



Spaces of football and belonging for people seeking asylum

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Spaces of football and belonging for people seeking asylum: Resisting policy-imposed liminality in Italy

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Abstract

As radical right parties capitalise on the salience of immigration among the Italian public, this paper explores solidarity grassroots football as a unique lens to investigate how people seeking asylum resist the effects of policies and discourses of exclusion, and develop senses of belonging in the microscale of their day-to-day lives. Sport and migration studies researchers have primarily considered policy-based questions (e.g. how can sport facilitate integration?). In shifting the focus from integration to belonging, this ethnographic study engages with the embodied and affective experiences of individuals seeking asylum. Employing the analytical framework for the study of belonging advanced by Yuval-Davis and integrated by Antonsich, four themes are discussed: the agency of people seeking asylum in appropriating football to nurture a positive sense of self; the emergence of the material environment of sporting activities as a space of belonging; the negotiation of belonging within and beyond the team; and the local neighbourhood as possible *trait d'union* between sport-specific attachments and belonging to the wider community. The article contends that involvement in solidarity grassroots football can provide people seeking asylum with opportunities for belonging that go beyond the momentary, and play a vital role in resisting the liminality imposed by autochthonic politics of belonging.

Keywords

space of belonging, football (soccer), migration, asylum seekers, liminality

Introduction

Following the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, in Italy, populist parties with a critical stance on immigration capitalised on a widespread concern about cultural diversity and

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made big gains in the March 2018 and September 2022 general elections. In June 2018, the Five Stars Movement and the right-wing populist party, the League, created a coalition government that, with the appointment of the League's leader, Matteo Salvini, as Minister of Interior sought to take a highly restrictive approach to immigration and asylum (Strazzari and Grandi, 2019). In October 2022, a government led by the leader of the radical-right party *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), Giorgia Meloni, succeeded the technocrat-led Draghi government (Garzia and Karremans, 2021). Anti-immigration sentiments and policies are not new phenomena originating from the 'refugee crisis' (Ambrosini, 2013; Dal Lago, 1999). However, as Geddes and Pettrachin (2020: 234) note, quoting data from Eurobarometer, the percentage of Italian people who considered immigration among the two most impellent issues of the country sharply rose from 5% in 2014 to over 30% in 2015 and reached its peak (over 40%) in 2017. Hence, the authors argue, the salience of the 'immigration issue' constitutes a considerable factor of change in the Italian political landscape and a major element behind the popularity of radical right-wing parties.

Research has contended that increasingly restrictive asylum policies and stigmatising public debate in the Global North in the last decade have impacted dramatically on people seeking asylum's life conditions and chances, and on their sense of self and place in the new setting (Griffiths, 2014; O'Reilly, 2020).

It is in this context that supranational and national migration policies are enacted, contested and negotiated in 'local battlegrounds' through a wide range of actors – such as local authorities, NGOs and civic associations (Ambrosini, 2021). In recent years, grassroots football and multi-sports projects have increasingly become a privileged setting for Italian civic associations and left leaning social movements to create safe spaces of inclusion and socialisation for, and in solidarity with, those subjected to criminalising asylum policies. These experiences have converged in an informal and wider network of grassroots projects commonly known as the *sport popolare* (literally, popular sport) movement (Mauro, 2016).

Recent scholarship has lamented the 'instrumentalist tendency in research' (Spaaij et al., 2019: 14) on sport and forced migration – whereby sport is mobilised as a tool for achieving policy goals, for example, integration – and called for a more robust focus on the wider role of sport in the lives of people with forced migration backgrounds (De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell, 2021; Nunn et al., 2022). In this sense, De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell (2021) have outlined the significant epistemological and political implications of such a policy-driven focus – that is, the failure to explore refugees and people seeking asylum's sport experiences and practices *vis-à-vis* state-imposed socio-spatial mechanisms of exclusion (e.g. coercive dispersal, rights to work, etc.) as well as to challenge the essentialising gaze on this population. This paper builds on this scholarship and, in shifting the focus from integration to belonging in sport, engages with the intimate, embodied and affective experiences and practices of individuals seeking asylum in grassroots football (Nunn et al., 2022). In particular, this article explores the significance of these experiences and practices in participants' resistance of socio-spatial exclusion and development of belonging. In doing so, it brings new knowledge which could help move refugee solidarity practices (including sports and leisure) in a direction mindful not just of people's needs but also of their agency and strengths.

The data discussed in this article was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation within two solidarity grassroots football projects in Italy during the first year of the Five Stars Movement and League government (October 2018–July 2019). Notably, the Immigration and Security Decree (decree law 132/2018), popularly known as the Salvini Decree, entered into force on the 4th October 2018. Among the critical points of these sets of laws for participants seeking asylum were the cancellation of ‘humanitarian protection’ (article 1) and the exclusion of the temporary permit for registering at the registration office (article 13). The former significantly decreased their chances of obtaining a form of protection that would entitle them to the same welfare provisions as Italian citizens. The latter allowed local authorities more discretion on, and leverage for, denying people seeking asylum a focal document – the Italian identity card – to access key services (Chiaromonte, 2019). Together with the Immigration and Security Decree, and equally important for the participants, was a new tender of specifications for Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS) that entailed significant cuts. This meant that during my time in the field, some participants saw their reception centre shut down and were forcibly dispersed to other facilities in the region.

This paper is organised as follows. I first identify the place of the article in the existing literature on sport and people with forced migration backgrounds, and outline its theoretical basis. In particular, drawing from Yuval-Davis (2006) and Antonsich (2010), I theorise belonging as a dynamic process in which an emotional attachment to a collectivity or a place is negotiated *vis-à-vis* practices and discourses of socio-spatial exclusion/inclusion – that is, the politics of belonging. I then illustrate and justify the choice to employ in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation as methods of enquiry. Following this, I analyse and discuss four themes emerging from the research: the agency of people seeking asylum in appropriating football for development of a positive sense of self; the emergence of the material environment of sporting activities (the pitch) as a space of belonging; the negotiation of attachment to the collectivity within and beyond the team; and the local neighbourhood as possible *trait d’union* between sport-specific attachments and development of senses of belonging to the wider community. I conclude that solidarity grassroots football can provide opportunities for shared senses of belonging with the wider local community that go beyond the fleeting. As such, grassroots football can play a vital role in the resistance of the liminality imposed by autochthonic politics of belonging.

In discussing participants’ experiences, this article uses the term ‘people [individuals/those/men] seeking asylum’. This is mainly to avoid imposing the legal label of ‘asylum seeker’ that participants found stigmatising, and to highlight the fact they were still in the process of receiving refugee status. Ultimately, although I mostly employ the expression ‘people seeking asylum’, the experiences and practices discussed in this manuscript overwhelmingly belong to men seeking asylum.

Analytical framework: Belonging and politics of belonging

In addressing the questions outlined in the introduction, this article engages with Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) and Marco Antonsich’s (2010) work on belonging and the politics

of belonging. The notion of belonging is often mobilised as a self-explanatory term and conflated with notions of identity and citizenship (Antonsich, 2010). On a general level, belonging is constituted by ‘how we feel about our location in the social world’ (Anthias, 2006: 21). Its nature is relational and deeply connected to intimate experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Belonging is also about rights and obligations which come from formal citizenship. As such, belonging is multidimensional and located at the intersection of political practices and day-to-day lived experiences.

Yuval-Davis (2006) has theorised this intersection by distinguishing between belonging, as an ‘emotional attachment, about “feeling at home”, [...] about feeling safe’ (2006: 196), and the politics of belonging, as discourses and practices of exclusion and inclusion. In this context, belonging is never fixed and always in becoming. The temporary and apparent fixity of belonging is only ‘a naturalised effect of a particular hegemonic form of power relations’ (2006: 199).

To advance a better understanding of the notion of belonging, Yuval-Davis distinguishes three interrelated analytical facets (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Firstly, the author acknowledges the relation between social location and belonging. Belonging to a specific class, gender, race, age implies the occupation of a position in society which is deeply dependent on the dominant matrix of power relations of a given socio-historical context. The second facet concerns belonging as the result of both identifications and emotional attachments to specific collectivities. In this sense, belonging reveals its emotional side. The third facet includes those political and ethical criteria through which we value our own and other people’s belonging. The politics of belonging is strictly linked to the struggles around these criteria and concerns the way in which people and institutions make use of social locations, identifications and emotional attachments in order to draw boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In recent years – Yuval-Davis et al. (2018) have contended – immigration policies and discourses about diversity have gradually been informed by an autochthonic politics of belonging, whereby the claim ‘I was here before you’ assumes central stage in the work of boundary making.

However, Yuval-Davis has made clear that:

The politics of belonging involves not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers [...] but also their contestation, challenge and resistance by other political agents. (2006: 205)

In the context of this research, the football projects under investigation contested, challenged and resisted the autochthonic political project of belonging embodied by the Salvini decree.

While commending Yuval-Davis’ analytical effort, Antonsich (2010) has pointed out that such a framework tends to overlook the spatial nature of the boundaries drawn by different politics of belonging. In other words, according to Antonsich, Yuval-Davis’ theorisation does not offer a robust framework to analyse that personal feeling of being at home and safe in a place (place-belongingness), so central in the intimate side of belonging. From this perspective, belonging can be fully grasped only if we take into consideration practices and discourses of socio-spatial exclusion/inclusion (i.e. the politics of belonging)

as well as the spatial and affective dimensions of the feeling of being 'at home' (Antonsich, 2010).

Accordingly, this paper theorises belonging not just as a cognitive process of identification with a collectivity, but a dynamic process of seeking and granting in which discourses and practices of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion impact on the development of attachment to particular places. In this theoretical context, belonging is a feeling built on the accumulation of those practices, knowledge and memories which are connected through the everyday use of space (Fenster, 2005).

People seeking asylum and policy-imposed liminality

In order to reach a nuanced understanding of the relevance of solidarity grassroots football in participants' lives as well as in their search for belonging, this article engages with works that have theorised through the lens of liminality the temporal and spatial dimensions of the experiences of those seeking asylum in the Global North (Hynes, 2011; O'Reilly, 2020). Scholars have drawn from, and applied to, refugees and people seeking asylum's lives, van Gennep's (1960) theorisation of the liminal period in rites of passage, and Turner's (1969) later development of the notion. In van Gennep's (1960) work on rites of passage, the liminal phase represented the middle and transitory stage from the separation to the new incorporation. According to Victor Turner (1969: 95):

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the position assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.

Since they are in-between 'home and host, part of society, but sometimes never fully integrated', refugees and asylum seekers have commonly been conceived as liminal beings (Thomassen, 2009: 19).

Hynes (2011) has applied the concept to analyse the impact of compulsory dispersal policies on people seeking asylum's lives in the UK. Indefinite waiting, grim living conditions and a process of relocation to places they do not have the freedom to choose, force the lives of those seeking asylum into a general state of temporariness and spatial uncertainty ruled by a sense of lack of control and low self-esteem. In this temporal and spatial state of in-betweenness, the quest for belonging is necessarily an uphill journey. This condition of policy-imposed liminality has been observed from the vantage point of a wide range of sites. Reception centres (O'Reilly, 2020; Waardenburg et al., 2018), queues at Home Affairs offices (Sutton et al., 2011), border crossing spaces and refugee camps (Tsoni, 2016) have often been theorised as liminal spaces. Waardenburg et al. (2018) have documented how liminal spaces like reception centres, characterised by meaningless time and a wide range of measures of control, neutralise the potential positive outcomes of sport, such as development of feelings of belonging. O'Reilly (2020) has thoroughly described the spatial (lack of autonomy, sense of confinement, lack of intimacy, etc.) and temporal (boredom, directionless of time, waiting) dimensions of liminality experienced by those in Direct Provision centres in Ireland, and proposed the concept of 'ontological liminality' to portray participants' internalisation of a sense of being a liminal being or, in other words,

[...] the ways in which an existence which is 'in-between' becomes part of one's identity and self and therefore lived on an everyday basis. (2020: 177)

However, despite their experience of policy-imposed liminality, people seeking asylum do not passively accept the condition of liminal beings but negotiate and challenge it in their everyday space of action, seeking opportunities to regain control over their lives, forge relationships and develop belonging (Hynes, 2011; O'Reilly, 2020).

This paper builds on this work and illustrates the relevance of solidarity grassroots football in people seeking asylum's negotiation of liminality and quest for belonging.

Sport, forced migration and belonging

In the context of sport and forced migration, an increasing body of literature has questioned the epistemological and political implications of a functionalist focus on integration, and shifted focus to how people with forced migration backgrounds experience sport *vis-à-vis* policies, practices and discourses of exclusion (De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell, 2021; Nunn et al., 2022; Webster, 2022; Webster and Abunaama, 2021). Webster (2022), for instance, has documented the ways that forced migrant men experienced their footballing pleasures as moments of agency and regained control over their emotions, countering the dehumanising dynamics entailed in the UK asylum system. Sport has also been shown to provide those caught in the nets of the asylum process with opportunities to experience – albeit momentarily – meaningful time (Webster and Abunaama, 2021) as well as regained control over the construction of their identity (Woodhouse and Concricode, 2017). On the other hand, scholars have also acknowledged the potential for sport to reproduce exclusions along the – often intersecting – lines of class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality (Adjepong, 2017; Caudwell and Browne, 2011; Ratna, 2010). Adjepong (2017), for example, has illustrated how the presence of women in a commonly perceived masculine sport, like rugby, is accepted on the basis of the adherence to a social hierarchy centred on whiteness and heterosexuality.

Alongside the move from a functionalist focus, there has been growing interest on how people with forced migration backgrounds develop (non)belonging through sport (De Martini Ugolotti, 2015; Nunn et al., 2022; Spaaij, 2015; Stone, 2018). This body of literature is of particular interest for this article. De Martini Ugolotti (2015) has shown that sport can facilitate the transformation of spaces, previously experienced as exclusionary, into spaces of belonging (De Martini Ugolotti, 2015). Through their bodily performances, expression and engagement with urban sites, people with forced migration backgrounds manage to create 'paths of belonging and self-worth within marginalising environments and to negotiate processes of inclusion and exclusion' (2015: 29). In a similar vein, Stone (2018) has contended that through regular presence and routine activities, football spaces may become places of belonging and provide opportunities for people seeking asylum to both interact with the wider population and claim their presence in public. The very activity of playing football in public spaces represents a claim: 'this space belongs to me too, I belong here!' Although alone unable to overturn the detrimental effects of restrictive asylum policies, sport – and in the context of this research, football – can offer opportunities for 'moments of belonging' (2018: 178). In

his ethnographic work, Spaaij (2015) acknowledged the multi-layered and dynamic nature of belonging developed within community football by Somali Australian youth with refugee backgrounds. Football worked as a site in which belonging based on clan affiliation could be blurred and opportunities for developing diasporic and, in some cases, transnational belonging could arise. Yet, football was not able to break gender barriers and go beyond the gendered nature of belonging. Furthermore, the ability to become at 'home' in Australia had to be negotiated *vis-à-vis* wider 'othering' practices (e.g. nicknames with racial connotations) that informed the politics of belonging of those, in football, with the power to grant belonging to the national imagined community.

Scholars (Burdsey, 2011; Doidge et al., 2020a) have contended that belonging in sport is not only impacted by institutional policies but also by a sport organisation's own culture and practices. In this context, literature has shown that for racialised minorities in the Global North, belonging is not necessarily an outcome of sport participation (Burdsey, 2011; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2008). Burdsey, for example, has documented how colour-blind ideology and persistence of 'racial microaggressions' in first-class cricket in England contribute to the marginalisation of players from ethnic minority backgrounds.

As such, Spaaij (2015) argues, a major challenge for all the actors involved in solidarity grassroots sports initiatives is

to make the social boundaries that demarcate spaces of (not)belonging more fully permeable and create conditions that make their crossing easy and equitable. (2015: 316)

This paper understands participants' experiences of belonging as situated at the intersection of the government's autochthonic politics of belonging and the attempts of the projects under investigation to make the crossing of oppressive social boundaries 'easy and equitable'.

Research design and methods

The data analysed in this paper is part of the dataset collected during the author's doctoral research (2017–2021). Data from ten months of participant observation with two solidarity grassroots football projects is integrated with data gathered through 17 semi-structured interviews.

Participant observation took place within ASD Quadrato Meticcio (QM – Padova) and Africa Academy Calcio (AAC – Livorno). The former project was constituted by both people seeking asylum and local Italian people, while the other project was constituted entirely by people seeking asylum from Africa, apart from the three organisers and coaches – who were local Italian people. While both QM and AAC allowed me to investigate the fixed spaces of the pitches in which the training sessions and matches would take place, QM provided me with two additional fixed sites to carry out my observation, the '*sede*' (literally, the headquarters) and the '*piazzetta*' (literally, the little square) it faces. The *sede* was a re-purposed commercial unit – located close to the pitch and in the middle of a council housing project – that hosted QM's office, a bar and a space to watch films or matches on TV, or organise debates and live music. As we will see

later, the *sede* and the *piazzetta* turned out to be the focal points of QM. Participant observation was extremely useful for refining the research questions, building rapport with participants and identifying key informants to invite to interviews. In addition, participant observation allowed for informal conversations, which were helpful in further exploring key themes which emerged in the interviews. During participant observation, I took part in matches as a player and assisted with coaching, event organisation and practical day-to-day tasks (e.g. bartending at fundraising events, line marking the pitch, etc.).

Semi-structured interview participants came from the following Western African countries: The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea, Mali and Ghana. Among them, only one female took part. While QM did have a women's team – a futsal team – only one member was an individual seeking asylum. I followed a flexible interview guide that aimed to elicit reflections on the meanings that participation in grass-roots football took in participants' day-to-day lives and in their experiences of inclusion/exclusion in Italy. In order to steer the conversations towards 'place-belongingness', for example, I would ask them to name spaces related to QM/AAC in which they felt particularly comfortable. Then, I would ask probing questions such as 'what do you feel when you're there?' or 'how different do you feel when you are in [place where participants said to avoid]?'

Interview participants were recruited during participant observation. Although the overall principle behind the recruitment process was a purposeful sampling technique, I counted on the help of the first interviewees and gatekeepers to generate 'smaller snowballs' within their social networks. In practice, I asked early interviewees if they could help me to find someone interested in taking part in the interviews who would fit the profiles I was seeking. This led them to talk about their interview experience with their peers and convey a level of trust and curiosity towards me and my project that made the recruitment process smoother and participation genuinely voluntary.

All the data collected was analysed through the six-phase strategy of thematic analysis outlined in Braun and Clarke's (2006) seminal study. In the first phase, I familiarised myself with the data collected. Fieldnotes and interview data were transcribed and transferred into NVivo. I then produced an initial set of codes (Phase 2) using 'in vivo' coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For example, 'family' was one initial code. In Phases 3–5, I collated similar codes and created initial themes. For instance, one theme was 'sense of belonging to the team'. Each theme was reviewed in relation to relevance to dataset (i.e. is there enough meaningful data to support this theme?) and research questions. In Phase 6, the themes were defined, analysed and interpreted in relation to the literature. For example, the theme 'sense of belonging to the team' was defined and analysed in relation to belonging as emotional attachment to a collectivity (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Then, I started the final analysis and write-up.

The study received ethical approval from the Ulster University Research Ethics Committee. To help ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms and details that would risk making them recognisable have been slightly modified. The research engaged with approaches that go beyond the standardised practices of procedural ethics (MacKenzie et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2023). As a White Italian male researcher, I was aware of the risk of reproducing the exploitative relations that participants experienced in their day-to-day lives. To provide

participants with some level of control over their stories and the study, I employed an iterative model of consent (MacKenzie et al., 2007; Pittaway et al., 2010). Semi-structured interviews were carried out in the second half of the fieldwork and participants' willingness to take part in the study was checked again before the interviews. The prolonged time I spent playing and volunteering with participants allowed for the development of trust and strong relationships. This helped to create a relaxed and friendly conversational atmosphere in the interviews and contributed to shifting a degree of control over them to participants. This allowed participants to delve into topics they felt comfortable to discuss, minimising the risk of re-traumatisation and emotional stress. My player position as well as the rapport developed buffered the risk of being seen as part of the coaching team and being told what they thought would please the coaching team.

The desire to maintain this relaxed atmosphere was at the core of my decision not to work with interpreters. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English (11 interviews) and Italian (6 interviews, then translated by the author). In some circumstances, language fluency may have impacted on the depth of the data collected. On the other hand, collaborating with an interpreter would incur the risk of formalising the atmosphere of the interview. To minimise the limitations coming from this decision, clarifications over interview data and their interpretation were sought in the field through informal conversations. This approach had the benefit of participants retaining some control over their stories (Pittaway et al., 2010).

Although this study did not employ the Participatory Action Research framework that has been used in recent works on sport and forced migration studies (Smith et al., 2023; Stone, 2018), the methodological decisions outlined above contributed to creating more equitable relations. Yet, my position of privilege in terms of language, race, gender, legal status and class, still involve an inextricable differential of power between me and the participants. Acknowledging the methodological limitations of this study and outlining the actions adopted to minimise them, therefore 'exposing the partiality of [my] perspective', is how I attempt to avoid the totalising and objectifying gaze of the privileged researcher on the participant (England, 1994: 250).

'I want to showcase my talent': agency and self-esteem in solidarity grassroots football

One of the main themes that emerged in interviews, informal conversations and observation was the eagerness of those seeking asylum to show their footballing abilities. Their involvement in football was experienced as a way to be seen by others. This often involved a pronounced instrumental and very pragmatic approach to footballing activity. In most cases, participants seemed to interpret the role of the team in which they were involved as a platform through which to emerge as a footballer. In AAC, this approach created a degree of frustration in the local organisers who tended to regard it as a form of cynicism and lack of gratitude towards their 'humanitarian' efforts. This divergence revealed participants' agency in the appropriation of spaces of football often in contrast with the organisers' expectations.

The pragmatic approach to footballing activity is well illustrated by Abdul, an AAC player, when I asked him the reasons for low attendance at the training session that week. Abdul complained that AAC did not organise enough friendly matches with other teams, and added:

We want AAC to be that platform... where people can come and see us [...] if that's happening every year we see the movement of people joining...they'll see this place as a platform to come and showcase their talent...and if people come, people come to see us, we play, they'll sign us and they'll give us monthly tips...so things like that....

Similar to most of the male participants I interviewed, Abdul was adamant about seeing his experience as an opportunity to get trained, be seen by scouts, play at a higher level and be paid or get 'monthly tips'. Although at risk of being unrealistic, I suggest that these expectations provided the material upon which participants nurtured confidence and self-esteem. Scholars have illustrated the sense of humiliation and feeling of being devalued that those in the asylum system experience (Elsrud, 2020; Hynes, 2011). According to Elsrud (2020), biased and increasingly restrictive asylum policies and criminalising discourses have forced many young people seeking asylum into a condition of 'social death', that is 'a state of social valuelessness' (2020: 5). In this context, the hopes of competing at higher levels and being paid, together with an eagerness to show off 'their talent', responded to needs that went alongside the pursuit of material gains. When I asked Eddy why he would 'feel good' when playing with QM, he replied:

I feel they appreciate me for my ability, so everybody like me, everybody like the way I play with them...you know so we try our best together...so this I like of QM.

In the attempt to show his football skills, Eddy – like most of the participants – strove to appropriate moments and spaces of self-worth in front of the local community. Murphy et al. (2018) have identified a sense of self-worth and accomplishment of value in an activity positively valued in the new country as essential to the process of resistance against the erosion of meanings in life so common in people seeking asylum.

During participant observation within both the projects' male teams, I took note of many occasions in which a successful nutmeg, a well-aimed free kick and a perfect finish brought some momentaneous blasts of joy, laughter and pride. Joining participants on the pitch, and so positioning my body in direct relation to their embodied performances, provided me with significant 'sensual data' (Evers, 2010: 60). I argue that, on the occasions mentioned above, football provided participants with a bodily-mediated language that could be appropriated to resist dehumanising narratives and policy-imposed 'social death', and at the same time keep the future open to hope. In the football space, they could experience a far greater freedom than the one they would experience in their daily lives, and they used that freedom to express themselves and try to gain valued recognition from the local community. Scholars (Nunn et al., 2022; Woodhouse and Concricode, 2017) have pointed out that football allows for people with forced migration backgrounds to free themselves from the negativity attached to the 'refugee' or 'asylum

seeker' labels. Likewise, in the case of this research, the expressivity afforded by football was individually mobilised in the construction of an identity alternative to that imposed by policy and the political and public debate. The players' avidity to demonstrate value and ability in, as well as to experience pleasure through, a familiar game betrayed an eagerness to regain control and resist policy-imposed liminality.

As Adama said during the interview: 'that's the game that I have played and I like most so when I play my mind is stable, I feel confident, I feel comfortable!' This sense of confidence, stability and comfort when playing football left room for the development of attachments to place and collectivities. This process will be discussed in the next sections.

'I feel completely me, I feel I truly belong there': The pitch as a space of belonging

The most evident attachment that all male participants developed was strictly related to the sport activities of the project and the close environment in which they took place, namely the pitch. This is illustrated particularly well by the extract from my interview with Dave. Dave told me that the pitch was the space in the city he felt most comfortable to inhabit. He continued:

I feel great because when you do something you like most there is not bigger pleasure than that...to me I feel very very good when I am playing football, there is the place I'd love to be each and every day [...] I feel completely me, I feel I truly belong there.

Dave felt he 'truly belong[ed]' at the pitch in which AAC training sessions and friendly matches took place. He connected this feeling to the fact that on that pitch he did something he loved and, notably, the fact that in that place he felt 'completely' himself. This resonates with what has been discussed in the previous section, that is the potential of football to provide those seeking asylum with an opportunity to go beyond the 'asylum seeker' label. When he played football, Dave was himself, and the place in which he experienced these moments of authenticity made him feel comfortable. Eventually, he characterised this place in terms of belonging 'there'. This process echoes Stone's (2013) argument according to which the normality of football in the lives of those seeking asylum not only provides a rare occasion of familiarity in an often unfamiliar setting but gives 'a sense of consistency and continuity in one's self-identity' (2013: 78). As he said to me in the interview, Dave had always loved football, he would play 'back home', and dreaded to think about the time he was in Libya and could not play. He was enjoying the renewed opportunity to play in the new country. Fenster (2005) characterised the intimate feeling of belonging as originating with the repetition of 'corporeal everyday activities' (2005: 243) and the 'everyday ritualised use of space' (2005: 244). From this perspective, Dave's sense of familiarity and attachment to the experience of playing football extended to the place in which this experience and practice happened on a routine basis. This is how the expression 'I truly belong there' should be interpreted as referring to the pitch. Considered in this light, the reference to a sense of belonging to the pitch represented an emotional investment to the place in which the version of the self he considered authentic emerged and was expressed with freedom.

Football as a site of free expression of the body and identity offered participants the opportunity to perform belonging to a global ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 2006): that of those who love and play the game of football. Not dissimilarly to what Mauro (2019) has pointed out in his study, I observed that this mode of belonging came through the re-enactment of skills or celebrations they saw on TV or on the internet. Bamba would celebrate his goals with the ‘dab’, the distinctive celebration of the French international Paul Pogba, while Musa would try the ‘step overs’ in training sessions like his favourite player, Cristiano Ronaldo. Through these performances their belonging to the global community of football was enacted, and the pitch became the tangible manifestation of this community. In other words, the pitch, as a site in which a routine and familiar practice and the common belonging to the game was performed, was experienced by many participants as a space of belonging. Yet, this process of negotiation was a gendered process – as it involved only men. The relevance of solidarity grassroots football spaces for women seeking asylum may constitute a compelling topic of inquiry for future research in the field.

Negotiating belonging in the team and beyond

With all participants, friendships and bonds developed in the team had a heavy impact on the development of group belonging. The different composition and organisational practices of the two projects reflected two different politics of belonging and made a difference to how group belonging was negotiated.

AAC tailored its activities to refugees and men seeking asylum from Africa. Accordingly, for those who took part in AAC, the common migratory experience was a key characteristic of the group that helped participants to join and stay in the team. In many participants, the awareness of this commonality mutated into an enhanced sense of group belonging, as the following exchange with Issa shows:

Researcher – How is your relationship with your teammates?

Issa – Brotherhood

Researcher – What do you mean by brotherhood? Why brotherhood?

Issa – Because we’re all migrants, we know what to do and what we all have gone through... this makes us feel a sense of brotherhood, we’re in the same situation, we know it and we feel that we must be united.

The mobilisation of a term like ‘brotherhood’ to characterise the relationships developed within the team resonates with the expression ‘we’re family’ that Adama used during the interview. As such, AAC helped participants to build belonging to a diasporic community characterised not just by a common ethnicity or nationality, but by a common migration trajectory and a common interest – namely football. In other words, AAC’s own politics of belonging aimed at fostering solidarity between men seeking asylum from Africa, as well as a common passion towards the game, facilitated the negotiation of national and cultural differences, and the development of belonging to the collective of the team.

On the other hand, QM aimed to widen opportunities of interaction and solidarity between local Italian people and people seeking asylum. This meant that both men and

women's teams had a prevailing presence of local Italian participants, and that group belonging was negotiated with people from local backgrounds and predominantly developed around the organised cooperative endeavour entailed by the game of football (Kuhn, 2011). Unlike AAC (due to the projects' different politics of belonging), as I observed at the men's team matches and as mentioned by Idris in the interview, the presence of a few supporters who encouraged the players with chorus, chants, flares and smoke bombs provided them with the feeling of 'being part of something bigger than a football team'. Abdoulaye told me that he loved the supporters' chants as he would feel a sense of 'pride and unity with the teammates' (Abdoulaye). Doidge et al. (2020b) have highlighted the process through which the repetition of rituals and performances of the *ultras* in the liminal space of the stadium 'produces the collective effervescences of the group' (2020: 30). In this process, 'the self and collective become ontologically conflated' (2020: 39). As Idris and Abdoulaye's experiences show, the performance of the small group of followers – inspired by the *ultras* movement – on certain occasions produced a collective effervescence that invested the player too. Arguably, this helped to convey a sense of solidarity among the players, and between them and the wider community involved in the project.

Notably, once those seeking asylum got to know their Italian teammates better and began to feel part of the group, the sense of shared goals extended to the whole project rather than being limited to the football team. As with many of those taking part in the football activities of QM, Sarah would help at the bar during the DJ nights or cook at the BBQ during special events (i.e. National Liberation day); Benedict would look after the pitch and help to tidy and set up the *sede* when social events were carried out; Eddy would cut the grass before the youth teams played; Robert would mark the lines; Idris would help as a linesman when he could not play; and Abdoulaye would invite as many people as possible to take part in periodical DIY mini-tournaments organised at the pitch. These roles were essential in guaranteeing the smooth running of the sport activities, the funding of the project itself and for appealing to a vast and diverse public.

This self-managed and mutualistic approach, borrowed from the values of the DIY tradition typical of Italian social centres (Mudu, 2004) – in which some activists and players in the team were involved – allowed for the development of an interest not only related to the immediate success of the team on the pitch, but more broadly to the success of the overall project in terms of sustainability and efficacy of its activities and its achievement of public recognition and interest. As such, this collective effort in which people seeking asylum were gradually involved opened spaces for development of feelings of belonging to the project itself. As Benedict said to me during the interview, 'day by day you understand that's not only football, it's all the other activities, so you play and you stand for all that QM is'.

This emphasis on the cooperative running of the project and a focus on wider social issues within a marginalised neighbourhood were missing in AAC. Prioritising the solidarity between men seeking asylum from Africa did not open opportunities for those in AAC to develop belonging beyond football and its spaces. Arguably, this hampered the transformative potential of the project.

Més que un club: Quadrato Meticcio and belonging to the neighbourhood

In QM, the osmotic relationship between the project and the neighbourhood, and the gradual involvement of those seeking asylum in mutualistic practices and events that were placed within and oriented towards it meant that this was the scale to which they developed the strongest sense of belonging in the new country.

While the pitch was the focal point of the sport activities, the *sede* and the *piazzetta* were the nerve centre of the whole project. From the Friday DJ nights to the wide range of fundraising events (e.g. concerts, book presentations and theatre), from the screening of the Serie A and Champions League games to the legal assistance services and foodbank days, homework groups and language courses, the *sede* and *piazzetta* were the spaces in which football encountered the everyday spaces of the neighbourhood and mingled with the everyday rhythm of its inhabitants.

The gradual introduction of those seeking asylum into the spaces of socialisation in the neighbourhood fostered attachments and feelings of belonging to them. In the following exchange, Benedict insightfully explained his attachment towards the *piazzetta*:

I love it [*piazzetta*] because I know everybody, everybody speak with me, different people... there is music too almost every Friday, and it's close to the pitch in which I play and help with the grass and changing rooms, I love this place, it's part of me...I have good memories here, also at the pitch...I wish I would live around here, but well I thank [the name of the social centre he is hosted by] anyway.

Being recognised by everybody ('everybody speak with me') from a wide range of backgrounds ('different people'), the convivial atmosphere and the proximity with the place in which he played and carried out some responsibilities for the project made the *piazzetta* – and the *sede* – part of Benedict's everyday life in Padova. In addition, Benedict's reference to 'good memories' resonates with Antonsich's (2010) conceptualisation of belonging as an affective and emotional attachment to a place. Eventually, Benedict revealed a sense of 'place-belongingness' (2010) that led him to wish he lived in this neighbourhood.

A sense of conviviality and connectedness at the origin of attachment to the neighbourhood emerged in the interview with Eddy:

since the first time I came here [the area around the *sede*] is fantastic... drink something together, like *birra* [beer]... I love the *sede*, we stay here or in *piazzetta*, we talk, we laugh, we joke, it's really good environment, I like this place [...] I feel safe, happy... I feel it is part of my life in Padova, then we'll see.

This sense of place-belongingness is noteworthy as many of the participants in the study – including Eddy and Benedict – had experienced events of racial profiling and everyday incivility that made them feel excluded from some public spaces. These events resulted in many of them giving up inhabiting some neighbourhoods and squares or accessing public transport. In this sense, the spatial practices adopted by

QM have facilitated participants to slowly but consistently accumulate a range of positive experiences in public space. These provided people with a number of meaningful experiences through which to redraw a map of the city which neutralised the production of an 'inventory of spaces of fear' (Noble and Poynting, 2010: 502) derived from episodes of racialised micro-aggressions.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an in-depth analysis of the processes through which people seeking asylum develop senses of belonging through involvement in solidarity grassroots football. A key aspect highlighted in the paper is the agency of male individuals in carving out opportunities provided through the projects for identity confirmation. This is significant as literature in migration studies and sport and migration studies has overwhelmingly focused on the 'depressing circumstances' associated with the status of people seeking asylum (Spaaij et al., 2019). The eagerness to showcase their talent went alongside the pursuit of material gains (i.e. 'monthly tips' or making a living out of football). Football was harnessed to nurture a positive sense of self *vis-à-vis* the local community and in reaction to autochthonic politics of belonging.

Football conveyed a sense of confidence and familiarity that allowed for feelings of belonging to be attached to the very space in which the activity would take place, the pitch. I argue that the pitch was a site in which the continuity of one's self-identity could be experienced and belonging performed to the imagined global community of those who love football. While these processes were common to both of the projects under investigation, not dissimilar to what Doidge et al. (2020a) argue, I found that each project's own culture and practices (i.e. politics of belonging) had an impact on the processes of development of belonging and the nature of the senses of belonging developed. AAC was a project designed to host only males seeking asylum and male refugees from Africa. This meant that a sense of belonging to the team was negotiated around the common migratory experience as well as around a common passion for the sport. As the project did not have a relationship with the local neighbourhood, the senses of belonging developed were relegated to the team and the pitch.

Conversely, QM involved people seeking asylum and local Italian people and organised self-managed social activities within and for the local neighbourhood (i.e. food-banks, legal and housing advice clinics, fundraising events, homework group, etc.). Drawing from the tradition of Italian autonomous social centres, the project emphasised cooperation, employed mutualistic practices and aimed to widen opportunities of interaction and solidarity between local Italian people and people seeking asylum. People seeking asylum gradually got involved in these mutualistic practices and widened their sense of belonging from the team to the entire project. In turn, this involvement gave the opportunity for people seeking asylum to inhabit with consistency the everyday spaces of the neighbourhood. Their routine presence in the spaces of the neighbourhood, like the *sede* and *piazza*, allowed for the development of strong attachments to that neighbourhood. As Fenster (2005) argues, the process in which a sense of belonging comes to be developed is

a process of transformation of a place, which becomes a space of accumulated attachment and sentiments by means of everyday practices. Belonging and attachment are built here on the base of accumulated knowledge, memory, and intimate corporal experiences of everyday walking. (Fenster, 2005: 243)

As such, I argue that this sense of belonging to the project and the neighbourhood go beyond ‘momentary connections’ (Stone, 2018: 9). This place-belongingness structured participants’ day-to-day routines, experiences and relationships and helped them to resist their policy-imposed liminality. Finally, I claim that – to enhance this potential – solidarity grassroots football should strive to create sites beyond football in which autochthonic and exclusionary structural practices and discourses are contested through a politics of belonging based on new local solidarities among the marginalised.

A case in point for the need to create sites beyond football is that of the only woman seeking asylum in this study. Sarah demonstrated strong belonging to the team, the project and, most notably, to the neighbourhood. However, football itself tended to have a more marginal relevance to her than to her male friends. Arguably, the wider activities organised by QM in the neighbourhood played a central role in her development of belonging. Football was for her a serendipitous encounter with a leisure activity through which she got involved in ‘something bigger’.

It is worth noting, in conclusion, that this paper has explored solidarity grassroots football through overwhelmingly male experiences. Therefore, I argue that an investigation of the relevance of these spaces for people seeking asylum that face additional challenges at the intersection of ‘race’, gender, religion, physical (dis)ability could be a compelling development of this research.


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