

# Makeshift activism and the afterlives of refugee welcome in Covid-19 Italy

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## Abstract

This article captures a shift occurring at the peripheries of the Italian asylum system where, as reception infrastructures are progressively gutted, dismantled, and transformed into security apparatuses, local organizations refocus their efforts on helping refugees and asylum seekers carve out spaces of agency and autonomy in the time-space *after* institutional reception. I introduce the concept of “makeshift activism” to describe this relentless, creative patching together of solutions to support migrant emplacement beyond and – sometimes – against the confines of official programs. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in one of the world’s first Covid-19 hotspots – Italy’s Veneto region, I take the pandemic as a magnifying glass to expose the precarious nature of this activism but also its potential for prefiguring alternatives to the state’s (non-existent) paths towards long-term inclusion. More broadly, I shift the anthropological gaze towards charting the afterlives and aftermaths of refugee “welcome” in less spectacular locales, such as mid-size cities and small municipalities in peripheral mountain regions.

## Keywords

Asylum seekers, Covid-19 pandemic, Italy, local activism, organizations, refugees

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork in two northern Italian towns to capture a shift occurring at the peripheries of the Italian asylum system. Starting in 2018, as reception programs were increasingly gutted, suspended, and reduced to one of their basic functions as security apparatuses (Della Puppa et al., 2020), many local activists and organizations progressively refocused their efforts on helping holders and seekers of

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international protection build a life *after* leaving institutional reception. Here, I introduce the concept of makeshift activism to characterize these sustained attempts at supporting migrants' emplacement beyond and against the confines of official programs, taking the Covid-19 pandemic as a magnifying glass to look at the precarious, contingent nature of this activism. While recent scholarship on "vernacular," "makeshift," or "grassroots" humanitarianism (Brković, 2023; Sandri and Bugoni, 2018; Vandervoordt and Fleischmann, 2020) has mostly centered on informal camps, large arrival cities, and other spectacularized sites of border crossing and solidarity, I shift the anthropological gaze to follow activists and program managers in their relentless efforts to support refugees' emplacement in mid-size cities and remote mountain regions.

### **Local activism in a post-reception, post-welcome context**

The "long summer of migration" of 2015 (Hess et al., 2016), when an unprecedented process of debordering and re-bordering of Europe triggered massive arrivals of people seeking asylum in European Union (EU) member states, was seen by many as an "historical crossroads" for the emergence of citizen- and volunteer-led initiatives to "welcome" and support refugees in their autonomous journeys across borders (Picozza, 2021: xvii; cf. Fontanari and Borri, 2017; Hamann and Karakayali, 2016). Since then, scholars have increasingly turned to analyzing these "vernacular humanitarianisms" (Brković, 2023; Sutter, 2020), asking about their potential for unsettling the hierarchical logics of formal humanitarianism and the inherent coloniality of Europe's asylum and border regimes (Picozza, 2021; Rozakou, 2017; Sandri, 2018). Sandri and Bugoni (2018) have focused on aspects of improvisation and informality as defining the work of volunteer groups in Calais' "Jungle," showing how these "makeshift humanitarians" came to develop more overt political stances by refusing to cooperate with state bordering and surveillance practices. Vandervoordt and Fleischmann (2020) have argued that this emergent politicization is often reflected in the ambiguous temporalities of grassroots humanitarian actors. On the one hand, these activists and organizations are so caught up in addressing refugees' present material needs that they tend to forego aspirations towards broader societal change, while on the other, they seek to re-appropriate their capacity to fight for a different future by engaging in transnational movement-building; combining service provision with political mobilization (Zamponi, 2018); and experimenting with alternative forms of care provisioning at the "peripheries" of official humanitarian infrastructures (Ramakrishnan and Thieme, 2022; Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan, 2020).

These studies have mostly focused on informal camps, emergency "hotspots," and other sites of spectacularized border crossings and solidarity (De Genova, 2013; Picozza, 2021), especially in the 2014–15 juncture (but see Storer and Torre, 2023 for a more recent focus). Here, I draw attention to the afterlives of these mobilizations, showing how local activists and organizations carry forward their efforts to support migrants in a "post-compassion" environment characterized by budget cuts, right-wing policies, and the layering of multiple emergencies (Giudici, 2021). This framing is inspired by recent scholarly calls to explore how the memories and political legacies of solidarity may remain even after actual spaces and initiatives have been dismantled, their "traces" picked

up by different actors and “reactivated in ongoing mobilizations in support of migrants in Europe” (Ramakrishnan and Thieme, 2022; Tazzioli, 2021: 139). At the same time, I use the term “afterlives” to capture a shift under way in my field site and elsewhere in Italy, where many organizations formerly involved in the initial “welcome” and reception of asylum seekers have been redirecting their efforts towards helping these people build a dignified life in the time-space *after* institutional reception (Sanò and Della Puppa, 2020; Sanò and Zanotelli, 2022). To understand how this shift in focus relates to the practice of a “makeshift” activism, we first need to look at how reception is structured in the Italian asylum system.

After initial operations of rescue, health screening, and identification, migrants applying for international protection are sent to “first reception” centers (CPAs) directly run by the Ministry of the Interior. Then, they are distributed across the national territory through a double-track reception system, consisting of both “ordinary” and “extraordinary” solutions. The ordinary system (SAI, “reception and integration system”) is managed by municipalities that have freely chosen to join the system. The SAI provides assistance with language, paperwork, health and material needs, while also offering additional services, such as job training, linguistic and cultural mediation. Because of its voluntary nature, over the years the SAI proved insufficient to accommodate all asylum seekers arriving on Italian soil. Starting in 2011, the government set up a parallel system of extraordinary reception (CAS), giving national authorities the power to set up centers by partnering directly with local nonprofit and for-profit organizations. CASs can be run as large facilities hosting hundreds of people, or according to the model of “diffused reception” (*accoglienza diffusa*), wherein small groups of asylum seekers are hosted in apartments and small-scale facilities distributed across a particular region.

While originally introduced as a temporary fix to deal with seasonal arrival peaks, over time CASs became the most prevalent solution for hosting asylum seekers, reflecting a broader tendency to approach immigration as “a permanent emergency” to be dealt with “by activating exceptional, and often discriminatory, instruments of intervention” (Giudici, 2021: 31). Compared to the SAI, CASs tend to offer lower standards of service and focus on addressing basic short-term needs, even though, at least before the funding cuts introduced in 2018, some organizations were able to provide additional services such as job training programs. In fact, as Campomori and Ambrosini (2020: 16) have argued, the field of asylum seekers’ reception in Italy resembles a “battleground” where local civil society actors retain a certain “autonomy ... in the face of public policies,” variously acting as trailblazers for national policies or, at times, refusing to go along with their implementation (Campomori and Feraco, 2018; Sempregon et al., 2022). Over the years, the lack of a coherent policy framework on matters of immigration in Italian society, combined with an over-reliance on emergency measures, has resulted in a “patchworked geography” where the kinds of services and opportunities available to migrant people vary greatly across localities, dependent as they are on the “discretionary power and goodwill of single organization workers” (Marconi and Cancellieri, 2022: 22).<sup>1</sup> While creating new types of inequalities, this poorly coordinated system also leaves room for “a certain flexibility and for an advanced capacity for experimentation,” allowing “various

civil society actors to find new (and creative) solutions to ever-evolving contexts and to their emerging challenges” (Marconi and Cancellieri, 2022: 22).

Here, I focus on “post” or “third-stage” reception as an understudied realm where this on-the-ground challenging and reworking of asylum policies through a *makeshift activism* becomes manifest. The expression “third-stage reception” (*terza accoglienza*) is used by Italian scholars and practitioners to refer to a diverse range of initiatives “pertaining to the delicate process of [asylum seekers] transitioning from a situation of tutelage inside [...] reception centers [...] to one of reaching full autonomy” (Sarli, 2019: 5). Unlike with first- and second-line reception, there are no laws or policies specifically focusing on “third-stage” reception, nor on the long-term inclusion of migrants and refugees in Italian society. With the Decree D.L. 130/2020, the government did envision the possibility of introducing “additional integration programs” for those who are granted international protection, such as language and professional training and orientation to Italian bureaucracy (Fondazione ISMU, 2021: 117). In actuality, the decision on whether or not to implement these programs was left to local administrations, many of which did not have the resources nor the political will to go along with these recommendations. At present, what counts as “third-stage reception” is thus a constellation of small local projects, financed through local municipal and EU funds or – most often – private philanthropy, and entirely dependent on the “proactiveness of civil society actors [...] which represent the lifeblood of these multiple ongoing experiments and the core of strategies of intervention at the local level” (Sarli, 2019: 5; see also Campomori and Feraco, 2018).

According to Sarli (2019: 10) activists and organizations in charge of these initiatives often possess a keen “awareness of the dysfunctionalities inherent in the system and of the clunkiness of its bureaucracy,” including long waiting times for court decisions, the impossibility for asylum seekers to secure long-term employment while stuck in this legal limbo,<sup>2</sup> and rules requiring them to leave reception facilities as soon as they obtain international protection or, in some cases, even just when their wages exceed a certain threshold.<sup>3</sup> Activists and program managers work around these issues through both advocacy and ad hoc local initiatives, tailoring programs to individual needs and, often, bending eligibility criteria to include not just refugees but also asylum seekers in the pool of potential beneficiaries. As a loosely regulated policy realm, “third-stage” reception gives local actors more room to act outside of state-sanctioned logics of deservingness and to interject their own visions into the implementation of programs. At the same time, because of the time-bound nature of funding and the rapidly shifting political climate, many organizations struggle to scale up their initiatives and ensure continuity in their intervention (Campomori and Feraco, 2018).

Here, I build on and systematize these findings by introducing the concept of “makeshift activism,” referring to this relentless, creative patching together of solutions to support migrant emplacement beyond and sometimes against the confines of official programs.<sup>4</sup> Going beyond a merely descriptive use of the term (as in Sandri and Bugoni, 2018), I employ it to suggest that contingency and improvisation have become the default operating mode of organizations operating in a context where right-wing policies and the withdrawal of state support work to “render [asylum seekers] presence invisible, temporary, and precarious” (Della Puppa et al., 2020). In critical urban scholarship, the

concept of “makeshift urbanism” has been used to refer to all the “practical interventions” – from squatting to the self-provisioning of services – that re-make derelict, disinvested, or marginal spaces “in provisional or rigged up ways” (Tonkiss, 2013: 312–13). These small-scale acts are seen as part of the contingent, incremental process through which cities are composed, dis-assembled and reassembled in the everyday (Vasudevan, 2014) – a meaning I seek to retain as I apply the concept to a different social realm. By salvaging local networks and reception infrastructures, and using them to build alternative forms of support for asylum seekers, the activists and program managers featured in this article similarly contributed to the undoing, hacking, and reshaping of an inadequate reception system.

I begin by discussing how dynamics of precarization and invisibilization affecting migrants and asylum seekers were exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. After some notes about methods and context, I delve into the analysis of two ethnographic examples featuring different localities (a mid-size city and a mountain province, both in the Veneto region) and different types of organizations, namely, a leftist collective focusing on housing rights, and a professional NGO that, until recently, was partnering with the state to run reception programs. I purposely offer this heterogeneous sample to suggest that, far from being specific to a certain social and political environment, makeshift activism can be found across the spectrum of migrant-serving organizations in Italy, whether they gravitate more towards “contentious politics” or humanitarian-like forms of service provision (Della Porta and Steinheilper, 2021).

The context of Veneto lends itself especially well to studying how local actors re-imagine their role vis-à-vis a crumbling reception system. In this relatively wealthy industrial region, non-state actors – Church-affiliated organizations, trade unions, nonprofits – have played a key role in the incorporation of migrant populations, serving as counterpoints to hostile local and regional governments dominated by the right-wing anti-migrant party La Lega (The League). This dynamic role of civil society has been especially evident in smaller municipalities, which, in Veneto, have been home to significant numbers of migrant-origin residents (Cancellieri et al., 2015). Being a populous region, Veneto hosts a relatively high percentage of asylum seekers. Yet, with the exception of a few experiments in diffused reception implemented by left-leaning municipalities, the region has overwhelmingly relied on emergency solutions like large-scale CAS facilities to run its programs. As we will see in the next section, most “virtuous” initiatives were shut down following recent policy changes, pushing activists and organizations to re-mobilize in the post-reception space.

## **Time-spaces of emergency and multiple crises**

My discussion of the pandemic and its effects builds on the work of scholars who have “look[ed] at the *productive* dimension that the declaration of a state of ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’ generates,” for instance, by legitimizing the adoption of new strategies for the control and capture of migrant mobilities (New Keywords Collective, 2016). Focusing specifically on the Italian context, Della Puppa and Perocco (2021: 7) have characterized the pandemic as a “double ‘ecological-healthcare’ and ‘socio-economic crisis’” throwing

into sharp relief the inequalities of Italy's neoliberalized healthcare systems and labor markets, as well as the structural failures of its migration policies. As with the 2008 economic recession, during the pandemic people with migratory backgrounds were the most exposed to unsafe and exploitative working conditions, unemployment, and casualization of labor (IDOS Study and Research Center, 2020). Under Italian laws, when people lose their jobs they also lose the possibility of renewing their residency permits, and thus risk slipping into a condition of illegality (Perocco, 2021: 21). While the government did eventually extend all residency permits as part of a package of emergency measures taken (and repeatedly renewed) during the pandemic, these short-term interventions had the effect of "put[ting] migrants' legal life *on hold*" (Bonizzoni and Dotsey, 2021: 54) – their asylum and naturalization procedures temporarily suspended, their permits neither expired nor renewed.

In the case of asylum seekers, this situation was exacerbated by the after-effects of the "Salvini" Security Decree (D.L. 113/2018), named after the then Minister of the Interior and leader of the *Lega* party, Matteo Salvini. The decree, passed in 2018, abolished humanitarian protection, a residual form of international protection available to those who did not qualify for refugee status or subsidiary protection, driving thousands of asylum seekers into homelessness and illegalization (Della Puppa et al., 2020).<sup>5</sup> It also curtailed funding and access for both the CASs and SAI, making small-scale reception financially untenable and indirectly favoring the warehousing of asylum seekers in large facilities offering barebone services. Faced with these changes, and increasingly coming under attack through Salvini's ideological war on NGOs, many organizations decided to opt out of the reception system altogether. This trend was especially pronounced in Veneto, where local actors' refusals to participate in calls for tender led to the almost complete shutdown of reception in some areas, further decreasing the forms of support available to asylum seekers (Firouzi Tabar and Maculan, 2021; Openpolis, 2022).

The pandemic inserted itself into this context as a sort of "emergency within the emergency," accelerating an ongoing shift away from a logic of compassion and towards one of control. Stressing the continuities between pre- and post-pandemic times, Sanò and Firouzi Tabar (2021) note that, when the first wave of Covid-19 broke out, many asylum seekers were already confined in large and overcrowded reception facilities which, due to a combination of institutional abandonment and lack of adequate health and sanitation measures, quickly became hotspots for spreading the virus. In addition to being subject to stigmatization as potential carriers of the virus, asylum seekers experienced further segregation and limitations to their personal freedoms, while also being deprived of any remaining form of support (Perocco, 2021; Sanò and Firouzi Tabar, 2021).

At the same time, the coronavirus emergency created the conditions for enacting some limited policy changes, such as the passage of the DL34/2020, commonly known as the Amnesty Decree (*Sanatoria*) in May 2020. While the official goal of the *Sanatoria* was to favor the emergence of informal work relationships so as to guarantee the protection of individual and collective health (art. 103 c.1), the measure was fundamentally motivated by the need to address labor shortages in the agricultural sector, as travel restrictions had foreclosed traditional avenues for recruiting seasonal workers from selected countries (Ambrosini, 2020: 8–9). In the months prior to the passage of the *Sanatoria*, many voices

within civil society had called for a comprehensive measure addressing the precarization and exploitation of illegalized migrants in *all* employment sectors (Ambrosini, 2020: 9). In the end, however, a much more limited measure was passed, applying only to workers in the sectors of agriculture and domestic labor. A few months later, in October 2020, the government approved a new Immigration and Security Decree, D.L. 130/2020, which repealed some of the changes introduced by Salvini by reintroducing a form of “special” protection akin to the former humanitarian permit, and again expanding provisions and eligibility for reception programs (Camilli, 2020).<sup>6</sup>

On the ground, activists and organizations struggled to keep up with these shifting policy landscapes and multiple time-spaces of emergency. When the pandemic broke out, many of them were busy seeking alternative ways to help asylum seekers who had lost their legal status and/or were deprived of support in the aftermath of the Salvini Decree, be it by providing informal legal or practical help, or by setting up various post-reception initiatives. The health emergency both interrupted and accelerated these emergent re-configurations, accentuating the makeshift nature of these interventions.

## Methods and context

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted between 2019 and 2023 as part of two different projects. The first, a team project sponsored by the EU’s Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF), engaged with migrant-serving organizations in the Veneto region using a participatory research-action approach (Marconi and Cancellieri, 2022). The second project, carried out as part of my postdoctoral fellowship, focused on the politics and afterlives of refugee “welcome” in a mountain province struggling with depopulation. Specifically, it followed the life stories of refugees who had remained in the area, focusing in particular on their friendship and kin-like bonds with other refugees as well as with longtime residents, NGO workers and volunteers. Between the two projects, I conducted a total of forty-five unstructured and semi-structured interviews with activists, volunteers, migrants, and organization workers.<sup>7</sup> The second project included extended periods of participant observation for a total of ten months, during which I participated in a volunteer-led Italian language school, shared meals and walks with my interlocutors, and attended public events. When in-person research was not possible due to pandemic restrictions, I maintained contact with my interlocutors through WhatsApp, social media, and zoom interviews. These sustained engagements with refugee and migrant interlocutors shape the analysis presented in this article.

The case studies discussed below are based in different localities of the Veneto region.<sup>8</sup> The first is set in a medium-sized city (ca. 80,000 residents) whose history of right-wing, openly racist anti-immigrant policies is interestingly paralleled by the existence of a thriving social movement scene, mostly revolving around leftist and post-autonomous social centers (Zamponi, 2018). During the 1990s and 2000s, the city’s booming industrial sector attracted foreign migrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, South and East Asia. In the 2010s, the arrival and forced resettlement of asylum seekers traveling through both the Central Mediterranean and Balkan Routes triggered a new wave of racist and

xenophobic backlash from both politicians and local residents – including violent protests against the opening of reception centers.

While not exempt from racist and exclusionary responses, the mountain province featured in my second example, overall, stood out for its “welcoming” approach to the resettlement of asylum seekers, including both spontaneous, citizen-led mobilizations and the pioneering of a “diffused” reception model aimed at including refugees in the social and economic fabric of local towns. After the passage of the Security Decree in 2018 and the election of right-wing mayors, however, local reception networks were almost completely dismantled, leaving local activists scrambling to find alternative ways to support refugees and asylum seekers in a context of dwindling institutional support. Smaller municipalities, in fact, are less likely to “have the economic, organizational, and human resources to provide highly specialized services oriented to long-term incorporation” (Bolzoni and Ponzio, 2022: 200). When they exist, these initiatives tend to be less formalized and stem from the actions of a few committed individuals whose personal and professional roles often straddle across public and nonprofit sectors (Sempredon et al., 2022). Small mountain towns with stretched budgets and limited associational ecologies (Sempredon et al., 2022) are thus an especially fruitful context to observe the makeshift nature of post-reception activism, as are cities whose exclusionary measures have fueled the emergence of activist collectives operating outside and against official government logics.

### **In the meantime, the revolution: Makeshift networks and interstitial activism**

It is a torrid Saturday afternoon and I am sitting in the backyard of an occupied social center in a mid-size city in Veneto, Italy, together with a group of asylum seekers – all young men from sub-Saharan Africa – and female volunteer teachers from the Italian language school. Alice, the activist running the center’s homeless shelter, is arranging some wooden benches for us in a circular fashion, close enough to hear the speaker, while still ensuring some form of social distancing. We are in July of 2020, and lockdown measures to contain the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic have just been lifted. The center has decided to reopen its doors by hosting, as its first in-person event, a special meeting on the newly approved Amnesty Decree.

Once the group has taken their seats, Sandra, the meeting leader and longtime “comrade” of the center, starts delving into the complicated details and eligibility criteria established by the decree. She puts particular care into dispelling any doubts about asylum seekers’ ability to apply for the regularization without having to give up their pending requests for international protection – a detail that had been left unclear upon the passage of the decree (Morlotti, 2021). Sandra works for an independent union that organizes migrant workers while helping them access various government services (health and welfare benefits, immigration documents, etc.). As an employee “with an activist calling,” she is known for handling even the most hopeless cases, resolute in her mission to “hack” a “rigged” system to her clients’ advantage. The Amnesty Decree is no exception. Ever since the passage of the decree, Sandra has been working painstakingly through her



contacts among local police officers and immigration lawyers to gather information about the procedure, moved by a sense of urgency that transpires from her words that day. Alice echoes these sentiments as she addresses the men, most of whom she knows personally, first in Italian and then in English, issuing twice the same call to arms:

We want to help you, regularize all of you. I know that the government is shit, that they are racists and don't care about you. But they need people to work and so they're doing this *Sanatoria*. *Sanatorie* like this one don't happen very often. The last one was ten years ago and we don't know when the next one is going to be. Maybe, in the meantime, we'll make the revolution, and things will change. But this is all you have for now, so you have to take advantage of it.

This insistence on acting fast and leaving nothing untried is the leitmotif of the entire meeting. "Don't wait until the last minute, start looking now," Sandra urges the attendees, citing the notoriously slow pace of Italian bureaucracy. "Talk to your employer to see if they're willing to sponsor your application. Talk to your friends and your networks, too. Find someone, whoever is willing to give you a job, it doesn't have to be forever." The men interject to ask questions, sharing information about their current workplaces and pending asylum pleas. Meanwhile, the volunteers joke about the possibility of fake-hiring some of them as house helpers. The atmosphere is relaxed and informal, but scathing remarks about the exclusionary yet opportunistic nature of Italian migration policies ("They need people to work") and tips on how to get around the system abound.

In the weeks before the meeting, Sandra and Alice had mobilized to support racialized and marginalized populations most affected by the Covid-19 outbreak through both advocacy and service provision. In March 2020, shortly after the Veneto region had become one of the world's first Covid-19 hotspots, the two women helped stage a sit-in outside the city hall asking for the regularization of all migrants living on the Italian soil, so that they could access healthcare and financial relief measures ("*Sanatoria for all!*"). In those same weeks, Sandra and her union became inundated with requests from people who could not access healthcare and social benefits because the "closure, contingent opening, and /or virtualization of the main public administrations" had made it impossible to renew their IDs and residency permits (Perocco, 2021: 21).

While overburdened with the task of helping people navigate ordinary bureaucracy in extraordinary times, Sandra welcomed the passage of the *Sanatoria* with a combative spirit, as did Alice. Certainly the measure had much more stringent requirements than these two had advocated for, but this only ignited their commitment to ensuring that as many people as possible took advantage of the regularization, especially asylum seekers who had been stuck in a legal limbo waiting for their pleas to be adjudicated. Soon, the two women took to organizing informal meetings to spread the word about this opportunity; connecting with employers potentially interested in sponsoring applications; helping both parties prepare the necessary paperwork; and devising workarounds to ensure that even those who worked in non-eligible employment sectors could have a chance of regularizing their status.

Through this careful and creative hustling, Alice and Sandra transformed simple acts like assisting asylum seekers with bureaucratic procedures into *political* efforts to help them carve out interstitial spaces of autonomy within the legal and temporal constraints of national and international policies and border regimes (Bonizzoni and Hajer, 2023). Fontanari and Ambrosini (2018: 10) deploy the concept of “interstices” to describe the everyday social practices through which refugees and their supporters open up spaces of agency by “creat[ing] fractures in the judicial and political systems.” Here, I suggest that we see interstices not only as legal, spatial, and social, but also as temporal. With support from activists and allies, asylum seekers were able to transform a state of temporal suspension into a space for active waiting and strategizing, taking advantage of the protracted emergency to apply for the *Sanatoria* (cf. Bonizzoni and Dotsey, 2021; Han, 2012; Lanari, 2019).

Even while caught up in the effort to help people navigate heightened precarities and time-bound policy measures, Alice and Sandra did not put their efforts to bring about broader societal change on hold. Rather, they continued to carry out this work in the background and “in the meantime” (to use Alice’s words) balancing present- with future-oriented actions and initiatives. This approach was well exemplified by “Abitare” (“To inhabit, to reside”), the self-funded grassroots organization through which Alice and others sought to “respond to the shortcomings of municipal policies with regard to the right to housing, immigrant integration, and situations of marginality.”<sup>9</sup> Ever since its founding in 2014, Abitare had engaged in several “disturbance actions” (*azioni di disturbo*) to “serve as a megaphone” for people rendered “invisible” by local political discourse. Increasingly, the organization had expanded the reach of its activities beyond the provision of emergency assistance to homeless populations.

In 2019, Abitare decided to turn its small homeless shelter – hosted inside the social center – into a transitional “home” where refugees and asylum seekers, who were put directly in charge of running the facility, could “live, work, and build their future.” Extremely critical of the patronizing approaches dominating official reception systems, Alice and her comrades believed that “building alternatives [to these models] from the bottom up (*dal basso*), by directly involving those who experience these situations, is possible.” This project was geared towards legally and financially precarious migrants who struggled to find accommodation upon exiting official programs. “You could think of this experiment as a sort of third-stage reception,” noted Alice, quickly pointing out, however, that the organization did not want to replicate the model of “the white people helping the migrants.” “Ours is a decolonial and intersectional network, or at least it tries to be,” she further elaborated, referring to the heterogeneous publics involved in Abitare’s actions, from pensioners struggling to pay rents to young families on the waiting list for public housing, to migrants of various backgrounds experiencing discrimination in the rental market. Some of the people who lived in this “home” eventually joined the organization and its nightly outings across the city, connecting activists with other struggles and people in need. This was the case of Seydou, a thirty-something man from the Gambia who, during one of Abitare’s campaigns, recounted: “This temporary home, where I stayed for a year and a half [...] gave me the opportunity to look for a job, to finally have my own freedom, to build what I wanted to become.” Seydou used the time inside the

“home” to kick-start his career as a tailor. He also continued to engage with the center and its publics even after leaving the shelter, setting up his workshop inside one of the unused buildings.

Alice, who was also involved with local LGBTQ+ activism, resorted frequently to the word “network” (*rete*) to refer to the constellation of people bound to each other by friendship, shared ideals, solidarity, and mutual aid who gravitated around Abitare and the social center, while also existing outside of them (as in the case of Sandra’s union). “I wouldn’t call it a *group*, for it doesn’t have that cohesiveness or stability over time,” she reflected. “It’s rather a network that is activated in situations of need, whose composition varies case by case.” We could see this network as coalescing and fluctuating according to the rhythms of the various emergencies facing its communities. As others have shown (Zamponi, 2018: 100), state and local governments play a key role as the counterparts of solidarity movements, “creating and removing emergency situations to which the movement answers and the related political opportunities.” However, this particular network existed beyond these situations, sustained by the everyday work of activists like Sandra, Alice, and Seydou to carve out interstitial spaces (and times) of struggle within a hostile political context. This substratum of shared goals, cultivated relationships, and memories of solidarity was reactivated every time a new crisis erupted, prompting people to “show up” and quickly shift gears from direct action to political protest, or vice versa, all the while reframing their strategies and language in a broad enough way to unite different publics.

In the same months as Alice and Sandra were busy helping people take advantage of the *Sanatoria*, for instance, a major Covid outbreak erupted in the area’s largest CAS, triggering securitizing measures and racializing discourses from local government authorities. The two women thus quickly banded together with other organizations, migrant-led collectives, and sympathizers to stage a protest outside the facility. While incorporating references to earlier actions undertaken by these same collectives to denounce human rights violations occurring inside this reception center, protesters (re)framed their stances through the language of Black Lives Matter, which was then being increasingly taken up by activists across Europe, using slogans such as “racism is the real health threat” (*il pericolo per la salute è il razzismo*).

This ability to refocus priorities and horizons of activism, to tackle new emergencies without losing sight of long-term “revolutionary” goals, to work through the cracks in official systems while also criticizing these systems head-on, constituted the default operating mode of these organizations beyond pandemic times. “If anything [changed] with the pandemic, it was the number of people who wanted to come out to the streets to volunteer with us [to deliver assistance to the homeless]. Everybody was looking for an excuse to get out of the house,” Alice told me, with a hint of irony, when we met in the fall of 2022. At the time, Abitare’s social housing experiment had come to an end, pandemic restrictions were being phased out, and the home-shelter was being transformed into a help desk for migrants. As one initiative morphed into the next, temporary collectives formed to tackle new, “ordinary” emergencies, feeding into an “ever-changing assemblage of peripheral humanitarianism” entangling various people and places across the city (Ramakrishnan and Thieme, 2022: 781). Whether they dissipate quickly or turn into new

configurations, these assemblages hold a transformative potential to rethink a late capitalist society of differentiated rights and racialized exclusions through “structural forms of care, struggle, and political imagination” (Ticktin, 2020).

### **“We didn’t want things to end this way”: Post-reception in small mountain towns**

When I visit the offices of the third-sector organization “Insieme” (“together”) in August 2021, at the peak of Italian summertime and with Covid-19 cases on the rise, I am almost surprised to see them bustling with activity. I am there to meet with Silvia and Antonia, the two employers responsible for the organization’s migrant-serving initiatives. I find them sitting behind a desk stacked with a pile of papers, their cellphones ringing incessantly, colleagues stepping into the room to announce visitors. I cannot help but notice the contrast between this scene and the eerily quiet atmosphere that surrounded our last (virtual) conversation in May 2020, when the two women were grappling with pandemic restrictions halting the launch of their new project, a help desk for migrants. Back then, the odds seemed to be stacked against them. A year later, not only is the help desk up and running, its pool of users growing by the day. But the initiative has taken on a new dimension, as Insieme embarked on a “small experiment” in third-stage reception, starting a transitional housing program for refugees.

These initiatives stemmed from a disillusionment with national policies during Salvini’s era. Until 2018, Insieme had been running reception programs (CAS), according to the model of “diffused” reception embraced by the local municipality. Yet, with the passage of the Security Decrees, the organization had come to face a tough choice: staying in the network, thus significantly lowering the standards of their programs; or opting out of it altogether, with the risk of forcing asylum seekers out of the system, or at least out of the places and contexts they had known until that point. Insieme chose to opt out, as did nearly all of the other organizations that had been involved in asylum seekers’ reception in the region.

Antonia and Silvia had always struck me as very different in their approach to working alongside migrant communities, almost embodying two ideal types of reception workers one can find in the Italian system, “the bureaucrat and the militant” (Altin and Sanò, 2017: 16). One (Antonia) is poised and controlled, her opinions tempered by the rationale and lingo of the organization. The other (Silvia) is more unfiltered, her biting remarks and hippie-ish attire betraying her background as a leftist activist. And yet, in their account of the organization’s response to the Salvini Decree, their roles seem inverted: Silvia appears calm in her rejection of anything Salvini-related, Antonia more emotional, as if still processing what has happened. “When the first tender notice (*bando*) [to run reception programs] after the passage of Salvini Decree came out, and we saw the extent to which our services would have been reduced, we decided, as a group, not to apply any more,” Silvia explains matter-of-factly. “We didn’t want to accept those conditions, neither for us, nor for the boys.” Antonia picks up where she left off:

This decision provoked a certain ... shock. For us, it was truly a loss. We didn't want everything to end this way. *We were looking for an ideal continuation to this experience, a way to carry forward what we had developed.* And we have found it through this [help desk] project.

After opting out of official reception, Insieme faced an impasse. Many asylum seekers were turning to Silvia and Antonia for support in establishing a new life after leaving the CAS, but the two women lacked the financial means and infrastructure to help them. The political climate was far from ideal, with right-wing politicians attacking and criminalizing migrant sea rescue and local mayors shying away from taking concrete actions to oppose Salvini's policies. Silvia and Antonia thus turned to the private sector which, in the wealthy industrial region of Veneto, has historically played a key role (alongside the Catholic Church) in the incorporation of migrant populations (Cancellieri et al., 2015). In 2019, Insieme secured a grant from a private banking foundation to launch a help desk (*sportello*) offering all-round orientation services to people with migratory backgrounds.

This new project tapped into the informal networks that the organization had built over the years, using them to support asylum seekers formerly hosted inside the CAS, so that "not everything would be lost." Antonia describes these local "networks" as including

primary schools, schools for continuing education, the local job center, the hospital's prevention department ... as well as private citizens who did all they could do to help. [...] During these five years when we ran the CAS, we had found our go-to people for a series of issues, and we didn't want to throw all of that away. Once you've found who has the keys to the door, you'd better cultivate these relations! [*laughs*]

While the local municipality had earned national praise and visibility for its diffused reception model, it was mostly private citizens and third-sector organizations that sustained these politics of welcome in the everyday. My fieldwork featured numerous encounters with people like Mario, a local resident who had hosted two asylum seekers he had met through his son's soccer team in his home for several months. Recounting his desperate attempts to find accommodation for the two men after their time in the CAS had ended, Mario bluntly noted that "no networks existed back then. I asked around [the prefecture, the city, the local Caritas] but didn't receive help from anyone. Only later did those networks materialize, but it was because I reached out to people I knew." These perspectives were echoed in the stories shared by my refugee interlocutors, who referred to their encounters and relationships with longtime residents as turning points in their journey towards building a "normal" life outside the CAS. Assane, a Senegalese man who had been hosted by Insieme, told me of a "very lucky" encounter he had with a woman in the local town library. At the time, he had a temporary job contract in a local factory and was desperately looking for housing. Hearing about his situation, the woman and her husband offered to let him stay in their house in exchange for a small rent. Their cohabitation lasted for a couple of years, until Assane was finally able to obtain international protection and land a permanent job contract.

Organizations like Insieme were only half-aware of these and other spontaneously emerging instances of vernacular humanitarianism, as Silvia recalls:

Since we had a diffused reception model, our facilities were scattered across the province, in places that were [...] sometimes even 10 kilometers apart. In some of the small towns, we saw emerging spontaneously these groups of people who would go to interact with the boys [asylum seekers] – running various initiatives, sometimes even without coordinating with us first. We didn't know anything, and then, one day, we would find out that the boys had been invited to a fair at the town library, or to help serve tables at a local event. And in all truth, you just have to create an occasion for these people [volunteers] to gather again.

For some of the asylum seekers hosted by Insieme, interactions with local residents had disclosed possibilities for escaping their confinement in the camp as well as the paternalistic relationship of dependence that characterized reception programs – which we see transpiring from Silvia's use of the infantilizing word "boys" (*ragazzi*) above (Zavaroni et al., 2021). "The organization helped us a lot with finding jobs and sorting out our documents," Demba, a friend of Assane, reflected. "But when you are in the CAS, and you feel like you depend on them for support, you can't wait to get out and become independent." In a way, Insieme's help desk and transitional housing programs can be seen as attempts to honor these desires for independence by channeling the spirit and "traces" of informal welcome into new initiatives.

When setting up the help desk, Silvia and Antonia (the only paid staff on the project) had asked some of the residents who had been helping refugees on a private basis if they would be willing to volunteer for the project. "We had even recruited some of the asylum seekers who were previously part of our CAS to serve as translators for clients speaking less-common languages," Silvia recounts. The outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 and the adoption of strict lockdown measures forced the project to stall. Not wanting to risk losing the grant money, and thus a chance to help people at a time when they most needed it, Silvia and Antonia opted for a "soft" launch of the help desk which, for most of 2020, only existed in the atomized virtual space of phone and WhatsApp conversations. In its initial stages, the project built on existing needs and contacts. Within a year, though, the number of people using the help desk had swollen, triggered by the Amnesty Decree and its intricate bureaucratic requirements. This period was also punctuated by a new string of lockdowns and pandemic waves, which meant that the original plan of involving volunteers – many of them elderly and thus more at risk – never materialized. Instead, another initiative gradually took shape, as the two women shifted gears to respond to the pandemic and its multiple, connected emergencies.

Shortly after the first Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, when calls to "stay home" dominated national media, some refugee men turned to Silvia and Antonia for help in their desperate search for housing. The two women thus convinced Insieme to devote the flats formerly used for their CAS to help some of them until they had found a more stable accommodation. Unlike the help desk, this transitional housing program was internally funded by the organization, giving the two women considerable leeway in adjusting eligibility criteria as the pandemic and housing situations evolved (for the worse):

We usually have about four people at a time living in the house. In theory, they should remain there only for the time necessary to stabilize their economic situation and find another accommodation. Some managed to do that [...] they secured long-term job contracts, which helped [with finding housing]. Others, who came during the second wave, especially those who worked in sectors that were hit the hardest by the pandemic, like the restaurant industry ... only had on-call job contracts and were more exposed to the course of events.

The pandemic and, before then, the Security Decrees increased the risk of homelessness among refugees and asylum seekers, forcing many of them to accept substandard living conditions (D'Ambrosio, 2022). Silvia and Antonia recognized that housing precarity was connected to larger structural issues that required new policies rather than private solutions. "But local governments are in the red and absent, really," Silvia noted bluntly. Like Abitare, Insieme operated within the institutional void created by the national government's abdication of its role in coordinating and supporting local municipal efforts for the inclusion of refugees. It is within this void that their makeshift activism unfolded, which, in this instance, led Silvia and Antonia to bypass the local government altogether and use the health emergency as a lever to recombine existing networks and organizational resources into the creation of new projects.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have taken the Covid-19 pandemic as a magnifying glass to look at the makeshift activism of local organizations seeking to help asylum seekers and refugees build a future beyond the expiration date of their residency permits and stay inside reception programs. While differing in their roles and political commitments, organizations like Insieme and Abitare similarly refused to succumb to state-imposed emergency approaches and temporalities of crisis. Rather than subscribing to dominant narratives of scarcity (Giudici, 2021), Silvia, Antonia, Sandra, and Alice emphasized the *richness* of relations forged by and in support of people on the move, tapping into these "peopled infrastructures" (Simone, 2004) to build alternatives to the state's non-existent paths towards long-term inclusion. These women were not alone in their stubborn refusal of emergency reception models. Since 2018 many organizations across Italy and Veneto have demobilized from the official space of reception to focus, either formally or in an underground manner, on "third-stage" initiatives (Bertasi, 2022; Centri d'Italia, 2022). Thus, future studies should pay more attention to the realm of post-reception as a key battleground for the reshaping of asylum policies through small-scale instances of makeshift activism. Similar to the "makeshift" or "DIY" *urbanism* theorized by scholarship on cities under austerity, this activism is one of "minor practices and ... little anti-utopias" developing through the cracks and interstices opened up by existing modes of governance (Tonkiss, 2013: 323). For sure, many of the initiatives analyzed here were short-lived or quickly morphed into a different shape. Insieme's help desk was shut down just a few months after my last visit in 2021, because the funding had run out. Yet, as Silvia cared to remind me, some of the "seeds" it had planted have since then been picked up by a consortium of public and private actors concerned about the lack of affordable housing in the region. With their mobilizations, Sandra and Alice shaped the lives of dozens of asylum

seekers, all of whom were able to use the *Sanatoria* to obtain a residency permit and eventually take up employment in a sector that better matched their opportunities and aspirations. In the future, anthropological research should continue to follow the non-linear trajectories and multiple afterlives of initiatives that seek to carve out spaces of care and autonomy for those who are marginalized by national policies and global emergencies.

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### Notes

1. All translations from sources in Italian are by the author.
2. As reported by ASGI (2022), the average waiting time for court decisions on asylum pleas, considering also the right to appeal in case of a negative decision, is three years.
3. Some regional districts, including those where I conducted fieldwork, require asylum seekers to leave reception facilities when their wages exceed a certain (rather low) threshold. This rule, much like the one requiring refugees to leave CASs as soon as their status is recognized, does not account for the difficulties and discrimination they face when looking for housing in the private market. Due to their extremely precarious legal and financial situation, asylum seekers in particular might be drawn towards the informal labor market to avoid losing accommodation (Sarli, 2019).
4. As recently discussed by Mitchell (2023) and Van Liempt (2023), the concept of emplacement allows for centering migrants' agency and ways of embedding themselves in a particular place, pointing to a "kind of insurgent social and spatial integration from below" (Mitchell, 2023: 119).
5. To appreciate the impact of this measure, it is sufficient to consider that, in the year before the approval of the decree (2017), 25% of all requests for international protection resulted in the granting of a humanitarian permit, 8% in refugee status, and 8% in subsidiary protection, the remaining 52% being denied ("Cos'è la protezione umanitaria," 2018).



6. These changes were short-lived. In March 2023, Italy's new right-wing government passed the so-called "Cutro" Decree (D.L. 20/2023), which marked a return to the Salvini era, further reducing the support available to asylum seekers while strengthening the state's arbitrary powers to control and detain them.
7. All interviews were conducted in Italian and have been translated for the purpose of citation in the text.
8. To ensure confidentiality, the names of cities and localities have been removed, while pseudonyms are used to refer to people and organizations.
9. The source of this quote has been removed to protect the interlocutor's confidentiality.

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