
# Heritages of Migration: Moving Stories, Objects and Home
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## Conference Proceedings
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# Displaced by the humanitarian sea? The representation of contemporary migration in an Italian maritime-emigration museum

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**Introduction: migration heritage matters in Italy and Europe**

This paper interrogates the permanent display on the history of foreign migration to Italy in the Galata Maritime Museum in the northern port city of Genoa. In doing so, I want to critically reflect upon some key representational frames that I believe have been largely overlooked in international debates in museum studies: namely (i) the implications of treating the sea as a metaphor for mobility, (ii) the juxtaposition between emigration and immigration, and (iii) the recourse to images of humanitarian emergency and crisis, such as the arrivals of migrants on the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa. I am interested to think how such frames shape the production of migration heritage in a public-institutional context, in other words to consider how certain types of representation become prominent and possible and how others are instead foreclosed. Without underestimating the groundbreaking initiative and important educational role of the Galata Museum in publicly affirming Italy's cultural diversity, I argue that its portrayal of migration history also works to dislocate the more mundane, local contingencies of immigration and the ways in which migrants have contributed to reconfiguring the heritage landscapes of Genoa's historic centre that lies adjacent to the museum. If the notion to place is a 'fundamental epistemological structure and referent within museums' (Whitehead et al. 2015: 7), then what is the role of place and what sorts of places are evoked in a maritime-emigration museum vis-à-vis immigration?

The underlying goal of the paper is to probe the idea of 'migration heritage': a broad concern that has emerged in European scholarly and policy literature over the last ten years, but often without sustained reflection as to its meaning and reach in theory and practice. I use 'migration heritage' conscious of the fact that, in some cases, discussion of the relationship between migration and heritage does not always employ this specific compound term. In contrast, the term is more established and commonly used in Australia and to a lesser extent in the United States where migration is perceived to be a key, albeit contested, founding myth of the nation. I am also very aware that 'migration heritage' should be considered an open and fluid concept that, like any (aspiring) key term, emerges and changes in relation to different historical and material circumstances (Williams 1983). For the immediate purposes of this paper, I understand migration heritage to be distinguished from 'community' and 'multicultural' heritages, even if there are overlaps between them. Migration heritage foregrounds the question of mobility which is not always acknowledged in the other two cases. Moreover, it is not reducible to one particular group nor is it necessarily bound up with culturally specific artifacts, customs or belief systems, but also encapsulates the ways in which locations (e.g. urban public spaces) and activities (e.g. forms of employment) have come to be resignified over time.

Much of the recent discussion about migration heritage in Italy and Europe more broadly has taken place within the field of museum studies (Innocenti 2014; Stevens 2008, 2009; Sutherland 2014; Whitehead et al. 2015), which has inevitably oriented the direction of research in certain ways. While I am interested to explore the museum as one among many sites of heritage production, my disciplinary background is not in museology. I am an urban sociologist with additional training and practice in the fields of history, cultural studies and anthropology and this interdisciplinary perspective has largely shaped my approach to the questions in hand. Much of my previous research on southern European cities, and in particular Naples, focused on the questions of regeneration and public space and how these interconnected with a set of concomitant issues such as migrant settlement or heritage policies in historic centres (Dines 2012; 2016). Therefore, for the most part, migration and cultural heritage were studied separately, which also meant engaging with two different sets of literatures. Recently, I have sought to bring migration and heritage into critical

conversation, in other words, to think about the relationship between, on the hand, human mobility and, on the other, the material and discursive use of the past in the present. This emergent research interest has been driven by some elementary questions. How does the arrival and settlement of migrants in cities over recent decades square with contemporaneous public discourses about urban cultural heritage that, at least in Italy, have aimed to revaluate and promote meanings of place and local identity? How do expert-driven definitions of cultural heritage – or 'authorized heritage discourses' to use Laurajane Smith's term (2006) – acknowledge and embrace mobility or other layers of history that have originated from elsewhere? But also, how are histories of migration and settlement inscribed in the built environment and people's experiences of the city? How might migrants disrupt dominant sedentary ideas of heritage? In other words, I am interested both in the representation of migration in museums but also in everyday migration heritage-making that takes place beyond the walls of cultural institutions (and the interrelationship between the two). This double focus lies at the heart of a new research project, very much in its early stages, that sets out to explore the construction, experience and contestation of migration heritage in Mediterranean cities in Europe, including Naples, Marseille and Barcelona.

My burgeoning interest in migration heritage has also been motivated by the conviction that it is something that fundamentally matters, even if one could rightly retort that there are far more pressing issues at stake concerning migration in Europe during our current crisis-ridden era. First and foremost, migration heritage entails the active acknowledgment and comprehension of the historicalness of migration, which counters the common perception of migration – especially in Italy – as something locked in a perpetual present, as an unresolved issue or an ongoing emergency. The significance of the relationship between migration and heritage has also become especially acute against the backdrop of the growth of radical right and populist parties across Europe, the sharp increase in migrants and refugees entering Europe since 2015, the impact of terrorism but also the rise of Islamophobia, and the purported crisis of multiculturalism (Triandafyllidou and Kouki 2016). Thus, investigating the contemporary production and reception of migration heritage represents an important social and political endeavor that has implications not just for research, policy and curatorial practice, but one that can be brought to bear upon wider debates about migration in Europe.

## The incorporation of immigration history in Genoa's Galata Museum

In order to start to grapple with some of the questions raised above, this paper draws on a pilot study conducted in the Galata Maritime Museum in Genoa (fig. 1). The study is based on visits and participant observation in the museum itself between late 2016 and early 2017 and analysis of press coverage and scholarly discussion of its migration exhibition.


Fig. 1. Galata Maritime Museum, port of Genoa (photo by author 2017)

The Galata Maritime Museum was opened in 2004, the same year in which Genoa became European City of Culture, and swiftly became an integral part of the regeneration of the inner harbour, which over the last two decades has been transformed into the city's key tourist destination (the same area includes Renzo Piano's Aquarium). The word Galata in the museum's title recalls the neighbourhood in Istanbul where a Genoese community had flourished until the fifteenth century, although it is more directly a reference to the building's location on the former commercial dock that was given the same name in the nineteenth century. Initially designed to celebrate Genoa's maritime past with replicas of historic ships and experiential attractions such as a CGI storm simulator, since November 2011 the Galata Museum's third floor has been occupied by an interactive and multi-sensory exhibition on emigration that builds on the commercial success of a previous temporary show La Merica! Da Genova a Ellis Island held between 2008 and 2011 (Cimoli 2013). Since its inauguration, and thanks to the insistence of the museum's directors, this section has been accompanied by a permanent display dedicated to contemporary immigration. The two exhibits on the third floor together have been given the title Memorie e Migrazioni (Memories and Migrations).

The presence of immigration in Italian museums is a very recent phenomenon. In fact, the Galata Museum possesses the first and only permanent display in Italy, although there have been a number of temporary exhibitions in major cities such as Turin and Rome since the early 2000s. Emigration museums have a longer history in Italy dating back to the 1980s, but most of the twenty or so sites are located in small towns or rural areas historically associated with emigration (one of the best examples is the Regional Museum of Emigration in Gualdo Tadino in Umbria, which opened in 2003). To date, the Galata Museum is the only emigration museum located in a major Italian city. Significantly, Genoa was not a city of emigrants but rather a centre of the emigration industry. Indeed, together with Naples (where a project for a Maritime-Emigration museum is currently under discussion), the port of Genoa was the point of departure for millions of emigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This has important implications for the representation of emigration:

while the displays in the smaller museums are connected with the history of the local territory, the third floor of the Galata Museum places greater emphasis on the national and global scales of emigration, with most of the rooms focused on recounting the transatlantic journey of Italians and their disembarkation in Argentina, Brazil and the United States. The last room is a mock-up of the arrival hall in Ellis Island where visitors are interrogated by life-size border guards on video screens prior to being allowed (or denied) entry into the destination country.

After two floors of maritime vessels and regalia, followed by embarkation onto an ocean liner and the final arrival on Ellis Island, visitors finally enter the last and smallest section of the museum dedicated to contemporary immigration. This final section is spread across four rooms that measure roughly a sixth of the floor space dedicated to emigration and about a twentieth of the floor space dedicated to Genoa's maritime past. From the previous glut of multimedia and sensory features, the exhibition on immigration abruptly shifts to an information-intensive layout that relies on an abundance of texts, dates, photographs and manually activated audio-visual material, which together require a greater commitment on the part of the visitor (who, in most cases, has probably already spent a number of hours in the museum). The first room provides a detailed timeline of the history of immigration to Italy since 1973, the year in which Italy, we are informed, went from being a country of net emigration to one of net immigration (fig. 2). This is followed by a large interactive screen containing an International Organization of Migration application that provides statistical information about migration flows to and from every country in the world. In other words, the display on immigration continues to place emphasis on the national and global scales. Indeed, similar to other migration museums across Europe (Stevens 2009; Sutherland 2014), the intention is not to transcend 'official' Italian history, but to reconfigure the representation of immigration into a more progressive, multicultural vision of the nation. This is not to say that no attention is paid to the local context: in a subsequent room there are a series of interesting video interviews with migrants who have settled in Genoa, however these are all stored on a single touch screen and need to be individually activated by the visitors themselves. The central exhibit and the only physical object in the immigration section is a Tunisian fishing boat, one of two boats donated to the museum by the municipality of Lampedusa in 2011, which is surrounded by looped video installations that use archive footage and the testimonies of migrants to recount rescue operations at sea (figs. 3 & 4).


Fig. 2. Time line of immigration to Italy in Galata Museum (photograph by author 2017)

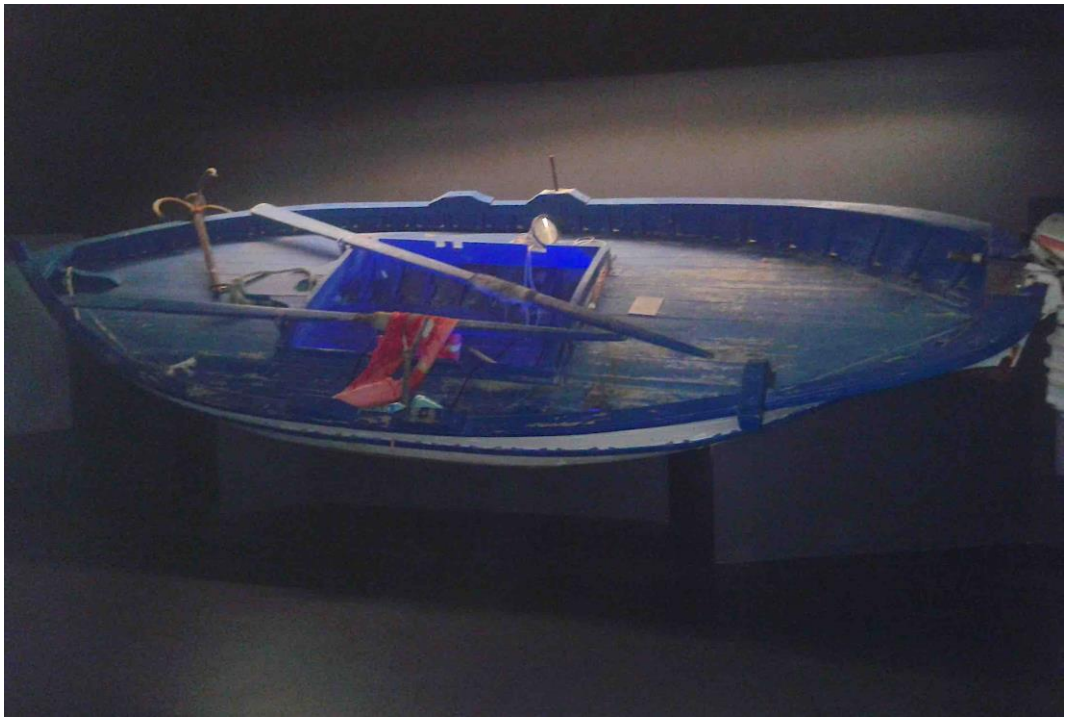

Fig. 3. Tunisian Fishing Boat donated to Galata Museum by Lampedusa municipality in 2011 (photograph by author 2017)

Fig. 4. Bow of fishing boat next to video screen showing looped images of the Italian Coast Guard escorting migrants rescued at sea into the port of Lampedusa (photograph by author 2017)

**Three elephants in the room: the sea, emigration and Lampedusa**

As Italy's principal public display of migration history, the immigration section in the Galata Museum has received considerable coverage in both the local and national press. For example, to celebrate the reorganization of the exhibit in 2016, La Repubblica included a selection of photographs on its website and a description of the key elements under the title "Galata Museum: here migrants are citizens":

"There are symbolic objects, starting from the rickety vessels on which the desperate journeys to Italy are made […], there are images and multimedia screens, including a timeline that starts in 1973 when, for the first time, the rapport between emigration and immigration is inverted, but above all there are the voices that recount stories." (La Repubblica (Genoa edition) 29 June 2016)

The Galata Museum has, unsurprisingly, also attracted scholarly interest. For instance, it featured in the EU-funded international MeLa - European Museums in an Age of Migrations research project. Discussion of the museum has been largely positive. Describing the exhibit before its rearrangement in 2016, art historian and member of the MeLa project, Anna Chiara Cimoli wrote for example:

"in [one] space we see a ship from Lampedusa […] If the visitor holds a fender, he can listen to the accounts of migrants. By the ship, in small cases, there are several objects belonging to migrants (documents, pieces of clothing, a baby's bottle…). On the walls, video projections show dramatic images of the rescue of shipwrecked persons, made by the Italian Finance Police. Due to the power of the images – which need no captions – and the evocative nature of the objects, this is one of the more moving rooms." (Cimoli 2013: 84 + 89)

However, there has been little concern in either media and scholarly accounts to move beyond mere description, approval or formal criticism (for example about the "dense" nature of the exhibition design (ibid.)) and to instead interrogate the broader representational framework that underpins the museums' reconstruction of migration history. Such a move might be considered to overstep the mark given that the exhibition's very existence is a laudable achievement in itself. But this is not about picking holes in a worthy initiative or identifying room for improvements. Rather, it is about the need to understand the Galata exhibit as one specific public articulation of migration heritage that reflects a particular way of reading, ordering and depicting history.

I want to argue that there are three pivotal frames that determine the representation of immigration history in the Galata Museum. The first, overarching frame is that of the sea. It is impossible to physically escape the fact that Italy's only permanent immigration exhibit is hosted in a maritime museum: there are boats literally in every direction. This works to accentuate certain narrative themes, in particular the idea of the migrant journey and the risks that this involves (the second Lampedusa fishing boat was in fact recently relocated to the second floor to become the final exhibit in the section dedicated to the dangers of the high seas). However, the problem is that the vast majority of migrants have arrived in Italy by air or land routes, while the port of Genoa itself has never been an entry point of immigration. Indeed many of the video interviews with local migrants speak of arriving in Italy by plane and moving to Genoa from other cities.

The second frame, which again is physically unavoidable, is the juxtaposition between Italian emigration and foreign immigration. The implications of this juxtaposition remain unexplored in the exhibition itself. The only conspicuous reference lies in the explanation for starting the immigration section in the year 1973. While this date functions as a sort of historical tabula rasa that provides for a smooth break, it also obscures the earlier foreign migrations to Italy (such as Tunisian migration to Sicily in the 1950s and 1960s), the emigration flows that continue to the present day as well as the postwar internal migrations that were fundamental to Italy's modernization.[Endnote 1] Arguably, the correlation between emigration and immigration is targeted largely at an Italian audience, which over the last two decades has been frequently invited by various commentators, such as the well-known journalist Gian Antonio Stella (2002), to reimagine the times when Italians fled poverty so as to better empathize with the current plight of migrants. Nevertheless, the connection between emigration and immigration can be interpreted in a myriad ways and it is interesting to note that some of the school guides introduced their own material to provoke responses from students. For instance, one guide introduced the immigration section to his group by reading out a passage that complained about the invasion of dirty hordes of people and then asked students to guess the source (some thought it was Matteo Salvini, current leader of the Northern League), before revealing that it was a statement about Italian workers in a Swiss newspaper from the 1960s.

The third and most prominent frame in the museum is the repeated use of images of emergency and crisis, capped by the obtrusive presence of the fishing boat but also reiterated in photographic and video material throughout the section's rooms. The metaphor of Lampedusa and the object of the fishing vessel that migrants use to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe are both extremely powerful tropes that inevitably influence the general tone and content of the exhibit. One could argue that the fishing boat itself makes sense: it fits the maritime theme and certainly captures a dramatic aspect of Italian migration in recent years. However, the implication relayed through the exhibit that it is somehow emblematic of Italy's migration history is problematic. Arrivals on Lampedusa only became numerically significant after 2002, and until recently accounted for a just a small proportion of the total numbers of migrants entering Italy (Dines, Montagna and Ruggiero 2015). Rather than setting out to contextualize the recent events on Italy's southern borders in relation to the other exhibited material, I want to argue that the museum's overall portrayal of migration is underpinned by what Didier Fassin (2012) defines as "humanitarian reason". This is understood to be those governmental and discursive practices geared towards the protection of life, the reduction of suffering and the transmission of compassion and that have permeated increasingly the social and political spheres of Western societies. According to Fassin, as a language that speaks about violence and inequality, humanitarianism is the one that is most likely to generate support among readers and viewers. The relationship between this particular language and the production of migration heritage has been overlooked in discussions in museum studies and thus, I would contend, demands greater attention. Here I want to simply note that by amplifying recent images of suffering, tragedy and rescue, the Galata Museum's exhibit downplays the embodied and emplaced layers of migration that have accumulated across Italy over at least the last forty years.

The Galata Museum's treatment of contemporary migration is not especially unique but employs representational techniques that have been used elsewhere in Europe and further afield, albeit with less intensity than in Genoa. For instance, the German Emigration Centre in Bremerhaven and the Red Star Line museum in Antwerp both use the theme of the sea and emigration as pretexts to include representations of immigration to Germany and Belgium, while images of the Mediterranean refugee crisis have become an increasingly common feature worldwide, as in the case of the Hotel de los Immigrantes museum in Buenos Aires where a recent exhibition on emigration from Basilicata to Argentina ends with images of crowded boats in the Straits of Sicily (and the Aegean Sea!) that visually serve to switch attention to contemporary foreign migration even though such phenomena have no direct connection with the southern Italian region (fig. 5).


Fig. 5. Final panel of exhibition on emigration from Basilicata to Argentina, Hotel de los Immigrantes, Buenos Aires, April 2017 (photograph by author 2017).

This critical discussion of the representational politics in the Galata Museum is not meant to underestimate the curators' commitment to a permanent collection or the museum's important role in educating young people about contemporary immigration. Indeed, most of the visitors observed during my week-time visits to the museum were students of primary and secondary school age. Further research should be directed at how school guides (mainly young adults in their twenties and thirties) engage with the exhibit to construct their own narratives about migration histories that range from lengthy critiques of Italy's relationship with immigration and the exhibit itself to a few pithy or disinterested remarks.

In sum, the museum's presentation of migrant history is aimed primarily at an Italian audience and is structured around a national narrative. References to the sea, emigration and Lampedusa all further work to bypass the complex relationship between migration and place. Ironically, only a few yards from the museum, on the opposite side of the dual carriageway that runs along the side of the port, is located Via del Pré: one of Genoa's historic 'migrant streets', which over the last forty years has been a first point of reference for various groups of migrants arriving in the city and today is home to numerous Senegalese, Chinese, Bangladeshi and North African businesses. A non-local visitor to the immigration section of the Galata Museum would not be aware of its existence.

**Conclusion: migration heritage beyond a humanitarian gaze**

Scrutinizing the immigration section of the Galata Museum serves to problematize certain unspoken assumptions about what and who constitutes migration heritage, and how this connects with questions of place, identity, inclusion and audience. Rather than being seen as givens or fixed outcomes, such connections should be posed as open questions that can guide analysis of what is a complex and at times elusive phenomenon. The point is not to establish whether the Galata Museum offers a more or less accurate or legitimate version of migration heritage. All heritage is constructed within specific historical, material and social circumstances and can therefore be deconstructed to understand the underlying contexts, motives and power relations at play. Migration heritage is a protean idea with plural forms, each of which is time and space specific, but at the same time open to reinterpretation and manipulation. In terms of organized cultural practice, it is also a relatively new phenomenon in Italy and has had to grapple with the nationally entrenched, expert-driven 'authorized discourses' (Smith 2006) about cultural heritage as well as hegemonic definitions about migration as an ongoing process that lacks history.

Here I have considered the representational frameworks of migration heritage produced for public consumption in a maritime-emigration museum in order to think about the different scales of reference, how these might or might not connect with everyday emplaced experiences of migration that accrue over time, and to reflect on the consequences of affective registers – in this case a dominant humanitarian logic – that structures the presentation of migration. Such registers, I suggested, privilege certain narratives about the past and present, but also preclude the possibility of others.

On this last point, I want to end with a provocation, but one that raises a serious question about the limits of migration heritage. Does its production have to inevitably rely on a minimum level of moral propriety in order to stake claims to historicalness? How might a figure like the 24-year-old Italo-Ghanaian rapper Bello FiGo, who became a national YouTube sensation in 2016 as a result of his playful subversion of racist stereotypes about refugees, feature in a future, expanded notion of migration heritage? Bello FiGo's lyrics speak about free Wi-Fi and not paying rent, about his penchant for the tuna pasta served up in reception centres and his refusal to go to work. He pays respect to his "refugee friends" and on one occasion his usual dab moves are replaced by the gesture of rowing across the Straits of Sicily (fig. 6), the stretch of water where thousands of migrants have drowned. His gender politics are also pretty reprehensible. He has courted controversy by willingly participating in television chat shows with political leaders of the Right such as Northern League leader Matteo Salvini and il Duce's granddaughter Alessandra Mussolini. He has been vilified by some migrant cultural operators and has received death threats from neo-fascist groups. At the same time, his songs have been downloaded over twenty million times and the lyrics can be commonly heard chanted on the streets by white and minority Italian youths alike. Some commentators have gone as far to argue that his irreverent re-appropriation of populist discourses marks a historical turning point in the discursive framing of migration (Salvia 2017). In one notable case, a far-right rally at the Arco della Pace in Milan, one of the city's architectural symbols, was disturbed by a group of teenage skateboarders gathered at the site who, in response to the sight of the approaching fascists, decided to create a sort of sonic force field by playing Bello FiGo songs on their mobile phones. By doing so, the ephemeral life of a lone internet sensation became grounded in place and was spun by some observers as a watershed moment in the politics of cultural diversity in Italy. If the Galata Museum today includes a photograph of Mario Balotelli in its historical timeline to mark (erroneously) his

status as the first black player in the Italian national football team, then what is the likelihood of Bello FiGo making an appearance in the future?

Ultimately, the question is about what constitutes the acceptable content and tone of migration heritage and how far this can be pushed as an idea. Asking such a question invites a more reflexive approach to the construction and presentation of migration pasts in places where 'indigenous' cultural heritage continues to be considered a priori as a 'good thing' rooted in fixed notions of local identity. Drawing on the popular idea of the 'right to the city', we could think in terms of a 'right to migration heritage', which is not simply about access or being involved in its production, but about the right to define the rules of the game and what is at stake.

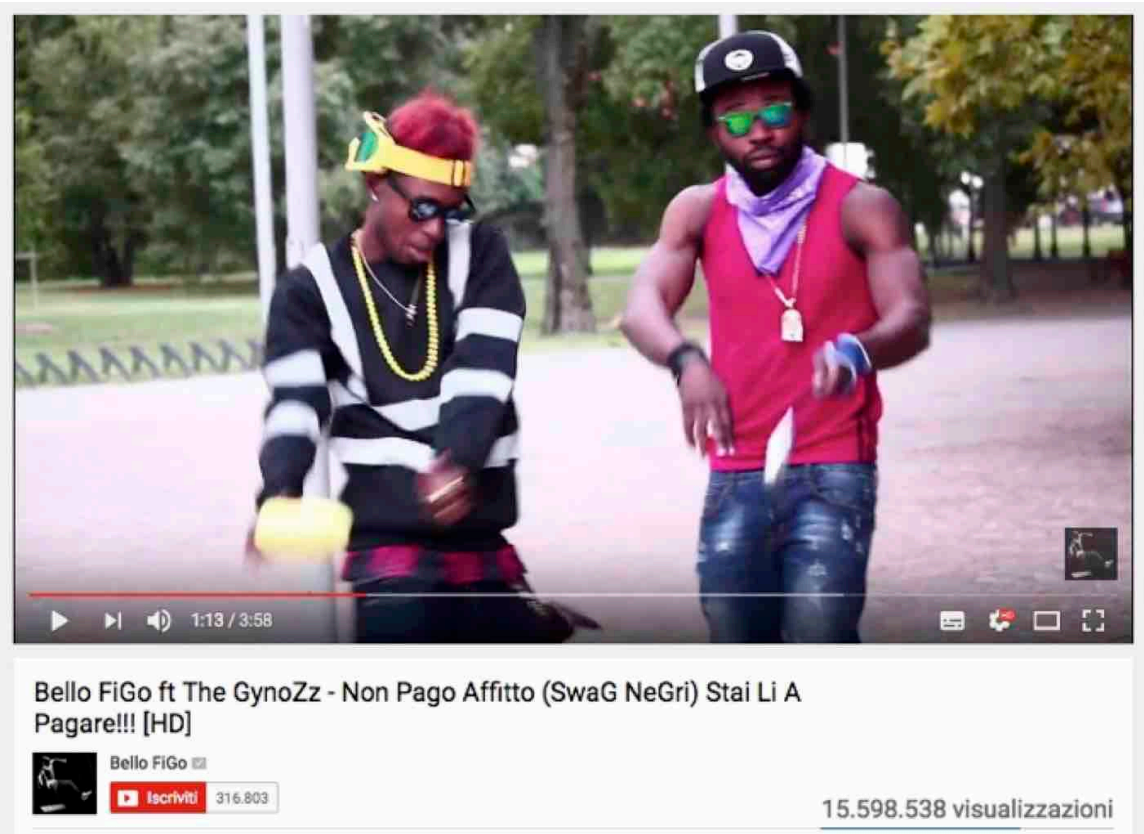


Fig. 6. Bello FiGo, 'Non Pago Affitto' (I don't pay rent), still from Youtube video 2017.

## Endnotes

1. While the idea of a turning point typically plays an organizing role in popular perceptions of migration histories, these have rarely been tackled in museum exhibitions. One notable case was the groundbreaking 'Peopling of London' exhibition at the Museum of London in 1993, which specifically challenged the commonplace that Britain's capital prior to 1945 had possessed a homogenous white-British population. As the exhibition set about to demonstrate, such an idea overlooked the history of London's medieval Jewish community, the continuous black presence since the sixteenth century, the establishment of Asian communities from the seventeenth century onwards as well as the immigration of Chinese, Italians and Germans during the nineteenth century (Stevens 2009: 6).

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