric notion that *tarantamuffin* is, like *tarantella*, trying to help rid the Apulian people of their "societal ills" such as the crime, unemployment, and economic stagnation. He goes further and angrily accuses the Lapassade and Fumarola of overanalyzing the situation by

³⁶ Plastino, Goffredo, "Una Conversazione," *Mappa della voci: rap, raggamuffin e tradizione in Italia* (Rome: Meltimi, 1996): 62.

making tenuous connections and unfounded assumptions about the Sound System's ulterior intentions.

Papa Ricky is likewise hesitant toward the idea of identifying himself as a continuator of popular Salentino culture:

A me piace più parlare del diritto alla casa che del tarantismo, nel mio stile, i problemi sono questi. Ho fatto un pezzo sul tarantismo, ma non più di tanto, non riveste un'importanza per me significativa.³⁷

Papa Ricky says he prefers to talk about socio-economic issues like the “diritto alla casa” (a controversial law in Italy where in addition to rent a renter must pay additional interest every month to the landlord) than talk about culture (“tarantismo.”) He establishes that for him there is a clear difference between his “style” and that of *tarantismo* and further rejects any deeper personal connection by denying the existence of any “significant importance for [him].”

Despite the discomfort the artists have in addressing *tarantismo* in their music, Lapassade and Fumarola argue—even within the presence of the artists themselves—that there must be some direct influence of the *tarantella* on the production of their music:

FUMAROLA: [...] For me you all are the rightful representatives of the popular culture of Salento, of its profound and unexpected renewal, of the traditional popular spirit that intersects with the metropolis . . . Your voices are the product of this land and of this farmer culture and of others still . . . The voice, your bodies are in this sense traditional instruments . . .³⁸

Fumarola claims that Papa Ricky, GgD, and “Fracitana” are “rightful representatives” of Salentino culture because they were born and raised in the region of Apulia; thus for scholars, the use of traditional Apulian folk music is

³⁷ Plastino, 64.

³⁸ Plastino, 63.

not an issue of appropriation or cultural imperialism but rather an issue of continuing the folk traditions of their “birth right”. Furthermore, by identifying the artists as products of their environment, Fumarola suggests that any influence GgD and Papa Ricky deny is irrevocably present in their cultural DNA as children of the Salento.

But more importantly, why do these Apulian posse artists vehemently deny any influence from the musical tradition of their home region when it is audible and apparent in their music? Are they guilty of self-denial? Or do they not want to be identified as regional artists? Papa Ricky makes an interesting point about issues of authenticity in the conversation, in which he admits that

In ogni caso mi sento lontano dalla cultura del tarantismo, se incontrassi uno di questi personaggi non saprei cosa dirgli, più che chiedergli, per cultura mia personale, cosa ha fatto, cosa pensa . . . non potrei.³⁹

Here Papa Ricky confesses that though he may have been raised in the land of *tarantismo*, the “culture” of this distinctly regional practice is foreign to him. By calling it another “culture” apart, he insinuates that pure *tarantismo* cannot be considered a part of the contemporary Salentino culture than informs his experiences and identity. And by declaring traditional Salentino culture separate from contemporary culture, Papa Ricky expresses an unsaid but apparent fear that if he admits to using the *tarantella* as a cultural artifact in his music, he may be just as guilty of appropriating indigenous materials as other dominant cultures have been. Though he concedes reluctantly that his father “sang once upon a time,” that he “also learned from him,” Papa Ricky

³⁹ Plastino, 64.

refuses to concede any sort of ulterior motive in regards to his use of Apulian musical idioms.

Ultimately Papa Ricky essentially rejects any claims to authenticity in his use of Salentino musical idioms. He claims that he cannot relate to it because he has never identified himself as being an active participant in their traditions. In this sense he describes himself as an outsider, and though through the chance of his birth he has right to claim it as it part of his culture, he views his own actions as a form of cultural appropriation. Perhaps, then, he recognizes himself as being the product of multiple influences, unconsciously acknowledging a more global identity than he would prefer to claim ownership to. To claim a right to *tarantismo*, he feels, would mean to disregard the other non-local cultural influences that inform his music and identity.

GgD offers a similar reaction: “Noi li apprezziamo, dopo di che noi siamo qui . . . Ci divertiamo, siamo totalmente autosufficienti.”⁴⁰ He does not look down at the idea of being a *tarantella* musician or playing *tarantella* music; rather, GgD and the rest of the Sud Sound System identify themselves as individuals outside of a smaller, traditional cultural identity that does not thoroughly reflect and account for the growing diversity of their modern environment and society.

Are the interpreters and scholars of *tarantamuffin* constructing a narrow Apulian identity beyond the intended aims of the artists? By arriving at the same conclusion from which they begun despite evidence to the

⁴⁰ Plastino, 62.

contrary, Lapassade and Fumarola appear to disregard the voices of the musicians themselves, instead relying on their own understanding and interpretations as non-participating outsiders and “objective observers.” But the two scholars cannot be accused of negligence and self-indulgence based on their conclusions. The mistake Lapassade and Fumarola make in their approach is their belief that *tarantamuffin* is directly descended from *tarantismo*. The artists deny using Apulian musical traditions as a continuation of this marginalized culture because they are, in fact, *not* continuing the tradition of *tarantismo* as the scholars understand it. While *tarantismo* informs a portion of Sud Sound System’s sound, it only accounts for *one* aspect of their music and their identity because Sud Sound System is not trying to identify itself with any one culture; rather, the group is re-defining the very definition of their cultural heritage.

The Use of Dialect

Though groups like the Sud Sound System and Papa Ricky deny any ulterior motive in regards to their usage of Salentino musical idioms, they place a particular importance on dialect as a means of communication. But often in order to reinforce this notion they utilize the same musical idioms that they claim do not function as anything beyond musical embellishment. Why do these artists use dialect alongside traditional sonorities in the construction of their music?

According to Tony Mitchell, the use of dialects and regional elements in their music alongside traditions of other cultures (reggae, American hip hop)

engenders the creation of “a new culture” that paradoxically reinforces their personal connections to their regional roots.⁴¹ This enables them to utilize specific indigenous (cultural) artifacts, thus reconciling their traditional associations with contemporary culture.

But Mitchell appears to stand alone with this view. Other scholars argue more commonly that the use of dialect functions more as a means to express self-constructed identity through common links with other marginalized groups. Santoro and Solaroli contend that dialect in music, especially music with multicultural roots, reflects “a social practice of cultural recontextualisation”⁴² through which regional Italian posse artists create a connection with other subjugated groups—like Rastafarians and reggae—by making music local and relevant to their problems and their reality. This would further explain Sud Sound System’s (and many other groups’) ardent affinity to reggae, as expressed earlier. They are essentially redefining for themselves what it means to both Italian and Salentino, for example, by their own terms.

In an interview excerpted in the book *Posse italiane* (1992), the Sud Sound System explains the important components of their song “Punnu Ieu”:

“Punnu Ieu” è sicuramente la canzone che in qualche modo continua la ricerca sui suoni mediterranei che avevamo lambito con “T’a’ sciuta bona”. Abbiamo utilizzato campionamenti di strumenti della tradizione meridionale, come la tamorra e lo scacciapensieri [Jew’s harp]. Ma è soprattutto una canzone che esprime, finalmente, il nostro punto di vista sul dialetto. C’è in particolare una frase, riportata anche a caratteri cubitali sul foglio interno del mix, *Ncarra cu nu sparisci, insisti per non sparire, metticela tutta per sopravvivere*, che è

⁴¹ Tony Mitchell, “Questions of style,” 346.

⁴² Santoro and Solaroli, “Authors and Rappers,” 477.

esattamente il manifesto del Sud Sound System per il 1992. Il dialetto è l'unico modo che abbiamo per esprimere noi stessi, per sentirci pianamente realizzati.⁴³

Here Sud Sound System clearly outlines their intentions with regards to their use of traditional instruments and dialect. They proudly admit to actively sampling traditional Southern Italian instruments, citing their usage as contributing to their further “research on Mediterranean sounds.” For the band, the “only means [they] have to express [themselves]” is their regional dialect that directly reflects their upbringing and their cultural pride.

Additionally, their “point of view,” they feel, can only be expressed properly in the linguistic structure of their dialect, not in proper Italian.

In attempting to explain the conscious use of dialect in Italian rap, Italian scholar Felice Liperi suggests that

. . . the motivation was not only cultural, it was also technical. Italian DJs and musicians . . . found dialect a more malleable language in which to combine rhythm and rhyme. [...] Dialect is also the language of oral tradition, and this brings it close to the oral culture of rap.⁴⁴

By defining their motivation as “cultural” as opposed to “technical,” Liperi suggests that the use of dialect is a derivation of regional oral traditions, much in the same way that Lapassade and Fumarola suggest that *tarantamuffin* artists use regional musical idioms to continue the tradition of the *tarantella* in a modernized way. Furthermore, by focusing on the “oral tradition” of the language, they emphasize its function as a means of communication. The use of dialect as an important means of cultural communication is reinforced by

⁴³ Branzaglia, Pacoda and Solaro, *Posse italiane*, 96.

⁴⁴ Felice Liperi, “L’Italia s’è desta. Tecno-splatter e posse in rivolta,” *Ragazzi senza tempo: immagini, musica, conflitti delle culture giovanili* (Genoa, Italy: Costa & Nolan, 1993): 201

Sud Sound System themselves, who have said that “la gente, in ogni angolo d’Italia, inizia a riscoprire il dialetto, non nell’accezione leghista di linguaggio isolazionista, ma come ulteriore, eccitante possibilità per comunicare.”⁴⁵

Like I have mentioned previously Tony Mitchell suggests that Italian posse artists’ use of dialect is a more appropriate example as dialect as a form of ‘resistance vernacular.’⁴⁶ By choosing dialect over Italian or English, he proposes that posse artists consciously embrace a specific audience that understands the language while simultaneously alienating the majority of Italians who don’t understand. Thus dialect in this context can function as a vehicle of subversion towards national Italian identity and the way it fails to account for the nuances in regional cultures and identities. In this way they characterize both Italian and American identities in rap as evidence of cultural imperialism. By turning the tables and inflicting a kind of “marginalization” on a mainstream identity, they celebrate their own cultures and dialects that have otherwise been ignored or threatened with extinction.

But while this argument may apply to Sud Sound System, do other Apulian artists actively utilize dialect and Apulian musical idioms in their music to address issues of identity? At least in the case of one other Apulian musician, the answer is yes. In an interview with Fabio Volo on the MTV Italia program *Italo Spagnolo*, the Apulian rapper Caparezza (real name: Michele Salvemini) was featured alongside his raggamuffin band

⁴⁵ Branzaglia, *Posse Italiane*, 96.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, “Use of ‘Resistance Vernaculars’ in Hip Hop,” 3.

SunnyColaConnection in a “casual” televised mini-concert in Barcelona.⁴⁷

Though Caparezza as an artist is more famous for his comedic yet pointed solo raps sung entirely in Italian, here he was featured as a *tarantamuffin* artist and during the show he only played *tarantamuffin*-style music sung in dialect.

For all the fame that he has developed as a rapper with non-regional characteristics, why did Caparezza agree to present himself on the show as a distinctly Apulian artist? During the interview with Volo, Caparezza explains that he uses dialect for the music of his band SunnyColaConnection not because it is a typical practice of Italian raggamuffin but because the Molfetta dialect (his hometown) seems to “adapt itself well to music.”⁴⁸ Caparezza also cites a traditional Molfettese song about Santa Claus because the song’s syllabic and rhythmic inclinations lend themselves to a kind of “proto-rap.” This reinforces Liperi’s comment that the use of dialect among Italian DJs became a technical matter because of the malleability of the language. But unlike GgD of Sud Sound System and Papa Ricky, Caparezza also affirms that when he uses dialect, he uses it in conscious attempt to get in touch with his regional cultural roots. When asked by Volo if the use of dialect is a way to “tornare indietro alla tua proprio origine,” Caparezza says yes and adds that using dialect in his raps instead of standard Italian can be “fun and interesting.”

⁴⁷ Caparezza, interviewed by Fabio Volo, *Italo Spagnolo* (MTV Italia, 18 May 2006), from YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDZWNo24qL4>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Reggae for Caparezza also has a cultural affinity to his own Molfettese upbringing. After performing SunnyColaConnection's song "Scazz i mini" (meaning "Rompi le mandorle" in the dialect of Molfetta) which features undeniably reggae-infused instrumentation, Volo is prompted to ask why Apulian rap and hip hop artists in general seem to embrace wholeheartedly the sounds of "Jamaican culture" like reggae. Caparezza responds that this is perhaps the result of thousands of years of "contaminazione-etno" from foreign colonizers like Spain and North Africa.⁴⁹ Caparezza thus appears to embrace the multicultural aspects of his identity, openly challenging the idea of a singly-informed national character.

What does this interview suggest about Caparezza's self-conscious use of dialect in his music then? Caparezza essentially claims that for him the dialect of Molfetta actively creates and shapes the direction and construction of his music, not the other way around. Furthermore, the natural inflections of Molfetta's dialect "suggest" the rhythm and beats of the rap, making the use of dialect of particular interest to him. He also affirms that his use of dialect instead of Italian or English is a conscious appropriation of Italian raggamuffin standard practice as well as an exploration of his cultural roots. But by explaining this all on national television, Caparezza consciously decided to publicly identify himself as not Italian but as Apulian—with an asterisk. Because even though he takes pride in his Apulian roots, he recognizes that his cultural identity and his music are the result of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

“contaminazione-etno”. If his music is culturally dynamic in nature, does that imply his identity is too?

Sud Sound System’s “Le Radici Ca Tieni”: A Case Study

Though much of *tarantamuffin*’s diffusion has been relegated to underground venues and alternative radio stations, there have been a few groups and songs that have managed to gain national exposure and popularity. The most recent and notable example is Sud Sound System’s “Le Radici Ca Tieni” [Le radici che hai], which is sung entirely in the dialect of Copertino (a town in the province of Lecce.) The song’s lyrics reflect an unabashed anthem about the importance of recognizing one’s roots—specifically, those from the Salento, a sub-region of Apulia—and yet the song became a national hit. For all its potentially alienating characteristics, how did this song manage to transcend the barriers of regional language and content?

“Le Radici Ca Tieni” is not the first example of the Sud Sound System’s exploration with the use of dialect and traditional Salentino sonorities. Yet this song, released in 2003, became extremely popular not only in the Salento but also throughout Italy, with its music video winning the prize of Best Video at the 2003 “M.E.I” Festival at Faenza.⁵⁰ It was even featured on Adriano

⁵⁰ “I Sud Sound System al Candle con il loro reggae pluridecorato,” *La Repubblica*, December 30, 2003, final edition, via Repubblica.it, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2003/12/30/sud-sound-system-al-candle-con.html>.

Celentano's television program *Rockpolitik* on RAI with subtitles in Italian for the general Italian public in 2005.⁵¹

Sud Sound System's musical voice has always featured an amalgamation of different musical styles, and "Le Radici Ca Tieni" is no different. The music incorporates both Salentino traditional music and Caribbean dance hip hop, but the song is by no means a true hybrid of the two. Sud Sound System makes a distinct division between the opening section with its *tarantella*-like melody and the dancehall rhythms of the song's body. The opening section begins with a lone guitar and a girl's voice, singing the chorus in a characteristically Mediterranean folk manner with open breaks in the vocal register as she slides between pitch intervals and words. But after her verse the lithe tarantella is interrupted by the rough rappers of the Sud Sound System accompanied by pulsating dancehall bass line. Why does Sud Sound System divide the two music styles and appear to relegate the one supposedly so close to them culturally—the *tarantella*-like opening—to a brief thirty seconds?

Whatever tension that may arise from a division of musical voices is immediately diffused by the lyrical content. The title of the song itself, "Le Radici Ca Tieni," already lends itself to an examination of cultural identity and self-construction by asking a more individualized "tu" to consider his or her heritage and roots. But who falls under this privileged "tu", as designated by

⁵¹ "Rockpolitik, secondo round e stavolta arriva Benigni," *La Repubblica*, October 25, 2005, final edition, via Repubblica.it, http://www.repubblica.it/2005/j/sezioni/spettacoli_e_cultura/celent1/celedue/celedue.html.

the group? From the lyrics of the chorus, the intended audience appears to be the general Italian public, not Salentini, despite the language of choice:

Se nu te scierry mai delle radici ca tieni
rispetti puru quiddre delli paisi lontani!
Se nu te scierry mai de du ede ca ieni
dai chiu valore alla cultura ca tieni!
Simu salentini dellu munnu cittadini,
radicati alli messapi cu li greci e bizantini,
uniti intra stu stile osce cu li giammaicani,
dimme mo de du ede ca sta bieni!

[Se non dimentichi mai le tue radici,
rispetti pure quelle dei paesi lontani.
Se non dimentichi mai da dove vieni,
dai più valore alla tua cultura.
Siamo salentini, cittadini del mondo,
radicati ai messapi con i greci e i bizantini,
oggi uniti in questo stile con i jamaicani,
dimmi ora da dov'è che vieni.]⁵²

The chorus begins by claiming that if “you never forget your roots,” the listener consequently gives respect to the cultural roots of others from other countries, even countries far off. Sud Sound System then raps (in unison) that by remembering “your roots,” the listener gives his or her roots more “valore”: more worth, more importance, more value, and even more validity. By emphasizing the importance of consciously breaking down, understanding, and self-constructing one’s cultural roots, the band encourages agency among members of marginalized cultural groups to not accept the identities bestowed upon them by hegemonic groups and to reconstruct their own identities according to their own desires and, ideally, pride in their roots. And

⁵² Sud Sound System, with translations provided by RAI, *Rockpolitik* (RAI, 2005), from YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mibkWHB484&feature=related>.

with the “tu” being unidentified and general, Sud Sound System’s address can be extended to the general Italian public.⁵³

The chorus also refers directly to the diverse cultural influences within the Salento region affecting them, the group, directly, ranging from the ancient Messapi people (whose pre-Roman origins can be traced to the region between Albania and Turkey) to the Greeks and Byzantine empire, and the lyrics even suggest that Jamaicans can be considered influential, as it directly influences the band’s style of music. Thus they are rightfully “cittadini del mondo”. But by ardently acknowledging their multicultural heritage, Sud Sound System refutes any notion of a “pure” Salentino; they are Salentino, paradoxically, as the result of immigration, colonialization, and globalization. And by asking the listener at the end of the chorus to tell them “da dov’è che vieni”, Sud Sound System challenges them not only to identify the origins of their roots but also to question what it means—what it implies, even—to identify with a specific cultural and regional identity like Salentino.

So what does it mean to be Salentino, according to Sud Sound System—or even better, what does it mean to recognize one’s marginalized origins? The group elaborates on this exact subject in the verses of the song (in this case, the second verse):

Me la difendu, la tegnu stritta cullu core
la cultura mia rappresenta quiddru ca é statau e ca ha benire
Intra stu munnu, a du nu tene chiui valore
Ci parla diversu o de diversu ede culure!
Te ne leanu tuttu puru la voglia de amare,

⁵³ For many groups in Italy, regional identities are sometimes strikingly different from the national one imposed upon them by the government, foreigners, and even themselves.

cussi ca tanta gente a pacciu modu stae a regire!
Te ne leanu tuttu puru le ricchie pe sentire,
ci chiange e chiede aiutu pe li torti ca stae a subire
Te ne leanu puru la terra de sutta li piedi,
se cattanu tuttu quiddru a cui tie nci tieni
Me dispiace pe tuttu quiddru ca ne sta gliati
Ma stamu ancoraa quai, de quai nu ne limu mai sciuti!

[Me la difendo, la tengo stretta con il cuore,
la mia cultura rappresenta quello che è stato e che verrà
in questo mondo, dove non ha più valore
chi parla diverso o è di diverso colore!
Ti levano tutto, pure la voglia di amare,
così che tanta gente sta reagendo in maniera folle.
Ti levano tutto, pure le orecchie per sentire
chi piange e chiede aiuto per i torti che sta subendo.
Ti levano pure la terra che hai sotto i piedi,
comprano tutto ciò a cui tieni.
Mi dispiace per tutto quello che ci state togliendo.
Ma siamo ancora qui, da qui non siamo mai andati via!]⁵⁴

For Sud Sound System, their culture represents the past and future of “questo mondo” where constructions of race and cultural identity will be irrelevant to how people treat each other. They claim that “ti levano tutto” to further oppress marginalized groups, but despite this, “siamo ancora qui” and have never abandoned their homeland before. By addressing these issues of marginalization in their own dialect as opposed to Italian or English, Sud Sound System “vocalizes” the frustrations of the dialect’s group of origin—in this case, in Copertino and in other towns within the province of Lecce—in modern Italian society. And by adding defiantly that despite all their hardships, the Salentini have never left their homeland, they reinvigorate their cultural pride as a group that has evolved and survived despite the odds

⁵⁴ Ibid.

and as a group that recognizes the importance of the “lotta” in the formation of their existence and identity.

How do the lyrics represent a reconstruction of Sud Sound System’s cultural identity? By openly identifying with their colonized past and with their musically-similar “siblings”—Jamaicans—the band envisions contemporary Apulian culture as a constant evolution and re-appropriation of other cultural influences. They are, like Mitchell has said of regional Italian posse artists in general, actively creating “a new culture” that accounts for all parts of their cultural history, be it past, present, or future.

Furthermore the initial division of the *tarantella*-like opening from the dancehall chorus is not the establishment of a cultural boundary but rather the fast-forwarded demonstration of how “Apulian” music has evolved. Like the way the Salentino identity is an amalgamation of Arabic, Greek, Byzantine, and other cultural influences, the *tarantella* itself reflects Apulia’s ancient and colonized history. For the contemporary generation of Apulia, the music of Jamaica *is* the most current influence on their constantly evolving cultural identity and musical sound, but Sud Sound System makes no promise that it will be the last.

Thus for the Sud Sound System, their conception of Apulian identity is a constantly changing, dynamic identity that is subject to what Caparezza called “contaminazione-etno”. And “Le Radici Ca Tieni” has proved an ideal case where the lyrics speak louder than their actual words. Previously in the interview with Fumarola and Lapassade, GgD argued that the use of traditional Apulian music in their sound was nothing more than “fun” and

that it did not intend any kind of “cultural self-exploration”, and yet the lyrics of “Le Radici Ca Tieni” reflect an active reconstruction of what it means to be culturally Apulian in this age and time.

Conclusion

Apulian posse artists like Sud Sound System use *tarantamuffin*, a distinctly Apulian musical style developed in the free and exploratory environment of the CSAs, as a creative vehicle to redefine their cultural identities according to their own terms. As a result they create what Tony Mitchell calls “a new culture” that utilizes and reconciles both past and present influences from the underground Italian music scene.

The artists’ unwillingness to identify themselves as “continuator” of the *tarantella* tradition furthermore suggests that their identities are informed by the realities of their own *current* generation, not just the past defined by their ancestors. For them, to be Apulian is also to be cognizant of the “contaminazione-etno” from other cultures and to reconcile the constant influx of non-local cultural influences with one’s own cultural identity. The dynamic aspect of their cultural identity is further reflected in the construction of their music, as demonstrated in the case study of Sud Sound System’s “Le Radici Ca Tieni” in which both the lyrics and the music exhibit a dynamic, fluid concept of self-defined cultural identity.

I initially chose this topic after spending my junior year with the Eastern College Consortium in Bologna, Italy, where the Italian posse scene and CSAs were a constant and vocal presence in the university social scene.

Though Sud Sound System plays a major force in this essay, I was inspired to write about Apulian hip hop artists after seeing Caparezza twice in concert: first at the former CSA (now legal venue), Estragon, in Bologna, and the second time at the Primo Maggio Concert 2008 at Rome. At both concerts the most fervent audience response came from when Caparezza sang the only song that reflected his roots: “Vieni a ballare in Puglia”, where cultural pride is mixed with irony when one realizes that by “ballare” he refers to the *danse macabre* and not a night in a *discoteca*. (Though this song reflects frustrations with the marginalization and exploitation of Apulian workers, it is sung entirely in Italian, rendering it topically irrelevant to the paper despite its somewhat relevant lyrical content.)

For all the enthusiastic audience reception Caparezza and his song received, I wondered what it meant to be Apulian on a public level when the popular national culture (as witnessed through mass media) fails to account for the complexities of an often marginalized local culture. To appeal to a broader market, by rule Apulian groups should not sing in dialect nor use traditional musical idioms if they do not want to risk alienating non-members of their culture. But Sud Sound System *does* use dialect and Apulian musical elements in its sound, and though the members started out in CSAs like most posse artists, after more than a decade they have developed a national, non-Apulian following. Do audiences appreciate local culture more, or is it the dancehall elements of their hit songs that make the music more palatable? While there is no right or wrong answer, I believe it is neither.

Italy is a country composed of regions each with their own distinct culture, dialects, and foreign cultural influences throughout the history of time. What makes Sud Sound System so successful is not its catchy hooks. Rather, it is the universality of their experience and their sympathetic but constant, never-ending struggle to reconcile their local cultural identity against the pressures of both a national Italian identity and globalization, for this is a struggle felt by many marginalized local groups in Italy. By redefining contemporary Apulian identity as dynamic through the hybrid genre of *tarantamuffin*, Sud Sound System ensures that their identity—and any other's cultural identity— is not fixed by any time, place, or event. It is the idea of cultural identity without boundaries or ends: infinite and perhaps even immortal.

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